

---

Spring 1998

## "Who Do You Say That I Am?" Christological Perspectives on Leadership in the Vincentian Tradition

Thomas Esselman C.M.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj>

---

### Recommended Citation

Esselman, Thomas C.M. (1998) "'Who Do You Say That I Am?' Christological Perspectives on Leadership in the Vincentian Tradition," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.  
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol19/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact [digitalservices@depaul.edu](mailto:digitalservices@depaul.edu).

# “Who Do You Say That I Am?”

## Christological Perspectives on Leadership in the Vincentian Tradition

BY

THOMAS ESSELMAN, C.M.

### *Introduction*

Christians in every age are challenged to answer the question posed by Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel (16: 15), “Who do you say that I am?” This was true of Saint Vincent in his own time. As a person whose natural bent was not speculative thinking or theory-making, he offered no formal or explicitly theological answer to this question.

Yet, the story of his life, and the story of the Vincentian movement from the beginning, reveal the absolute centrality of Jesus Christ. To know Vincent and the works of reform and renewal he sponsored with Louise de Marillac is to encounter a deep personal love for Jesus and a clear vision of Jesus animating and directing the missionary life.

Who is the Jesus of Vincent de Paul? What did Vincent come to learn about Jesus in that encounter we call the life of faith? What does Vincent have to teach the members of the Vincentian family today? Here I want to explore the vision of Jesus Christ that Vincent offers us in the narrative of his life. I will do so by first placing Saint Vincent in some historical and theological context. Then I will offer five characteristic features of this Vincentian christology. I will conclude by suggesting some of the practical challenges this vision of Jesus Christ provides for Vincentian leaders today.

### *Christology in the French School of Spirituality*

The years 1575 to 1680 mark out, approximately, the period known as the French School of Spirituality.<sup>1</sup> It was an time of almost seismic transformations in the intellectual, political, and religious spheres of Europe. Political power was being redistributed to nations like Spain, Sweden, and France—nations that had the commercial skills and mili-

---

<sup>1</sup> A helpful introduction to this period, its major themes in Christology and spirituality, and its key figures can be found in William Thompson’s, *Bérulle and the French School: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist, 1989).

tary prowess to sustain new and vibrant urban centers. In terms of culture, the Renaissance was still being felt; the empirical sciences were in full bloom, redefining humanity's understanding of the cosmos and operation of the human body, among other things. And in religion, Christians divided by the Reformation were either at war or seeking some kind of peaceful co-existence. It was a time of developing cultural pluralism, one that was, on the one hand, creative and eventful, and, on the other hand, volatile, and frightening.

This period also marks out the beginnings of what is later called "dogmatic theology" and a gradual separation between theological reflection and spirituality. In this case, the rational spirit of the age encouraged a style of theological reflection which replaced the *quaestio* of the great medieval syntheses with the assertion of a (clear and distinct) dogmatic truth, followed by a deductive exposition of that truth.<sup>2</sup>

From our vantage point today, theology became impoverished as it cut itself off from the questions and experiences of everyday life. It was only in the middle of this century—with the Second Vatican Council—that this style of dogmatic theology was replaced byologies that, once again, consciously brought the narrative of the gospel into relationship with contemporary life.

The development (and failure) of dogmatic theology in the Counter Reformation period is important to note. As theology narrowed its scope to the exposition of dogmatic truths, the question inevitably arose: Who will tell the story of Jesus? How will that narrative—in its full symbolic meaning—be explored and communicated? Here the rich spirituality of the French School assumed a crucial role. The list of impressive women and men who make up the French School was, at one and the same time, deeply immersed in the contemplative life and committed to the needs of the Church and society of their day. They were mystics while being missionaries. In a striking way they kept alive in the Church the kind of "faith seeking understanding" that dogmatic theology no longer pursued.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Thompson writes: "If we follow Yves Congar, theology at this time was on the way toward becoming rather arid, uncreative, and 'scholastic' in the rather pejorative sense. The notion of a 'dogmatic' theology, tied to an exposition of church doctrines and thus free of theological disputes, was coming into its own." *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson comments about spirituality in this period: "One of the greatest sources of renewal must be, of course, the breakthroughs in mystical and spiritual thought and practice. On one level, surely, this mystical renaissance can be seen as a creative alternative to the dogmatic aridity of the prevailing school theology. It represents a deep effort to remain in tune with the experiential sources of faith and theology." *Ibid.*, 9.

And the spirituality of the members of the French School was deeply Christ-centered. Bérulle, for example, understood Jesus as the Incarnate Word, the perfect servant and adorer of the Father. Jesus is the fulfillment of revelation, the outpouring of the Trinity's love, the adorer and server who calls us to self-renunciation and contemplation. Other members of the French School—Olier, John Eudes, Madame Acarie, Louise de Marillac, as well as Francis de Sales and Jane Frances de Chantal—contributed their own accents to this deep love and commitment to Jesus Christ. All of these people influenced Vincent de Paul, whose unique experience of Jesus Christ is the foundation for the Vincentian movement.

*Vincent de Paul and the Hermeneutics of Experience*

If Vincent's "way" of knowing Jesus Christ is like a precious narrative that must be interpreted and passed on, then it is good to know the idiom in which he speaks. In this regard, Vincent does not approach life from the realm of theory or ideas but from experience and action. In modern language, he approaches life from praxis, not theory. As the late Father André Dodin has written:

Vincent's ideas cannot be isolated and reduced to abstract propositions. They were inspired and protected by love, which animated them, and expressed the life which bore and nurtured them. Love for Vincent was not a consequence of his thought. On the contrary, his thought was, like a daughter, the expression of his love. His life was experience, and his experience carried and confirmed his doctrine. This explains the radical source of dynamism in his life.<sup>4</sup>

Vincent lived out of experience and the profound conviction that God's presence could be found in time, events, and people. For this reason, Vincent learned from Bérulle's "high Christology" but found his own way of experiencing and naming Jesus. He would not so much contemplate Jesus as see Jesus at work, strive to imitate him, and

---

<sup>4</sup> André Dodin, C.M. *Vincent De Paul and Charity: A Contemporary Portrait of His Life and Apostolic Spirit*. Jean Smith and Dennis Saunders, trans. Hugh O'Donnell, C.M. and Marjorie Hornstein, eds. (New Rochelle, N.Y.: New City Press, 1993), 53.

learn from this experience. Jean-Pierre Renouard, C.M., has written that Vincent does not so much have an *idea* of Christ as he *lives* Christ.<sup>5</sup> This way of engaging Jesus is reflected again and again in his writings.

And who is the Jesus Christ that Vincent came to know?

*Jesus Christ is the Evangelizer of the Poor*

For Vincent, Jesus is, first and foremost, the *Evangelizer of the poor*. Jesus is the missionary of the Father who comes into the world, a poor man to live among the poor. As Vincent reads the gospel, he *sees* Jesus announcing to the poor, by word and deed, the coming of the Reign of God. The words of Jesus in the fourth chapter of Luke announcing the Reign of God—

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me;  
 therefore he has anointed me.  
 He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor;  
 to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the  
 blind  
 and release to prisoners;  
 To announce a year of favor from the Lord  
 (Luke 4:18-19 NAB.)

—are words which resonate with Vincent who has experienced the spiritual and material poverty of abandoned country people. Time and time again Vincent points to this understanding of Jesus as the source and inspiration of Vincentian life. In his well-known conference of 6 December 1658, entitled, *On the End of the Congregation of the Mission*, he notes the special privilege of missionaries dedicated to the country poor. He says:

There is not in the Church of God a single Company which has the poor for its portion, and which gives itself so wholly to the poor as never to preach in large cities. This is what missionaries profess to do; it is their special characteristic to be like Jesus Christ, devoted to the poor. Our vocation then, is a continuation of His, or, at least, it

---

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Pierre Renouard, C.M., "Le Christ De Monsieur Vincent," *Vincentiana* 4-6 (1984), 566.

is in harmony with His in circumstances. O! What happiness my brothers! A great motive, then, is the dignity of this employment. To make God known to the poor; to announce Jesus Christ to them; to tell them that the Kingdom of heaven is at hand and that it is for the poor. But that we should be called to be associated with, and to share in, the works of the Son of God surpasses our understanding. What! To render ourselves—I dare not say it—so great, so sublime, is it to preach the Gospel to the poor, for it is above all else the office of the Son of God, and we are applied to it as instruments by which the Son of God continues to do from Heaven what he once did on earth. Great reason have we to praise God and to thank him unceasingly for this grace!<sup>6</sup>

In a very direct way, Vincent understands the “office of the Son of God” as the work of evangelizing the poor. As Evangelizer of the poor, Jesus heals the sick, drives out demons, feeds the hungry, and treats the outcasts with compassion. This is the evangelizing Jesus whose life Vincentians are to imitate in all its virtues. This is the Jesus who calls missionaries to a life of self-sacrifice. In a striking section from a conference given in 1638, Vincent said:

In this vocation we are in close conformity with our Lord Jesus Christ, who, it would seem, made it his principal concern on coming into the world to help the poor and take care of them if the Lord were asked: Why did you come on earth? He would reply: ‘To help the poor.’ ‘Anything else?’ ‘No, to help the poor!’ Should we not be most happy to belong to this Company which has for its end the same one which induced God to become man? And if a missionary were questioned, would it not be a great honor for him to be able to say with the Lord: ‘He sent me to evangelize the poor.’<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Coste, C.M., *Saint Vincent de Paul, Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris, 1920-1925), 12: 79-80. I have used Joseph Leonard’s translation of Coste in his *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul* [to the Congregation of the Mission], compiled by Pierre Coste, translated by the Joseph Leonard, C.M. (Philadelphia: Congregation of the Mission Eastern Province, U.S.A., 1963), 602. (Hereafter “Leonard, *Conferences C.M.*”)

<sup>7</sup> Leonard, *Conferences C.M.*, 111-12.

The Vincentian family today finds its foundation and animating vision from Vincent's experience of Jesus Christ, Evangelizer of the poor. But as his faith grew and as he participated in the work of evangelizing the poor, Vincent came to other, related ways of knowing Jesus Christ.

*Jesus Is Present in the Lives of the Poor*

For Vincent, Jesus lives in the poor person. This is an extraordinary claim, given that we live in a world which often demonizes people who are poor, suffering, and different from ourselves. Serving the poor person in the spirit of Jesus—humble, gentle, realistic—opens one to a sacramental encounter. And in that encounter, a new communion, a new solidarity is forged.

As Abelly notes, Vincent sought to see Jesus in the other person, no matter what station or rank in life the person held. Abelly comments:

The second maxim of this faithful servant of God was always to see our Savior Jesus Christ in others, to inspire our charity toward them. In the Holy Father, the pope, he saw our divine Savior as pontiff and head of the Church. The bishop he saw as Jesus the bishop and prince of pastors he saw all religious as Jesus the religious, the king as Jesus the sovereign ruler. He saw Jesus the worker in the artisans, Jesus the poor man in the poor, Jesus suffering in the sick and dying. He looked on all states in life, seeing in each the image of his sovereign Lord who dwelt in the person of his neighbor. He was moved, in this view, to honor, respect, love and serve each person as our Lord, and our Lord in each individual.<sup>8</sup>

But Vincent was most insistent about the importance of seeing Jesus in the poor person. As a man who was no fool about human nature, and one who struggled to develop a spirit of affability and gentleness, he followed the gospel example of Jesus. He saw beyond appearances, beyond manners and demeanor. He viewed the poor

---

<sup>8</sup> Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, Vol 1. John E. Rybolt, C.M., ed. And William Quinn, F.S.C., trans. (New York: New City Press, 1993), 107.

person through the eyes of faith and, in doing so, saw Jesus. In a conference entitled, *On the Spirit of the Faith*, Vincent said:

I should not judge poor peasants, men or women, by their exterior, nor by their apparent mental capacities. All the more is this so as very frequently they scarcely seem to have the appearance or mind of reasonable beings, so gross and earthly are they. But turn the medal and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, whose will it was to be poor, is represented to us by these poor creatures; that he scarcely had the semblance of a man in his Passion, and that in the eyes of the Gentiles he was regarded as a fool and in the eyes of the Jews a stumbling block. And yet, with all that, he styled himself the Evangelist of the Poor. If we look upon the poor according to the flesh and the spirit of the world they will seem contemptible. But, O my God, what a beautiful sight are the poor if we consider them in God and according to the esteem in which they are held by Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus lives in the poor person. The fact that Jesus was willing to come and live among the poor meant that no person or no situation is beyond value and redemption in God's eyes. Moreover, seeing Jesus in the poor instilled in Vincent a deep respect for their human dignity—for their hard work, their perseverance in suffering, and their rights to the essentials of life. Seeing Jesus in the poor led him, I believe, to question at times whether or not the Congregation was living in solidarity with the poor. During one Repetition of Prayer in 1655 he challenged the confreres on this issue:

(The poor) live simply; they don't examine everything minutely; they submit to order and in the extremity of their miseries suffer patiently as long as it is pleasing to God; some suffer from the wars, others from working hard all day long in the heat of the sun. We seek the shade; we don't want to go out in the heat of the sun; we love our comfort so dearly! During a Mission, we are at least in a church sheltered from the inclemencies of the weather,

---

<sup>9</sup> Leonard, *Conferences C.M.*, 41-42.



from the heat of the sun, from the rains to which those poor people are exposed. And we cry out for help if we are given a little more to do than usual. 'My room, my books, my Mass!' But enough! To possess every comfort? Is that being a missionary. We are living on the patrimony of Jesus Christ, on the sweat of the poor.<sup>10</sup>

Jesus is the Evangelizer of the poor. But, in Vincent's experience, serving them is not simply a matter of giving. It is also one of receiving. Jesus lives in the depths of human experience, ennobling it, and calling all people to a solidarity in him.

*Jesus is the Exemplar of all Missionary Virtues*

If Vincent understood Jesus as the Evangelizer of the poor, he also saw him as the perfection of all the virtues needed to live that mission in the world. In an age when we so frequently speak of personal autonomy and the importance of discovering one's own unique identity, (we advise young people to become your "own person,") Vincent's insistent writings on the virtues may sound rigid or overly pietistic to us. But in the gospels he encountered Jesus as the source and model of all virtues, and he challenged his followers to "re-present" the Savior by our imitation of him. For Vincent this was to make the evangelizing love of the poor concrete. During Repetition of Prayer on 1 August 1655, he said: "Our Lord Jesus Christ is the true model and the great invisible picture on whom we should model all our actions."<sup>11</sup>

In his conference of 6 December 1658, to the priests and brothers Vincent explained:

The design of the Company is to imitate Our Lord as far as poor and wretched persons can do so. What is the meaning of that? It means that the Company has proposed to conform itself to Our Lord in its lines of action, its deeds, its employments and its ends. How can one person represent another if he has not the same features, lineaments, manners, and looks? It cannot be done. And

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 208.

hence it is necessary, if we are resolved to render ourselves like unto this divine Model and feel in our hearts this desire and holy affection, it is necessary, I repeat, for us to strive to conform our thoughts, our words, and our intentions with His. He is not only *Deus virtutum*, but he came to practice all the virtues; and as his actions and inactions were so many virtues, we too should conform ourselves with them, by striving to be men of virtue, not only with regard to the interior, but by acting virtuously, so that what we do or do not do is done or not done according to this principle.<sup>12</sup>

Missionaries are called to their own perfection for the sake of the mission of following Jesus, the Evangelizer of the poor. Vincent models his own commitment to the virtuous life on the example of Jesus who he says, in the gospels, began, not by teaching but by doing. "What he did was to integrate fully into his life every type of virtue. He then went on to teach, by preaching the good news of salvation to the poor"<sup>13</sup> The "program" of evangelical maxims that Vincent outlines in his conferences to the priests and brothers and the daughters are intended to make us more like Jesus, the Evangelizer of the poor. In every case Jesus is the model of living the virtues, whether it is that of seeking the will of God in all things,<sup>14</sup> simplicity,<sup>15</sup> prudence,<sup>16</sup> gentleness,<sup>17</sup> humility,<sup>18</sup> mortification,<sup>19</sup> detachment,<sup>20</sup> or, of course, charity.<sup>21</sup>

This *imitatio Christi* is a dynamic principle in the Vincentian way of life. It gives direction, focus, and energy to our personal and community lives. It helps incarnate the presence of Jesus in ways that, slowly but surely, convert us to him. Vincent meant that, through the life of the virtues, the will and action of Jesus would slowly "overtake

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 597-98.

<sup>13</sup> *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*, (Perryville, MO: M.M.A., 1974) I:1. (Hereafter cited as CR.)

<sup>14</sup> CRII: 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

us" at every moment. As he wrote in a letter to Antoine Durand in 1656:

Another point to which you should pay particular attention is to depend greatly on the guidance of the Son of God; I mean to say that, when you have to act, you should reflect like this: "Is this in conformity with the maxims of the Son of God? If not say: I will have nothing to do with it; if you find that it is, say: 'Very well, let us do it.'"<sup>22</sup>

Thus, Jesus the Evangelizer of the poor, teaches us how to join him in his work through the perfection of the virtues which he, himself, first lived. Only by first seeing and imitating Jesus in his example can we truly follow him in the manner of life demanded of an Evangelizer of the poor.

### *Jesus Heals the Whole Person*

As Vincent contemplated Jesus, he saw a missionary Savior reaching out to people on all levels of life. As Father Maloney has written, "Vincent's view of Jesus' evangelizing activity is a broad one."<sup>23</sup> The preaching of the gospel to the poor must be accompanied by works of healing, teaching, and raising up. Jesus, in Vincent's experience, comes to call us to an integral liberation. He wishes to heal the whole person.

For Vincent and Louise, the truth of this insight can be seen in the various groups they formed to share in the evangelization of the poor. The Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, the Ladies of Charity, and the Daughters of Charity each have their own histories and mandates. Yet each are called to follow and imitate the missionary Jesus who loves the whole person.

This integral vision is expressed in a conference that Vincent gave to the Daughters of Charity in July 1634, on the subject of the rules. He said:

My daughters, remember that when you leave prayer and Holy Mass to serve the poor, you are losing nothing, because serving the poor is going to God and you should see God in them. So then be very careful in attending to

---

<sup>22</sup> Leonard, *Conferences C.M.*, 327.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Maloney, C.M., *The Way of Vincent De Paul* (New York: New City Press, 1992), 24.

all their needs and be particularly watchful in respect to the help you may be able to render them for their salvation, so that they may not die without the sacraments. You are not to attend to their bodies solely, you are also to help them save their souls. Above all, urge them to make general confessions, bear patiently with their little fits of temper, encourage them to suffer patiently for the love of God. Never get angry with them nor speak to them harshly. They have enough to do to put up with their illnesses. Weep with them; God has made you their consolers.<sup>24</sup>

For the Congregation of the Mission the preaching of missions and the administration of the sacraments, especially that of reconciliation, has always been central. But it is not enough to preach to people in a sort of disembodied way. Missionaries are to seek the good of the whole person. Abelly records Vincent as saying:

Missionaries above all other priests should be filled with this spirit of compassion. They are obliged by their state and their vocation to serve the most miserable, the most abandoned, and those suffering from corporal or spiritual ills. First, they should feel in their hearts the sufferings of their neighbor. Second, their sentiment should appear in their features and their whole attitude, after the example of our Lord. Third we should use compassionate language to make our neighbors aware that we truly have their interests and sufferings at heart. Lastly, we must help them as much as we can to bring about a partial end to their sufferings, for the hand must be directed as much as possible by the heart.<sup>25</sup>

*"The hand must be directed by the heart."*

This was Vincent's way in following Jesus, who in Matthew's gospel associated himself with the "least" of the brothers and sisters. We know that Vincent was ardent in coming to the spiritual and material aid of the poor. He trusted in divine Providence to provide

---

<sup>24</sup> Frances Ryan, D.C. and John E. Rybolt, C.M., eds. *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: Rules, Conferences, and Writings* (New York: Paulist, 1995), 204.

<sup>25</sup> Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant*, Vol. III, 119.

the means; like the widow in the gospel he gave at the community's expense in order to care for the poor. And in his last year of life, he challenged the Company not to go back on this vision of integral liberation. As he said in 1658:

After my death there may come men with a spirit of opposition, and lazy men who will say: 'Why bother ourselves looking after these hospitals? How can we help so many people ruined by the wars and go visiting them in their lodgings? What is the good with bothering ourselves with so many employments and so many poor.' There will be some who oppose these works, have no doubt about that; and others who will say it is far too much to undertake men to distant islands, to the Indies, to Barbary. No matter; our vocation is *Evangelizare pauperibus*.<sup>26</sup>

Jesus, the Evangelizer of the poor, the one who holds even the most wretched person in inestimable value, cares for the complete human person. The body and the soul, the family structure and society, the inner depths of the spiritual life and the social order that impacts upon the person—all are part of the evangelizing event. The Vincentian family is called to join its gifts so that the whole person may experience the healing of God.

### *Jesus Embodies the Life of Doxology*

The word *doxology* is not one that is often associated with Vincent or his experience of Jesus. In fact, the language of doxology—or praise—is often narrowly associated with one kind of personal or liturgical prayer. But contemporary studies in theology have re-appropriated doxology in a rich and suggestive way that captures Vincent's experience of Jesus.

For, according to the theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna, doxology is not simply one kind of prayer, nor is it the act of offering self-congratulatory words to an abstract God in heaven. It is, rather, a basic life stance, characterized by an openness to the mystery of God at work in the world, a trust—in the great and small moments of life—in the Providence of God, and a commitment to live in right relation-

---

<sup>26</sup> Leonard, *Conferences C.M.*, 609.

ship with all of creation.<sup>27</sup>

LaCugna cites Daniel Hardy and David Ford who note that there is a certain “logic” to doxology in the Christian life.<sup>28</sup>

Doxology or praise involves us in the act of getting out of ourselves, becoming less self-absorbed, dying to self while, at the same time, naming God as “our God.” Doxology redirects ourselves away from ourselves to the greater story of God at work, saving the world. And at the same time it challenges us to match our deeds to our words. Entering into the praise of God can help us critically evaluate all our relationships from God’s perspective, which in the New Testament is called the Reign of God.

The Jesus that Vincent knows lives this life of doxology before God. Vincent sees in Jesus one who lives for others in a free, non self-absorbed way. He is the model of prayer. He lives in communion with the Father’s will, even at the cost of suffering and death. He reaches out to the “untouchables” of society. He lives in confidence that the Father loves him. In a conference in 1659 Vincent noted that we work for the spread of the Kingdom of God because Jesus Christ commands it: “The first of his maxims, *the principal thing in his own actions*, is to have a longing desire that God may be known, loved, served, and that his reign and justice may be sought before all else.”<sup>29</sup>

For Vincent, imitating Jesus is to enter into this doxological way of life. It means, on the one hand, becoming conscious of the presence of God in all things, even the simplest or the most menial events. It also means seeing and loving the poor as God sees and loves them—living in right relationship, here and now. In the same conference referred to above, Vincent challenges his hearers to seek the Kingdom in all things. He says:

Seek the Kingdom of God before all other things. But sir, (you say) there are so many things to be done, so many appointments in the house, so many employments everywhere work. Must we abandon them all to think only of God? No, but we must sanctify these occupations by *seeking God in them*, doing them with a view to finding him

---

<sup>27</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “Trinity Theology and Doxology,” in her *God For Us; The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 319-75.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 338-39.

<sup>29</sup> Leonard, *Conferences C.M.*, 479.

therein, rather than merely to see them done.<sup>30</sup>

The life of doxology includes trusting in the Providence of God and viewing the present moment with faith and hope. But doxology also includes that commitment to see and love others as God does. Vincent's commitment to love the poor because God does reflects this stance of doxology. The poor are our "lords and masters" he reminded the Missionaries in 1657:

God loves the poor and, thus surely he must love those who love and serve them. The little Company of the Mission strives to love the poor tenderly. God loves them so much, and so we have reason to hope that because of them God will love us as well. We then have, my brothers, a new reason to serve them. We should seek out the poorest and most abandoned. We must recognize before God that they are our lords and masters, and that we are unworthy to render them our small favors.<sup>31</sup>

*Jesus and the Challenges of Leadership in the Vincentian Mission Today*

I have suggested here that the life of Vincent de Paul can be read as a narrative which reveals an experience of Jesus Christ which is at the very center of the Vincentian Mission. Jesus, the Evangelizer of the poor, lives in the poor. As model of all missionary virtues he invites us to represent him in the world by our imitation of him. Jesus seeks to heal the whole person and calls us to an integral work of liberation today. Finally, Jesus invites us to join him in living lives of doxology, free and open, confident at every moment in the providence of God.

Much more could be said. Vincent's life is a rich narrative, but so is that of Saint Louise and other Vincentians. A part of our task today is to dip ever more deeply into their worlds, learning from them and allowing them to inspire and guide us.

As Scripture scholars would tell us, however, it is never sufficient to simply stay within the "world of the text" or narrative—whether that be the gospel story of Jesus, the writings of Vincent or Louise or anyone else. For there also exists, the world of meaning "in front of the

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 473.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 366; and Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant*, Vol. III, 117.

text,” the world where people live today, the world of our context.<sup>32</sup> This is the world of suffering human beings, of institutionalized violence and poverty, of injustice, and violated human dignity. This is the world that wants to know, for example, what the Vincentian message has to say to a broken world. This is our world. In so many ways it longs for the evangelizing, liberating presence of Jesus that Vincent knew. How does Vincent’s vision of Jesus challenge us in our work today? Let me suggest some concrete ways by posing some questions:

1. Jesus is absolutely central to members of the Vincentian family. Do we reflect on the meaning of Jesus out of an active presence to the poor—the model that Vincent presents us? Or have we become comfortable with a certain image of Jesus, unrelated to our presence to the poor?
2. Do we understand our Vincentian mission as an integral response to the whole person—especially within the contexts of institutions? Have we divided the “spiritual” from the “material,” the “affective” from the “effective” works of love?
3. Do we see Jesus truly living within the poor? Do we carry into our ministries a sense of the sacramentality of the moment? Have we “professionalized” our service to the point that evangelizing the poor is not a privileged place of God’s presence?
4. In the gospels, there is an intrinsic connection between illness and possession. Illness was naturally attributed to some kind of sin. People were then “demonized,” their status and dignity within society was destroyed, their access to community cut off. In his healing ministry, Jesus restored people’s dignity. He enabled community. How are the poor demonized today? How are we effectively touching them to restore their dignity?

---

<sup>32</sup> I am grateful to Mary Margaret Pazdan, O.P., my colleague at Aquinas Institute, for helping me see this insight and its methodological implications for theology as well as for the work of interpreting the meaning of Vincent and Louise today.



5. How do we, in a culture which prizes individuality and “being your own person” represent Jesus in the vibrant way that Vincent and Louise did? Does our prayer together, our sharing of life make sacramental the Jesus we claim to follow?

Sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking* and a well-known opponent of capital punishment, exemplifies to me someone who, like Vincent, has come to know God in a new way through her experience of the poor. In an interview in *America* this past winter, she said:

I first moved to Saint Thomas Housing Project in New Orleans in 1981 and started working in the adult learning center at Hope House. That is when I began being in direct contact with poor people. It was waking up to problems I'd never seen before at close range—racism and poverty and police brutality. One of the things that shook me about my prayer life then was that although I'd been meditating on Scripture all my life, with phrases like the one in Matthew, “When I was in prison you visited me,” I hadn't really lived any of it out. From that time on I realized that being with poor and struggling people is itself a spiritual discipline, as much as actual prayer or reading scripture. To be with them is to see a manifestation of God, which in turn is to be in the presence of love, which then leads you to do what love requires. So praying and action began to be one.<sup>33</sup>

What a wonderful expression of the call to follow Jesus evangelizing the poor!

---

<sup>33</sup> “Opposing the Death Penalty: An Interview with Helen Prejean,” *America* 175 (November 9, 1996): 9.



Vincent de Paul. "Education, Dignity, Community."  
*Saint Vincent's Circle, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois*  
Sculpture by Sister Margaret Beaudette, S.C.

**I praise God for the disposition He has given you to do  
willingly whatever is His good pleasure.**

*(Saint Vincent de Paul,  
Letter to Antoine Durand, 21 December 1657)*