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"Lord, teach us to pray." Mission Spirituality: Contemplation in Action

BY
BERNARD J. QUINN, C.M.

I. Introduction

A few years ago, Vincentian Father Gene Sheridan told me about one of his experiences while he was serving as pastor of the Immaculate Parish in Germantown. A non-Catholic lady had come to him to ask for some financial assistance. She said that she was confident that he would be able to help her because on her way there she had stopped in to see the minister of her own church. They had prayed that the Catholic Church would be able to help her out.

So we at once see the importance of prayer in the life of the poor, and at least one instance in which our church is perceived to be a resource for material if not spiritual assistance. It is important that we talk about and learn about the place of prayer in our ministry to the poor.

Saint Vincent's popular reputation revolves, of course, around his dedication to the poor and the works he organized or inspired on their behalf. He is almost always portrayed in popular imagery with abandoned babies and orphaned children, or with beggars and galley slaves. However, we know that he was not the first one to be concerned about the poor and to do something about it in an organized way. One of Vincent's contemporaries, Theophraste Renaudot (1586-1653), established *le Bureau de l'Adresse* in Paris, a kind of employment agency for the poor while also advocating publicly on their behalf.¹

Vincent de Paul was declared a saint, however, not for his social activism but for his holiness. What he accomplished for the poor sprang from his love of God. He learned that his love of God had to then be expressed in his love for the poor, just as Jesus himself taught and just as Jesus himself did and called his followers to do. As a holy man Vincent was also a man of prayer.

¹ E.K. Sanders, *Vincent de Paul: Priest and Philanthropist, 1576-1660* (London: Heath, Cranton & Ousley, Ltd., 1913), 91-103.

II. *Spiritual Development*

It took awhile for Vincent's motive to change from self-interest to a preoccupation with fulfilling the God's will, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the preeminent place of the poor in the kingdom. Vincent de Paul was not always the saint, the Apostle of Charity, the Father of the Poor and the Light of the Clergy. In 1610, writing to his mother from Paris, and still pursuing financial security ten years after his ordination to the priesthood, Vincent told her that "I have such trust in God's grace, that He will bless my efforts and will soon give me the means of an honorable retirement so that I may spend the rest of my days near you."² Vincent was clearly a pious man, but not a saint at this point. His vocation to the priesthood was still a career choice and not a vocation.

Vincent soon found a position at the court of the former Queen of France, Marguerite de Valois. He was hired as one of her almoners, distributing her charity on behalf of the sick poor of Paris. But he also found much more to satisfy a deep longing. He became involved with a circle of clergy, religious and laity seeking spiritual renewal for themselves and for the Church. One of the leaders of this movement that would eventually be referred to as "the French School of spirituality" was Pierre de Berulle, who established the Oratory of Saint Philip Neri in France and was one of those responsible for introducing the Carmelites of Saint Teresa of Avila to this country.³ Berulle, who would eventually be given the rank of cardinal, became Vincent's spiritual director, mentor and friend. It was Berulle who in 1612 arranged Vincent's first position as local pastor in the village of Clichy outside Paris, and soon after sent him to the di Gondi family as personal chaplain and the children's tutor.

As important as Berulle's influence was, Vincent found neither Berulle's spirituality nor image of Jesus very appealing. It was too intellectual, too doctrinal and too negative. By 1617 Vincent had discovered the world of the poor, begun to experience Christ in them, and come to understand that his life's work would be in the service of the poor.

² Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre J. Gabalda, 1920-26), 1: 15. Hereinafter cited as *CED*.

³ Michael Downey, ed., *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 420-423.

At this same time, Vincent made the acquaintance of the celebrated Bishop of Geneva, Francis de Sales. They soon became friends and admired each other's talents and qualities. Saint Francis's most famous writings on the spiritual life, *The Treatise on the Love of God* and *The Introduction to the Devout Life*, became required reading for all of Vincent's followers.⁴ The following book review of *The Treatise* has a certain contemporary ring to it.

This is a very noble and immortal work, a worthy testimony of his most ardent love of God.. It is certainly a book to be admired and it will preach the goodness of its author as many times as it is read. I have therefore earnestly made sure that it is read in our community, as a universal remedy for tepid souls, as a mirror for the sluggish, and as an incentive to make progress in love for those who are aiming at perfection. I greatly desire everyone to make fitting use of it. Its warm appeal is for everybody.⁵

In these works Francis de Sales develops a spirituality and approach to prayer that Vincent would adopt and offer to his spiritual family – the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, the Ladies of Charity, the priests of the Tuesday Conferences, and other individuals under his guidance.

Most of all, Vincent admired Francis' *humanity*. Jesus did not simply lower himself in the incarnation but appealed to, and often brought out, the best in human nature. He often demonstrated its great potential for proclaiming the glory of God and carrying out the divine plan for salvation. Francis had the ability to see and draw out the good in everybody (including Vincent de Paul) and to recognize the important role of lay people as witnesses to the kingdom. Furthermore, Francis de Sales was a living *model* of holiness for Vincent – a standard to which Pierre de Berulle could not measure up. Ever after, Vincent would refer to Francis as "our Blessed Father."⁶ Two of Vincent's major character flaws were his surliness and melancholy, and so he saw himself as Francis' opposite. Vincent would fall on his knees before those he felt he had offended as a way of struggling with

⁴ José María Román, C.M., *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, trans. by Sr. Joyce Howard, D.C. (London: Melisende, 1999), 149-156.

⁵ CED, 13: 71.

⁶ CED, 2: 70, 212.

his failures against meekness. Hence he sought to emulate Francis de Sales. Vincent later claimed, after Francis's death in 1622, that it was through his intercession that he was able to overcome these failings. Vincent would say of him, "How good you must be, O my God, since your creature is so good."⁷ Francis admired Vincent as well, and entrusted to him the spiritual care of the Visitation nuns at their first foundation in Paris.

III. Prayer

A. Foundations

There are quite a few sayings of Saint Vincent that might come to mind when we think about his teaching on prayer. One of the best known is "Give me a man of prayer and he can do anything."⁸ When we look for a model of Vincent's prayer we should not be surprised that the one he made use of, and recommended to others, was that of Francis de Sales. We describe prayer as the lifting or opening up of the mind and heart to God, that by so doing our minds and hearts become filled with God's love. For Vincent de Paul prayer is the ordinary means to acquire the motivation to do God's loving will and therefore cooperate with God in renewing the earth.

As I mentioned earlier, the Jesus of Vincent was different than the Jesus of his mentor Berulle and his disciples, who focused on the suffering and death of Jesus as the principal acts of his incarnation and ministry. However, Vincent's Jesus was first of all the itinerant missionary, the evangelizer of the poor who gathered disciples together to do, and continue to do, what he did even after his death and resurrection. (Vincent would even say that the Congregation of the Mission did only what Jesus and his disciples did, by going out to the rural poor to proclaim salvation, and in witnessing the reign of God by caring for the sick and poor.) The love of Jesus Crucified was the fulfillment of the love of the evangelizer of the poor.

Prayer leading to intimacy and union with God was an end in itself, even the ultimate end of human life, but it was also a very practical matter. Vincent would say that it was enough for an individual to love God if his neighbor did not. Only the love of God and neighbor, learned and appropriated through regular prayer, could sustain a life committed to the loving service of them. As Vincent got

⁷ CED, 13: 78.

⁸ CED, 11: 83.

to know the poor personally (and not just the *nice* or *deserving* poor, as we might say today), the more he knew that weak human nature unassisted by divine grace could not sustain a commitment to serve them as “lords and masters.” Recall as well that the poor were to be served as Jesus himself was to be served, which meant treated with love and respect. If Jesus deserved the very best one could offer, both materially and spiritually, so too the poor. We recall that famous line in the movie *Monsieur Vincent*, that attributes this sentiment to Vincent: “The poor will forgive you for the bread you give them only because of your love.” Simply giving the poor left over crumbs, or the cast off clothing from our closets, is not enough. Just as we have to be the best people and best Christians we can be, so we have to acquire the virtues of Christ suitable for servants of the poor, as well as eliminate our vices and failings. Hence personal transformation acquired by a commitment to prayer is essential to Vincentian life and ministry. In speaking to his community at the end of his life he observed:

In order that prayer might be truly efficacious, it should tend to give us a real knowledge of our inclinations and attachments, and should strengthen us in our resolutions to fight against them, to grow more holy, and resolutely to carry out what we have determined.... We should ever labor at this, my brethren, we should always study ourselves, and why not, then, at prayer tomorrow?⁹

A modern spiritual writer, Reverend Henry Nouwen, would say that prayer serves to unmask our illusions *about ourselves*, and Saint Vincent would agree whole-heartedly.

B. Method

Vincent made sure in organizing a rule of life for his followers: priest, sisters, and laity, that regular daily prayer was determined. While insisting on the proper and prayerful recitation and singing of the Divine Office and the celebration of Mass, Vincent was most concerned that an hour of daily personal prayer be maintained. He told the Daughters of Charity that their way of life was too hard and offered too few human consolations that it would be impossible to persevere in it without the practice of prayer. Furthermore, prayer

⁹ *CED*, 12: 231.

should not be made in an off-hand, sloppy, inattentive manner.

I said Mass this morning; if I did not say it with the requisite conditions I have made no progress by doing so. You have gone to communion, served the sick, made your prayer, and done other things; now if you did not unite the interior with the exterior you have done nothing. For even a pagan might do what we do, just to amuse himself merely as a natural work.¹⁰

This kind of prayer is often referred to as *mental prayer* or *meditation* and it could be done either alone or in common, although the latter was preferred since it had the advantage of offering support, good example and inspiration to the praying community.

Vincent did not develop a model of this prayer but adapted that of Francis de Sales.¹¹ This model was the basic one followed by the C.M.'s and D.C.'s and probably other Vincentian inspired communities up until Vatican II. We C.M.'s made use of a book of abridged meditations which outlined points for reflection on biblical themes and virtues for every day of the year.¹² This method was further distilled, as we see in the outline described by Reverend Maloney who calls this format the *Prayer of the Mind*.¹³ It is a series of three reflections on the nature of a desired virtue, the proper motive to pursue it, and the particular, concrete means for acquiring it. While the focus of this method was often on acquiring virtues and eliminating vices, it could also be used in considering the life of Christ, the saints and so on. Saint Vincent would say that this method involved reading from Holy Scripture and then "turning over in one's mind" the truth being revealed.

Any method used was a way of striking flint until there was a fire, and once lit there was no point to continue to strike the flint. When we look at this approach to meditation in comparison to other prayer forms, we understand how Vincent always sought balance in spiritual

¹⁰ CED, 10: 131.

¹¹ Robert P. Maloney, C.M., *He Hears the Cry of the Poor* (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1995), 81.

¹² A Priest of the Congregation of the Mission, *An Abridgement of the Course of Meditations for Every Day of the Year for the Use of the Congregation of the Mission* (United States: Eastern and Western Provinces, 1958).

¹³ Maloney, *He Hears the Cry of the Poor*, 88.

things even as he did in material matters. He was able to maintain a "circle of sensibility" within the various directions one could go, and avoiding the extremes. From the use of imagination on the one hand to complete negation of thought and feeling on the other; from a dependence on reason to purely affective prayer and so on, thusly he avoided such extremes as encratism (an obsession with ascetic practices), pietism (anti-intellectual, sentimental, subjectivism), rationalism (obsession with reason), and quietism (complete passivity, annihilation of the will).¹⁴

C. Characteristics

Two of the characteristics of Vincentian prayer are its practicality and flexibility. Uppermost in Vincent's mind and heart was the primacy of service, or as we would say, "walking the walk" and not just "talking the talk." Prayer that did not lead to service, faith and love that did not lead to action was empty. Vincent insisted, moreover, that prayer should not remain fixed on considerations but should move to affections and then to concrete resolutions for the day. The end result would be to move thoughts, feelings, and acts of the will to action on behalf of God and neighbor. One of those favorite Vincentian sayings stresses this point:

Let us love God, my brothers, let us love God, but let it be at the cost of our arms, let it be by the sweat of our brows. For very often so many acts of love of God, of obliging someone, of kindness, and other such affections and interior practices of a tender heart, although very good and very desirable, are, nevertheless, very suspect when one does not go on from them to the practice of effective love.¹⁵

Vincent would quite agree with Reverend Nouwen who said that "we have accepted the idea that 'doing things' is more important than prayer and have come to think of prayer as something for times when there is nothing urgent to do."¹⁶ However, Vincent was aware of the urgency of serving the poor, and therefore how the schedules and the

¹⁴ Urban T. Holmes, *A History of Christian Spirituality* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981), 4.

¹⁵ CED, 11: 40-41.

¹⁶ Henri J.M. Nouwen, et al, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1982), 104.

mechanics of prayer forms should not interfere with the love of God through the love of the poor neighbor. So even while espousing a regular regimen of daily personal meditation under normal circumstance, Vincent insisted upon flexibility. For this reason, he was very fond of the use of spiritual aspirations, as was his friend Francis de Sales, as he notes in *The Introduction to the Devout Life*:

This habit of spiritual retirement and the prayer of aspirations is the keystone of devotion, and can supply the defects of all your other prayers; but nothing else can supply its place. Without it, you cannot follow the contemplative life well, or the active life without danger. Without it, repose is but idleness, labor but trouble: therefore, I beseech you, cleave steadily to it, and never forsake it.¹⁷

Vincent described such prayer as sending “a dart of love to the heart of God” and singled it out as a good way for busy people to pray affectively, effectively and often.

Likewise, Vincent made clear that while methods of prayer have their value, they should not be over-estimated and could even be set aside for something else. This was a kind of “whatever works for you” approach. Some individuals just cannot keep their minds involved in considerations and so they should find the way that will help them move to affective love, and then the formation of resolutions that would be carried out during the day. So if you could not catch on fire by meditating on themes, then slowly, prayerfully, read Holy Scripture or a spiritual book, say the rosary, meditate on a statue of the Blessed Virgin or the picture of a saint.

Another familiar Vincentian adage regarding prayer is “leaving God to go to God.” He said in an instruction to the Daughters of Charity, “My daughters, learn this, when you leave prayer and holy Mass to serve the poor you lose nothing, for you go to God while serving the poor, and you should see God in them.”¹⁸ However, on their way they were to keep the flame of prayer and devotion alive within their hearts to assure them that their encounters with the poor were indeed encounters with God. It was recommended that the

¹⁷ Cited in Killian J. Healy, *Awakening Your Soul to the Presence of God* (Manchester, N.H.: Sophia Institute Press, 1948), 106.

¹⁸ Joseph Leonard, *St. Vincent de Paul and Mental Prayer* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1925), 72.

sisters say in their hearts, "My God, I adore thee," or "My God, I love thee with my whole heart," or "I desire, my God, that the whole world may know and honor thee."¹⁹ He likewise counseled them to imitate one of the Ladies of Charity who carried a picture of the Blessed Virgin in her sleeve, or to regularly look upon the cross of the rosary they carried with them. He quoted the Old Testament by saying that "A short and fervent prayer penetrates the heavens."²⁰

We have sometime heard it said that "my work is my prayer." One might think that this reflects a sentiment of Saint Vincent, as it made clear that our work had to become an occasion for formalized prayer, rather than a replacement for it.

Along with regular times for daily prayer and substitutes for it, Vincent also made use of a practice for sharing the fruit of prayer called "the repetition of prayer" which became a regular part of the spiritual life of his two communities.²¹ Those of us of a certain age have un-fond memories of the practice of "repetition," at least during the time of novitiate formation. During Saint Vincent's time, these were dialogues he led with the sisters, priests, and brothers in which he sought to draw out from them the graces they had received in prayer, and to lead them to inspire one another in the practice of prayer and spiritual life overall. Much of Vincent's spirit and teaching have come to us from the notes that Saint Louise, or members of his Congregation, secretly took. This practice entered into the life of his communities, but over the years lost its spontaneity and fervor. Nevertheless, this practice was a form of faith-sharing that has become popular in our own times, and stresses the value of talking about such important matters openly.

IV. For the Vincentian Family Today

This symposium itself bears witness to a resurgence of the charism in our contemporary Church. It is a cause for gratitude and excitement. But it seems that we are tentative about the role of prayer in our lives and the overall spiritual dimension. We are busy people and time for regular prayer is more difficult to organize, even for those of us who live in religious community. If we pray morning and evening and go to daily Mass we are probably already doing a lot. What of personal

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁰ *CED*, 11: 53.

²¹ Maloney, *He Hears the Cry of the Poor*, 82.

prayer, though, as Saint Vincent demanded? Let's be clear that Vincent's understanding of its role in our mission is still quite valid — without regular prayer we can do little of lasting value. Vincent de Paul said that without it one could lose his vocation, and that failure to pray daily, at the beginning of the day, could lead to the ruin of the Congregation of the Mission.

The contemporary call to such prayer is made clear by Reverend Henry Nouwen and the authors of: *Compassion, A Reflection on the Christian Life*:

Prayer is in many ways the criterion of Christian life. Prayer requires that we stand in God's presence with open hands, naked and vulnerable, proclaiming to ourselves and to others that without God we can do nothing. This is difficult in a climate where the predominant counsel is, "Do your best and God will do the rest." When life is divided into "our best" and "God's rest," we have turned prayer into a last resort to be used only when all our own resources are depleted. Then even the Lord has become the victim of our impatience. Discipleship does not mean to use God when we can no longer function ourselves. On the contrary, it means to recognize that we can do nothing at all, but that God can do everything through us. As disciples, we find not some but all of our strength, hope, courage, and confidence in God. Therefore, prayer must be our first concern.... Prayer is not an effort to make contact with God, to bring Him to our side. Prayer, as a discipline that strengthens and deepens discipleship, is the effort to remove everything that might prevent the Spirit of God, given to us by Jesus Christ, from speaking freely to us and in us. The discipline of prayer is the discipline by which we liberate the Spirit of God from entanglement in our impatient impulses. It is the way by which we allow God's Spirit to move where He wants.²²

Saint Vincent found in Saint Francis de Sales a way to live before God and the world according to the promptings of God and his own

²² Nouwen, et al, *Compassion*, 104-5.

heart. So too, he found in the prayer of his friend and mentor a way to open his mind and his heart to God, and to love and serve Him as he knew he was called to do. What is most key for us, Vincentians of this age called to love God and to manifest this love by our service to the poor, is to discover what is in our own hearts and to pray accordingly. Reverend Nouwen speaks to this:

When we are serious about prayer and no longer consider it one of the many things people do in their life but, rather, the basic receptive attitude out of which all of life can receive new vitality, we will, sooner or later, raise the question: 'What is the prayer of my heart?' Just as artists search for the style that is most their own, so people who pray search for the prayer of their heart. What is most profound in life, and therefore most dear to us, always needs to be properly protected as well as expressed.²³

The Franciscans of Southern California have a beautiful retreat center at Malibu in the hills overlooking the Pacific Ocean. In one of the many gardens there is a plaque that reads: "The kiss of the sun for pardon, the song of the birds for mirth. One is nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth."

These are lovely sentiments and inspire us to sense God's presence in the beauty of nature. These sentiments certainly reflect the Franciscan spiritual vision. Francis could meditate on Jesus' challenge to see God's loving care for us by reflecting on the lilies of the field and the birds in the sky. We Vincentians, however, turn to his challenge to love Him and serve Him to the extent we do by serving the poor in their needs.

Like the apostles we must regularly turn to Jesus to ask him to teach us to pray. He, in turn, directs us to Saint Vincent, and then to Saint Louise, and then to all of the others who learned what Vincent discovered about the relationship between contemplation and action.

Let us close this session with a prayer composed by the Congregation of the Mission shortly after the death of Saint Vincent and adapted for the use of the Vincentian Family today. In doing so we ask

²³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1975), 89.

for the gift of prayer along with all of the other Vincentian virtues:

O Lord, arouse in our Vincentian Family, the spirit which animated your servant Vincent, that filled with the same spirit, we may enthusiastically love what he loved and practice what he taught. We ask you this through Christ our Lord. Amen.



Very Reverend Bernard Quinn, C.M., pauses for a picture.

Be patient, allow Him to act, and tell Him that you want His Will and not yours do be done.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul,
letter to Sister Anne Hardemont, 10 August 1658)*