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Vincent de Paul's Discernment of His Own Vocation And That of the Congregation of the Mission

by
Douglas Slawson, C.M.

Discernment According to Vincent

The mature Vincent de Paul had two preoccupations: 1) to live in Christ, and 2) to adapt his life and activity as closely as possible to the designs of God's will. The saint felt such conviction about these that he codified them in the *Common Rules* by urging his disciples to "make every effort to put on the Spirit of Christ" and to do "the divine will always in all things."¹ As the *Gospel of John* made clear, the two were actually one. Vincent alluded to this in the reminder that "it was [Jesus'] practice, always to do the will of his Father in everything ... that is why he said he had come down to earth, not to do his own will, but that of his Father [*John* 6:38]."² If one were to clothe himself in Christ, he must seek to fulfill God's will, for that is what enlivened Jesus. The implementation of this practice had important ramifications for the Congregation. "We know," the saint told his followers, "that our works are worthless if they are not living and animated by God's will."³

What was that? It was one thing to say that Jesus always did the will of his Father, and another to give that a degree of specification. The first clue to Vincent's thinking on the matter comes from a letter to a priest engaged in seminary work. The saint encouraged him to see that the divine Spirit worked through him to establish in the seminarians the two cardinal virtues of Jesus' life.

[The Holy Spirit] is residing and operating in you, not only to make you live his divine life, but also to establish his very life and operations in these gentlemen [the seminarians], called to the highest ministry there is on earth,

¹*Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission* (Perryville, Missouri, 1974), 1:3 and 2:3.

²Conference on Conformity with the Will of God, 7 March 1659, *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols, ed. Pierre Coste, C.M. (Paris, 1924), 12:154. Hereafter cited as CED.

³*Ibid.*, 12:154-55.

by which they ought to exercise the two great virtues of Jesus Christ, namely, religion toward his Father and charity toward men.⁴

These two elements, religion toward God and charity toward men, were the hallmarks of Jesus' ministry and, for Vincent, were inseparable. In 1655, he unified them in the declaration that Christ "came on earth only to do the will of God, his Father, by accomplishing the work of our redemption." In short, Jesus enfleshed God's salvific design for mankind. This was accomplished in his coming "to preach the gospel to the poor."⁵ Thus, three notions - charity, redemption, and the poor — were essential components of doing God's will. By linking them together, it is safe to say that, in Vincent's mind, the Lord's desire consisted in meeting human need. Love for the abandoned moved the saint to extend a saving hand. In 1659 he saw this as proof of the divine origin of the Congregation. "Everyone in the world," he said, "thinks that this Company is from God, because they see that it runs to the most pressing and most neglected needs."⁶

The discovery of those needs took place in history. Vincent was a realist, and considered God's will to be real, palpable. It was woven in the fabric of life. "What [the saint] intends," noted José Ibañez Burgos, C.M.,

is to discover the Will of God in reality, which is harsh and demanding, and then unite himself to that Will ... His openness and fidelity to the Will of God are, in reality, but signs of his preoccupation to discover God in the history he has to live, to find out how God appears in events, and to learn how to respond to this faithful and surprising God who is so involved in history.⁷

God's providence, his will, were revealed in occurrences. In 1655, for instance, John le Vacher, a missionary in Tunis, was expelled from that city because he tried to prevent captive Christians from

⁴Vincent de Paul to a priest of the Mission, undated, *CED*, 6:393.

⁵Conference on Conformity with the Will of God, 15 October 1655, *CED*, 11:313 and 315.

⁶Conference on the End of the Congregation of the Mission, 6 December 1658, *CED*, 12:90.

⁷José M. Ibañez Burgos, C.M., "The Voluntarism of Saint Vincent de Paul," trans. by Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., *Vincentian Heritage* 6 (1985): 151 and 136.

converting to Islam. He retired to Bizerte where he found two ships of newly enslaved Catholics whom he exhorted to go to confession. Upon learning this, Vincent examined it for the divine will. "Who knows ... but that it was God's design that this little disgrace should happen to dear Father le Vacher so that he might be able to help and assist these poor Christians to put themselves in a state pleasing to God?" Although the saint admitted that the divine reason behind events was not always apparent, he affirmed that God never did anything except for a good end.⁸ One such occurrence was the Protestant Reformation. He believed that God allowed it to befall Europe because of the sad state of the clergy. As disastrous as it was for the Roman church, Vincent saw it as a divine call to renew priestly life.⁹

For him, events and human need were key elements in the discernment of God's will as it resides outside of us. There was also a third: obedience. "It is the will of God and his good pleasure," he told the confreres, "that we obey the prelates of his church, kings [and] magistrates, when they command or forbid us to do certain things."¹⁰ Although he expressed it here in terms of command and prohibition, Vincent was attentive to the *requests* of prelates and nobles. He often, though not always, saw in them the divine invitation.

Observance of the divine will concerned not only the great things of life, but also the ordinary. Applying these three elements — need, events, and obedience — to daily existence, Vincent handily summed them up for his disciples in the *Common Rules*. To do the will of God, 1) one should *obey* what was commanded or avoid what was forbidden, provided the command or prohibition came "from God, the church, our Superiors, or from the Rules or Constitutions of our Congregation." 2) In choosing among indifferent things, one ought to prefer that which was more repugnant to nature, unless that which pleased nature was *necessary*. In that case, the latter was to be preferred "as more pleasing to God." 3) One ought to accept "calmly all unexpected happenings [*events*] as coming from the paternal hand of God, whether they [were] adverse or favorable, whether they affected the body or the soul."¹¹ In short, Vincent advocated *obedi-*

⁸Repetition of Prayer, News of the Missions of Poland and Barbary, 12 September 1655, *CED*, 11:306.

⁹Extract of a Conference on Priests, September 1655, *CED*, 11:308-12.

¹⁰Conference on Conformity with the Will of God, 15 October 1655, *CED*, 11:314.

¹¹*Common Rules*, 2:3. See also Conference on Conformity with the Will of God, 15 October 1655, *CED*, 11:313-16.

ence to lawful superiors, mortification in indifferent things or submission to *necessity* (to *need*), and the tranquil acceptance of *events*.

So far, the discussion of discernment has focused on external reality. It also had an internal element — the prompting or inspiration to respond to events and needs. In his old age, Vincent spoke to the confreres about the discernment of spirits, illusions as he called them. In the *Common Rules* he commanded that

since the evil spirit frequently disguises himself as an angel of light and may even mislead us at times by his deceptions, all shall carefully guard themselves against them, and shall endeavor to learn how to recognize and overcome them.¹²

In commenting on this passage the saint outlined four ways of judging spirits. 1) Consider the substance of matter and all the circumstances that accompanied it to determine if it was good in itself. 2) If superstition was present, it was an illusion. 3) Illusions were persistent, troublesome, and made one uneasy. The Spirit of God, on the other hand, never disquieted: *Non in commotione Dominus* (“the Lord was not in the violent movement [1 *Kings* 19:11]”). Rather, it “instills itself gently into our souls and inclines us to seek whatever concerns the greater glory of God.” 4) If one was unwilling to submit an inspiration to his superior or confessor, or if one was unwilling to follow the latter’s advice, he was moved by the spirit of falsehood. For “the Spirit of the Gospel is a spirit of obedience; and to refuse to obey, is to resist the will of God.”¹³ In summary, one must judge if an inspiration involved something good; if it lacked haste and disquiet; and if it could be submitted to one’s spiritual director, who was to be obeyed.

How did Vincent arrive at all this? Did he practice it in the discernment of his own vocation before he preached it to the confreres? The following sections attempt an answer through an historical examination of the saint’s career. Attention will center, not on the discovery of his call to priesthood, but on the ministry in which he involved himself and the community he established.

¹²*Common Rules*, 2:16.

¹³Conference on True Lights and Illusions, 17 October 1659, *CED*, 12:349-50. For the same advice, see also Repetition of Prayer, 27 December [no year], *ibid.*, 12:435-36.

From Childhood to Chatillon-les-Dombes

Vincent lived at a time when entrance into the clerical state was considered a move upward in class. The procurement of a decent benefice, moreover, meant a life of comparative ease. The de Paul family already had an example of this. A relative, Father Stephen de Paul, who headed the Hospital Priory at Poymartet, a league from Vincent's home village of Pouy, lived a comfortable existence and may have had enough to assist his relations.¹⁴ By the future saint's own admission he found the condition of his family, personified in his father, a source of shame. "When I was a small boy," he told his followers,

and my father was taking me with him into town, I was ashamed to walk with him and have people know that he was my father, because he was badly dressed and a little lame.¹⁵

The priestly calling opened an avenue to a higher estate, and spared the young Vincent the grinding and financially uncertain life of a peasant farmer.

If he was to have a career in the church, he had to be educated. Fortunately, the Franciscan Friars had a college in Dax, near Pouy. He entered there in 1594 or 1595 late in his fourteenth year. Once in school, the boy was on his way up. Concomitant with moving into a higher echelon came the distancing of oneself from those in a lower one, even if they were parents. "I remember," Vincent once told Madame de Lamoignon,

that on one occasion at the college where I studied, someone came to tell me that my father, who was a poor peasant, was asking for me. I refused to go and speak to him and thereby committed a great sin.¹⁶

Obviously, the boy found the poverty of his family an embarrassment. He must have been a bright and upwardly mobile youth, for he quickly came to the notice of the district judge, Monsieur de Comet,

¹⁴Coste, *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, 3 vols., trans. Joseph Leonard, C.M. (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1987), 1:12.

¹⁵Conference on Obedience, 19 December 1659, *CED*, 12:432.

¹⁶Quoted in Coste, *Life of Vincent*, 1:14.

who became his patron. The lad took up residence in the latter's home and tutored his children while minding his own studies.¹⁷

Vincent's church career moved apace. In December 15896, because the see of Dax was vacant, he received tonsure and the four minor orders at the hands of the neighboring bishop of Tarbes. The young cleric was then fifteen. In the following year, 1597, he began a theological curriculum at the University of Toulouse. During his first year, his father died. The latter's will, dated 7 February 1598, urged the family to spare no sacrifice so that Vincent could continue his schooling. Either these sacrifices were insufficient or the youth did not wish to burden his relatives because he soon accepted an offer to direct an academy for small boys at Buzet-sur-Tarn several miles from Toulouse. He soon moved the school to the city so he could carry on his studies.¹⁸

In September 1598 Vincent was ordained to the subdiaconate and three months later to the diaconate, both times by the same bishop of Tarbes. In the following September, dimissorial letters were issued for his elevation to the priesthood, which he apparently planned to receive during the ensuing ember days, the customary time for ordination. Although the dimissorials described him as being of legitimate age (twenty-four), this was not the case. Vincent was only eighteen. Such fibs, however, were quite common among eager and ambitious clerics, and were tolerated by church authorities. The young deacon waited more than a year before accepting ordination. When the time came, he did not go to his own bishop or even to nearby Tarbes. Rather, he went more than 130 miles away to receive it from Francis Bourdelle, bishop of Périgueux, on 23 September 1600. The new priest was then nineteen, almost twenty.¹⁹ Why the delay, and why Périgueux? Although the facts may never be known, an explanation is possible. Bishop Bourdelle was old (eighty-four), blind, and famous for performing irregular ordinations. The new bishop of Dax, on the other hand, was a reformer who, after the issuance of Vincent's dimissorials and before his ordination, began to implement the decrees of Trent, including the stipulation that a priest be twenty-four. Hence, the long trip to a willing prelate.²⁰

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 1:15-20.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 1:21.

²⁰Stafford Poole, C.M., "Saint Vincent de Paul, 1595-1617," *Vincentiana* 4-6 (1984):421-22.

The circumstances of the young priest's elevation did not ruin his standing with his bishop. Almost immediately, through the good offices of his patron, Monsieur de Comet, the prelate appointed Vincent pastor of the parish in Tihl, one of the finest in the diocese. Yet he never took possession, because the appointment was contested by another to whom Rome awarded the benefice. About the incident, Louis Abelly, the saint's first biographer, said that Vincent, not wishing to enter litigation, let the matter drop because he did not want to interrupt his studies.²¹ In fact, however, he made a trip to Rome in 1600 or 1601, the very time of the dispute. In a letter dated July 1631, he wrote to Francis du Coudray, recently arrived in the Eternal City,

O Monsieur, how fortunate you are to walk on the ground where so many great and holy individuals have trod! This consideration moved me to such an extent when I was in Rome *thirty years ago* that, although I was burdened with sins, I could not help being moved, even to tears, it seems to me.²²

Although Vincent never explained the purpose of his sojourn there, Stafford Poole, C.M., has noted that it coincided with the Tihl contestation and was probably an attempt to win back the parish.²³

With the loss of Tihl, Vincent returned to his studies, his boarding school, and his hope of having an ecclesiastical career. According to rumor, the year 1605 found the young priest in Bordeaux where a patron was working to secure him a bishopric.²⁴ The effort failed. Upon returning to Toulouse, Vincent disappeared from historical view for two years. When he resurfaced at Avignon in 1607, he was in hot pursuit of a lucrative benefice and needed the help of his patron back home to get testimonials of his ordination and good standing with his bishop. His massive debts convinced him that his sorry financial condition had gone home to roost on family and friends. "It is impossible," he wrote to Monsieur de Comet, "for you and my relatives not to have been slandered by my creditors on my

²¹Louis Abelly, *La Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul, Institeur et Premier Supérieur Général de la Congregation de la Mission*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1664), 1:11.

²²Vincent de Paul to Francis du Coudray, 20 July 1631, *CED*, 1;114-15. Emphasis added.

²³Poole, "Saint Vincent," 423.

²⁴Abelly, *La Vie*, 1:14.

account.” The errant priest masked his absence during this time of mounting bills with an imaginative tale about a two year captivity in Barbary.²⁵

The picture that emerges thus far is of a man in search of advancement. It seems that his vocation consisted in getting ordained as soon as possible and securing a comfortable prebend. A bright and attractive person, Vincent quickly cultivated the friendship of a powerful local patron. Although benefactors lent him every support, the young priest’s hopes of preferment were forlorn. He sank into debt, but never quit the hunt for a benefice. Whatever discernment he may have done seems to have focused on the next step up the ecclesiastical ladder.

Things began to change, however, in 1608 or 1609, the time of his arrival in Paris. There, he took Peter de Bérulle as spiritual director. The latter was a prominent figure in the *milieu dévot*, a group of spiritual reformers. Deeply disturbed by the sad state of the church, they were committed to the religious renewal of France. The movement centered on a mystic, Madame Acarie, whose circle included, besides Bérulle, such noteworthy people as Francis de Sales, Benedict of Canfield, Andrew Duval, and Madame de Maignelay, the sister of Philip de Gondi, Vincent’s future patron. When Acarie entered the Carmelites in 1614, leadership passed to Bérulle.²⁶

Although Vincent was becoming more spiritual, he was still ambitious for a benefice. His letter home in February 1610 cited this as the reason that prevented him from coming to his mother’s side. “The prolonged sojourn,” he told her,

which I must necessarily make in this city [Paris] in order to regain my chances for advancement (which my disasters took from me) grieves me, because I cannot come to render you the services I owe you. But 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.²⁷

²⁵De Paul to Monsieur de Comet, the younger, 24 July 1607, *CED*, 1:1-13. About the veracity of this account, see Poole, “Saint Vincent,” 425-35.

²⁶Coste, *Life of Vincent*, 1:43; Hubert Jedin, gen. ed., *The Handbook of Church History*, 10 vols. (New York, 1981), vol. 6: *The Church in the Age of Absolutism and Enlightenment* by Louis Cognet et al., 10-11. For a discussion of the influence that Berulle, de Sales, Canfield, and Duval had on Vincent, see Ibañez Burgos, “Voluntarism of Vincent,” 138-51, also Luigi Mezzadri, C.M., and Luigi Nuovo, C.M., “The Directors of Saint Vincent,” *Vincentian Heritage* 6 (1985): 173-79.

²⁷V. de Paul to Bertrande de Paul, 17 February 1610, *CED*, 1:18.

Although it may strike the modern reader as strange to hear a twenty-nine year old man speak of retirement, such were the times. His desire seemed destined for fulfillment. In March or April of the same year, his friend, Charles du Fresne, the secretary of Queen Margaret de Valois, got her to appoint Vincent her royal almoner. A month later the Archbishop of Aix named him abbot of Saint Leonard de Chaumes, the Cistercian monastery in Saintes which provided him an annual income of 1200 *livres*. Abbot Vincent thought no more of going home. His position with the queen prevented it, and perhaps his relationship with Bérulle did too.²⁸

The latter introduced him to the life of virtue and schooled him in the plight of the French church. Through Bérulle, Vincent made the acquaintance of another young cleric, Adrian Bourdoise, destined to become a tireless reformer of the clergy and the saint's intimate friend. Early in 1611, the three discussed the sad condition of the French church and how best to renew the religious life of the realm. They agreed to make a ten day retreat before coming to any decision. Legend suggests that as a result Bérulle determined to establish the Oratory of France, Vincent to found the Congregation of the Mission, and Bourdoise to erect seminaries. This, however, smacks of hindsight.²⁹ Although Bérulle set up the first Oratory later that year, the other two took more than a decade to arrive at their lives' work. Whatever may have been the real fruits of that retreat, it is enough to know that under Bérulle's guidance, Vincent was becoming concerned about the *needs* of the church.

One of these was the lack of good priests in country parishes. In October 1611 Bérulle steered his directee that way. Father Francis Burgoing, pastor of the church in Clichy, several miles north of Paris, decided to join the Oratory, and Bérulle convinced him to surrender his parish to Vincent.³⁰ This marked a dramatic step in the latter's life. He finally discovered happiness, not in a wealthy prebend, but in the service peasant folk. "I was a country vicar," he later recalled,

(a poor vicar!). I had people who were so good and obedient in doing whatever I asked them that when I told them they ought to go to confession the first Sunday of the month, they never failed. They came and confessed, and I

²⁸Coste, *Life of Vincent*, 1:45-48.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 1:50-53.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 1:54.

saw from day to day the good they did their souls. This gave me such consolation, and I was so pleased about it, that I used to say to myself: “My God! How happy you are to have such good people! I don’t think the pope is as happy as a vicar with people of such good heart.” One day [the bishop of Paris, Henry de Gondy,] Cardinal de Retz asked me, “Well, sir, how are you?” I replied, “My lord, I am too contented for words. Why? Because I have people so good and so obedient to all I tell them that I think neither the Holy Father nor you, my lord, are as happy as I.”³¹

He instructed his flock with care. So much so that a theologian of the Sorbonne who went to preach at Clichy confessed, “I found those good folk living like angels, and to tell the truth, I was bringing light to the sun.”³²

Vincent remained there for only a year. For reasons unknown, in 1613 Bérulle advised him to entrust the parish to an administrator and become the tutor for the family of Philip de Gondy, Count of Joigny and Marquis of Iles d’Ores. Always docile to spiritual direction, Vincent obeyed. In addition to teaching the Gondy children, he ministered to the people on the family’s several estates.³³ This afforded him the opportunity to experience widely the religious plight of peasants. One aspect in particular — confessional practice — became a principal concern. It was brought to his attention by Philip’s wife, Frances Margaret, who took Vincent as her spiritual director. She told him when she was young, her confessor was so ignorant that he did not know the words of absolution.³⁴ The problem of ignorant confessors was compounded by the shame that often prevented country folk from telling all their sins to the parish priest.³⁵ These evils caused Madame de Gondy, who was scrupulous by nature, to worry about the religious welfare of her peasants.

A general confession of one’s past life seemed an appropriate remedy. As early as 1616 Vincent was hearing this type on the Gondy lands. In that year he asked the vicar general of Sens, the diocese in which Joigny was situated, for permission to absolve from reserved

³¹Conference on the Practice of Asking Permission, 27 July 1653, *CED*, 9:646.

³²Quoted in Abelly, *La Vie*, 1:26.

³³Coste, *Life of Vincent*, 1:57, 63-64.

³⁴Repetition of Prayer, 25 January 1655, *CED*, 11:170.

³⁵Extract of a Conference on the Mission Preached at Folleville in 1617, *CED*, 11:2.

sins because “we sometimes meet good people who wish to make a general confession, and ... we very often encounter reserved cases.”³⁶ An event at Folleville, however, brought home the full weight of the need for such confessions. In January 1617, while residing at the castle there, Madame de Gondi attended a sick man at Gannes, a few miles distant, and advised him to make a general confession. She summoned Vincent who heard the man’s sins. Afterward, the peasant, who was reputed to be one of the best living men in the village, admitted to the lady, “Madame, I was damned if I had not made a general confession on account of the grave sins I had never dared to confess.”³⁷ This moved her to have Vincent preach the following day on the need of making this type of confession. His words stirred the entire parish to penitence. So many people flocked to the confessional that he had to call the Jesuits from Amiens to help shrive and catechize them.³⁸

In the absence of evidence for Vincent’s next move, one can only speculate about his discernment. It seems, however, that this first mission profoundly affected him by bringing him face with a pressing need, the want of spiritual care among rural folk. This caused him to question his ministry with the Gondis. What, after all, was a good and able priest doing as a tutor in a noble family, especially when the work he enjoyed was being a country curate? Perhaps, too, he wanted to distance himself from the attachment the wife had developed for him. In any case, he sought the advice of his spiritual director, Bérulle, who through Father John Bence of the Oratory in Lyons got Vincent the parish at Chatillon-les-Dombes in eastern France near the Italian and Swiss borders. In July 1617, on the pretext of making a brief journey, the erstwhile tutor left the Gondi household and headed for his new post.³⁹

³⁶De Paul to Edmond Mauljean, 20 June 1616, *CED*, 1:20.

³⁷Conference on the Observance of the Rules, 17 May 1658, *CED*, 12:7-8. See also Extract of a conference on the Mission Preached at Folleville in 1617, *ibid.*, 11:4.

³⁸Conference on the Observance of the Rules, 17 May 1658, *CED*, 12:8; Extract of a Conference on the Mission Preached at Folleville in 1617, *ibid.*, 11:4.

³⁹Coste, *Life of Vincent*, 1:71, 74-75. In the foregoing, I have omitted the story of the temptation against faith which Vincent allegedly experienced. This was supposed to have been a determining factor in the discernment of his ministry. According to Abelly, when the saint was almoner to the queen, a theologian in her service underwent a severe test of faith. He sought help from Vincent, who suggested that the man simply point his finger toward Rome with the understanding that this act implied belief in all that the church taught. When this failed to bring relief, Vincent asked God to transfer the temptation to himself. So it happened. The future saint entered intense spiritual darkness. He wrote out the creed, placed it near his heart, and resolved that whenever he touched it, it was to be taken as an act of faith. He also began to visit the sick

Although evidence is sketchy for this early period in Vincent's life, several elements of his later discernment process begin to emerge. During the first years of priesthood, events prevented him from realizing his dream of a comfortable benefice. The pursuit of this elusive goal took him to Paris where he finally got a spiritual director. Bérulle, a mogul in the *parti dévot*, acquainted Vincent with the needs of the French church, and helped him discover a ministry that made him happy, that of a rural vicar. As tutor of the Gondis, the young priest got firsthand experience of the hidden spiritual destitution of peasant folk. The event of the Folleville mission brought this home with full force. Through reflection upon this incident, Vincent discerned that he belonged in a country parish where he could help simple people work out their salvation. With the approval and aid of his spiritual director, he got the pastorate in Chatillon. Thus far, three elements of discernment appear: need, events, and submission to spiritual direction.

Foundation of the Congregation

When Vincent fled to Chatillon-les-Dombes, both Philip de Gondi and his wife were beside themselves. To a friend, possibly Bérulle, the lady wrote:

I never would have believed that Monsieur Vincent who had shown himself so charitable to my soul would have abandoned me like that ... He knows the need I have of his guidance and the matters I have to confide in him ... the good I wish to do in my villages and that it is impossible to carry out without his advice ... I will do everything in my power to have him back.⁴⁰

poor in charity hospital. All was in vain. After three or four years of mental anguish, he made a strong and inviolable resolution to consecrate the rest of his life to the service of the poor. With that the temptation vanished (Abelly, *La Vie*, 3:116-19).

I disbelieve the story for several reasons. First, by Vincent's own account, the theologian's temptation ceased when he followed the saint's advice (Account of a Temptation Against Faith, *CED*, 11:32-34; Abelly, *La Vie*, 3:116-117). Second, the time frame does not square with known facts. Vincent became almoner in April or May 1610, and was at work in Charity Hospital by October 1611. This meant that the alleged temptation began sometime in between, perhaps early to mid 1611. If it lasted for three or four years, he was still suffering from it while at Clichy, a time when he considered himself incomparably happy. Moreover, if the temptation began in mid 1611, this would date his commitment to lifelong work with the poor at 1614 or 1615, while he served the Gondis. Yet he did not quit their household until July 1617, two or three years later. Such a delay is difficult to explain. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that he left, not to work with the poor, but to become a parish priest. These facts cast doubt upon, if not disprove, the incident.

⁴⁰Quoted in Coste, *Life of Vincent*, 1:89-90.

In September she addressed Vincent himself and begged him to return. “If you refuse me,” she warned, “I shall hold you responsible before God for whatever happens to me, and for all the good that I shall fail to do for want of being helped.” The woman informed him that Bérulle would soon be writing him too.⁴¹ Vincent simply encouraged her “to be submissive to the good pleasure of God.”⁴²

Not to be undone, Frances de Gondi moved heaven and earth to get him back. She had every religious community in Paris pray for this intention. She then sent Vincent a personal messenger, his old friend, Charles du Fresne, armed with letters from her husband’s brother, Henry de Gondi, bishop of Paris, from her children, from theologians, from persons of rank, and from Bérulle. The latter did not ask Vincent to return. He simply described the lady’s distress, and asked him to consider what he should do.⁴³

These representations deeply shook the curate. He went to Lyons and consulted with John Bence, superior of the Oratory, who had gotten him the pastorate at Chatillon. Bence advised him to return to Paris and there confer with Bérulle and other trusted friends, whose counsel he should follow. Accordingly, Vincent informed the Gondis of his decision to visit the capital. He knew, however, that once there, he would almost certainly be persuaded to remain. Late in November 1617 he bade farewell to his parishioners as if never to see them again. Although he assured them that he had come to town with the intention of living and dying there, he felt he must be guided by Providence.⁴⁴

He arrived in Paris on 23 December. After calling on Bérulle and others, he saw Madame de Gondi. The two came to an agreement whereby Vincent conceded to take the chaplaincy of her estates, and promised to remain with her until her death. Another part of the arrangement was the periodic preaching of missions on her lands. Almost immediately, he drew up a plan of campaign for the evangelization of the Gondi estates. Implementation began in February 1618 at the village of Villepreux. Over the next six years and using the assistance of available clergy, Vincent gave missions to the dioceses of Beauvais, Soisson, Sens, and Chartres.⁴⁵

⁴¹Frances de Gondi to de Paul, n.d. September 1617, *CED*, 1:21-22.

⁴²De Paul to F. de Gondi, September or October 1617, *CED*, 1:23.

⁴³Coste, *Life of Vincent*, 1:91.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 1:91-92.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 1:92-105 *passim*.

There is evidence to suggest that at some point he may have wanted to abandon the project altogether. It comes from a letter in 1640 to James Tholard, a confrere suffering temptations over what he heard in the confessional. To ease the man's conscience, Vincent offered in story-form advice he himself had once received. He recounted the tale of a bishop in the early church who suffered enticement while baptizing women by immersion (they were baptized naked). Several times he begged God to deliver him from these, but to no avail. Exhausted, the prelate finally lost patience and retired to the desert. There, the Lord showed him three crowns, each more precious than the other, prepared for him if he persevered. It was revealed, however, that he would receive only the least, because he lacked confidence in his maker's power to keep him from succumbing, for it was God who allowed him to be tempted in the duties of his calling. "This example," said Vincent, "which was told to me one day by a Carthusian under whom I was making a retreat at Valprofonde, toppled a very similar temptation I was suffering in the exercise of my vocation."⁴⁶

Although he said nothing further of the temptation, his statement gives a clue about what it may have involved. That it was "very similar" to the bishop's experience, indicates an attraction to females in the duties of office. The lady in Vincent's life was Frances de Gondi, to whom he was committed for life as chaplain. Her picture reveals a fetching woman. Four years his junior, she was also quite attached to him. Beginning in June 1620 her husband, who was General of the Gallies and King's Lieutenant-General in the Levant, was away at war for more than a year and a half. During his absence, she suffered within two months the loss of two family members, first her brother-in-law, Henry de Gondi, and then her son of the same name.⁴⁷ Such circumstances, no doubt, increased her dependence on Vincent. It is quite possible that he felt drawn to her. Frightened by the prospect, he made a retreat at Valprofonde to discern if he should remain in her service. Had he decided otherwise, it is very likely that the Congregation of the Mission would never have been established. So much for speculation.

Madame de Gondi wanted to perpetuate parish missions on her lands. Year after year, in redrafting her will, she left 16,000 francs to continue this work. She urged her chaplain to find a religious order

⁴⁶De Paul to James Tholard, 26 August 1640, *CED*, 2:107.

⁴⁷Coste, *Life of Vincent*, 1:118-21.

to undertake it. By his own account, Vincent went to the Jesuits, who refused the task as contrary to their institute. He then turned to others.⁴⁸ Abelly says he called upon all the orders in Paris, but time and again their superiors gave him nothing but excuses.⁴⁹

The lady's concern went beyond her own people. The spiritual destitution on her estates convinced her of the plight of country folk in general. For several years she and her husband, as Vincent recalled, seriously pondered

the fact that while the inhabitants of the cities are sufficiently provided with every spiritual assistance by distinguished doctors and good religious living everywhere in these cities, the people of the countryside, oppressed by ignorance and poverty, are deprived of this same assistance so abundant in the cities and, therefore, these people remain ignorant of the mysteries of faith necessary for salvation even to their old age. Thus they often die miserably in the sins of their youth because they are ashamed to confess them to their pastors or curates, whom they know and with whom they are familiar. In view of this, the ... couple thought that some remedy for such an urgent evil could be found in the benefit of missions which were then given in the towns and villages of their estates.⁵⁰

That various religious orders refused to undertake this work did not discourage the woman. She knew that there were priests interested in the missions, because several routinely joined her chaplain in giving them. She thought that by procuring a house in Paris, one destined for those who wished to do this work, she might lure interested clerics into continuing the apostolate, and thus her desire would be fulfilled. To this end, she spoke with her husband, who favored the plan, and the two conferred with his brother, John Francis de Gondi, who succeeded Henry de Gondi as archbishop of Paris. In view of the advantage this work held for his archdiocese, John gave the couple the Collège des Bons-Enfants as lodging for the

⁴⁸Repetition of Prayer on the Origins of the Congregation of the Mission, 25 January 1655, *CED*, 11:171.

⁴⁹Abelly, *La Vie*, 1:66.

⁵⁰De Paul et al. to Urban VIII, June 1628, *CED*, 1:45.

priests. The three then ganged up on Vincent. They spoke with him together in order to bolster themselves against the excuses he would offer. Perhaps telescoping events, Abelly indicates that the saint, out of respect for each of them, immediately caved in.⁵¹ In fact, it may have been at this point that Vincent became cautious.

He later recounted that the prospect of founding a missionary society greatly excited him, and for that reason he made a retreat. This information comes from a 1642 letter to Bernard Codoing. The latter was quite anxious to effect some project, and Vincent was trying to calm him down. "The Spirit of God," he told Codoing,

moves softly and always humbly. Remember that you and I are subject to a thousand sallies of nature. I have told you of this, namely, that in the initial planning of the Mission, I found myself in a continual preoccupation of spirit. This made me challenge that the affair came from nature or the evil one. I expressly made a retreat at Soisson in order that it might please God to remove the spirit, the pleasure, and the eagerness that I had for this affair, and it pleased him to grant my request. By his mercy, he removed from me the one and the other. He permitted me to fall into the opposite dispositions, that is, to think that if he were to grant some blessing to the Mission, I would attribute it first to him and then to the fact that I was found without scandal before him. And I desired to abide in this practice of undertaking and concluding nothing while in the ardors of the hopeful view of great goods.⁵²

It is quite possible that Vincent made this retreat before answering the Gondis. In the end, he agreed to accept the college and to select priests to work with him on the missions. Accordingly, on 1 March 1624 the archbishop made the appointment, which was accepted by proxy, Anthony Portail.⁵³

⁵¹Abelly, *La Vie*, 166-67.

⁵²De Paul to Bernard Codoing, 1 April 1642, *CED*, 2:246-47. The above is a free translation of a single run-on sentence that made difficult reading even in the original.

⁵³Abelly, *La Vie*, 1:67; Coste, *Life of Vincent*, 1:145.

Faithful to his promise, Vincent continued to reside with the Gondis. Thirteen months later, on 17 April 1625, he signed a contract with them, whereby they agreed to provide 45,000 francs in return for which he was to establish within a year a community of six priests

who, going from village to village at the expense of their common purse, would devote themselves purely and entirely to the salvation of poor people, to preach, to instruct, to exhort, and to catechize these poor country folk, and to incline them to make a good general confession of their whole past life, and without taking recompense in any manner whatever, in order to distribute freely the gifts they have so liberally received from the hand of God.⁵⁴

Two months after the agreement, Madame de Gondi died, leaving Vincent free to pursue his work. Sometime around December 1625 he left the Gondi household, and was joined at the college by Portail. The two hired a third priest, and the three began giving missions. They submitted the contract of their foundation to the archbishop of Paris, who approved it in April 1626.⁵⁵

Thus, Vincent arrived at the missionary aspect of his vocation. Safely tucked away in Chatillon, he pursued what he saw as a pressing need: the salvation of the rural poor. His benefactors begged him to return to care for the people of their lands. In this they secured the help of the bishop of Paris and Vincent's director. Authority had spoken. Vincent returned to the Gondis and began missions on their estates. At some point it seems he was tempted to give up his chaplaincy, and thereby the missions. A retreat at Val-profonde dispelled the temptation. His success with the new apostolate convinced his patrons of the plight of country folk in general. When no religious order would accept the task of rural missions (God's will in events, refusals), the Gondis including the archbishop, summoned Vincent to do the work. Because *non in commotione Dominus*, he made a retreat to rid himself of eagerness. Here are to be found four elements of discernment: need, events, obedience, and calmness.

⁵⁴Contract of the Foundation of the Congregation of the Mission, 17 April 1625, *CED*, 13:198; Coste, *Life of Vincent*, 1:145-49.

⁵⁵Coste, *Life of Vincent*, 1:157-51.

One man's discernment, however, is another's illusion. No less a light than Cardinal de Bérulle, Vincent's old advisor, wrote in 1628 (the time Vincent was seeking papal approval of the Congregation) to his agent in Rome: "The design of which you inform me and on behalf of which those who are petitioning in this matter of missions, in various and, in my opinion, oblique ways, should render it suspect ..."⁵⁶

Reform of the Clergy

If the predicament of the rural poor was bad, it was made worse by the condition of the clergy. In 1642 a cathedral canon wrote to Vincent:

in this diocese the clergy is without discipline, the people without fear, the priests without piety or charity, the pulpits without preachers, learning without honor, vice without chastisement; virtue is persecuted, ecclesiastical authority hated or held in contempt, self-interest is the customary scales in the sanctuary; the most scandalous are the most powerful, and flesh and blood have here supplanted the gospel and the spirit of Jesus Christ.⁵⁷

Another prelate recounted his failed efforts to reform his diocese. The attempts were shipwrecked, he lamented, because of the "great and inexplicable number of ignorant and vicious priests" who could not be won to virtue.⁵⁸ In 1648 Alain de Solminihac, bishop of Cahors, wrote to Vincent about the state of the diocese of Rodez after the death of its reforming bishop, Charles de Noailles. The morals of the clergy were so depraved, he said,

that when the lord bishop of Rodez was dead, they abandoned the clerical habit. Some hung their cassocks in tavern windows, others drank to his health, and those who had left their mistresses returned to them. The first act of the vicars general was to annul all the ordinances made by the prelate for the reform of his diocese.⁵⁹

⁵⁶Quoted in *ibid.*, 1:157.

⁵⁷Quoted in Abelly, *La Vie*, 2:213.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 214.

⁵⁹Alain de Solminihac to de Paul, n.d. April 1648, *CED*, 3:294.

Vincent had first hand experience of such deportment at Chatillon-les-Dombes. A parishioner recounted how the saint had changed the behavior of several old priests who kept women of ill-repute and frequented bars and gaming houses.⁶⁰

Ignorance of religion plagued the priesthood. Bourdoise reported that in a gathering of clerics, he found none who could explain a simple verse from the *Magnificat*. Some did not even know who Jesus Christ was, let alone how many natures he had.⁶¹ As recounted above, both Vincent and Madame de Gondi had discovered several priests who did not know the words of absolution. Many others were ignorant of the fact that they needed faculties for confessions and from whom to get them.⁶² In short, the clergy was in a deplorable state. The *need* was great.

Vincent's first involvement in meeting it came through Augustine Potier, bishop of Beauvais. The two frequently conversed about the sad condition of the clergy. One day the latter asked what might be done to reform priests. Vincent gave him the standard advice of those in the *milieu dévot*, namely, that it was practically impossible to restore to duty priests who had grown old in the habits of vice. One had to head off the evil by instilling the necessary spirit and virtues in a whole new generation of clerics. In July 1628, while the two men were traveling by carriage together, the happy thought came to Potier (when he dozed off on Vincent) to bring ordinands to his house for a retreat and instruction on the duties of their state. He ordered Vincent to draw up a program and carry it out at Beauvais in September. The effort was so successful the Potier encouraged his brother bishops to do the same.⁶³

In February 1631, John Francis de Gondi, archbishop of Paris, decreed that all his ordinands must make a two-week retreat before the laying on of hands. He asked Bourdoise to conduct the exercises at his house of Saint-Nicholas du Chardonnet. When the latter refused, the archbishop decided his men should go to the Collège des Bons-Enfants. Vincent was urged to give the exercises or have one of his priests do it. This was not to his liking. He objected that the Congregation had no other aim than the preaching of country

⁶⁰Report of Charles Demion on the Sojourn of Saint Vincent at Chatillon-les-Dombes, *CED*, 13:50.

⁶¹Coste, *Life of Vincent*, 1:246-47.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 1:247.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 1:116-119; De Paul to Francis du Coudray, 15 September 1628, *CED*, 1:64-66; Cognet et al., *Age of Absolutism and Enlightenment*, 6:20.

missions. (So much for obedience to the request of prelates.) Gondi had Jerome Duchesne, a professor at the Sorbonne, lead the retreat which still took place at the college. The next year, in confirming the transfer of Saint-Lazare to the Congregation, the archbishop imposed on Vincent and his successors the obligation of conducting the annual retreat for ordinands of Paris. In 1639 the decree was extended to include all clerics, of whatever diocese, residing in the city. Upon recommendation of Bishop Potier, the sees adjoining Paris began sending their candidates to Saint-Lazare.⁶⁴ Thus began the community's involvement in retreats for ordinands. It came at the command of superiors, and in response to a pressing need.

The success of the retreats, reported Abelly, greatly heartened Vincent. The latter, however, was no fool. He knew the weakness of man's will, especially under the daily grind of life. Something more was needed to fortify the newly ordained. He pondered the matter and prayed.

And behold, while he was considering these very thoughts, a virtuous ecclesiastic who had attended the exercises for ordinands in Paris came to find him, and proposed to him that he form some sort of clerical fraternity of those who had taken the exercises for orders and who had the desire to live in conformity with the sanctity of their calling.

"Vincent," said Abelly, "received this advice as coming from God."⁶⁵ Several who had recently been ordained, offered their services to him by way of thanks for their retreat. He intended to have them give a mission. In interviewing them, he spoke of the fraternity he planned to form, and asked if they would like to join. All agreed. At the first meeting Vincent explained that the purpose of the new organization was to offer mutual support to keep alive the grace of vocation. This was to be accomplished by holding weekly assemblies. Thus, in July 1633, the famous Tuesday Conferences began.⁶⁶

⁶⁴Coste, *Life of Vincent*, 1:257-58.

⁶⁵Abelly, *La Vie*, 2:245-46.

⁶⁶Coste, *Life of Vincent*, 1:265-67.

This second work for the clergy, was a logical extension of the first. Vincent pondered it in prayer, and received it from outside himself, at the suggestion of another, to whom he gave full credit for the work.

The final element in Vincent's life of clerical reform, is the one about whose origins the least is known. Exactly how he got involved in seminary work is unclear. His biographer, Abelly, says that although retreats for ordinands and Tuesday Conferences were excellent means for the revitalization of the clergy, they did not produce all the fruit Vincent desired. It was necessary to apply the remedy to the foundation of the priesthood. He decided to implement the Council of Trent's plan for the long-range preparation of priestly candidates, that is, the erection of seminaries.⁶⁷ This explanation is certainly possible. A conciliar injunction would have been sufficient to move the future saint, always an obedient son of the church. Yet there may have been more. It is possible that his friend Bourdoise convinced him that "to give a mission is like giving a poor starving man a meal, but to set up a seminary is to aim at feeding him all his life."⁶⁸ By all accounts, this fellow reformer was blunt enough to have said these words to Vincent's face. What good did it do, after all, to revitalize a parish by a mission, and leave it in the hands of ignorant, unworthy priests? In addition to Trent's plan and Bourdoise's opinion, Vincent had his own experience to draw on. While pastor at Clichy, he had run a school for clerics. Any one of these reasons, or all of them, may have given him the idea to use the Collège des Bons-Enfants as a seminary.

About 1636, four years after a sizable portion of the community moved to Saint-Lazare, Vincent threw open the college doors to children who felt called to the priesthood. It became what amounted to, in present day terms, a minor seminary. Little is known about its functioning. Trent laid down no hard and fast program of formation. Basically, it recommended a boarding school for those interested in the clerical state. They were to come at a young age - ten or twelve - and remain until ordination, more than a decade later.⁶⁹ As early

⁶⁷Abelly, *La Vie*, 1:146.

⁶⁸Quoted in Coste, *Life of Vincent*, 1:259.

⁶⁹Stafford Poole, C.M., *A History of the Congregation of the Mission, 1625-1843* (Santa Barbara, California, 1973), 84; Raymond Chalumeau, C.M., "Saint Vincent de Paul and the Work of the Seminaries," *The Evangelizer of the Poor: Saint Vincent de Paul*, eds. Rolando Dela Goza, C.M., and Reginald McDonnel, C.M. (Manila: Adamson University Press, 1985), 65.

as 1641 the saint grew displeased with the system. When Justine Guérin, bishop of Annecy, sought advice about the erection of his own seminary, Vincent recommended the admission of only older candidates who had completed the course in humanities.⁷⁰ By 1644, his dissatisfaction was complete. "The ordinance of The Council of Trent," he wrote to Codoing,

is to be respected as coming from the Holy Spirit. Experience, nevertheless, compels us to see that it has not been successful either in Italy or France in the manner in which it is carried out, as far as the age of seminarians is concerned; some leave before the time, others have no inclination for the ecclesiastical state; some again retire to religious communities, while others ... prefer to seek their fortunes elsewhere ... It is quite another thing to take men from twenty to twenty-five or thirty years of age. We have twenty-two scholars in our seminary of the Bons-Enfants, and of that number we can only see three or four who are passable, and who give hopes that they will persevere, no matter what care may be taken; and hence I infer there is reason to fear ... that this arrangement as it has been proposed will not succeed.⁷¹

Clearly, Vincent felt that it was a waste of time and energy to attempt the formation of children or teenagers.

In 1642 he got the chance to air his views to a significant church authority, Cardinal Richelieu. Vincent told him that seminaries might work better if they concentrated on forming men who were in the final years of their preparation for priesthood, those already in major orders or close to it. To his way of thinking, it made more sense to spend one's energy on clerics who would almost certainly be ordained. He envisioned a seminary that prepared them during the final year or two of study. In it, they would be formed in virtue, the practice of mental prayer, the administration of sacraments, catechetical instruction, preaching, and other ecclesiastical functions. The suggestion so impressed Richelieu that he encouraged Vincent

⁷⁰Chalumeau, "Vincent and Seminaries," 67.

⁷¹De Paul to Codoing, 13 May 1644, *CED*, 2:459.

to begin such an institute, and gave him a thousand crowns to get started. In that year the latter began the new program at the Collège des Bons-Enfants, which now housed two sets of students in separate courses of study. In 1645, he removed the young scholars to Saint-Lazare, leaving the Bons-Enfants as a major seminary.⁷²

Although the precise reason for Vincent's involvement in seminaries is obscure, it clearly sprang from the same need of clerical reform. He learned from experience (events), six years of it, how to improve on the Holy Spirit (Trent)! By reflecting on his observations, he devised an alternative system. Unwilling to act on his own initiative, he submitted the matter to ecclesiastical superiors, Riche-lieu, when the chance occurred. The later not only encouraged him, but backed him with money.

Conclusion

Clearly, Vincent's life taught him how to discern the will of the Lord. The latter revealed his plan through needs and events. One's response to these came either from calm and prayerful reflection on inspirations, obedience to ecclesiastical superiors or spiritual directors, or a combination of both. At first, events played a negative role in the saint's career, which consisted in the pursuit of a good benefice. Blocked at every turn, his search finally led him to Paris where to took Bérulle as spiritual director. This leader of the *milieu dévot* introduced him to the needs of the church. Thereafter, events took a positive twist.

Under Bérulle's guidance, Vincent discovered a meaningful ministry. The experience of Clichy surfaced his love for rural folk. This deepened during his first stay with the Gondis, whose peasants he cared for. While in the service of that family, he became aware of a new need: hidden spiritual destitution. This often resulted from a combination of human shame and ignorant confessors. The events surrounding the Folleville mission brought this into relief, and convinced Vincent that he belonged in a country parish. With the cooperation of his spiritual director, he began a pastorate in Chatillon. Madame de Gondi, however, was not to be abandoned. With the help of ecclesiastical authorities, she secured Vincent's return and had him give missions throughout her estates. Their success convinced her of the need to extend them to country people in general.

⁷²Coste, *Life of Vincent*, 1:261-62.

When no religious order was willing to undertake them, she urged her chaplain to establish a community of missionary priests. Excited by the prospect, Vincent first sought to calm himself by a retreat so as properly to discern the will of God. He then went forward with the foundation.

His involvement with the reform of the clergy was similar. The *milieu dévot* and personal experience taught him the need. His friendship with Bishop Potier provided the opportunity. At the latter's request, Vincent gave the first ordination retreat. This was the clerical equivalent of the Folleville mission. Like the latter, the saint wanted nothing more to do with it. He tried to avoid the task until the archbishop of Paris commanded him to undertake it. Authority had spoken and obedience was given. Once committed to the work, Vincent learned by trial and error, trial and success, how to expand it. Through prayerful reflection and at the suggestion of the newly ordained, he developed the Tuesday Conference. Because neither conferences nor retreats struck at the root of the problem, more was needed. Trent had recommended a remedy - the establishment of seminaries - and so Vincent began one. Experience taught him, however, that the Tridentine model was deficient. He developed his own, but implemented it only with proper approval.

The Vincentian method of discernment comprised four elements: need, event (experience), calmness, and submission to authority. The saint applied this to his own ministry and thereby came to the vocation of the Congregation. It is interesting to see in his later life how he interpreted this. As mentioned at the head of this article, the key to doing God's will was the imitation of Christ. In the twilight of his years, Vincent told the confreres,

the design of the Company is to imitate our Lord as far as poor and wretched persons can do so ... It means that the company has proposed to conform itself to our Lord in its line of action, its deeds, its employments, and its ends ... He preached the gospel to the poor. But in the course of time he chose apostles, went to the trouble of instructing, warning, and training them, and finally, animating them with his Spirit ... And so, in the beginning, the Company concerned itself only with ... the poor ... it went forth to

instruct the poor country people ... In the fullness of time [God] ... has called us to contribute towards the formation of good priests.⁷³

In short, by following the prompting of Providence, Vincent believed that he and his community had lived the very life an vocation of Jesus.

The saint's method of discernment has much to teach his twentieth century disciples. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Congregation has struggled to rediscover the spirit of its founder and to redefine its apostolate. With the advent of subsidiarity, this search has extended down to the level of the province and even the local house. Although the provisional constitutions of 1969 and the final ones of 1984 declared that the Congregation existed for the evangelization of the poor and the formation of the clergy, each made allowance for other works. While stressing this end, the new constitutions offered as an aside that the community should "always [be] attentive to the signs of the times and the more urgent *petitions* of the Church."⁷⁴ This wording considerably weakened that found in the provisional constitutions. "Faithful to Saint Vincent's special love for the poor," they read,

the Congregation will always be mindful of them. At the same time, it will look to the signs of the times and will come to know God's will in the more urgent *needs* of the Church and of the contemporary world.⁷⁵

This statement captured better the spirit of the founder, who discovered God's will in the church's pressing needs. His fulfillment of them led to the creation of the Congregation and the definition of its vocation. If the community is to remain faithful to Vincent, it must not absolutize this end, but continue to discern the divine call in the signs of the times, in needs and events.

⁷³Conference on the End of the Congregation of the Mission, 6 December 1658, CED, 12:75, 83-84.

⁷⁴*Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission* (Rome, 1984), 1:2. Emphasis added.

⁷⁵*Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission* (Rome, 1969), 1:4. Emphasis added.

While we dilly-dally with our plans, God raises up others to do what he had first asked of us.

Saint Vincent de Paul

All ships are exposed to storms but are not thereby doomed to perish.

Saint Vincent de Paul

The judge will show mercy in proportion as we show it.

Mother Seton

Can there be actual sorrow in that soul which confidently says, "My God and my all"?

Mother Seton