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VINCENT IN TRANSLATION

BY

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On 29 November 1998, many Catholic parishes in the United States will begin to use the new Lectionary for the proclamation of Holy Scripture during the liturgy, the third English version since Vatican II. The rapid growth and development of our language has necessitated a translation that is both faithful to the original biblical texts and meaningful to contemporary Christians. In an article published in the *Boston Pilot*, Fr. Sean McCarthy remarked that: "Translators have the unenviable task of making words that are thousands of years old, written to a specific audience, come alive for us today."¹

While the parallel is not exact, an analogy might be made here with the mandate of the Vincentian Translation Project, namely, to make the words of Saint Vincent de Paul, more than three hundred years old and written for specific individuals, come alive for us today. The aim of this project is to produce a complete, modern American English edition of the extant works of Saint Vincent--a daunting task indeed. Most of his writings are found in the fourteen-volume collection in French of Pierre Coste's *Saint Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Entretiens, Documents*,² published over seventy years ago. (Hereafter I will refer to this work simply as Coste.) Another, much shorter volume, *Mission et Charité, 19-20*,³ contains 144 letters and two conference outlines unknown to Coste. To date, eight volumes of these letters, talks, and documents have been translated.

A little background information may be helpful here: in response to requests to make Vincent's words available to the English speaking world, the project began in 1973 with a publication goal of five years. To expedite the work, translators were recruited from among the Daughters of Charity and the Vincentians. It soon became obvious that this method was counter-productive: the volunteers were of unequal

¹ Sean McCarthy, "Toward a Better Translation," *The Pilot* (11 Sept 1998), 4.

² Pierre Coste, C.M., *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1920-25).

³ André Dodin, C.M., ed., *Mission et Charité 19-20* (Paris: Congregation of the Mission, 1970).

language ability, and unity of style was lacking. The most proficient of these volunteers were then asked to do the entire series. In January 1983, (already ten years later) Reverend Richard McCullen optimistically stated in his preface to Volume One: "Hopefully, within the next four years or so, all of Vincent's writings will be available to us in English."⁴

This was easier said than done because, after more than twenty years of work, six volumes have yet to be completed.

Three Daughters of Charity, together with a Vincentian priest who is annotator, now compose the editorial staff; three reviewers serve as readers and consultants in the fields of French language and history, English, theology, spirituality, Vincentian heritage, Canon Law, and Sacred Scripture. The seven-hundred-page volumes are now appearing at approximately eighteen-month intervals.

If I were to ask the ordinary person "Who is Vincent de Paul?" the majority--at least those who are familiar with him at all--would probably answer that he is the "Apostle of Charity," or might mention his works for the poor. For many, he is the character so superbly portrayed by Pierre Fresnay in the film *Monsieur Vincent*. His name conjures up images of abandoned babies, galley convicts, or beggars. This perception is correct, but very restrictive.

Although Vincent is recognized as the "Father of the Poor," and the Catholic Church has proclaimed him "the Universal Patron of Charity," he has many other attributes worthy of admiration and imitation. That is why the fascination for this man persists. Well over one thousand biographers have written about him, his life and work documented in many languages. A complete bibliography of books and articles on him would encompass at least ten thousand entries.⁵ In painting, sculpture, and other creative artwork, more than four thousand representations have attempted to capture his essence.

However what Vincent de Paul did does not convey *who he was*. Many people are satisfied with a surface knowledge of the general facts--or sometimes the *fictions*--of a celebrity's life, but to say that one knows Vincent, without having read his correspondence, is to fail to understand him in any depth. The intensity and directness of what he himself has to say allow us to get to know the real man, his spiritual way, and

⁴ Pierre Coste, C.M., *Saint Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C. [vols. 1&2], Marie Poole, D.C. [vols. 3 through 8], 8 vols. (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1985), 1:page xx. Hereinafter cited as *CCD*, followed by volume and letter number.

⁵ André Dodin, C.M., *Vincent de Paul and Charity* (New Rochelle: New City Press, 1993), 118.

his organizational, charitable, and financial genius. In my more than two decades of close association with him--reading his mail, analyzing his rules, regulations, maxims, contracts, and business transactions, observing him in his frequent illnesses and in difficult situations--I have come to know not only the apostle of charity, the model priest, and the saint, but also an astute entrepreneur and an extraordinary human being.

His writings dispel the myths that have surrounded him for centuries, creating a holy card image, instead of that of a actual flesh and blood person. He was not a cradle saint but went to God gradually, with his faults and failings like all of us, while coping with the daily pressures of life in the secular world. His early ambitions led him to write to his mother from Paris that he hoped God would soon give him the means of "a comfortable retirement" with her. Quite an aspiration for a calculating young priest of 29!⁶

Key events that occurred a few years later, however, especially his direct contact with the misery of the poor, led him to see that God had other plans for him. From that time on, he took the road of "conversion," guided by Divine Providence manifested, not in any lofty, intellectual concept of charity but, in God's presence in those around him and in daily realities. (In his case, "conversion" is to be understood as a total, radical orientation toward God, rather than as a turning away from a sinful life.)

When we send a note to a friend, we usually put ourselves into what we write, and it is not intended for other eyes. In his book, *A Place in the City*, Edmund Campion, the distinguished Australian historian, quotes Cardinal John Henry Newman as asserting that "a man's life lies in his letters ... the most accurate form of biography."⁷ This applies eminently to Vincent de Paul. In his correspondence we see him *as he is* and not as others perceive him. His choice of words contributes to this, and we take great care in the translation to respect his simple vocabulary, in order to transmit as accurately as possible the nuances of his thought and of his very being. However, despite an attempt to communicate the richness of the original, the English version can fall short at times, as when there is a lexical gap or no exact equivalent in the target language.

It is estimated that Vincent wrote more than 30,000 letters. The list of his correspondents, which number close to 600, touches every class

⁶ CCD, 1:3.

⁷ Edmund Campion, *A Place in the City* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1994), 74.

of society, and his style and comments are adapted to the particular needs of each one. Today, we have less than one-tenth of his talks and writings (including about 3000 letters), but even that much is amazing when we consider that archives were not organized as they are today and that his works have survived natural disasters, wars, and the ravages of time. We also have a large number of letters to Vincent, which, in many cases, assist us to grasp a fuller picture of the persons and events that figure in this mutual communication.

The question is often asked: "How is it that all those letters have been preserved?" Perhaps it is due in part to the high rate of illiteracy in the seventeenth-century -- 71-75% of the men; 86-90% of the women. In many cases, the arrival of a letter was a rare occurrence, requiring the services of the local scribe in the marketplace to read it or to send a reply. So, letters were precious, treasured and saved by the recipients and passed on to their descendants. Those to or from important figures, such as Vatican officials, Bishops, and those in political life, were preserved in their respective archives, and copies of Vincent's mail were kept on file by his two secretaries.

Vincent's correspondence also paints for us a vivid picture of life in the "Great Century." My appreciation for him grew even more as I saw how he overcame the obstacles he faced in the pursuit of his two-fold ideal of "Mission and charity," the evangelization and relief of the poor country people. But very early into the project, it was clear to me that a basic comprehension of the historical, social, religious, and political context of seventeenth-century France was imperative for an accurate rendering of the writings. (I have learned a lot of history!) This necessitated transporting myself mentally into his milieu, where events were played out against the backdrop of an era when:

- Life expectancy was 37-45 years of age for the upper classes, and 25 for the poor;
- Almost nine-tenths of the total population resided in rural areas;
- France was still in the grip of the little ice age, whose cold, rainy weather caused continual crop failure. This precipitated destitution and widespread famine, even driving some parents to cannibalism;
- 71-75% of the men, and 86-90% of the women, were illiterate; hundreds of men, many unjustly imprisoned, provided the manpower to row the royal galleys, of which Vincent would become the Chaplain General;

- Begging and mass migration were endemic; plague, constant war, and dueling to the death ravaged the populations;
- One out of seven women died as a result of childbirth, and the infant mortality rate hovered around 50%;
- There were no state banks and very little organized charity as we know it;
- Both laity and clergy were in need of formation and evangelization.

This is the tapestry into which Vincent's life and works are woven.

Besides familiarizing myself with the world that surrounded him, I had to try to enter his interior world and to think as he would think. To do so required a perception of what it meant to be a Gascon, a characteristic that profoundly marked his personality and spirituality. The future saint was born and spent his early years in Gascony, a rural region in southwestern France, whose inhabitants had a reputation for boastfulness, bragging, exaggeration, and wit.

We should not be surprised, then, that this highly esteemed reformer and founder would later describe himself as "a wretch"⁸, "an earthworm"⁹, "a miserable old man filled with sins"¹⁰, "a farmer's son who tended swine and cattle"¹¹, "a nitwit"¹² Reading between the lines, we realize that, while genuinely humble, he was also being true to his cultural heritage in expressions that the modern reader may find somewhat implausible. His wry sense of humor and irony enabled him to poke fun at himself and to laugh at the foibles of others. Listen to this tongue-in-cheek reply to one of his young priests, who asks to go home to help his "needy old father":

Your father, who is only forty or forty-five at the most, is well and still working; otherwise, he couldn't have been recently remarried to a young woman of eighteen, one of the most beautiful girls in town.¹³

⁸ CCD, 1:30.

⁹ CCD, 4:1548.

¹⁰ CCD, 8:3153.

¹¹ CCD, 4:1372.

¹² CCD, 4:1242.

¹³ CCD, 2:781.

Regarding a young Brother's struggle to learn Italian, he remarks: "I am greatly consoled that he [Bro. Demortier] has already made such progress in the language that he knows how to say *Si, Signor!*"¹⁴

In another place¹⁵ the reader can almost catch the malicious twinkle in the eye of the lively, impetuous Gascon when he thanks a missionary for his "little report" on Madagascar; a glance at the text shows that the "little report" covers thirty-nine pages in English! Samples of his quick wit sprinkle the correspondence, diffusing many a tense situation. The translator needs to be aware of this background trait in order to avoid being too literal.

Since Gascons are also keen observers, Vincent had the rare ability to see the broad picture while, at the same time, giving close attention to specifics. For instance, when he writes to his priests who are leaving to preach on a mission, he often spells out detailed itineraries, mentioning the difficulties they may experience, and even giving recommendations regarding the climate and the mentality of the people to whom they will minister. He scolds one Superior for serving poor bread in the house.¹⁶ In reviewing the precarious political situation in Poland with one of his missionaries there, the great leader is not too sophisticated to take the time to describe in two different letters the antics of a puppy that the Daughters of Charity are minding for the Queen of Poland.¹⁷

Ideally, a translator of Vincent's works should be proficient in the languages of French, Italian, Latin, and English; seventeenth-century medicine, history, politics, religion, and geography; civil law, Canon Law, nautical and financial terms--or have experts in these areas to consult. He or she must resolve questions such as: What corresponds today to certain obsolete legal terminology of the period? What is the current status of countries or departments that have changed their names or are now different political units? Will terms such as prebend, fulmination, synderesis, or advowson require footnotes? Have any anachronisms been used? (I once labeled a part of a ship with a term that applied to a steamboat! On another occasion, a heated transatlantic debate took place over the use of the word "coffer," which one reviewer considered archaic. When the word was replaced by "safe,"

¹⁴ CCD, 6:2290.

¹⁵ CCD, 6:2216.

¹⁶ CCD, 1:269.

¹⁷ CCD, 5:1861, 1870.

another reviewer commented that it was too modern. We finally compromised on “strong box!”)

Most of us are aware that every translation is a form of treason, and often lacks the spontaneity and freshness of the original. So, although I am editor and translator, in all honesty I would advise others to read Vincent in the original, whenever possible. Having said that, I must add that the English edition represents certain improvements over Coste, and over the Spanish version completed in 1986. In what way? We have verified the location of most of the letters and corrected the citations accordingly. This updating presents a challenge because the previous locations of some letters no longer exist due to bombings, demolitions, closing of religious houses, etc., while other letters have been lost, mislaid, given away, or have disappeared without a trace. Because many of the letters were undated, Coste was obliged to insert them where he thought they fit best; on the basis of new information or internal evidence. The chronological placement of a number of texts has now been rectified. Access to originals unavailable to Coste has enabled the editors to replace excerpts from them, or to combine fragments of what were formerly considered separate letters. Updated, amplified footnotes reflect the contributions of modern studies, shedding further light on the man and his achievements.

One of our primary concerns has been how to retain the style of the original, while making it “reader friendly” to today’s audience. Vincent was not writing for publication; it is a temptation to doctor awkward or somewhat antiquated phrasing. Even as far back as 1664, four years after the Saint’s death, Louis Abelly, his first biographer, tried to “clean up” his writings, editing certain passages to improve the literary style and to portray a model priest who was saintly all his life.

Obviously, a slavish adherence to a word-for-word rendering is not translation and often reads badly, but it is not the prerogative of the translator to deliberately modify what the author intended. Our main concession in this area has been to follow standard American usage regarding punctuation and sentence structure, so as to make the text more intelligible, but without changing its substance. At one presentation, someone asked if I used inclusive language or gave a feminist slant to the work. When the context clearly allows it, inclusive language is used but not otherwise.

To preserve the flavor of the original, particular words and expressions have been retained in French. These include forms of address

such as *Madame, Monsieur, Monseigneur*; landholding titles such as *Duchesse, Seigneur, Comte*; and exclamations such as *Mon Dieu, Quoi!, Jésus!*, used frequently by Vincent and which are almost untranslatable in English. Monetary terms, such as *écu, livre, piastre*, and words that have no exact parallel in English, such as *Parlement, collège, faubourg*, have been left unchanged. On the other hand, proper names that have well-known equivalents--Brittany for Bretagne, Saint Francis de Sales for Saint François--have been put into English.

Over the years, an Australian, a Scot, an Irishman, and a Frenchwoman have been members of our staff. Because of our various nationalities we are constantly on the alert to avoid inconsistencies. Each country has its own spelling, vocabulary, and speech patterns, which vary occasionally from those of American English (-s/-z, as in realize, -our/-or as in harbor; in the use of prepositions: different to/from, acquiesce to/in, on/in the grounds). Cultural references may also differ: where we will say Muslim, they might prefer Moslem or Mohammedan. Where we might call the people of Madagascar Blacks, Australians find this pejorative. What should we say: Negroes? natives? colored? indigenous inhabitants? Our consultants offer us invaluable help but they sometimes contradict one another, so a footnote may be required to clarify ambiguous words or expressions.

Difficulties also arise when the reader has no information concerning circumstances of which the context is obscure. By way of example: in making financial arrangements with one of his priests (G. Delespigny) for the ransom of French captives in North Africa, Vincent suddenly interrupts his instructions to write:

You do not tell me for whom those two lions, which the Consul in Algiers is sending to France, are intended. . . . If he is sending them to us, with no further designation, I agree that you may make a gift of them to the King. . . . See how to present them in a manner suitable for persons of our social status.¹⁸

What is this puzzling allusion to these wild animals? Two weeks later he refers to them again: "Since the lions have been sent to us to dispose of them as we wish, do it in the way I prescribed to you. . . . I have nothing to add to what I told you."¹⁹

¹⁸ CCD, 8:3067b.

¹⁹ CCD, 8:3076b.



Pierre Coste, C.M. Portrait. Coste initially collected and edited the surviving writings of Vincent de Paul, including eight volumes of letters, four of conferences, into *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretien, Documents*.

Image courtesy of the collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute, Chicago, IL

We searched for another translation for the French *lions* (Were they stone ornaments or jewelry, perhaps?), but even the experts could not enlighten us so we had to assume that the word must be taken literally, even though the reference is unclear. In some instances, an allusion in another letter to a person or an incident may elucidate a cryptic passage, but unfortunately there are no further clues concerning the lions!

Since both French and English are living languages, new vocabulary appears, some words die, some have multiple meanings, some no longer have the same meaning (*batiment* in classical French is defined as building/boat). The context usually helps to give the correct interpretation, but to find precisely the right word in English I have spent half an hour checking seven dictionaries: bilingual, monolingual, classical, dictionaries of synonyms, legal, or financial terms--only to realize that I had lost precious time by failing to consider the word in its cognitive context. What had to be adapted was not the word in question but another part of speech that was being used with it.

What interest is there in our day to read Vincent in translation? I think we are more apt to read something available in our mother tongue. The appeal comes from the fact that, by getting to know Vincent through his writings, people from every walk of life can identify in some way with this seemingly ordinary man. That readers will relate to this man who made an extraordinary impact on religion, society, and politics by using to the full the gifts God gave him to make this earth a better place, especially for those who are poor. His letters introduce us to someone who is prayerful, intelligent, realistic, practical, and down-to-earth, who found God, not in visions and ecstasies but in his neighbor and in everyday events.

For the laity in general, Vincent is a model of charity, collaboration, and competency. Perhaps it was his deep concern for justice that impelled him to foster the promotion of men and women in both church and society. All his initiatives began with the laity, and the continuance of his works depended in large part on their participation. If he was able to accomplish so much for others, it was because of the support of a host of committed associates, whose consciousness he raised regarding the plight of the poor, and their responsibility in helping them. He envisaged with them a holistic service, joining evangelization and the alleviation of material misery--a very modern concept.

For contemporary women, it is affirming to ascertain Vincent's recognition of the contributions of the Ladies of Charity and his other female collaborators--not only the qualities of the heart ordinarily attributed to them, but also their financial and organizational skills. As late as 1600, a book, ironically entitled *La Sagesse* (Wisdom), propagated the thesis that women were biologically and morally inferior to men.²⁰ At a time when the role of women was contested and limited, their dedication found full scope in the service and evangelization of the poor under his leadership. Here again, his action was revolutionary. While Vincent would not be classified as a feminist, many authors assert that he related better to women than to men. Writing to one of his priests, he acknowledged: "And I can give this testimony in favor of women: that there is no fault to be found in their administration because they are so careful and trustworthy. . . ."²¹ Coste names about forty women, in addition to the Daughters of Charity, who were enlisted in his army of charity.

²⁰ Wendy M. Wright, *Bond of Perfection* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 24.

²¹ CCD, 4:1254.

For those who contend with pain and suffering, his valiant perseverance in giving himself wholeheartedly to God and to others, while battling frequent bouts of illness, may be an encouragement to face their own limitations with greater serenity. His sanctity did not detract from his humanness, he sometimes found consolation in discussing his many ailments with his partner in ministry, Saint Louise de Marillac. Having experienced sickness himself, he could be very compassionate toward others. When one of his young priests in Poland, far from home, was suffering from an open sore that refused to heal, the elderly Vincent, a leading personality in France, asked the Superior to pass on the following message: "Give Fr. Duperroy a hug for me, and tell him I am sending him my heart folded up in this letter, even though he has it already."²²

In an age attentive to the defense of human rights, *the underprivileged or those who work for their cause* may find in Vincent a true champion. Being a man of his time, and faced with cases of destitution that required an immediate response, he was not sensitized to the eradication of the *root causes* of poverty or to movements aimed at changing social structures; nevertheless, he insisted that charity always be accompanied by justice and respect, avoiding all paternalism and condescension. The hardships of his own peasant upbringing gave him an insider's understanding of the poor, whom he never romanticized; he was fully aware that they could be demanding and ungrateful, yet he saw in them the face of the suffering Christ. By providing them with the means to earn their own living--plows and tools for the men; spinning wheels for the women--he empowered them, as a true educator, to become agents of their own promotion. His genuine concern and attentiveness put a very human face on charity.

For those whom society has marginalized or even dehumanized, his respect for the dignity of each individual may also foster self-esteem and a sense of personal worth. In Frank McCourt's prizewinning memoir *Angela's Ashes*, the young mother, whose baby has just died, must, to her great shame, go to the St. Vincent de Paul Society to beg for a handout. As she waits in the long line with the other women, one of them sympathizes:

²² CCD, 6:2320.

'Missus . . . I think you should be sitting down, for we heard about your loss.' But another woman worries, - Ah, no, they don't like that . . . Ah, sure, the Society don't like us sittin', on the steps. They want us to be standin' respectful against the wall, . . . A door opens at the end of the hall and a man appears. 'Are any of ye waiting for children's boots? . . . Well, the boots are all gone. Ye'll have to come back next month . . . Nothing I can do . . . I'm telling ye once more, no boots.' And he slams the door behind him . . .²³

This probably fictional incident is in no way typical of the well-known dedication of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society throughout the world; such harshness would belie the respectful charity of an organization that proclaims the ideals of the "Father of the Poor!"

And what of *those in the professional arena*, striving to balance the demands of making an honest living with the responsibilities of a good Christian life? They might be surprised to discover in his writings the less-publicized aspect of his brilliance in fiscal affairs, which in no way impinged upon his fidelity in spiritual matters. From his youth he knew the value of money and/or other property, and the hard work demanded to acquire and maintain them. No stranger to insecurity and risk-taking, his shrewd peasant inventiveness continually sought new ways to finance his many charitable projects for the poor. If he were around today he would no doubt make good use of the Internet!

Translation of his financial and legal documents poses many problems: monetary values; weights and measures have changed; the legal system is complex. Yet, the work of deciphering them is well worth the energy expended because these business affairs acquaint us with the network of resources Vincent established for the poor, and for those who worked with them.

Preserving the sources of income was especially critical in an era when the throne had the power to confiscate revenue to cover its expenses, particularly to finance the constant wars being waged. Among his many obligations was that of administrator of all works of charity in Paris--for orphans, the homeless, refugees--in addition to supervis-

²³ Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 64-5.

ing the ransom of captives in North Africa and operating a mail service between them and their families. His letters speak of enormous sums of money that passed through his hands; in his incessant search for funds, he had to engineer some astute negotiations: making wise investments, property purchases, and sales, assuring the income from coach lines, managing huge farms, and fending off lawsuits.

With all the power and prestige these enterprises brought him, he always lived poorly himself, even known to sleep on the floor. His deep spirituality--he prayed three hours a day--did not hinder him from keeping his feet on the ground in the secular world, and it was in this complicated milieu that he became a saint.

From a literary standpoint, Vincent de Paul is recognized as a master in the epistolary genre and in his use of the French language. This is not to say that everything he wrote or said is exciting to translate! On occasion, his readers have criticized his manner of expression, and his vocabulary that now appears archaic, but no one can deny that he had his finger on the tempo of his time.

For me, personally, it is a privilege to converse daily with this stocky little peasant, over whom I would tower physically (he was only about 5 feet 4 inches tall), but whose sanctity, charity, and genius dwarf me. He challenges my language proficiency and my writing skills, but also my faith and my commitment to the service of others.

I know that Vincent's words risk losing their savor in another language--rather like serving canned peaches only because the succulent, fresh fruit is not available. Nevertheless, a translation, imperfect though it may be, can serve the purpose of making Vincent come alive for the contemporary reader. Because he speaks the language of love of God and of the poor, which touches the heart, his appeal is universal and timely. The availability of his works in English should inspire future generations, and our own, to pursue a deeper knowledge of this exceptional man. A man whose words and works, linking faith with life, remain very modern, and still have something to say for each of us personally and for the holistic service of our less fortunate sisters and brothers.

**We should obey willingly, punctually, gaily, promptly,
intelligently and, above all, for the love of God.**

*(Saint Vincent de Paul,
conference to the Daughters of Charity, June 1642)*