

Fall 1985

Brother Bertrand Ducournau

Stafford Poole C.M.

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

Recommended Citation

Poole, Stafford C.M. (1985) "Brother Bertrand Ducournau," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol6/iss2/5>

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

Brother Bertrand Ducournau, C.M.

Stafford R. Poolc, C.M.

An interesting, if relatively unexplored, facet of the life of Saint Vincent de Paul is the fact that his influence and impact on men was different from those on women. In a society that saw only two places for women, as wives or nuns (*aut maritus aut murus*, as the saying had it), Saint Vincent showed a genius for leading them into new roles and liberating their potential for the good of the church. His influence over men, specifically the members of the Congregation of the Mission, was more ambiguous. When dealing with timid and diffident personalities, such as Antoine Portail, he could use his strong and forceful personality to support and affirm them and eventually to bring them to a level of achievement that they could not otherwise have reached. When faced, however, with a personality as strong as his own, and perhaps intellectually superior, such as that of François du Coudray, he did not cope so well. Because of his tendency to overshadow his confreres and to favor more dependent personalities, the men who surrounded the Saint during his lifetime have escaped close study by historians. They lived in his shadow, yet quite often their lives and deeds repay close study. Such a one was Bertrand Ducournau, Saint Vincent's private secretary.

Like Vincent de Paul, Bertrand Ducournau was a Gascon. He was born in the year 1614 in the village of Amou, near the city of Dax and only a few miles from Vincent's birthplace at Pouy. He was the youngest child of a poor but virtuous family. His father was a tailor by craft but had inherited some farm land which by great personal

labor he caused to appreciate in value. As a child Bertrand made a pilgrimage with his parents to the sanctuary of Our Lady of Buglose where a few years later Saint Vincent would say Mass for his family on the occasion of his last visit to them.

His parents were illiterate and the same fate would have befallen the boy, had it not happened that a teacher from Paris moved to the region in order to establish a school. Bertrand's father took advantage of the opportunity to have his son instructed, hoping in this way to use him in his own business affairs. The boy proved an apt pupil and soon achieved a reputation for both his quick intelligence and his graceful handwriting. He began to perform secretarial services for some of the more important personages of the area. His teacher had a similar appreciation of his talents and so at the age of no more than ten or eleven, Bertrand found himself handling many of his instructor's business transactions. After a prolonged stay with his teacher, the boy returned home to work for his father.

When the young man was about fourteen or fifteen years old, his father died and he was left with precisely five *écus* as his inheritance. Very quickly, however, he began to make a good living as a secretary and amanuensis. His first employer was a notary in Saint-Jean-de-Luz who, after only three months, found that he did not have enough work to keep the young man busy. So, after paying him, he gave him a letter of recommendation to a friend in Bayonne. As a result, Ducournau secured a position as secretary and clerk to one of the most important persons of the city, a member of the great family of Duvergier de Hauranne, whose most famous offshoot was the Abbé de Saint-Cyran. His new employer had neither wife nor children and was not an easy man to please, but Ducournau remained with him for three years and was

practically master of the house. When his employer died, Ducournau continued to work for his heirs, in spite of numerous offers from other important families in Bayonne. His work during these years is somewhat obscure. Though his employer had been a bachelor and childless, Ducournau appears to have been left with the guardianship of a young girl. After about six years, when the girl was of age, she married against her parents' will and Ducournau decided to terminate his relationship with the family. He entered the service of François Fouquet, the Bishop of Bayonne, a member of one of the oldest and most powerful noble families in the realm.¹ Instead of making the young man a secretary, the Bishop appointed him as his steward. It was not a post that suited him, and after a year he returned to his former employers. The year with the Bishop, however, was marked by one of the several coincidences that eventually associated Bertrand Ducournau with Vincent de Paul. Fouquet was a Parisian and had brought with him from Paris some priests who were members of Saint Vincent's famous Tuesday Conferences. Among them was his Vicar General, Louis Abelly, later Bishop of Rodez, whom Ducournau was to help in writing the first biography of Saint Vincent.

At about this time, at the insistence of his older brother for whom he had the greatest respect, Ducournau began to think about marriage. When and how he met his intended bride is not known. What is known is that the

¹He was the brother of the famous Nicholas Fouquet, Superintendent of Finances under Louis XIII. This brother was notorious for his financial manipulation and self-aggrandizement. In 1661, after Louis XIV came to power, he had Nicholas Fouquet arrested, using as his agent a retainer named d'Artagnan, the original of Dumas' famous musketeer. After his brother's fall, François Fouquet was exiled from Bayonne and never again returned to his See.

matter went as far as the formal signing of a marriage contract. The girl's mother pressed for an early marriage but the young man was in no hurry. He had almost yielded when business called him to Paris, a city he had always wanted to visit. His employer's brother had died and left a large legacy. He was chosen to accompany the family's procurator to Paris to arrange the inheritance. Bertrand never saw his native province or his fiancée again.

One of the first persons Ducournau contacted in Paris was Jean Duvergier de Hauranne, the Abbé de Saint-Cyran, the most famous of the French Jansenists, who was also his employer's brother. The Abbé took a liking to the young man and secured him a position as secretary to the Intendant of Catalonia, which in 1640 had accepted the rule of the French King, Louis XIII. He accompanied his new employer to Catalonia but a change in political fortunes forced them to return almost immediately. The Marshall de Brezé, the former governor of Catalonia, wanted Ducournau to enter his service but Saint-Cyran dissuaded him. Staying with his original employer, Bertrand accompanied him on a trip to Languedoc. While there he consulted frequently with a Franciscan priest whom he had taken as a sort of director of conscience. To Ducournau's surprise, the good father strongly suggested that he had a religious vocation, something to which the young man had never given any consideration. The Franciscan would not even accept the marriage contract as a valid excuse. Still in a dilemma over the Franciscan's advice, Ducournau determined that on his return to Paris he would seek and follow the counsel of Saint-Cyran. On his arrival, however, he discovered that the Abbé had died October 11, 1643. He always considered it a special providence of God that he had not consulted with Saint-Cyran for the latter would almost certainly have directed him away from the Congregation of the Mission. He then

consulted two other theologians, who told him the same thing that the Franciscan had. One of them told him that he should join a new company, one that was still in its first fervor. Bertrand was now determined to embrace some form of the religious life.

Not long after this a friend of his, who had made a retreat at Saint-Lazare, told him about Saint Vincent and the work of the Congregation of the Mission, which he praised highly. The friend had made a retreat there and said that "those who belonged to that Community lived like saints, they had holy conversations, they spoke there only of God and received great graces and blessings." Ducournau decided that he would make a retreat at Saint-Lazare and persuaded his friend to take him there. On the day appointed, however, his friend did not show up and Bertrand appeared at Saint-Lazare by himself. He was welcomed at the house and made an eight-day retreat. By its conclusion, he had resolved to enter the Congregation. He had an interview with Saint Vincent who promised to receive him into the Community. When he informed his employer of his resolution, the latter asked him to stay on briefly to finish some business. When Ducournau communicated this to Saint Vincent, he received the answer, "Let the dead bury the dead." He immediately took leave of his employer and entered Saint-Lazare as a brother candidate on July 28, 1644.

He also wrote to his prospective mother-in-law and her daughter, informing them of his decision and telling the young lady that if he had it within himself to get married, she would have been the only one. Not long after, she married a rich young man of the town.

The new brother's first employment was in the kitchen. That lasted about three weeks for his skills as a secretary were needed elsewhere. Until 1645 Saint Vincent had written most of his own letters or, if necessity

demanded, had Father Antoine Portail help him. His volume of correspondence had increased to such an extent that a secretary was indispensable and Saint Vincent chose his fellow Gascon for the work. The first letter written in Brother Bertrand's hand is to Jacques Chiroye, May 3, 1645. In the following year Brother Louis Robineau was delegated to assist him.

The choice of Brother Bertrand as the Saint's private secretary was providential both for the Congregation of the Mission and for future historians. As Pierre Coste has pointed out, far more than anyone else at Saint-Lazare he understood what Saint Vincent would mean for posterity. To his boundless personal devotion to Saint Vincent Brother Bertrand joined a zeal for preserving everything that the Saint wrote and said. Vincent sometimes entrusted him with special tasks, both of a commonplace and a sensitive nature.

One of Ducournau's most important contributions was his initiative to have Saint Vincent's conferences to the Priests of the Mission transcribed and kept for posterity. The Daughters of Charity, of course, had been far ahead of the priests in this regard. They had made the first steps toward copying down his conferences in 1634 and had done so continuously since 1640. Ducournau had very quickly seen the importance of the Founder's conferences for future generations, but unfortunately his interest was not shared by others in the Congregation of the Mission. After many years of silent anguish, he finally presented a memorandum to Father René Almeras, the Assistant Superior of Saint-Lazare (August 15, 1657). It was a rather lengthy document that gave the reasons for and against any attempt to transcribe Saint Vincent's conferences. "The best legacy of parents is the good instruction that they leave to their children." For the Missionaries who had known Vincent not to leave his

words to their successors would be “an irreparable wrong.” Answering the objection that M. Vincent spoke mostly about ordinary things, Brother Bertrand wrote that “everyone knows that it is yet with a force that is not ordinary.” He then went on to suggest the means by which this could be done. These were not easy. One or two persons with good memories were eventually commissioned to write down the conferences after they had been given. They were to compare notes and try to arrive at an accurate transcription. Ducournau himself had offered to do this on condition that he be released from his job as secretary. This was refused on the valid grounds that Saint Vincent would never have agreed to it. Despite this, Brother Bertrand did most of the copying himself.

The result was three manuscript volumes, all the originals of which have been lost with the exception of one conference of May 30, 1659. Fortunately copies were made and it is on these that the published conferences are based. It is to be regretted that Ducournau’s suggestion was not made or adopted many years before. The published conferences of Saint Vincent to the priests date from only the last three years of his life. They are a minute sample of his years of instruction to them. Thus there is no way of tracing the development of his spiritual teaching to the Congregation of the Mission over a number of years as there is with the Daughters of Charity. Still, Brother Ducournau earned everlasting gratitude for his work in preserving what we do have of Saint Vincent’s conferences.

He was equally instrumental in preserving the two famous letters in which Saint Vincent recounted the tale of his captivity in Tunisia. These letters, written in 1607 and 1608, had lain unknown in the archive of the Comet family, the heirs of Saint Vincent’s benefactor in Dax. In 1658 they were rediscovered and an old friend of Saint

Vincent's, the Canon de Saint-Martin, sent him copies in the expectation that his friend would enjoy rereading the story of his youthful adventures. Saint Vincent's reaction was just the opposite. He destroyed the copies and desperately begged the Canon to send him the originals. Brother Bertrand, to whom the letter had been dictated, added a postscript warning the Canon not to do so because the originals would then surely be destroyed. He also arranged for copies to be sent to the three Assistant Generals of the Congregation. Saint Vincent died without ever having recovered the letters. Ducournau had also written to the Canon de Saint-Martin in an attempt to find out information about Vincent's early days in Dax, where and when he was ordained to the priesthood, how he came to Paris, and similar items. It can be surmised that Brother Bertrand was already looking forward to the day when Vincent's biography would be written.

In the years following Vincent's death, Brother Bertrand used to describe him as "an incomparable man" and to say that he considered all other men, in comparison with Saint Vincent, half-men and pygmies in virtue and wisdom. He soon adopted the custom of doffing his hat whenever Vincent de Paul's name was mentioned. An accomplished poet, he wrote verses in praise of M. Vincent's virtues and a long panegyric in 1672. The esteem was reciprocal, for Saint Vincent had the highest regard for his secretary.

Ducournau was equally esteemed at Saint-Lazare for his charity, sanctity, and amiability. He often engaged in long spiritual conversations with the other brothers. In time he became their advocate before their Superiors and often intervened in favor of individuals who were in difficulties.

After Saint Vincent's death, Brother Bertrand continued to act as secretary for his successors, Fathers Almeras and Jolly, and as archivist at Saint-Lazare. One of

his most important tasks was that of helping Abelly write the first biography of Saint Vincent. He acted as secretary and researcher for the Bishop of Rodez who wrote that he “set all these memoranda in order and arranged them in such fashion that I can truthfully say that I have done scarcely anything but transcribe what they gave me....” Of these later years, however, relatively little is known in detail. On Christmas day, 1676, Brother Bertrand was attacked by his final illness. After suffering a series of hemorrhages, he died on January 3, 1677. He was sixty-two years old and had spent thirty-three years in the Congregation of the Mission.² Shortly before his death, he had asked the Superior General, Father Jolly, permission to make “the great voyage to eternity.” The reason was that some years before Father Almeras, who had great need of Brother Bertrand, had told him not to die before him without receiving permission. He was buried in the church of Saint-Lazare.

Brother Bertrand’s tomb was lost in the final demolition of the church at the beginning of this century. He left, however, a far greater monument in the records and words of Saint Vincent that have survived because of him.



²Father Jolly, in his letters to Superiors announcing Brother Bertrand’s death, gave his age as sixty-three. He was apparently following Saint Vincent’s style of giving an age as the year that one had entered, not completed.

God be praised because you are ready to do always and everywhere His most holy Will and to go and live in whatever place He is pleased to call you! This is the disposition of good servants of God and of truly apostolic men who are attached to nothing. It is the distinguishing mark of genuine children of God who are always free to respond to the designs of so good a Father.

St. Vincent de Paul

A maxim of the saints says that when an important work of the Church is undertaken after many prayers and counsels, it must be believed that is God's Will that it be accomplished and any proposals contrary to that resolution should be rejected as diabolical temptations.

St. Vincent de Paul



Oh, be with me and I shall be whole. Comfort Thy servants whose trust is in Thee, bend our minds to Thy Will, enlarge us with Thy grace, sustain us with Thy blessing, until through the gate of death and the grave we pass to our joyful resurrection.

Mother Seton

We must submit ourselves to the ordinances of Providence, as rude instruments in the hands of a skilful workman. God leads us to find our welfare where we expect to meet with detriment.

St. Vincent de Paul