
Spring 1985

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Recommended Citation

Davitt, Thomas C.M. (1985) "Humanness in a Saint," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol6/iss1/1>

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Humanness in a Saint **

Thomas Davitt, C.M.

“Saints must not be reduced to plaster statues, to colorless figures always first in the class and never singing a wrong note.”¹ This idea is now generally accepted, but there is another way in which an author can convey, perhaps unconsciously, the impression that there is not much common ground between his subject and his readers. In the case of St. Vincent it is the barrier-like effect of the titles Founder of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, Apostle of Charity, Great Saint of the Great Century, or, even more grating, The Holy Founder. These verbal walls tend to suggest that we cannot come too close to the late Rev. V. de Paul, CM, our deceased confrère. St. Louise provides the corrective to this. On 6 June 1648 she wrote to Sister Jeanne Lepeintre in Nantes:

Fr. Vincent says you may go to confession to him. But remember, no matter how good he may be — even if he were a saint raised up by God — you must be careful about becoming too familiar with him. My Sisters, you know how dangerous this is and what trouble it can cause in the Community, and how difficult it is to be rid of the evil once it has entered through the door.²

**“Some Less-publicised Facets of Saint Vincent” appeared originally in *Colloque, A Journal of the Irish Province of the Congregation of the Mission*, 5 (Spring 1982), 14-23. It is reprinted here with the permission of its editor but with a new title and some incidental editing.

¹Franco Molinari in the Introduction to Mezzadri and Nuovo: *San Vincenzo de' Paoli—Pagine Scelte*. (Rome: CLV, 1980), p.4.

²Sainte Louise de Marillac, *Ecrits Spirituels* (Tours: Mame, 1983), No. 249, pp. 244-245.

Vincent was sixty-eight at the time but Louise thought it necessary to remind the Daughters that he was still a man, and like them we also need to be reminded of this. Behind the Saint there was a man, behind the Founder, a confrère. Keats in one of his letters wonders what position Shakespeare was seated in when he began to write *To be, or not to be...*; he was trying to reach the man behind the Famous Author. There is plenty of material to let us get to the man behind the Saint and Founder, but authors and anthologists don't seem to publicise it. Abelly mentions an occasion when Vincent and a companion were served tasteless fish in an inn and Vincent called for some oil to give a bit of taste to the meal. Then, thinking he may have scandalised him, he apologised to his companion.³ Abelly relates this because he thinks it interesting that Vincent apologised, but it is far more interesting that Vincent wasn't going to put up with tasteless fish. He could be annoyed with people also; in 1638 he wrote to St. Louise:

I'm annoyed with Fr. Dehorgny that he went off down the country without letting you have any money. Send word to me if you need any. I have the key of the safe but have no time to go and get it. I've never been busier....⁴

In a letter to François du Coudray in 1634 he refers to simplicity as

... the virtue which I love most and to which, it seems to me, I pay most attention in my conduct.⁵

Five years later, in writing to Louise about her son Michael, who was at the Bons-Enfants, he says he will

³Louis Abelly, *La Vie de S. Vincent de Paul*, livre III, chap. XII, sect. I.

⁴Pierre Coste, *Saint Vincent de Paul, Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents* (14 vols., Paris: Gabalda, 1920-1924), vol. I, p. 518.

⁵*Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 284.

send over there to see how things are but without letting it be known that that is what he was doing.⁶ The following year he writes to Lambert aux Coutcaux that Louise would like Lambert to make a detour to Angers and under the guise of a casual visit conduct a visitation.⁷ Two years later he was making a visitation of the Ursulines in Beauvais and wrote from there to Bernard Codoing in Rome. He mentions that funds for the work of the ordination retreats in Rome were being provided by the Duchess of Aiguillon but that it would be better if Codoing did not let their origin be known since her uncle, Cardinal Richelieu, was not then popular in Rome.⁸ In the 1634 letter referred to, he had added that he had made progress in this virtue of simplicity.

He had quite a share of scepticism about people. One of the reasons he wanted something like a vow of stability for the Congregation was to save it from those who joined in order to get educated at its expense and left it after ordination.⁹ In 1658 he wrote to Edme Jolly, Superior in Rome:

I'm glad you always have plenty of people on retreat. You should be aware that quite a number of people, on pretext of making a retreat, come only for the food. There are those who are quite content to put in a quiet seven or eight days at no expense.¹⁰

A student in Saint-Lazare had a brother in Le Mans who showed interest in joining the Congregation. Vincent,

⁶*Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 584.

⁷*Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 67.

⁸*Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 271.

⁹*Ibid.*, vol. IV, p. 133.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, vol. VII, p. 376.

when writing to the Superior in Le Mans, suggested that perhaps the young man wanted merely to see his brother, or to see Paris, or both.¹¹

He recognised that confrères needed from time to time to be jolted back to reality. In November 1658 he refused an attempt as “passing the buck” by Edme Menestrier, Superior in Agen:

It's not through humility that I decline to see the Bishop of Agen about your house but in order to do things properly, in other words the Superior of each house informs the bishop of the diocese in which it is about its temporal needs....¹²

At the opposite end of the scale was Jean Thibault, whose thirst for power was “beyond imagination.”¹³ In 1659 he mentions something similar in a letter to Jacques Pesnelle, Superior in Genoa:

...you are right in saying that those who take over in his (the Superior's absence) have difficulty on his return in yielding, and in giving up the habit they've got into of running things and giving orders....¹⁴

In his diary, under the date on 15 September 1660, twelve days before St. Vincent's death, Jean Gicquel gives an account of a Council meeting about the appointment of a successor to St. Louise as Mother General. He quotes Vincent as saying to Jean Dehorgny, who was Director of the Daughters:

Fr. Dehorgny, you will assemble them together, and after the conference you'll announce to them the choice God has made of

¹¹*Ibid.*, vol. VII, p. 227.

¹²*Ibid.*, vol. VII, p. 335. [¶]

¹³*Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 292.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, vol. VIII, p. 48.

our Sister (Margu rite Ch tif) as Superior, telling them beforehand that they will kiss her hands as a sign of acceptance and she will embrace them; and you will keep an eye on the faces and expressions of the Community, above all of the two or three office-holders who were, perhaps, thinking that they would be appointed.¹⁵

All his life he had been realistic about people. In 1655 he wrote to a confr re who was a professor in Le Mans:

There are some people so warped that even if they had a St. Thomas to teach them they would still show their real selves.¹⁶

A week earlier he had written to another confr re:

We must never be surprised when the men on whom we counted most let us down.¹⁷

On a lighter note, in 1658, he told the Superior in Saintes:

In future missionaries who stop off at your house are to stay only one or two days if they have not been told, or if they have no reason, to stay longer, and you'll do well to let them see after that that they should move on to where they are supposed to be going.¹⁸

His attitude to the poor is famous, but what is not so well-known is that he was not indiscriminate. In 1650 he wrote to the Daughters of Charity in Valpuseaux:

That poor man came yesterday morning to collect his things at the door without either coming in or speaking to anyone except the porter. You can rest assured, Sisters, that you'll never see him down there (in Valpuseaux) again with my consent; and, if he is

¹⁵*Ibid.*, vol. XIII, pp. 180-181.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, vol. V, p. 446. ✻

¹⁷*Ibid.*, vol. V, p. 436.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, vol. VII, p. 57.

so unthinking to go back, I ask you to let me know immediately so that I can see to his removal. I don't think he'll ever come to see me again, for which I'll be very grateful.¹⁹

Crowds of poor people used to come to Saint-Lazare each day, and Abelly says that sometimes one could see up to five or six hundred. Two or three years before his death Vincent stopped giving out alms or food at Saint-Lazare when the city authorities forbade it after the founding of the General Hospital in an attempt to rid Paris of beggars. Some of the poor complained to St. Vincent, saying "Didn't God command that alms be given to the poor?" His answer to that was, "True enough, my friends, but he also commanded us to obey the civil authorities." During a subsequent very severe winter he relented in the case of some extremely poor families.²⁰ Also, he did not think that the locals should be allowed to plunder the Saint-Lazare crops, and in 1644-45 he applied to the civil authorities for permission to cut down and sell some timber in the Rougemont farm in order to raise some money to finance the rebuilding of the ruined walls of Saint-Lazare so that the locals could be kept out. They used to come in at night at harvest time and steal up to one third of the crops.²¹ In July 1652 he made two requests for a military guard for the Rougemont farm.²² In July 1648 he was seeking a different kind of protection for Saint-Lazare, protection against unauthorized encroachment of house-builders on one side of the property.²³

¹⁹*Ibid.*, vol. V, p. 594.

²⁰Abelly, *op. cit.*, livre III, chap. XI, sect. III.

²¹Coste, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 539, text and notes, and p. 555.

²²*Ibid.*, vol. IV, pp. 431-432.

²³*Ibid.*, vol. III, pp. 339-340 and vol. XIII, p. 848.

On 15 May 1658 he wrote to Edmond Barry, from the diocese of Cloyne, who was Superior in Notre-Dame de Lorm:

The people of Brial and Falquières are right when they complain that they never see you except when there is money to be collected.²⁴

But Vincent knew that money was necessary and had to be properly used. In 1637 he told Louise that a foundation had to be properly funded because in fifty years time inflation would have cut the value of money in half.²⁵ In 1649 he wrote to Antoine Portail in Marseilles about the difficult financial situation of both the Orsigny farm and Saint-Lazare, saying that Saint-Lazare was unable to come to the aid of the Marseilles house and wondering whether more confrères in Marseilles should sign on as chaplains to the galleys in order to bring in the salaries.²⁶ Eight years later he wrote to Jean Chrétien, Superior in Notre-Dame de la Rose:

Isn't it right that Saint-Lazare, which forms men in order to supply them to other houses when they are needed, should be helped to bear the expense of this?²⁷

Guillaume Delville was staying in Arras in 1657, apparently in connection with some works of the Daughters of Charity. He also seems to have been in contact with young men who were showing interest in joining the Congregation, but he told Vincent that he has

²⁴*Ibid.*, vol. VII, p. 152.

²⁵*Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 194 and vol. VIII, p. 623.

²⁶*Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 417.

²⁷*Ibid.*, vol. VI, p. 162.

taken a resolution not to send any such men to Paris unless they have earned some certificate of education. St. Vincent told him to keep to that, and to add to it

...anyone who cannot initially equip himself, for we cannot supply all who enter the seminaire with soutanes, dressing gowns, cloaks, hats, slippers, etc.²⁸

So, he adds, when Le Grand, Masson, Caron and the other two have their certificates “valid and approved,” and at least 20 *écus* for their clothing, they can be sent on to Paris if suitable.

There is an earlier letter to the same *confrère* the previous year, and in a footnote Coste gives a long passage which he says is not in the original but appears in one copy:

The least they can do is to bring sufficient to clothe themselves for the first time, and we make a great effort to assume all the rest of their expenses up to the time they are ready to be of some use, which are not too heavy. You couldn't believe the expenses we have and the difficulty we have in carrying the burden. I have the bursar of the house on my back telling me what he owes and what he has not got. But the fact remains, Father, that we cannot make the reduction you ask for, except in favour of the less well off from whom we will accept 20 *écus* (60 *livres*); but as regards the rest, they must bring not less than 100 *livres* all told for their clothing. It is right that they should make this effort; it's not certain that they will stay with us, as frequently some leave after having been supported for five or six years in their seminaire and studies, in this way making such expenditure profitless for the Congregation.²⁹

Shortly before this, in the same year, he had written to an unnamed *confrère* about postulants for the Daughters of

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²⁸*Ibid.*, vol. VI, p. 533.

²⁹*Ibid.*, vol. VI, p. 70, n. 5

Charity; they were to bring enough money for their first habit, and also enough to pay their return fare home if they were judged unsuitable for the Community.³⁰

As well as Saint-Lazare the Bons-Enfants had money problems of a slightly different sort, as Vincent wrote to Louis Thibault in Saintes, “if he is still there,” in 1646:

There is no place at all in Paris where the fees are lower than ours, nor is there anywhere the boarders are better treated, and as a result of this we have to put up with great inconvenience, God knows.³¹

One of the aspects of the use of money about which Vincent held rather strong views was any attempt to bind any house of the Congregation to submit an account of its financial affairs to a bishop or anyone other than the Visitor. In 1652 a senator in Genoa was willing to give money to the house in the city, but with such a condition attached to the gift. On 5 July Vincent wrote to the Superior in Genoa, Etienne Blatiron:

...to give an account to anyone other than the Visitor of the money he (the senator) will give you is something we cannot do, and I have never been willing to accept such a condition, not even for the Saint-Lazare property. When we took that over the Archbishop of Paris brought us there and wanted to oblige us to give him an account, as the former religious used to do, but I told him we'd prefer to leave the place; and no matter what anyone could say to me God gave me the grace to stand my ground. My reason was that as we go on missions from one place to another it's almost impossible to note down in detail the different expenses we incur, and in view of this difficulty, in order to draw up an account it would be necessary to suppose payments which we had not made, in place of the actual ones which we had not written down....³²

³⁰*Ibid.*, vol. V, p. 635. ■

³¹*Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 603.

³²*Ibid.*, vol. IV, p. 417.

Three weeks later he wrote to Patrick Walsh,³³ who had been stationed in Genoa since 1647, on the same subject and went over the same line of argument about Saint-Lazare, ending up with:

The idea, Father, of missioners when they are down the country on missions keeping an exact account of all the small things they buy!³⁴

Ten days before his death, St. Vincent is still maintaining the same line, this time with the Archbishop of Narbonne who wanted to hand the running of his seminary over to the Congregation; once again the argument about Saint-Lazare is used. The Archbishop also wanted to reserve to himself the right to dismiss members of the Congregation from the seminary staff, but Vincent told him that other bishops were content to leave that matter in the hands of the Congregation's Superiors, and he added:

Your Excellency would greatly oblige us if you drew up the deed of agreement in the same way as the other French and Italian bishops have done.³⁵

Towards the end of 1659 Denis Laudin, the Superior in Le Mans, was considering some scheme about obtaining a better income from rents or leases and asked Vincent for his advice. Vincent replied that he cannot advise him to act in one way or the other, there being reasons for and against. The point at issue seems to have been the

³³Patrick Walsh was born in Limerick in 1619 or 1621. He entered the Congregation of the Mission in Paris in December 1644, was ordained in 1646, and from 1647 to 1652 and from 1656 to an unknown date he was in Genoa; his other appointments are not known, nor is the date of his death.

³⁴Coste, *op. cit.*, vol. IV, p. 137.

³⁵*Ibid.*, vol. VIII, p. 451.

exclusion of some third party so that Laudin could deal directly with the tenants, and Vincent warned that if the latter

...indicate that they would prefer to deal with you rather than with him, it is because they expect you to deal with them more leniently, that you will give them a reduction, that you will not press them and will not cause them any expense. However, you will be able to obtain satisfaction from them only by dint of threats and seizures, and the easier you are with them the less they will pay you. And if you exert some force, no matter how little, they will say that you are treating them more cruelly than a *fermier général*,³⁶ and they will spread it around that you are avaricious, and pitiless, merciless tyrants. That is how ordinary people, especially the poor, treat priests, imagining that the clergy should not look after their own interests.³⁷

In June 1656 Louis Rivet, Superior in Saintes, is told:

We cannot give you any brother for your garden; make use of workmen, as we do here.³⁸

A year later, almost to the day, Firmin Get is given the same advice, and told that in Saint-Lazare there are workmen employed in the kitchen and in other jobs, and

The Carthusians have several, and a Barnabite Father was telling me yesterday that in their colleges they have the humanities classes taken by outside teachers whom they hire.³⁹

He adds that it is also very expensive to send a brother from Paris to Marseilles, and anyway he hasn't got a

³⁶A *fermier général* was one of a group of forty men whose business was "to make a forecast of the yield (in taxes) and, if their estimate was accepted, pay the State accordingly, after which they dealt directly with the taxpayer, retaining the balance for themselves." (Cf. Ritchie, *France—A Companion to French Studies* [London, 1961], pp. 155-156.)

³⁷Coste, *op. cit.*, vol. VIII, p. 200.

³⁸*Ibid.*, vol. V, p. 628.

³⁹*Ibid.*, vol. VI, p. 316.

suitable one to send. In 1659 and 1660 he mentions in letters that he is not accepting any more young men who want to become brothers because there are too many brothers in the Congregation.⁴⁰

As well as priests and brothers, Vincent also had seminarists and students to deal with. In 1642 he dismissed a seminarist who then threatened to kill him and set fire to Saint-Lazare. Vincent told this to Bernard Codoing in Rome, adding:

Our Lord gives me strength to run this risk rather than to accept into the Congregation someone who had led the sort of life in it that he did.⁴¹

In 1658 Denis Laudin, Superior in Le Mans, had a troublesome student who was taking liberties, unspecified. Vincent commented that tolerance towards him would encourage others to do the same, so he suggests something like depriving him of wine at table, or something else which he will feel; if that has no effect, he could be locked up in a room, if there is a suitable one like there is in Saint-Lazare. He cannot be dispensed from his vows because there is no real reason to do so, since his problem might be mere youthful high spirits. St. Vincent then adds:

Perhaps, seeing himself under pressure, he will break down completely; if that happens, I'll be very sorry, on the one hand because of the good he would be able to do in the Congregation and the danger he will be in if he leaves it against his vow. But, on the other hand, it will be a relief for it to be rid of someone incorrigible.⁴²

A seminarist was dismissed on completion of his seminaire because he had no aptitude for study,⁴³ but the normal

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, vol. VII, p. 48⁵ and vol. VIII, p. 287.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 323.

⁴²*Ibid.*, vol. VII, p. 210.

annoyed and insulted Le Vazeux who then called him *archisot*, which might be rendered “superclot.” The thing escalated from there on, with Vincent sending in Thomas Berthe to handle the Congregation’s interests.⁴⁷ Some months later Le Vazeux was replaced as Superior by Mark Cogley, from Carrick-on-Suir.⁴⁸ In 1652 he had claimed in a letter to Vincent that the Congregation’s vows were null and that it was a mortal sin either to take them or to renew them.⁴⁹ Jean Gicquel in his diary, under the date of 19 September 1660, eight days before Vincent’s death, has an account of a Council meeting. Jean Watebled, Superior of the Bons-Enfants, asked for the removal of Le Vazeux because he was a source of trouble all the time, being undisciplined, slanderous, constantly complaining and always going out. Vincent suggested that he should be prayed for and that he should be invited to come and join in the Saint-Lazare retreat which was just beginning. He was told that Le Vazeux was surprised that others less troublesome than himself had been dismissed, and he had become suspicious. He had asked Watebled to bring Vincent a letter asking to be allowed to leave the Congregation because his father was very old and the family was being ruined because it had no defender; secondly, because he always had “a horrible aversion to our vows which he believed must be the ruin of the Congregation;” his third reason was that he couldn’t keep the rules and that he had had no peace for the previous eight months. St. Vincent agreed to his departure so that he could find his peace. Gicquel adds:

Fr. Vincent for the next four or five days repeated several times at each meeting, “What a reason for thanking God for having rid us, etc!”⁵⁰

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, vol. VII, pp. 79-82.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, vol. VII, p. 255, n. 2.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, vol. IV, p. 347.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, vol. XIII, pp. 186-187.