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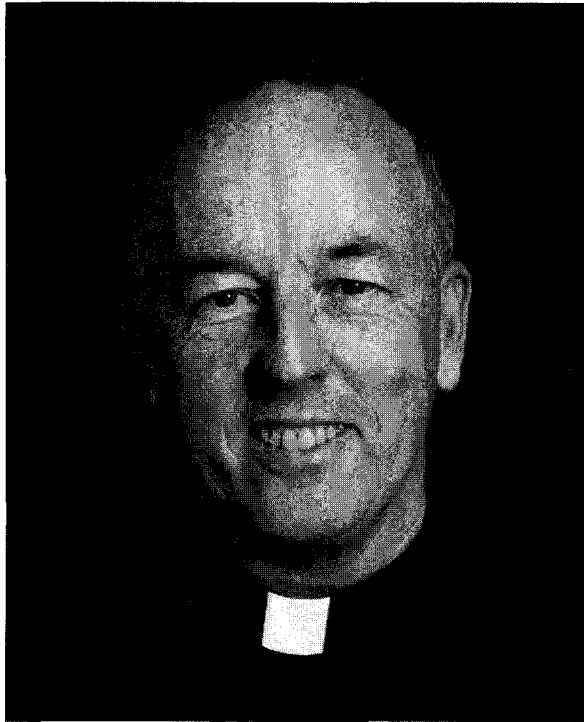
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Vincentian Simplicity: A Core Leadership Trait

BY

THOMAS MCKENNA, C.M., S.T.D.



Thomas McKenna, C.M., S.T.D.
Courtesy of The Hay-Vincentian Leadership Project

In the late 1980s, William Thompson wrote a book on the saints whose title, I think, points to a key reason for our interest in the life of any holy person. He calls the saints "Fire and Light," and says that they are celebrated because they can illuminate saving pathways and fire up our motivations to follow those paths. The phrase he used to describe his method was "a consultation of the saints." If consulted in a sympathetic and critical way, they can provide warmth and light for walking, particularly in cold and dark places.

That is how I conceive my brief task here: to perform a consultation of one saint, Vincent de Paul, on a present cultural difficulty which has relevance not just for personal life but more so for institutional existence, particularly in the aspect of leadership.

In line with Vincent's penchant for collaboration, I would also like to bring in another saint from the Vincentian tradition, Elizabeth Seton. There is a general resonance between the two, and in particular a certain harmony to the issue at hand. I suspect this to be one of the reasons why Elizabeth, two centuries Vincent's junior, felt so drawn to the saint and his ways.

The Concern

I would like to consult these saints about the societal concern of what I call "the truthful connection." More than one commentator has noted the struggle in our increasingly cyber-linked society to find reasonable assurance that there is something real out there, something genuine supporting appearances. While there are many philosophical approaches to this (grouped generically around the reliability of the link between symbol and symbolized) the most accessible avenue to the issue, I think, is through market advertising. How is the 24/7 bombardment of commodities on our senses affecting the very way we know?

Advertising's impact, as you know, is massive. Sometimes it bowls us over like a fire hose, but more often it is a fine spray ever drizzling on the psyche. Among the most pervasive effects is a kind of acquired suspicion of what is shown. An image dances up before me on a screen. I am instantly attracted; it has pizzazz, sizzle, it is sexy. I like it.

But another consideration soon dawns: does it correspond to anything? Does it deliver on what it is promising? Is it true? The answer to this second and more substantial question is increasingly

elusive and, in fact, has been “no” on enough occasions to cause the building of protective hides around our knowing, an instinctive mistrust. Further, observers note that for many the link between image and reality becomes so slippery that they gradually give up on the ‘question’ and look only to the attractiveness of the image. Whether or not there is substance is of little concern. “I’ll be a media agnostic and just enjoy the dancing icon.” When this happens, for all practical purposes, image really does become everything.

One commentator, John Staudenmeier, has styled this reaction “preemptive skepticism.”¹ You switch on a channel and filling the screen is a lush tropical lake. A white heron rises off a clear pond. Silver ripples spread out from its feet. The bird lifts its wings with no seeming effort and elegantly glides out over the tree line and into the forest of sparkling mangroves. Only a Mozart strain breaks the silence, its rhythm following the silky beat of the wings. For a second you are carried out of yourself, you feel time stop, you are transfixed by the peace and life in the scene. But then, flashing across the bottom of the screen – *Verizon, The Message Carrier*. And, at some level you know, you have been had.

This kind of thing happens so often that you stop noticing – not only the hook, but the very sting as it catches you. At first sight, I looked upon it as something beautiful, glorious in its own right, stirring up the aesthetic and even religious sensibilities in me. But then the little slap, “ah, this scene is selling me something.” It was true, and beautiful enough to work its way into my depths – but once in there it diverted them to another purpose: Buy this. It has happened so many times that I have grown another layer of psychic skin. Mostly unconsciously, I put filters between what is being presented and my susceptibility to believe it genuinely represents what is ultimately said. I protect myself. A learned skepticism preempts my getting taken in again.

What I have described here is minimal and subtle, but the constancy of it coming on all fronts slowly wears down my trust in the link between symbol and symbolized. Not just in advertising, but on the internet (are you really as you present yourself on this screen?), in mass media, politics, religion, and education. I was predisposed

¹ Address at Conference of Major Superiors Workshop, Winter, 2000, Jacksonville, Florida.

to believe there was a “there” there. Now I am congenitally skeptical about that basic correspondence.

While this is too brief a presentation on the point, I have tried to serve up a flavor I suspect most have tasted – the tang of this disconnect, the aroma of increasing slipperiness between image and reality, symbol and symbolized, appearance and substance.

The Consultation

Let us now move to the consultation. As a category for conversing with our saints, I propose a subject that has ties both with their core spiritual teachings and the point just described. That is, Personal Presence.

How am I using this term? More anecdotally than technically. A celebrity has a presence on the screen, but is this presence real? There is a vivid, pulsating image on the television, but does it have any substance to it? Are the words, expressions, and body language of this person a carrier of his or her inside self? Does this face have depth to it, or is it only a face?

These are descriptions of personal presence (or its lack) and not definitions. But I think they suffice to locate the subject which Elizabeth and Vincent can address: this unsettling experience of the slippery connect, the massive disconnect. Let us begin with Vincent.

Vincent

Utilizing a modern phrase in the context of 17th Century France, we could say Vincent de Paul was very “present to” his contemporaries. While there were those who thought him mistaken in his methods, and those who opposed him on certain spiritual teachings, there is no record of anyone who did not consider him genuine. For decades he moved in the intrigue-filled world of the French Royal court, engaged in his share of controversy – and yet he managed to maintain the trust of all sides. At the same time, he had nationwide credibility among the little people, the poor of the cities and the country. Standing in a breach between the classes, he was remarkably believable to both.

In many letters and conferences, he declares that being genuine is uppermost among his personal values and that in fact he has spent a lifetime pursuing this trait. His word for it? Simplicity.

Simplicity for him meant personal transparency, squaring up outside appearances with inner attitudes and dispositions. It was truth-telling and truth-witnessing. In a letter of 1634 he writes to a collaborator:

You know that your own kind heart has given me, thanks be to God, full liberty to speak to you with the utmost confidence, without any concealment or disguise; and it seems to me that up to the present you have recognized that fact in all my dealings with you. But am I to fall into the trap of being forced to do or to say, in dealing with you, anything contrary to holy simplicity? May God preserve me from doing this in any way whatsoever! Simplicity is the virtue I love the most, the one to which in all my actions I pay the most heed, so it seems to me. And if it were permissible for me to say it to you, it is the one virtue in which by God's mercy I have made some progress.²

It was a virtue he urged in all his followers. Their heart must not think one thing while their mouth says another.³ They must steer clear of all duplicity, hidden agendas, two-facedness, cunning, studied cleverness and double meaning. He allows that he has such a great respect for simplicity that he calls it "my gospel." He confides that he has a conscious intent to say things as they are, and that he gets strong consolation when he does.⁴

Why is it so valuable to him? First of all, because he sees the trait in Jesus Christ and in his Father. God himself is this way, Vincent says; where this kind of transparency prevails, God is present.⁵ Simplicity is in the makeup of Jesus Christ, demonstrated even unto his death.⁶

But there is also a very pragmatic reason Vincent praises simplicity. It is impossible to be effective as an apostle without it. If

² Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre J. Gabalda, 1920–1925), 1:284. Hereinafter cited as *CED*.

³ *CED*, 9:81.

⁴ *CED*, 9:106.

⁵ *CED*, 11:50.

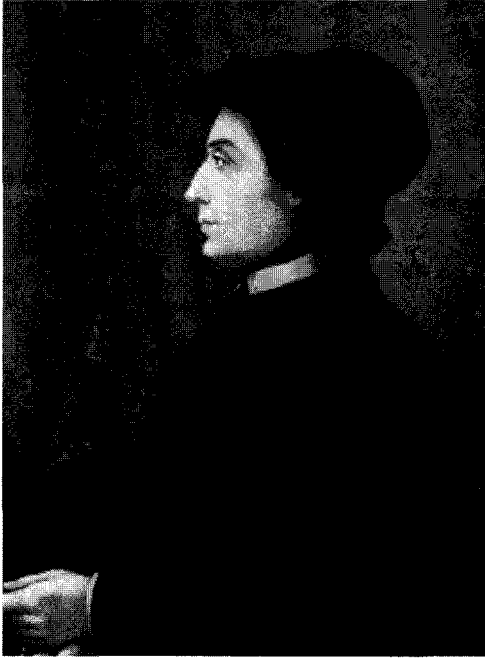
⁶ *CED*, 4:486.

people see that your words do not correspond to what is really inside you, they will not hear your preaching nor will they accept your ministries. Vincent expands on that reasoning. The people he has observed having the highest sensitivity to deception are the poor. They see through the clever talker. They sense what is hidden in an agenda. You cannot doubletalk them for long. To bring the good news to these individuals (Vincent's life mission) the evangelizer's language has to be coming from his heart. Her service has to spring from her inner conviction about the worth of the other, and not from some masked self-interest. For Vincent, it is the simple who have what he calls "true religion." And they instinctively recognize those with false religion.

What does this say for personal presence? Everybody, even the most astute critics, the poor, came to take for granted that the Vincent in front of them was the real Vincent, evidenced by a contemporary's compliment, "M. Vincent is always M. Vincent." He was real; his presence was real. And he insisted that those around him be the same, because without personal transparency the gospel would not be preached. The outer word has to be a faithful echo of the inner. This, for him, is what it meant to have simplicity – be a personal presence that was real.

A litmus test for rooted personal presence comes in apostolic service. Motives for serving the needy can be other than respect for the dignity of the one served. Those good feelings that accompany giving, a reward for the giver in the next life, the subtle rush one might get in the power differences between giver and receiver, all these and more can be part of the transaction – and they diminish and do not build up the self-esteem of the one served.

For charity to be healing, only one motive suffices: genuine love and respect for the person receiving it. There must be a match between the words of the giver concerning the goodness of the poor, and the giver's inner attitude. Vincent's special knack was to honor the ones he helped in the very act of helping them. As one writer put it, "the poor could forgive him the bread he gave them." When he gave assistance, the people believed his charity came from real respect for them. A way to regard Vincent's service of the poor? Simplicity, a key to action, a real presence in charitable works.



Elizabeth Seton, D.C. Portrait.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

Elizabeth

Now, let us observe Elizabeth Seton under the heading of personal presence.

An opening to personal presence for Elizabeth is the universe of relationship. Most of her interpreters agree that this domain was home for Elizabeth, the dimension in which she most vividly lived. Here she wrestled with her most wily demons; and here, Jacob-like, she was given her most potent blessings.

Relationships live and die in the world of presence. They are made of a subtle amalgamation of presence – to one's authentic self, to the other's reality, and most profoundly to the Divine Self. Elizabeth's special gift was a highly tuned sensibility to the very real but elusive shadings of this world.

To be less abstract, we know that all her life Elizabeth sought assurance that the important others in her life were "there." Whether this was residue of the many separations she faced during the course of her life (her dying mother, traveling father, weakening husband,

failing children), an ingrained predisposition for the universe of friendship, an “original blessing” she had, or a combination of these and more, she craved connection. From early on she sought deep assurance that the promises implied in a commitment between persons had substance, that the down payment of one’s initial offer of self in a relationship had backing and lasting power. For her, the best possible world was one in which connections remained, stayed solid, and could be counted on. Her deepest sufferings came when she could no longer sense those connections and felt doubt as to whether they really perdured. Her greatest joys and fondest hopes centered on reestablishing and preserving her links with loved ones. She longed for genuine personal connection.

The reverse side to this coin is that she gave her real self in relationships. Faithful friend, true companion, lasting ally, trustworthy confidant – these are the testimonies her soul mates left behind. Elizabeth was “there,” authentically, dependably. It was really her behind the words and promises. There was no gap between her talk of friendship and her will to friendship. Her correspondence rings with instances of personal depth meeting personal depth.

Appreciating this lifelong desire and gift for truthful presence, I was especially struck with reasons Elizabeth gave for her attraction to the Roman Catholic understanding of Eucharist. Listen to the letter she wrote from Livorno to her dying stepmother describing her excitement at a new possibility:

How happy we would be if we believed what they believe: that they POSSESS God in the Sacrament and that he remains in their churches and is carried to them when they are sick... I cannot hold back the tears as I think, “my God, how happy I would be, even if it meant being separated from those who are so dear to me, if only I could find you in the Church as they do.”⁷

Because this dawning insight of hers is so much to the point in regard to personal presence, let me paraphrase it:

⁷ Cited in Marie-Dominique Poinset, *Isabel Seton: Sólo busco a Dios y su Iglesia* (Salamanca: CEME, 1977), 78.

What if the thing these Catholics are saying and ritualizing really is the truth of the matter. What if the fact which is claimed – God in Jesus is here – really is the case? What if these objects and words and gestures actually do deliver on what they are saying? What if there is a “there” of God here? What if these appearances have solidity to them? Some rock hard substance behind them? Wouldn’t that all be too good to be true – that I can count on God being here, being present. There are half presences, pale presences. I have thought that about the Eucharist all along. But what if this presence were real, if there were a full connection between what I see on the outside and what is happening on the in? That would be all I could wish for.

And in fact, Elizabeth’s move to Catholicism was signaled by her crossing just this line of belief. On the day of her First Communion, she wrote to Amabilia Filicchi, “At last, Amabilia, God is mine and I am his. I have received Him.”⁸ Accepting this “Presence that is Real” is the demarcation point in her faith journey. In the years ahead so much of her life-in-the-Spirit came to center around exactly this belief.

My primary point? There is an enlightening consistency between the truth of presence, which Elizabeth asked for and gave in her friendships, and the realness of the personal divine presence she found so attractive in the Eucharist. In both, the outside word voices the inside truth, the claim appearance makes proves trustworthy, the link between symbol and symbolized is firm, and there is that dependability of connection so needed to call forth durable trust.

Could we not use the same litmus test for personal presence that we did with Vincent? What of the quality of Elizabeth’s service? Do we not take it for granted that her way of helping always “rang true?” While she is remembered more as an educator than a worker amongst the poor (even though, from an early age, she had a great deal of frontline contact with the poorest of the poor), can it be argued that all the service she gave was flavored with the clear taste of believability and authenticity? Perhaps a look at a contrasting experience will underline this truth.

⁸ Letter from her visit to Montenero.

In a book on classic Christian practices, Margaret Miles raises the recognizable point that for many today the phrase “Christian service” has come to mean the exact opposite of its original Gospel intent. Rather than a practical, acted-out medium for genuine love, divine and human, service can connote a subtle kind of self-promotion – or more dramatically phrased, “self-intending Interference.”⁹ She notes how certain reasons for helping others found in the tradition now sound so self-absorbed: I serve you for “the good of my own soul”; for “heavenly rewards”; for “doing penance and offering up”; or even for “the sake of God.” It is only your concern, respect and love for the other (felt by the other) that will let your help be absorbed fully. Lacking this, your service comes across as “Do-gooderism,” a sour substitute for the real thing.

I cite Miles to highlight a taken-for-granted quality in Elizabeth. The people she served sensed it was really Elizabeth giving the service. They felt her care flowing from her own heart. There are many testimonies that make this point. For this short talk, it is enough to note the instinctive acceptance of her service that so consistently marked her life’s work.

Summing Up

My intention was to highlight the strong witness to truth and transparency that both Saints illustrate, Vincent from his simplicity, Elizabeth from her openhearted relationships. Each speaks the grounded, rooted word. Each elicits the same trusting reaction from others. This man’s claims are solid. This woman’s word is anchored. His assurances, promises, explanations “ring true”; her heart is in her actions. The proof positive was in the way each saint’s service was accepted – trustingly, without the resentment that easily arises when there is a notable power difference between giver and receiver, with a gratitude that wells up at the realization that the provider has their true interests at heart. This trait, “realness,” is so much a part of both of them that it almost slips by unnoticed.

My larger intent was to let the “realness” of each of these Saints speak to today’s culture-wide skepticism about truth in packaging. They present a world where the bond between what is claimed and the truth of that claim is strong. They raise an aspect of the Gospel

⁹ Margaret Miles, *Practicing Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 120.

to special visibility, the reliance on the firm correlation between the symbol and what is symbolized.

Closer to home, let Elizabeth's and Vincent's character speak to us, their followers. Our spiritual genes run counter to the contemporary bent to devalue and downgrade the connection between appearance and substance. Ours is a heritage which cannot brook the pragmatic (perhaps better, jaded) stance which says it does not much matter whether a word has backing, a statement has depth, a gesture has follow through. Said differently, Elizabeth and Vincent speak against the massive manipulation – and cheapening – of the bond between image and imaged. Call their virtue authenticity, integrity, simplicity, trustworthiness, transparency, or resonance between inside and outside, these two saints invite us to a demanding countercultural practice, the asceticism of Gospel genuineness.

One especially important place for this practice is in the performance of Vincentian/Setonian service, both personally and institutionally. Any help provided in Elizabeth's and Vincent's names must be transparent, the kind which is a true, open faced, trust-eliciting embodiment of the love God has for His people.

I came across an engineering term recently that illustrates the idea well. A building designer professed his firm intention to make his buildings "architectonic." People should see all the architecture, both the outer *and* the inner. If you stand in front of the building, you should observe both its façade *and* its underlying structural supports, the outside shell adorning the building *and* the inside frame holding it up. That, he said, is what architecture in this image-only culture needs, the solid visual feel that things are not hollow, not hanging by wires and sky hooks, that there is truth in the packaging of this medium. He thinks people long for that harder-to-come-by assurance that there really is correspondence between the outside and the in.

This is what I suggest Vincentian service should strive to be, "architectonic." Our Institutions, under more and more pressure to appear "right," to present the image which sells, have to keep asking themselves the transparency question – and with greater insistency in this slippery age. Elizabeth and Vincent, whose shadows these colleges and hospitals are supposed to cast, stand for coherence between appearance and reality. From different but complimentary angles, they pressure the works and institutions we sponsor to be on the inside what they claim on the outside.

Both witness to trustworthy connection. Both witness to the need to build strong bonds between appearance and substance. Both say service is not possible unless this link is presented convincingly.

Their counsel to our culture today? Be integral, be truth tellers, have truth in your packaging. Their witness is especially needed in a time when this link is so epistemologically threatened and eroded. They declare it is worth it to keep realness present. Vincent lived this through a transparent truthfulness, Elizabeth in trust-inspiring relationships. Both did it in service that was accepted by the served, and experienced it as an extension of each saint's deep sounding belief in the worth of the people they helped.

Simplicity for Leadership

A striking note in current literature about leadership is the insistent call for something like Vincent's simplicity. To provide leadership for the long haul, many theories and studies say, the leader needs to be believable, trustworthy, genuine, credible, truth-telling – all those things that define the character of someone with “real presence.”

One popularization of these findings that brings home the point convincingly is James C. Hunter's short book, *The Servant*.¹⁰ The author's primary contention is that effective leadership establishes itself not in power but in personal authority. It is the combination of expertise and believability, tightly integrated in the leader's person, that undergirds true leadership.

Personal authority and believability are rooted in a leader's character, in who he or she is as a person. Coercion can move elements in an organization, but over the longer haul it only diminishes effectiveness. Power used by itself undercuts relationships, and in the long term reduces influence.¹¹ But when the leader's inner substance shines through his or her behavior in consistent ways, trust, the essential ingredient in all relationships, grows. The likelihood that the leader will be believed (a useable definition of credibility) increases in direct proportion to this trust. Transposed into Vincent's language, simplicity creates the kind of influence that lasts.

¹⁰ James C. Hunter, *The Servant: A Simple Story about the True Essence of Leadership* (Prima Publishing, 1998).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

Hunter also touches on simplicity when he writes of the place of honesty in leadership.¹² He observes how some supervisors refuse to discuss deficiencies out of fear they will not be liked. In other cases, they are not willing to give the bad news along with the good because of a distaste for the anger they might meet. Either way, the leader's behavior demonstrates a kind of dishonesty or lack of transparency that works to undermine trust.

That a person would "ring true" is key to his or her success in leadership. In Hunter's words, "...people will buy into a leader before they buy into a mission statement. Once they have bought into the leader, they will buy into whatever mission statement the leader's got."¹³ Honesty, that congruence between the inside and the out, increases influence.

A clear reiteration of Vincent's simplicity, now set in the key of leadership, comes in Kouzes and Posner's synopsis of practices as they describe trustworthiness and authenticity:

The most important personal quality people look for and admire in a leader is personal credibility. Credibility is the foundation of leadership. Leaders must find their own voices, and then they must clearly and authentically give voice to their values. Eloquent speeches about common values are not nearly enough. Exemplary leaders know that it's their behavior that earns them respect. The real test is whether they do what they say. Leaders set an example and build commitment through simple, daily acts that create progress and build momentum.¹⁴

These authors regard personal credibility as the foundation of leadership. From their empirical base, to have any long-term influence, they too underline the necessity of being real in one's personal presence. From their more explicitly religious outlook, but in much the same organizational spirit, Vincent and Elizabeth proposed the same truth. Credibility, transparency, honesty in communication with

¹² *Ibid.*, 119.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁴ James Kouzes and Barry Posner, *The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership: When Leaders Are at Their Best* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 1-2.

collaborators, congruence between the inside and outside, truth in packaging, working against the cultural fracture between image and substance – these are requisites for genuine service, most especially in the form of good leadership.