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# Vincent de Paul as Mentor

BY  
ALISON FORRESTAL, PH.D.

In September 1626, Vincent de Paul and three companions signed an act of association that described the common work that they had been performing over a period of several years and presented a promise from each man that they would continue to devote themselves to that work in the future. Their work had already been approved by the archbishop of Paris, and was shortly after approved by the French crown and the papacy (1627).<sup>1</sup> This meant that, under the auspices of the Congregation of the Mission, Vincent de Paul and his colleagues could continue their missionary work and consolidate and extend their activity to other fields, including seminaries, retreats and charitable initiatives. By the time that Vincent de Paul died, on 27 September 1660, the Congregation had spread beyond France to Italy, Savoy, Poland, Ireland, Scotland, North Africa and Madagascar, and possessed twenty-one establishments within French borders.

This was a massive and rapid expansion that required skills of vision, precision and oversight, but also involved the cultivation of capable Congregation workers to govern, organise and, perhaps more importantly, to nurture Congregation members, spiritual values and the Vincentian ethos. As Vincent's reputation flourished and as the Congregation's infrastructure and range of labour grew, he also provided important support and direction to those who became affiliated with his vision and organisations; we think particularly of Louise de Marillac, co-founder and first superior of the Daughters of Charity, as well as large numbers of Ladies of Charity and French bishops.

Obviously, Vincent's centrality within a network of organisations and associations brought enormous practical demands to him and to those personnel who routinely acted within the network. Leadership, therefore, placed Vincent in the position of figurehead, inspiration and model, but it also required him to become a wellspring of spiritual and practical support and direction, and the fosterer of collegiality, common purpose, discipline, initiative and confidence. De Paul's role as mentor incorporated all of these elements, but their exhibition was colored profoundly by the spiritual values and goals that he envisaged to be central to Christian vocations and to Christian engagement with the world. Indeed, we can say that his undeniable prowess as mentor rested on an acute understanding of human psychology and a consistent acceptance of key spiritual principles. In other

<sup>1</sup>Pierre Coste, C.M., *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. by Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., et al, 1-10, 13a & 13b (New York: New City Press, 1990-2006), 13a:123-36. For volumes 1-8, 13a and 13b, I have used the CD-rom version, produced by the Congregation of the Mission under the direction of Père Claude Lautissier. Hereinafter cited as CCD, and specifically in reference to CD-rom version. I would like to thank Père Lautissier and Père Paul Henzmann for their assistance to my research.

words, his methods kept a close eye on both natural or human, and supernatural or divine principles. He did not see these as opposing but as complementary and co-operative.

Vincent de Paul did not use the term 'mentor' to describe his direction of others but, clearly, he was a mentor to a wide variety of people who undertook different tasks in clerical, religious and lay life. Structurally, his own Congregation was punctuated with official and routine mentoring, ranging throughout the organisation. At its head stood the Superior General, who was to act as mentor to all members, followed by provincial visitors, house superiors and house members. But it was not envisaged to be a hierarchical, top down, system, by which superiors would be impervious to guidance from colleagues; rather, each superior was directed to possess a council of experienced advisors and was told that, although they should take into account the needs of all of those under their care within their household in making decisions, they should not discuss matters of importance in the presence of those who were not council members. For, ultimately, Vincent advised them, they must be courageous enough not to follow their council's advice, if they judged their own opinion to be wiser before God:

Although, according to the Rules of the Company, the Superior is not obliged to follow the majority opinion, and matters brought up are to be resolved between God and himself, except that he must answer at the visitation for the outcome of what he does contrary to the opinion of his council, you will nevertheless have very great respect for M. Dufestel's (one of two councillors in the Annecy house) advice, as I am sure you will.<sup>2</sup>

Allow me to tell you also, Monsieur, how surprised I am that you would discuss, in the presence of all the priests, what you should propose and discuss only with your two assistants... everything should be directed only by the Superior and his two assistants, so that, if the Superior is of a mind different from that of the assistants, he can and must act according to his own if, before God, he judges it to be best.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, this suggests that the primary role of a superior was to govern, and this was certainly a crucial element in a rapidly expanding organization. One important element of Vincent's vision of mentoring was, therefore, to coach his superiors to govern responsibly. But his vision was not limited to this aspect, and it is fair to say that he neither reduced the role of superior to governor nor suggested that government was the most significant or most fundamental part of their functions. His own mentoring incorporated guidance, nurturing, persuasion and

<sup>2</sup> "Vincent de Paul to Jean Guérin (superior in Annecy)," 24 September 1642, CCD, 2:188.

<sup>3</sup> "Vincent de Paul to Charles Ozenne (superior in Warsaw)," 2 April 1655, *Ibid.*, 5:137.



Portrait of Vincent de Paul.

*Image Collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute*

empathy as well as governing, and he wished house superiors to follow the same positive pattern of mentoring amongst their personnel. Significantly, it is clear that these approaches were transferred and adapted as individual circumstances and personalities required.

Three questions therefore arise: firstly, from where did this perspective arise (motivations)? Secondly, how did Vincent seek to actualise it (means)? Thirdly, did it work (results)?

In 1644, Vincent de Paul told his Congregation that superiors correct their men "firstly, with great bounty and mildness... the second time, with a little more severity and gravity, but nevertheless with mildness, using affectionate prayers and remonstrances full of bounty; the third time, with zeal and heat, testifying to them what you will be obliged to do."<sup>4</sup> This quotation is enormously revealing of his motivations and means in seeking to act as mentor. What he hoped to do, he often said, was to motivate others to live 'with God and with men,' in union with all and with God. He did not expect all to live the same type of life, hence his ability to see a role in charitable work for all kinds of people. But he did assume that the goal of human activity was the 'glory of God,' and that it was the duty of every individual to strive personally for that through seeking to perfect themselves and helping others towards this goal. It was not enough therefore to assist others by missions or charity if one did not strive to follow God's will and the example of Christ. Everybody was, in some sense therefore, a potential mentor to others, both an example and consolation to the wider world. For this reason, he was always keen to encourage all of his associates to 'edify' all those with whom they came into contact.

As a result, the primary motivation for Vincent's mentoring was emulation and love of Christ. Christian theology centred on the suffering endured by Christ on the cross to redeem the sins of man. At the heart of Christ's sacrifice stood his love for mankind. For Vincent, Christ was the ultimate example of charity: self-giving, suffering, compassionate, but above all, empathetic. So empathetic, in fact,

<sup>4</sup> "Conférence de 1644 sur les charges et les offices," in Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 15 vols. (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre J. Gabalda, 1920-25), 11:140.

that he stood for all men, but in particular, for the poor, the vulnerable and the helpless. In other words, Christ identified with the poorest of the poor, yet at the same time available for all and present in all humanity. No matter what their status in worldly terms, no matter what their social or moral state, therefore, every person was equal in dignity, according to Vincent de Paul, and worthy of cordial respect. This was so even if they should resist help or continue to immerse themselves in harmful affairs and actions. This belief clearly underpinned his attitude towards the abandoned children whom the Ladies and Daughters of Charity supported from 1638: rather than being the result of the sins of immoral parents, they were Christ's 'little children' who deserved the dignity of material care, affection, moral guidance and a sound start in life.

The Christ of charity was therefore the mentor of Vincent de Paul, who sought to form himself in the mould of compassion, zeal, self-giving and service. This meant that he understood mentoring to function in two ways, beyond the practical organisations of the offices in his charitable infrastructure: firstly, the mentor should act as a living example and inspiration to others; and secondly, they should be devoted to helping others to live up to the ideals set by their supreme mentor Christ.

It is not difficult to find examples of Vincent's actualising of the qualities of zeal, compassion, service and self-giving. The effects of this didactic approach are certainly recorded in the admiration and assessments of him by those who knew him. Despite the fact that the heavy weight of administrative responsibilities could threaten to take him from the coalface of charitable work, he took opportunities to aid poor women that he met on the streets, according to his secretary Louis Robineau, who witnessed such acts.<sup>5</sup> But his demonstrations of charity were not always explicit acts of material help; often, witnesses testified to his generosity and humility of spirit, when he refused to speak ill of detractors or to respond to ridicule or sarcastic criticisms. In the face of public mockery of his ancient and well-worn clothing by a scornful courtier at the royal court Vincent's bowed head and silence is a classic example of teaching by example, for it demonstrated more obviously than any words could the values of detachment from materialism, willingness to live by spiritual values of suffering, humility and poverty, and identification with the poor. However, he was invariably loath to draw esteem for such actions; the lesson they offered was lost if he unjustifiably earned praise for them. This, of course, follows his tendency to denigrate himself and to identify his failures and 'wretchedness' before others. As well as being a Christian virtue, it was an effective means of earning good will, neutralising enmity and establishing rapport. Robineau recorded that Vincent said he knew of no other means than humility to bring unity and charity with God and neighbor:

Self-love blinds. Your brother reads well but you hear him badly, he explains well and you do not understand him. However ferocious

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<sup>5</sup> Louis Robineau, *Remarques sur les actes et paroles de feu Monsieur Vincent de Paul*, ed. André Dodin, C.M. (Paris 1991), 129.

the lion may be, if he sees a person humiliating himself before him, putting himself on his knees, he will not treat him badly.<sup>6</sup>

Mentoring worked most effectively therefore, when its authority was tempered with humility.

Vincent de Paul often styled his mentoring in the guise of paternal 'fatherhood,' which enabled him to include elements of discipline and judgement in his directions. However, just as he knew that house superiors were not simply governors, fatherhood allowed him also to demonstrate qualities of nurturing, advice and wisdom, characteristically less disciplinary and holding more positive associations for those to whom he acted as mentor. Constantly alert to the temptation for a mentor to be or to appear autocratic, he used a variety of means to ensure that he could find common ground with those under his care, and to communicate to them that he shouldered their burdens and understood their difficulties. These were essential accompaniments to his suggestions for resolving spiritual or practical problems.

Here is an outstanding example, taken from a case in which a young priest experienced a personality clash with his superior, complained about his superior's lack of gentleness, and found it difficult to communicate the preoccupations of his inner spiritual life to him. Vincent's response to this situation, so unsettling to the individuals immediately involved and to the harmony of the community in the house, involved several approaches: he was careful to diffuse any resentment or patronage that the complainant might feel when the superior general wrote to him about his problem. He also established empathy with the complainant by pointing out that he too was far from perfect and that, therefore, he was prone to just the same sort of struggles and inadequacies:

I—the most uncouth, the most ridiculous, the most stupid of men among these persons of rank to whom I could not say six consecutive words without letting it be seen that I have neither wit nor judgement—how have people put up with me until now, if that is the case, in the position I hold? But what is worse, I have no virtue that even comes near the person in question.<sup>7</sup>

Equally, Vincent ensured that recognition and praise of the complainants' work, and a ringing affirmation of his affection for him, balanced his criticisms. What followed, therefore, was to be understood by the complainant as constructive criticism inspired by a loving desire to assist him to improve his virtues and behaviour:

I cannot refrain from telling you how consoled I am that you are devoting yourself almost continually to the salvation of souls, that

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-51.

<sup>7</sup> "Vincent de Paul to a priest of the Mission," 1650, CCD, 3:243.

your own soul is advancing in the love of God by this means...  
I certainly thank Him for this with as much gratitude as he has  
given me esteem and tenderness for you.

Vincent even stated that he knew that the complaints the priest had made were for the right reason, that is, his zeal to correct faults in his community (although he privately declared that he thought the priest was troubled because of the impetuosity of youth and passion—his calm reaction was designed to soothe and redirect). Having cushioned his forthcoming critique and recommendations, Vincent then encouraged the priest to follow appropriate practises, but did so in a manner that flattered the priest's common sense and assumed he already knew what he should be doing if he would only consider and admit it:

If, nevertheless, you prefer to open your heart to [your superior], so as not to deviate from the common way, I shall be consoled by this and you, I hope, will be satisfied because, since Our Lord approves of the trust you have in your Superior as the representative of His Divine Person, He will inspire him to say whatever is most appropriate for you.

As was his custom, Vincent avoided heaping blame on the superior; it was never his practice to encourage himself or others to avoid taking responsibility for their own actions, to shirk scrutinising their own traits and behavior for inadequacies or to avoid identifying means of remedying them. On this occasion, in a format characteristic to the climax of all his mentoring sessions, he then went on to harness a sense of common path and purpose to bolster and rouse his priest. For Vincent, fraternity was as important an element of mentoring as paternity; it was absolutely crucial to those striving for improvement that they were not left to feel isolated, completely inadequate and without any hope:

I mention this to you only to excite us to gratitude for the grace God has bestowed on us, in giving us the determination to walk in the path traced out for us by Our Lord and the saints. Let us ask Him for the grace of persevering to the end. I am inclined to believe that human nature inspires you with many thoughts contrary to the esteem and deference you owe to [your superior], but I am also inclined to believe that you rise above these base feelings and profit from this repugnance, and this increases the merit of your fidelity... I beg you to do this with all my heart.

De Paul to a priest of the Mission,  
20 February 1650<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:262-3.

Throughout these letters, Vincent reiterated that he was always available to his priest, always ready to reply to his letters and to console and assist him. Robineau claimed that Vincent de Paul never ordered anyone to do anything, but always asked and suggested.<sup>9</sup> This technique pervades his correspondence, for he usually suggested strategies and actions using phrases such as ‘it may be well to,’ ‘perhaps you could’ or ‘do you think.’ Some of the best instances of this gentle implanting of ideas and persuasion occur in his correspondence with Louise de Marillac, who emerged over the course of approximately thirty-five years as an astute and formidable mentor in her own right. Much of Vincent’s communication with her illustrates his determination to encourage her to focus her mind on discerning and concentrating on God’s will, and to gain confidence in applying her growing spiritual wisdom and judgement.

This relationship also reveals another classical feature of Vincent de Paul’s mentoring: the prudence and modesty to join with others as they initiated and ruminated over ideas and plans. According to Vincent, divine providence guided the outcome of affairs; almost invariably, therefore, he was never in a hurry to make decisions, because God’s will would become evident as events unfolded. For this reason, he was slow to fully endorse Louise’s wish to establish a community of Daughters of Charity, though he simultaneously nourished her ability to discern whether this idea accorded with God’s will:



Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac.  
Image Collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

To be sure, Mademoiselle, it is well to take notice of the more ardent affections that agitate your heart so that you can do your best to regulate them by the standard of the holy and ever-adorable Will of God. And you have done well, in this doubt, to seek enlightenment so that you may do what Our Lord is asking of you, without fear of burdening me by seeking it.

<sup>9</sup> Robineau, *Remarques*, 56.



Vincent then states in a way now familiar to us:

Courage! May Our Lord be in our hearts and our hearts in His, so that they may be three in one and one in three and that we may wish only what He wills.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly evident in Vincent's relationship with Louise de Marillac is his recognition of her inherent gifts, a willingness to foster them and to allow her a light rein to use them fully and securely as she progressed in her vocation. We can see a similar skill in his relations with Antoine Portail. Portail began a thirty-eight year intimacy with Vincent de Paul in 1612, and became the first member of the Congregation of the Mission in 1625. In 1642 he became first assistant in the Congregation, and was entrusted with visitations of Congregation houses and other major affairs, dying shortly before Vincent in February 1660. From the beginning, Vincent was his companion, friend and mentor, and his experience provides a fruitful example of Vincent de Paul's methods and success in formation, as Portail progressed from being an inexperienced youth to a primary pillar of the Congregation.

Vincent used a mixture of direct suggestion, warm encouragement and praise to provide Portail with a pool of confidence, experience and wisdom from which to draw in all of the circumstances he faced. Knowing that the novice Portail was not a natural preacher, Vincent congratulated him for taking the plunge, alerted him to the fact that he could depend on God for inspiration, and that he was not the only priest to have struggled to fulfil this task:

Blessed be God, Monsieur, that you have begun preaching in the pulpit and may it please His Divine Goodness to give His blessing to what you will teach in His name! You have begun late; so did Saint Charles (Charles Borromeo, archbishop of Milan). I wish you a share in his spirit, and I hope God will give you some new grace on this occasion. I beg Him with all my heart that it may be the one you wrote to me about at the end of your letter, that of being an example to the Company, in which we lack holy modesty, meekness and respect in our conversations... I need them more than anyone else. Please ask them of God for me.<sup>11</sup>

Vincent's final request was supremely canny, for it empowered Portail to help him, and directed him towards effective and helpful action for another's benefit rather than absolute obsession with his failures. Vincent's mentoring invariably aimed for this, but he was also attentive to directing people towards responsibilities for which they showed special assiduity. Portail went on to mentor other Congregation members and to direct the Daughters of Charity, for he seemed

<sup>10</sup> "Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac," undated (probably 1633), *CCD*, 1:94.

<sup>11</sup> "Vincent de Paul to Antoine Portail," 27 June 1630, *Ibid.*, 1:51.

to have remarkably good interpersonal skills. His 'modesty, mildness and respect in conversations' were saluted by Vincent early in his career, and his mentor helped him to overcome his natural timidity so that he could provide discipline, guidance and support to others, using his natural delicacy positively to defuse tensions and foster the mutual trust so valuable to mentoring:

I am hoping for much fruit... if union, cordiality, and support exist between you two... Because you are the older, the second in the Company, and the Superior, bear with everything... I repeat, everything, so that, laying aside your superiority, you may adapt yourself to him in charity... humor him, never contradict him on the spur of the moment, but admonish him later cordially and humbly. Above all, let there appear no sign of division between you.<sup>12</sup>

Vincent's success as a mentor was partially due to his willingness to adapt his tactics to character and circumstance. The basic principles of charity, love of Christ and human dignity were always key, but it was essential to be flexible regarding the means to reach the goals of perfection and divine glory. Here is his advice to another of his superiors:

Be firm as to the end and humble and gentle with regard to the means... And because only the Spirit of Jesus Christ Our Lord is the true director of souls, I beseech His Divine Majesty to grant you His spirit for your own guidance and for that of the Company.<sup>13</sup>

However, Vincent's preoccupation with humility would have led him to admit that he was not always successful in his formations. A particularly interesting case is that of François Du Coudray, the third of the original members of the Congregation. He ended his life within the Congregation but provided Vincent de Paul with sustained challenges to his insight and creativity as mentor. For all his ability to listen, evaluate and suggest, Vincent found it almost impossible to persuade Du Coudray to anything, and although he did not admit it, perhaps Du Coudray was simply unsuitable for the Congregation's ethos. He was scholarly and served the Congregation very well in negotiating its formal approval from the pope during the 1630's, but he did not prove malleable or amenable to advice. Vincent did consider asking Du Coudray to leave the Congregation, but could not bring himself to abandon him altogether. He sought to harness this clever and strong personality's talents of organisation as superior of several houses, and as a member of the commission chosen to write the Congregation's Rule. But he knew to step carefully, for Du Coudray seemed quick to take offense at criticism and

<sup>12</sup> "Vincent de Paul to Antoine Portail," 21 June 1631, *Ibid.*, 1:60.

<sup>13</sup> "Vincent de Paul to Jean Guérin," 24 September 1642, *Ibid.*, 2:188.

was wayward in his opinions and actions. When he died in 1649, Vincent simply recorded that he had served the Congregation well, but he did not present him as an example of humility and discretion to fellow members of the Congregation.<sup>14</sup>

When faced with difficult cases, Vincent de Paul rarely thought the answer lay in changing their environment. Rather, the role of the mentor was to persuade individuals to change from within, so that they were able to deal with whatever circumstances God placed them in. Training the will to virtue, keeping one's eyes focused on appropriate goals and on models of behavior, and constant support from those with wise and trustworthy intentions, stood at the heart of his conception of formation.

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<sup>14</sup> "Vincent de Paul to Antoine Portail," 4 March 1649, *Ibid.*, 3:166.