

Spring 2008

"In the Footsteps of Monsieur Vincent: Diary of an Ordinary Professor"

Annalisa Sacca Ph.D.

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

Recommended Citation

Sacca, Annalisa Ph.D. (2008) ""In the Footsteps of Monsieur Vincent: Diary of an Ordinary Professor";" *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 2 , Article 25.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol28/iss2/25>

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.

“In the Footsteps of Monsieur Vincent: Diary of an Ordinary Professor”

BY

ANNALISA SACCÀ, PH.D.

Professor, Department of Language and Literature, St. John's University

I am a professor of Languages and Literature, specifically Italian — but mostly, and metaphorically speaking, I am a contrabandist. That is, in my classes I contraband life. I shall explain what I mean by “contrabanding life,” but let me first tell how I became a contrabandist.

Ever since I can remember, I wanted to be a teacher. At fifteen, as a member of the *Azione Cattolica* (Catholic Action, an organization which involved people at a very young age) I was teaching religion to the nine and ten-year-olds in the parish of my town — Latina, Italy — and had become very good friends with some Salesian missionaries who inspired me to action. And at sixteen, like many girls of my age, I dreamed of going to Africa as a missionary to change the world. Instead I came to America as an immigrant — my father who had left seven years before us, had finally received the necessary papers — and I cried for one year.

In Italy I had studied English in my “liceo classico” and was well ahead in school, having started at the age of five and skipped the fourth grade. But in New York’s Pier 52 on a beautiful October day, as the porters moved our trunks from our ship, the *Raffaello*, and screamed at me — “Watch, watch!” — I could neither understand anything nor figure out why they were talking about watches.

I was surrounded by a wall. I could not understand anyone, nor could they understand my broken British English exacerbated by a heavy Italian accent. So I kept a dictionary with me at all times, particularly when watching cartoons on television, trying to make sense of what I was hearing. One month after my arrival in the United States, something happened that changed my life.

I was on a bus going to school when somebody turned to me and said, “What a beautiful day it is today, right?”

I answered, “Right.”

I had understood. For the first time, I had understood a full sentence in English. My God, I could communicate. I was not alone anymore. The barrier around me had suddenly disappeared. I felt myself again part of

the human family, and I cried. It was at that moment I decided that “understanding others” would be my field of academic specialization — even if it meant giving up my earlier love of the field of philosophy. I began studying languages and literature — including English literature, surprising my professors who, given my accent, always thought I had registered in the wrong class — and my earlier studies in Latin and ancient Greek were certainly a help. I thought that since I was living in the city of New York, filled with so many languages and cultures, it was appropriate for me to promote the study of these languages as a bridge to reach other human beings.

I started teaching in college in blue jeans, and many of my students were older than me. Quite soon I realized, however, that teaching Italian language and literature was not enough; the students needed more from me. I had to go beyond; I had to be creative to bring about a fresh way of learning. That is when I started to become a contrabandist: Italian language would be the vehicle, the goods, through which I would contraband something I thought more important: a culture of awareness.

A culture of awareness meant to me a culture of closeness. And how do you get close to someone, if not by speaking to them to discover their world? After all, each one of us carries with us a world that wants to be discovered and shared. And in order to enter this world we need a key, which is language. So I would use the study of language to educate my students’ hearts and minds, and also to empower them.

During religious instruction in my early youth I had heard of San Vincenzo dei Paoli, as we call him in Italy, and his love and care for the poor. Later I got to know him better through the Vincentian Center at St. John’s. But a few months ago I met him in the pages of his correspondence. It is one thing to hear people talk about Monsieur Vincent, but it is another to come into direct contact with him through his words. I was interested in his missions abroad, and the more I read the more I realized that in my teaching and my service to the university, I had been following Vincent’s path.

After all, he too was a contrabandist. He contrabanded the word of God to the poor by helping them first with their basic needs, since he understood poverty as something not just physical but spiritual. He promoted a culture of closeness, not just at home but particularly in his missions abroad, where often his missionaries worked undercover and died. He was indeed the best at contrabanding what has become my mission today: empowerment through education.

Vincent repeatedly said that the goals of “the small company” were to serve the poor and train seminarians. To do this, he empowered people who in turn learned how to empower others. His affective/effective model of empowerment — based on the values of respect, compassionate service, simplicity, inventiveness, and advocacy for the poor — may be the only one

that can still work today. This is because the alternative, a model of secular reasoning that excludes the divine from public awareness, is turning out to be a failure, as religious and moral traditions are intrinsic to human nature. Moreover, Vincent's model is not outdated because today's social framework is comparable to his own time, considering the presence of political instability, religious struggles, cross-cultural differences, poverty, and disease.

So we actually can say that if Vincent were able to take a look at our modern society, and particularly at the issue of global poverty, he would act as he did in his own time, using the same measures and strategies. In his fund-raising activities, promotional enterprises, training and field work, setting up of missions, acquisition of embassies, and facilitation of ransom payments to Turkish pirates, Vincent exemplified the practical visionary who had learned how to put people to work in restoring the dignity and faith of the disadvantaged.

Furthermore, there is little difference between Vincent's creative enterprises and the methods advocated by modern economists to combat poverty and promote human development — from Amartya Sen's promotion of adequate food distribution systems and understanding of cross-cultural differences, to Stefano Zamagni's call to invest in human capital and education.

Vincent's empowerment of people can be summarized in one of his sentences: "Totum opus nostrum in operatione consistit" (All our work is based on action). Better yet, consider the sentence in context:

These days there are many people who seem to be virtuous, and indeed they are so, but they are inclined to lead a quiet, easy life rather than one of solid and active commitment. The Church is like an immense harvest that needs laborers, but laborers who are willing to work. There is nothing more true to the spirit of the Gospel than gathering light and strength in prayer, and then going out to share this spiritual food with others. This is what our Lord did, and the Apostles followed his example. To do this, we must combine the role of Martha and Mary; we have to imitate the dove which takes only half of its food and feeds the rest into the beaks of its young. This is how we shall act, and prove our love for God through our labors. Totum opus nostrum in operatione consistit.¹

This is Vincent at his best. His subtle criticism of members of the Church

¹ Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 15 vols. (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre J. Gabalda, 1920-25), 11:40-41. Hereinafter cited as *CED*.

is overpowered by the inspiring commitment to action where the combining of the spiritual and the practical (Martha's and Mary's role) are fundamental to the effective sharing of material goods and the word of God.

This is the message our contemporary world needs to follow by promoting global activism; this is the message I take to my classroom with a great sense of urgency, under the label "awareness of the other." And the most effective tool to carry it out is communication — that is, language.

Nobody more than Monsieur Vincent understood the power of language, as a bridge to others, and all his work was based on the ability to build bridges — that is, to open dialogue with others, particularly the poor, in any possible form to achieve effective results. From revealing the secrets of alchemy to Bishop Montorio (Vincent used to tease him, for the bishop's last name loosely translates as "Mountain of Gold") who supported him in Rome, to persuading his friends through financial means or direct intervention, to constantly writing to members of his congregation to give them direction, to the discussions in the Tuesday Conferences, Monsieur Vincent made communication his best asset.

As a language professor I am always reminded of the importance Vincent gave to language learning to better serve the poor — and not just the language of the country, but also what I have termed, "the language of the heart," which, as we shall see shortly, is at the core of the Vincentian spirit.

I shall not indulge in discussing the importance Vincent gave to learning languages for cross-cultural communication at home and abroad, since it has been covered extensively and in fine detail by Professor Marco Tavanti in his article on "Cross-cultural Vincentian Leadership: The Challenge of Developing Culturally Intelligent Leaders."² It will be sufficient for me to give an example of Vincent's writing, just to focus on the lessons learned from his *modus operandi*.

Monsieur, what would you do if you had to be in two places with only two priests? For even if we sent you a few... they would not be in a position to work for a long time because they would not know the language. The result is that when I think of means to furnish good missionaries for Poland, this one only comes to mind: to bring together about twelve good young men from there... and give them a sound preparation in a seminary, where they can be formed in virtue and ecclesiastical functions.³

² Marco Tavanti, Ph.D., "Cross-Cultural Vincentian Leadership: The Challenge of Developing Culturally Intelligent Leaders," *Vincentian Heritage* 23-25:2, 26:1 (2005): 201-225.

³ Letter 2660, "Vincent de Paul to Guillaume Desdames, in Warsaw," 13 September 1658, *CED*, 7:260-262.

Vincent's practical words in this letter are indeed applicable today to the issue of global poverty. If you lack the personnel who speak the language, use the local manpower and train it. Is this not what many NGOs are currently doing in developing countries?

Certainly the key word for Vincent remains training — or, as he says, “a sound preparation.” From the example of Jesus training his disciples, Vincent stressed this “preparation” as key to his entire mission. Knowledge of the language or dialects of a country was good for the initial approach to the poor, but to get truly close to them one needed to learn “the language of the heart.” Probably one of Vincent's favorite topics in his Tuesday Conferences, this “language” encouraged simple, straightforward speech that poor people could understand — quite revolutionary, one might think, considering the tendency of that time toward complex and ornate speech. Vincent called it “le petit method,” an act of humility toward the poor people he had come to love and to serve. This “petit method,” whose requirements are expounded in the Vincentian values, is what I understand Vincent to be all about, and again it is also part of what I have called “a culture of awareness.” It is what I try to uphold everyday in my classroom, because it is a language that seeks continually God's face in the other's.

For many years, as my students have been required to sit in a semicircle and look at each other when they talk (surely uncomfortable for many of them during the first few days), I make them seek each other's faces. “You must always go into the detail,” said Vincent. The face is the detail. To look at the other's face is to establish a relationship of non-indifference that is not cognitive but ethical. And if we really think about it, I tell my students, our own face also belongs to the other. As much as it is dear to us, we cannot see it, and certainly the distortion of the mirror does not do the job. We rely on others to name it. Faces meet in dialogue before words. To look at a person's face is to keep them at a close range. Vincent's exhortation was to keep the poor at a close range where we would recognize them as our brothers and sisters, carrying the divine.

If my classroom is the best environment to test Vincent's affective love — that is, the “language of the heart” — through active participation and through writing projects I published in the Italian journal *Parola Mia*, then my networking at the university and projects abroad are, I humbly believe, examples of Vincentian affective love.

The issue of poverty reduction is on everybody's mind today, from the United Nations Millennium goals to various initiatives by private corporations. The commitment to help is there and the finances are there. The problem is: How do you do it constructively? It is not easy as I learned four years ago when in my husband's memory I created a nonprofit organization called

Frates (4frates.org) and a center (Centro Franco Desideri) on the fringes of the rain forest near the town of Puyo, Ecuador, to help local tribes. On one side, our focus was to help people, particularly the young, to become self-sufficient by offering services that ranged from computer skills to language, arts and crafts, cooking (we even taught them how to make pizza), farming (including experimenting with medicinal herbs), health education, and hygiene. On the other, we provided food and health services. We obtained some of the financing by involving my students in a very creative way. Every Saturday many of them would come to practice conversational Italian with me in a well-known restaurant and at a very reasonable price thanks to the generous owner, who contributed five dollars to Frates for each student present.

From the beginning, Frates encountered difficulties ranging from cultural misunderstandings to an inability to follow through with the work. In servicing local communities we had to rely on local help, and our most difficult task was that of training these people. How I wished that some Vincentians were present in the area! Finally, though, we found a well-trained local non-profit group whom we engaged to work for our organization.



Indigenous children learning in the Centro Franco Desideri in Amazonian Ecuador, sponsored by the Frates organization.

Photo courtesy of the author

The issue of training people who want to help the poor was the topic of a conversation between me and my dearest friend, Riccardo Colasanti, two years ago on a particularly cold winter's afternoon in a bar in Piazza San Silvestro, Rome. Riccardo is to me what Saint Francis of Sales was to Vincent: my inspiration, my call to action. Originally a medical doctor, he is today an *Identite* missionary,⁴ and the secretary general and treasurer of Caritas of Rome.

⁴ The *Identite* is a group of missionaries who work in twenty-seven countries, dedicated to promoting Catholic teaching in parishes, schools, and universities. Their founder, mystic poet and philosopher Fernando Rielo, is well known for his "genetic concept of the principle of relation," through which he discusses the nature of "being" going beyond the Parmenidean concept of "being is being." "Being," for Rielo, is always "being +" where the "+" denotes the relationship

Riccardo and I had been talking for several months about training and educating the young to be future leaders able to serve globally. But it was on that day, as we sipped our espresso, that the conversation turned into a vision. Caritas would provide the financing, St. John's the professors, and we would try to change the world with a new Master's degree, which we envisioned to be the Master of the Catholic Church (and these are the exact words I told Benedict XVI when we inaugurated our Master in Global Development and Social Justice last year in Rome).



Prof. Saccà with the Director General of Caritas of Rome Don Guerino Di Tora, speaking with the Pope about the new Master in Global Development and Social Justice.

Photo courtesy of the author

The idea was to use my university's information technology resources to teach the bulk of the courses via distance learning to fifteen students from all over the world. They would receive a full scholarship and spend the first and last summer of the program in Italy, where they would meet all their professors and take their first two courses (taught by external professors chosen by Caritas) and their final capstone seminar (taught by Riccardo), with all expenses paid by the sponsors. Furthermore, the Master would not be in the hands of an individual, but would be run by a steering committee with representation from my university (including the Vincentian Mission Center) and the sponsors.

What makes this program special is that it is totally based on Vincentian core values (solidarity, social justice, dignity of the human person, universal charity), thus promoting Catholic social teaching within content areas including anthropology of development, immigration, health care issues, communication, ethics, and economics of global development viewed from

of being with the other, who actually defines one and gives one reason for one's destiny and life. Thus, we might add, human nature is relational and the expression of this relationality generates a culture of solidarity as Vincent meant it.

the perspective of Catholic social thought. Moreover — and this is a coincidence — all distance-learning courses are taught by professors who are also Vincentian Fellows.

It is not just “global development” we are after, but “integral” and “authentic” development, as Pope Paul VI defined it in *Populorum Progressio*: a development that is directed to help “every man and the whole man.”

The length of my description of this project reflects my enthusiasm for it, and my hope to build it up with other activities which are already in the planning.

Another venture very dear to me, initiated by a Vincentian Fellow, has been a conference called *Languages for Peace: Respect, Dialogue, Understanding, Tolerance*. In collaboration with the Vincentian Mission Center, which I consider the heart and soul of our university, we set up a three-day conference, inviting speakers from the Comunità di Sant’Egidio and the Federal Government, International Education Office, and my own language department, to discuss the importance of languages in building relationships among people, cultures, and nations and in advancing social justice, development, and peace among all peoples. The students’ reaction to this conference can best be described as “a call to action” as many, for example, inquired how to become members of the Comunità di Sant’Egidio.

In another project, keeping in mind that many of our students are not aware of what poverty is all about, I thought it would be very interesting to offer them a cross-cultural experience. So last January I took them to Italy — not to Rome, Florence, Venice, or Milan, but to what I called the silent Italy, in the narrow streets of the mountainous towns of the south, some of them almost abandoned, in the province of Salerno and Matera, where each face had a story to tell.

It was a six-credit January mini-session entitled “Culture of Southern Italy through Images,” organized in a joint venture with the Fine Arts department. My friend and colleague, another Vincentian Fellow, taught photography while I covered the history and culture of southern Italy. I still believe today that for us and our class it was one of the most unforgettable experiences of solidarity, generosity, and understanding.

Students had the opportunity to enter people’s homes, talk to them, and share their culture and their food, their stories and their worlds. The course included a service learning component in which we worked in Paestum with the priest of a poor parish. We painted the church inside and outside while locals would come with espresso coffee and cookies to warm us. We laughed a lot, learned a lot, and also shed some tears as parishioners applauded us during Sunday’s mass when we donated to the church a picture of the Virgin Mary, Saint Ann, and Saint Joachim painted by our own students. Their faces

and their stories are still with us today in the photographs taken by the students and hung on the walls of our university for everyone to see.

Many photographs also hang in my own department and tell their own stories. I particularly like the ones taken during my summer study abroad program in Rome. They are pictures of students laughing, eating gelato, showing their artworks in my friend's gallery, but also working. I have included a service component in my program and, thanks to Caritas and the Comunità di Sant'Egidio, we work every summer in a soup kitchen and get to see the faces of the poor. This is important because by seeing them again, students are reminded of their needs, which is the first step toward poverty reduction.



Students painting and cleaning the church of Sant'Anna in Paestum.

Photo courtesy of the author

Furthermore, I have created a new three-credit course entitled "International Internship" in which students can work in any field of their choice. In Rome I have placed them everywhere, in the Italian Parliament (tied to an international leadership certificate from the Government and Politics department), in the Olympic Stadium in the Foro Italico, at the Italian broadcasting network RAI, in four-star hotels, in law and marketing firms, and at the Rome zoo. Many choose service for their internship, so they work in poor parishes, on the outskirts of Rome, in Caritas clinics for immigrants, in the Caritas offices in the Laterano for special projects dealing with the poor, or with the Sisters of Charity.

In this internship they keep a diary and share with me their thoughts and reactions. Nobody returns to New York the same. This is the promise I make before we leave, and one I always keep. As Vincent could not be the same after meeting the poor in the estate of Margu r ite de Silly, so we are transformed when we meet our brothers in need, no matter where we are, in any part of the world.

Again, I shall never stop repeating that in order to move to action — to poverty reduction, in this case — we first need to be aware of what we are facing. A culture of awareness is, as I have said, a culture of closeness. Professors have the responsibility to educate students to understand closeness by promoting “the language of the heart” — that is, the Vincentian values — not because they are Christian values but because they are genetically (as Riello would put it) inherent to our being human.

In the poem “First of All Man” from *The Last Letter to my Son*, the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet writes:

One doesn't live on this earth
 as a stranger or as a tourist in nature.
 Live in this world as in your father's home.
 Believe in the wheat, in the land, in the sea,
 but first of all, believe in man.
 Love the clouds, the cars, the books,
 but first of all, love man.
 Feel the sadness of the tree branch dying, of the star fading,
 of the wounded animal gasping,
 but first of all, feel the sadness and pain of man.⁵

This is what the Vincentian spirit is all about: feeling the sadness and pain of man, and taking action.

⁵ Not available in English; loosely translated from the Italian, found online at: <http://www.esoteria.org/documenti/massime/hikmet.html>