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The Virtue of Holy Indifference: The Fruit of Saint Vincent de Paul's Spiritual Journey

SUNG HAE KIM, S.C.¹

¹ I am grateful to John E. Rybolt, C.M., who read this article and offered valuable suggestions.



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Introduction

While reading Saint Vincent de Paul, I was struck by his repeated emphasis on the virtue of Holy Indifference. I wanted to find out what ‘Holy Indifference’ meant to him and how it can transform us today, individually and communally. Some five years ago I wrote an article, “Indifference as the Freedom of the Heart: The Spiritual Fruit of Apostolic Mysticism – Christian, Confucian, and Daoist Cases.”² As my resource for the Christian case, I used only five conferences of Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity, which focused on indifference as their theme. Since then, in 2014 the Index to *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, and Documents* was published.³ Because of this, I am now able to update my work utilizing all the occurrences of indifference provided in a vast number of Vincent’s letters, as well as in his conferences to the priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Mission.⁴ In other words, this article completes the former article, while focusing anew on the Christian spirituality of indifference through the example of Vincent de Paul. This new research provided me joy in offering a deeper look into the unique life’s pilgrimage of Saint Vincent de Paul.

It has been a challenge in how to best translate the French term *indifférence* into contemporary English. The word does not mean ordinary indifference, with its negative connotation that one is so self-centered that s/he is not interested in anything or anyone else. Sister Marie Poole, D.C., the chief English translator of *CCD*, attempted to convey the original meaning of *indifférence* using a variety of English words, such as transcendence, detachment, freedom of heart, a state of openness to God’s Will, etc. according to the context. These various translated words, however, forced me to go back to the original French text in order to confirm instances when Vincent actually used the term *indifférence*.

Recently Pope Francis warned us about the attitude of indifference, which he considers the root cause of human sins against our neighbors and against nature, such as the rich man in the Gospel story uninterested in the plight of the beggar in front of his own house (Luke 16: 20). The Pope’s concern for the ‘globalization of indifference,’ which includes indifference to God, indifference to neighbor, and indifference to environment, has been notably expressed in his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* (#54, 61, etc.), and in his message on the World Day of Peace on 1 January 2016. Interestingly enough, however, if we do not stop at the verbal level but delve more deeply into content, Pope Francis’s appeal to overcome our attitude of indifference through solidarity and compassion is connected to Vincent’s Holy Indifference, which frees a person and a community from egoism. Vincent recommended that we cultivate this virtue, that is, a habitual capacity to see things as they are, offering the freedom of heart to love all things through the eyes of God. Vincent was convinced that Jesus Christ practiced this virtue on earth: emptying himself and faithfully

² See *Vincentian Heritage* 30:2 (2011), 27-46.

³ Pierre Coste, C.M., *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. by Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., et al, vols. 1-14 (New York: New City Press, 1985-2014). Hereafter cited as *CCD*.

⁴ I will primarily focus upon 24 letters written by Vincent that appear throughout eight volumes of *CCD*. These include three Conferences to the Missioners and five conferences to the Daughters of Charity, all of which feature indifference as their title/theme.



Vincent writing letters at his desk.

Original in Vincentian provincial house, Stradom, Krakow; signed by G. Lewandowska.

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<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>



following the will of God. Holy Indifference was, for Vincent, the source of all virtues from which freedom and love flow.

Finally, in order to provide some additional context, it would also be of value to compare the virtue of Holy Indifference in Vincent de Paul with that of Ignatius Loyola; this is worth discussion as it was Loyola whom introduced the concept into the Catholic spiritual tradition.

The Virtue of Holy Indifference in the Letters of Vincent de Paul

In twenty-four letters, Vincent presented the state of Holy Indifference as the ideal to which every disciple of Jesus should aspire. For thirty years, beginning with his letters to Louise de Marillac in the 1630s, to a letter to a seminarian of the Congregation of the Mission in 1660 just months before his death, the virtue of Holy Indifference was central to Vincent's vision of imitating the true freedom of Jesus Christ. Consider how Vincent, as the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission, described the virtue to his priests and brothers missioned outside of Paris. He wrote to a priest of the Mission:

O Monsieur, what a beautiful adornment for a Missionary is holy indifference, since it makes him so pleasing to God that God will always prefer him to all other workers in whom He does not see this disposition for indifference in carrying out His plans! If we divested ourselves, once and for all, of all self-will, we would then be in a position of being sure of doing the Will of God, in which the angels find all their delight and men all their happiness.⁵

Vincent assured the priest that God sees our mind, the root of all our actions, and believes it more important than all our great achievements. This statement is striking when

⁵ Letter 1472, "To a Priest of the Mission," *CCD*, 4:339.

we consider Vincent's extraordinary lifetime of accomplishment. He worked tirelessly for the poor and for victims of wars; but what he really wanted to teach his companions was their need to be emptied of desires thereby filling their hearts with God. Vincent was convinced that only when we preserve this freedom of heart, doing whatever God asks of us, will heaven and earth rejoice with us.

Vincent wrote comfortingly to one of his priests who was experiencing difficulty accepting a change of ministry. He pointed out that the priest's patience was being tested, that he should let go of his repugnance to change and bear the temptation to move to another place: "...well aware that without peace of mind it is difficult to succeed in any duty. But since it depends mainly on God and our own indifference, those two principles must be established in us and sought in these two sources."⁶ Here Vincent made it clear that two principles from which we can draw energy are trust in God and Holy Indifference. These two sources are intimately tied together, for only when our mind is in the state of indifference can we truly trust God and let divine grace freely work within us.

Reading Vincent's letters, I received a special consolation as I could see that he also experienced all the communal conflicts we experience today. Consequently, I read his letters with much interest and curiosity about how he faced these perennial human problems, and how he solved them. Once Vincent received a letter from a rector telling of a seminarian who was persistent in his desire to move to Paris because the courses he wished to take were not offered in the seminary at Rome. Vincent advised the rector to persuade the seminarian that it was not advisable to move between semesters, and that it would be beneficial for him to serve as a companion to a new seminarian in Rome. Then Vincent offered the fundamental principle of how to discern our motivations, the source of our desires:

Desires that come from God are gentle and leave the soul at peace; whereas inspirations of the evil spirit are, on the contrary, harsh and troubling to the person who has them.... It is up to the Company to assign individual members either to studying or to the works, at the time and in the manner it deems appropriate; otherwise, if each person were at liberty to choose, it would no longer be a body composed of parts which constitute that beautiful harmony of well-regulated Communities, but rather a division of persons following their own inclinations.⁷

Vincent suggested the same principle of discernment to Brother Pierre Leclerc, who had threatened to leave the community if his request was not accepted. "I feel that your desire does not come from God because it is too vehement. Those given by God are gentle

⁶ Letter 1897, "To a Priest of the Mission," 1 August 1655, *Ibid.*, 5:410-11.

⁷ Letter 2760, "To Edme Jolly," 27 December 1658, *Ibid.*, 7:434-435.

and peaceful; they in no way trouble the mind as yours does, causing you anxiety.... Where is that holy indifference to places and duties that made you say so frequently that you were ready to go and ready to remain in order to follow Our Lord?"⁸ To another Brother who repeatedly asked to move his mission Vincent answered that God was trying to teach him, for the Brother wanted to go where he was now. Then Vincent ordered the Brother to stay, thinking it was God's will that he bear the hardships he was experiencing in order to learn patience:

You have encountered a few difficulties there, and I told you that there were some everywhere.... Dear Brother, if you want to have peace of heart and a thousand blessings from God, do not listen any longer either to your own judgment or your will. You have already made sacrifice of them to God; be very careful not to take back the use of them. Allow yourself to be guided, and rest assured that God will be the one who guides you; but where? To the freedom of His children, to a superabundance of consolations, to great progress in virtue, and to your eternal happiness.... I ask Our Lord to animate you with His own Spirit. He was so submissive that He compared Himself to a beast of burden, which is so indifferent that people do to it whatever they want — anywhere, any time. If we were in this disposition, God would soon lead us to our perfection.⁹

We should pay special attention to the concept of freedom Vincent portrayed here. The freedom that the children of God are enjoying is mentioned in Rom 8:21: "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." For Vincent the journey to freedom was the process of cultivating the virtue of Holy Indifference. Freedom meant a state of mind liberated from any attachment or bondage outside of God. Just like the donkey Jesus rode on his entrance to Jerusalem (Mt 21:5), the disciples of Jesus should preserve freedom of heart and be ready to leave any time and go to any place as the Lord directed. This image of the mule/donkey also appears several times in Vincent's conferences to the Daughters of Charity.

It is noteworthy that freedom of heart enables us not only to willingly accept the decisions of superiors, but also offers us creativity and the courage to take initiatives in responding to events without fear of failure.¹⁰ A person who walks through life with inner freedom makes decisions consistently and courageously without fear of criticism

⁸ Letter 2168, "To Pierre Leclerc," 12 November 1656, *Ibid.*, 6:143.

⁹ Letter 2854, "To a Coadjutor Brother," 28 May 1659, *Ibid.*, 7:589-590.

¹⁰ Robert P. Maloney, C.M., quoted André Dodin in his article, "The Freedom of the Children of God: The Fruit of Indifference." See *Vincentiana* 60:2 (April-June 2016).



Vincent receives the offer of Saint-Lazare.

From a series of etchings on his life by Vignola.

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<http://stovincentsimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>



or adverse consequences.¹¹ This creative and freeing aspect of Holy Indifference for an individual should be emphasized and developed further, and we should even consider an external element of decision-making, an awareness that others play a role in accordance to their talents and ability. Indeed, our contemporary understanding of systemic change calls for this greater understanding of Holy Indifference, the inner freedom of heart.

In the first volume of the *Correspondence*, we find Vincent's letters to Louise de Marillac in the 1630s. In 1633, when young women began to gather in Louise's house to serve the poor in the parishes of Paris, Vincent not only suggested qualifications for their acceptance, but also emphasized the importance of inner preparation. He believed virtues to be the foundation of all the apostolic ministries: "Permit me to add to this the recommendation of holy indifference, although nature grumbles against it. I tell you that everything is to be feared until we succeed in this, since our inclinations are so wicked that they seek themselves in all things."¹² Vincent encouraged Louise and the early Daughters of Charity to cultivate the virtue. He felt it was important to train young women aspiring to religious life to learn it in their initial formation period: "It will be good, meanwhile, to have them understand that they must remain in a spirit of indifference. Indeed! They must be trained in the knowledge of solid virtues before we can make use of them."¹³

When he was writing the draft of the rules for the Daughters of Charity, Vincent advised Louise to teach them to learn mortification and to attain the virtues of obedience and indifference:

¹¹ *Ibid.* Maloney illustrates nine major initiatives Vincent took in his lifetime: the Ladies of Charity; Congregation of the Mission; 20 seminaries; 60 houses of the Daughters of Charity; 30,000 letters; 13 houses for foundlings; organizing relief campaigns for victims of war, plague, and famine; massive relief programs at Saint-Lazare; and the houses of Daughters of Charity and the Council of Conscience.

¹² Letter 148, "To Saint Louise," *CCD*, 1:212.

¹³ Letter 152, "To Saint Louise," [September or October 1633], *Ibid.*, 1:217.

It would be well for you to tell them what constitutes solid virtue, especially that of interior and exterior mortification of our judgment, our will, memories, sight, hearing, speech, and other senses, of the attachments we have to bad, useless, and even to good things; all this for the love of Our Lord Who acted in this way. You will have to strengthen them a great deal in all these matters, especially in the virtue of obedience and in that of indifference.¹⁴

Vincent recommended the virtue to not only Louise and those preparing to be Daughters of Charity, but also to himself no matter the situation: “I am like you, Mademoiselle; there is nothing that bothers me more than uncertainty. But I do indeed greatly desire that God may be pleased to grant me the grace of making everything indifferent to me, and to you as well. Come now, we shall make every effort, please God, to acquire this holy virtue.”¹⁵

We know how much Vincent trusted God’s providence in moving the Motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission to Saint-Lazare, a vast property with great possibilities for expansion. Their possession of the property faced an uncertain future due to a lawsuit concerning whether missionaries would be allowed to remain. The following is a candid letter of Vincent’s:

You are well aware that the religious of [Saint-Victor] are contesting our possession of Saint-Lazare. You could hardly believe the acts of submission I have rendered to them as the Gospel prescribes, although truly they are not called for. M. Duval has assured me of this, as has everyone who knows what this affair involves. Things will be as Our Lord wishes. He knows that His goodness has made me as truly indifferent on this occasion as during any other difficulty I have had. Please help me to thank Him for this.¹⁶

The Congregation of the Mission began in 1625 with six priests and an endowment of 45,000 livres from Phillipe Emmanuel de Gondi and his wife. Recognizing this new community’s vitality and vision Adrien Le Bon, the superior of Saint-Lazare, asked Vincent to take over his huge priory just outside of Paris, on the condition that the Congregation of the Mission would take care of the remaining members of his monastery until their deaths. Initially Vincent was hesitant to accept this vast property, but André Duval, his spiritual

¹⁴ Letter 156a, “To Saint Louise,” [January 1634], *Ibid.*, 1:223.

¹⁵ Letter 175, “To Saint Louise,” [between 1632 and 1636], *Ibid.*, 1:240-241.

¹⁶ Letter 102, “To N.,” [1632], *Ibid.*, 1:151. For more on the Religious of St. Victor’s dispute over Saint-Lazare with the Congregation of Mission, see José María Román, C.M., *St. Vincent de Paul: A Biography*, trans. by Joyce Howard (Melisende, UK Ltd: 1999), 231-234. André Dodin commented on the influence André Duval had on Vincent, both in enabling him to recognize his call to establish a community, and later in accepting the huge priory of Saint-Lazare. See *Vincent de Paul and Charity: A Contemporary Portrait of His Life and Apostolic Spirit*, trans. by Jean Marie Smith and Dennis Saunders (New York: New City Press, 1993), 27.

director and a professor of theology at the Sorbonne, persuaded him to accept it and use it for the poor and the renewal of the Church. After Saint-Lazare became the Motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission in 1632, the Augustinians of Ste. Geneviève and St. Victor filed a lawsuit claiming Saint-Lazare should stay in the Augustinian union. Vincent felt tempted to give up the property, but Duval dissuaded him and assured him he was in the right. Therefore, Vincent went to court, keenly aware of his duties as head of a congregation. Yet, as we read in the letter above, Vincent was able to maintain his freedom of heart or state of indifference in the midst of this unsure situation.

In a separate instance, Vincent proposed to practice the virtue of indifference when members of the community were experiencing conflicts among themselves. When the superior of the Le Mans seminary wrote to Vincent that priests in his house had diverging opinions on liturgy, some very critical of what he was trying to do, Vincent responded that he would send someone soon to establish a common liturgy as in the Motherhouse. But he also used this occasion to teach his company to practice the virtue: “In God’s name, Monsieur, let us remain indifferent; let us strive to be equally attached to whatever obedience marks out for us, be it agreeable or disagreeable.... For some petty contradiction should we stop doing good, and a good such as glorifying God?”¹⁷

Around the same time, Vincent heard from the superior of Saintes that he did not know what to do because a young priest refused to obey him. Vincent responded that while the superior should advise the young priest to learn the virtue, the superior should also maintain the heart of indifference:

I will also try to give him a hint that he should show a little more submission and indifference than he now does. However, since this is the work of the Holy Spirit rather than that of men, who can say things but not move the person, we shall pray to God for that.... I know well, Monsieur, how much you have to endure in your present duty, and I ask Our Lord to strengthen you in your difficulties. It is in such circumstances that we acquire virtue; where there is no suffering, there is little merit. My wish is that God may grant us great indifference with regard to duties.... I beg you to ask Him earnestly for this grace for me and for the whole Company.¹⁸

It is clear that Vincent thought the virtue of indifference should be practiced by all members of the Congregation of the Mission and, in the end, by all disciples of Jesus.

To a priest of the Congregation of the Mission wanting to go on foreign missions, Vincent responded thus: “Holy indifference in all things is the state of the perfect, and yours gives me hope that God will be glorified in and by you.... We must serve Him as

¹⁷ Letter 1157, “To Jean Gicquel,” 5 December 1649, *CCD*, 3:509.

¹⁸ Letter 1158, “To Louis Rivet,” 8 December 1649, *Ibid.*, 3:510.

He wishes and renounce our own choice, with regard both to places and employments.”¹⁹ To a seminarian in Genoa suffering spiritual dryness and hesitant to give a lecture on philosophy, Vincent offered the following advice: “I praise God for the indifference He has given you regarding the place where you live and, I venture to say, regarding all the works.... Your lowly sentiments concerning yourself are good, and I ask Our Lord to give you enough of them to enable you to follow Him always in the practice of holy humility. They should not, however, prevent you from being submissive, if holy obedience requires that you teach philosophy.”²⁰ Vincent sympathized with the student’s suffering, his distaste for prayer and spiritual reading, etc., but he encouraged him to be faithful to his spiritual exercises — to remember that our Lord is faithful and tests His best servant, now in one way, then in another.

In another instance, an Irish priest entered the Congregation of the Mission in order to serve the poor in the countryside, but he was missioned to a seminary to teach music and liturgy to seminarians. He was so upset that he did not participate in the community’s morning or evening prayers. Upon hearing this news, Vincent wrote him that the formation of the clergy was as important as ministering to the poor in the countryside. Then Vincent pointed out a practical matter too; the priest should wait until he became more fluent in French in order to preach to people in the village. “In the name of Our Lord, Monsieur, humble yourself, ask His pardon for the bad example you give the seminary and your confreres, and rest assured that the Company will be indulgent enough to forget the past and to give you the satisfaction you desire, when it sees that you are indifferent to duties and very exact to the things recommended to you.”²¹ Vincent’s advice to those not satisfied with their ministry would be the same, whether in 1659 or now; one must be patient and wait for God’s time, cultivating the virtue of Holy Indifference.

When the superior of the Annecy seminary insisted that Missioners should go to the cities to find success, Vincent wrote the following letter three years before his own death:

Because that [a new community established in Lyons] has given you reason to tell me that there is no hope that our Company will ever progress and be provided with good subjects unless we take the trouble to establish ourselves in large cities,.... Up to this point, His Providence has called us to the places where we are, without our seeking this either directly or indirectly.... Indeed, if we were really convinced of our own uselessness, we would be wary of entering someone else’s vineyard before being invited there...²²

¹⁹ Letter 2047, “To a Priest of the Mission,” *Ibid.*, 5:593.

²⁰ Letter 2082, “To a Student of the Mission,” 16 June 1656, *Ibid.*, 5:630.

²¹ Letter 2847, “To Luke Plunket,” 21 May 1659, *Ibid.*, 7:578.

²² Letter 2274, “To Achille Le Vazeux,” 1 June 1657, *Ibid.*, 6:331. Historical information concerning Achille Le Vazeux, the superior of the Annecy Seminary (1653-58), is from footnote 1.



A holy card picturing Louise with the Daughters and persons in need.

The text reads: "Blessed be God for all things, may His holy will be preferred to everything."

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>



The superior at Annecy was not only success driven, but also hasty and obstinate in his decisions and found it hard to take advice from others. He once tried to merge with another congregation in the region without permission of the superior general. In the end, he was not able to complete his term of office, was recalled to Paris, and then left the Congregation a few days before Vincent's death. Vincent regarded his withdrawal as a blessing from God.

Although it was not common for a Daughter of Charity to write Vincent directly, as Louise was their direct superior, we find several interesting letters between Vincent and Sister Anne Hardemont, the sister servant in Ussel. She wrote to Vincent, complaining she was angry with Louise for missioning her to a remote country village where she could not find anything worthwhile to do. She even confessed to Vincent that she was so displeased with Louise that she no longer wished to write to her. Vincent's answer to her was gentle, but firm:

I received two letters from you which have distressed me deeply and with good reason, seeing how you are behaving there. Who, indeed, would not be distressed at seeing a Daughter of Charity — one of the oldest in the Company — brought to Limousin by Divine Providence to do the works of mercy, no sooner arrive on the spot than she wants to return out of sheer caprice and constantly complains of being left there, although she has no difficulties to endure other than the ones she makes for herself? ...Now, I ask you to consider the scandal you are giving and the insult which Our Lord, who has called you to His service, receives from it. Look at the harm that you are doing to the Duchess, who brought you to her estates for the relief of the poor and the edification of her subjects.... No one likes being in a strange place; yet, they go there and they stay. How many young

women who have married far away are unhappy with their homes and their husbands as well! But they do not return to their parent's house because of that. They have to mortify their preference.... Furthermore, you should not always stay in your room, but take turns with your Sister — or go with her — visiting and serving the poor. That is one way of not getting bored.²³

Vincent concluded his letter with warm advice on how to comply graciously with another's wishes; she should be humble, gentle, and wise in her leadership, and never lose confidence in the leadership of Louise who had received graces from God to give instructions to others.

Vincent rejoiced when he saw people living with the spirit of indifference. When he heard from a priest of the Congregation that in his heart he accepted the change of superior, Vincent answered thus: "*Mon Dieu*, how consoled I am by the share Our Lord has given you of His humility, in the change of Superiors that has taken place, and likewise your indifference in submitting yourself to anyone whomsoever. That is, indeed, a mark of the sovereign dominion Our Lord has over your dear heart, which I love more than my own, in the heart of Our Lord in whose love I am your most humble and obedient servant."²⁴ Vincent praised yet another priest of the Mission and encouraged him to maintain this spirit: "God be praised that you are ready to do His Will in all things and everywhere and to go to live and die wherever He chooses to call you! This is the disposition of good servants of God and of truly apostolic men, who are attached to nothing."²⁵

About one year before his death, a seminarian wrote to Vincent that he wished to be missioned to a distant place to administer sacraments to the people. Vincent's response warrants our attention because he includes a recommendation to cultivate different virtues through which one can attain the virtue of indifference:

It was a joy for me to receive your letter, and I was grateful to God in His goodness when I saw your readiness to go to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments to people in distant lands. This holy seed that Our Lord has sown in your heart will be able to bear fruit in due time, and fruits of eternal life. Cultivate it carefully but without departing from the holy indifference you must have for places and works. And since you are now engaged in studying, make it your principal concern, after that of pleasing God and making yourself ever more pleasing in His sight by the practice of the virtues.²⁶

²³ Letter 2768, "To Sister Anne Hardemont," 4 January 1659, *Ibid.*, 7:447-449. Volume 7 contains four letters of Vincent to Sister Anne beginning in August 1658, three months after her arrival at Ussel. See also, Letters 2641, 2734, and 2786. This is the third letter and the strongest admonition. The last letter is of a more consoling nature as Sister Anne was enduring difficulties in starting the hospital, and in community life.

²⁴ Letter 642, "To Pierre Escart," 11 February 1643, *Ibid.*, 2:401-402.

²⁵ Letter 1534, "To a Priest of the Mission," *Ibid.*, 4:437.

²⁶ Letter 2886, "To a Seminarian of the Mission," 28 June 1659, *Ibid.*, 7:636.

The Conferences of Vincent to the priests and brothers of the Mission frequently mentioned five virtues: simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification, and zeal.²⁷ In Conference 211, which he gave on 22 August 1659, Vincent expressed that these five virtues are the spirit and life of the Congregation of the Mission. He explained each of these five virtues as they applied to the *Common Rules*, chapter II, article 14:

We should follow, as far as possible, all the Gospel teaching already mentioned, since it is so holy and very practical. But some of it, in fact, has more application to us, particularly when it emphasizes simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification and zeal for souls. The Congregation should pay special attention to developing and living up to these five virtues so that they may be, as it were, the faculties of the soul of the whole congregation, and that everything each one of us does may always be inspired by them.²⁸

It is worth noting that Vincent connected this part of the *Common Rules* to the freedom of the children of God. He was convinced that those detached from a love for worldly possessions, from the greedy desire for pleasures, and from their own will, become the children of God and enjoy perfect freedom. “Is there anything as useful as freedom? The teaching states that freedom should be bought at the price of gold and silver and that we should sacrifice everything to possess it.”²⁹ Vincent then explained how this freedom from the charms of the world, the pleasures of the flesh, and the illusions of the devil, will lead one to attain the five virtues of simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification, and zeal. After further clarifying each virtue, Vincent concluded “to put it in a nutshell, everything God asks of us in the Gospel teachings is found in these five virtues.”³⁰

Vincent advised cultivating these five virtues with Holy Indifference to a seminarian aspiring to join the foreign missions. To a priest suffering from a disease, he focused on indifference’s value: “A perfect abandonment to Providence such as yours is far more valuable than any other establishment. I ask Our Lord to strengthen you in it so that you may honor by your poverty the state in which He found Himself on earth, when He said that the birds had nests and the foxes had holes, but He had no place in which to withdraw.”³¹

²⁷ See Volume 11 of *CCD*, Conferences 33 and 34, pp. 40-41 for simplicity, Conferences 36 to 40, pp.44-50, for humility, Conferences 44 to 47, pp. 53-55, for gentleness, Conferences 52 and 53, p. 59, for mortification, and Conferences 56 and 57, p. 62, for Zeal. In the last two years of Vincent’s life conferences to the Missioners became longer — however, while Conferences 201, pp. 139-50, and 204, pp. 173-86, in Volume 12 mention four of the virtues, only Conference 211, pp. 243-52, cites all five.

²⁸ Conference 211, “The Five Characteristic Virtues,” 22 August 1659, *Ibid.*, 12:243.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12:245.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 12:251.

³¹ Letter 3075, “To Jean Martin,” 5 February 1660, *Ibid.*, 8:271-272.

Holy Indifference in Vincent's Conferences to the Missioners

Ordinarily, on every Friday evening from 8 to 9 PM Vincent gave a conference to the priests and brothers at Saint-Lazare. Since he opposed having his talks written down, most of these early conferences were not preserved. Although we have 224 conferences in Books eleven and twelve of *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, those in Book eleven are usually from one to six pages and preserve only the skeleton of a longer talk. On the other hand, the conferences in Book twelve are talks given from 1658 to 1660, the last two years of his life, and are usually longer than 10 pages as the Missioners were consciously preserving Vincent's remarks as their spiritual heritage. Though three conferences to the Missioners take the virtue as their theme, the first two, Conferences 62a and 188, are summaries, while only the third one, Conference 205, contains a full text.

First, Conference 62a is an abstract from the earliest biography of Vincent by Louis Abelly, but it denotes quite well how the virtue of indifference is closely connected with resignation or trust in the providence of God:

As for myself, I know nothing more holy or more perfect than this resignation, when it leads to a total stripping of self and true indifference for all sorts of states, in whatever manner we may be placed in them, except sin. So then, let's be steadfast in that and ask God to grant us the grace of remaining constantly in this indifference.³²

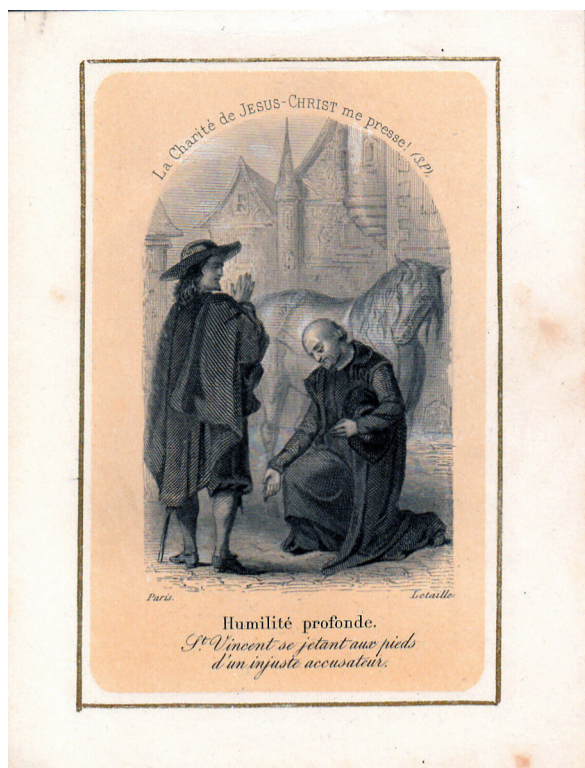
Here Vincent used an analogy of taking off the clothes of self-centered attachment and ambition. In another conference on detachment, Vincent warned the priests not to embellish their homilies with flowery words, for doing so revealed a hidden desire for success, fame and self-satisfaction. Vincent pointed out that such homilies do not move the hearts of people, nor meet the need of each person according to God's design. Detachment requires not only detachment from property, and detachment from an inordinate love of family and friends, but also detachment from self-gratification, "such as wanting others to adapt themselves to us, wanting to be successful in all we do and have everything smile on us."³³ In order to be freed from all these thirsts for interior or exterior satisfactions, we have to learn to "annihilate ourselves in His presence."³⁴ Annihilation of self is an important term in mystical theology, which signifies the ultimate point wherein a person becomes united with God by emptying him/herself.³⁵ The fact that Vincent advised his companions

³² Conference 62a, "Indifference," *Ibid.*, 11:70. Conference 62a is not found in the original French edition of *CCD*; it is an excerpt from Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God: Vincent de Paul*, trans. by William Quinn, F.S.C., 3 vols. (New York: New City Press, 1993), 3:47-55.

³³ Conference 196, "Members of the Congregation and Their Ministries," 13 December 1658, *CCD*, 12:95.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (The New American Library, 1958), 99, 170.



Holy card with the theme of Vincent and humility, in which the saint throws himself at the feet of an unjust accuser.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>



to annihilate themselves in God's presence reveals that his spirituality was not only concerned with charitable activities, but also with a mystical depth rooted in love. Because of this mystical depth, the authenticity of apostolic spirituality could be maintained.

Conference 188 to the Missioners is titled "Availability [Indifference] for Any Ministry Assignment," and records that, for Vincent, the virtue can be applied to the act of accepting assignments. In order to maintain the universal application of indifference towards all members, Vincent appealed to his companions to abandon any sense of privilege they felt entitled to because of their advanced age, higher education, or holiness:

The man who is not in this state of availability [indifference], but in the contrary one, is in a devilish state. In order to keep the vow of obedience we've taken, we must be in a state of openness to God's will [indifference] regarding all things.... "Oh, but I'm an old man!" someone may say. You're an old man! *Eh bien!* Should you on that account be less available, less virtuous? "Oh, but I'm an educated man!" Think about that a little. He's an educated man! And because he's educated, he doesn't have to be available or ready and willing to do what the Superior or an Officer of the house will ask of him. Consider whether that objection is reasonable, and if it ought to come from the mouth of someone who professes to serve God. "Oh, he's a holy man, Monsieur!" I'm glad he's a holy man. *Quoi!* Is that any reason why he should be exempt from doing what will be asked of him, what he'll be ordered to do, from obeying this Superior, who is, if you like, less perfect than he is, less educated and, if you like again, whose faults

and failings are obvious?³⁶

Vincent explained that we need humility and self-abjection in order to preserve this state of indifference. However, he also allowed for the possibility of dialogue with a superior should some obstacle in carrying out the ministry be found. “Go before Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament and there ask Him for the grace to let us know whether we should make this known to the Superior; and once He’s let us know that it’s His Will that we mention it, to do so, and then do whatever the Superior tells us.”³⁷ In essence, Vincent tried to balance personal discernment with intellectual reasoning and obedience to the superior, all within the state of Holy Indifference.

Worthy of note too are the qualities Vincent thought most important for a superior: “Some men are holy and lead a saintly life; however, they don’t always have the gift of leadership. Holiness is a continual disposition and total conformity to God’s Will, and leadership resides in the judgment. That is, a sound judgment is needed to guide and organize.”³⁸ Vincent knew by experience that sound judgment and humility were necessary requirements for good leadership, while being learned was not an absolute necessity, although it could help.

In conference 205 to the Missioners, commenting on the *Common Rules*, chapter II, article 10, Vincent explored the virtue:

Each one should show great eagerness in that sort of openness to God’s Will [indifference] which Jesus Christ and the saints developed so carefully. This means that we should not have a disproportionate liking for any ministry, person, or place, especially our native land, or anything of that sort. We should even be ready and willing to leave all these things gladly if our Superior asks it, or even hints at it, and to put up with any disappointment or disruption this causes, without complaint, accepting that, in all this, the Superior has done well in the Lord.³⁹

Vincent began his talk with a simple rhetorical question, “How could the Company attain holiness, if it doesn’t acquire openness to God’s Will [indifference] and detachment from all things?If we’re attached to the world and ourselves, to our pleasures and self-esteem, how, I repeat, could we work for the sanctification of the clergy, which consists in

³⁶ Conference 188, “Availability for Any Ministry Assignment,” [30 August 1658], *CCD*, 12:44-45. Sister Poole translated the French word ‘Indifference’ using a variety of suitable contemporary words and phrases, such as ‘availability’ or ‘state of openness’ to God’s will. I have placed the original term in [], in order to better convey Vincent’s emphasis on the virtue of indifference.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12:47.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12:45.

³⁹ Conference 205, “Indifference,” 16 May 1659, *Ibid.*, 12:187.



The Baptism of Saul (Paul) at Ananias. Mosaic, circa 1150.

Located in the Palatine Chapel, Palazzo Reale, Palermo, Italy.

Public Domain



turning away from these things? No one can give what he doesn't have."⁴⁰ It was crucial for the Missioners to attain this virtue:

Openness to God's Will [indifference] must set the captive free; this virtue alone draws us away from the tyranny of the senses and the love of creatures.... Openness to God's Will [indifference] must necessarily be akin to the nature of perfect love, for it's an activity of love, inclining the heart to all that's better and destroying everything that keeps it from this, like fire, which not only aims at its center, but consumes anything that holds it back. So, my dear confreres, if openness to God's Will [indifference] detaches your hearts from earth, they'll be afire with the practice of the Will of God. When they stop loving other things, they will necessarily be filled with God's love. It is in this sense that openness to God's Will [indifference] is the source of all virtues and the death of all vices.⁴¹

To better understand Holy Indifference as the source and mother of all virtues, consider that Vincent makes a distinction between 'indifferent action' and the 'state of indifference.' An indifferent action is a voluntary, moral act, which is neither good nor bad, such as eating, walking, sitting, standing, or taking one road. Since they are neutral actions, they are neither meritorious nor blameworthy. However, Vincent said the state of indifference is "a state in which a virtue is found whereby a person detaches himself from creatures in order to be united to the Creator. It's not only a virtue; it is, in some way, a state that encompasses it and in which it acts; it's a state, but in which this virtue must be active, by which the heart detaches itself from the things that hold it captive."⁴² Holy Indifference, therefore, frees our hearts from all attachments, all captivity, and in being free, it leads us to happiness: "It's characteristic of openness to God's Will [indifference] to take from us any resentment and desire, detaching us from ourselves and from every creature; that's its

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* This conference was given a little more than a year before Vincent's death.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 12:188.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 12:188-189.

purpose. That's the happiness in which it places us — provided it's active and working."⁴³

Vincent valued freedom of heart not only for himself but also for his companions. He appealed to them to pray and cut the bonds tying them to self-love and misery as soon as they became aware of them. He even prayed for the assembly listening to him: "O Savior, You've opened freedom's gate for us; teach us to find it; make known to us the importance of our freedom; help us to have recourse to You in order to reach it; enlighten us, my Savior, to see to what we're attached, and please place us in *libertatem filiorum Dei*."⁴⁴

Jesus and the Apostle Paul were two examples for Vincent, both of whom enjoyed a true freedom filled with God. Interestingly, Vincent used an analogy of a master's submissive beast of burden to understand Jesus' complete submission to the Father. "You do what you want with it; it's always ready to set off and go, to take on a saddle or a pack, to be hitched to the plow or to stand still; it's indifferent to everything, allowing itself to be led around, without the slightest attachment to its stall, and with no inclination to go to one side or another. It isn't attached to anything."⁴⁵ It was Jesus' total surrender, total flexibility, and constant readiness to do anything God asked of him, which impressed Vincent. He offered Jesus as the model of a life of indifference, the source and fruit of all virtues.

Similarly, Vincent believed the Apostle Paul to be another example of perfect Holy Indifference. Vincent focused on St. Paul's question to Jesus upon his conversion, 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' "What admirable words! They indicate a detachment as complete as it is astonishing. What an abundance of graces suddenly poured into this vessel of election! What a wonderful moment, which changed a persecutor into an Apostle! Oh, what great insight was then given him! By cutting him off from the law, his commission, his fortune, and his opinions, it causes him to say all at once, *Domine, quid me vis facere?*"⁴⁶ Vincent appealed to his companions to equip themselves with this virtue. The Company of Charity did not belong to them, just as with Jesus and the Apostle Paul, but as a vessel to be used by God to spread His reign.

The conference concludes beautifully with a prayer safeguarding the bliss that comes from freedom of heart flowing from the virtue/state of indifference:

O Sauveur! How happy we'd be if we were as detached as beasts of burden, like you, Lord, who compared yourself to a beast of burden, in order to adapt yourself to the greatest flexibility imaginable! We entreat you, our Liberator, to grant us at least the grace of sharing in this disposition, confident that we'll never again lose our freedom or abandon the practice of holy openness to God's Will [indifference]!⁴⁷

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12:189.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 12:192.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 12:195.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 12:199.



Vincent de Paul gives a conference to the Sisters.

From a series of illustrations on his life by Bernal.

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<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>



It is clear according to Vincent that if we maintain this disposition of Holy Indifference, we will be the true disciples of Jesus and enjoy happiness both on this earth and in eternity.

The Virtue of Indifference in Vincent's Conferences to the Daughters of Charity

By starting an active religious community with the official recognition of Church authorities, Vincent not only provided an opportunity for ordinary village women without dowry to serve the poor, but also to deepen their spirituality so that their service would be authentic and effective. The best means to deepen the spirituality of the Daughters of Charity was through monthly conferences held by Vincent, which Louise de Marillac preserved and put to good use.

In November 1633, when several "country girls" gathered at Louise's house with the intent to serve the poor for life, a little community was formed. On 31 July 1634, Vincent gave his first recorded conference encouraging them to live a life of community according to the rule. In this conference, documented by Louise, Vincent reminded their community how the providence of God gathered twelve of them to honor the life of Jesus on earth. His emphasis of the eternal significance of an ordinary daily schedule is succinct, but very memorable: "So, dear Sisters, let's see how you should spend the twenty-four hours that make up the day, as the days make up the months, and the months the years that will lead you to eternity."⁴⁸ Vincent compared the lives of the sisters to gold being purified in the furnace. He assured them they would become treasures of the community if they overcame difficulties and cultivated virtues daily, and thereby became persons of wisdom and humility. Vincent's language was direct and colorful, mixed with humor. He used more stories of saints, and his own experiences, to the Daughters than he had to the priests, so that those women with a less formal education could grasp what he was trying to convey.

Among the 120 conferences that Vincent gave to the Daughters of Charity, five

⁴⁸ Conference 1, "Explanation of the Regulations," 31 July 1634, *Ibid.*, 9:2.

conferences are titled "Indifference."⁴⁹ Conference 25 was given to sisters missioned to a new place, to whom Vincent recommended it: "We will begin with the first point, which is indifference, and so necessary to your Company that when it is no longer found in it, that will be a sure sign of its downfall. That's why those who want to be true Daughters of Charity, must be totally indifferent to whatever God wills to ordain in their regard: to be sent to this region or to another, to minister in this duty or in that, to be given orders by this person, or by someone else; in a word, to be indifferent to everything."⁵⁰ Before the Daughters of Charity were founded, almost all women religious were cloistered and once individuals entered a monastery, they stayed there for life. However, with the beginning of apostolic religious formation, it became crucial to possess the freedom of heart to move whenever need arose. In other words, the mobility and flexibility of this new lifestyle demanded the virtue of Holy Indifference.

Conference 48 conveyed a similar message with an added emphasis that founding such a new religious community was within God's eternal plan. Louise stated, "As the first reason we have for being always and at all times disposed to go everywhere and with any of our Sisters, I thought that this disposition was absolutely necessary in order to be faithful to God's plan in establishing this Company."⁵¹ Vincent confirmed Louise's remark: "You should have no doubt, Sisters, that this is the Will of God; and, as has been so well remarked, that it's what He has willed for the Company from the time when, in His infinite goodness, He first brought it into existence."⁵² Vincent added that whenever he found himself getting weak he invoked the presence of God and prayed to His mercy to send him the strength of the Holy Spirit. He knew well that without the grace of God it was impossible to preserve a state of indifference.

Conference 73 expounds on the *Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity*. "They will have no attachment, especially to places, duties, and persons, even their relatives and confessors, but will always be prepared to leave everything willingly when they are instructed to do so, reflecting that Our Lord says we are not worthy of Him if we do not renounce ourselves and if we do not leave father, mother, brothers, and sisters to follow Him."⁵³ Vincent singled out three types of attachment: attachment to vanity, fastidiousness, and esteem; attachment to our own judgment; and attachment to money. He also warned against spiritual attachment to particular devotions such as excessive fasting, mortification,

⁴⁹ Among the 120 conferences Vincent gave to the Daughters of Charity, five from the years 1646 to 1660 featured the theme of indifference: Conferences 25, 48, 73, 116, and 117. While the first three were given every five years, the last two conferences were given on December 8 and 14, 1659, about nine months before Vincent's death. The Conferences which followed, numbers 118 and 119, were given after the death of Louise de Marillac and concerned her virtue as well as the election of her successor. Conferences 116 and 117, then, might be read as Vincent's last words directly to the Daughters.

⁵⁰ Conference 25, "Indifference," 1 May 1646, *CCD*, 9:201-202.

⁵¹ Conference 48, "Indifference (now 43a)," *Ibid.*, 9:402; upon realizing an error, Sister Marie Poole changed the number of this conference from 48 in the original French edition to 43a (thereby reordering it) after confirming its date as 14 July 1650.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 9:405.

⁵³ Conference 73, "Indifference," 6 June 1656, *Ibid.*, 10:126-127.

and pilgrimage. As Vincent appealed to the Missioners, he also reminded the Daughters about the happiness that comes from keeping a state of indifference. “Look at the happiness of Sisters who aren’t attached to anything; they’re always satisfied, fear nothing, and always walk with head uplifted along the highway of virtue; if they encounter some difficulty, they don’t lose courage, since they trust in God and say, ‘God is my all; God is my Creator and all my hope; He won’t allow me to have greater suffering than I can bear.’ That’s a great happiness for a soul that’s attached to nothing but God alone.”⁵⁴

Conferences 116 and 117 read as the last words of Vincent to the Daughters of Charity. He urges them to imitate the life of Jesus who became like a mare, mule or carriage horse, totally compliant to the will of the master:

And since this virtue is repugnant to nature, which always tries to do its own will, ask Our Lord for it and say to Him, “Lord, grant me the grace to be as you were.” And in what state was our Lord? He tells us himself: He was like a mare, like a mule or a carriage horse. Just reflect how carriage horses allow themselves to be driven and led wherever people want, for no one has ever heard that they resisted the will of their masters. And Our Lord, to show that He was indifferent, said, “I have been like the horse and the mule, which allow themselves to be led wherever anyone pleases.” Isn’t it a great pity that senseless animals teach us this lesson of indifference, and we have such trouble practicing it! Sisters, let’s keep firmly in mind this lesson of Our Lord, who submitted in all things to the Will of His Father; remember that well and ask Him fervently in your prayers for the grace of being always indifferent to all sorts of ministries, in one place or another, be they important or lowly, ready for whatever pleases Him.⁵⁵

In thirteen more conferences to the Daughters of Charity, Vincent also recommended the virtue.⁵⁶ These conferences offer similar content, but Conference 81 is noteworthy as in it Vincent expressed a deep sense of the equality of all people before God:

“But, Monsieur,” someone will say, “do you think that a poor village girl like me can reach that point?” Yes, I do, Sister, and those who serve persons who are poor without being attached to this place or that, who seek only to please God, who ask for nothing and refuse nothing, and are always the same whether they’re sent here or left in a place, I tell you I know no one happier, and I know of no more perfect state than that. Sisters, when you begin to reflect and ask yourselves. “What do I want?” and you see that you want only what God wants,

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 10:141.

⁵⁵ Conference 116, “Indifference,” 8 December 1659, *Ibid.*, 10:560.

⁵⁶ See *CCD*: Volume 9, Conferences 1, 6, 15, 47, and 52; also Volume 10, Conferences 70, 71, 78, 81, 82, 97, 104, and 115.



Portrait of Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556).

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isn't it true that you experience a joy, an interior peace, and a certain inexpressible serenity of mind?⁵⁷

Vincent understood that praying for and practicing indifference was the best way to follow Jesus. It was the joyful fruit of the journey, for both himself and his Company of Charity.

'Indifference' in Saint Ignatius Loyola and Saint Vincent de Paul

In the thirteen volumes of *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vincent mentions Ignatius Loyola twelve times, and in all instances as the founder of the Society of Jesus. Vincent used Ignatius as an example when making decisions on direction of the Congregation of the Mission. In 1642 when several Missioners left the congregation, Vincent wrote his companions saying it was better to have fewer members who were truly devoted rather than a large number fearful of hardship and attached to their families. Vincent reminded his missioners that although a few thousand initially followed Jesus, many disciples left him when commitment was required; also, he pointed out, Ignatius Loyola had even sent away twelve people during the founding period of the Society of Jesus.⁵⁸ In 1647, responding to a letter from the superior of Rome asking for more personnel, Vincent again illustrated the example of Ignatius. "Did not Saint Ignatius make a hundred foundations before his death, with two or three men in each? This was not done without great inconvenience, since he sent some novices and was obliged at times to make them Superiors, but neither

⁵⁷ Conference 81, "The Practice of Asking For and Refusing Nothing," 17 June 1657, *Ibid.*, 10:223.

⁵⁸ Letter 631, "To François Dufestel," 28 November 1642, *Ibid.*, 2:355-356.

was it fruitless nor without providence.”⁵⁹

Vincent was convinced the best way to follow the will of God was to trust in Providence instead of relying on our own plans or choices, and to wait for such direction with Holy Indifference. In fact, Vincent was remarkably open to the idea that in future the center of the Church would move away from Europe. “How do we know, I say, whether God does not wish to transfer the Church to the lands of unbelievers, who perhaps preserve greater innocence in their morals than the majority of Christians, who have nothing less at heart than the holy Mysteries of our religion? On my part, I am aware that this feeling has been with me for a long time.”⁶⁰ Vincent also shared examples of how Ignatius wrote *The Constitutions for the Society of Jesus*, how he sent Jesuits to care for wounded soldiers, how he lived a life of perfect poverty and chastity, and how he chose every opportunity to give greater glory to God.⁶¹

It is interesting that Vincent never mentioned Ignatius in connection with the idea or practice of Holy Indifference. In other words, Vincent was not thinking about Ignatius when he appealed to his Missioners and the Daughters of Charity to cultivate the virtue. Indeed, there seems to be no direct, conscious influence of the Ignatian concept upon the spirituality of Vincent. It would be worthwhile, however, to compare both saints’ conceptions of it, especially as Ignatius of Loyola is whom introduced the idea into Catholic spirituality. Moreover, the very word indifference is regarded as characteristic of Ignatian spirituality.

In his article “Indiferencia,” in the *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Ignaciana*, Pierre Emonet, S.J., wrote that the term indifference does not generally appear in the writings of Church Fathers or other spiritual writers until it was developed by Ignatius Loyola.⁶² Ignatian indifference is rooted in several of Ignatius’ spiritual experiences: the illumination on the bank of the Cardoner River; and a series of events, which taught him not to confuse his own projects with the will of God. Through discernment he gave up excessive mortification to imitate the life of the desert Fathers. Eventually he began to realize that imitation of Christ is not only in following in the footsteps of Jesus in the Holy Land, but in pursuing theological studies for the salvation of souls. In other words, he had to discern between his self-made plans and the Will of God, and he grasped that we have to recognize this difference and choose anew for the greater glory of God. Through this experience, Ignatius realized the importance of it as a prerequisite of good discernment in responsible decisions. Consider, for example, his metaphor of the well-balanced scale. The scale, representing indifference, should not be weighted one way or another, but should preserve the dynamic to move

⁵⁹ Letter 922, “To Jean Dehorgny,” March 1647, *Ibid.*, 3:163-164.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:164.

⁶¹ See, for example, *CCD*: Volume 3, Letters 1016, pp. 272-73, and 1064, pp. 358-66; Volume 5, Letter 2017, pp. 557-61; Volume 10, Conference 100, pp. 440-46; Volume 11, Conferences 40a, p.49, 79, p.86, and 127, pp. 197-98; Volume 12, Conferences 198, pp. 110-25, and 219, pp. 324-27; and Volume 13b, Document 181, pp. 366-69.

⁶² “Indiferencia,” in Grupo de Espiritualidad Ignaciana, *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Ignaciana (G-Z)*, José García de Castro, Director (Madrid: Ediciones Mensajero, Sal Terrae, 2007), 1016.

toward the greater glory of God and salvation of souls. At the beginning of each chapter of his “Spiritual Exercises,” Ignatius asked retreatants to pray to the Lord for the grace to keep this scale in perfect balance.⁶³

In the Exercises Ignatius used the term indifference four times, in *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* eight times, and in his Spiritual Journal twice. For instance, in the “Spiritual Exercises,” First Week, article 23, Principle and Foundation, we read:

To do this we need to make ourselves indifferent to all created things, provided the matter is subject to our free choice and there is no prohibition. Thus as far as we are concerned, we should not want health more than illness, wealth more than poverty, fame more than disgrace, a long life more than a short one, and similarly for all the rest, but we should desire and choose only what helps us more toward the end for which we are created.⁶⁴

Here Ignatius presents the fundamental principle that we have to be indifferent to all worldly values including health, wealth, and long life, in order to have the freedom to choose what God wants of us.

Article 157 further develops the concept to safeguard freedom of heart:

It is to be noted that when we feel attachment [to riches] or repugnance with regard to actual poverty, when we are not indifferent towards poverty or riches, it is a great help towards extinguishing such a disordered attachment to ask in the colloquies (even though it goes against our natural inclination) that Our Lord should choose us for actual poverty, and to desire, request, indeed beg of this, provided it be for the service and praise of His Divine Majesty.⁶⁵

In Memo 17 of the *Directories*, written in Ignatius’ own hand for directors of his spiritual exercises, he states:

First of all, it should be insisted that whoever faces a choice for a state in life, must enter it with an entire resignation of will; and if possible, should reach the third degree of humility... Whoever has not reached the second degree of indifference, should not be allowed to make a choice; it is better to encourage him to cultivate his virtues until he reaches the second degree of indifference.⁶⁶

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1017.

⁶⁴ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings: Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters including the Text of The Spiritual Exercises*, Translated with introductions and notes by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (Penguin Books, 1996), 289.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁶⁶ Miguel Lop, *Ejercicios Espirituales y Directorios* (Barcelona: Balmes, 1964), 101. The English translation provided is my own.



Stained glass depicts Vincent de Paul with foundling.
An image of food being distributed below.

Original in chapel, Loyola University, Chicago.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>



In order to understand what these first, second, and third degrees of humility or indifference are, consider how they are explained in the “Spiritual Exercises,” of Loyola’s *Personal Writings*, articles 165 to 167. To paraphrase from Loyola’s own words on the subject: The first kind of humility is obedience to the law of God in everything and avoidance of deliberately breaking any law that obliges me under pain of mortal sin. The second kind of humility, more perfect than the first, is attained when I do not desire to be rich rather than poor, to seek fame rather than disgrace, to seek a long rather than a short life, provided it is the same for the service of God and the good of my soul; and along with this I would not deliberately set about committing a venial sin, even for the whole of creation or under threat to my own life. The third kind of humility is the most perfect humility. In order to imitate Christ and to become like him, I want and choose poverty with Christ poor rather than wealth, and ignominy with Christ in great ignominy rather than fame, and I desire more to be thought a fool and an idiot for Christ.⁶⁷ Thus, in Memo 17 of the *Directories*, we understand that Ignatius believed that the mind has to be like a well-balanced scale in order to make good choices.

In article 179 of his “Spiritual Exercises” Ignatius again introduced the image of the scale:

It is necessary to keep as my objective the end for which I was created, viz. to praise God Our Lord and save my soul, and at the same time to be in an

⁶⁷ Loyola, *Personal Writings*, 315.

attitude of indifference, free from any disordered attachment, so that I am not more inclined or attracted to accepting what is put before me than to refusing it, nor to refusing it rather than to accepting it. Rather I should be as though at the center of a pair of scales, ready to follow in any direction that I sense to be more to the glory and praise of God Our Lord and the salvation of my soul.⁶⁸

For Ignatius Loyola indifference was like a well-balanced scale, which always tips towards the Will of God forsaking private attachment and personal preference or desires.

The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus written in Ignatius' own hand also mention an adjectival form of indifference eight times in relation to the act of discernment. *Constitutions*, article 132, requires of a candidate: "After he has been thus instructed, he will be asked whether he finds himself entirely indifferent, content, and ready to serve his Creator and Lord in whatever office or ministry to which the Society or its superior will assign him."⁶⁹ *Constitutions*, article 633, stipulates, "those professed members who live under obedience to the Society not to scheme, directly or indirectly, to be sent here or there. Nevertheless one who is sent to an extensive region such as the Indies.... while praying and keeping his will indifferent, may travel about wherever he judges this to be more expedient for the glory of God our Lord."⁷⁰

Even though an attitude of indifference, or availability, is required, "the motions or thoughts which occur to him contrary to an order received" (article 627) may be humbly shared with a superior.⁷¹ However, one should not be inclined to one way over another, so that afterwards he can follow the path shown to him with peace of mind. Here then is a commonality between Ignatius and Vincent, that total availability/indifference and a dialogue with the superior, given the situation and based upon personal discernment, are two dynamic elements necessary for fulfillment of the Will of God.

Conclusion: Characteristics of the Vincentian Virtue of Indifference from the Perspective of Ignatian Indifference

For Ignatius Loyola, in practicing discernment to make the right choice, preserving a state of indifference was crucial. It meant not only waiting for and listening to God, but the capacity to commit to God's will and remain ready to act.⁷² Perhaps this is the reason Ignatius advised directors of his spiritual exercises that until a person reaches its second

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁶⁹ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, Translated with introduction and commentary by George E. Ganss, S.J. (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), 117.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 280.

⁷¹ Antonio M. de Aldama, S.J., *An Introductory Commentary on The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, Translated by Aloysius J. Owen, S.J. (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1989), 256.

⁷² Michael Ivens, S.J., distinguished indifference as capacity and as act. The act of indifference should be practiced in times of uncertainty as to God's word to oneself, a doubt that makes possible the discovery leading oneself to commitment. Capacity is to be found within the commitment. See *Keeping in Touch: Posthumous Papers on Ignatian Topics*, ed. by Joseph A. Munitiz, S.J. (Leominster: Gracewing, 2007), 139.

degree they should postpone their decision on a life choice. In this sense, Pierre Emonet rightly pointed out the most typical characteristic of Ignatian indifference: “Ignatius never talks of indifference itself in the way of a philosopher but always in an existential way in the perspective of a choice to make.”⁷³

Indifference unites the early life of Ignatius as a pilgrim, his middle age as founder of the Society of Jesus, and his maturity as writer of *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*. The virtue of indifference in the *Constitutions* is connected with obedience, in that a Jesuit should accept whatever he is given and wherever he is sent. In this practical emphasis on availability, or openness, to any ministry assigned, both Ignatian and Vincentian indifference converge. However, the primary characteristic of Ignatian indifference is centered upon a discerning heart leading to the right and responsible choice, while the Vincentian virtue of indifference emphasizes a concrete openness to the Will of God concerning ministries, places, and persons.

The spirituality of Saint Vincent and Saint Ignatius share common ground found in Holy Indifference: complete self-surrender; true humility; and abandonment of self-will and self-satisfaction in order to imitate Christ in solely seeking the Will of God. However, while the indifference of Saint Ignatius focused on an interior freedom for discernment as with a well-balanced scale, Saint Vincent’s focused on the concrete action of joyfully accepting where one is missioned as with a beast of burden following the master. For Vincent, a practical mystic and the organizer of the Company of Charity, in serving Jesus the evangelizer of the poor it was crucial to nurture a community whose members freely move wherever and whenever the need was apparent. That may be the reason Vincent depended upon Ignatius’ example as the founder of the Society of Jesus spreading his resources to respond to the calls of Providence. We might conclude, then, that in the cultivation of the virtue, Ignatius focused on the initial point of discernment in making an election/choice, while Vincent focused on the fruit of Holy Indifference in actively moving forward with joy and happiness. It remains intriguing that Vincent did not mention Ignatius Loyola when he preached the virtue, in spite of the close connection forged between these two traditions of apostolic spirituality.

Saint Vincent de Paul was convinced that the virtue of Holy Indifference should be practiced and perfected in our daily lives and ministries, for this is the only way we can fully proclaim the reign of God. He sang this song of bliss, which Holy Indifference brings to us. He taught us this song so that it might continue through generations to eternity.



⁷³ *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Ignaciana (G-Z)*, 1015.



Vincent writing letters at his desk.

Original in Vincentian provincial house, Stradom, Krakow; signed by G. Lewandowska.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>





Vincent receives the offer of Saint-Lazare.

From a series of etchings on his life by Vignola.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>





BOUMARD FILS, ÉDIT. PON'Y. 1234 MADE IN FRANCE

SAINTE LOUISE DE MARILLAC

Fondatrice des Filles de la Charité

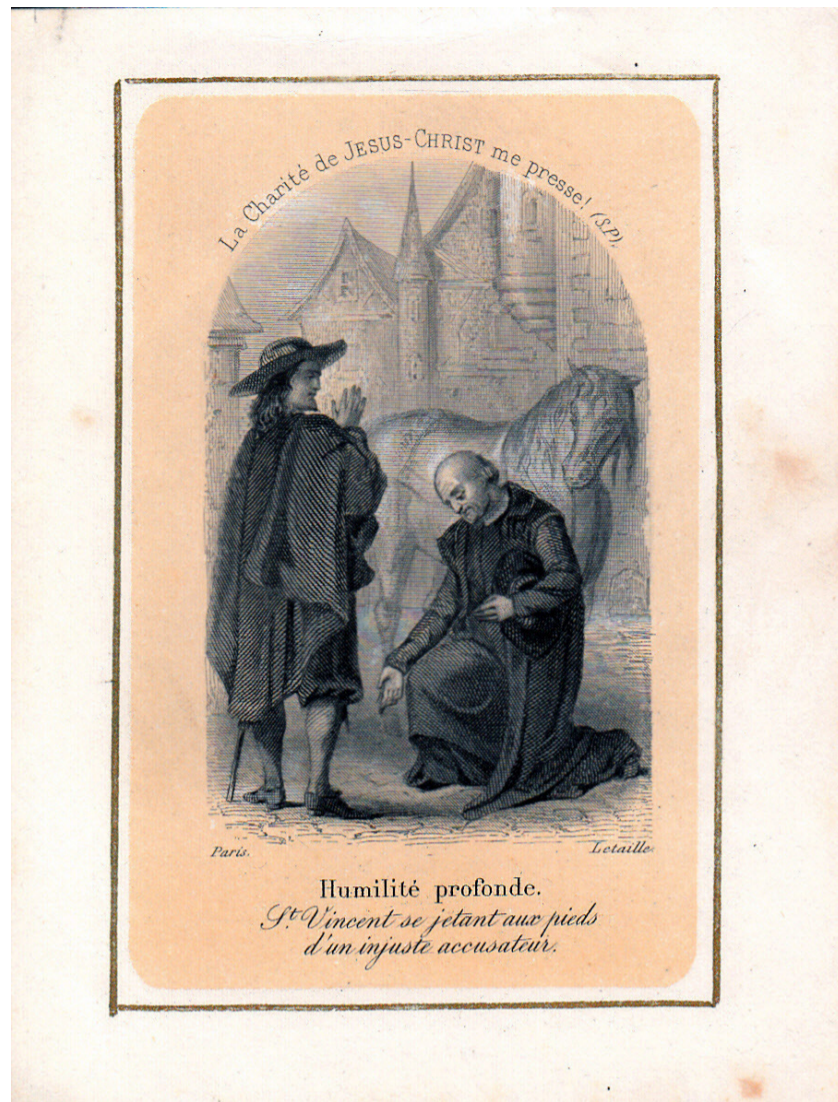
“Dieu soit Béni de toutes choses et
sa sainte volonté préférée à tout”.
(Paroles de Sainte Louise de Marillac).

A holy card picturing Louise with the Daughters and persons in need.

The text reads: “Blessed be God for all things, may His holy will be preferred to everything.”

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>





Holy card with the theme of Vincent and humility, in which the saint throws himself at the feet of an unjust accuser.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
<http://stoincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>





The Baptism of Saul (Paul) at Ananias. Mosaic, circa 1150.
Located in the Palatine Chapel, Palazzo Reale, Palermo, Italy.

Public Domain





Vincent de Paul gives a conference to the Sisters.

From a series of illustrations on his life by Bernal.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>





Portrait of Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556).

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Stained glass depicts Vincent de Paul with foundling. An image of food being distributed below.

Original in chapel, Loyola University, Chicago.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>

