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# FIRE WITHIN: The Spirituality that Sparked the Works of St. Vincent de Paul

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.

Few saints have been as active as Vincent de Paul (1581-1660). Even if we highlight only his principal accomplishments, the list is stunning.

In 1617, struck by the need to organize practical works of charity in Châtillon, France, he founded “the Charities” (known today as the Ladies of Charity in the USA and called the International Association of Charities worldwide). During his lifetime, they spread rapidly throughout France and then throughout the world, counting today more than 100,000 members in 53 countries.

In 1625, he founded the Congregation of the Mission, the community of priests and brothers that sponsors St. John’s and three other universities. By the time of his death, the Congregation had spread to Poland, Italy, Algeria, Madagascar, Ireland, Scotland, and the nearby islands. During his lifetime, the priests gave more than a thousand missions among the poor. Vincent served as Superior General of the Congregation until his death, holding regular council meetings, giving frequent talks, writing its rules, conducting general assemblies, and resolving a host of practical questions.

From 1628 on, he became more and more involved in the reform of the clergy, organizing retreats for those about to be ordained to the priesthood and those already ordained, and offering conferences on Tuesdays for leaders among the clergy. His first biographer tells us that, during Vincent’s lifetime, more than 12,000 men made retreats at the central

house in Paris in preparation for being ordained priests. In the last 25 years of his life, he took an interest in beginning seminaries. He founded 20!

In 1633, along with St. Louise de Marillac, he founded the Daughters of Charity. They were a revolutionary type of women’s community. Whereas

formerly religious sisters had been confined to living in cloistered convents, the Daughters worked on the streets, in hospitals and in schools. With Louise at his side, he acted as Superior General, guiding frequent council meetings, drafting a rule of life for the sisters, and working out the innovative juridical base that would make the Daughters such a powerful apostolic force in the years to come. In his lifetime, more than 60 houses sprang up in both

France and Poland. The community later became one of the largest congregations the Church had ever seen. Today, the sisters serve in 94 countries on all the continents.

In the process of guiding the three groups that he founded, Vincent carried on an enormous correspondence, writing more than 30,000 letters. He gave frequent conferences to both the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters. Only a small number of these are extant today, and even these are merely copiers’ accounts of what he said. For decades, he also gave conferences to the Visitation nuns who had been entrusted to his care by Francis de Sales in 1622; none of these talks have been passed down to us.

In 1638, he took up the work of the foundlings,

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providing a home for infants abandoned on the streets of Paris. Eventually, he assigned numerous Daughters of Charity to the work and had 13 houses built to receive the children. When this work was endangered in 1647, he saved it by making an eloquent appeal to the Ladies of Charity to regard the foundlings as their very own children (Vincent DePaul, n.d.,13b:416-420)<sup>1</sup>.

Beginning in 1639, Vincent began organizing campaigns for the relief of those suffering from war, plague, and famine. One of his assistants, Brother Mathieu Regnard, made 53 trips, crossing enemy lines in disguise, carrying about a million dollars a trip from Vincent for the relief of those in war zones (Dodin, A., 1960)<sup>2</sup>.

From 1643 to 1652, he served on the Council of Conscience, an elite administrative body that advised the king about the selection of bishops. At the same time, he was the friend and often the counsellor of many of the great spiritual leaders of the day.

In 1652, as poverty enveloped Paris, Vincent, at the age of 72, organized massive relief programs, providing soup twice a day for thousands of poor people at the central house of the Vincentians and feeding thousands of others at the houses of the Daughters of Charity. He organized collections, gathering each week 5-6 thousand pounds of meat, 2-3 thousand eggs, and provisions of clothing and utensils<sup>3</sup>.

Since his death, numerous other branches have sprouted on the Vincentian Family tree. One of these, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, has more than 750,000 members today, serving in 151 countries.

So striking were Vincent's activities that the preacher at his funeral, Henri de Maupas du Tour, stated, "He just about transformed the face of the Church!"<sup>4</sup> (Udovic, 2015, p. 173).

But all those who knew Vincent recognized that he was not just a prodigious worker and a skilled organizer. They regarded him as a saint. They saw that a deep spirituality undergirded the remarkable works that he initiated. How might we describe the fire that burned within him?

## THE FIRE— Vincent's Spirituality

In this short space, I can offer only a brief overview of Vincent's spirituality. Much more could be said. His spirituality was the driving force that enflamed his everyday activity.

### Following Christ As Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor

For Vincent de Paul, a single focus inspired everything: the person of Jesus. "Jesus Christ is the Rule of the Mission,"<sup>5</sup> (Vincent DePaul, n.d.,12:110) he told his followers. Jesus was to be the center of their life and activities. "Remember, Father," he wrote to one of his closest friends, "we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ." (Vincent DePaul, n.d.,1:276).

But Vincent had a *particular* view of Christ. He saw him as the Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor. He spoke of this Christ again and again. In one of his most famous conferences, he states: "He scarcely had a human face in His Passion, and passed for a madman in the mind of the gentiles and a stumbling block in the mind of the Jews. With all that, he describes himself as the Evangelizer of the Poor: 'To preach the good news to the poor he has sent me.'"<sup>6</sup> (Vincent DePaul, n.d.,11:26).

Vincent's spirituality flows from contemplation of *this* Christ. This Christ, the Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor, was the driving force that generated both the incredible activity and the daily prayer of Vincent de Paul<sup>7</sup>. Vincent encouraged his followers to contemplate this Christ again and again.

When he spoke about Christ, he could be rapturous. In 1655, he cried out:

*Let us ask God to give the Company this spirit, this heart, this heart that causes us to go everywhere, this heart of the Son of God,*

*the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord, that disposes us to go as He went... He sends us, like the apostles, to bring fire everywhere, to bring this divine fire, this fire of love... (Vincent DePaul, n.d.,11:264)*

For Vincent, the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of spirituality were meshed inseparably; love of Christ and love of the poor were one. Again and again, he urged his followers not just to act but also to pray, and not just to pray but also to act. He heard an objection from followers who hesitated to take time out to pray: *But there are so many things to do, so many house duties, so many ministries in town and country; there's work everywhere; must we, then, leave all that to think only of God.* And he responded forcefully: *No, but we have to sanctify those activities by seeking God in them, and do them in order to find Him in them ... Our Lord wills that we seek above all His glory, His kingdom, and His justice, and, to do this, we make our primary concern the interior life, faith, trust, love, our spiritual exercises, meditation, shame, humiliations, our work and troubles, in the sight of God our Sovereign Lord. Once we're grounded in seeking God's glory in this way, we can be assured that the rest will follow.* (Vincent DePaul, n.d.,12:111)

Vincent was at times so caught up in the mystery of God's love, as revealed in Christ, that his words spontaneously reveal how closely united with God he was.

*Let us look at the Son of God; what a heart of charity He had; what a fire of love!... Our Lord... was so enamored with the love of creatures as to leave the throne of His Father to come to take a body subject to weaknesses. And why? To establish among us, by His word and example, love of the neighbor. This is the love that crucified Him and brought about that admirable work of our redemption. O, if we had only a little of that love, would we stand around with our*

**So, the keystone in Vincentian spirituality is this: following Christ as Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor.**

*arms folded? Would we let those we could assist perish? Oh, no! Charity cannot remain idle; it impels us to work for the salvation and consolation of others.* (Vincent DePaul, n.d.,12:216)

So, the keystone in Vincentian spirituality is this: following Christ as Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor. How can someone *live* this foundational aspect of Vincentian spirituality today? Vincent was not content with merely words. "First *do*, and then teach," he said to his followers. He told them that Jesus is "in our midst as one who serves" (Lk 22:27). Today, then, Vincent calls us to follow Christ the Evangelizer and Servant of the Poor:

- through the language of works: performing the works of justice and mercy which are a sign that the kingdom of God is really alive among us: feeding the hungry refugee, slaking the thirst of the AIDS patient, helping to find the cause of their hunger and thirst and the ways of alleviating it; (Vincent DePaul, n.d.,2:4-5)
- through the language of words: announcing with deep conviction the Lord's presence, his love, his offer of forgiveness and acceptance of all;
- through the language of relationships: being *with* the poor, working *with* them, knowing and loving them as friends, brothers and sisters, forming a Vincentian Family that shows the Lord's love for all.

### **Being Passionate for the Truth (or what Vincent called "simplicity")**

Vincent loved the truth. In fact, he focused his whole life on it. He called this passion for the truth, "simplicity."

Simplicity "is the virtue I love most," (Vincent DePaul, n.d.,1:265) Vincent told his Family. "I call it my gospel" (Vincent DePaul, n.d.,9:476).

In Vincent's eyes, Jesus (Vincent DePaul, n.d.,4:471) is utterly simple. He speaks the truth. He says things as they are (Vincent DePaul, n.d.,1:140). His intentions are pure, referring all things in life to God, whom he regards as his "father and mother" (Vincent DePaul, n.d., 2:4).

How might his followers live simplicity today?

Today, just as in Vincent's time, simplicity means genuineness, transparency. It remains very attractive to the modern men and women. It means:

- speaking the truth (a difficult discipline, especially when our own convenience is at stake or when the truth is embarrassing)
- witnessing to the truth (or having the personal authenticity that makes our life match our words)
- searching for the truth as a wayfarer rather than possessing it as an "owner"
- striving for purity of intention
- practicing the truth through works of justice and charity
- living modestly and sharing what we have
- using clear, transparent language, especially in teaching or preaching

Vincent would surely say to all the members of his Family today: have passion for the truth. *Be true.*

### Having Exuberant Confidence in God (or what Vincent called "humility")

There was no virtue about which Vincent spoke more eloquently than about humility. "It is the foundation of all evangelical perfection," he told his followers, "it is the core of the spiritual life. If a person has it, every good thing will come along with it. Those who do not have it will lose any good they may have and will always be anxious and worried" (Vincent DePaul, n.d., 2:7).

For Vincent, humility entailed the recognition that all good comes from God (Vincent DePaul, n.d., 1:183). It involved an acknowledgment of our own limitedness and sinfulness, (Vincent DePaul,

n.d., 2:7) accompanied by exuberant confidence in God's forgiveness (Vincent DePaul, n.d., 3:279).

How might someone embody humility today.

Humility involves:

- gratitude for gifts, seeing all things as grace,
- recognition of our creatureliness and our redeemedness, both being gifts of God's love,
- development of a "servant's attitude," a willingness to undertake even menial tasks in the service of the poor,
- listening well,
- being willing to be evangelized by the poor, "our lords and masters," as Vincent put it.

### Showing Practical, Concrete, Effective Charity (or what Vincent called "zeal")

Vincent prayed: "Let us ask God to give (us) this spirit, this heart, this heart which will make us go everywhere, this heart of the Son of God, the heart of Our Lord...." (Vincent DePaul, n.d.,11:264). He was convinced that the fire of love enables Jesus' followers to go anywhere and to do everything (Vincent DePaul, n.d.,11:193).

But, for Vincent, love is always very concrete and effective. It is love in practice. "Let us love God, my brothers and sisters," he urged, "let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows. For, very often, many acts of love of God, of devotion, and of other similar affections and interior practices of a tender heart, although very good and desirable, are, nevertheless, very suspect if they don't translate into the practice of effective love" (Vincent DePaul, n.d., 11:32).

How might we live this concrete, practical, effective love today. I suggest four means:

#### 1. *Accepting God's love*

God's love comes first. St. John tells us: "The marvelous thing is not so much that we love God but that God first loved us" (John 4:10). Meditation on some of the striking scriptural texts concerning God's personal love for us is a very helpful means of growing in awareness of that

love. In his struggles, Moses, pleading for light and strength, heard these words from the Lord: “This request which you have just made, I will carry out, because you are my intimate friend and you have found favor with me” (Exodus 33:7-17).

## 2. Labor

Vincent calls his Family to follow Christ as *servants* of the poor. Servants get their hands dirty. They labor long and hard. They engage in difficult tasks, visiting the sick and elderly in their homes, feeding street-people, serving as nurses, teachers, social workers, administrators. They are on the front lines ministering to the poor. As Vincent says, they must first *do* and then teach.

## 3. Creativity

Vincent stated that “Love is inventive to infinity” (Vincent DePaul, n.d., 11:131). Today, he would encourage his followers to be very creative. Those who are on the front lines in laboring for the poor are the first to know the real needs of the marginalized. Not I, who am sitting at my desk writing this article. Nor economists or psychologists, who study the needs of the poor by examining the data they receive. Those on the front lines know ahead of us because the poor tell them directly. It is crucial to be inventive in meeting those needs not just immediately, but by working toward systemic change within society.

## 4. Perseverance

Dorothy Day stated starkly: “Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams.” It is easy to love for a time. It is difficult to love for life. Ongoing, faithful, persevering service of the poor in good times and in bad is a striking sign of one’s love. It is gold tested in the fire.

## Serving in Company with Others

Vincent organized and formed others for the service of the poor. With remarkable creativity, confronting the needs at hand, he founded the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. He

brought together women and men, rich and poor, clergy and lay, younger and older, learned and unlearned. He wrote statutes and rules structuring these groups, and throughout his life he gave them ongoing formation.

Vincent founded a Family. His followers live his charism not simply as isolated heroes, lone rangers, so to speak, but as brothers and sisters...

Vincent founded a *Family*. His followers live his charism not simply as isolated heroes, lone rangers, so to speak, but as brothers and sisters who channel their common energy, their common love, their common creativity toward practical service of the poor. Collaboration is key,

so let me suggest several means for fostering this communal dimension of Vincent’s spirituality.

### 1. Work together with others as harmonious teams, fostering common projects.

There are many things that we cannot do alone that we can do together. There are many projects that require communal planning, organization, the participation of many people, and responsible carry-through. So, today Vincent would encourage the members of his Family to dialogue well together and commit themselves to common goals.

### 2. Pray together with others.

The Lord is the source of all the good that we do. “Unless the Lord builds the house,” the psalmist tells us, “they labor in vain who build it” (Ps 127:1). Vincent calls his followers to pray together frequently and without embarrassment: to pray at the beginning of meetings; to pray together before visiting the homes of the poor in teams; to pray together on the great Family feasts, like the feast of Vincent himself or of St. Louise de Marillac or of Blessed Frederick Ozanam.

### 3. Be brothers and sisters with the poor.

It is essential that the poor sense not only that we bring them aid, but also that we care for them. They should sense God’s love coming through us. They should feel part of our Vincentian Family too.

## Trusting in Providence

For Vincent, God loves us deeply as a “father and as a mother,” (Vincent DePaul, n.d., 6:463)



and exercises a continual providence in our lives. Vincent emphasized the need to trust deeply in God's action in our lives: "Grace has its moments. Let us abandon ourselves to the Providence of God and be on our guard against anticipating it. If Our Lord is pleased to give me any consolation in our vocation, it is this: I think it seems to me that we have tried to follow Divine Providence in all things...." (Vincent DePaul, n.d.,2:499).

Providence is the virtue of meaning. Trust in providence shows itself in the ability to see beyond particular events to a larger picture, in patient waiting, in perseverance. It is belief in the attentive presence of a personal God who walks with us in the tragic polarities of human existence: abundance and poverty, light and darkness, love and hate, grace and sin, plan and disruption, peace and violence, health and sickness, life and death.

But Vincent was far from passive. Providence is honored, he pointed out, (Vincent DePaul, n.d.,5:400) by using the means that God places at our disposal for accomplishing his goals. We share in the providence of God by being provident ourselves, making provision for the future.

How can one *live* trust in providence today. Let me suggest three means:

1. To use a Lucan phrase: "Pray always and never lose heart" (Luke 18:1). Bring all events to prayer, the joyful ones as well as the painful ones, and seek to find what God is saying through life's events.
2. Be provident. Plan, organize, gather funds, prepare, develop competence.
3. Be patient. Vincent said that patience is "the virtue of the perfect" (Vincent DePaul, n.d., 13:147). If that is so, then most of us have a long way to go in struggling to develop it. Yet few good things are accomplished overnight and the service of the poor, especially, demands great patience.

## Developing a Positive Spirit of Renunciation (or what Vincent called "mortification" or "self-denial")

Here is the striking way in which Vincent spoke about this theme: "There is no better way to assure our eternal happiness than to live and die in the service of the poor, within the arms of providence, and in a real renunciation of ourselves by following Jesus Christ" (Vincent DePaul, n.d., 3:384).

Mortification, or self-denial, found a prominent place in his talks and writings. He described it in considerable detail. To motivate his followers to engage in it, he cited many of the New Testament sayings recommending it (Vincent DePaul, n.d., 9:136).

Today, self-denial tends to be misunderstood and, consequently, unpopular, but it is a very important evangelical value. It is not an end in itself; rather, it is a means toward achieving higher goals. Contemporary "functional asceticism" emphasizes that self-denial is:

- the renunciation of one good thing for the sake of another good thing,
- defining our goals and channeling our limited energies toward them.

In practice, it can involve such things as:

- being faithful to the duties of our state in life – married, single, celibate – and giving them preference when they conflict with other more pleasurable matters;
- employing a critical sense in using the media: our cell phones, twitter, Facebook, television, radio, movies, etc.;
- working hard in whatever we do;
- responding promptly to the needs of the poor, particularly in going to difficult places;
- praying faithfully each day;
- sharing our material possessions generously and living simply;
- being moderate in eating and drinking.

There is something wonderfully liberating about being a servant of the poor and living in simplicity, humility and charity. Vincent was so deeply convinced of this that he called his followers to make those values the core of their lives. In a poetic moment, toward the end of his life, he cried out:

*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; for that's to be found in the love of God alone. Those are the persons who are free, who have no laws, who fly, who go to the right and to the left; once again, who fly, who can't be stopped, and who are never slaves of the devil or of their passions. Oh, blessed freedom of the children of God!*  
(Vincent DePaul, n.d., 12:245)

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## Notes

1. Refers to the English translation of VINCENT DE PAUL, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translators: Helen Marie Law, DC (Vol. 1), Marie Poole, DC (Vol. 1-14), James King, CM (Vol. 1-2), Francis Germovnik, CM (Vol. 1-8, 13a-13b [Latin]), Esther Cavanagh, DC (Vol. 2), Ann Mary Dougherty, DC (Vol. 12); Evelyne Franc, DC (Vol. 13a-13b), Thomas Davitt, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), Glennon E. Figge, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), John G. Nugent, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), Andrew Spellman, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]); edited: Jacqueline Kilar, DC (Vol. 1-2), Marie Poole, DC (Vol. 2-14), Julia Denton, DC [editor-in-chief] (Vol. 3-10, 13a-13b), Paule

Freeburg, DC (Vol. 3), Mirian Hamway, DC (Vol. 3), Elinor Hartman, DC (Vol. 4-10, 13a-13b), Ellen Van Zandt, DC (Vol. 9-13b), Ann Mary Dougherty (Vol. 11, 12 and 14); annotated: John W. Carven, CM (Vol. 1-14); New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014. On occasion, to fit the context, I have changed the translation slightly, in light of the original text.

2. André Dodin, *St. Vincent de Paul et la charité* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1960), 45, states that Brother Mathieu carried 25 to 30 thousand *livres* a trip, or, in today's currency, about a million dollars each time.

3. For many interesting details on St. Vincent's handling of money and his administration of charitable works, cf. René Wulfman *Charité Publique et Finances Privées : Monsieur Vincent, Gestionnaire et Saint* (Villeneuve d'Ascq, France: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1998).

4. From»(Vincent de Paul) a presque changé la face de l'Église. The text of de Maupas' funeral discourse is available in a beautiful edition by Edward R. Udovic, C.M., *Henri de Maupas du Tour: the Funeral Oration for Vincent de Paul* (Chicago: DePaul University Vincentian Studies Institute, 2015), cf. 173.

5. Also XI, 43. "Let us walk confidently on the royal road on which Jesus Christ will be our guide and leader."

6. While a given reader may doubt that this text (calling Christ "the Evangelizer of the Poor"), attributed to St. Vincent by Abelly, his first biographer (1664), conveys the *ipsissima verba* of the saint, the idea itself, nonetheless, seems to me indisputable, given St. Vincent's repeated recourse to Luke 4:18.

7. Mezzadri points out how forcefully St. Vincent's concrete vision of Christ as coming in the service of the poor influenced his view of the formation of the clergy