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The Vincentian Homiletic Tradition

*Joseph M. Connors, S.V.D.**

I

The reform of homiletic theory and training which had gotten well under way in Italy and Spain, after the Council of Trent, was frustrated in France by wars between the Catholics and Huguenots and by a Gallican reluctance to accept the Tridentine decrees. Bishops reported to Rome that their best laid plans for reform had brought them only disillusionment. In April of 1598, however, the Edict of Nantes gave peace after thirty-five years of upheaval, and in August of the same year Pope Clement VIII wrote a poignant letter to the bishops, asking them to take up the task once more. He urged them, in the name of God, to unite their efforts to cure the ills of the Church: to improve the moral lives of the clergy first of all, and then to raise the standard of their ecclesiastical training, since the sorry state of the one and the other had been and always would be the only real cause of decadence in the Church.¹

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¹Augustin Theiner, *Histoire des institutions d'éducation ecclésiastique*, trans. J. Cohen (Paris: Debécourt, 1841), I, 312.

Seeking guidance in the lives and writings of Saint Philip Neri and Saint Charles Borromeo, the Assemblies of the Clergy saw in the concrete achievements of Italy in the sixteenth century a clear outline of what France must do in the seventeenth. A new understanding of the priestly vocation had to be instilled, and this would involve, among other reforms, the purging of the abuses of preaching which had been deplored at Trent but which still pervaded the French pulpit.² The leading preachers still treated the sermon as a literary essay, still made use of the references to pagan mythology and the tortured Scriptural interpretations which were part of a general spirit of exhibition and display. A great task was clearly ahead, and the efforts of a score of saints to achieve it would fill the history of a great century. The energies of reform, pent up in the hearts of some of the French clergy while they watched the progress of Italy and Spain and even of southern Germany, were about to burst forth in the Catholic Revival of the seventeenth century. Drawing from many tributaries, these energies would unite to form a strong current of tradition which would be channeled down to coming generations in foreign lands through the religious institutes then established. The Vincentian and Sulpician traditions especially would be funneled into the American seminary system.

At the turn of the seventeenth century, Divine Providence had already placed upon the scene in France three men who would be prime movers in the Catholic Revival, and particularly in the reform of homiletic theory and training. Pierre de Berulle became a priest in 1599. In 1600 Vincent de Paul was ordained. In 1602 a newly consecrated bishop came to Paris, the co-adjutor Bishop of Geneva, Francis de Sales. Berulle would be to the clergy of

²P. Jacquinet, *Des prédicateurs du dix-septième siècle avant Bossuet*, 2 ed. (Paris: Belin, 1885), pp. 31-78.

Paris what Saint Philip had been at Rome. Francis de Sales would be to his bishops of France what Saint Charles had been in Italy. Vincent de Paul, the peasant from Gascony who would hold in his arms a dying king, who would nominate dozens of bishops after training them in his Tuesday Conference, and who would set on foot so many of the needed reforms that he would be called "le grand saint du grand siecle," was destined to learn from the teaching of Berulle and the example of Saint Francis, as well as from his own deep meditations, a new style of preaching which he would call the *Little Method*. He would teach this *Little Method* to the clergy of France, among them Olier and Bossuet. Then he would write it into the living tradition of the Congregation of the Mission, from whose ranks would come the directors of numerous seminaries, first in France, then throughout Europe and the New World.

When Saint Francis de Sales came to Paris in 1602, he was introduced by Father de Berulle, his former schoolmate at the Jesuit College of Clermont, to a circle of earnest souls engaged in the study and discussion of the Spanish mystics. The discussion was not new to the visiting Bishop. As a student at the University of Padua he had been urged by Possevino to read Scupoli, Luis of Granada, and Saint Teresa of Avila. But he did find membership in this circle of great value to him, for it was here that he became aware of his own skill in directing souls. Meanwhile, Paris became aware of another skill he had, an art developed by years of constant preaching in the villages of Savoy. "He preached, not great sermons polished and memorized, but from the fullness of his heart. His listeners, accustomed to the eloquent essays of Du Perron and Coeffeteau, were astonished, then enraptured to feel themselves drawn to the love of God by this slow, simple, familiar preaching, inspired by a mysterious fire. He

preached every day, and they did not tire of hearing him.”³

The preaching of Saint Francis was remarkable for its departure from the exhibitionism of the time, and for its return to apostolic simplicity, but it was not entirely free of the general bad taste of the day. Saint Francis was a thorough humanist, and in his years at the University of Paris and at the home of Italian humanism in Padua he had learned to be conscious of stylistic effects to a painful degree.⁴ He had also acquired the habit of employing comparisons from fanciful natural histories like Pliny’s, and like his contemporaries he indulged in the contrived interpretations of Scripture which were the plague of preaching.⁵ That he was trying to extricate himself from these habits is evident, however, from the theory of preaching he sketched in a hurried letter in 1604 to Andre Fremiot.⁶ In this letter he pleads for simple and familiar moral instruction and even suggests the nucleus of the special sermon plan later adopted by Saint Vincent de Paul. The latter was meantime studying theology in Toulouse, and had many eventful years ahead of him before meeting Saint Francis for the first time in Paris in 1618.

When the Bishop of Geneva died in 1603 and Saint Francis, as his co-adjutor, returned to the diocese to succeed him, Berulle and his circle continued their labors

³ Jean Calvet, *Histoire de la littérature française*, Vol. V: *La littérature religieuse de François de Sales à Fenelon* (Paris: Gigord, 1938), p. 29.

⁴ Sister Maria Teresa Guevara, R.S.C.J., *El humanismo de San Francisco de Sales* (Mexico: 1955), pp. 117-131.

⁵ Jacquinet, *op. cit.*, pp. 81 f.; Calvet, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁶ S. Francois de Sales, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Migne (Paris, 1861), IV, columns 647-696. There is an English translation in Patrick Boyle, C.M., *Instructions on Preaching* (New York: Benziger, 1902), pp. 41-73.

for the reform of the French church. They reached a milestone when Berulle opened the Oratory of Saint Philip Neri in Paris in 1611. To the little house in the faubourg Saint-Jacques, as to Saint Philip's in Rome a century before, came the members of the clergy who were in the forefront of reform. Among them were some already engaged in preaching missions in country places, so that discussions on the renovation of the pulpit unavoidably arose. In his conferences Berulle urged upon them the need for simple moral instruction, adapted to the capacity of both preacher and congregation, which had been formulated at Trent as the homiletic ideal.⁷ He saw among them some who could bring to the pulpit a new spirit and style, and events were to justify his hopes, for long before they gave Lamy to homiletic theory and Massillon to the French pulpit, the Oratorians produced Bourgoing, and Paul Metezeau, and above all Lejeune, whose years in the pulpit (1625-1660) closely paralleled Saint Vincent's most active years, and whose many published sermons closely parallel Saint Vincent's conferences for their simplicity, moral insight, and rapport.⁸

As a constant guest at the Oratory, and as a spiritual client of Berulle, Saint Vincent must have learned much from this circle, as they learned much from him. The new spirit and style of preaching was in complete accord with his own ideals of priestly humility and apostolic effectiveness. It was the style and method of our Lord himself, whose manner of preaching had been even more intimate and self-effacing than the preaching of his immediate apostles.⁹ Saint Vincent, then, had in his

⁷M. Houssaye, *Le Père de Bérulle et l'oratoire de Jésus* (Paris: E. Plon, 1874), pp. 138-145.

⁸Jacquet, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-187.

⁹Pierre Coste, C.M. (ed.), *Saint Vincent de Paul, correspondance, entretiens, documents* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1923), Vol. I, 183.

meditations on the life of Christ ample motives for the new kind of preaching, and he had heard its general nature defined clearly enough by Berulle, but, with his habit of searching always for practical procedures, he must have looked about for a definite statement of the means. If Berulle had formulated such a statement, we have no record of it. The record rather shows that Berulle would have referred an inquirer to the *Rhetoric* of Luis of Granada. This is his advice in a letter to an Oratorian preacher in 1623: "Blend in with those elevated thoughts which you have some considerations of a more moral nature, more common, and more useful, and adapt yourself to the capacity of the people. If you have not read the *Rhetoric* of Granada, I beg you to read it and to follow the spirit and advice of this author, whom I esteem very highly."¹⁰ This was sound advice, but, without repudiating the homiletic treatises based on classical rhetoric which had been the textbooks of the Borromean reform, Saint Vincent was about to work out his own concise statement of the new kind of preaching. Before doing so, however, he would sit at the feet of the "restorer and master of sacred eloquence," Saint Francis de Sales.

When Saint Francis came again to Paris in 1618, he had been away from it for sixteen years, and it had been fourteen years since he had hurriedly stated his homiletic theory in the letter to Andre Fremiot. He had now hardly unpacked his luggage when he came to the church of the Oratorians to preach on November 11. Half of Paris seemed to be there to listen, but instead of the grand essay which was expected of him by those who had not as yet heard him, he delivered a plain discourse on the life of Saint Martin. He preached often after that, and in his familiar

¹⁰ Jean Dagens (ed.), *Correspondance du Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle* (Paris: Desclée, 1937), Vol. II, 398.

conversations with Saint Vincent, for whom he immediately conceived great admiration and warm friendship, he disclosed that he felt in the pulpit almost like a passive instrument of Divine Grace. "I am aware," he told Saint Vincent, "that something has gone out from me, not of my own initiative, without prior meditation, even something of which I entirely lack knowledge, but which I express by divine impulse." Saint Vincent later testified, in the beatification process, that "the fervor of the Servant of God was evident above all in his public sermons, which I looked upon as the Gospel itself speaking."¹¹

It was not only by his example, however, that Saint Francis exerted influence upon Saint Vincent. Unlike many other good preachers, he had reflected upon his own methods. He had developed theories about the composition and delivery of sermons. He had worked out principles and rules that could be taught to others. He even wanted to retire from his diocese, to write, among other works, a manual of homiletics for the clergy.¹² He was a man, therefore, who had things to tell to anyone who wanted to discuss preaching. Saint Vincent, on the other hand, had a lifetime habit of picking the brains of men who had methods he could use. Had he not, as a slave in Tunis, tried to learn as much as he could of the medical lore of the old alchemist who was his master? And had he not published, on his escape and return to France, the old man's remedy for stones? And, even more speculatively, had he not set himself to be the pupil of his master in other ways:

¹¹The testimony given on April 17, 1628 by Saint Vincent in the beatification process of Saint Francis is reproduced in Coste's collection, *op. cit.*, Vol. XIII, pp. 66-84. In many passages it reveals the intimacy that existed between the two Saints, and the profound impression which Saint Francis made upon Saint Vincent as a preacher.

¹²Calvet, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

geometry, for instance, and the Archimedes' mirror, and a talking machine? The slave who in exile had carried on such interests would hardly fail to make the most of an opportunity, years later when he was engaged in giving country missions, to learn about preaching from a saint.

Here the explicit evidence stops. There is no record of what was said in those conversations on preaching between the two saints. But can we divine what was said? To some extent we can do so confidently, on the basis of similarities and parallels in the homiletic theory of both saints which are too close to be the result of coincidence. Before pointing these out, however, it will be of service to make a distinction between a general style or manner of preaching and a particular formula for sermon composition. We can say with certainty that the *Little Method* of Saint Vincent de Paul, considered as a general style of preaching characterized by intimacy and simplicity and practicality, was greatly influenced by the teaching of Saint Francis. We can also say with high probability that the *Little Method* considered as a specific formula for a moral sermon, based on an outline of *motives, nature, and means*, was influenced by Saint Francis, since its elements can be found in his letter of 1604. A quick summary of the *Letter to Andre Fremiot* will support both these claims.

Speaking of the general purpose of preaching, Saint Francis shows a desire to emphasize moral instruction. The triple purpose of sacred rhetoric, as adapted by Saint Augustine from Cicero, was *docere, delectare, flectere* — to instruct, to please, and to persuade. Saint Francis, however, realizing that the second element was being misinterpreted in his day, makes a distinction between the pleasure which is a by-product of instruction and persuasion, and the pleasure which is only literary. Let us hear this theory in his own words:

The end, then, of the preacher is that sinners, dead in sin, may live to justice; that the just who possess spiritual life may have it more abundantly by becoming more and more perfect To succeed in this aim and purpose, two things are necessary: to instruct and persuade. To instruct as to virtues and vices: to cause the former to be loved and practiced and the latter to be detested, resisted, and avoided; in a word, to impart light to the understanding and fervor to the will.

I am aware that some add a third end, and say that a preacher should please. For my part, I make a distinction, and I say that there is a pleasure which arises from instruction and persuasion: for who is so insensible as not to feel great pleasure in being well and holily instructed concerning the way that leads to heaven? Who does not experience great consolation in the love of God? As for this pleasure, it should be sought. But it is not distinct from instruction and persuasion, it is a consequence of it.

There is another kind of pleasure, which does not depend on instruction and persuasion, but is distinct from them and very often hinders them. It is a certain gratification of the ears arising from a certain elegance — secular, worldly, and profane — of unusual turns, ornamental descriptions, words and phrases, but all the results of artifice. As for this, I strongly and firmly maintain that a preacher ought not to aim at it.¹³

Having disposed of the purpose or final cause of preaching, Saint Francis takes up the matter or material cause, which he finds succinctly stated by Saint Paul in the two words: *Praedica verbum*. The word of God, as found chiefly in Sacred Scripture, will be the matter of preaching, “but,” says Saint Francis, who knew the style of his times, “it is necessary that as far as possible the texts be interpreted in a natural, clear, and solid manner.” Let

¹³ Boyle’s translation, *op. cit.*, pp. 45 f.

the preacher use the four traditional senses of Scripture, literal, allegorical, anagogic, and tropological, since they “supply copious, excellent, and solid matter for preaching, and are very useful for the explanation of doctrine.”¹⁴ But special caution must be observed in handling the allegorical interpretation. It should arise naturally from the literal sense, and should not be forced, as they force it who find an allegory in everything. It should be kept in good taste, should not be too long, and should be drawn with clarity and common sense. This was a direct hit at many of the sermons of the period, among them the extravagant allegories of Camus, who was the intimate friend but not very apt pupil of his fellow Bishop of Geneva.

The supporting texts in a sermon, which may be taken from Sacred Scripture, the Fathers, or Church Councils, says Saint Francis, should be short and pungent. Preachers who cite lengthy texts weaken their own ardor, and exhaust the attention of the audience. The style should be simple, and the preacher must guard against the long period of pedants, as well as their gestures, their airs, and their attitudes.

It is necessary, in a word, to speak with feeling and devotion, simply, candidly, and with confidence, and to be convinced of what you teach and what you inculcate. The great art is to have no artifice. Our words should be inflamed, not by cries or unmeasured action, but by interior feeling. They should come from the heart rather than from the mouth. After all, it is the heart that speaks to the heart; the mouth speaks only to the ears Language should be clear, neat, and natural, without any

¹⁴The four senses can be traced back through the Middle Ages to Saint Augustine and Saint Ambrose, and still further back to the School of Alexandria and Philo Judaeus. The anagogic sense is the reference to eternal life; the tropological is the moral application. Saint Francis quotes the mnemonic verses of the Scholastics: “Littera gesta docet, quod credis allegoria, Quid speres anagoge, quid agas tropologia.”

display of Greek, Hebrew, or fashionable words. The structure of the discourse should be natural, without preface or studied ornament. I approve of saying, In the first place, at the first point, and In the second place, at the second point, that the people may perceive the plan. . . . The concluding words should be brief, animated, and vigorous. I approve of making as a rule a summary or recapitulation of the discourse, and then saying four or five fervent words by way of petition or exhortation. It is desirable to have in readiness certain familiar exclamations, and to utter them judiciously and in the proper place.¹⁵

Saint Francis' advice on preaching, as outlined in these few strokes, may seem ordinary enough in our own day, when even in secular public speaking an informal and familiar tone has replaced the spread-eagle style of earlier generations, but viewed against the background of its own era the letter to Fremiot is remarkable. By contrast, during the very months in which Saint Francis was in Paris in 1618, the Jesuit chaplain of Louis XIII, Nicholas Caussin, was preparing an encyclopedic homiletic manual of well over a thousand double-columned pages, *De eloquentia sacra et humana*, which was then published at La Fleche in 1619 and widely purchased, if not widely read. The spirit of the two works could not be more diverse. It is enough to say that Saint Francis anticipates many points of the Vincentian Method. His recommendations of short texts from Scripture, of neat but natural language, of a functional preface rather than an ornamental one, of clear structure with clearly divided points, are all familiar to the Vincentian tradition. His call for a brief but animated conclusion, consisting usually of a summary and then a fervent petition for Divine aid, and especially his advice to have in readiness familiar exclamations and expressions of

¹⁵ Boyle's translation, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-69.

emotion to be used in suitable places throughout the sermon, are followed in the conferences of Saint Vincent, and, as we shall see, are paralleled almost verbatim in the official Vincentian formulation of the *Little Method*.

There is an even greater resemblance between the teachings of Saint Francis and Saint Vincent, however, in the plan which each gives for a moral sermon on a virtue or a vice. This is the *Little Method* considered not as a general spirit and style, but as a precise formula for sermon composition. In the section of his letter in which he treats of sermon arrangement, Saint Francis proposes a number of sermon plans. There are four plans for sermons on mysteries, one plan for a sermon on the Gospel, and three plans for panegyrics on saints, but his greatest attention is given to plans for moral sermons. While the other sermon plans allow extensively for moral instruction and would actually develop in many instances into moral sermons, Saint Francis has in mind in the following plans the special purpose of preaching which he had defined above, namely, "to instruct as to virtues and vices: to cause the former to be loved and practiced and the latter to be detested, resisted, and avoided." In his own words, then, let us hear his three plans for such moral sermons:

When you have discovered in the text you are about to explain the virtue to which it refers, you may form the plan of your sermon by considering in what the virtue consists: its marks, its effects, and the means to acquire or practise it. This has always been my plan

There is another method, namely, to show how the virtue is upright, useful, and agreeable or pleasant: these being the three classes of goods which men may desire.

Again, the subject may be treated in another way, by pointing out the advantages which the virtue brings, and the evils which follow the opposite vice. But the first method is best.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 62 f.

If you wish to preach on humility, arrange your plan as follows: (1) in what this virtue consists; (2) its marks; (3) its effects; (4) the means to acquire it Such will be your arrangement.¹⁶

Saint Francis's statement that "this has always been my plan" is borne out by the transcript of some conferences given to the Visitation nuns in 1618, the same year that brought him together with Saint Vincent. There is even a thumbnail record of a conference, short enough to be printed entire on this page, on "The Spirit of Humility."¹⁷ It follows closely the outline suggested to Fremiot. With the other conferences to the Visitation nuns, so similar to those given later by Saint Vincent to the Daughters of Charity, it is marked by the greatest simplicity and practicality, the very opposite of exhibition or display.

A closer look at the three plans Saint Francis suggests for moral sermons shows that they are closely related to each other. He wrote to Fremiot, "Here you have plans enough to make a beginning, for after a little practice you will make others of your own better than these." If we remember how hurriedly Saint Francis wrote this letter, and how he wished he had been able to revise it before sending it off, we are led to speculate on the improvements he might have made. One obvious improvement, which many preachers would make almost automatically, would be to combine the three plans into one. The difference between the second and third methods is not a great one. Certainly it is not very different to "show how the virtue is upright, useful, and agreeable" and to point out "the advantages which the virtue brings, and the evils which follow the opposite vice." Moreover,

¹⁷*The Spiritual Conferences of Saint Francis de Sales* (Westminster, Md. : Newman, 1943), p. xxv and p. 71.

the first method deals at one point with the "effects" of the virtue, which again is not far from dealing with "how the virtue is upright, useful, and agreeable" or "the advantages which the virtue brings." If, finally, the effects and advantages are the same as "the upright, useful, and agreeable," and these in turn are called by Saint Francis "the three classes of goods which men may desire," it cannot be straining the theory to call them the motives for practicing the virtue. If we do so, the composite plan of a moral sermon becomes an outline of *nature, motives, and means*, which even a Vincentian might mistake for the *motives, nature and means* which is the sequence of Saint Vincent's *Little Method*. This is the plan which, as we shall see, was employed by Saint Vincent in his Tuesday Conferences, then made by him the characteristic homiletic theory of the Congregation of the Mission, and finally published in a definitive form in 1666 by his successor, Father Almeras, as *A Summary of the Method of Preaching in Use in the Congregation of the Mission*.

II

The approach which Saint Vincent de Paul made to preaching was influenced by many factors. Some of these have already been discussed, such as the influence of Berulle's conferences, and the example and teaching of Saint Francis de Sales. But a force by no means small in the shaping of the Vincentian homiletic tradition was the activity of Saint Vincent and his early companions in giving missions to the peasants of the French countryside. From January 25, 1617, when he gave his first mission sermon on the Gondi estates, until 1625, when he founded the Congregation of the Mission to put his work on a

broader and more permanent basis, Saint Vincent was acquiring at first hand the deep understanding of the needs of the people which is characteristic of his *Little Method*. Going from village to village, giving mission to the poorest of the poor, he realized at once the futility of any method of preaching which was not eminently popular and practical. The need was too great for trifling. He had to get these people to reform their lives, and to do so he must first motivate them to desire virtue and to detest vice. Then he must give them clear conceptions of what the virtues and vices were, and how they manifested themselves in daily life. Finally, he had to explain to them the means of acquiring these virtues and eradicating these vices. For what he wanted them to do, he had to give them the motives, the definition, and the means. The aim of his preaching shaped the method; form followed function.

Unfortunately, Saint Vincent's mission sermons from these early years have not been preserved. In his conferences to the Daughters of Charity, however, starting in 1634, and in his conferences to the members of the Congregation of the Mission, we can clearly see the *motives-nature-means* sequence which is characteristic of a moral sermon preached according to his *Little Method*.¹⁸ In addition to these examples, we are fortunate to have his full and formal explanation of the *Little Method* in a conference given on August 20, 1655, to the Vincentians assembled at St. Lazare in Paris.¹⁹ This conference is an explicit instruction on the method of preaching, and represents the convictions and insights which Saint Vincent had developed in more than three decades of teaching the *Little Method* to the members of his own Congregation and to clergy of every diocese in France.

A sermon according to the *Little Method* usually

¹⁸Pierre Coste, C.M. (ed.) *op. cit.*, Vols. IX-XII.

opens with a text, then gives the reason for speaking on a certain subject and a clear statement of what the subject will be and how it will be divided. This is exactly how Saint Vincent opens his conference on preaching. His text is St. Mark, 16:15, "Going into the whole world, preach the Gospel to every creature." This text, he says, is meant in a special way for the Congregation of the Mission, for the missionaries who go throughout the world, preaching in the manner of the Apostles. And what manner is that? "Plainly, familiarly, simply." Although the great preachers of the day might find it to their need and to their taste to "employ elegant language and fine thoughts," God had given to the Congregation of the Mission the *Little Method*. It is of this that Saint Vincent will speak to them:

My discourse, therefore, is on the method of preaching well, and in order to observe the method myself while I am explaining it, I shall divide my sermon into three points. In the first, we shall look into the motives which should make us well-disposed toward this method; in the second, I shall discuss just what this method consists of, so that we may understand it and be able to put it into practice in the future; and in the third, I shall propose some means which can be of use to us in learning this method.²⁰

Keeping to this outline, Saint Vincent first gives the *motives* for employing the *Little Method*, maintaining that it is the natural process of persuading people to do something, that it is the method used by our Lord and His Apostles, and that it has demonstrated its effectiveness even with the most difficult congregations, including the bandits of the countryside.

Coming to his second point, which is the *nature* of the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, XI, pp. 257-287.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 259.

Little Method, he is quite brief. He promises that Father Portail, who for years had been his companion on country missions and was now, with Father Almeras, a kind of authority on the *Little Method*, will explain it to the group the next day.²¹

For his third point, as he had promised, and as the *Little Method* demanded, Saint Vincent discusses the *means* of learning to preach in the recommended way. Then, in full fidelity to the plan, he takes up the *objections*. First, it seems to be asking too much to expect a preacher to use the same points constantly. Saint Vincent answers that the points may be disguised, or they may be rearranged from time to time. Furthermore, there are varieties of the *Method* for various purposes, as a method for treating the festival of a saint, a method for treating a mystery, a method for treating a parable, a method for treating a maxim, a method for treating the Gospel, and particular methods for other subjects. A little ingenuity will therefore counteract any monotony.

A second objection to the *Little Method* might be that many who have never heard of it seem to preach quite well without it. Saint Vincent answers, if we may paraphrase him colloquially, that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The fact is that the *Little Method* gets results, whereas one seems to look in vain for the results produced by many who do not use it but are considered outstanding preachers. He conjures up a few more objections, seemingly as a device for inserting new motives. The

²¹ *Ibid.*, 275. Saint Vincent here speaks of Fr. Portail as an expert on the *Little Method* and a little later (p. 279) in this same conference describes both Fr. Portail and Fr. Almeras as specially gifted by God in this regard. His endorsement here enhances the value of the *Summary* of the method made a decade later by Fr. Almeras from the copious notes of Fr. Portail. Cf. *Recueil des principales circulaires des supérieurs généraux de la congrégation de la mission* (Paris, 1877), Vol. I, pp. 77-83.

conference then closes with a fervent peroration and a request that the missionaries offer Holy Mass for the grace to learn how to preach according to the *Little Method*.

From this summary of the conference, the reader should have a fair knowledge of the general theory of the *Little Method*. The explicit content of the conference, however, was only half the lesson on preaching which Saint Vincent gave to his followers on that day in August, 1655. The other half consisted of his own example as he stood before them and spoke. The missionaries gathered at St. Lazare to hear this conference had been trained in an age when every student was familiar with rhetorical analysis. Presumably they would analyze the persuasive style of the founder they admired so much. The Saint's vivacity, his rapport, his countless ways of expressing his thought in striking and cogent fashion, his brilliant imagination and facile illustrations — here was eloquence at its highest pitch. Here was a Pauline vigor and excitement which was yet fully conversational, marked and achieved by stylistic devices which, even if Saint Vincent was not fully conscious of employing them, were not for that reason any less technical or any less effective.

A very common stylistic device is *rhetorical interrogation*,²² which may be defined as putting questions for some other purpose than to obtain information. Sometimes such questions are used to arouse the attention of the audience before proposing a new unit of the discourse. Sometimes they are used to make a transition, especially when it would be tedious to spin out the logical connection from one part of the speech to another. Sometimes a volley of questions is used at the end of explanations or series of arguments to sum up all the

²² Quintilian *Inst.* ix. 2. 6-16 *Auctor ad Herrenium* iv. 15. 22-24.

points that have gone before and to overwhelm the audience with their cumulative force. Saint Vincent makes use of interrogation in all these ways.

For example, when he is about to show how our Lord and his Apostles employed the *Little Method*, he introduces this idea as follows:

The Son of God, who was the eternal Word and Wisdom, chose to express his sublime mysteries in a manner which appeared plain, common, and familiar. And we, shall we be ashamed? Shall we fear to lose our reputation by acting as the Son of God did? O Savior! — But where can we see the Son of God making use of this method? In the Gospel, in the Gospel. There you see observed in his sermons the three points of our method.²³

Further on, Saint Vincent makes the transition from his first to his second point, or from the discussion of *motives* to the discussion of the *nature* of the *Little Method*. To make the transition he employs interrogation:

We now come to the second point. In what does the method of which we are speaking consist? What is it, what is this method?²⁴

Just before making this transition, Saint Vincent had used interrogation to clinch the impression made by his analysis of motives in the first part of the conference:

Then there is nothing, after these great motives which we have been looking into, there is nothing, except perhaps my great shortcomings, which can prevent us from being attached to the Little Method. Is there any other method more suitable, better, or more advantageous, Fathers? If you know of one, do me the kindness of telling me about it. Tell me, Fathers, is there a better method than this? As for me, I do not know of one, and

²³ Coste, *op. cit.*, 265.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 273.

you are all, I am sure, well convinced of it, more because you know it yourselves than because I have come to tell you of it.²⁵

In this quotation just given, the interrogation is closely combined with another stylistic figure called *communicatio*.²⁶ It amounts to taking one's audience into a kind of intimate partnership in the search for truth, and thereby brings to a high pitch the rapport and reciprocity between speaker and audience. It is a submission of one's case to the judgment of the listeners, appealing to their own good sense and experience, and relying on their honesty and fairness to recognize the truth and justice of one's claims. It dramatizes the speaker's confidence in his cause, it implies respect for the audience, it gives the air of conversational exchange of views. Saint Vincent used it repeatedly with great skill.

There are so many excellent examples of *communicatio* in the conference that it is difficult to choose among them. After claiming that the *Little Method* contains all that is necessary to persuade people, and that there is no other method in use quite as effective in achieving that purpose, Saint Vincent appeals to the missionaries, most of whom were experienced preachers, to testify to the truth of what he says:

There is no method of preaching now in use which is so suited to winning hearts and producing great results. And do not take my word for it. I beg you, look at it yourselves, Fathers. Consider well all the methods they follow in preaching. Consider them well, and judge in truth and according to what your hearts tell you of it, according to your conscience. Put your hands there in the presence of God, and tell me if there is a more effective method for

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Quintilian ix. 2. 20.

hitting the target and reaching the goal than our method.²⁷

A little later, when he has shown the need for a discussion of *motives*, *nature*, and *means*, in any effort to persuade, he combines *interrogatio* and *communicatio* in an appeal to his audience to acknowledge that these three elements of persuasion are all that is necessary:

What is there left to do after this to incline and persuade a person to practice this virtue? What is left, Fathers? Tell me, if you please, do you think there is still something? Do you know of anything, Fathers? Ah! Will you be kind enough to teach it to me?²⁸

At one point the use of *communicatio* goes so far as to break through the traditional silence of the audience, as it often did in Saint Vincent's conferences, and becomes an actual exchange with one of the listeners. The Saint has been speaking of the efficacy of the *Little Method* in missions given to the Italian banditti. He turns to a missionary who had done such work:

O Savior! Is it not true, Father Martin, that the bandits in Italy are converted during our missions? You have been there; is it not true? We are here in familiar conference: tell us, please, how it is.²⁹

Another animated rhetorical figure is *impersonation* or *prosopopeia*.³⁰ It consists in expressing in direct address the thoughts and sentiments of some person other than the speaker himself. Sometimes it is introduced by the phrase "someone might say . . ." or a similar preface, but quite often the speaker will slip into the other character with no

²⁷ Coste, *op. cit.*, 260.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 262.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 268 f.

³⁰ Quintilian vi. 1.25 f.; ix 2. 29-32. *Auctor ad H.* iv. 53. 66.

introductory expression, indicating only by a change of voice or of bodily attitude that he is quoting what he thinks are the thoughts and sentiments of another person. With Saint Vincent this is a favorite stylistic turn. For example, when he is giving the outline of the *Little Method*, he first explains why it is necessary to explain the *motives*; then, to show the need for following this up with the *nature* or definition, he slips without warning into the role of a member of the audience, and says the following:

But it is not enough to tell me what a great obligation I have of acquiring a virtue, if I do not know what this virtue is, nor in what it consists. I see clearly that I have great need of it, and that this virtue is very necessary for me, but, Father, I do not know what it is nor where I can find it.³¹

After using this impersonation of a bewildered listener to show the need of the second step in the *motives-nature-means* sequence, Saint Vincent shifts back to his own personality and viewpoint in order to explain the step. Before moving on to his discussion of the third element, or *means*, he again impersonates an imaginary listener:

Well then, I now see clearly what it is, in what this virtue consists, the actions in which it is found, what these actions are like. It seems to me I understand all this quite well. Clearly it is good and very necessary. But, Father, how difficult it is! What are the means of achieving it, the ways of putting into practice this virtue which is so beautiful and so desirable? I neither know what is expected of me in this regard nor how to go about it. What shall I do?³²

In frequent instances in the quotations already given from his conference on preaching, Saint Vincent could be

³¹ Coste, *op. cit.*, 260.

³² *Ibid.*, 261.

heard using the device of *rhetorical exclamation*.³³ The psychology of this stylistic figure lies in the fact that by dramatically expressing his own reaction to a thought, a speaker induces the same reaction in his listeners. Saint Vincent does this repeatedly, and it is perhaps from his example as well as from the explicit advice of Saint Francis de Sales³⁴ that Father Almeras, or Father Portail, later made the exclamation a recommended feature of the style of the *Little Method*. Rather than accumulate passages in which Saint Vincent employs exclamation, we shall content ourselves with one more quotation, which exhibits how he combined all the rhetorical devices together in many passages with the utmost energy and vivacity. In the following passage from the conference, he first proposes an objection which may occur to his audience (*occupatio*),³⁵ and he proposes it by slipping over into the impersonation of one who might raise such an objection (*prosopopeia*). He then answers it partially by a barrage of exclamations and rhetorical questions (*interrogatio*), and even more emphatically by concluding from it that the Son of God lacked dignity and wisdom (*ironia*).³⁶ Finally, he appeals to his listeners to reject the objection and its implications as a blasphemous absurdity (*communicatio*):

But this method is so plain! What will people say about me for preaching this way all the time? What will they take me for? In the end everyone will look down on me; I shall lose my reputation! — You will lose your reputation! O Savior! By preaching as Jesus Christ himself preached you will lose your reputation! To express the message of Jesus

³³ Quintilian ix, 2. 26.; 3.97

³⁴ *Letter to André Frémiot* of 1604, in Patrick Boyle, C.M. (trans. and ed.), *Instructions on Preaching, Catechising, and Clerical Life* (New York: Benziger, 1902), p. 69.

³⁵ Quintilian ix. 2. 16 f.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, vi. 2. 15

Christ in the way Jesus Christ himself chose to express it is to have no reputation. Speaking about God as the Son of God spoke of him means losing your reputation! O Savior! O Savior! Then Jesus Christ, the Word of the Father, had no reputation. To proceed as one ought to in a sermon, in simplicity, in a familiar and ordinary style, as our Lord did, this means to have no reputation; and to do otherwise is to be a man of some repute! To camouflage and counterfeit the word of God this means having a reputation! Having a reputation means clothing God's word in affection, dressing it up and masquerading it as a courtesan filled with vanity; it means doing this to the sacred word of God! O Savior! O divine Savior! What does this mean? What does this mean, Fathers? To say that one loses his reputation by preaching the Gospel as Jesus Christ did! I might as well say that Jesus Christ, he who was Eternal Wisdom, did not very well know how to express himself, that he did not understand the matter very clearly, that he should have acted otherwise than he did. O Savior! What blasphemy! Yet this is what they are saying, if not explicitly, at least in the silence of their hearts, if not openly before men, at least before God, who sees their hearts; and they dare to pronounce these horrible blasphemies before God, before God, to his very face! while they are ashamed before men! Before God! Before God! O Savior, merciful Savior! Alas! Fathers, you see clearly what a blasphemy it is to say and to think that we lose our reputation by preaching as the Son of God preached, as he came to teach us to preach, as the Holy Spirit taught the Apostles to preach!³⁷

The reader who closely studies this powerful passage must concede that Saint Vincent's style can be called highly figurative, vivacious, and dynamic.

As a theory of *delivery*, this conference of 1655 is again richer in example than in precept. We know that in other places Saint Vincent spoke and wrote about the need

³⁷Coste, *op. cit.*, 284.

for a natural and conversational delivery, but here he does not discuss it explicitly. Yet who does not see, even in the last quotation given above, that it would be impossible for Saint Vincent to utter the words he did without employing all the variety of vocal change and bodily action which they naturally demand? There could be no harmony with the other elements of the *Little Method* if the element of delivery were not "plain, simple, and familiar." But if there is any doubt that the method of Saint Vincent also called for energy, fervor, and vivacity when these were appropriate to the material, the reader only has to read this conference aloud to be convinced. Let him also picture the energetic, fervent, and vivacious Saint as he delivered this conference. Imagine what he looked like, now white-haired and venerable, still with his gift of mimicry, as he assumed different roles and spoke the thoughts of one fictitious character after another, to the quiet delight of the listening Vincentians. Imagine how the conference room rang with conviction as he asked them again and again if they knew a more effective and more apostolic method of preaching than he had described. And how the moment of pregnant silence when they could not answer him must have borne witness to their consent! Imagine what inflections he could put on that word "reputation," not letting up on it until its very sound connoted all that was selfish and shallow and unworthy. Speaking to his missionaries as he did, he had no need to say anything about delivery. As they sat in rapt attention they knew they were listening to a master, whose energetic, imaginative, wonderfully insinuating and persuasive delivery was all the lesson they needed.

III

If good example, good manuals, and zeal for instruction were the only necessary elements for a general reform of preaching in France in the early seventeenth century, these laments were abundantly present. But it seems often to be with the crystallization of religious reforms as it is with the chemical process itself. The necessary elements may be all present in solution even to the saturation point, but they do not crystallize until they find some nucleus around which to form. In the homiletic renewal of seventeenth century France, the seed crystal was the *Little Method* of Saint Vincent de Paul.

There are many reasons why this was so. One important reason was that the *Little Method* was simplicity itself. Saint Vincent could explain its essentials in an hour, and his successor, Father Almeras, could summarize it in a circular letter. Any preacher who heard of it, even if he did not wish to adopt it, could immediately understand what it was. In any reform, such simplicity of program is a great advantage. How great it was in this case can be judged by examining the way in which others at that time stated the principles of a reform of sacred eloquence. There could be no greater contrast, for example, than between the description of the *Little Method* by Saint Vincent in his conference or the summary of it by Father Almeras in his letter and the labored utterance of Nicolas Caussin's *De Forma et Characterere Sacrae Eloquentiae*.³⁸

The simplicity of the *Little Method*, however, was not

³⁸Nicolai Caussini Trecensis e. Societ. Jesu, *De Eloquentia sacra et humana, libri XVI* (La Flèche, under title *Eloquentiae sacrae et humanae parallela*, 1619; Paris, 1623, 1627, 1630; Lyons, 1643, 1651, etc.). Editions are found at Widener Library, Harvard; Seminary of St. Charles Borromeo, Overbrook, Pa.; and St. Andrew-on-Hudson, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

by any means the only reason for its success. With his genius for practical measures, Saint Vincent made the most of the three chief means he had at hand for publicizing and popularizing it. Through the Tuesday Conference he trained the elite of the French clergy, among whom were many future bishops, in the *Little Method*. With their aid, in turn, he made it known to the majority of candidates for Holy Orders, who made his Retreat for Ordinands. Finally, he gave to the *Little Method* an enduring vitality by grafting it into the living rule and tradition of the Congregation of the Mission, which would always be nourished at the roots by the practical needs of its work among the poor.³⁹

The Tuesday Conference took its name from the day of the week on which a dedicated group of secular clergy were accustomed to gather as guests of the Vincentians to discuss the priestly vocation and the means of carrying out their duties in the most exemplary fashion. Founded in 1633 and lasting until the French Revolution, this Conference was not unlike the Third Order of the Dominicans and Franciscans, inasmuch as it gave to its members, who were carefully screened before admission, a rule of life and a periodic assembly. Furthermore, the Superior General of the Vincentians was by rule the director of the Conference, an arrangement which put Saint Vincent in a position to publish his ideas on preaching to the outstanding clerics of metropolitan Paris, who vied with each other for membership in the inspired little group. The strategic value of such a position to a man

³⁹For a definitive account of the Tuesday Conference, Retreats for Ordinands, and foundation of the Congregation of the Mission, cf. Pierre Coste, C.M., *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul* (translated by Joseph Leonard) (3 vols.; Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1952). See especially Vol. II, chap. xxviii, "The Tuesday Conferences"; chap. xxix, "Retreats for Ordinands"; chap. xxx, "Seminaries"; chap. xxxii, "The Reform of Preaching."

with Saint Vincent's ideas and ability may be estimated from the fact that of the 250 members enrolled in the Tuesday Conference from 1633 until his death in 1660 more than a score became exemplary bishops, forty were doctors of the Sorbonne and the College of Navarre, and others, like Father Olier and Father Tronson, later became founders and superiors in their own right of institutes of seminary educators who, along with the Congregation of the Mission, staffed the seminaries of France.

In the Tuesday Conference, during the discussions and exhortations concerning the virtues and duties of the priesthood, the emphasis returned again and again to the method of preaching. On such occasions, Saint Vincent seized the opportunity to inculcate the principles and the formula of the *Little Method*. In general, the members insisted that anyone who spoke should be simple and practical. If a speaker became artificially eloquent, or seemed to intend to parade his knowledge or fluency, he was checked by the group and recalled to their unpretentious style. More than once Saint Vincent, in his demonstrative way, fell on his knees before the speaker and pleaded with him to be more simple and natural.

In addition to this unwritten demand for the simplicity and practicality which characterizes the *Little Method* in its broad sense, the members of the Conference practiced the composition of sermons according to the sequence of *motives-nature-means* which characterizes the *Little Method* as a specific formula. Reminiscing as an old man, Saint Vincent described the exercises. "A virtue or vice was proposed as a subject; each of us took some paper and ink and wrote down a motive for avoiding the vice or embracing the virtue, and then proceeded to look for a definition and means; finally, all that had been written was collected, and a sermon composed from the material. It was all done without books; everyone worked out the

subject for himself.”⁴⁰

To such discussions and exercises, this cadre of exemplary priests, under Saint Vincent’s direction, added the activity of preaching missions in the cities, supplementing the work of the Vincentians, whose missions were restricted by rule to the peasants of the countryside. Saint Vincent called upon them to give missions to the workers and in quarters of Paris most in need of moral renewal. In 1641 they gave a mission in the notorious sector of Paris called the Faubourg Saint-Germain, and with such success that all who witnessed it were astonished, as Father Olier testifies. The clergy of Paris came in large numbers to learn the secret of the preachers’ effectiveness, but heard and saw only the disarming directness and simplicity of the *Little Method*. Another famous mission was that given in Metz in October of 1657, in which the members of the Tuesday Conference filled even the orator Bossuet with the greatest admiration for their preaching, inspiring him to found a Conference at Metz as an affiliate of the one in Paris. And all this while, Saint Vincent was calling upon them to help preach his Retreats for Ordinands.

The Retreats for Ordinands had been begun in 1628 by Saint Vincent, in co-operation with the Bishop of Beauvais, as an effort to give at least some vocational training to the young men who were approaching Holy Orders. The failure of the seminary ventures following the Council of Trent had left the clergy without a program of specialized training for the ministry, a situation which in our own time would be incredible and which at that time led to conditions just as incredible. It was at that time a novel idea to invite the ordinands to the Vincentian house for ten days or a fortnight to attend exercises of piety and

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 219.

practical pastoral instruction, but so successful was the practice that it soon spread everywhere. In a short time the Parisian clergy were all required by their Bishop to make the two-week retreat with the Vincentians before ordination. Saint Vincent even lived to see Pope Alexander VII, in 1659, require all the clerics of Rome to do the same.

So widely did the movement of Retreats for Ordinands spread in France and Italy that it would be hard to calculate the percentage of the ordinands every year who came under Vincentian influence. Furthermore, as time went on, Saint Vincent, who knew that it takes more than two weeks to train a man for his priestly vocation, found reasons to multiply the number of retreats for each candidate and to lengthen their duration. With help from Father Olier he drew up the program for an intensive course in pastoral theology. To preach the retreats and teach this course in pastoral theology he enlisted members of the Tuesday Conference whose names read like a roster of the leaders of the French clergy in this age of spiritual renewal. One man chosen for retreat master, for instance, was De Rance, who later founded the Trappists. Another was Fleury, the famous historian and catechist.⁴¹ Still another, who considered it one of his greatest honors to be chosen to give these retreats, was Bossuet, who had made his own retreat before ordination under the direction of Saint Vincent. One and all, the preachers of the retreats

⁴¹ Claude Fleury (1640-1723). This great scholar's thoughts on preaching, as given briefly in his *Les Moeurs des chretiens*, (Paris, 1682), and more at length in his *Discours sur la predication* of 1688, are echoes of Saint Vincent's thinking, and are sometimes repeated, with great similarity even of wording, in Fenelon's *Dialogues on Eloquence*. To show the bridge established by Olier, Tronson, Fleury and Bossuet between the homiletic thinking of the Tuesday Conference and that of Fenelon's *Dialogues* is matter for a separate study.

were held to the simple and practical manner of the *Little Method*.

If Saint Vincent's ideas on homiletic reform were spread far and wide through the Tuesday Conference and the Retreats for Ordinands, they were given an even greater extension in place and time through the Congregation of the Mission, which he had founded in 1625. The Vincentians spread rapidly throughout France and then into foreign countries, and with them everywhere went the spirit and formula they had learned from their founder. Not only had every missionary been exhorted to follow the *Little Method* when he preached, but he had been exercised in it over and over again, for Saint Vincent had built the discussion of *motives, nature, and means* into the structure of every missionary's long training. In the Internal Seminary, as the Vincentian's period of ascetical formation was called, there were several exercises whose cumulative effect would be to leave on every seminarian the stamp of the *Little Method*. In meditation, in repetition of prayer and of spiritual reading, in conferences, and in spiritual colloquies, the candidates in the Internal Seminary, whom we may call in a broad sense novices, met the *motives-nature-means* sequence at every turn.

For a method of meditation, the *Regulae Seminarii Interni*,⁴² which was the manual of the Vincentian novice, drew substantially upon the writing of Saint Francis de Sales.⁴³ When meditating on a virtue or a fault, the novice

⁴² *Regulae Seminarii Interni Congregationis Missionis* (Lutetiae Parisiorum, 1888). Father Fiat, the Superior General who published this edition, explains in a preface that this copy of the novitiate rules is quite faithful to those that came from Saint Vincent's own hand, and that the comparison of the rules of the Internal Seminaries of all the provinces showed a remarkable uniformity of practice. What is said of these practices in this study, therefore, is true of Vincentian training from the seventeenth century down to the present day.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

was given a plan of procedure which corresponds to the outline of a moral sermon given by Saint Francis in his *Letter to Fremiot*. The manner in which the *Regulae* convert Saint Francis' plan into the typical Vincentian formula seems to recapitulate the process by which, as we have speculated earlier, Saint Vincent evolved the *Little Method*.⁴⁴ It is all done neatly in a short paragraph or two:

According to the method of Saint Francis de Sales, in meditating on a virtue or a vice, close attention should be given to its definition, namely: what it is, by what signs it may be recognized, what its species are, how they differ from one another, what the effects are, by what means a virtue is to be acquired or a vice eradicated. This method, then, consists of two elements: (1) the motives which prompt us to practice a virtue and avoid a vice; and (2) the means of acquiring the virtue and overcoming the vice.

It should be noted that the considerations most useful and effective in moving the soul are those derived from the advantages which the future brings, or the disadvantages which follow from the vice. As for the means, the ones which are found most effective are the acts proper to that very virtue, together with special care to avoid the obstacles to it.⁴⁵

To show how this plan of mental prayer could be worked out in a particular case, the *Regulae* complete the instruction by offering a sample meditation on the value of a spiritual retreat. The three points of the body of this model meditation are: (1) *momentum et scopus exercitiorum*, or the nature of a retreat; (2) *causae quae nos ad rite implenda secessus exercitia movere debent*, or the motives for making a good retreat; and (3) *viae quibus ab exercitiis fructus haberi potest*, or the means of making a good retreat.⁴⁶ In this outline we can see an example of

⁴⁴Cf. *AER*, CXXXIX, 4 (Oct., 1958), 217-27.

⁴⁵*Regulae*, pp. 68 ff.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 84-88.

the variation achieved in the *Little Method* formula by occasionally changing from *motives-nature-means* to *nature-motives-means*, as Saint Vincent had suggested.⁴⁷ We also have here an illustration of how *motives* can be found in the *nature* of the subject and exploited as such without being explicitly referred to as motives. The considerations listed under *momentum et scopus* in the first step constitute a descriptive definition or a broad explanation of the *nature* of a retreat, and yet are considerations which, by focusing on the importance and aims involved in the essence of a retreat, are additional *motives* for making it a good one. This manner of making the *nature* step an additional source of persuasion was also counselled in the official Vincentian doctrine of the *Little Method*.⁴⁸

Preparing his meditation day by day according to this formula, a Vincentian novice in all likelihood was acquiring insights and habits which would strongly influence his later efforts at sermon composition. As if this were not enough, the Internal Seminary provided other ascetical practices which amounted to brief exercises in sermon delivery. In these exercises the novice was admonished to speak in the simple and devout manner

⁴⁷Pierre Coste, C.M., *Saint Vincent de Paul, correspondance, entretiens, documents* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1923), Vol. XI, p. 279. Saint Vincent suggests occasionally transposing the points for the sake of variety. Thomas McNamara, C.M., in his *Sacred Rhetoric*, published anonymously ca. 1881 (New York: Benziger, n.d.), makes a similar suggestion (p. 72) for another reason. When dealing with a moral subject which may not be immediately clear to the audience, he recommends anticipating the definition, which ordinarily belongs in the second step of the motives-nature-means sequence. This does not really consist in a transposition of the points, however, since the anticipated definition is very brief and is given with the announcement of the subject at the opening of the sermon, together with a promise that the definition will be made even clearer later on, i.e., in the second of the three steps.

⁴⁸Cf. *AER*, CXXXIX, 4 (Oct., 1958), 217-27.

characteristic of Saint Vincent, and to adhere strictly to the prescribed method.⁴⁹ In the exercise called the *repetition of prayer* he stood up in the presence of his confreres and gave an account of his morning meditation, which, if it were patterned on the model meditation just described, would naturally result in a short talk based on the *Little Method* formula.

In a *spiritual conference*, the one who addressed the novices was instructed to say: "The subject of this conference is . . . (for example, humility). It is divided into two (or three) parts. In the first point we are concerned with the motives which should draw us to humility. In the second point, with the nature of humility. In the third point, with the means we must employ to practice humility."⁵⁰

Another exercise was the *spiritual colloquy*, which consisted of a group discussion about some virtue or fault. The novices first took turns speaking briefly on the motives involved; then each took another turn to speak about the means.⁵¹ In still another exercise, called the *repetition of spiritual reading*, the novice gave a public account of his recent findings in Rodriguez or the life of some saint. Even here the influence of the *Little Method* was at work, as when the rules instructed the novice whose reading had dealt with the acquisition of some virtue to begin his account by saying, "I have read chapter . . . of . . . , in which the author deals with the means by which the virtue is acquired."⁵²

It is obvious that all these practices would habituate a novice to the traditional Vincentian way of discussing moral topics. If the reader of the preceding pages feels by now

⁴⁹ Cf. *Regulae*, pp. 122 ff.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 129.

that he has received an indelible impression of the *Little Method* as a formula of motives, nature, and means, let him imagine how strong an impression the formula made upon the novice who found it woven everywhere into the tissue of his life. There is no doubt that the use of the *Little Method* in these phases of ascetical formation had a more immediate and more important purpose than the training of the future Vincentian for preaching, but it was happily inevitable that men who for years during the formative period of their religious lives had thought and spoken so often of motives, nature, and means would later on adopt the familiar pattern when they preached, perhaps without even adverting to it. In this way, the whole style of life of the Vincentian seminarian supplemented his homiletic training.

Before Saint Vincent died in 1660, he had carefully written the spirit of the *Little Method* into the Vincentian rule and tradition. The Constitutions of 1658, which established the written tradition, held all Vincentians to simplicity and practicality in all their preaching and catechizing and in their work with the Tuesday Conference and the Retreats for Ordinands.⁵³ Add to this the oral tradition, passed on when Vincentian recruits in other lands and other generations listened to the reminiscences of those veteran missionaries who had known Saint Vincent personally in the early days in Paris, and it is not hard to understand that the *Little Method*, both as a spirit and a formula, was in the very marrow of the Congregation of the Mission.

In summary of the Vincentian homiletic tradition, it is true to say that Saint Vincent de Paul did as much as any man has ever done to bring to the pulpit a sense of apostolic sincerity, simplicity, and directness. Due to him

⁵³ *Regulae seu Constitutiones communes Congregationis Missionis* (Parisiis, 1658), *Caput VII*, §§ 5 and 6.

in his own day and to his spiritual sons after him, countless preachers laid aside their practice of composing lofty literary essays for the pulpit, and, instead, began to preach the Gospel with all their heart. Urged by Saint Vincent, they put their emphasis on moral instruction, suited to the needs of the people, and in this way fulfilled the letter and the spirit of the Tridentine decrees on preaching. They kindled in their listeners the love of virtue, gave them clear notions of what virtue is, and pointed out the very specific means to be employed in acquiring it.

Never had it been made more dramatically clear that the one purpose of preaching, from which no preacher may for an instant swerve, is to persuade one's listeners to advance the salvation of their souls. A superficial observer might have judged from this that in the simplicity and practicality which Saint Vincent so incessantly urged upon his missionaries there lay a rejection of rhetoric. The very opposite is true, for if we define rhetoric as "the power of discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion,"⁵⁴ no one ever believed in it or sought it out with more zeal than did Saint Vincent. His *Little Method* was a rejection only of the same sophistic rhetoric which had drawn protest from Saint Paul and had plagued the Fathers of the fourth century as well as every earnest soul after them who has tried simply to preach the word of God. Rejecting exhibition and display, it was a return to rhetoric in the classic and profound meaning given to it in another ancient definition which speaks of rhetoric as "the art of winning souls by words."⁵⁵ If it was

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1.2.

⁵⁵ Toward the middle of Plato's *Phaedrus* (261a), Socrates is represented as asking, "Taken as a whole, is not Rhetoric the art of winning the soul by discourse?" The discussion which centers around this question brings the noblest concepts of classical rhetoric closely into accord with the ideals of Catholic preaching.

left to others like Bossuet to state that meaning more beautifully, and to others like Fenelon to analyze it more learnedly, it was left to none to insist on it more effectively than did Saint Vincent de Paul and those within and without his religious family who inherited his spirit.



Prayer is a great book for preachers; it is from thence they will draw in the eternal word, the truths of which it is the source, those holy truths which they are commanded to announce to the people.

St. Vincent de Paul

A person who preaches in order to win applause, to be praised, to be esteemed, to be spoken of, what does such a person, such a preacher do? What does he commit? A sacrilege! Yes, a sacrilege! What! to use the word of God and divine things in order to acquire honor and reputation! Yes, it is a sacrilege!

St. Vincent de Paul