

1985

The Voluntarism of Saint Vincent de Paul

Jose M. Ibañez Burgos C.M.

Jacqueline Kilar D.C.
Translator

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

Recommended Citation

Ibañez Burgos, Jose M. C.M. and Kilar, Jacqueline D.C. (1985) "The Voluntarism of Saint Vincent de Paul," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol6/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

The Voluntarism of Saint Vincent de Paul*

José M. Ibañez Burgos, C.M.

Translated by Sr. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C.

I. Introduction

There is nothing more profound nor less known in God than the disquieting strangeness of His Will. There is nothing more profound nor less known in man than the disquieting familiarity of his own will. And yet, every project of the Christian man becomes a continuous "search," a constant attentiveness to discerning and accomplishing the Will of God. Through "action" and "non-action," the Christian seeks "to have one and the same will and non-will" with God, to enter "into a unity of spirit with Him."

In addition, Monsieur Vincent does not allow himself to be reached easily. And because this is just in the family, I admit this quite frankly and quite quickly: It is not enough to study this man, who commits his thought to

*This article was published in *Actes Colloque International d'Etudes Vincentiennes* (Rome: Edizioni Vincenziane, C.L.V., 1981), pp. 155-184. The *Actes du Colloque* is a collection of the papers delivered at the international symposium organized by the former Groupe International d'Etudes Vincentiennes (GIEV); since 1983 this group has been replaced by the Secretariat International d'Etudes Vincentiennes (SIEV). Future issues of *Vincentian Heritage* will print translations from the international symposium of GIEV and the Vincentian Months of the SIEV.

Sister Jacqueline Kilar, D.C. a member of the Southeast Province and the V.S.I., holds a Master's degree in French from the Graduate School of French in France of Middlebury College. She has taught French for many years and has recently served as the Editor-in-Chief for the translation of Pierre Coste's *Saint Vincent de Paul, Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*.

action, through the conferences to the Missionaries of Saint-Lazare, his “little talks” to the Daughters of Charity, his outlines for talks to the Ladies of Charity, his voluminous correspondence, and “legal documents.”¹ We must also scrutinize his sense of economic realities and his power of intuition concerning “business affairs.”² We must recall that he was a member of the “Council of Conscience” for ten years (1643-1653) during the regency of Anne of Austria, inspired politics, and negotiated with Mazarin, the “shrewdest” man of his time.³ All this prevents us from isolating him from the living world of his day with its political and religious intrigues, popular revolts, wars, famines, fads, fears, and also with the traits of its human face.

The study, for fifteen years, of Vincentian life, work, and thought brings me once again to make this statement: when one approaches Monsieur Vincent, it would be better to look for a man than to seek an author. Yet he loves intellectual discipline and clarity,⁴ all the while making profitable use of his capacity for feeling and emotion, “the art of being eloquent.” His private

¹*Saint Vincent de Paul, Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, Paris, 1920-1925, 14 volumes. Edition prepared by P. Coste. The letters S.V. refer to this edition. The roman numerals, which follow them, refer to the volumes, and the arabic numbers to the pages.

²Cf. *Documents du minutier central concernant l'histoire littéraire (1650-1700)*, Paris, 1960, pp. 430-433. Vincent de Paul illustrates the union of spirituality and business: his name is among those most frequently seen in notarial minutes; J. Jacquart, “La politique foncière de Monsieur Vincent,” *Actes du colloque international d'études vincentiennes*, 1981, pp. 129-143.

³Cardinal Mazarin's forte was precisely that of engaging in idle talk, intimating, raising hopes; casting light on matters and then withdrawing it; giving views and then confusing them. Here we have a genius perfectly suited for the service of the illusions royal authority always has at hand when engaging in negotiations...”: Cardinal de Retz, *La Fronde*, texts chosen and presented by Ph. Bernard, Paris, 1962, p. 241.

⁴In order to study the spirituality of Monsieur Vincent, let us not separate his conception of Christian life from his manner of acting. For that matter, if we hold to

secretary, Brother Ducournau, is unaware of what he is telling us as he calmly states that Monsieur Vincent says “ordinary things,” but that, nevertheless, “he ennobles them both as regards their practice and his expression of them.”⁵ We know today that language and practice are signs of an ideology, a spirit, an interior experience, and the best translation of the everyday. The word flows, is interrupted, stops for it is through the word that the “desire” of the one who speaks is freed, and finally expressed. One who “ennobles both in practice and expression,” is not an intellectual passing his time, taking pleasure in building intellectual constructions, but a man who is experiencing and living with his whole being. A mystic of action reveals the depth of his existence through his watchwords, his dynamic strategy. These watchwords and this strategy can help us understand the meaning of his words. Monsieur Vincent’s words are dynamized by his spirit, and only through his spirit can we have the possibility of interpreting them. To forget this would be a failure to recognize that Vincent de Paul belongs to that category of men whose life and thought are born and develop at the same time and in the same rhythm. His life becomes the hermeneutic key of his thought, and his doctrine is the formulation of his faith and his experience.

While the difficulties get entangled and come one on top of the other when we try to explain Monsieur Vincent,

the letter of his teaching, we could find that its “common denominators” are not always treated in a coherent fashion; on the contrary, they are rather freely reworked and have little overall coherence. But on going deeper, to the thought that nourishes this solid spirit, we see him envisaging sanctity (his own and that of his disciples) as depending on two dominant principles: a doctrine and a method which are quite clearly conceived, quite consciously chosen, constantly applied...”; P. Defrennes, *La vocation de saint Vincent de Paul, étude psychologique surnaturelle*, R.A.M. (1932), pp. 63-64.

⁵Cf. *Mémoires du Frère Ducournau sur les entretiens de Monsieur Vincent*, S.V. XII, 447-448.

nothing allows us to grasp his spiritual experience, still less to put his teaching in a box with a few phrases, even if the latter are worded perfectly and magnificently adorned. He slips away from those who try to force him to speak of his religious experience and interior abysses. In spite of this resistance, a minute and attentive analysis of his life and of the genesis of his thought verifies the fact that one fundamental preoccupation traverses his entire life: discovering more clearly every instant and uniting himself more intimately each day to the Will of God by continuing the mission of Christ, Evangelist of the poor.

II. Awakening

Vincent de Paul is not content with offering his spirit to God. He is determined to give his existence a very concrete meaning and make his manner of acting coincide with the mysterious plan of Divine Providence, which is revealed in acting and whose action is indicated by means of a concrete, existential realism. His openness and fidelity to the Will of God are, in reality, but signs of his preoccupation to discover God in the history he has to live, to find out how God appears in events, and to learn how to respond to this faithful, surprising God who is so involved in history.

The originality of Vincent de Paul, in comparison with his teachers and the spiritual men of his time, is most significant: for him the Will of God is an active presence of God in the world, a will to be of service to man. It is realized, in imitation of Christ, by the evangelization of the poor.

Monsieur Vincent's whole life is oriented by his desire to transform his life and mold his spirit in order to bring them into accord with the recommendation of Saint Paul: "Do not model yourselves on the present world, but let the renewal of your judgment transform you and allow

you to discern what is God's Will, what is good, what is pleasing to Him, what is perfect." (Rom. 12:2) This Will, according to the same Saint Paul, has been revealed in the mystery of Jesus: "Jesus is the supreme testimony for our knowing just how far God's fidelity has been pledged to history." (Cf. Eph. 2:15-16; 3:3-10; Rom. 16:25-26; 1 Cor. 2:7-10; Col. 2:2-3) This desire, which permeates Vincent de Paul's life and animates his spirit, compels him "to be perfectly submissive to the commands of Providence."⁶ Now, at the same time that he seeks "to draw God to himself"⁷—this God, who according to the Vincentian formula "leads us by the hand"⁸ to accomplish "those things which are agreeable to Him"⁹—he makes the Will of God the illuminating center of his teaching and his action: "Let us adjust ourselves to the judgment God makes of things.... Let us, like our Lord, adjust our judgment to God's judgment, which is known to us through Holy Scripture.... Then, in the name of the Lord, we can form our reasoning to the way of thinking which most conforms to the spirit of the Gospel."¹⁰ That is where we must look for him in order to find him seeking the "good pleasure of God" and his "greatest glory."¹¹ His desire to discover and accomplish God's Will leads him to "seek above all (God's) glory, His kingdom, and His justice,"¹² to "seek the honor and good pleasure of our good and sovereign Savior,"¹³ to become like Him "agreeable to

⁶S.V. XII, 235.

⁷Ibid.

⁸S.V. XII, 236; cf. S.V. XII, 243.

⁹S.V. XII, 235.

¹⁰S.V. XII, 213, 214.

¹¹S.V. XI, 48; XII, 132.

¹²S.V. XII, 132.

¹³S.V. XII, 135-136.

his Father and useful to his Church,"¹⁴ to "put on the spirit of Jesus Christ,"¹⁵ to continue Christ's mission.¹⁶

In order to decipher the meaning and the object of God's Will in the life of Vincent de Paul, in order to surprise and discover this indefatigable seeker and accomplisher of God's Will, two paths are offered to us. One goes by way of the trajectory of his experience and permits us to perceive his progressive evolution, his orientation, and the meaning of his dynamism. The other analyzes his words and, through the multiple forms of his expression, attempts to make the genesis, the development, and the constants in his thought stand out in order to admit us to his spirit.

III. Under the Influence of Voluntarism

The dates which enclose the life of Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) mark the most interesting part of the seventeenth century with regard to French spirituality: one in which the currents congeal and in which major works are published. In order to understand "the voluntarism" of Vincent de Paul, it is thus indispensable to be familiar with the complex geography of "devout France." The problem in question, moreover, is one of those in which the configuration is best grasped.

Let us remember this point: within the heritage which the sixteenth century, at its decline, bequeathed to the seventeenth century are found both "devout humanism" and "mysticism." These two currents mark the spiritual milieu of the sixteenth century as much by their

¹⁴S.V. XII, 128.

¹⁵Cf. S.V. XII, 107-108, 109, 112-113; XI, 343.

¹⁶Cf. S.V. XI, 343; XII, 107-108, 75-79, 367....

intensity as by the duration of their influence.

In the perspective that interests us, the devout humanists and the mystics, as much as the adherents of other spiritual currents, even those most foreign to humanism and mysticism, are in effect almost all deeply impregnated by voluntarism, that is, by an anthropology in which a central place is given to the will, which seems, so to speak, to summarize the very essence of a conscious being. This human exaltation is due, no doubt, to a curious renewal of stoicism.¹⁷

1. DEVOUT HUMANISM¹⁸

In the sixteenth century, devout humanism exalts the possibilities of man and regards him as the crown of creation, the masterpiece come forth from the hands of God. Among the devout humanists, beyond a pervasive literary taste for the heroes of pagan antiquity and for mythology, one finds a religious philosophy with a clearly anthropocentric bent. Consequently, although there is question here of an element of spiritual horizon that is disparaged by other currents, its importance remains

¹⁷On the influence of stoicism in France at the end of the sixteenth century and during the seventeenth century, cf. L. Zanta, *La renaissance du stoïcisme du XVIe siècle*, Paris, 1944; R. Baby, *L'homme et son "institution" de Montaigne à Bérulle*, Paris, 1964; J. -E. d'Angers (P. Ch. Chesneau), "Le stoïcisme en France dans la première moitié du XVIIe siècle," in *Etudes Franciscaines* (1951), pp. 398-405; various other articles of the same author have studied these prolongations of stoicism; see the list in *XVIIe Siècle*, 90-91 (1971), pp. 9-14).

¹⁸On devout humanism, cf. H. Bremond, *Histoire du sentiment religieux en France depuis les guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours*, Paris, 1967-1968, vol. I; H. Busson, *La pensée religieuse française de Charron à Pascal*, Paris, 1933; F. de Danvily, *Naissance de l'humanisme moderne*, Paris, 1940; J. Orcibal, *Jean Duvergier de Hauranne, abbé de Saint-Cyran*, Paris-Louvain, 1947, vol. II, pp. 40-47; L. Cognet, *Les origines de la spiritualité française au XVIIe siècle*, Paris, 1949, pp. 27-32; Id., *Histoire de la spiritualité chrétienne*, vol. III; *La spiritualité moderne (1500-1650)*, Paris, 1966, pp. 411-425; J.-E. d'Angers (P. Ch. Chesneau), *L'humanisme chrétien au XVIIe siècle. Saint François de Sales et Yves de Paris*, La Haye, 1960.

considerable: the Capuchin Yves de Paris¹⁹ by his prolific work and long life prolongs its trends of thought.

The range of diversity with regard to the trends within devout humanism is multiple and "this devout humanist can and must differ from that other as day differs from night."²⁰ In spite of this diversity, the humanists are unanimous in exalting the human will and in affirming that man is God's masterpiece. While some of these humanists never succeed in having the least intention of inserting the human will within the designs of the Divine Will,²¹ others, especially the Jesuit group, try to reconcile, even to harmonize—sometimes too easily—the demands of the Divine Will, of God's love, of Christian life with the laws of nature, human love, and devotional practices. "Experience," writes Pascal in another line of thought, "brings us to see an enormous difference between devotion and goodness."²²

2. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622)

To deny in Francis de Sales the taste for the human and not to recognize in him the features of spiritual psychologism²³ would be a failure to recognize his "heroic optimism." Now, with him, this "heroic optimism" reaches its highest point "in absolute submission to the good pleasure of God."²⁴ To wish to consider him only

¹⁹Concerning Yves de Paris, consult the important work of J.-E. d'Angers (P. Ch. Chesneau), *Le P. Yves de Paris et son temps* (1590-1678), Paris, 1946.

²⁰H. Bremond, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 2; Le Brun, *Le grand siècle de la spiritualité française et ses lendemains (XVIIe siècle)*, in *L'histoire spirituelle de la France*, Paris, 1964, pp. 238-240.

²¹"Christianity as it is presented to us by Charron as well as by Du Vair has nothing to do with the life of union, with aspiration towards a profound personal intimacy with God": L. Cognet, *L'histoire de la spiritualité, op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 416.

²²B. Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Laf. 365; ed. Br. 496.

²³Cf. H. Bremond, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 68-127.

²⁴E.-M. Lajeunie, *Saint François de Sales et l'esprit salésien*, 2 Paris, 1971, p. 30.

from the point of view of devout humanism would be a failure to recognize the fundamental theocentrism which marks his spirituality.²⁵ Now, it is voluntarism which provides the link between humanism and Salesian theocentrism. Through this voluntarism “the will” of man “ends in and fuses with the love of God.”²⁶

At the beginning of the *Devout Life*, Francis de Sales writes: “True and living devotion...presupposes the love of God; it is, indeed, nothing other than a true love of God. Nonetheless, it is not an ordinary love; for, in so far as divine love beautifies our soul, it is called *grace*, which makes us pleasing to His Divine Majesty; in so far as it gives us the strength to do good, it is called *charity*; but when it has arrived at that degree of perfection in which it not only makes us do good, but causes us to act diligently, frequently, and promptly, then it is called *devotion*.”²⁷ The initial chapter of the *Treatise on the Love of God* is entitled: “That, for the beauty of human nature, God has given to the will the management of all the faculties of the soul.”²⁸ Now, for Francis de Sales, as for almost all the Spirituals of the seventeenth century, love and will are one and the same: “God wants man only for his soul, his soul only for his will, his will only for his love.”²⁹ In the *Treatise on the Love of God* he wrote again with greater precision: “Man is the perfection of the universe; the spirit is the perfection of man; love, that of the spirit; and charity, that of love: that is why the love of God is the end, the perfection, and the excellence of the universe.”³⁰

²⁵Cf. H. Bremond, *op. cit.*, vol. VII,

²⁶F. de Sales, *Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, t. V, vol. II, p. 289. I always quote Francis de Sales according to the Annecy edition 1992-1964, 27 vols.

²⁷F. de Sales, *La vie dévote*, vol. III, p. 14.

²⁸F. de Sales, *Traité, op. cit.*, t. IV, vol. I, p. 23.

²⁹F. de Sales, *La vie, op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 201.

³⁰F. de Sales, *Traité, op. cit.*, t. V, vol. II, p. 165.

“Salesian thought,” writes Lajeunie, “can be summarized in this proposition of the doctor of love.”³¹

Voluntarism leads Francis de Sales to a synthetic view of Christian life in which charity—pure love—holds a central place.³² In such a perspective, he dedicates one chapter of the *Treatise on the Love of God* to showing “how charity comprises all the virtues,”³³ and another to proving “how we must reduce the entire practice of the virtues and of our actions to holy love.”³⁴ There he writes: “the motive of our actions, which is that of heavenly love, has this sovereign property, that being more pure it renders the action which proceeds from it more pure.”³⁵ And once again he adds that the motive is the “good pleasure of God.”³⁶ The anthropocentric voluntarism of Francis de Sales leads Salesian asceticism to find its end in the “complete stripping of the soul for the Will of God.”³⁷ He gives a marvelous analysis of “this passage from anthropocentric preoccupation to theocentric indifference,”³⁸ bringing it to the absolute submission of the human will to the good pleasure of God, to “living

³¹E.-M. Lajeunie, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

³²“While there are so many different degrees of love between true lovers, there is, nonetheless, but one single commandment binding each one equally with a quite similar and total obligation... which must prevail over all our loves.... God requires of us, that of all our loves, His may be the most... dominant over our heart.... And through this love we choose God as the sovereign object of our spirit.... Supreme love which places God in such esteem in our souls, and makes us prize so highly the good of being pleasing to Him, that we prefer and love it above all things.... Love of excellence which is a commandment for all mortals”: *Traité, op. cit.*, t. V, vol. II, pp. 186, 187, 188.

³³*Ibid.*, t. V, vol. II, pp. 262-266.

³⁴*Ibid.*, t. V, vol. II, pp. 285-288.

³⁵*Ibid.*, t. V, vol. II, p. 287.

³⁶*Ibid.*, t. V, vol. II, p. 288.

³⁷*Ibid.*, t. V, vol. II, p. 160.

³⁸H. Bremond, *op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 45.

purely in the Will of God": "Certainly, our will can never die, no more than our spirit, but it sometimes passes beyond the limits of its ordinary life in order to live completely in the Divine Will; it is then that it neither can nor wishes any longer to will anything, but abandons itself totally and without reserve to the good pleasure of Divine Providence, so mingling and saturating itself with this good pleasure, that it is no longer seen, but is completely hidden with Jesus Christ in God (Col. 3:3), where it lives, no longer of itself, but the Will of God lives in it (Gal. 2:20)."³⁹ This union of the human will with the Divine Will, which is realized in the "supreme point" of the spirit, of the will,⁴⁰ is for him an "acquiescence in all that God wills to be done in us, to us, and with us."⁴¹

Such a union does not coincide in Salesian thought with Canfieldian "annihilation," from which Francis de Sales always remains quite distant and toward which he remains even hostile: "And certainly, just as I have been unwilling to follow those who hold in contempt those books which treat of a certain supereminent life in perfection, I have also been unwilling to speak of this supereminence; for I cannot censure the authors, nor authorize the censures of a doctrine that I do not understand."⁴²

3. BENEDICT OF CANFIELD (1562-1610)

In the spiritual atmosphere of the seventeenth century, mysticism holds an important place.⁴³ In France,

³⁹F. de Sales, *Traité, op. cit.*, t. V, vol. II, p. 149; cf. *Ibid.*, t. V, vol. II, pp. 158-159.

⁴⁰Cf. *Ibid.*, t. IV, vol. I, pp. 67, 334.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, t. V, vol. II, p. 153.

⁴²*Ibid.*, Preface, t. IV, vol. I, p. 13.

⁴³Cf. L. Cognet, *Crépuscule des mystiques (Le conflit Fénelon-Bossuet)*, Tournai, 1958, pp. 9-53.

it prolongs the influence of the Rheno-flemish mystics,⁴⁴ whose works were widely read throughout the course of the sixteenth century. Because of its taste for metaphysical abstraction and its aspiration towards a direct union with the divine essence, the French group merits the name of the abstract school.

This group, which forms around Madame Acarie, envisages the spiritual life from the point of view of the interior experience of the divine, from which point of view proceed a certain number of fundamental principles.

To begin with, the *problem of union with God* is based on a divine unity which transcends essences. This union, which is envisaged here as the end of mystical life, is a veritable fusion of the divine essence and the essence of man. It is accomplished by the absorption of man's will into the Divine Will, ending in a sort of "depersonalization," according to the word used by L. Cagnet.⁴⁵ It is right to add that the abstraction of this outline is corrected by the introduction of the Trinitarian element. It is, in the last analysis, with the life of the divine persons that the soul participates in mystical union.⁴⁶

From this principle flow various consequences. We shall name but a few of them. One of the most immediate is that this fusion of wills by which the soul is united to the very essence of God must be necessarily a *direct union without intermediary*, for the soul could not be perfectly satisfied so long as it found anything between itself and God.

⁴⁴On the Rheno-flemish mystic, cf. L. Cagnet, *Introduction aux mystiques Rhéno-Flamands*, Tournai, 1968; J. Orcibal, *Saint Jean de la Croix et les mystiques rhéno-flamands*, Bruges, 1966; R.-L. Oechslin, *Divinisation, Ecole Rhénane et Flamande*, in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. III, col. 1432-1446.

⁴⁵L. Cagnet, *Crépuscule*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁴⁶Cf. J. Dagens, *Bérulle et les origines de la restauration catholique (1575-1611)*, Paris, 1952, P. 307.

Another consequence is that this union, because it is *immediate*, could not admit of any intermediary, even intellectual. From this it follows that this mysticism takes on an attitude that is deliberately anti-intellectual: these authors are unanimous in their thinking that the journey towards union is accomplished by non-discursive contemplation without images. The efforts of the soul in its striving for union are inscribed in heroic abnegation. The soul must, therefore, tend towards so perfect a forgetfulness of self that only the term *annihilation* can express it. On this beginning an entire mystique of nothingness is built.

Finally, the last consequence—the union at which one arrives through this perfect annihilation, being constituted by a veritable absorption of the human will into the Divine Will, is a stable state in which the soul experiences the fact that it is living in God and that God is living in it in a sort of indistinction, which permits us to speak here of *deiformity*.⁴⁷

The best theorist of this abstract group is the Capuchin Benedict of Canfield in his book: the *Rule of Perfection Containing a Brief and Clear Resume of the Whole of Spiritual Life Reduced to the Single Point of God's Will*.⁴⁸ This work, often reedited, exercised a great influence throughout the seventeenth century, and Vincent de Paul does seem to have been affected by it in some measure.

Canfield, like the devout humanists and like Francis de Sales, is attached to voluntarism, which becomes here a “mystical voluntarism.” Together with Francis de Sales, Canfield reaches a synthetic vision of the spiritual life.

⁴⁷L. Cognet, *Crépuscule*, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-21.

⁴⁸On Benedict of Canfield, consult O. de Veghel, *Benoît de Canfield, sa vie, sa doctrine et son influence*, Rome, 1949; P. Renaudin, *Un maître de la mystique française, Benoît de Canfield*, Paris, 1956.

Despite this synthesized vision, he presents things in a somewhat different perspective. Where the Bishop of Geneva puts forward the idea of love, Canfield uses that of the will, which, in the conceptions of the period, is quite close to it, it is true. For the Capuchin, the center of Christian life is found in “the practice of the Will of God.”⁴⁹ It consists essentially in not having any other intention in all of one’s life and in all of one’s actions that the accomplishment of the Will of God.⁵⁰

The *Rule* of Benedict of Canfield is one of the significant expressions of French mysticism at the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth. The success of this work is due to “its skillful construction,”⁵¹ the “marvelous lucidity” of its author,⁵² and above all to its objective of summarizing perfection “in this single point of the Will of God,”⁵³ that is to say in the conformity of the human will with the Divine Will. Canfield likes to insist, moreover, on the simplifying and direct character of this attitude: “This exercise of the Will of God will be found to be, without comparison, shorter than any other, for what others bring about through many

⁴⁹“Having well considered the diversity of the paths, and the multiplicity of the exercises discovered and practiced by quite a number of learned and devout persons in order to arrive at true perfection; and seeing that, since all are tending to one and the same end, they thus scarcely differ from one another, but rather in fact are one and the same no matter how different they seem to be: I wished, for the usefulness of devout souls, to abbreviate them and reduce all of them to one single point.... For this purpose I have not been able to find any point so proper as that of the Will of God.... Therein consists all the perfection of the spiritual life”: B. of Canfield, *Règle de Perfection*, First Part, f. 1 r.–2 r. I cite the *Règle de Perfection* according to the Paris edition, 1610.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, First Part, f. 2 v.; cf. f. 3 r.

⁵¹J. Orcibal, *Vers l'épanouissement du XVIIIe siècle* (1580-1600), in *Histoire spirituelle de la France*, p. 222.

⁵²H. Bremond, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 158.

⁵³Cf. O. de Veghel, *op. cit.*, pp. 115, 171-172.

circumstances, multiplicity, change, and degree, this one accomplishes all at once by a single application of intention.”⁵⁴

He presents all spiritual progress schematically within the perspective of the union of man’s will with what he calls the three Wills of God. However, before being able to conform oneself to God’s Will, one must know it. Now, the Will of God is known to us in three ways. First of all, we know it by means of good laws, for these laws are the expression and manifestation of God’s Will for us. The Will of God known in such wise, Benedict of Canfield calls the *exterior Will of God*, and it corresponds to the *active life*.

Next, the Will of God can be known by means of interior illumination and divine inspirations. This is the *interior Will of God* and it corresponds to the *contemplative life*.

Finally, one can know the Will of God which is God Himself or the Divine *Essence*. This is the *essential Will of God* and it corresponds to that *supereminent life* in which the soul is “deified” or “divinized,” for it is there “transformed,” “absorbed” into God.⁵⁵ In order to reach that point, the soul must “experience by means of a special light this Everything and this Nothing, namely, that God is everything and that the creature is nothing.”⁵⁶ Now it is impossible to arrive at this state if the soul does not consent to live “the active and passive annihilation” of Canfield.⁵⁷

This supereminent life is constituted by a stable state of union with the Divine Essence, which comes about

⁵⁴B. of Canfield, *Règle*, *op. cit.*, First Part, f. 2.

⁵⁵Cf. *ibid.*, Second Part, f. 150, 157 r., 159-161; First Part, f. 15-19.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, Third Part, f. 97 r.

⁵⁷On Canfieldian annihilation, cf. O. de Veghel, *op. cit.*, pp. 306-325.

without intermediaries: “No means must mediate here between the soul and this essential will or essence of God; rather, this end alone, without any means, must draw us and raise us to the happy vision and contemplation of itself.”⁵⁸ Moreover, this unitive life transcends the non-conceptual ways of knowledge; it is pure conformity to the essential Divine Will, which is “purely spirit and life, totally abstract, purged of itself, and stripped of every form and image of created things, corporal or spiritual, temporal or eternal; and is grasped neither by the understanding nor the judgment of man, not by reason nor the judgment of man, not by human reason, but is beyond every capability and above any understanding of man, because it is nothing other than God Himself.”⁵⁹ These few lines show clearly how Canfield is impregnated with abstract theses, and in fact they imply the idea of the *transcendence* of Christ’s humanity.

The thesis of this transcendence was combatted by Bérulle, whose entire spirituality was centered around the mystery of the Incarnation, “adherence” to Christ. Yet nothing, in fact, is less Berullian than this passionate obsession with nothingness. Moreover, pure mysticism, so well summarized by Canfield, will be found throughout the mystical current of the French seventeenth century.

IV. Teaching of Vincent de Paul on the Will of God

The spirit of Vincent de Paul finds itself drawn by two magnetic poles: imitation of Jesus Christ and conformity of his will with the Will of God. We know this from Louis Abelly,⁶⁰ but we also know it from reading the eight

⁵⁸B. of Canfield, *Règle, op. cit.*, Third Part, f. 14 r.

⁵⁹Ibid., Third Part, f. 7 r.

⁶⁰L. Abelly, *La vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul*, Paris, 1664, 3 tomes in 1 volume, cf. I, p. 78; III, p. 32.

thousand pages of his complete works. In an attempt to find the center in which this double attraction converges, I would say this: it is *the Will of God which Jesus Christ accomplishes through His incarnation in history*, or, if you prefer, *Jesus Christ Who is incarnated in history in order to accomplish the Will of God*. Up to the year 1635, the evolution of Vincentian life and thought is centered around the Will of God. Starting with this date,⁶¹ Vincent de Paul speaks insistently of Christ present and acting in man.⁶² Yet, and it must be pointed out, at no moment does he disregard his continual desire to be united to the Will of God.

To succeed in understanding and grasping the originality of Vincent de Paul's thought concerning God's Will, it is not enough to be familiar with the spiritual milieu of his time and his spiritual masters; we must also insert him within the movement of "the spirit of God," within the dynamism of "the spirit of Jesus," and place him within the synthesis of his spiritual teaching. Let us recall what Father Deffrennes, the Jesuit, wrote in 1932, speaking of Monsieur Vincent: "We have here a very independent man." "In his spirituality, it is not coherence that is lacking."⁶³ An impression, moreover, that is ratified by a detailed study.

I. WITHIN THE MOVEMENT OF THE SPIRIT OF GOD

For thousands of years, throughout the diversity of His interventions, God has not yet ceased declaring to us that "His ways are not our ways," that He is the "quite different One."

⁶¹Cf. S.V. I, 295, letter of Vincent de Paul to M. Portail, May 1, 1635.

⁶²Cf. S.V. VI, 393; XII, 108-109, 112-113, 154-155, 264-265, 270-273, 371; XI, 23-24; XII, 79-80, 83, 84, 87, 367....

⁶³P. Deffrennes, *art. cit.* (1932), p. 182.

Firmly and with perseverance, for such is his faith and experience, Vincent de Paul leads us along the path that can bring us to discover the active presence of God in history. Throughout his journey towards God, he perceives that an “incomprehensible” and hidden God is concerned, One Who is sovereign and independent, transcendent and concrete, faithful, surprising, involved in history. To reach this true and living God, Vincent de Paul joins a tender, compassionate, docile love with a desire for annihilation.⁶⁴

He had heard from Pierre de Bérulle and read in the *Rule of Perfection* of Benedict of Canfield:⁶⁵ “We must first consider God and not ourselves, and not act through this consideration and seeking of ourselves, but through the pure consideration of God.”⁶⁶ He will take up this theme unceasingly and furnish multiple variations of it.⁶⁷ It is from God that we succeed in knowing ourselves and recognizing that “we are His and not our own.”⁶⁸ His goal is to make us aware of our initial, radical dependence with regard to God, to bind us and unite us to Him both in the intrinsic nature of our soul and in our action.

Notwithstanding the rootedness of this Berullian and Canfieldian axiom in his soul, Vincent de Paul, unlike his spiritual master and most of his contemporaries, calmly

⁶⁴Cf. S.V. XI, 48, 77; XII, 108-109; XI, 40-41; XII, 261-265, 271.

⁶⁵Cf. Depuy, *Bérulle. Une spiritualité de l'adoration*, Paris, 1964, pp. 49-57.

⁶⁶P. de Bérulle, *Opuscules de Piété*, 182, ed. Migne, col. 1245.

⁶⁷“I ask God two or three times a day to reduce us to nothing if we are not useful for His glory. What! Gentlemen, would we want to be in the world without pleasing God and without procuring Him His greatest glory!” (S.V. XI, 2). “We must first consider the glory of God, after that the interest of the Company” (S.V. XIII, 629). “Let us seek the glory of God; He will take care of our affairs” (S.V. II, 263; cf. S.V. III, 40; VII, 478; XII, 138-139, 1435, 146-147). “Let us take care of God’s affairs; He will take care of ours” (S.V. XII, 139, 145; cf. S.V. III, 151-152; VII, 348; II, 465; IV, 115-116).

⁶⁸S.V. XII, 93.

repeats that God acts within history and not on its fringe or outside it. "The adorable" and "mysterious" Will of God,⁶⁹ therefore, reveals itself for him in time. It is day by day that he seeks to discover and to accomplish the Will of God tenaciously and thoughtfully.

While the relationship between God and man reveals for him the "nothingness" of the creature before God,⁷⁰ it also reveals that man, "created in the image and likeness of God," must, within the autonomy of his initiatives, his conscience, and his will, accomplish the designs of God.⁷¹

In the language of Vincent de Paul, the active presence of God in man and in the world is expressed through the formulas of the "mysterious Providence of God," of the "will and non-will of God," of "not running ahead of Providence," but of "following it step by step."⁷² And man's action, by reason of the Divine power which is in him, is defined through the expressions "act in the name of God," "work in Him and through Him," "let God act in us and with us."⁷³ What he intends is to discover the Will of God in reality, which is harsh and demanding, and then unite himself to that Will. Once he has succeeded in discerning it, he gives himself to God completely and annihilates himself before Him in order to further as perfectly and thoroughly as possible the designs of that Divine Will. Only then does the laborious existence of Vincent de Paul reveal the creative dynamism of God's spirit living in the Church and in the world.

⁶⁹Cf. S.V. XI, 374-375, 415.

⁷⁰Cf. S.V. XII, 207; X, 136; XII, 114, 457; XIII, 36, 146.

⁷¹Cf. S.V. IX, 483-498.

⁷²Cf. S.V. I, 26, 37, 39, 40, 62, 68, 87, 128, 150, 173; II, 4, 137, 2087, 276, 419, 428, 453, 456, 466, 472-473; III, 188-189; IV, 122-123, 347-348; XI, 45-48....

⁷³S.V. XI, 343; XII, 154, 179; V, 484; VIII, 231.

2. WITHIN THE DYNAMISM OF THE SPIRIT OF JESUS CHRIST

The principle of the *imitation* of Christ is inscribed at the very heart of the Incarnation in the living flesh of Jesus, "source of love humiliated."⁷⁴ We must enter this movement in order to understand how God's Will has been fully accomplished by the Son of God through His teaching, His life, and His death (cf. Jn. 4:34; 6:16-17, 38; 10:17-18; 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1).

Once Vincent de Paul entered this movement of the Incarnation, his spirit was mobilized, dynamized by two great preoccupations: to live in Christ,⁷⁵ to put on his spirit,⁷⁶ "to act in Him and through Him,"⁷⁷ and to adapt his life and activity as closely as possible to the designs of God's Will:

"We know that our works are worthless if they are not living and animated by God's Will. This is the advice of the Gospel, which causes us to do everything for the sake of pleasing Him. We must greatly praise His Infinite Majesty for the grace He has given to the Company of undertaking this all holy and ever sanctifying practice (of the Will of God). Yes, from the beginning, we have all desired to enter into this way of the perfect, which is to honor Our Lord in all our works."⁷⁸

The Founder of the Congregation of the Mission (1625) and of the Daughters of Charity (1633) declares that Christ has taught us by His actions and His words. Now, we must notice that what he insists upon is not just any word, not just any episode of the Gospel, but the person of Christ. This living person is a rule which molds

⁷⁴S.V. XII, 264; cf. S.V. XI, 77, 212; XII, 73, 75, 114....

⁷⁵Cf. S.V. VI, 563; VIII, 15; I, 295; VIII, 149, 178; V, 584; L. Abelly, *op. cit.*, I, p. 78.

⁷⁶Cf. S.V. XII, 107, 108-109; XI, 343-344.

⁷⁷S.V. XII, 154; cf. S.V. XII, 212; XI, 343-344, 74; IV, 81; V, 484; VIII, 231.

⁷⁸S.V. XII, 154.

and enlightens: “Our Lord is the rule of the Mission,” states Vincent de Paul.⁷⁹

In order to participate in the life of God, to be united to Him, and to continue the mission of Jesus, it would be absurd to imitate literally what Christ said or what He did. We must “enter into His spirit in order to enter into His operations.”⁸⁰ This Christ, what “has He done during His life, what example has He given us?”⁸¹ The Vincentian Christ has no other desire than the accomplishment of the Father’s Will:

“It was His practice to do always the Will of His Father in everything, and that is why He said He had come down to earth not to do His own Will, but that of His Father. O Savior!... You come to the world only to do the Will of Him Who sent You. You know, my brothers, to what extent this sacred attachment has hold of the heart of Our Lord. ‘My food,’ He said, ‘is to do the Will of Him Who sent Me’ (Jn. 4:34); that which nourishes Me, delights Me, strengthens Me is to do the Will of My Father.”⁸²

Now, this Will, as we have already noted, is a will to render service to man.⁸³

Within the same line of thought and inspiration, but in another mode of expression, Vincent de Paul orients the imitation of Jesus around the “putting on of Christ.”⁸⁴

⁷⁹S.V. XII, 130.

⁸⁰S.V. XII, 179; XI, 53.

⁸¹S.V. XII, 426.

⁸²S.V. XII, 154-155.

⁸³Cf. S.V. XII, 264-265, 262-263, 127, 113; XI, 313, 74, 23-24; XII, 3-4, 4-5; XI, 392-393; III, 392; XII, 79-80, 81, 87; IX, 244-246, 324-325, 59-60, 119, 592-593.

⁸⁴“We must put on the spirit of Jesus Christ. O Savior! O Gentlemen! there you have a grand undertaking, to put on the spirit of Jesus Christ! This means that in order to become perfect and to assist people effectively, to be of good use to ecclesiastics, we must labor to imitate the perfection of Jesus Christ and strive to attain it. It also means that of ourselves we can do nothing. We must be filled and animated by this spirit of Jesus Christ!” S.V. XII, 107-108.

“Our Lord had two great virtues,” he specifies when he wishes to characterize the spirit of Jesus, “*religion* towards His Father, *charity* towards men.”⁸⁵ Inspired and guided by the Gospel of Saint John, Vincent presents us a theology of the Incarnate Word. Let us allow him to speak:

“What is the spirit of Our Lord? It is a spirit of perfect charity, filled with a marvelous esteem for the Divinity and with an infinite desire to honor Him worthily. It is a knowledge of the greatness of His Father, which admires and extolls it unceasingly. He has so high an esteem of it that He paid Him homage with everything that was within His sacred person and which came forth from it; He attributed everything to Him; He was unwilling to say that His teaching was His own teaching, but referred it to His Father: My teaching is not Mine, but that of the Father Who sent Me (Jn. 7:16). Is there any higher *esteem* than that of the Son Who is equal to the Father and Who yet recognizes the Father as the author and sole principle of all the good that is in Him? And His *love*, what was it? Oh! what a love! O my Savior, what love did you not have for your Father? Could there be any greater... than to reduce yourself to nothing for Him? For, Saint Paul, speaking of the birth of the Son of God upon earth, says that He annihilated Himself. Could there be any greater witness of love than by dying out of love in the way that He died? O love of my Savior! O love! you were incomparably greater than the angels could understand nor will they ever understand! His humiliations were but love, His work but love, His sufferings but love, His prayers but love, and all His interior and exterior operations were but reiterated acts of love. His love gave Him a great contempt for the world, contempt for the spirit of the world, contempt for its goods, contempt for its pleasures, and contempt for its honors.

There you have a description of Our Lord’s spirit, with which we must be clothed; it is, in a word, having always a great esteem and a great love for God. Our Lord was so filled with it that He did nothing in His own name, or to satisfy Himself. *Quae placita sunt ei facio semper* [I do always those things that are pleasing to Him]: I do always the will of My Father; I do always the actions and works that are pleasing to Him.”⁸⁶

⁸⁵S.V. VI, 393.

⁸⁶S.V. XII, 108-109.

While Vincent de Paul affirms that “the spirit of Jesus Christ is lavished on all Christians,”⁸⁷ he does not forget to specify:

“All the baptized are clothed with His spirit (the spirit of Jesus Christ), but all do not carry out His works. Everyone must, therefore, strive to conform himself to Our Lord, to shun the maxims of the world, and to bind himself by affection and practice to the example of the Son of God, Who became man like us, in order that we might not only be saved, but saviors like Him.”⁸⁸

In order to live and act like Christ, “we must often lift ourselves up to Him.” Then, only then, shall we be able “to know the height, the depth, and the breadth” “of practicing what the Son of God practiced,” that is, of accomplishing the Will of God “promptly, entirely, constantly, and lovingly.”⁸⁹ This “practice,” “which goes to God, which fills us with God,” becomes the “special profession” of Vincent de Paul.⁹⁰ It allows him to create within himself an open space in which his desire is expressed in prayer: “Let us beg Our Lord to grant us the grace to say like Him: My food is to do the Will of Him who sent Me. Let us give ourselves to God... to hunger and thirst for this justice.”⁹¹ Through this prayer, the fundamental will of Vincent de Paul is expressed:

“Let us think about it; let us make it clear; let us inflame our will to say and to accomplish these divine words of Jesus Christ: ‘My meat is to do His Will and to complete His work’ (Jn. 4:34). That was your pleasure, Savior of the world... to do the Will of

⁸⁷S.V. XII, 108.

⁸⁸S.V. XII, 113; cf. S.V. XII, 127, 262.

⁸⁹S.V. XII, 155.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹S.V. XII, 164.

Your Father. We are Your children, who throw ourselves into Your arms to imitate Your practices....O Lord, if You be pleased to give this spirit to the Company, if it labors to make itself ever more pleasing in Your sight, You will fill it with ardor to become like to You; and this affection already makes it live with Your life, in such a way that each one can say with Saint Paul: 'I live, now not I, Christ lives truly in me' (Gal. 2:20).... For we no longer live with human life, but we live with a divine life, and we shall live with it, if our hearts are filled with the intention of doing the Will of God and our actions accompanied by that same desire."⁹²

This life in Christ causes God "to reside peacefully and completely" in man and leads him to "give" himself totally to God, to devote himself to obedience to the Father,⁹³ and to seek His glory, His kingdom, and His justice.⁹⁴ At the same time, "the Holy Spirit... gives him the same inclinations and dispositions that Jesus Christ had on earth, and they cause him to act in the same way."⁹⁵ Once inserted into this movement of life, man "will be worthy to be in the school" of Christ. There he will learn three maxims capable of enlightening his thought and orienting his activity: "to reduce himself to nothing before God" in order to live the divine life; to have a never-ending desire to accomplish the Will of God by pursuing in time unceasing creation; and to consume himself in the gift made to the Father, so that everything may be consumed by Christ in God:

"To consume oneself for God, to have neither goods nor strength except to consume them for God, that is what Our Lord Himself did, He Who consumed Himself out of love for His Father."⁹⁶

⁹²S.V. XII, 164-165.

⁹³Cf. S.V. XII, 134.

⁹⁴Cf. S.V. XII, 144-145.

⁹⁵S.V. XII, 108; cf. S.V. XII, 113, 134, 214.

⁹⁶S.V. XIII, 179; cf. S.V. XI, 48; XII, 108-109, 112-113; IX, 483-498.

Through the “putting on of the spirit of Our Lord,” Vincent seeks to be in “continual communion” with Christ,⁹⁷ in order to have, like Him, but one and the same “will and non-will” with God and to enter “into a unity of spirit with Him.” It is in maintaining his union with the spirit of Jesus that Vincent de Paul has the best opportunity to unite himself to God and to continue the mission of Christ.

The reading of Saint John’s Gospel thus causes Vincent de Paul to discover that the existence of Jesus is *love* and *gift*. The reading of Saint Luke’s Gospel allows him to complete this image of the Son of God with that of the poor Christ, sent by the Father to evangelize the poor.⁹⁸

Firmly and peacefully the Founder of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity declares: “Perfection does not consist in ecstasies, but in doing well the Will of God.”⁹⁹ And, to define his thought more accurately, he adds:

“The most perfect man will be the one whose will is most conformed to that of God. Perfection consists in so uniting our will to God’s, that His and ours are, strictly speaking, but one and the same will and non-will; and he who most excels on this point will be the most perfect.”¹⁰⁰

To attain this union, man must make his own the desire of Christ:

“Our Lord... desires us to carry out unceasingly the holy and

⁹⁷“Our Lord is a continual communion for those who are united to what He wills and does not will”: S.V. I, 233.

⁹⁸Cf. Lk. 4:18-19; S.V. XII, 3, 4, 5, 79-80, 81, 84, 87....

⁹⁹S.V. XI, 317.

¹⁰⁰S.V. XI, 318.

adorable Will of God... with as much perfection as we possibly can." He Himself gives us the example; He came here below to earth for no other reason than to do the Will of God His Father by accomplishing the work of our redemption; and in that consisted His delight, doing the Will of God His Father."¹⁰¹

The conclusion becomes apparent and the desire of Vincent de Paul is expressed:

"If we wish, we can always do the Will of God. Oh! what a happiness, what a happiness to do always and in all things the Will of God! Is that not doing what the Son of God came on earth to do?... The Son of God came to evangelize the poor, and we, are we not sent for the same purpose? Yes, the Missionaries are sent to evangelize the poor. Oh! what a happiness to do on earth the same things that Our Lord did."¹⁰²

Inserted in the movement of the Incarnation, clothed with the spirit of Jesus, and united to His Will, Vincent de Paul unites his will to that of the Father. At this price, it will be possible for him to seek truly the Kingdom of God, and to accomplish His Will by continuing the mission of Christ, Evangelist of the poor.

3. DISCERNMENT OF THE WILL OF GOD

Vincent de Paul does not want to be "like those workers of iniquity who build on sand and perish miserably."¹⁰³ He does not belong either to "those who expect to sail against the wind and the tide, guided by their own reason" and who "fail miserably."¹⁰⁴ What he intends each day is to live an evangelical exigency within the uncertain conditions of history. Now, "the spirit of the

¹⁰¹S.V. XI, 313.

¹⁰²S.V. XI, 315.

¹⁰³S.V. XII, 126.

¹⁰⁴S.V. XII, 126; cf. S.V. XII, 178-179.

Gospel is a spirit of obedience... to the Will of God."¹⁰⁵ And the life of Christ, the key to the reading of the Gospel, "was but a tissue of obedience"¹⁰⁶ to the Father's Will. Just as Vincent de Paul prolongs and transposes "the spirit of God into the spirit of Jesus,"¹⁰⁷ he reduces and makes the imitation of Christ lead to an intimate communion with the Divine Will.

To understand Vincent de Paul's teaching on conformity to the Will of God, we must first analyze his conference of March 7, 1659 to the Missionaries. After a rapid reference to the thought of Francis de Sales¹⁰⁸ and to that of Pierre de Bérulle,¹⁰⁹ he adopts, while adapting it within another spiritual climate, the teaching of the *Rule of Perfection* by Benedict of Canfield. This work, which had become the bedside reading of the Spirituals of the seventeenth century, Vincent de Paul read in company of "good Monsieur Duval" and he himself personally meditated on and actually made use of it for more than thirty years.¹¹⁰ His purpose, when he sets forth for his disciples how "the practice of doing the Will of God" contains all the virtues, confines itself neither to exalting the excellence and usefulness of this teaching, nor even to transmitting a "piece of knowledge." Through this exposition, he seeks to communicate his interior

¹⁰⁵S.V. XII, 350.

¹⁰⁶S.V. XII, 426.

¹⁰⁷Cf. S.V. XII, 108-109.

¹⁰⁸"It is to be noted that there are a variety of exercises suggested by the masters of the spiritual life, which they practiced in a variety of ways. Some proposed for themselves *indifference* in everything and thought that perfection consisted in neither desiring anything nor rejecting anything that God sends.... Oh! holy exercise! to want what God wills in general and nothing in particular": S.V. XII, 152.

¹⁰⁹"Others proposed to themselves, with purity of intention, to behold God in the things that happen so as to do and suffer them in his sight. That is very astute.": S.V. XII, 152.

¹¹⁰Cf. S.V. I, 26 (October 30, 1626); S.V. XII, 150-167 (March 7, 1659).

experience:

“To be brief, the exercise of always doing the Will of God is more excellent than all that, for it includes indifference and purity of intention and all the other methods practiced and advised; and if there be any other practice which leads to perfection, it is found preeminently therein.”¹¹¹

The outline of this conference corresponds in its basic structure to the first thirteen chapters of the *Rule of Perfection*; and several expressions from this *Rule*, used by Vincent de Paul, are from the master Capuchin, who was a convert from English Puritanism. Like him, Vincent de Paul admits “five methods” or systems for transmitting the Will of God and, consequently, for being able to discern and accomplish it.¹¹² However, Vincent de Paul modifies and transforms the teaching of his master, Benedict of Canfield. He states, in particular, his reticence with regard to interior “inspirations.”¹¹³ But he does not reject, because of this, that source of transmitting the Will of God and he urges both his Missionaries and Louise de Marillac to act according to their inspirations: “Do what

¹¹¹S.V. XII, 152; cf. B. of Canfield, *Régle, opt. cit.*, First Part, chaps. 1 and 2, f. 1-33.

¹¹²Cf. S.V. XII, 157-160; B. of Canfield, *Régle, op. cit.*, First Part, chap. 5: “Of the exterior Will of God,” f. 37-41; chap. 6: “Rules for knowing and practicing this Will of God in all things,” f. 41 v^o-50.

¹¹³“There is a fourth way of knowing God’s Will, that of inspirations; for He often casts light on the understanding and moves the heart in order to inspire the will; but *the grain of salt* is needed, so that we be not deceived.... Among the multitude of thoughts and feelings that come to us, there are some that are good in appearance, but which, nevertheless, do not come from God and are no longer according to His taste; we must, therefore, examine them carefully, even have recourse to God, asking Him how that can be done, while we consider the motives, the end, and the means to see whether everything is seasoned according to His good pleasure; we must lay them before wise men and get advice from those who have care of us....”: S.V. XII, 159-160.

Our Lord inspires you to do.”¹¹⁴ There are, no doubt, precautions to be taken, a sort of technique to test the inspirations, but they do exist and they are not simply overexcitement of the imagination.¹¹⁵ He also gives little credit to the objective requests of natural reason.¹¹⁶ One fact is imperative and Vincent de Paul repeats it to us incessantly: Only “Christian prudence,” which enlightens human intelligence and orients the spirit of man, will furnish the latter with the light which will allow him to discern the “good pleasure of God” and to avoid falling into illusion: “Human reasoning... never does it attain the truth, never does it attain God, never the divine motives, never.”¹¹⁷ After attempting to test its strengths, he confesses to us:

“To judge things well and to use prudence well, we must form our judgment on Christian maxims of the worldly.... In order to use our mind and reason well, we must make it our inviolable rule to judge in everything as Our Lord has judged; but I say always and in all things.... That is a rule of paramount importance.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴“What I desire for you most particularly,” he said to a Sister leaving for a mission, “is *the accomplishment of God’s Will*, which does not consist only in following what our superiors prescribe for us... but in responding to *all the interior impulses* sent to us by God”: S.V. XIII, 615.

¹¹⁵Cf. S.V. XII, 340-355, conference to the Missionaries concerning true inspirations and illusions (October 17, 1659).

¹¹⁶“A fifth way of knowing and accomplishing it (the Will of God) is to consider and to do reasonable things. Something comes to mind which is in conformity with reason. It is, therefore, according to God’s Will, which is never contrary to reason, and we must do it, according to the mind of the Church, which has us ask this grace of God by this prayer: ‘Grant, Lord, that we may always have in mind that which is reasonable and that we may carry it out!’ So that, according to this prayer, doing a thing which seems reasonable is doing the Will of God. That is always understood with *the grain of salt of Christian prudence*...”: S.V. XII, 160.

¹¹⁷S.V. XII, 178.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

Finally, we must let ourselves be guided by Christian prudence, which “consists in judging and acting as eternal Wisdom has judged and operated,”¹¹⁹ so that inspirations and natural reason become sources which transmit the Will of God reliably and which are capable of discerning and accomplishing it.

While Vincent de Paul does not adopt the teaching of Benedict of Canfield in its entirety, he does go so far as to borrow the text of his *Rule*. We have proof of this when he classifies the expressions of the Divine Will into three categories which solicit from man three criteria:

—*Things commanded and forbidden. Criterion: obedience.* The discernment and the accomplishment of the Will of God and, therefore, union with that Will of God are realized “by duly carrying out the things that we are commanded to do and by carefully shunning those which are forbidden to us, and by doing so each time it appears to us that such a commandment or such a prohibition comes from God, from the Church, from our superiors, from our rules and constitutions.”

—*Indifferent things, pleasant or unpleasant. Criterion: mortification.* “Among the indifferent things which present themselves to be done, choosing those which are repugnant to nature rather than those which give it satisfaction; unless those which are pleasing to it are necessary, for then we must prefer them to the others, considering them, nevertheless, not from the aspect of their delighting the senses, but only from the aspect of their being more pleasing to God.”

—*Indifferent things, neither pleasant nor unpleasant, and unexpected things. Criterion: submission to Providence.* “If several things indifferent by their

¹¹⁹S.V. XII, 179; cf. S.V. VI, 51-53.

nature and equally pleasant or unpleasant present themselves to be done at the same time, then it is proper to proceed indifferently to that which one wishes, as coming from Divine Providence. And with regard to things that happen to us unexpectedly, such as afflictions or consolations, either corporal or spiritual, it is by receiving them all with evenness of spirit, as coming forth from the paternal hand of Our Lord.”

Vincent de Paul specifies the motive which must animate from the interior all human activity which realizes union with God:

“Doing everything from the motive that it is God’s good pleasure and for the purpose of imitating therein, as far as is possible for us, Our Lord Jesus Christ, Who always did the same things and for the same end, as He Himself gives testimony: ‘I do always,’ He says, ‘the things that are according to the Will of my Father’.”¹²⁰

4. NECESSITY AND EVENTS ARE THE MOST INDISPUTABLE SIGNS OF THE DIVINE WILL

The missionary vocation is a continuation of the mission of Jesus and that mission is a revelation of the active love of the Father.¹²¹ Christ, sent by the Father, realizes His mission by the faithful accomplishment of His Father’s Will. This fidelity to the Sender, to His mission, glorifies the Father, reveals the active love of God, and saves man by creating a community and a life of love.

Those who seek to discern and accomplish the Will of God are forewarned by Vincent de Paul of a permanent

¹²⁰S. V. XII, 150; cf. S. V. XII, 150-155, especially 157-162; S. V. XI, 317, 318-320, 45-46, 46-47, 47-48; B. of Canfield, *Régle, op. cit.*, First Part, chap. 6, f. 42-43, 45, 47.

¹²¹Cf. S. V. XI, 202; XII, 87; V, 68; IX, 59-60, 244-246, 324-325, 592-593; X, 667-668; XII, 107-108, 73-83, 371; VII, 382; VIII, 162; IX, 115, 122, 124, 126, 141, 222-223.

temptation and of the familiar demons that bring it on: *withdrawal into oneself* before the newness of each day.¹²²

While we need listen only to God and obey Him diligently, we must also be aware that God speaks in many ways. Pascal states admirably: "If God were to give us masters from His own hand, oh! how willingly we would obey them. Necessity and events are infallibly from Him."¹²³ For Vincent de Paul, who professes the "particular devotion of following the adorable Providence of God,"¹²⁴ necessity and events are the most indisputable signs of the Divine Will.

What were then, for Vincent de Paul, the inspiring events? Where did he read the Will of God? Where did he find need, that infallible master which God gave to all from His own hand? On what did Vincent de Paul rely in order to realize what others could not conceive or did not believe themselves capable of undertaking? If we put ourselves in his place and adopt his vision of the world, we shall see that God expressed Himself in two "needs" brought about by events and people: the *material misery* and the *spiritual misery* that reigned in the springtime of the Great Century.

Vincent de Paul knew by faith and by experience that we must be attentive to the Providence of God which is manifested in the temporary, the unforeseen, and the unforeseeable. He peacefully asserts: "We must submit to

¹²²Vincent de Paul spurs on and points out the way for "people who have only a small periphery, who limit their view and their designs to a certain circumference within which they enclose themselves as in a point; they do not want to come out of it; and if they are shown something beyond it and they approach to consider it, they immediately return to their center, like snails into their shells": S.V. XII, 92-93; cf. S.V. XII, 89-91.

¹²³B. Pascal, *Pensées*, edit. Laf. 919.

¹²⁴S.V. II, 208.

God in events.”¹²⁵ Necessity and events become for him, unlike his spiritual masters and the majority of his contemporaries, a source of transmitting the Will of God. Every change questions man, asking of him an attitude and a response. Vincent de Paul discovers himself and is reassured when he recalls the trials that transformed and molded him. While he rejects and fears the changes accounted for by the instability of nature and fostered by the malice of sin, he attaches himself irrevocably to everything that calls into play the Will of God and the salvation of man. Submission to God in events, obedience to necessity, therein lies truly the absolute sign that one is within the spirit of Jesus. In this sense, he confesses to the Missionaries:

“Everyone in the world thinks that this Company is from God, because they see that it runs to the most pressing and most neglected needs.”¹²⁶

This submission requires the mobilization of man’s entire being so that he might be able to respond within events and through “needs” to the multiple forms of God’s unique love. In the face of the opposition from Bérulle¹²⁷ and from the Congregation of the Propaganda to the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission,¹²⁸ in the face of Mazarin’s opposition to Vincent de Paul’s perspectives and way of acting,¹²⁹ in the face of Saint-Cyran’s reproaches with regard to the organization of the

¹²⁵S.V. X, 532; cf. S.V. I, 26, 39, 62, 82, 291; II, 36, 208, 456; IV, 476.

¹²⁶S.V. XII, 90.

¹²⁷Cf. J. Dagens, *Correspondance de Pierre de Bérulle*, Paris-Louvain, 1937-1939, 3 vols., vol. III, pp. 434-435.

¹²⁸Cf. S.V. XIII, 225.

¹²⁹Cf. S.V. XIII, 136-138; L. Robineau, *Remarques sur les actions et les paroles de feu Monsieur Vincent*, ms., p. 60; L. Abelly, *op. cit.*, I, p. 181.

Congregation of the Mission and popular missions,¹³⁰ Vincent de Paul prays, reflects, asks advice of competent people.¹³¹ This triple movement prevents him from becoming wrapped up in himself and succeeds in creating within him a climate in which, “breathing only God,”¹³² he “aspires only to God,”¹³³ that is, to “seeking the Kingdom of God and His justice,” the Will of God.

Thus, events, despite the ambiguity which characterizes them,¹³⁴ are the “places” in which Vincent de Paul succeeds in discerning the Will of God. Adopting a position in these conditions is for him one of the ways, among others, of announcing the Gospel, of rendering God’s Will intelligible, of judging his faith in the face of the urgency of a concrete, human situation. This commitment and reflection lead him to live the demands of God’s Will within the concrete conditions of the living, impassioned, tortured history of his time.

5. *THE PRACTICE OF THE WILL OF GOD* *IN THE ACTION OF MAN*

“The practice of the Will of God,” affirms Vincent de Paul, “is all holy and ever sanctifying,”¹³⁵ for it sums up the whole of spiritual life and unites to God. Yet, how does one discern this “Will of God which is the soul of the Company and one of the practices it must hold most deeply in its heart... a means of perfection which is very

¹³⁰Cf. S.V. XIII, 106-107, 116-117, 96, 98.

¹³¹Cf. S.V. XII, 159.

¹³²Cf. S.V. XII, 133.

¹³³S.V. XII, 139.

¹³⁴Ibid.

¹³⁵Cf. the affair concerning Cardinal de Retz when he arrives in Rome while fleeing from Mazrin and is received into the house of the Missionaries. To know Vincent de Paul’s stance concerning this event, cf. S.V. XI, 172-173; V, 269-272; V, 336; VI, 20-21.

easy, excellent, and infallible, and which makes our actions no longer human actions... but actions of God, since they are done in Him and through Him?"¹³⁶

This "practice" is the exercise preferred by Vincent de Paul to bring himself into conformity—to identify himself in so far as it is possible for man—with the "will and non-will of God." This attitude dominates and orders his actions explicitly and directly. For him it is a case of uniting the will of man to that of God in action. Father Deffrennes does not hesitate to qualify this position of "integral voluntarism."¹³⁷ It comprises a conformity to the Divine Will which is not intermittent and transitory, but constant and habitual. Particular actions, concrete expressions of this conformity to the Divine plan draw their value and meaning from the fact that they are realized by those whose will is habitually conformed to God's and animated with His spirit:¹³⁸ "I beg Our Lord," writes Vincent de Paul to Philippe Le Vacher on December 6, 1658, "to grant you the grace to consider those matters as they are in God, and not as they appear outside of Him, because otherwise we could be deceived and act differently than He wishes."¹³⁹ This rule of "considering matters as they are in God" demands on the part of man the courage to discover the reality and the fidelity to the Divine plan which are expressed in them.

One's first care will be, therefore, "to seek first" the Kingdom of God and His justice.¹⁴⁰ The living articulation

¹³⁶S.V. XII, 183; cf. S.V. XII, 152, 154; II, 36; XII, 300.

¹³⁷P. Deffrennes, *art. cit.*, p. 171.

¹³⁸Cf. S.V. XII, 153-154, 156.

¹³⁹S.V. VII, 388.

¹⁴⁰"Seek—that is only a word, but it seems to me that it says a great deal; it means that we apply ourselves in such a way that we always aspire to what we are commanded, that we work unceasingly for the Kingdom of God and do not remain in a fixed and indolent state, and that we pay attention to our interior so as to order

that he establishes between the Kingdom of God¹⁴¹ and the Will of God¹⁴² is one of the original characteristics of Vincent de Paul's spirituality. The junction which this articulation brings about with precision and dynamism is action. By reason of this profound and creative conviction, he responds to an objection which he himself raises:

“But, Sir, there are so many things to be done, so many duties at home, so many employments in the town, in the fields; work everywhere; must we leave everything in order to think only of God? No, but we must sanctify those occupations by seeking God in them and we must do them in order to find Him there rather than to see them done. Our Lord wishes that, before anything else, we seek His glory, His kingdom, and His justice.”¹⁴³

This “lapidary formula” is the watchword of a mystic of action. Vincent de Paul finds God and unites himself to Him in concrete, exterior action, because he has one and the “same will and non-will with Him.”¹⁴⁴ And those who are united to His will and non-will are in communion with Him: “Our Lord is a continual communion for those who are united to what He wills and does not will.”¹⁴⁵ He seeks to unite himself to God, to maintain his soul in intimate contact with God, but in a direct way by submitting his entire being and his action to the spirit of God, to the Will of God.

Need we recall that Vincent de Paul excelled in the

it well, but not to the exterior so as to enjoy ourselves. Seeking indicates care; it indicates action...”: S.V. XII, 131.

¹⁴¹Cf. S.V. XII, 150-165.

¹⁴²Cf. S.V. XII, 132-150.

¹⁴³S.V. XII, 132.

¹⁴⁴S.V. XI, 318; I, 62....

¹⁴⁵S.V. I, 233.

practice of this conformity of his will with the Will of God? “One can say that this conformity of his will with God’s Will was the proper and principal and, as it were, the general virtue of this holy man, which spread its influence over all the others. It was, as it were, the mainspring which put into action all the faculties of his soul and all the organs of his body. It was the prime mover of all his exercises of piety, of all his holy practices, and, in general, of all his actions.”¹⁴⁶

Conclusion

The teaching of Vincent de Paul on the conformity of man’s will to God’s places in the center a motive that can be called theocentric. Moreover, this “practice of the Will of God” was for him a participation in “the spirit of Jesus.” That which sustains this “exercise” is that he is animated by a principle common to Christ and to the Christian, namely, “the spirit of God.” To conform himself “actively” and “passively”¹⁴⁷ to the “will and non-will” of God is to share in and practice this spirit of God.¹⁴⁸

This teaching of Vincent de Paul can very well pass unperceived in its originality. “The practice of God’s Will” which “goes to God,” which “fills us with God... embraces every good thing and passes over those which are evil.... It is that sanctifying grace which renders the action and the person pleasing to God.... It is, therefore, the grace we need to ask for, possess, and put into practice; otherwise, everything is lost....”¹⁴⁹ Vincent de Paul is determined to adhere to this, for what he intends during

¹⁴⁶L. Abelly, *op. cit.*, III, p. 32.

¹⁴⁷Cf. S.V. XII, 160-161; I, 39, 62, 82, 291; II, 36; IV, 476; VII, 489; XI, 45-46, 46-47, 47-48.

¹⁴⁸Cf. S.V. XII, 108-109, 112-113, 154-156, 157....

¹⁴⁹S.V. XII, 155-156.

his life is to unite himself more profoundly and more intimately each day to the adorable Providence of God, but in the real, in the concrete, in action.

Now we can better understand Vincent de Paul when he declares: "Perfection does not consist in ecstasies, but in doing the Will of God well."¹⁵⁰ "What is holiness? It is a cutting oneself off from and a shunning of the things of earth, and at the same time an affection for God and union with the Divine Will."¹⁵¹ It is within this spiritual atmosphere that another Vincentian requirement comes to be revealed: "we must... detach ourselves from all that is not God and be united to our neighbor by charity in order to be united to God Himself through Jesus Christ."¹⁵² To be "detached" from everything in order to allow access to God in man is a common reference to all the spiritual masters. Nothing new, therefore, on the part of Vincent de Paul. The Vincentian originality is found in this: detachment, annihilation itself, becomes for him a requirement of charity by reason of the misery in which "others" find themselves, and a means of being united to them and to God. Whence comes his specificity and originality: detachment, the concrete expression of the requirements of charity, establishes man in union with other men and with God through Jesus Christ.

The experience and teaching of Vincent de Paul on the Will of God establish and confirm a triple reality:

—Psychologically speaking, the discernment of the Will of God enlightens, calms, frees, and dynamizes the spirit of man.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰S.V. XI, 317; cf. S.V. XII, 152, 183, 300.

¹⁵¹S.V. XII, 300.

¹⁵²S.V. XII, 127.

¹⁵³Cf. S.V. I, 26, 37, 39, 40, 68, 77, 86, 128, 150; II, 208, 472-473; IV, 122-123, 340; XI, 527, 645; XII, 235, 240, 242.

—Theologically speaking, the accomplishment of God's Will transforms human action into divine action and it becomes lasting for time and for eternity.¹⁵⁴

—Sociologically speaking, the accomplishment of "God's good pleasure," of the designs of God, transforms social reality into the realization of the Kingdom of God and of his justice in favor of men and, especially, of the poorest of those men.¹⁵⁵

While Vincent de Paul was called to "consume himself for God" and not to "lose himself in God," to "annihilate himself *before* God" and not to "annihilate himself *in* God," unlike his spiritual masters, he also knew that God had placed him before a task to be accomplished, a task from which he could not run away under pretext of dying of starvation and not of ecstasy in God.



¹⁵⁴Cf. S.V. XII, 154, 132, 183, 214-215; XI, 343, 344, 41; XII, 136; II, 208, 453, 456, 466; III, 188-189; IV, 122-123, 347-349.

¹⁵⁵Cf. S.V. XII, 131-132, 133, 136, 138, 139, 144, 145-146, 147, 153-155, 156-157, 162, 164, 165; XI, 32; XII, 3-4, 4-5, 79, 84, 87, 90.

The works of God are done by degrees, both in their beginnings and through the course of their progress. It is not expedient to wish to accomplish everything suddenly and at once, and to think that everything is lost unless everyone is eager to cooperate with the little goodwill that we have. What then should be done? We should proceed gently, praying earnestly to God, and acting in concord.

St. Vincent de Paul

I entreat the goodness of God to dispose your souls to receive profitably the graces of the Holy Spirit so that, burning with the fire of His holy Love, you may be perfected in that Love which will make you cherish the most holy Will of God.

St. Louise de Marillac

Let your chief study be to acquaint yourself with God because there is nothing greater than God and because it is the only knowledge which can fill the heart with a peace and joy which nothing can disturb.

Mother Seton

Neither philosophy, nor theology, nor all the reasoning in the world will have any effect on souls. It is necessary that Jesus Christ should act with us, and we with Him. We must speak as He spoke and be in union with His spirit as He was united with God His Father. He preached only the doctrine which God His Father had taught him.

St. Vincent de Paul