

1994

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Recommended Citation

Guyon, Gerard D. and Poole, Stafford C.M. (1994) "Saint Vincent de Paul and the Internment of Minors in Seventeenth-Century France," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol15/iss2/5>

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Saint Vincent de Paul and the Internment of Minors in Seventeenth-Century France

BY

GÉRARD D. GUYON¹

TRANSLATED

BY

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Among the numerous institutions created for the internment of minors, a special mention should be made of the undertaking of Saint Vincent de Paul, one that was original for the seventeenth century.² Obviously it must be seen in its relationship to the wider phenomenon of the penal and social perspective that underlay the entire epoch.³ Similarly it has to be viewed in terms of the educational and moral philosophy of which the institutions of internment were at that time one of the principal instruments.⁴ It was based in a special way, however, on a very strong conviction: that it was by education of the poor from their earliest years that poverty, beggary, and vagabondage could best be combated in order to bring about a correction of behavior and to reduce the delinquency of minors.

¹This article is taken from *Revue d'Histoire de l'Église de France* 78 (1992):5-19, and is translated and published with the permission of the publisher.

²Bibliographical data on Saint Vincent de Paul. *Saint Vincent de Paul, Correspondances, entretiens, documents*, Pierre Coste, ed., 14 vols. (Paris: 1920/1925); A. Dodin, *Mission et charité*, (Paris: 1970) [Publication of about a hundred unpublished letters]; by the same author, *François de Sales et Vincent de Paul, les deux amis*, (Paris: 1984). ————*La légende et l'histoire: De Monsieur DePaul à Saint Vincent-de-Paul* (Paris: 1985). The hagiographical tradition is based on the works of Louis Abelly, *La vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu, Vincent de Paul* (Paris: 1664); Pierre Collet, *La vie de saint Vincent de Paul* (Nancy, 1748); M. Maynard, *Saint Vincent de Paul, sa vie, son temps, ses oeuvres, son influence* (Paris: 1860); L. Bougaud, *Histoire de saint Vincent de Paul* (Paris: 1889). For a more critical approach, both spiritual and doctrinal and sociological: J. M. Román, *San Vicente de Paul I. Biografía* (Madrid: 1981); H. Brémond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France*, 3 (new edition) (Paris: 1967), 199-228; *Vincent de Paul (1581-1660)* Luigi Mezzadri, ed. (Paris: 1985); José María Ibáñez, *Vicente de Paul y los pobres de su tiempo* (Salamanca: 1977); Igino Giordani, *San Vincenzo de Paoli, servo dei poveri* (Rome: 1981); *Actes du colloque international d'études vincentiennes* (Rome: 1983).

³J. P. Gutton, *La société et les pauvres en Europe* (Paris: 1974), 152. We will not go over again the great works on social and intellectual history and the history of spirituality by P. Chaunu, J. Delumeau, P. Goubert, Y. M. Bercé, J. Seguy, J. Ferté, F. Lebrun, D. Julia, J. Jacquart, C. Jones, E. Le Roy-Ladurie.

⁴P. Sérieux, "L'internement par ordre de justice des aliénés et correctionnaires sous l'Ancien Régime," in R. H. D. F. É. (1932):413, 462.

That is the way that Saint Vincent de Paul and those who imitated him thought, and it is what supported all the activity of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament. In a more general way, the place of the religious apostolate, the activity of the "petites écoles," and the role of the parish clergy, show clearly how complex were the attitudes toward disadvantaged children throughout the century.⁵

Minors in the General Context of Poverty

The wording of laws, which increase in number after 1612, viewed almost all poverty from a strongly repressive standpoint.⁶ It is equally possible, by analyzing the penal vocabulary, to see the lack of precision in distinguishing among vagabonds, beggars, and disreputable persons (especially thieves), with whom the poor were frequently equated. In addition to the special harshness toward beggary between 1685 and 1724,⁷ there persisted a mingling of the classical spiritual attitudes that flourished in the Middle Ages. In fact, on the one side, the texts show a growing concern for severity, for firmness, and the increase of enclosures, but together with these legal attitudes, there was always a great impulse toward generosity. In the face of hatred and especially of fear, the poor person still remained the privileged child of Christ who should be received with a maximum of feeling, affection, and human warmth.

In spite of everything it can be remarked that this "consecration" of the poor person almost always implied an inclusion within a parish territory. Even if it is the protector—the beggar is consecrated and helped within his parish—it deliberately excluded all those who are without a fixed residence and consequently the immense army of vagabonds.

The numerous establishments that at that time received foundlings or orphans have some characteristics quite similar to those of the

⁵J. Imbert, "L'assistance et les oeuvres," in *La France et les Français* (Paris: 1972), 400-38. "Marginalité, déviance, pauvreté en France, XIV-XIXe siècle," in *Cahiers des Annales de Normandie* 13 (1981):317. In addition, the older and classical works of L. Lallemand, *Histoire de la charité* (Paris: 1910-1912). By the same author, *Histoire des enfants abandonnés et délaissés* (Paris: 1885).

⁶See the ordinances on vagabondage in the seventeenth century, 30 March 1635 (Isambert, 16: 424), "All vagabonds are bound to take employment or leave Paris." 24 May 1639 (Isambert 16:509), "The provost of Paris and the Chatelet have final jurisdiction in cases concerning vagabonds." December 1660 (Isambert, 17: 389); ordinance of 1670 (18: 28); regulation of 25 July 1700 (20: 366). Ordinances on beggars: August 1612 (16: 28); January 1629 (16: 235); August 1661(18: 5); declaration of 13 April 1685 (19: 504); 12 October 1687(20: 21); 25 January 1687 (20: 22).

⁷N. Castan, *Justice et répression en Languedoc* (Paris: 1980), 1-80ff.

great institutions which today are defined as those of enclosure. This was the case with the hospices of the Enfants-Dieu and de la Trinité in Paris. That is not surprising if one reads again the address that Colbert sent in 1667 to the municipal magistrates of Auxerre.⁸ It is even possible to find a uniquely economic perspective in this philosophy of imprisonment. "In addition to the fact that abundance always proceeds from work, and want from sloth, your principal application must be to find the means of shutting up the poor and giving them an employment in order to earn their living. In this regard you will know that you are not to make any premature plans."

Nevertheless, the regulation of 20 April 1684 for the hospice of Paris shows again some hesitation in the royal legislation. It spoke of shutting up boys and girls for correction, but there was still a clear distinction among beggars, disreputable persons, and vagabonds. Still, changes came quickly, and in the following year, as in 1686, the able-bodied beggar, no matter what his age, was henceforth considered to be a vagabond.⁹ The Hospices Généraux then accepted some of those sentenced to but dispensed from the penalty of the galleys, especially young women, and who served a prison sentence. Among these were very many simple beggars who had been grouped with vagabonds.

The social perspective, then, finally carried the day, even in regard to minor children. Chamousset, in his *Mémoires politiques sur les enfants*,¹⁰ insisted on the fact that they must be useful to the state and that the more uncertain or unknown their origins, the more they could dedicate themselves to the tasks that society expected of them. There was nothing better, then, than foundlings or illegitimate children for the carrying out of "national functions." "By reason of their absence from the restraining bonds of the family . . . they have nothing to lose." Thus, death and danger would be indifferent to them and their employment in colonization, the militia, and the navy, would at the same time assure them an increasing socialization and would bring them a

⁸Quoted by J. P. Gutton, *La société et les pauvres*, 134.

⁹J. Depauw, "Pauvres, mendiants, valides ou vagabonds," in *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 21 (1974):407, 410. In contrast was the edict of 1656 which distinguished between the two classes.

¹⁰Cited in J. Donzelot, *La police des familles* (Paris: 1977), 16, 58, 59. One could compare from this point of view P. Legendre, *L'amour du censeur, essai sur l'ordre dogmatique* (Paris: 1974); Donnedieu de Vabres, M. Ancel, *Le problème de l'enfance délinquante* (Paris: 1947), 2:95. The canonical rule on illegitimate children, *Semper in dubiis benigniora preferenda sunt*. P. Ourliac, J. de Malafosse, *Histoire du droit privé* 3: *Le droit familial* (Paris: 1968), 198. Likewise P. Ourliac, J. L. Gazzaniga, *Histoire du droit privé* (L'évolution de l'humanité) (Paris: 1985), 261-62.

needed guardianship. Policing and social economy were thus joined together. It is true that above and beyond the pitfalls of public relief which would be emphasized by numerous authors,¹¹ the “shutting-up” seemed ineffective and better suited to sustaining poverty or even causing it to proliferate. But this poverty increased in exactly the same way as individual alms, which multiplied the number of indigents and gave rise to the artifice employed by the feigned poor who made use of numerous children (the famous *comprachicos*) prior to the interventions of Saint Vincent de Paul and developed the minors' habits of dependency. This finishing touch was necessary, then, and these concepts should be kept in mind in order better to understand what was profoundly original in the outlook of Saint Vincent de Paul. Starting with the commonly accepted idea that vagabonds, the poor, and their children were automatically suspect,¹² and always considering the monastic model¹³ and their total isolation as the determining factor (if not also excluding any other), Vincent de Paul elaborated a strategy that combined internal discipline and instruction in the faith. This was the absolute basis for the conversion of the whole person. It was the same as apprenticeship, which by the repetition and acquisition of reflex habits, permitted the molding of children, who had often been interned because of transgressions or disobedience.

Moreover, in contrast with his times, Saint Vincent's judgment on childhood was not marked by any profound and unyielding pessimism. Bossuet maintained that “the child lives the life of a beast,” or again Bérulle, “the state of childhood is the lowest and most abject after that of death.”¹⁴ Saint Vincent, however, was a realist, and he knew well that if the child sometimes showed a “despicable face,” it ought to be turned around and become the face of Christ. Hence his unique compassion toward the most disadvantaged, for example, the illegitimate. It was a question of rehabilitating them in spite of ancestral prejudices. In this overall view he admitted the weakness and even the foolishness of the child, who could be a blot on the age, but

¹¹Especially in the line of M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: 1975); *L'enfermement, Actes du colloque, nov. 1975, Amsterdam* (Travaux et mémoires de la maison Descartes, Amsterdam, no. 3) (Lille: 1981).

¹²In the seventeenth century, some authors expressed surprise that there was a bounty of ten livres for the head of a wolf, since a *vagabond child is more dangerous* for society. Quoted in M. Capul, *Internat et internement* (Paris: 1983), 2:407.

¹³See the *Réflexions sur les prisons des ordres religieux* of J. Mabillon, published in 1724 in the *Ouvrages posthumes*, Dom V. Thuillier, ed., 3:32-35.

¹⁴Quoted by Luigi Mezzadri, *Vincent de Paul*, 114-15.

it was simply a weakness inherent in the condition, and rehabilitation was always possible. According to Saint Vincent innocence could always be recovered. In this way we come up before the very base of his action. Sympathy and charity were linked together.

Despite this profound originality, Saint Vincent de Paul was also heir to the pedagogical teachings of the seventeenth century. He advocated a severe education, discipline, and moral decency. He was even in favor of humiliation. Finally and above all, manual labor had a special value for him, one that was doubly effective: redemption and *conversio morum* [change of behavior], but also the exercise of a trade, which guaranteed full maturity.¹⁵

All these viewpoints explain his hesitations about, not to say his repugnance toward, the internment of minors. If he believed that it was sometimes necessary, it was by way of experiment, and he did not wish to associate the Priests of the Mission with these practices, which had become frequent.¹⁶ First of all, his organization of “adoptive mothers” (Ladies and Daughters of Charity) rested essentially on a giving love, a freely given devotion, and even sacrifice. It was, then, far removed from the actions of his age.¹⁷ For him the question was not one of public order. It belonged entirely to individual salvation and if, for example, it was possible to find some similarities between his system of supervision and education and that of John Baptist de la Salle, his pedagogical options were different and very innovative in many respects.¹⁸

Still it is good to temper this totally “modern” paternalism a little. Saint Vincent de Paul was not the only one to be converted to an attitude that began by being radically different with regard to the responsibility and psychology of the child, and the educational approach that ought to be followed. From the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Church was the new conduit of a devotion to the child which was developed by the slant of the devotion to the Child

¹⁵A. Dupoux, “Sur les pas de Monsieur Vincent, 300 ans d’histoire parisienne de l’enfance abandonnée,” *Revue de l’Assistance Publique* 5 (1958):35. An opposing view of this question is the studies of Y. Poutet, *L’enseignement des pauvres dans la France du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: 1971), and Ph. Sasser, *Du bon usage des pauvres. Histoire d’un thème politique* (Paris: 1990), the course of the idea of R. P. Binet and of Vivès (the first lay approach according to the author, who never mentions Saint Vincent de Paul), 82, 91, and 67-113.

¹⁶M. Maynard, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, 360, 369, 370-72.

¹⁷J. Charpentier, *Le droit de l’enfance abandonnée* (Paris: 1968), 67.

¹⁸Coste, *Monsieur Vincent*, 82-85. See M. Capul, *Internat et internement*, 2:52.

Jesus. Étienne Binet's treatise, *Les saintes faveurs de l'Enfant Jésus à ceux qu'il aime* (1617) shows well how appropriate it was to relate some traits characteristic of the childhood of Christ to the education of children. The "Infancy Gospels" had a great success, and the apocrypha illustrated with details his obedience to his mother, his gentleness, his humility and patience, and his diligence in work. The purpose of these examples was to encourage children to do the same thing. Finally, the confraternities of the Child Jesus were an essential instrument in this new attention that was finally paid to a very brief period of childhood.¹⁹

Nevertheless, it was only at a late date, toward the age of fifty-seven and after some gropings and hesitations, that Saint Vincent de Paul became occupied with foundlings. His realization was slow and prudent. One explanation can be found in the attitude of the Church. Actually, even though Catholicism had rehabilitated and attempted to move legislation in favor of the foundlings, they were always excluded from the resources offered by the hospitals and the *hôpitals-dieu*. The statutes of these institutions often included a clause of this sort, *Pueri inventi non recipientur in domo nostra* [Foundlings are not to be accepted in our house]. It would, then, take all his stubborn action to begin to alter, even partially, practices that were deeply anchored in custom and policy.²⁰ But it was again because he succeeded in awakening, interesting, and moving the sensitivities of the elite women of his time that he transformed in its very depths the attitude toward unfortunate children in general. It was in this way that he conceived the idea of using the existing houses of the Daughters of Charity and established for them a disciplinary rule whose essential elements would survive him by ten years. As a result, after 1670, some changes were introduced, of which the most important was a collaboration with the administration of the *Hôpital Général*. In fact, the edict of 1670 foresaw very clearly a union between the foundlings hospice and the *Hôpital Général*. Certainly, it is clear that the salient feature of this edict was that it was limited exclusively to this case and applicable only to a restricted part of the kingdom. It was only one hospice among the others of the city of Paris, but it was first of all the confir-

¹⁹See the last refinement by R. Taveneaux, "Les prémices de la réforme tridentine," in *Revue d'Histoire de l'Église de France* 75 (1989), 211, 212, quoting to the same purpose Abbé Jérôme, *Une oeuvre inédite de saint Pierre Fourier* (Nancy: 1925).

²⁰Capul, *Internat et internement*, 2:11.

mation of the work of Saint Vincent de Paul. It was also an important measure of great originality because, for the first time, it dealt with a protection for childhood by the state coupled with administrative guarantees, as well as a specific attention to foundlings.²¹ Finally, the text moves on the hinge of a Christian and political vision. There is found the idea of rehabilitation, piety, salvation, substitute mothers, and practically the entire Vincentian perspective, as well as some social advantages that would become classic “since some could become soldiers and serve our troops, others workers and inhabitants for the colonies that we establish for the good of the commerce of our kingdom.”

Placing and Interning Delinquent Minors

Side by side with this condition of the foundlings, there should be kept in mind the basic notions concerning discipline and the right of correction over minor children in general.²² Certainly, the distinction between delinquent and non-delinquent children was determinative, but it is easy to show the harshness, even the very great severity, with regard to the latter. Parents themselves could beat them (though without being able to mutilate or cripple them). In the same way they could lock them up with the authorization of judicial authority (either royal or municipal)—a decree presented to the jailer within three days of incarceration. There were also the penalties of flogging, branding, the pillory, and banishment, which were punishments in use up to the end of the eighteenth century and even a little later. In this we are at the opposite extreme of modern pedagogical and psychological viewpoints, for example, it was common that delinquent minors had to be present at the punishment of their parents or adult accomplices.²³ One can see clearly, then, a constant slippage, perhaps more noticeable

²¹These actions were preceded by various measures and judgments (Parlement of 13 August 1552), letters patent of 1642, and especially by a judgment of 3 March 1667 of the Parlement of Paris which levied a higher financial contribution for the high justices in favor of charitable persons. The edict of June 1670 was implemented by a judgment and ruling of the Council of State of 21 July of the same year.

²²On the child in the family, see P. Petot, *Cours d'histoire du droit privé* (Paris: 1947-1948). See as an example for discipline and correction P. Coustel, *Règles de l'éducation des enfants* (Paris: 1687).

²³With regard to attitudes toward the child, Ph. Ariès and G. Duby, *Histoire de la vie privée. De la Renaissance aux Lumières* (Paris: 1986), 3:412f. L'Enfant, Société J. Bodin (Brussels: 1977), 38:185-87. J. L. Flandrin, “L'attitude à l'égard du petit enfant dans la civilisation occidentale,” in *Annales de démographie historique* (1973):143-210.

after the sixteenth century, and a confusion of categories in repression, something that is then verified, in contrast, in the totally humane and understanding attitude of Saint Vincent de Paul. To this right of correction in families, which is in addition a reflection of the power of marital and paternal authority, there was added a great increase in the requests for internment in the course of the centuries. The law contained an echo of it, since a declaration of 1639 reinforced the right of parents by authorizing forceable internment (on their authority alone) if their children were libertines, debauchees, or "in danger of so being," or if they had mistreated their parents.²⁴

Age was clearly taken into account. Up to the age of seven (that was the classic idea in canon law) the child was in a state "of imbecility and innocence," hence there was an ironclad presumption of lack of responsibility. In addition, there is the clear continuity with a concept inherited from ancient Rome, according to which the state of childhood was close to that of madness or insanity. By reason of his age the child was incapable of distinguishing between good and evil and so between what was lawful and what was criminal.²⁵ Between the ages of seven and fourteen (twelve for girls), and closer to seven in terms of chronological age, there was *proximitas infantiae*; close to twelve or fourteen, *proximitas pubertatis*, the child could be considered as responsible and capable of penal discernment.²⁶ Authors, legislation, and the jurisprudential practice of the courts all show the existence of numerous exceptions that authorized punishment even for the very young, for example, whipping while in custody, if the rule of *capacitas doli* could be applied or even if there was a crime by association. Judges of their own will revived the ancient maxim of Roman law, *malitia supplet aetatem* [malice compensates for age]. In that case the minor was locked up in such a way as to compel him to denounce his accomplices. One can add to this evidence the fact that, following the scholarly authors of penal law in the sixteenth century, the jurists and magistrates of the seventeenth easily admitted correction and internment, if the circumstances required it. In addition the leeway that was increasingly given to the judges in matters of penalty and indictment allowed them to free themselves from restrictive legal constraints. All

²⁴In order to add to these the regulations of the Parlement of 20 April 1684 and 27 October 1696 on the kinds of punishment, see A. Laingui, A. Lebigre, *Histoire du Droit Pénal* (Paris: 1979), 83, 90f, on penal minority, procedure, penalties.

²⁵Laingui-Lebigre, *Histoire*, 89.

²⁶The same attitude as in Roman and canon law (*facultas deliberandi*).

in all, this was less and less the case with regard to procedures for testimony, with numerous gaps between theory and law concerning the rebuking of witnesses.²⁷

Thus it was that both internment and confinement to a hospice became common. The purpose of these measures was twofold and difficult to reconcile. On the one hand there was a question of protecting society from the children who were troubling it or who could be a danger in large numbers. On the other hand, there were more and more attempts to protect children from society and the world, as well as from themselves, and it was this that constituted the central point of Saint Vincent de Paul's involvement.

The extent of these internments in the middle of the seventeenth century can be measured in Paris: more than 1,300 children.²⁸ The reasons for this were the growing importance of youthful lawlessness in the great cities, and especially Paris, where there was less integration of society and family than elsewhere, where employment was scarce and precarious, and where children, thanks to their physical aptitude (their agility) and their psychological aptitude (their daring, the lack of reflection on the serious consequences of their acts) were led to be used more and more frequently. Far from being transitory, this phenomenon developed even more during the first half of the eighteenth century.²⁹

To these external reasons there was a corresponding arsenal of new sanctions that the royal and municipal authorities judged to be most suitable. Warnings and reprimands were useless, but they were also insufficient. Internment in public or private establishments of a semi-charitable, semi-repressive character was added. These practices revived the initiatives of the Church. The houses of detention were not places of punishment, but of "ordinary correction," where the child was at the same time "raised" and "detained." It is well known that for all practical purposes the penalty of imprisonment did not exist for adults (except preventive imprisonment) because of the frequent penalty of the galleys, banishment, or death. In contrast it quickly became common for minors. It consisted, then, of more or less lengthy intern-

²⁷See B. Schnapper, *Les peines arbitraires du XIIIe au XVIIIe siècle* (doctrines savantes et usages français) (Paris: 1974).

²⁸Capul, *Internat et internement*, 328.

²⁹Y. Bongert, "Délinquance juvénile et responsabilité pénale du mineur au XVIIIe siècle," in *Crimes et criminalité en France sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: 1971), 68, 71, 73, 75-76.

ment, sometimes until adulthood, and even in certain very serious cases, perpetual imprisonment in place of the death penalty.

The first attempts at the internment of minors dates from the years 1610-1620. Thus a royal declaration of 27 August 1612 concerning the Hôpital des Pauvres Enfermés, which was a royal foundation, established the incarceration of delinquent minors who would be “punished at the discretion of masters and governors.” In addition to some very strict disciplinary provisions, the wording foresaw a coercion to obligatory work—to spin and card wool, and to sew buttons. As can be seen, the moral, educative purpose and economic usefulness were already linked together.³⁰ Still, there was not until 1632—the year in which Saint Vincent de Paul took over Saint Lazare and began to accept libertine, mentally ill, and delinquent youths, sent there by the authorities or often even by their families—establishments that were truly specific and founded for this purpose. Nevertheless one can put aside the attempt (which failed) to create a house of correction for schoolboys and “vicious children,” rebellious sons, dealers in contraband salt [a government monopoly], in the house of Saint Charles in Paris. After this date and even from 1670 onward, there always remained some confusion between the role of the Hôpital Général and the more specialized houses. In this regard, then, the seventeenth century remains on the whole a period of transition and of setting things in place. In March 1656 Saint Vincent de Paul renounced the chaplaincy of the Hôpital Général and declined the offer to staff it with his missionaries, since he did not like the total confusion of roles, and especially did not want his “brothers and sisters” to be used in works that he regarded as purely those of police.³¹ After his death in 1660, numerous texts (decisions of 1673, 1674, 1678, 1679) make a profession of transfers of children, schoolchildren, in the prisons of the archdiocese of Paris. Despite certain restrictions—no more than six weeks of detention without an order from the lieutenant of police—they make clear practices that were still poorly controlled and a concern that was too exclusively repressive.

³⁰Thus the famous example of the story of the Abbé Prévost in *Manon Lescaut*.

³¹Mezzadri, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, 128.



Saint Lazare in the eighteenth century.
Courtesy of Reverend Edward Udovic, C.M.

Saint Vincent de Paul and the Controversial Example of Saint Lazare

On 7 January 1632 Saint Vincent de Paul took possession of Saint Lazare. We are dealing with an institution about which numerous judgments have been made. These are based either on a general perspective—that of internment—dear to Michel Foucault,³² or on the testimonies of former detainees, 1667 (the *Relation sommaire*),³³ or again on some inquiries made at the beginning of the eighteenth century concerning the establishment's operation (for example, that which Chancellor Pontchartrain ordered drawn up by d'Aguesseau in 1703 in order to find out if there had been abuses committed against the interned children), or finally on some *Mémoires instructifs* dating from the second half of the eighteenth century. Following these sources historians have been divided over the nature of the institution, but they have almost always emphasized the degree of coercion toward those living there.³⁴

In almost all these analyses Vincent's perspective has not been taken into account, or it has been very much neglected. The same is true of the educational reality of his times. In a special way the status of Saint Lazare has been reported as it was in the eighteenth century, quite different from the preceding century and particularly during the time that Saint Vincent de Paul was alive, when his influence could have truly made itself felt. First of all, it is necessary to keep in mind the diverse nature of Saint Lazare. The house from 1632 was at one and the same time the motherhouse of the Congregation of the priests of the Mission, an internal seminary for the formation of priests who belonged to it, and a place of conferences and retreats. The spiritual and moral importance that Saint Vincent attached to this function, which went beyond strict clerical limits, is well known, since he also dealt with the formation of a social and lay elite—men and women—according to the great principles of charity and humanity. Finally, the establishment was a house of correction. These last two uses were, in the spirit of Saint Vincent de Paul as well as in reality, subsidiary tasks, especially the latter.³⁵ The children, whom in the terminology of the

³²*Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: 1961), 150.

³³Relation sommaire d'un ancien détenu de Saint-Lazare, 1667, in Capul, *Internat et internement*, 2:190.

³⁴L. Bizard-J. Chapon, *Histoire de la prison de Saint-Lazare* (Paris: 1925), 91-92.

³⁵M. Maynard, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, 380.

times he called "taken and separated,"³⁶ formed a group apart. In some locations that had the name of prison in the eighteenth century,³⁷ it was set up as "correctional and for the mentally ill." As a matter of fact, the superior of the Congregation very soon accepted libertine and mentally ill youths put there by the authorities or at the request of their families.

This role as a house of correction was very clearly formulated in the first paragraph of the rules of Saint Lazare. "The object and the end which is proposed for interning libertine and mentally incapacitated youths in this house has been to relieve families of persons who were troubling their peace by their disorder or their madness, to work for the improvement and conversion of the former and to the extent possible the healing of the latter, or at least to prevent their hurting themselves or others."³⁸

To these two categories of children there corresponded a great variety of cases, which are known for the period when Saint Vincent effectively exercised the direction of Saint Lazare. "Those given over to brigandage, physical violence, blasphemy, and other horrible crimes, [those who] have fled from their father's house, who have been so unnatural as to strike their father and mother, some others for making attempts on their lives and other for threatening them, [those who] have abandoned their studies to take up debauchery, given themselves over to infamous sins, some to drunkenness, others to lasciviousness and other disorders, and others with a totally perverse spirit."³⁹

To these can be added disorders that were not mentioned and also new classifications. For example, libertines included those who were guilty of marrying beneath their state, refusing an ecclesiastical vocation, misbehavior, extravagance, debts, rowdiness, scandalous flight, squandering their possessions, excess of devotion, blasphemy, quarreling, desertion, trade in immoral books, guilty relationships, forgery, or Protestantism. With regard to the mentally incapacitated, there were those of whom it was said that they were sick, deranged, feeble-

³⁶Abelly, *Vie*, 679.

³⁷Funck-Brentano, *Prisons d'autrefois* (Paris: 1927), 90-100, paints a quasi-romantic picture: "One enters Saint Lazare by a massive iron gate, after which, it is again necessary to pass through a half dozen others gates no less sturdy."

³⁸See *Mémoires instructifs touchant la manière de conduire les jeunes gens qui sont enfermés de l'ordre du Roy ou des Magistrats, dans la maison de Saint-Lazare* (Paris: n.d.), cited in Capul, *Internat et internement*, 2:196, 238.

³⁹Abelly, *Vie*, 687, 688.

minded, epileptics, or deaf-mutes. Obviously, the reasons were very numerous and lumped together what was injurious to the general interests of society as well as those of the Church, and everything that went contrary to paternal and moral values of the family. Nevertheless, it happened that the indictments were hazy (for example, simply “bad, dangerous subject”)⁴⁰ and for long detentions the entry “the reason why he was locked up has been forgotten” was not uncommon. Except for the mentally incapacitated, then, this list corresponds to a classic mode of conduct toward children judged to be stubborn and insubordinate. The novelty comes from the fact that it was then thought that they could be corrected by a suitable approach.

If Saint Vincent de Paul himself said little about his boarders in his spiritual works,⁴¹ there is no doubt that the spirit and the implementation of these rules came from him. First of all, the monastic vision that was dominant at Saint Lazare is evident at every stage of internment. As soon as the boarder arrived, he was forbidden to tell his name and country of origin to anyone. This was obviously a concern for discretion with regard to the families that did not care to see the behavior that had led them to have their children locked up (undoubtedly always inspired by justice and fairness) made public and who feared for their honor and reputation. But this anonymity had another meaning that was borrowed from the practices of religious orders and the customs of religious novitiates. In the monasteries the postulant was warned not to mention his name, to keep secret his origins from the other members of the community and to emphasize, by the deep rooted nature of the rupture, the break with his former life. In that way it assured that he would be placed in a more complete psychological condition. Very many aspects, severely criticized by modern historians, show the difference between present day pedagogical concepts and the often harsh concrete conditions imposed on postulants in the monastic orders that were reputed to be the most severe (Benedictines, and especially Trappists of the strict observance). In the same way isolation in the cell matched this religious purpose. This isolation was almost total at Saint Lazare, in individual locations that simultaneously permitted better surveillance as a means of assuring order and keeping track of each one individually— a novelty that slowly made its

⁴⁰Coste, *Monsieur Vincent*, 515, 516.

⁴¹Entretiens spirituels, Coste, ed., n. 158, pp. 883, 884.

way in the primary schools and replaced teaching in common. Moreover, while rejecting promiscuity, the risk was run of moral contamination. Its importance in places of common incarceration is well known. Undoubtedly there existed some notable differences among children, for Abelly, who wrote in 1664 (just after the death of Saint Vincent), spoke of boarding schools which were ruled by the children who came from comfortable circumstances.⁴²

In this way, then, the importance accorded to the initial period of entry into the establishment shows the import of this monastic reference. The room to which the child was led and kept in complete isolation for several days without the other boarders seeing him was called the "novitiate." The rule recalled the three personal searches: on arrival before the procurator (master of novices), on entering the novitiate, and on leaving it.⁴³ The idea was that everything should be left behind. That closely resembled the practices of monasteries where the novice stripped himself of everything, even of his clothes and his personal possessions that no longer belonged to him (it is known that there later existed the expression "the civil death of religious"). After this first period, the child was submitted to a very strict regimen, a strict regulation of time whose essential purpose was to fight against boredom and to maintain a high threshold of vigilance over him by means of repetitious activities that should have permitted the bending of the most hardened. In this way, the priests of the Mission hoped to inculcate a disciplinary apprenticeship of the acquisition of reflex behavior.⁴⁴ Among these were the elementary signs of the faith, themselves the bases of conversion, and it was on this physical and psychic complementarity that Saint Vincent constructed his entire apostolate.

Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that incorrigibility often tried his patience, though it is easy to caricature the process. Still, if exercises in common, prayers, readings, and meditation were made under the gaze of supervisors, thanks to some peepholes poked in the doors where each child came to kneel down, there again the borrowing from monasteries, especially nuns, is clear. Everything could be heard but not seen; everyone had the feeling of participating in an activity without the inconvenience of actually being brought together.⁴⁵

⁴²Abelly, *Vie*, 686.

⁴³Règlement, 4:3; 4:4; 5:27.

⁴⁴Pierre Coste, "Les détenus de Saint-Lazare aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècle," *Revue des études historiques* (1926):286.

⁴⁵Capul, *Internat et internement*, 3:368.

Some other examples can also be explained by means of this religious "grill." Where certain persons have seen too exclusively a deep distrust of the boarders (always two supervisors, armed with sticks), this can be understood at the same time as an ordinary clerical practice and also by the need frequently to separate children who threatened to do themselves harm.

All the same the isolation in the cell left time for communication during meals (the children could speak to each other from one grill to another or through windows), as well as during walks in the courtyard, in groups of five or six at a time. At religious exercises in the chapel the boarders were placed in box-like seats where they could see only the altar. These practices continued for a long time, as in the usages of the famous agricultural colony of La Mettraie and in prison chapels even at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴⁶

If the prohibitions against communication formed part of the heritage of religious orders, they also had some practical purposes, including sexual ones (visits to rooms were very severely punished), but also to prevent every plot and every attempt at escape. Room changes were frequent in order to avoid a proximity that could result in excessively close personal bonds. The rule declared that this was to be done without the occupant's being forewarned, for example, during mass. This was a system known and still in force in religious boarding schools until the mid-twentieth century!

For the more difficult and more dangerous children, those "lost to morals and feelings," there were more secure rooms. Saint Vincent de Paul, while on the lookout for excesses that were still possible in this regard, showed well the risks incurred by an easy contamination. "One person of this kind could hinder the good of all the others." The practice of the narrow dungeon called *malaise* [discomfort] existed for the more stubborn in the internal policing of the Hôpital Général, but if corrections, floggings, the rod, and imprisonment itself were frequent, there were differences between the establishments destined for children and for adults. In an almost absolute way Saint Vincent had to forbid corporal punishments except in case of revolt. There is a question here of the outer limits of Vincent's action, and there were some examples of multiple excesses in the years following his death. Even if at the Hôpital du Roy the sisters in charge of the children

⁴⁶H. Gaillac, *Les maisons de correction (1830-1945)* (Paris: 1971); J. Bordeau, "Les colonies agricoles au XIXe siècle," *Bulletin du Laboratoire des sciences de l'éducation* (Paris 5), 2:68-100.

practiced a pedagogy that viewed correction only as an absolutely final recourse, the power of the prefects, such as came out of the rule of Saint Lazare, authorized them to impose handcuffs or leg irons and confinement in jail for the more incorrigible. The fear of the jail by itself exercised "a salutary influence."⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the ordinary forms of resistance were punished by the deprivation of meat and wine at meals. Undoubtedly it was ideas of this sort that explained the inquiry ordered by Chancellor Ponchartrain, but in the spirit of the early eighteenth century it was already considered as current practice. Clearly, the principles of tolerance and generosity were not yet the norm, but the entirety of the system drawn around Saint Vincent de Paul's conception was consistent with the heritage of religious, even canonical practice. Witness the frequency of internments for an indeterminate length of time. For certain authors (Capul, in particular), this was an example of an excessively rigid and inflexible attitude toward children or one marked by uncontrolled risks. Nevertheless, the notion of indeterminate sentences, so foreign to a strict legal balance of crimes and penalties passed down from the end of the eighteenth century, finds its application in classic canonical censures as opposed to penalties properly so called. While penalties had a fixed duration, whether by law for the most part or by custom, that was imposed by a decision of the court, censures were conditioned on the person's reform, on his conversion recognized as such by a judge, an "expert" belonging to officialdom, or by the pastor of the parish. From the thirteenth century on, this was the rule. In the present case, it was the priests of the Mission who judged the reality of the reform, for which the internment could go from some days to twenty years, if the case demanded it. When it was a question of internment by parents, the clerical authority was not to be substituted in their place, and they themselves fixed the length of the stay. Finally, there were some cases in which those enclosed by the decision of justice finished out their lives in the establishment. These were the incurably insane.⁴⁸

Clearly the most important objective remained the interior, moral, and religious conversion (the *conversio* or *conversatio morum* of the

⁴⁷See the judgment, always abrupt, but not unrealistic, of the Princess Palatine, mother of the regent, 12 February 1702, cited by Capul, *Internat et internement*, 4:212.

⁴⁸A positive notation that is not always corroborated by facts, since it happens that the motives for placement were so unclear that after some time nothing remained and none knew why a particular person had been locked up. "There was no more memory of the person" (*ibid.*, 4:194).

Benedictine rule, as long as this was possible, and that is what permitted imposing some kind of limit.

For Saint Vincent de Paul there was nothing more precious than unfortunate or lost children. "Their life and death are in our hands," he declared to members of the Mission,⁴⁹ and that is what explains why he emphasized the environment that they established and to which he gave a priority above others, such as the sick or the galley slaves. On the other hand his charitable activity became little by little accepted as the normal approach, grudgingly and with the entrenched confusions that we have pointed out with regard to delinquent or marginal children, who strictly did not come within the category of foundlings. Taking charge of some of these children constituted a first step, followed by many others. In reality there were two types of "correctional formulas" introduced at Saint Lazare from 1632 on and especially in 1638. Some of them came from the royal judicial authority. "The saint did not want any of them, but they were confided to him."⁵⁰ Others were those whom the missionaries themselves brought on their own authority in order to reform them at Saint Lazare. Most often these were libertines, drunkards, or dissolute young people. Saint Vincent soon devoted himself to keeping watch over this confinement in such a way as to lighten its inherent rigors, though he did not reject it absolutely. If hagiography is especially insistent about his forceful intervention when he had learned that "left over" food was being served to the sick, the mentally ill, and to "persons to be corrected" (a Vincentian expression),⁵¹ one should also note some aspects more in conformity with the pragmatism of his activity, such as the study of the cost of such a charge. In the same way there were some very original aspects in his attention to the more concrete ideas of prison life. These concerned not the children but the convicts, the galley slaves, the prostitutes, and the "*éphèbes*" [adolescent boys of great beauty], persons of a very young age, who were the object of an altogether special protection in an environment where they were at great risk. That can be surprising, but it shows the extent of his realism and his profound knowledge of human nature. In addition negligence and uncontrolled behavior were characteristic of jailers and guardians, for custom often permitted them to prolong detentions arbi-

⁴⁹In Mezzadri, *Vincent de Paul*, 111.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 129.

⁵¹*Spiritual Works*, 11:37 1 .

trarily and to continue receiving the payment of board that certain detainees turned in.

Saint Vincent de Paul's attitude was in the end dictated by two considerations. The first, urgent, and absolute—such a one that it could not be even totally understood by his time or even realized in all the long history that leads us to the middle of the twentieth century—was the protection of the child, orphan, martyr, or more simply one left to himself and corrupted by all the vices of a society that used him for its basest gain. Also, on this topic, Saint Vincent spoke of threshold of “humanization” on leaving which the child finds himself freed, since he can emancipate himself from the moral and physical conditions that hem him in, and in a very concrete way when he can earn his living, when he becomes competent. From this comes this long insistence on inculcating a *ratio laborandi*.⁵² The second is the interest of his community itself, his missionaries, which had concerns of its own. Their “educational” task was difficult, it was situated in a social environment where poverty and corruption of every kind were abundant. The priests, the social elite who helped people, had to deal with those marked by all the sicknesses of body and soul, and souls that had become totally immoral. So, in this regard Saint Lazare constituted a field of experiences where the priests of the Mission and their helpers became accustomed to encountering and bringing “consolations” to those who were in these lamentable situations.

Undoubtedly the history of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Lazare no longer retains the sinister character of the enclosure and the exceptional longevity of an establishment that became a revolutionary jail in 1789, then a women's prison until 1935, and was finally demolished in 1940. Still, even if only a few dispositions after 1700 can be qualified as inspired by Vincent, the name of Saint Vincent remains associated with the taking in of foundlings—at Paris, even today (1990), in the “Maison Saint Vincent.” In spite of later deformations and within a period of no more than thirty years, Monsieur de Paul remains the author of a unique attempt at joining a farsighted spirit, open in a special way, freed by service to the poor⁵³ (undoubtedly at a distance from Catholic and social action⁵⁴ but also from ineffective and conser-

⁵²Ibid., 8:73.

⁵³Igino Giordani, *San Vincenzo de Paoli, servo dei poveri* (Rome: 1981), throughout.

⁵⁴See the article of Monsignor Eyt, “Monsieur Vincent, l'énigme, l'aureole et l'histoire,” in *La France Catholique* (January 1986).

vative examples) and the harsh social and religious constraints of his time.⁵⁵ In this sense, he is indeed one of the greatest spiritual and innovative figures of the seventeenth century,⁵⁶ and encompassed within a realm where his activity would have been more visible, that of justice in relation to minors.

Your strength is God's providence; it was this providence that put our company on its feet.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul,
conference to the Daughters of Charity, 6 January 1642)*

O my daughters, blessed be God, who teaches us in his own person how to manifest this cordial respect, namely, by a strong and courageous love and not by weak and trifling manifestations of it.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul,
conference to the Daughters of Charity, 1 January 1644)*

⁵⁵P. Herrera Puga, *Sociedad y delincuencia en el siglo de oro* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1974), 68, 264-65. It is the journal of the Jesuit Pedro de León, chaplain of the royal prison of Seville.

⁵⁶This is the perspective in the *Actes du colloque international des études vincentiennes* (Rome: 1983), which unfortunately does not deal with the judicial, penal point of view but like the book of André Dodin is not bothered by a too exclusively hagiographic conception centered around the arrangers of the history of Saint Vincent de Paul, Louis Abelly, and Pierre Collet in particular.