

# Life Story

**SAINT**

**VINCENT DE PAUL**

**PAUL**



Vincent de Paul was born in the south-west of France in the little village of Pouy. He was the third of six children, having three brothers and two sisters. His parents belonged to the peasant class, and they struggled to make a living for the family by farming the land. Life was hard, but the family was rooted in a deep faith in God. Vincent was smart, and so his parents decided to send him to school in order that he could become a priest. Priesthood in that day was more of a career than a vocation. Priesthood opened doors to prestige and money, and the expectation was that Vincent would then be able to take care of his family.

## Priesthood

His parents even sold a pair of oxen in order to be able to finance his education, which was a considerable sacrifice for a poor farming family. So Vincent went off to school and was ordained at the age of 19. Vincent was a very ambitious young priest, he was determined to be successful and to get an office in the Church from which he could get enough money to take care of himself and to return to help his mother and family.

## Paris

Eight years after ordination, at the age of 27, and still empty-handed in his quest for the rewards of a Church benefice, Vincent left the south of France and went to Paris, hoping that the city would offer him more opportunities for advancement. Within a few years he became a chaplain in the court of the Queen of France, and a tutor and chaplain to one of the wealthiest and most influential families of France, the de Gondi's.

Vincent was now about 33 years old and moving along quite well in his career. But, just as Vincent thought he was secure in his position and influence at the court, someone accused him of theft. Vincent was innocent as was later proved, but the accusation was devastating because judgements were formed immediately. Vincent began to see his world collapse and all that he had built up: his reputation, his influence, his power, everything he had built his hopes on – that he had thought so important – seemed to crumble. The astounding thing is that Vincent remained silent and did not try to defend himself.

It was also at this time that Vincent began to face the darkness of doubt against his faith, a darkness that lasted almost four years. But Providence was leading the way, even though he did not yet understand. God sent special people into Vincent's life who loved him and challenged him, friends who were his spiritual directors, mentors and guides. The pain and struggle of these years slowly revealed to Vincent his own poverty, and in this poverty deep down, he was coming to know the mercy of God – the God of compassion.

*Vincent*

# Conversion

In 1617, at the request of Madame de Gondi, Vincent went to Folleville to minister to the peasants that worked on the de Gondi estates. It was here that Vincent heard the confession of a dying man. He became struck with the reality that had he, Vincent, not been sent to Folleville, the dying man would have died in despair not knowing there was a God who loved him and forgave him. In fact, he would have died without knowing the mercy of God.

Vincent pondered all of this, saw that, in order to find God, the poor needed good priests. Slowly, Vincent was being led to the poor, and believing that it was God leading him he surrendered. In the surrender to be God's servant of the poor, all of his doubts vanished.

Vincent then went to a town named Chatillon-les-Dombes, and he tells us the story *...When I was living near Lyons, in a small town to which Providence had called me to act as parish priest, on a certain Sunday, just as I was vesting to say Mass, a person came to tell me that, in an isolated house a quarter of a league away, the whole family lay ill, so that not a single one of them could come to the assistance of the others, and they were in such dire straits as cannot be expressed. It moved me to the depths of my heart. I did not fail to speak feelingly about them during the sermon, and God, touching the hearts of those who were listening, caused them all to be moved to compassion for the poor afflicted people.*<sup>1</sup>

This simple story holds in many ways the secret of Vincent and how his life became mission driven. First Vincent had finally come to know that priesthood was a vocation, not a career, and therefore he knew that he had been sent by God to Chatillon. It was God's work, God's mission that he was called to do. The secret lies in the one line: "This news touched me to the heart." When Vincent told the story of the poor family, he spoke from his heart, not his head. He didn't tell them they should do something he only told them how the poor family was suffering. When Vincent spoke about the poor, Vincent's heart was so transparent that others could see the faces of the poor and they could feel the pain that was in their hearts.

As the story continued, Vincent went to see the family and with his own eyes he saw how God evoked compassion and touched the goodness in people's heart. In awe Vincent tells of the "regular procession of people" that was unleashed, of people who wanted to help. Vincent learnt to believe and to trust in the goodness that was in people's hearts, a goodness that only had to be evoked. It was in Chatillon, in 1617, that Vincent founded the Confraternities of Charity and sent them on mission to serve the poor.

## Apostle of Charity

Vincent was 36 years old and had been a priest for 17 years, before he surrendered his life to the poor, and his doubts against faith vanished. He then became the "Apostle of Charity." He founded his community of priests and brothers, the Congregation of the Mission in 1625, and sent them to bring good news to the poor and to educate clergy.

God then sent Vincent to Louise de Marillac, a woman who had also learnt compassion through years of suffering. Together they founded the Daughters of Charity in 1633, a community of women who dedicate their lives to serving the poor through health, education and social ministry.

Vincent de Paul faithfully served the poor for 43 years: the refugees and beggars, the sick and the dying, orphans, indeed he touched and took healing to every form of poverty and destitution. Vincent died on the 27th of September, 1660 and the Church has named him the Universal Patron of Charity.