

Reading the Icon of St Vincent at Rosati House, Chicago



Reading the Icon of St. Vincent at Rosati House, Chicago

The icon of Vincent likewise celebrates incarnation. There is far less contrast between the divine world and the world of earth than is represented in the annunciation icon; creation is now diffused with the light of the incarnation. This insight is central to an understanding of Vincent and of Vincentian spirituality.

The icon presents an oval movement of the beggar-resembling a Palestinian Jesus-and an aged Vincent de Paul. The two figures interacting form the heart of the icon's message-the discovery that the beggar is Christ. We find Christ in the poor who in turn transform us into Christ.

The tree to the left of the beggar creates a vertical point of entry for meditation. As we enter the icon we become the tree and observe the relationship between Vincent and the beggar, the relationship between ourselves and Christ reflected in the poor. The tree becomes a sign of our ongoing growth in the Christian life. Moving through the beggar's back one looks directly at Vincent. Vincent's eyes focus on the bread. This creates a parallel oval at the center of the icon. While Vincent is probably giving the bread to the beggar is about to place the bread in Vincent's hand. Herein lies the theological truth of the icon: Once we find Christ in the poor, the poor have as much to give to us as we do to them. The poor person becomes Christ and we become Vincent. In this exchange we receive from Christ, from the beggar, as much as we give. Vincent de Paul said, "You will find that charity is a heavy burden to carry...It is only because of your love, only your love, that the poor will forgive you the bread you have given."

The beggar's deformed hand parallels Vincent's left foot. the relationship suggests a dynamism. The beggar's poverty enriches Vincent; Vincent's wealth enriches the beggar. Or perhaps it is the other way around: The beggar's esteem enriches Vincent's poverty the awkward positions of Vincent's foot and the beggar's hand suggest a relationship between the poverty of the beggar and the poverty of Vincent. The tattered edges of Vincent's coat underline the parallel. Vincent stands with a listening attitude; he experiences something of his own weakness, brokenness and poverty, an awareness affirmed as he enters the world of the beggar and hears his gift.

The sharing of bread clearly refers to Eucharist. The exchange is one of mutuality against the cloudy backdrop of divinization-God has penetrated the world of earth with the heavenly world. The cluster of stones and the barren branch at the far right side evoke the story of Jesus' temptation in Luke's gospel. The devil said to him, "If you are God's Son, order this stone to turn into bread." Jesus answered, "The scripture says 'Man cannot live on bread alone'" (Luke 4:3-4). The bread they give each other ultimately sustains life.

The beggar and Vincent step out from three horizontal planes. The lower third is the ground upon which the figures stand; the middle the ground upon which Saint-Lazare, the first Vincentian church, is built; and the top section fades into the heavens. Saint - Lazare is suspended between heaven and earth like the New Jerusalem coming down from heave; it is cloudlike and diffused in the heavenly light. This is the sphere of sharing between Vincent and the beggar; this is the place of encounter between the human and the divine. Saint-Lazare, sign of the heavenly Jerusalem, floats on the diffused light of God's glory now permeating the earthly sphere. The sharp contrast between the heavenly world and the earthly world in the annunciation icon is here diffused, in the light of our seeing in the beggar the divine presence, the person of Christ living in our world.

Louis T. Brusatti, CM

This icon was commissioned by Rosati house, a residence for the Vincentian Community at DePaul University in Chicago, on the occasion of creating its new chapel. The icon was written by Meltem Aktas. Ms. Aktas, a native of Turkey, studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She has worked as a graphic designer and a gallery director and has exhibited in both Istanbul and Chicago.

The Icon of Saint Vincent de Paul
by James Swift CM. and Louis Brusatti, CM.