

If we are mean-spirited right back to them without understanding or forgiveness, we will push them away and isolate ourselves from them. That can happen in many of our relationships. Vincent often told his followers that people are more easily won over by gentleness than by argument. Even if someone is trying to correct us, if we perceive that they love us, we will much more readily accept the correction. When we are hurt by someone, often our instinctual response is to hurt back. Someone once noted that if we lived by “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” that we would all be toothless and blind. Meekness allows us to sometimes endure an offense with forgiveness in order to resolve the situation. Fighting back is not always the best first response. Vincent wanted his missionaries to be kind and gentle. “Peace begins with a smile.” Mother Theresa

Mortification

Mortification is the triumph of reason and prayer and insight over our senses that might otherwise make the poor appear repugnant to us. Vincent urged his followers to become “indifferent” or “detached.” By this he meant that we must learn to bear with one another, forgive another for being dirty or smelly or different. Vincent wanted his missionaries to be slow to condemn others in order that we might be the presence of Christ to them and to one another.

Mortification can also mean choosing to hold back or to take things in moderation for a better good. For instance, rather than party all night, every weekend, a student might hold back and study. A parent might choose to stay up at night to care for a sick child to his/her own detriment of being tired the next day. We can’t do everything in life or be everything in life. Mortification means making choices, targeting our energies so that we can do something well—we give up some goods so that we can accomplish others. Mortification is about making wise choices in life.

Zeal

Vincent wanted his followers to be “on fire” with the love of Christ. This is what zeal is. Zeal is persevering, faithful love that strives to find new ways to bring the gospel to the poor. For Vincent’s followers, zeal encompassed being willing to be sent anywhere to share the good news of Christ. Vincent wanted his followers to have hearts of charity that worked to make a just world, hearts that were spent ministering the gospel to those in need. Somewhere between the extremes of inattentiveness to life and feeling burnt-out by doing too much was a balanced lifestyle that embraced “carpe diem,” the willingness to embrace life and to try to live it as fully as possible, to say “yes” to the invitation to be a messenger of the gospel to the poor.

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The 5 Virtues of the Vincentian Missionary

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The fundamental vision and charism of St. Vincent was to follow the call of Luke 4:18: to bring the gospel to the poor. Jesus brought the gospel to all people but especially to the poor, to those who were weak, the struggling, those who lived on the fringes of society. Vincent understood that Christ himself lived in the person of the poor and to minister to the poor was to minister to Christ Himself. Vincent called his followers to join in his mission to bring the good news of the gospel to the poor.

Drawing on the virtues of Jesus Christ, St. Vincent de Paul taught his missionaries to observe five virtues that would help them in their work, namely: Simplicity, Humility, Meekness, Mortification, and Zeal for souls. If practiced regularly in the life of the missionary, he/she would bring the gospel to the poor just like Christ did. The virtues would also help them (and us) to be good, well-rounded human beings.

“I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love.” Mother Theresa

What are these 5 virtues and how do we understand them today?

Simplicity

Why would a missionary need to be simple? Poor people seem to respond best when we are truthful with them, when we are not being cunning; that is, saying one thing but believing and doing another as a way of trying to manipulate them. Simplicity in this context means speaking the truth, being honest and sincere. For St. Vincent, missionaries must be honest and sincere before God and the people they serve. As such, the Vincentian missionary is called to shun duplicity, double meaning, and cunning. If we are not doing work for the love of God, we are missing the boat. Simple people are real and genuine; they have no hidden agendas; they are easy to relate to. When we strive for simplicity, we strive for personal wholeness that brings together the various aspects of life. Since we live in a world that is filled with duplicity, Vincent wanted his followers to strive for simplicity of life so they could in some way share in the experience of those who are needy.

Humility

Humility is the recognition that we are not perfect; in fact, even with all of our good qualities and talents, we are also flawed and imperfect. Since God is the creator, all good that we do ultimately comes from God and humility is the virtue that recognizes that fact. If we are not humble, we might fall into the temptation of preaching ourselves and not Jesus Christ.



Sometimes we walk through life thinking we can do it all, we can have it all, we can be all. But the reality is that we are quite interdependent; we need others and this is both a sign of our individual limitedness and a source of enrichment for us—others need us and we need others. When we find ourselves being stingy, believing that “it’s all about me,” not caring about others, not able or willing to feel compassion for another, we are probably lacking in humility. Humility allows us to see the good in others just as it allows us to see the good in ourselves; not only do we have something to bring to the poor but they have something to teach us. That was the attitude that Vincent wanted for his missionaries.

Meekness

Meekness is being gentle with people. A homilist once made the statement “everybody wants to be a somebody but nobody wants to be a nobody.” Sometimes, to make ourselves into a somebody, we get caught up in a world of boasting, of pushing others aside in order to make ourselves feel and look better in the eyes of others. A meek person, on the other hand, is approachable, gentle, warm, kind, even when a person is not kind and gentle with them. These are very important qualities in ministers, as St. Vincent knew very well. The poor can sometimes be very ornery or mean-spirited or demanding.

