

SOURCES AND UPDATES

Saint Vincent's spiritual experience

In no way is Vincentian spirituality a book of rules for holiness to be studied and then put into practice. It is a life, an experience on which we have to reflect, in order to develop the working of grace in a human life.

We are going to try and follow Vincent de Paul's spiritual experience step by step in order to grasp its main orientations, touchstones and significant moments. We might think of this process as developing in five steps, as outlined in the summary. These periods sometimes overlap since it is not easy to cut up life as with a knife! Nevertheless, we will see that overall, dividing his spirituality into these stages is appropriate.

I-1581-1595: FAMILY

In our day, we are more aware of the role of family in the spiritual journey of saints. In the past, we were often led to believe that some saints came into the world endowed with a sort of miraculous holiness and that grace accompanied them from the moment of their birth until their inevitable triumphal entrance into heaven! Such was certainly not the case for Vincent de Paul, and we could say that from his first fifteen years of life he knew

- the experience of a deep family affection
- the experience of a rural and peasant mentality
- the experience of poverty and manual labor.

These are three decisive experiences that directed the life of the man who benefited from them.

FAMILY AFFECTION

At the beginning of the conference on the virtues of village girls, Saint Vincent says: *"It will be very easy for me to speak to you about the virtues of good village girls because I know them by experience and by nature, since I'm the son of a humble tiller of the soil, and lived in the country until I was fifteen"* (Coste IX, 67). Vincent de Paul said this on January 25, 1643, when he was nearly sixty-three years old.

This reminder allows us to believe that Vincent de Paul recalled the memory of his mother and two sisters, Marie and Claudine, on more than one occasion.

With regard to village girls, Vincent said, *"they don't boast of what they have, don't talk about their relatives... Their language is truly simple and sincere... [they] are satisfied with their food and clothing... Most of them often make do with bread and soup, although they're constantly engaged in hard work... If they're praised, they don't know what is meant... They come home from work, worn out and fatigued, wet through and covered in mud, to eat their meager lunch, and they're barely there when, if the weather is suitable for work or if their father and mother tell them to go back to it, they do so at once, without paying too much attention to their weariness, or the mud, or how they look..."* (Coste IX, 68-75).

These characteristics are expressed in a tone of voice and with a level of detail that prove their authenticity, showing the relationship between the spirit of the Daughters of Charity and this period of Vincent de Paul's life from 1581 to 1595. You were envisaged and conceived on the model of young women from the Landes region of the village of Poy, and perhaps on the model of Vincent's mother and sisters.

There is no doubt that Vincent de Paul experienced an affectionate and unified family life. Afterwards, he would always show great affection for his mother, brothers, sisters and nephews. In speaking about community and relationships in community life, he often used expressions taken from family life and, perhaps more particularly, from his own experience of family life: "How is your family? Give my greetings to all your little family. The family in this house are doing

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well..." Similarly, in the first rules of the Confraternities or of the Daughters of Charity, "They will cherish each other like sisters..." With regard to those who are poor, the Daughters of Charity are encouraged to behave "like their mother," etc. Here, too, we discover a link between Vincentian spirituality and the period from 1581-1595. Consciously or not, the memory of what Saint Vincent experienced at Ranquines surfaced in his spirituality of community.

A RURAL AND PEASANT MENTALITY

Vincent de Paul remained a peasant at heart even though he lived in the city for more than fifty years.

His progress, his psyche, what was called his slowness, his attitude towards the great personages of society or towards money, the examples that quite naturally surfaced in his conferences or letters, his sense of Divine Providence... all of this is deeply marked by his peasant origins, origins of which at the beginning he was sometimes ashamed and then which he accepted by using them, first to humble himself, and sometimes even to boast!

Quite naturally, this rural and peasant characteristic also had an impact on the spirituality of Vincent de Paul and that of his disciples, especially its evangelical aspect. Vincent de Paul thought of Jesus as essentially someone from a rural background, and there must have been a real complicity between Vincent de Paul and the Gospel. How was this complicity made manifest in Vincent? Perhaps through his preference for action and for the concrete, through his distrust of theories that fall short of expectations, through his taste for simplicity, through his realistic humility about his rural roots, and through his simple, practical and direct approach to things and to people.

POVERTY AND MANUAL LABOR

This was also a fundamental experience that had deep and lasting reverberations. He was only "the son of a poor farmer"; a farmer who had to depend on his work for a livelihood and to support his family. There was no school for the poor, and girls and boys, from a very young age, were involved in the work of the little farm.

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Vincent watched over the herds on the banks of the Ardour River. He knew about the life of poor children, the life of a family weighed down by taxes and fees of all types.

His first reaction at the age of fifteen was to escape, to become free, to seek his fortune and to obtain a situation to get himself and his family out of difficulties. He did not know that God intended him for the poor, and especially for poor country people. This family experience from 1581-1595 prepared him to live this vocation more fully. Paradoxically, it would be poor peasants in Folleville and Châtillon who would reveal to him the direction his life should take.

After Vincent had lived in the city for forty years, we find this expression of his nostalgia for the peasant land of his childhood on his lips: "I cannot restrain myself and must tell you quite simply that this gives me renewed, greater desires to be able, in the midst of my petty infirmities, to go and finish my life near a bush, working in some village. I think I would be very happy to do so, if God were pleased to grant me this grace" (Coste V, 204, Letter to a priest of the Mission, October 17, 1654).

This first step was significant and even decisive in Vincent de Paul's spiritual journey. We are in 1595: Vincent, at the age of 14, still lives with his family on the farm at Poy, and perhaps is still illiterate.

II-1595-1610: CAREER

Abelly narrates the first turning point in young Vincent's life: "His father soon realized that this child was destined for other things than pasturing animals. He planned therefore to send him to school, encouraged by his acquaintance with a prior in the neighborhood. This man was from a humble family like himself, but it was known that he supported members of his family from the revenues of a benefice he enjoyed. In his simplicity the father imagined that with a little schooling Vincent too might receive a benefice, and while serving the Church might help to support his family" (Abelly Book I, ch.2).

The same Abelly specifies later that, before his death in 1598, Vincent's father stipulated by will that Vincent "should be helped by the remainder

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of the estate" (Abelly, Book I, ch 3) to continue his studies.

Things seem clear, especially with regard to the practice of the time in this social and regional context: it was indeed a sort of investment, a family contract. They were betting on the most gifted member, and they would do everything for his success. It would be his responsibility thereafter to give back a hundredfold to his family, once his fortune was made.

In my opinion, this is the main motivation that clarifies and explains Vincent's behavior and spiritual journey over the years to come. Vincent himself confirms this approach on two occasions:

-in the letter to his mother dated February 17, 1610,
-in the account of his last visit home in 1623.

When we read these two documents carefully, we recognize what dominated Vincent's concerns: his family contract, even after 1617.

In the letter dated February 17, 1610, the only question is about business, advancement and return home, "so that I may spend the rest of my days near you" (Coste I, 15-16).

As for the account of his final visit to his home, what seems to worry Vincent most is the feeling that he had betrayed the contract: "*The day I departed, it was so painful for me to leave my poor relatives that I did nothing but weep all the way back, and wept almost constantly. Those tears were followed by the thought of doing something to assist them and to better their situation, to give this to one, that to another. My mind was deeply moved and I was sharing in this way what I had and what I didn't have... This troubling passion for improving the lot of my brothers and sisters plagued me for three months, it was a constant weight on my poor mind*" (Coste XII, 180).

What Abelly tells us about the father's decision in 1595 and what Vincent writes to his mother in 1610 allow us to glimpse a continuity, of which Vincent's departure for school is a perfectly logical part. So in 1595, Vincent enters the Capuchin school in Dax. He soon proves to be a good student who can be trusted: he finds himself responsible for

tutoring the young children of M. de Comet who thereafter welcomes him into his home. What a promotion! Perhaps his reaction is not surprising when someone at the school announces that his father has come to visit him. He refuses to come out and see him, being ashamed (he admits this later) at his father's rustic appearance.

In 1596, advised by his teachers, M. de Comet, a lawyer in Dax and his benefactor, he goes to Bidache to receive the tonsure, symbolizing entry into the ecclesial state, and minor orders, the first steps towards the priesthood.

In the period from 1595 to 1597, two things are very evident:

-There was a real family contract, that is, a sacrifice on the part of the family confirmed by the father's will, so that Vincent could study in order to help his brothers and sisters afterwards;

-During his first two years of studies in Dax, Vincent strongly felt the difference between his former and his present situation; perhaps he even felt a certain glee in what seemed to him to be the beginning of his promotion.

Probably in 1597 Vincent entered the University of Toulouse, because in 1604, after seven years of study, he gained his bachelor's degree. Even if universities were not at the time what they are now, we note, on the one hand, the talent of our student who is above average and, on the other hand, his ambition. Going to university allows him to aim much higher than a little country parish (cf. Vincent's feeble effort to enter into possession of the little parish of Till, and, on the contrary, his eagerness to go in 1604 to Bordeaux, where he would have some opportunity to be granted a bishopric in the region.)

Meanwhile, Vincent progressed rather quickly down the path that he had chosen: tonsure and minor orders on December 20, 1596, in Bidache when he was just fifteen and a half; sub-diaconate in Tarbes on September 19, 1598, at the age of 17; priestly ordination in Châteauevêque at nineteen and a half, on September 23, 1600.

Apparently, Vincent was in a hurry. This is troublesome for some people like Abelly and those who came after him, who didn't hesitate to move his birthdate up to 1576, which would have made Vincent de

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Paul a priest at the age of 24, the minimum age, recently set by the Council of Trent!

We know little about his stay at the University of Toulouse: student life, at that time and in this hotspot, was rather turbulent. We also know that, in order to pay for his studies, he took responsibility for a small boarding school where he received young students, first at Buzet-sur-Tarn, and then in Toulouse.

Vincent de Paul obtained his bachelor's degree in theology in 1605. That's when the serious financial difficulties arose that led him to go to Marseilles. The dark years become very dark! All we have from this time are two letters (Coste I, 1-15) to M. de Comet to shed a curious light on the three years that seem to have been marked by stops and starts (cf. *Saint Vincent et la Charité*, coll. *Maîtres spirituels*, A. Dodin, pages 144-148).

Just two letters! This does not allow us to go very far in our deductions. However, in the current state of documentation, it seems to me that we aren't straying far from reality if we imagine a Vincent who is primarily concerned with his own promotion and fulfilling his obligation. Moreover, it is this same Vincent whom we find in the letter dated February 17, 1610. What happened between these dates? Nothing, in any case, that changed the plan and the outlook of Vincent de Paul.

According to official documents, it is at the end of February that we find Vincent de Paul in Paris. He is advisor and chaplain to Queen Marguerite, Duchess of Valois (Coste XIIIa, 20). He is staying near the Seine, in the Saint-Germain-des-Près neighborhood, across from the palace of the queen. One might say that the time of his hoped-for success had arrived. It is at least within grasp, as suggested by what Vincent wrote to his mother and his family. Let's read the beginning of this letter: "*But I have such trust in God's grace, that He will bless my efforts and will soon give me the means of an honorable retirement so that I may spend the rest of my days near you*" (Coste I, 15-16).

The letter is dated February 17, 1610. Exactly three months later, Vincent signed a document that made him the owner of the Cistercian abbey of Saint-Léonard-de-Chaumes, in the diocese of Saintes (Coste

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XIIIa, 8-11). In actual fact it was a bad business deal, but Vincent didn't know this yet. Vicissitudes and uncertainties followed one after another. The first half of 1610 was influenced by the family contract. Vincent was firmly persuaded that it would soon be the time to return home, where he would spend the rest of his days near his family.

It was around this time that a first problem occurred, one which seemed to tear the whole plan to pieces, a trauma that Vincent, when he had grown old, would recall with the surprisingly vivid memory that sometimes characterizes elderly persons. Vincent was 75 years old when he recounted, "*There's someone in the Company [he was referring to himself] who was accused of having robbed his companion and was denounced for his in the house, although that wasn't the case. Nevertheless, he was unwilling to justify himself and, seeing that he was being falsely accused, he thought to himself, 'Are you going to justify yourself? You're being accused of something, but it's not true. Oh no, he said, raising his heart to God, 'I have to bear that patiently.' And that's what he did. What happened next? Here's what happened, Messieurs. Six months later, when the thief was a hundred leagues from here, he acknowledged his fault and wrote to ask forgiveness for it. You see, God sometimes wants to test people, and that's why He allows similar things to happen*" (Coste XI, 305).

As with the account of his final visit home, the old Monsieur Vincent drew a moral from the event. He recounts it in order to point out a lesson, and so he orients or changes the significance of the dramatic event.

We find ourselves confronted with two possible levels on which to read this. The more interesting one for us is not to turn to Vincent narrating it in his seventies but to meet Vincent, accused at the age of 29, and quite a different person.

Abelly has his own version of the event: Vincent shared a room in Paris with one of his fellow countrymen, a judge from Sore (Landes). While Vincent was sick and confined to bed in the house, an errand boy came in and most likely made off with the judge's purse. Vincent was immediately suspected (was he open to suspicion?), and Abelly continues, in a very lively style, "*The judge furiously demanded restitution for his loss. He forced Monsieur Vincent to leave the*

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apartment and spoke against him everywhere as a thief and a liar to anyone who knew him or had any contact with him... calling him a thief and formally serving a writ upon him" (Abelly, Book I, chapter 5).

This 'writ' was a public accusation, read from the pulpit at all the Masses for three consecutive Sundays in the parish of the accused. Imagine a priest, chaplain to the Queen, subjected to such a humiliation. Imagine Vincent de Paul who thought he had entered a happy phase of his existence, and who was planning to return home soon. He had developed influential relationships, he had undertaken good business dealings (among others, acquiring Saint-Léonard abbey)... And here he was, suddenly discredited before all his friends and acquaintances, and denounced from the pulpit! "*God sometimes wants to test people,*" was the interpretation Vincent had of the event forty-six years later: a trial sent by God, undoubtedly with a good dose of bitterness. The disastrous 'writ' obliged Vincent to move to another district and parish.

In the course of Vincent's human itinerary, in a mere fifteen years, a young peasant who was practically illiterate and on his own had climbed the social ladder, created relationships, found a relatively stable position, and had acquired a fortune that would prosper, at least so he thought.

As the adventurous son who left to make his fortune, he only had to go to his home to receive his income on the agreed dates, help his family that had assumed the risk at the beginning, himself live honestly from his retirement, which, really, could have required more time. He was only 29!

Vincent wanted to succeed, and, humanly speaking, we could say he had succeeded. Despite some misadventures, he had made a career for himself.

This period from 1595-1610 was important in Vincent de Paul's spiritual development because this human success made him aware of all the possibilities open to him

This success also allowed him to get to know the world, the leading figures in the Church and society and those who had an important influence culturally. Both from 1605-1607 and from 1608-1610 he

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perhaps met members of the criminal world.

This, added to the knowledge he already had of the poor and country people: what an experience! And what a field of knowledge that humanly predisposed him to plurality and universality in his perspective and options!

The more rapid his ascension and the nearer his success, the darker the night would be, then would come the blinding and decisive light. This is how it was for the people of Israel from the captivity in Egypt and the Passover; from the exile of Babylon and the deliverance of the Lord's poor.

The sequence of events from the second, third and fourth steps, constitutes a logical progression of an especially dynamic conversion. Let us try to imagine briefly the passage from the first to the third stage via the second one; in this period (1595-1610) an aspect of his dynamism and universalism become rooted in Vincent de Paul, qualities that he continuously demonstrated.

III - 1610-1617: THE DARK NIGHT

We know that the dark night of the soul has been part of the experience of numerous mystics and great saints and that it is so, in different degrees, for the majority of people. Adulthood leads each person to awareness and then acceptance of their limitations. It is often on the level of awareness that the dark night is experienced: that impression of failure, resulting in a gap between aspirations and possibilities, between plans and reality.

For Vincent de Paul, this seems to have begun in 1608-1609 with a life of poverty in the Saint-Germain district, and especially with the theft, which we analyzed above. Following this human drama, doors were closed to him, his fellow Gascons distanced themselves from him, and he found himself alone in Paris. It was probably at this time that he tried to come closer to Father Bérulle.

His short-lived Oratorian vocation has been recorded: indeed, at the end of 1611, Vincent entered the Oratory when Bérulle was gathering his first

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disciples. Abelly provides a detail about this vocation: Vincent entered the Oratorians, but "he had no intention of joining the community, as he himself later said. He wanted only to shut out social engagements" (Abelly, Book I, chapter 6).

Whatever Vincent de Paul's motivations, we can easily understand his need to feel a bit protected, in the same way that we understand that his vocation was only a fleeting one, if we know that Bérulle was able to write forty chapters on the life of Jesus in the womb of His Mother, and if we then read what Vincent said on the love of God! "Let us love God, but let it be in the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows" (Coste XI, 32). It is understandable that Vincent de Paul's Berullian experience was not pursued and that it may have even given rise to a certain tension that existed afterwards between the two men (Coste II, 442).

It would be interesting to deal here with the relationships that would be established later between Monsieur Vincent and what is called the French School of Spirituality. Vincent certainly was a follower of this school... perhaps a bad disciple, in any case a very original and surely inspired follower if only in striving to translate lofty considerations, based on what we would today call Christocentric thinking, into action and the service of the poor. In the domain of faith, and especially of religion, the French School had the great merit of bringing Christ back to the center of everything. Vincent, for his part, focused this center on human beings, and the person of the poor: "You are serving Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. And that is as true as that we are here" (Coste IX, 199). But let's move on!

So in November 1611, Vincent de Paul was "safe" with the Oratorians, and probably he wasn't so comfortable... Therefore, when the pastor of Clichy, François Bourgoing, decided to enter the Oratory, Vincent didn't have to be asked to leave, and he took the priest's place in Clichy. (*Le grand saint du grand siècle*, Coste I, 73).

Here as well, it was just a passing experience that lasted sixteen months, yet one that was among the most influential and most profitable of these black or gray years.

Vincent had been a priest for twelve years, and he'd never been involved in a pastoral situation; the only goal of running the boarding school in Buzet was to help him make ends meet. However, from a psychological point of view, in a time of depression or doubt, nothing is as effective and beneficial as success. Indeed, the sixteen months in Clichy were, in Vincent's opinion (which was important then for him!), a real success. The echoes of those months that he gives us are enthusiastic, and all the more remarkable at this stage.

It was a real case of love at first sight: "I was once a country Pastor (a pretty miserable Pastor!). I had such good people, who were so obedient in doing what I asked of them that, when I told them they should come to confession on the first Sunday of the month, they didn't fail to do it. They came to confession, and I saw from day to day the progress these souls were making. That gave me so much consolation, and I was so pleased with it, that I used to say to myself, 'Mon Dieu! how happy you are to have such good people!' And I would add, 'I don't think the Pope himself is as happy as a Pastor in the midst of such good-hearted people.' And one day Cardinal de Retz asked me, 'Eh bien! Monsieur, how are you?' I said to him, 'Your Eminence, I can't tell you how happy I am.' 'Why?' he asked. 'Because I have such good people, so obedient to all that I tell them that it seems to me that neither the Holy Father nor you, Eminence, are as happy as I am.'" (Coste IX, 507-508).

"In the midst of the people"... Vincent is again happy and at ease.

Despite this, he does not entirely abandon concern for his career, and while keeping the benefice from Clichy, he accepts a new offer through Bérulle: a position as tutor in the de Gondî family, one of the most influential families in the kingdom. He goes there. To tell the truth, it was without any real joy that he went back to high society, and he soon found himself subject to spiritual bombardments from a very scrupulous directee, Madame de Gondî.

In 1614 a long period of temptation against the faith began, in the course of which he devoted himself to reading the rule of perfection by Benoit de Canfield. He had the time to not rush his reading, because in 1615, he suffered a serious illness which affected his legs for the rest of his life. It was surely because of his poor state of health that,

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when he became treasurer and canon of the chapter of Ecouis in the Diocese of Rouen, receiving the benefice thanks to M. de Gondi, he delegated a procurator to take possession of it in his place on May 27. It is probable that Vincent de Paul did not remain canon at Ecouis very long. On October 29, 1616, he gave up the abbey of Saint-Léonard-de-Chaumes, which he had possessed for five years. The benefices that he had ardently sought weighed more heavily on him as he gradually understood the importance of the duties entailed and the need to live on site. He kept Clichy, which was close enough for him to still care for his flock.

From 1615 Vincent de Paul tended to direct the thoughts and activities of his directee toward poor people, and it seems he tried a therapy on her, which he would later use with well-known benefit for himself, for Louise de Marillac and for the ladies of the Confraternities.

Even only skimming through this period from 1610-1617, it seems to have progressed unevenly (which is the usual growth curve of crisis periods) and in a generally somber atmosphere.

As for what concerns ministries, if he didn't try everything, Vincent was at least concerned with many things: the honest retirement and return home first of all, then chaplaincy at the court of Queen Margot, the stay at the Oratory, pastoral ministry in Clichy, and tutor with the de Gondis – as if he didn't know what to do with his life!

On the moral level, he seems rather inconsistent: by getting rid, for example, of an important bequest, whereas on the other hand he accumulated benefices (Clichy, Saint-Léonard, Ecouis, not to mention the position as tutor that must have generated a good income).

In the area of faith, he knew great joy in Clichy, but then he had to confront long months of terrible temptations against the faith.

In terms of health, he experienced sickness and especially suffered from violent pains in his legs; although he was only 34 years old, at times he must have felt quite weakened.

So, we are far from the previous period: the intrepid and adventurous eldest son of Gascony has been taken over by an anxious, distraught

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man who doubts himself and even God! He didn't know where to go or what to do: it was the dark night of the soul.

However, on his journey, this was a valuable period: apart from the destitution-failure in which his faith and trust in God will be rooted, Vincent had three decisive experiences-acquisitions.

Resumption of contact with those who are poor. As chaplain to the Queen, he was primarily responsible for distributing alms, obviously to those who were poor. The Queen regularly had money distributed to the unfortunate at the charity hospital, where the patients were in a wretched situation, something which certainly troubled Vincent, knowing the predilection he would later show for the "sick poor". The gift of 15,000 livres that he received surely didn't allow him to relieve the suffering of many, and perhaps that made him discover the extent of the blight of poverty.

The revelation of Clichy was the only real joy of these seven years, the only real light in the night, the **first pastoral experience** of the priest Vincent de Paul: a priest is never as happy as among the people. This experience was also one of an **encounter with the laity**. Backed up by the later experience in Châtillon and by his memories of family, this double experience would not only lead to the birth of the Confraternities and Ladies of Charity, but it would also be the basis for the secular foundation of the Daughters of Charity.

The experience of being **spiritual director** to Madame de Gondi, a tormented, scrupulous, and demanding soul, also left a deep impression on this period. It was openness to those who were poor that would allow Madame de Gondi to regain her moral and spiritual balance. So, NIGHT, but a decisive and fruitful period. Vincent de Paul's spiritual journey stabilized; it appeared much more direct and certain than one would have thought, or than even he himself thought!
(to be continued)

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