

**Saint Vincent's
Spiritual Experience
and Our Own**

"Saint Vincent's Spiritual Experience and Our Own"

Published by the Preparatory Commission for the
Vincentian General Assembly of 1980; published in 1977.

Members of the Commission:

Luigi Betta, Rene Dulucq, Jose M. Sanchez Mallo,
Carey Leonard, Jean-Pierre Renouard, Ventura Sarasola,
Italo Zedde.

(First written in French; author not given. Translated
into English, translator not given.)

CONTENTS

Spirituality or Spiritual Experience	1		
Saint Vincent's Spiritual Journey	3		
CHAPTER 1			
Origins	3		
Birth and Environment	3		
St. Vincent's Childhood	4		
CHAPTER 2			
Journey Toward the Priesthood	5		
The Facts	5		
Interpretation of the Event	5		
CHAPTER 3			
Accused of Theft	6		
The facts	6		
Interpretation of the Event	6		
CHAPTER 4			
Temptation Against the Faith and Clichy	7		
Chaplain	7		
Temptation Against the Faith	7		
Interpretation of the Event	7		
Clichy	8		
CHAPTER 5			
Folleville and the Mission	9		
Interpretation of the Event	9		
CHAPTER 6			
Chatillon and "The Charity"	11		
The Facts	11		
Interpretation of the Event	11		
Developments	12		
CHAPTER 7			
Encounters and Influences	13		
The Return to Paris	13		
Marchais	13		
Interpretation of the Event	14		
CHAPTER 8			
Beginnings of the Congregation of the Mission	15		
Tentative Beginnings	16		
The First Grouping	16		
The First House of the Community	16		
Saint-Lazare	17		
CHAPTER 9			
The Work of the Church	18		
The Reform of the Clergy	18		
Interpretation of the Event	18		
The Tuesday Conferences	18		
Interpretation of the Event	18		
The Daughters of Charity	19		
Interpretation of the Event	19		
His Instinct for the Church	19		
His instinct for the Poor	19		
CHAPTER 10			
Developments	20		
Operating in Depth	20		
Helping the Devastated Provinces	20		
Interpretation of the Event	20		
The Council of Conscience	21		
Interpretation of the Event	21		
The Mission ad Gentes	21		
Interpretation of the Event	21		
Conclusion	22		
Key Threads in the			
Spiritual Experience of M. Vincent	22		
The Event, Source of Revelation and Action	22		
Saint Vincent's New "Spiritual" World	23		
The Vincentian Way	24		
Notes	25		
Select Bibliography	25		

SPIRITUALITY OR SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

An Attempt at Methodology

In thinking about spirituality and Saint Vincent, it is useful first to explain or even to disagree with, the word *spirituality* itself. A spirituality actually means an analysis and synthesis of a way of thinking, of a doctrine; an organized approach, if not a structured whole. This work is usually broached and developed by the person concerned in one or other of his writings.

Apart from his letters, Saint Vincent wrote very little, and he certainly made no attempt at a synthesis of his spirituality. (Even Chapter XII of the Common Rules is more than an analytical description of how a missionary should behave than an attempt at a synthesis.)

Because of this, we have only two ways of discerning the dominant ideas in what is called "our spirituality":

- Either we undertake the work of synthesis that Saint Vincent did not do and did not want to have done (he forbade even note-taking during his Conferences, XII, 446). This means that we extract some order, even if we draw the line at systematization, from his way of thinking and from his experiences; this involves the risk of unjustified projections and interpretations, not to mention guesswork.
- Or we lower our aim and look at his actual life, at the spiritual experiences that he himself has described, or which are explicit or implicit in his Conferences and letters.

It would seem to be the duty and the special task of Saint Vincent's disciples to follow up such spiritual experiences and to draw strength and inspiration from them, even though we cannot, strictly speaking, refer to a spiritual doctrine.

The only things we can refer to in the matter of spirituality is *the actual way Saint Vincent, in his daily life, followed Jesus Christ*, penetrating through to the core of whatever was happening.

This approach naturally raises some important questions for anyone who wants to come to grips with Saint Vincent. Our own mentality, our analytical method, even our very vocabulary are geared toward, and accustomed to, the study of a doctrine. As a result, we are always in danger—even unconsciously—of approaching Saint Vincent in this way, because of our training and through force of habit. Now there is no question here of a spiritual *doctrine*, but rather of spiritual experiences; this presupposes an entirely different approach. That is why, for example, instead of studying themes (Saint Vincent's faith, his virtues, etc.) we have to focus on *happenings* and interpret them; we have to look at key events in Saint Vincent's spiritual pilgrimage instead of at dominating ideas, at events that had repercussions of varying permanence and depth. (Examples of these would be Gannes, Chatillon, his encountering Saint Francis de Sales, Saint Louise de Marillac or Margaret Naseau.) So instead of presenting a clear, coherent and planned synthesis, we will retrace the development and progress, including a look at the feelers that were put out and the projects broken off, which are found in any such journey.

Against this background it will naturally be dangerous to separate or to isolate too boldly what were fused together in his person and in his life. We can, of course, make a distinction between what Saint Vincent said to his priests and what he said to the Daughters of Charity or to the Ladies of Charity, though we must not forget that it is always the same Saint Vincent and the same spiritual experience that is revealed. One could, for instance, draw up a full and exact idea of the ideal relationship between a priest of the Mission and Jesus Christ, or between a priest of the Mission and the poor, without any reference to Saint Vincent as he is found in his letters, in his Conferences to the priests and to the Daughters of Charity, or in his talks to the Ladies of Charity. It would be a serious mistake to limit ourselves in our spiritual study of Saint Vincent to the Conferences to the confreres and the Common Rules, even though it is necessary to give the main attention and emphasis to them.

So we opt for spiritual experiences, and by definition they are seen against the background of their own time. It is necessary in this study therefore, to pay the utmost attention to events, circumstances, context, dates and Saint Vincent's age at the time. For example, we have to avoid overemphasis on particular aspects just because we have more documentation from that period—everyone knows that the 1655-60 period is very fully documented. Without downplaying the importance of these documents, we must see them against the background of their own time and the overall picture of Saint Vincent's development; we must be careful not to reduce all Vincentian spirituality that is relevant to us to the commentaries on the Common Rules from the last two years of Saint Vincent's life.

The fact that Saint Vincent presents us with spiritual experiences and not a doctrine forces us to devise a new technique for tackling the task, and Saint Vincent himself seems to provide this new technique in his way of scrutinizing and interpreting events. This is clear in the passages where he recalls Folleville, Chatillon, the episode of theft, the story of the theologian, the Marchais Mission, and so on. In all these instances and in many others that Saint Vincent's life shows, we see *events* that he scrutinizes and interprets for himself and for us. It is here above all that Saint Vincent presents us with the key to his spirituality. In each of these cases he does, to a certain extent, the work we are proposing to do—he shows us how to approach and analyze his spiritual experiences, and how to participate in them.

This technique, suggested by Saint Vincent himself, will be found throughout this essay: the event first, then its interpretation.

SAINT VINCENT'S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

CHAPTER 1

ORIGINS

Vincent first saw light of day in April 1581 at Pouy, in the Landes. He was the third child of John de Paul and Bertrande Demoras, a farming family that eventually totaled four boys and two girls.

He was born and grew up in a France that was about four-fifths the size of present-day France. There were very few natural frontiers. The geographical unity was broken by the existence of some enclaves. The territory of the Counts of Vaucluse belonged to the Holy See from 1274 until 1791, and there were also the Spanish fiefs in Flanders and the area around Nevers.

It has always been difficult to estimate the population of 17th century France; it seems to have varied between 17 and 20 million. Wars, famine and epidemics made the total drop rapidly (perhaps sometimes to 14 million). For further statistics consult André Dodin¹ who mentions a 50% infant mortality rate, an average life expectancy of 20 to 25 years for the poor, 40 to 45 years for the better off. Epidemics and famines affected up to 40% of the population in certain provinces.

War raged everywhere. It was in Lorraine (1636-1745), Picardy and Champagne. Local uprisings disturbed the country (Lyons, 1633; Rouen, 1674). Later on came the Fronde (1649-1652).

Witchcraft, another product of poverty, haunted the country, ranging from possession to magic. In France there were condemnations of witchcraft until 1860. In addition to all this was a low level of education—75% of the men and 90% of the women were illiterate.

"Food is scarce and bad. Meat is a luxury. Vegetables, soup, maslin bread [made from wheat and rye sown and harvested together] for the country-folk, corn or rye bread for the better off and the nobility, formed the staple diet. There was, in fact, no alternative. There was not enough livestock, and the land, insufficiently manured and inefficiently ploughed, gave a very poor return. Every second year the land lay fallow. No sooner had an epidemic broken out than it was out of control, because of poor transport facilities."²

Political power was exhibited by continually fighting heresies (the St. Bartholomew's Night massacre in August 1572 and the siege of La Rochelle on November 1, 1628, for instance). The wars of religion were actually civil wars.³

What was the spiritual condition of the country?

The people wavered between Catholicism and Protestantism in the wake of succeeding waves of influence. And what about the clergy?

The Catholic Clergy

The Catholic clergy was politically powerful because of the revenue under its control. The clergy, as a body, was the country's largest landowner: it had its land under cultivation and received tithes. There were about 130 dioceses, 15 archdioceses, 152,000 churches or chapels, 40,000 convents, 266,000 men in Holy Orders and 181,000 men and women in religious communities.⁴

We should remember the difference between:

The Upper Clergy, who were dominated by benefices. There were dioceses held by children, such as the four-year-old Charles de Levis, or Henri de Verneuil, who was appointed to Metz at the age of 10½. In 1596 six or seven of the archdioceses and 30 or 40 of the dioceses were vacant. A further example should suffice: Cardinal de Sourdis supposedly had military power equal to that of the great Condé.

The Religious Orders: The Carthusians and the newly founded orders were the only ones not in need of reform. In others, there were scandals. Cases of immodestly dressed nuns away from their cloisters are recorded.⁵ In 1597 there were 120 abbeys in 25 dioceses without lawfully elected abbots. At the same time, we must not exaggerate—things that were normal at the time did not find a place in the archives.

The Lower Clergy were sometimes uneducated and licentious. Generally there were enough churches: 100 in Paris, with 10,000 priests. There were no priests (or very few) in the rural areas. The churches had neither confessionals nor pulpits.

The Protestants

Protestant clergy were very respectable and numerous. They had 700 churches and four famous academies: Saumur, Monteban, Sedan, La Rochelle.

Along with the clergy, two other well known classes, should be mentioned:

The Nobility, who had a fairly well-developed social conscience. They were well educated and realized that they had responsibilities toward the people. There were two types of nobleman: the feudal, created by the king; and the functional, because of the office held. The nobles were loaded with privilege (“de” in their names, titles, coats-of-arms, rights of precedence, certain tax exemptions, hunting rights).

While Saint Vincent was still a child the income of the nobles became inadequate and dueling reduced their number. Some adapted to respectable reduced circumstances, and others meddled in politics.

The Third Estate had three levels. The Middle Class included financiers such as the de Gondis, businessmen, doctors and lawyers. This class extended back to the reign of Louis XIII. The Craftsmen (self-employed, guild members) felt the effects of rising prices and were hounded by the state. The Farmers, without high living standards, remained workers, were good humored and content to have the land as their special portion.

Vincent’s family belonged to this latter category—he was from a farming background.

Saint Vincent’s Childhood

“Luxury, none; comforts, few; but no real poverty”⁶ is the description of the home in which young Vincent grew up.

How did he spend the day during his early childhood? He looked after herds of pigs and flocks of sheep. Later on he would say: “I was a swineherd.” We are told he led his animals to the Chalosse plain, wandering as far as Saint Sever, about 37 miles from Pouy.

Whatever the exact details, it is quite correct to speak of the “humble origins” of Saint Vincent; they colored his whole approach to life. At first he was reluctant to acknowledge his origins (XII, 432).⁷ He was, to use his own word, “ashamed” of his poorly dressed and slightly lame father. Later, mellowed by age and experience, he would willingly speak of the virtues and values of farming folk, presenting them as models and examples (XII, 170-71).⁸

Saint Vincent’s experiences, which will be discussed later, were already present in an embryonic stage in this rural environment. It could truly be said later that “the poor made Vincent discover himself; spurred on by meeting poverty, Saint Vincent recalled what he himself had been, where he came from, and he would refer to these facts as if they strengthened his convictions and allowed him to perceive more clearly.”⁹

CHAPTER 2

JOURNEY TOWARD THE PRIESTHOOD

Was it simply the rural practice of the age? Or was it an act of insight on the part of M. de Paul? He decided that his son Vincent should engage in some study. He sent him to Dax College, boarding with the Franciscans. The judge at Pouy, M. de Comet (a barrister at the law courts at Dax) became his protector and even entrusted him with the education of his children.

Was it M. de Comet who was responsible for directing Vincent toward an ecclesiastical career? The truth is that his vocation wasn't out of the ordinary. Father Dodin notes that "for country folk, the Church is the normal way towards a rapid rise."¹⁰

The facts and the dates give the impression of a rather crazy race toward priesthood. In 1596, at 15 years of age, he received tonsure and minor orders at Bidache (XIII, 1-2). On September 19, 1598, at 17, he was a subdeacon; on December 13 of the same year he was a deacon. He received the priesthood at age 20, from the hands of the old Bishop of Perigaux, François de Bourdeilles (September 23, 1600). Later, reliving this premature ordination, he was to confide: "If I had known what the priesthood was when I had the temerity to enter it, in the way I have since come to know it, I'd have preferred to till the soil rather than get involved in so formidable a state" (V, 568: VII, 463). The fact is that Vincent was a product of his age; the directives of the Council of Trent were far from being applied. This would have to wait until at least 1615.

As a priest, Saint Vincent received the parish of Tilh (in the Landes); but would never occupy it. As a student-priest in Toulouse, he held at the same time responsibility for a small seminary at Buzet until 1604. Then there came a period during which it was difficult to follow Saint Vincent (1605-1608) and at Paris (1608-1610).

Interpretation of the Event

Popular imagination readily shows young Vincent as devout and already at the summit of sanctity. The facts suggest another picture: **that of an ordinary well-behaved child, a pious adolescent and a young man in search of a benefice and an "honorable retirement."** His ambitions are limited, his horizons restricted. He doesn't yet know **what he is capable of. He needs to open the book of life and turn the pages of experience.** God writes straight with crooked lines . . . He also needs people.

CHAPTER 3

ACCUSED OF THEFT

The desire to live in Paris, as in our own day, brings up the problem of lodgings. Fortunately, Vincent found a "fellow countryman." He went and lodged with one of his compatriots, a judge from the locality of Sore (in the Landes). One day he was confined to bed with illness. A young chemist's assistant came to tend him and took money belonging to the proprietor. Vincent saw nothing and yet was accused of theft and thrown out. The judge even pursued him into the street and into the houses of friends.

His feelings were deeply hurt. He was treated like a robber, and this publicly. He even had to ask Father de Berulle for a few crowns to live on. Vincent was made the object of a warning which, according to custom, had to be read on three successive Sundays at the Sermon. Around him there sprang up complaints and suspicions: a dark, sad story that went on for at least six months.¹¹

Interpretation of the Event

It was at the moment when Saint Vincent was particularly anxious to make good contacts with a view to "honorable retirement" (I, 18) that this accusation cut him off from several hard-won contacts. Let us not forget that he was probably made the object of a warning (Cf. *Mission et Charite*, N° 29/30, p. 33). Almost 50 years later (June 9, 1656, XI, 337), Saint Vincent was to appreciate the full spiritual value of the happening: "God sometimes wishes to test people, and so He allows such things to happen." He was made to feel the injustice that is too often inflicted on the defenseless poor.

CHAPTER 4

TEMPTATION AGAINST THE FAITH AND CLICHY

Chaplain

After the unjust accusation of theft, M. Vincent retired to the Rue de Seira. He wanted to live, but for that he needed money. To make do, two means were currently in favor: acquire a benefice or find a job. On May 14, 1610, he was granted a benefice—Saint Leonard de Chaumes, in the diocese of Saintes. It was a false trail. When Vincent got there he met with total disappointment. All he could see was ruins, no monks, no habitable house. Life had slapped him again—he had been deceived, and debts had piled up.

He also sought a fixed job. A friend, M. Leclerc de la Forst, succeeded in finding him a place among the chaplains to Marguerite de Valois, Queen Margot. His entry was not brilliant. He passed through the trade entrance reserved for the numerous distributors of alms that the Queen had gathered around her for her spiritual peace. From this observation post he began his acquaintance with high society, with the rich.

"Having become a Parisian at the age of 27, Vincent de Paul, during a period of 53 years, will evolve in a world which can be called the 'Miracle Department,' a world where simplicity finds it hard to survive. The young Vincent must have gone very near to falling victim and becoming a civilised slave, centred on material goods, immobilised, anaesthetised by a highly circumscribed horizon."¹²

In 1611 Vincent had another formative experience: an encounter with a theologian or teacher of the faith. This man, whose life had slowed to inactivity, was devoured by doubts and scruples. Vincent found himself faced with his own double. In their common inactivity both chaplain and controversialist had become feverish. The first made a prescription for the other: temptation must be treated with scorn and disinterest, harmful inactivity must be counteracted by visiting the sick.

Temptation Against the Faith

The Chaplain to the de Gondis experienced a formidable interior drama. We know how it started: keeping up contact with the theologian, Vincent was not succeeding in bringing him peace. Arguments and advice having proved ineffective, he made a decision that entailed serious consequences. He generously told God he would take upon himself the doctor's temptations. The man was freed, but his director was overwhelmed as he began to experience the interior night and the "whirring buzz of doubts."¹³ Later the Superior General of the Mission would speak about this to his missionaries (XI, 32-33). Without mentioning his personal involvement, he used this example to moralize on inactivity: "which shows us in passing how dangerous it is to remain inactive, whether in body or in mind" (XI, 33).

What exactly happened? Was it depression? Rashness? "Nervous exhaustion," as Monsignor Calvet would have it?

Whatever it was, Vincent "became the helpless witness to his own spiritual decay. He saved himself only by vowing his whole life to the service of the poor."¹⁴

Interpretation of the Event

Vincent's faith was thus marked by this acute human crisis. The solution to it he found in the service of the poor, in the mystique of the poor. The price was three or four years of disarray and of interior darkness. Afterward Vincent became a model of faith. This was forged in the crucible of suffering. At the very moment of experiencing doubt and the attack of the evil spirit, he strengthened himself with decisive personal convictions:

Faith always springs from a double movement of impoverishment and enrichment. "You must therefore . . . empty yourself of the self, to put on Jesus Christ" he said to Anthony Durand who was made Superior at Agde at age 27 (XI, 342, 351). He drew constant inspiration from the Pauline doctrine of the life and death of Christ. His favorite scriptural texts were: Galatians 3, 26-27; Romans 6, 3-4; Colossians 11, 12.

One must leave oneself, give oneself. "Our whole task lies in action." In 1653, he said to the Daughters of Charity: "We must pass from affective love to effective love which is the exercise of works of charity, the service of the poor, undertaken with joy, constancy and love" (IX, 393).

Acceptance of the accusation of theft and his readiness to carry the burden of others brought a change in Vincent's being, his desires and his vision of things and men. Thereafter he not only looked at the poor—he also saw them.

From then on he no longer looked upon misery as an object, a defect or a malformation in others. He was no longer an indifferent spectator, but a person who was in communion with the misery of others through his whole being and the very direction of his life.¹⁵ He loved those in misery, but fought poverty like a plague.

Was Vincent converted?

Opinions differ. What is certain is that there was no abrupt turn in the Pauline manner. It is better to think of an evolution that developed more and more, reaching its peak in 1617. The purifying ordeal that he experienced led him to say "Yes" to the Lord in a total and generous gift. Grace broke in on him in a decisive fashion. He was re-created interiorly.¹⁶

The first 12 years of the priesthood of Saint Vincent seemed to take place off center from what would today be called pastoral care. He devoted himself to "private ministries." Saint Vincent thus found himself ill at ease (temptations against the faith; disillusioned tone of his letters home, etc.). For him this early experience of the priesthood seemed disappointing.

Clichy

It was then that Berulle offered him the care of Clichy (a rural parish of about 600 people), and Saint Vincent took possession of this parish on May 12, 1612. He was 31, and threw himself fully into the new experiences: repairs to the church, visits to people, foundation of a small school for clerics, catechism lessons, etc.

The exuberance of this experience stands out all the more clearly because it succeeded a period of unease. Saint Vincent seems to have taken stock of all the advantages of a real pastoral charge, directly on the spot. What he said about it allows us to think that this first experience left its mark for the future (IX, 646; III, 339).

" . . . I was a country Parish Priest. One day, Cardinal de Ratz asked me: Well, Father, how are you? I said to him: My Lord, I am so happy that I cannot attempt to describe it. I myself think that neither the Pope, nor even you, My Lord, could be as happy as I am." (It wasn't much earlier that Saint Vincent had aspired to a bishopric rather than to a small parish.)

From this first stage of Saint Vincent's pastoral experience, we can note that it enabled him to evaluate the advantages of the "direct apostolate" of a parish priest over the "private" ministries (direction of a boarding school, a chaplaincy, etc.) that had preceded it. From then on, he felt himself fulfilled and happy among poor people.

Honest Withdrawal

In September, 1613 (one year after his arrival), the young parish priest left his parish. Instability? Pressure from Pierre de Berulle? M. Vincent was trying to get his bearings. He became a tutor with the de Gondis, the family of the General of the Galleys.

There, Vincent was chosen as tutor for the two boys, Pierre and Henri (at the time when Jean François, later to be the famous coadjutor and archbishop of Paris, had just been born). Such was the "honest withdrawal": he had crossed the threshold of the rich. Apparently he had betrayed his background. Once again he got nowhere.

CHAPTER 5

FOLLEVILLE AND THE MISSION

On his arrival with the de Gondis, Vincent took charge of the spiritual direction of Madame, and busied himself with the servants of the household and the country people living and working on the de Gondi estates.

There he was, it might be said, back again in "private ministries" . . . but he had had a taste of the pastoral life. And it is among the country people of the de Gondi estates that he had his second important pastoral experience—and this time it was decisive.

What happened at Gannes-Folleville is well known (IX, 2-4; 169-171; IX, 58-59; XII, 7-8; 82). An old man "who seemed to have lived a good life" confessed to Saint Vincent "sins that he had never dared to tell in confession." At peace with himself, the old man told Madame de Gondi what had happened. "Ah, Sir, what is this?" she exclaimed, "What have we just heard? Very probably, most of these good people are in the same position. . . Ah, Monsieur Vincent, how many souls are being lost! What can we do about it?" and she asked Saint Vincent to preach on the topic the very next day.

The result of this sermon seems to have made as much of an impression on Saint Vincent as the event of the previous evening: ". . . All these good people were so touched by God that they all came to make a general confession. I continued to instruct them and to prepare them for the Sacraments, and I began to hear their confessions. But the crowd was so great that, even with another priest helping me, I could not attend to them all. Madame sent to ask the Jesuit Fathers of Amiens to come to help. . . Then we were in other villages belonging to Madame in this area, and our experience was the same. Everywhere great crowds, and everywhere God blessed our work. There you have the first sermon of the Mission."

Interpretation of the Event

Several remarks can be made on this event, as described by Saint Vincent:

1. One further step has been taken toward the priest of the Mission. Having appreciated the advantages of the direct pastoral ministry (Clichy) over "private" ministries, Saint Vincent now saw the advantages of Mission intervention as against the local ministry of the parish priest. For this old man of Gannes, not only was the parish priest not effective, but—certainly through no fault on his part—he turned out to be in a certain sense an obstacle. In his letter of June 1628 to Urban VIII, Saint Vincent made the point: ". . . The poor country people often die in the sins of their youth, because they were too ashamed to confess them to pastors or assistant pastors who knew them well" (I, 45). Missionary intervention does not have these drawbacks and, therefore, is seen as a necessary and worthwhile complement to the normal pastoral care.

2. This experience of missionary intervention very logically leads Saint Vincent to the idea of "Going from place to place." The concept is contained in the extract just cited: "Then we were in other villages belonging to Madame in this area. . ."

3. We note also in the extract the great importance given to preaching and, of course, to general confessions. The missionary, Man of the Word? We find at any rate, the format of the mission already in outline "to instruct them, to prepare them for the Sacraments, to hear their confessions."

4. Finally, we can see that at this very first experience of missionary intervention Saint Vincent had to call on others for help. Already he had to take account of the need of a fair number for this type of pastoral activity . . . all the more so as the help of the Jesuits proved too episodic (XI, 4-5), this work being contrary to their institute (XI, 171).

5. Vincent grasped what happened and learned from it. A twofold ignorance was revealed: that of the people, ignorance of the truths necessary for salvation, and that of the pastors, ignorance of the formula of absolution. He recognized a concrete decline in the faith.

To sum up: taking stock of the overall situation and of pressing needs, he acted. As a result of his Gannes-Folleville experience, he logically went on to organize:

The Missions and the Priests of the Mission¹⁷

The Works for Ordinands

The triple reform: of the clergy, of religious, of the episcopate

Saint Vincent always regarded this date as marking the beginning of his missionary work: "That was the first sermon of the Mission, and it was not without design that God gave it such success on that day, the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul" (XI, 4).

Later, to emphasize how providential was the beginning of the Mission, he would tell his missionaries: "Alas! Gentleman and my brothers, nobody had ever thought of it, nobody knew what Missions were. We never thought of them, we didn't know what they were. In that fact you can see that here is a Work of God" (XI, 169).

In concrete terms, Vincent started from an experience in life itself, and not from any theory about Mission. He recognized that it is love for the poor that explains the task before the Company of the Mission. "Come then, my brothers, and set ourselves to work with a new love in the service of the poor. Let us even seek out the poorest and the most abandoned (XI, 393).

Already, a constant line of approach of M. Vincent becomes apparent: When he has thoroughly grasped the meaning of an event and realizes that it coincides with God's will, it is then that he moves into action. For him, one must know how to wait "not to put an obstacle in the way of Providence" (I, 26-28; IV, 123) and then, on becoming certain, hasten to attend to the needs of the neighbor "as you would run to a fire" (XI, 31).

CHAPTER 6

CHATILLON AND THE CHARITY

As important an experience as Gannes-Folleville was, it seems that it was only one parenthesis in the life of Saint Vincent. Because he was first of all a tutor and spiritual director, his missionary activity depended more on Madame de Gondi and her lands than on the needs of the poor. From this came Saint Vincent's desire to leave his office as tutor in order to find the poor country people anew—but on a permanent basis.

An occasion presented itself: Chatillon-les-Dombes. Saint Vincent flew from the one so as to never leave the other. He was 36 years old. Saint Vincent remained at Chatillon barely five months, yet we are surprised at the amount and quality of the work he accomplished in so short a time. Just as at Clichy, it was an important and unforeseen experience for the future; it was the story of the foundation of the first Charity.

At Gannes-Folleville, as has been noted, it was evangelization and the making of a general confession that was important. Here, at Chatillon, it was material assistance that would be discovered as the greatest need and that would call forth an immediate missionary reaction.

In order to better understand this new decisive step in the Vincentian experience and vision, it is necessary to listen to Saint Vincent's own account (IX, 242-244) when he places the event directly in relationship to the foundation of the Daughters of Charity. In this, we note simply:

that the reaction of Saint Vincent was immediate (as much later in face of wars, famines, epidemics, etc.): "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 . . ."

As at Folleville, it was once more a sermon that unleashed a "stampede," not to the confessional this time, but to the isolated home of these unfortunates.

Here, in passing, we can form some idea of the effective and stirring eloquence of Saint Vincent; of his practice of using quite spontaneously the concrete happening as his starting point. As at Folleville, he knows how to speak to the poor and to touch their hearts; he will recall these pastoral experiences when he comes to draw up his Little Method.

that the rush to provide help, though generous and general, is unorganized: "We met on the road women who were ahead of us and, a little further on, others who were returning. And as it was Summer, and during the period of great heat, these good people were sitting on the side of the road to rest and refresh themselves. Finally, my Daughters, there were so many of them that you would have said it was a procession . . ."

that Saint Vincent called some kind of meeting to organize this assistance: ". . . there was question of seeing how they could be helped in their need. I proposed to all these good people, whom charity had inspired to go there, to come to an agreement that each one would take a day to make the broth, not only for these people, but for those who would come later . . ." And Saint Vincent ends his account in almost identical terms as that of Folleville: "And this is the first place where the Charity was established."

Interpretation of the Event

At Chatillon, another step forward seems to have been taken by Saint Vincent. The Missionary, entrusted with the "evangelization-confession" of the Poor, should be equally capable of dealing with—and immediately—pressing needs, and of providing organized material aid. In accomplishing this, the laity show themselves efficient and generous. We know that, from then onward, the majority of Missions led to the foundation of "Charities" for this purpose.

Finally, we can note that when founding these "Charities" Saint Vincent was more and more inclined to refer to the Bishops, from whom he very quickly sought authorization and approval of the first "Rules" (of the Charities).

Again, Providence gave a new twist to his life, and to that of many others as well. Held captive by his own psychology and by the signs of God, he welcomed the event and immediately committed himself.

Thereafter, a primary conviction inspired him: "No one can show himself disinterested in face of misery." The real sinner is the person who fails to recognize misery. We are all answerable for the poor.

However, a second certainty also inspired him: soul and body cannot be separated; to reach the soul, we must care for the body.

Everything must be undertaken simultaneously—on many fronts. Organization followed from his effective desire for action. What distinguishes essentially the life of a Saint who perceives, is action. We see him full of activities. "He persists, works passionately and, in most instances, starts from events which have imposed themselves on him. . . Whether it be 'the Mission,' or the Charities, or the work for the Foundlings, or the Conferences, no one of these apostolates involves the execution of a foreseen programme. These creations are only progressive improvisations. They live by the best of the heart which supplies them, they have the face of those whom they contemplate and make to live."¹⁸

Father Riquet, S.J., rightly remarks of him: "All his life, the realism of his charity will inspire him to unite scattered charitable activities with a view to their coordination, to subject them to concerted action, to execute them as projects methodically studied and adjusted as much towards needs as resources, the former being limitless, the latter limited."¹⁹

How is it that we have not already emphasized a dominant factor with Saint Vincent: the heart. He does not study dossiers; he sees the poor (cf. his letters to John Parre). He stirs people to action. Three hundred years later, a woman echoed this Vincentian approach: "We have to humanize techniques and make of them the bearers of the tenderness of Christ."²⁰

Developments

Saint Vincent very quickly established a link between Mission and the Charities—between the importance of the one and the need for the other. From the time of his return to Paris in 1617, his fundamental plan was to preach the Mission and to establish, at its close, a Charity that would follow the Rule of Chatillon.

From 1618 onward, there are a series of place names that mark the first victories won over misery and spiritual abandonment: Villepreux, Joigny, Montmirail, Paillart, Serevilliers, Macon.

At a later stage, decisions were made concerning the assistance to be provided for the foundlings, the refugees, the war victims, etc.

Such was the situation when, in 1619, M. Vincent was appointed Chaplain General of the Galleys. Concerned up to then with the poor and the sick, he found himself facing another form of misery. He became aware of other needs. This marked the start of diversification. From then on, Saint Vincent continuously adapted himself and his institutes and foundations as well, to every situation of poverty and injustice that he encountered.

CHAPTER 7

ENCOUNTERS AND INFLUENCES

The Return to Paris

The de Gondis formed a coalition to secure the return to Paris of their fugitive chaplain. M. de Serulle was so insistent that M. Vincent obeyed his orders. On December 23, 1619, Vincent met Francis de Sales. Immediately, a bond of mutual esteem and understanding sprang up between them. Francis shared the same preoccupations. Vincent read the works of Francis: *Introduction to the Devout Life* (1608), *Treatise on the Love of God* (1616). During April 1619, Mother Jane Francis Framiet de Chantal arrived in Paris, and on May first established the first monastery of the Visitation nuns in Paris, in a small house in the Faubourg Saint Marceau.

The three understood each other so well that they collaborated in appointing Vincent director of the Visitation nuns in the Paris monastery. Vincent gave evidence at the process for the Beatification of the Bishop of Geneva, and had a vision on the occasion of the death of Saint Jane, and signed her death certificate.

There also were others who left their mark on Saint Vincent; in the first place, Berulle, who gradually withdrew and became even hostile to some of his projects; then Andrew Duval, professor of theology at the Sorbonne, who was the real counselor of Saint Vincent and the newly formed Congregation. In the view of Father Dodin, "the influence which Duval exercised on and through Saint Vincent de Paul should engage our attention in a special way."²¹

We should also mention that Duval introduced the writings of Benedict of Canfield to Saint Vincent who, on occasion, was influenced by his "Rule of Perfection."

A friend of long standing superseded these influences: John du Vergier de Hauranne, Abbe of Saint-Cyran. Their mutual friendship lead them to share a common purse. They also shared the same reforming zeal. Their paths diverged when the teaching of Saint-Cyran became a danger to souls. Saint Vincent, however, always remained faithful to his friend and testified in his favor before the ecclesiastical court (XIII, 86-93).

All this merely indicates that the spiritual milieu of the first part of the 17th century was not without its influence on Saint Vincent. A reader of spiritual works originating in Spain (Saint Teresa, Rodriguez, Grenada) or in Italy (Saint Charles Borromeo), he was, however, to be more appreciative of, and to adopt, the "insights," principles and practices of Berulle, Saint Francis de Sales, and the Jesuits, while reserving either to himself or to others the practical applications.

Marchais (1621-1622)

It was during the period when these influences were operative that Saint Vincent found confirmation of his own viewpoint. He has left us an account of it to encourage his missionaries in their vocation (XI, 34-37).

At Marchais, there was a Protestant who put to Vincent objections against the Catholic Church: the poor people were being lost and priests were not a bit concerned about it: "and perhaps you would find 10,000 of them in Paris who, nevertheless, leave the poor country people in this frightful ignorance as a result of which they are being lost. And you would try to persuade me that this is the work of the Holy Spirit! I shall never believe it" (XI, 34).

Vincent replied by pointing out: useless priests are not the Church.

A year later, he gave a Mission at Montmirail; the Protestant attended it. He saw the care given to instruction and he was so profoundly moved that he returned to the Faith.

Interpretation of the Event

And so we have confirmation of Folleville; Mission is necessary. The poor are abandoned. To the extent to which the Church will return to the poor, it will be the Church of God. It is necessary that the priesthood becomes the concrete expression of the Church. The priest is her effective mouthpiece for the poor. And thus M. Vincent put his finger on the imperative need for priestly renewal. Vincent, soon to reach his 40th year, was about to turn over a new page of his life. His many experiences gave him great sensitivity. "The wheat is ripe for the harvest." The hour of his great works had arrived. The time for his foundations had come.

CHAPTER 8

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION

So, Saint Vincent was now Principal of the College of the Holy Innocents and had a house of his own. From then on, matters progressed quickly, and on April 17, 1625, the contract for the Foundation of the Mission is signed (XIII, 197-202). This is a text that needs to be read very carefully; in practice, it sums up all the pastoral experience of Saint Vincent . . . and, at the same time, the "holy obstinacy" of Madame de Gondi.

Let us note as we read it through:

- the basic affirmation: "the poor people of the countryside . . . alone remain abandoned";
- defining the Mission: "to engage oneself totally and solely in work for the Salvation of these poor people, traveling from village to village (intervention, journeying) at the expense of their common purse, to preach to, instruct, exhort and catechise these poor people, and to bring them all to make a good general confession of their whole past lives, receiving no stipend or reward of any kind or description whatsoever for this . . ."
- renunciation "both of work in cities and of all benefices, offices or positions of honour in the Church."
- the important qualification: "under the direction of the Bishops, each within the boundaries of his own diocese."
- our first official name: "under the designation of the Company, or Congregation, or Brotherhood of Fathers or Priests of the Mission."
- finally, let us note the conditions laid down by Monsieur and Madame de Gondi:
M. Vincent must, within one year, choose six ecclesiastics, or "whatever number the present foundation can support." That Vincent "must reside permanently and actually in their house (i.e., in the Gondi household), to continue to give them and their family that spiritual help which he has given them for many years in this way . . ."

Let us also note in this text the clear reference to living in common; the reference to work for the galley slaves and "helping the parish clergy."

It seems quite clear that in this first official document referring to the Mission there is, indeed, a great deal of Saint Vincent and a certain amount of Madame de Gondi. The Principalship of the College of the Holy Innocents was to become an important step toward the independence of the Mission but, as we have seen, Saint Vincent himself, by the very terms of the contract, was to remain attached to the family and household of the Gondis, and in that way the Mission itself also remained tied to them.

Two months later, on June 22, 1625, Madame de Gondi died. She left a substantial legacy to Saint Vincent, but begged him "for the love of our Lord and his holy Mother, never to leave the Gondi household, even after the death of the General of the Galleys." Monsieur de Gondi himself, however, restored his freedom to Saint Vincent who accordingly left the family and installed himself in the College of the Holy Innocents sometime between October 20 and December 22, 1625. There Anthony Portail rejoined him. The Mission stood on its own feet at last.

Tentative Beginnings

As we have seen, Saint Vincent already had some slight experience of priestly community life, as parish priest (of Chatillon) and as a missionary on the Gondi estates. One thing remained wanting, which he came more and more to see as absolutely essential: stability. In 1617, the Jesuits had given him some passing help. After Chatillon, a certain number of "good priests" went about with him on his missions (B. Belin) . . . but all this appeared far too haphazard and uncertain to him, and we have already noted these two adverbs in the foundation contract: "to engage oneself *totally* and *solely* in work for the salvation of these poor people." It was not actually until 1626, after he had installed himself at the Holy Innocents, that Saint Vincent in fact experienced a stable Apostolic Community giving itself full time to the work of the Mission. This first experience must have made a strong impression on him, since we find him still talking about it in the warmest terms more than 30 years later, on May 17, 1658 (XII, 8):

"Father Portail and myself . . . took with us a good priest to whom we gave 50 crowns a year. So we used to go, all three of us, preaching and giving Missions, from village to village. Before leaving, we used to give the key to one of the neighbours, or ask them to sleep in the house at night. . . . This is what *we* did, for our part, and God at that time did what He foresaw from all eternity. He did not leave our work without His blessing and, on seeing this, good priests joined us, and asked to become part of us. . . ."

For the first time three priests gave themselves permanently to the work of giving Missions and truly constituted an Apostolic Community that was conceived and lived for "preaching and giving Missions."

And let us notice once again that, for Saint Vincent, it was the witness of this first Apostolic Community, this Mission Community that attracted the first vocations to the Mission: "on seeing this, good priests joined us and asked to become part of us. . . ."

The First Grouping (September 4, 1626)

In less than a year, this experience of Apostolic Community showed itself rich enough and definitive enough to be codified in a first "Act of Association" (September 4, 1626; XIII, 203-205). It should be remembered that the Foundation contract required Saint Vincent to assemble, within the year, six ecclesiastics to preach Missions.

This Act was signed by M. Vincent (age 45), Father Anthony Portail of the diocese of Arles (age 36), Father Francis Ducoudray of Amiens (age 40) and Father Jonn de la Salle, also of Amiens (age 28). These four signatories bound themselves "to live in common after the manner of a Congregation, Company, or Brotherhood, and to work for the salvation of the poor people of the countryside."

Here, before the vows and all other formalities, was the first constitutive bond of the Community. Indeed, it is very interesting to note and to underline that, in practice, the admission of the first three confreres was thus brought about through the signing of a contract by which they bound themselves to live in common to work for the salvation of the poor.

We may note, further, that even though the pastoral purpose of this "Association" is clear, its juridical form remains somewhat vague: "after the manner of a Congregation, Company or Brotherhood."

The First House of the Community (September 1627)

In order to exist, to own property, etc., the new Association had to have royal approval. Letters Patent of the King, dated May 1627, officially recognized this "Society and Congregation" and granted it all civil rights pertaining to such bodies. Saint Vincent quickly took advantage of these and transferred the ownership of the College of the Holy Innocents from his own name to that of the "Society or Community of the PRIESTS of the MISSION." We have the three documents by which this transaction was carried through, dated respectively, June 8, July 15 and September 15, 1627 (XIII, 208-216).

In these texts we may note the following points:

- The “juridical” description is still somewhat vague. As in the Foundation contract, reference is still made to a “society,” to a “community,” to a “congregation.” By contrast, the qualifying description “of the PRIESTS of the MISSION” seems to be definitively imposed. We find it repeated several times. It would appear that, for Saint Vincent, FUNCTION is still much clearer in his mind than STATUS.

- We note, too, that in these texts two new names make their first appearance: John Becu (of Amiens, age 35) and Anthony Lucas (of Paris, age 26). From then on, Saint Vincent had with him at Holy Innocents five priests and John Jourdain.

- Finally, we note that Saint Vincent had the title of “Superior of the Congregation or Society of the Mission.”

This period, from 1626 to 1628, thus seems clearly marked by the experience of a stable Apostolic Community. First three, then five priests banded together to preach missions and live in common, under the direction and “superiorship” of Saint Vincent. One layman had entered the Community, and all lived in a house of the Community. Mission work was thus guaranteed and, quite clearly, it was this above all that mattered most to Saint Vincent, and all the more strongly guaranteed for having come about by common agreement and in its own time (totally and solely).

By contrast, the “juridical definition” of the Association remained vague, and was Congregation, Brotherhood, Company, Society, or Community. The time came when, during the long and difficult negotiations with Rome, this had to be precisely determined and codified.

Saint-Lazare

In 1632 came the taking over of the Priory of Saint-Lazare, a great area of church property of some 75 acres in all.

This was, in every way, a truly important stage in the development of the Mission. From then on, M. Vincent had a social center, a command post, necessitated by the growing number of confreres. The income from the priory was a great help toward maintenance. The activities of the Community could then be multiplied. True, the “good old days” of life at Holy Innocents (acquired in 1624) were over. Life became less spontaneous, more regimented. At that time, too, the first missionaries began to put on paper the advice given by M. Vincent. All felt it strongly: the organization of the common life had received its definitive framework. Shared experience was moving toward a fixed form that was to be finalized in 1658 with the distribution of the Common Rules.

Monsieur Vincent was 51 years old.

CHAPTER 9

THE WORK OF THE CHURCH

The name of M. Vincent is associated with the Counter-Reformation of the Church through the reform of the clergy. The work accomplished, linked with that of other men (Berulle, Bourdoise, Olier), was immense.

On a journey in 1628, Vincent met the Bishop of Beauvais, Monsignor Augustine Potier. They had one pre-occupation in common: the urgency of careful choosing of candidates for the priesthood and, above all, of careful preparation for them. A tentative start was planned: M. Vincent came to preach a retreat for Ordinands at Beauvais during the September Quarter.

The experience was so successful that it became contagious. On February 21, 1631 an order of J.F. De Gondi required these ordination retreats for all the Parisian candidates for Orders. And one more time Vincent saw just what was needed. In this way he prepared the way for the creation of seminaries. At his death, his congregation would be in charge of some 18 seminaries.

Interpretation of the Event

We should recognize the request of the Bishop of Beauvais as an instrument of Providence. On his side, Vincent was convinced by the missions of the deficiencies of the clergy and probably foresaw the remedy. It is one of the clearest cases of the sense of Vincent's readiness as he waited for the calls of those who would be the instruments of the will of God. Also, we should take into account that this work on behalf of the clergy was not a matter of a break, or a change of orientation, but indeed a development of the initial work of the missions.

The Beauvais episode as well as some others have led some historians to believe—too simply—that Saint Vincent confused the will of God with experience. Clearly, Vincent was preoccupied with the desire to align his will with that of God, and to do this he made the effort to discern the call (spoken by people, the poor in the largest sense, and by the "legitimate leaders," "the prophets" or the events (signs of the times).

The Tuesday Conferences

The house was already full. On the suggestion of an ordinand, Vincent saw even farther: he decided to bring together priests who desired to live their vocation fully. In July, 1633 the first meeting at Saint-Lazare was held. Thereafter, each Tuesday the Parisian clergy met with M. Vincent. At the time of his death, 250 men would benefit from these encounters: 22 would become bishops. One name would ring like a gong: Boussuet.

This was "the Tuesday Conference": it would itself give missions. Isn't this the birthplace of ongoing clergy formation?

Interpretation of the Event

Here we see the call coming from "the poor" themselves: those who felt themselves to be spiritually deprived, concerned about maintaining their own devotion and zeal. The readiness of Saint Vincent is evident; recognizing in the call of the young clerics a manifestation of the will of God and desirous, in a concern for efficaciousness, to form a permanent group, he organized the Tuesday Conferences. This institution was not, we very quickly understand, an absolute novelty, it is the work for the ordinands that it which it continues and strengthens.

The Daughters of Charity

The great realism of Monsieur Vincent soon made him conscious of vast needs in another area. The demands made on the Charities were many and pressing. The good will of the Ladies was no longer enough, and they lacked the requisite expertise. In some instances they availed of the assistance of their servant girls.

God again beckoned to him. Two women came his way who encouraged him to drive further the furrow of charity. The first, Louise de Marillac (Mademoiselle Legras), knew him since 1624. Troubled, anxious about her son Michael, this widow listened docilely to the advice of her director, Monsieur Vincent, who did his best to ease her tensions. Thanks to him, her life was transformed, and she became his representative in organizing the Charities. She visited them to encourage and see how they were functioning. They had a common interest: the poor.

The second woman to come his way was the typical Daughter of Charity, that "fine country girl" Marguerite Naseau. Her desire, as M. Vincent said, was "to be at this work" (IX, 456), that is, in the service of the poor. Others wished to do the same.

Saint Vincent found himself at a point of decision with regard to both. He suggested to Mademoiselle Legras that she should take charge of these girls from rural areas. The new association was formed "without anyone planning it." It happened "almost imperceptibly" (IX, 209). When the Daughters of Charity set themselves up as a Community in 1633, the Procurator who ratified the Institute stressed, "This is without precedent." Now for the first time a founder launched his Daughters onto the high seas of Charity.

This enterprise of Vincent was original and unique. He was wholly opposed to the servants of the sick becoming a religious order, a step equivalent to "the last anointing" (X, 658) for this community.

Interpretation of the Event

This step was a significant one. Once again, there was no prior planning. It was the follow-up, the flowering one might say, of what had been done before. Experience taught Saint Vincent that all this good will needed professional and spiritual formation. This was what prompted him to set up a structure that at first was flexible, but became less so as time went on. Time and the lessons of life led Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, who interpreted success as a sign of divine approval, to form a community with a definite structure and hierarchy.

His Instinct for the Church

The previous description of his activities reveals in a striking manner Monsieur Vincent's interest in organic wholes. His foundations, the reform of the clergy, and the Tuesday Conferences, all entailed meetings and formation of groups of men and women. At a stroke his personal experience of the real world disclosed to him a needy and sinful humanity. His insight was that the people of God are inseparable from the mystery of the life and death of Christ. The church, as it existed for him, was "that vast fraternity of the Children of God, beginning with the lowliest."²² It was the world of the needy. His disciple, Boussuet, referred to it as "the city of the poor."²³

His Instinct for the Poor

It is clear that Monsieur Vincent was imbued with a single interest: the bringing of the Gospel to the poor. His whole life was polarized by the presence of the poor. Certainly he considered poverty as a scourge to be eliminated, as a scandal and an evil to be overcome. Yet he was equally aware that poverty is the mystery of coming closer to Christ, that it is the royal road to Him. Only through poverty does one understand the poor and abandoned Jesus Christ.

Vincent made the poverty of Christ his own. His room was of the simplest, his clothing of inferior quality, his diet frugal: "Oh wretched man! You did not earn the bread you eat!" Tirelessly, however, he spent 16 hours in work and prayer each day. God and the poor fuse in the image of Christ the simple and gentle countryman. Christ the poor man is represented by the poor. His choice was definitive, and opened up to him the way to holiness.

The Council of Conscience

After the death of the King, the Council of Conscience was set up. Anne of Austria appointed M. Vincent to it. At 63 years of age, "the range of his activity sweeps our breath away."²⁴ His influence was considerable. Between 1643 and 1653 Vincent intervened on moral questions, in the nomination of Bishops, in the bestowal of benefices. He took political initiatives with the Queen and Mazarin to try and open the way for peace. He was, in the phrase of Pere Costa, the "linchpin of the Assembly." He was even, for a time, its Recorder.

Interpretation of the Event

Here the logic of the situation is similar to that of the Beauvais meetings (1628) (II, 448) and the Tuesday Conferences (1653). His position on the Council of Conscience allowed Vincent to have some influence with regard to the selection of those Bishops who would ordain priests capable of evangelizing the poor. As always, his ultimate purpose was missionary: the poor and the clergy. "To work for the salvation of the poor country people is central to our vocation, and all the rest is directed towards this end. For we would never have taken on the work for ordinands and seminaries, if it had not been judged necessary to have good ecclesiastics in order to maintain the good results of the Missions—just as the great conquerors placed garrisons in the places they captured to avoid losing again what they had taken so much trouble to gain" (XI, 133).

The Mission ad Gentes

In his later life, M. Vincent's horizons continually expanded—he went international. Not content with helping the Daughters to find their second breath in order to bring assistance to the distressed provinces, he also broadened the activities of his Missionaries. They found new resources of energy when their founder calmly sent them to Barbary (Tunis 1645 and Algiers 1646) and to Madagascar in 1648. Some died shortly after they arrived. M. Vincent replaced them, generated enthusiasm for the missionary effort, was annoyed when the difficulties and the deaths gave rise to the "good sense" suggestion that it should be abandoned. Quite the contrary, he chose his best men for missionary work and remained convinced that each one should consider as addressed to himself the call of the poor from distant lands. In this view, every missionary should be in full readiness to answer this call.

Interpretation of the Event

For Saint Vincent, the Mission ad Gentes fit perfectly into the logic of what had happened at Gannes and Châtillon. Following the example of Christ, it is a question of bringing the good news to the poor, "to those most abandoned." It is quite natural that moving from one abandoned person to the next, he finally ended up with the "far distant poor," those in Barbary and Madagascar.

He went even further: the readiness "to leave all" became the touchstone of a missionary vocation. He himself was ready to give the first example: "Even I, at my advanced age, should not be lacking in this readiness to go as far as the Indies in order to win souls for God, even if it means that I should die on the journey or on board ship" (III, 285).

CHAPTER 10

DEVELOPMENTS

Operating in Depth

Once the doors were opened and the guidelines laid down, Monsieur Vincent dug his heels in—in a humble and patient way. The Congregation of the Mission took root, and houses were founded: Toul (1635), Agen (1637), Troyes-Richelieu-Lucon (1638), Annecy (1640).

The first house was established outside Saint-Lazare was Toul.

Hitherto the missionaries had been visitors from afar (it was ten years from the beginning). Saint Vincent realized that, for the benefit and effectiveness of the missionary work, there had to be a base closer to where the action was.

There was no absence of difficulties but Saint Vincent, convinced “before God” that Providence wanted the missionary work to develop in this fashion, decided that his confreres at Toul should devote themselves to retreats for ordinands, as well as to Missions. Both works were considered as essential from that time onward for the priests of the Mission. The difficulties encountered at Toul (running the hospital and keeping the local clergy satisfied) were a great help to Saint Vincent when it came to discussing preliminary contracts for later foundations in the provinces.

The Daughters of Charity were also expanding. Between 1638 and 1643, a number of new foundations were opened. In 1638, Saint Vincent was involved in a new project, the care of foundlings. The activities of M. Vincent had become nationwide, and it is therefore not surprising that he was at the bedside of the dying Louis XIII on May 14, 1643.

Helping the Devastated Provinces

In 1639 help was sent to Lorraine. The “call” of the poor was again to be found underlined here. News arrived at Saint-Lazare of countless people dying of hunger and misery. Saint Vincent sent missionaries. At the same time he obtained money from the Ladies of Charity, spread the news about the existing misery and also informed people about what was being done (charitable bulletins). His practical ability to care and help was again put into action. Very quickly a complete organization was working in unison—Missionaries, Daughters of Charity, lay helpers. The same “system” went into operation soon afterward when Picardy and Champagne were ravaged by war. Material aid was to be supplemented, whenever possible, by spiritual aid. Later, during the civil war of the Fronde, 1642 until 1649, when the Ile de France was devastated by fighting and troop movements, Saint Vincent had a further opportunity to exercise the same charitable zeal. In this last case, he was even officially appointed by the authorities to direct the whole charitable operation.

Interpretation of the Event

This new enterprise of Saint Vincent, repeated many times, was directly in line with Chatillon. Once again he responded to the call of some situation requiring material help, some pressing need. It was the logic of charity at work. The call was for him a concrete manifestation of Providence, the will of God clearly expressed. It resulted in extremely practical tasks being given to his missionaries. They became stretcher-bearers, nurses, grave-diggers. Corporal help came before spiritual help, but the latter was not neglected.

In this particular case, one is again struck by the extraordinary flexibility of Saint Vincent, who stretched his institutional resources to match the need of the moment. One is there to serve the other, and no established structure or personal situation could consider itself beyond the call to serve charity in action (VIII, 237).

CONCLUSION

When M. Vincent went into action, freed from all human ties, desiring only to fight misery and make Jesus Christ known, his activity flowed over in its generosity. Nothing could stop him. The Charity of Christ pressed on him. We are left breathless, silent. He recovered his breath and continued on his way, unperturbed, animated only by the Holy Spirit. His was to die in the front line. Six years before his own death, he wrote to one of his priests, rejoicing in the success of his confrere: "I have to tell you quite simply that this fills me with the desire, even with all my ailments, to end my days under a hedge while at work in some small village. I think I would be very happy if it pleased God to give me this grace" (V, 203-204).

The Master had decided otherwise. He came to greet him at Saint-Lazare, resting in his armchair, early in the morning of September 27, 1660.

KEY THREADS IN THE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE OF MONSIEUR VINCENT

Some Reflections on Saint Vincent's Spiritual Experience

To round off this review of Saint Vincent's spiritual experiences, it is possible to isolate and underline some constants and certain directions that can characterize what we call today "Vincentian Spirituality."

For Saint Vincent, the event was a sign from God that became a special sign—particularly clear and imperative—when this event directly concerned the poor. This is, it would seem, an echo of 1617, a year that had a profound impact on Saint Vincent's spiritual outlook, right up to the time of his death. It is known that before 1617, Saint Vincent, plagued by doubts, sought consolation in the writings of Benedict of Canfield, in questioning and following Berulle, in various ministries, etc. At this point two contacts with the poor occurred that truly reestablished his relationship with God and again gave meaning to his life. Thereafter, Saint Vincent's spiritual antennae were attracted and alerted by events, particularly those that concerned the poor. It was at this level that from then on was located the Vincentian "theological standpoint," the Vincentian sphere of "theophanies," or as he himself put it after the Marchais mission, "there is to be verified the guidance of the Holy Spirit" (XI, 37).

God regularly met Saint Vincent and revealed his will to him through and in events concerning the poor. This type of relationship was eminently suited to the active temperament of Saint Vincent, because the will of God is, in a sense, manifested on the same level as its execution. Hence the extraordinary continuity that is typically Vincentian: continuity between Gannes and Folleville, or between the discovery of the sick family at Chatillon and the establishment of the first Charity. God's revelation and the action that resulted from it seem to be woven from the same thread.

This continuity, or this extraordinary "short cut" between the revelation of God and its practical application between faith and action explain—among other things—the delightful difficulty of Saint Vincent when he talked about the origins of his foundations. Revelation and action appeared to him—with hindsight—so close and overlapping that the participants became so blended, making it practically impossible for him to situate the moment of his own intervention. Much more than humility is involved in this instance.

An echo of this continuity is to be found in Saint Vincent's reasoning for overlooking apparent incompatibilities between the duty of religious practice and the demands of service of the poor. Saint Vincent was so convinced of the presence of God in the poor that he was no longer conscious of any break in continuity between prayer or the Eucharist and the service of the poor.

The "leaving of God for God" is perhaps the richest and most faithful expression of what is called the spiritual experience, or even the spirituality, of Saint Vincent because it reveals best the actualization of his faith and the link between faith and service, faith and action.

Saint Vincent was so accustomed to this continuity, to this direct path from God's self-manifestation in events, and in the poor, to involvement, action and service, that he came to show an instinctive distrust of any, even the most noble, diversions between faith and action. He had little trust for a God who only reveals Himself "in pleasant conversations and interior practices however good and desirable," but nevertheless highly suspect (XI, 40-41), just as he greatly distrusted a solution that does not call for action, but stops short at affective love.

Saint Vincent's New "Spiritual" World

We have seen how the events of 1617 profoundly and definitively marked Saint Vincent. The privileged occasion of his encounter with God and the special moment of clarity in his life, was the event that put him in contact with the poor. Certainly his faith was nourished on the "ordinary Christian teaching," and he knew how to speak of God, Jesus Christ, the Church, the Sacraments, the virtues and holiness, in much the same way as did all the spiritual masters of that time, but after 1617, he seems to have lived very much in a new spiritual world, where the relations with God, with Christ, with the Church and with the world, were of a new type, geared toward action, toward action on behalf of the poor.

This is why, for example, in treating of God, his approach became very dynamic and action-oriented. The three lines of approach that he preferred are: Providence, the Presence of God, the Will of God . . . three themes, three lines of approach that allowed him to present God as intervening in human affairs and constantly involved in events—as at Folleville and Chatillon.

Of the three, he preferred the "Will of God" because it is the approach best anchored in the present and the most likely to lead to action. "The practice of the presence of God is very good, But I believe that the practice of doing God's will in all things is even better, because it includes the other" (XI, 319).

The same selective—some will say even simplistic—approach is to be found in his attitude to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God incarnated in the history of man, eminently concerned, involved and active in this history. Jesus Christ is the missionary from the Father, and it as the model missionary that Saint Vincent was again selective: he made a choice all the more dynamic and action oriented in that it is so precise: Jesus Christ is the missionary of the poor: "And if our Lord were asked: "For what did you come on earth?" the answer would be "To help the poor." Anything else? "To help the poor" (XI, 108).

This may appear simplistic by reason of the simplification and synthesis involved, but it is quite simply the Gospel message as received and interpreted by the Saint Vincent of 1617. It is Luke IV, 18, relived at Gannes and later at Marchais. This type of eclecticism in interpreting the Gospel and contemplating Jesus Christ can certainly be designated—together with the continuity between revelation and action and the theophanistic value of the "event"—as the main strands of Vincentian spirituality (taking into account, of course, the nuances to be applied to such terminology).

This precise and selective attitude toward Jesus Christ is again to be found in Saint Vincent's penchant for "the maxims of the Gospel" that are, as it were, the instructions of Jesus Christ, the missionary, for the missionaries of today, and also in the imitation of Jesus Christ as Saint Vincent saw it. This is not just any kind of imitation, but a quasi-functional imitation of Jesus Christ, sent to evangelize the poor.

He had a similar approach regarding the mystery of the Church. Saint Vincent certainly knew the theology of Trent on the subject, but here again he appears to interpret it in the light of 1617. He retained, by choice, all the images that suggest evangelization: the vine, the field, the workman. For Saint Vincent the Church is a vast enterprise (in the good sense) for the evangelization of the poor. Just as Christ came for this alone, so the Church, which is to carry on his work, can have no other reason, nor can its members from the pope to the laity: the pope is the one who says "Go" (I, 309). The priests are first of all missionaries to the poor (XII, 87), and the laity, in this respect, are just as responsible as the priests (XII, 375-376).

This typically Vincentian line of approach to God, Jesus Christ and the Church, in the light of 1617, evidently and logically colored Saint Vincent's treatment of holiness and the path to be followed by the men and women who wish to follow in his footsteps.

There is question, first of all, of adapting our point of view to the experience of 1617, and then of discovering this new relationship to God, Jesus Christ and the Church through a link with the poor. We know that Saint Vincent himself believed that he could sum up the Vincentian way insofar as it concerns us in the five virtues that he calls the five faculties of the soul: simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification and zeal.

The Vincentian Way

In the Footsteps of Jesus Christ, the Missionary of the Father

After 1617, Saint Vincent regarded Jesus Christ first and foremost as the One sent by the Father, the Missionary sent to the Poor (Isaiah 61,1: Luke IV, 18). From then on his own task and that which he gave his community, was to carry on and continue this mission of Christ, and—quite naturally—it was the “missionary” attitudes and virtues of Christ that he emphasized and proposed to his disciples.

And thus it is that he retains “as the faculties of the soul of the Company”: simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification and zeal.

In his Conferences, Saint Vincent presented these virtues in much the same way as did the other spiritual masters of his age, but what characterizes his presentation is a certain insistence on the practical aspects (what Saint Vincent often calls “usefulness”). These five virtues, contemplated in Jesus Christ the Missionary, are above all else means toward a better evangelization of the poor. They are “professional” virtues.

Simplicity. “Now, my brothers, if there are any people in the world who should possess this virtue, it is Missionaries, for our entire life is spent in performing acts of charity either towards God or the neighbour. And for both, it is necessary to act with simplicity. . .” (XII, 302).

Humility: “Here is the second maxim absolutely necessary for Missionaries: for pray tell me, how can a proud man adjust himself to poverty? Our end is the poor, people who are unpolished; now if we cannot adjust to them, we will not be of any service to them whatsoever” (XII, 305).

Meekness: “A Missionary needs forbearance in his relations with externs. The poor people whose confessions we hear, so uncouth, so ignorant. . . . If a man hasn’t the gentleness to bear with their uncouthness, what will he achieve? Nothing at all; on the contrary, he will dishearten these poor people who, on seeing this, will be discouraged and unwilling to return to learn those things necessary for salvation. Forbearance, then, is demanded on our part” (XII, 305).

Mortification: “When we go on a mission, we do not know where we shall stay or what we shall be doing; we shall have to deal with different circumstances than those we expected, for Providence frequently upsets our plans. Who, then, does not see that mortification must be an integral part of a missionary in his dealings not only with the poor, but also with retreatants, ordinands, convicts and slaves? Because if we are not mortified, how can we endure what must be endured in these various works?

“Poor M. Le Vacher, of whom we have heard no news, who is living among poor slaves who are in danger of death from the plague and, in all probability his brother lives just as dangerously, how can these missionaries look on the sufferings endured by those whom Providence has entrusted to their care without feeling them themselves? Let us not deceive ourselves, my brothers, missionaries need to be mortified” (XII, 307).

Zeal: “. . . is the fifth maxim which consists of a pure desire of rendering oneself agreeable to God and *useful to the neighbour*. Zeal to extend God’s empire, zeal to procure the salvation of the neighbour. Is there anything in the world more perfect? If the love of God is a fire, zeal is its flame; if love is a sun, zeal is its rays” (XII, 308-308).

NOTES

1. Cf. for a general picture: A. Dodin, *Saint Vincent de Paul et la Charité*. Collection "Maîtres Spirituels"—Seuil, 1960.
2. Op. cit. p. 6.
3. L. Prunel, *La Renaissance Catholique en France au XVI^e à siècle*. Desclès et Picard—Paris, 1928.
4. A. Dodin, op. cit. p. 8.
5. Angélique Arnauld was, in 1602, an abbess at the age of 11: she made her religious profession two years earlier. Prunel, op. cit. p. 12.
6. A. Dodin, op. cit. p. 11.
7. See the article by A. Dodin in *Mission et Charité*, n° 4, pp. 409-416.
8. *Cahiers Vincentiens*: Chaier n° 2 "Les Pauvres"—"Les humbles origines de Saint Vincent."
9. Id, p. 3.
10. A. Dodin, op. cit. p. 14.
11. A. Dodin in *Mission et Charité* n° 29/30: "Saint Vincent de Paul, mystique de l'action religieuse"—p. 33.
12. A. Dodin in *Mission et Charité* n° 29/30: art. cit. p. 31.
13. A. Dodin, *Saint Vincent de Paul et la Charité*, p. 21.
14. A. Dodin, *La misère vue par M. Vincent* in *Mission et Charité*, n° 4, p. 417.
15. A. Dodin in *Mission et Charité*, n° 4, art. cit. p. 412.
16. A. Dodin in *Mission et Charité*, n° 1, p. 61.
17. A. Dodin in *Saint Vincent de Paul et la Charité*, p. 22.
18. In "Assemblés du Seigneur," n° 66: A. Dodin, "Un Père de l'Eglise moderne. Saint Vincent de Paul, apôtre et docteur de la Charité."
19. Father Riquet in *Messages du Secours Catholique*, n° 267, p. 13.
20. Mother Suzanne Guillemin, Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity, *Circulars*, p. 250.
21. See *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, art. Duval.
22. Cf. for a general picture of this development: *Las Chaiers Vincentians*, Cahier n° 4 on the Church, p. 2.
23. Cf. his sermon on "The eminent dignity of the poor."
24. A. Dodin in "Monsieur Vincent et la Charité"—p. 46.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A. Dodin, *Saint Vincent de Paul et la Charité* Collection "Maîtres Spirituels" E. du Seuil, 1960.
Second edition, 1976.
- A. Dodin, *Saint Vincent de Paul Les Maîtres de la spiritualité chrétienne*. Aubier, 1947.
- L. Collucia, *Spiritualité Vincenziane, spiritualité dell'azione*, Rome 1975. (Thesis presented to the Lateran University)
- I. Zedde, *L'evangelizzazione dei poveri secondo S. Vincenzo de'Paoli*, Rome, 1972. (Extract from a thesis presented to the Gregorian University)
- Numbers 1-36 of *Mission et Charité* articles of A. Dodin (especially numbers 1, 3, 4, 13-14, 26-36.
Semana de Estudios Vicencianos—Salamanca. In particular, those of 1974 and 1975. Ed CEME.

PROPOSITIONS

inspired by the study entitled

Saint Vincent's Spiritual Experience and Our Own

and submitted to each confrere for his consideration

My Dear Confrere:

Here are some specific propositions for the 1980 General Assembly. They have been worked out from this study on *Saint Vincent's Spiritual Experience and Our Own* with the definitive redaction—and improvement—of our Constitutions in view.

1. Do you agree with each of these propositions?
2. And if not, why?

Thanking you in advance for the courtesy of a reply.

Members of the Preparatory Commission

Some Fundamental Propositions

1. *Won over by the poor*

Already a priest for 17 years, it was only in 1617 that Saint Vincent radically changed his plans and his way of fulfilling his priestly ministry—and this as a result of encountering the poor (XII, 7-8, 208-210).

To be a Priest or Brother of the Mission is first of all to share in this experience of 1617 by accepting that the poor of today have a claim on our life, our ministry and our institute and compel a continuing conversion in these areas.

2. *Missionaries in the footsteps of Jesus Christ*

From 1617 onward, Jesus Christ is, for Saint Vincent, "the One sent by the Father, the Missionary of the Poor" (XI, 168). He reads, understands and lives the entire Gospel in the light of Luke IV, 18.

To be a Priest or Brother of the Mission is to adopt this type of relationship to Jesus Christ and this key to the interpretation of the Gospel.

3. *Missionaries characterized by the five virtues*

For Saint Vincent, "the Christ to be followed and imitated is Jesus Christ sent to evangelize the poor"; hence the choice of the five "missionary" virtues of Jesus Christ: simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification and zeal (XII, 298). Saint Vincent chose them because they are "most appropriate for the missionaries" (XII, 302).

To be a Priest or Brother of the Mission demands a type of sanctity inseparable from its "apostolic quality," characterized by these five fundamental virtues.

4. *Missionaries with the Church*

The Father sends the Son to evangelize the Poor. The Son sends the Church. Hence, to follow Jesus Christ in His Mission, we must be SENT by the Church and work WITH the Church.

To be a Priest or Brother of the Mission is to answer the call of the Pope and the Bishops who send us to the poor (III, 154; I, 309).

To be a Priest or Brother of the Mission is to work for the evangelization of the poor WITH other priests and religious and WITH the laity (VIII, 238-239).

5. *Missionaries in community*

Between 1617 and 1625 the requirements of the Mission lead Saint Vincent to realize the need of a Community (XII, 8). In all the official documents (XIII), the Community is described as being FOR the Mission.

To be a Priest or Brother of the Mission is to bind oneself to Community FOR a better evangelization of the poor. The Community itself should always be defined and structured IN VIEW OF this evangelization.

6. *Missionaries for the poor*

This is *the* design of Saint Vincent and *the* end of the Company. The contract of foundation (XIII, 197-202) makes this quite clear, and up to 1660 it was continually reaffirmed.

To be a Priest or Brother of the Mission is to adhere to this end. In the words of Saint Vincent "There you have the source of our vocation" (XI, 133).

To be a Priest or Brother of the Mission is to accept that this end verifies and justifies each of our works: it is to be the strict criterion of all our apostolic activities.

7. *Saints for the poor*

The sanctity that Saint Vincent proposes to the Priests and Brothers of his Congregation is the sanctity of the "Missionary sent to the poor in the footsteps of Jesus Christ."

To be a Priest or Brother of the Mission is to accept a sanctity specified by the Mission and nourished by it (XII, 138).

8. *Consecrated to God for the poor*

According to Saint Vincent, the vows bind us to God for the poor. They cannot be defined or lived except in the context of the Mission.

To be a Priest or Brother of the Mission is to consecrate oneself to God for the service of the poor, making use of "the same weapons" as the Son of God: Poverty, Chastity, Obedience (XII, 366-367).

9. *Attentive to events*

For Saint Vincent, the event is a sign from God, and when it directly concerns the poor, it becomes a privileged sign.

To be a Priest or Brother of the Mission is to see "verified" in one's life and in events, especially those which concern the poor, "the hand of the Holy Spirit" (XI, 37). Hence the need for a Vincentian "*revision de vie*."

10. *Attentive to the fulfillment of God's will*

For Saint Vincent, the practice of doing God's will is the approach to God best incarnated in the present and the one most conducive to action.

To be a Priest or Brother of the Mission is to try to live according to God's will, "the soul of the Company and one of the practices which it should take most to heart. . ." (XII, 183).