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Humility in St. Vincent's Apostolic Dynamism

By Luigi Mezzadri, C.M.

Translated by Frederick J. Braakhuis, C.M.

Humility has always ranked highly in all forms of religion. Thus G. van der Leeuw has made it one of the criteria for his classification of religions.¹ In the seventeenth century this theme passed through extraordinary developments. After noting that humility had become a fashion, François Cullioré (d. 1684) wrote that many made their principal occupation to be the search for new terms expressing this virtue. In practice, however, they showed themselves incapable of passing the test when faced with the difficulties of life.²

The kind of humility which seeks to clothe thoughts or speech in modest appearances is only a mask which does not change man's pride [*hubris*] at all, save in exceptional cases; the case of saints, to be precise.

At the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of our own, there occurred a strong reaction which one can easily find expressed in authors who carried on a lively debate on the subject.³ However, they do not

¹G. van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie de Religion* (Tübingen 21956). The author speaks of the religion of nothingness and piety (Buddhism), the religion of majesty and humility (Islam) and the religion of love (Christianity).

²F. Guilloré, *Les secrets de la vie spirituelle qui en decouvrent les illusions*, Paris 1673, 254 ff.

³According to Nietzsche humility is the virtue of slaves who are incapable of avenging themselves on their masters. "Hubris is nowadays our entire position with regard to nature, our violation of nature with the help of machines and the low cost inventiveness of

give evidence of a response likely to emphasize the positive side of humility completely.

In Catholic circles a distinction is made between passive virtues and active virtues. Only the latter are capable of contributing to the moulding of a personality. The former, however [and among others humility], are ranked as psychological defenses of a person.⁴

The message of St. Therese of Lisieux (d. 1897) combined love and humility in the concept of "spiritual childhood." In this the merciful Love of God makes itself one with the nothingness of the created being which is called to bridal love and to total surrender to the action of God. This manner of speaking was in fact new at the time and capable of rousing far-reaching energies, as is demonstrated by the role of "Patroness of the Missions" ascribed to the saint.⁵

The spiritual experience of Charles de Foucauld (d. 1916) likewise ended in heroism: by choosing the last place, he discovered an extraordinary way toward spiritual fruitfulness.⁶

technicians and engineers." *Sulla genealogia della morale* (Opere, VIII), Milan 1927, 348. Cf. *ibid.*, *Ecce Homo* (Opere, XI), Milan 1927: ". . . The concept of the good man is on the side of all that is weak, sickly, turns out badly . . . And all of that was believed in the name of morals! Ecrasez l'infâme! Am I understood? Dionysus against the crucified one." (354 ff). Marinetti, giving first place to courage, the beauty of violence, the external act and gesture, condemned as hostile to future progress an attitude like humility. Cf. F.T. Marinetti, *Futurismo e fascismo*, Foligno 1929.

⁴On the passive virtues and Americanism condemned by Leo XIII in *Testem Benevolentiae* (January 22, 1899), cf. G. de Pierrefeu, in *Ds* 1 (1937), 475-488, and J. T. Ellis, *The Life of Cardinal Gibbons*, 2 vols., Milwaukee 1952 (especially on the concept of the "phantom heresy.")

⁵A. Combes, *Theresiana*, Rome 1970; P. Descouvermont, *Ste. Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus et son prochain*, Paris 1970; R. Laurentin, *Thérèse de Lisieux Mythes et réalité*, Paris 1972

⁶J.-F. Six, *Itinéraire spirituel de Charles de Foucauld*, Paris 1958.

More recently, the study of humility has been undertaken in a more scientific and positive manner, due to the contributions of such philosophers as Max Scheler (d. 1928) and psychologists as Carl Gustav Jung (d. 1961), and of theologians and moralists.⁷

HUMILITY IN THE MOST RECENT STUDIES ON ST. VINCENT'S SPIRITUALITY

For those who have made St. Vincent the object of their study, humility is, of course, one of the most vital centers of interest. With obvious exaggeration, Maynard declares that no saint has ever attained the humility of St. Vincent.⁸

Drawing attention to the repeated affirmations of St. Vincent, Henri Bremond concludes that humility was to an extent second nature to him.⁹

⁷B. Dolhagaray, in DTHC 7 (1922) 321-239; P. Canice, *Humility: The Foundation of Spiritual Life*, Westminster 1951; P. Adnès, *L'humilité vertu spécifiquement chrétienne d'après saint Augustin*, in RAM 28 (1952) 293-207; id., *L'humilité à l'école de saint Augustin*, ivi 31 (1955) 28-46; P. Blanchard, *Saint Bernard, docteur de l'humilité*, ivi 29 (1953) 289-299; V. Truhlar, *Antinomiae vitae spiritualis*, Rome 1958; O. Schaffner, *Christliche Demut. Des hl. Augustinus Lehre von der Humilitas*, Wurtzburg 1959; id., in LThK 3 (1959) 223-26; P. Adnès, in DS 7/2 (1971) 1136-87; G. Rossi, in *Dizionario enciclopedico di teologia morale*, Rome ²1973, 1118-22.

⁸U. Maynard, *Maximes et pratiques de Saint Vincent de Paul*, Paris, 1885, (Italian translation, *Virtù e dottrina spirituale di S. Vincenzo de' Paoli*, Siena 1902, 201). He is followed by Coste, *Le grand saint du grand siècle: Monsieur Vincent*, III, Paris 1931, 411 ff.

⁹H. Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux*, III, Paris, 1921, 242 ff.

Arnaud d'Agnel agrees that humility should be considered the predominant virtue of the saint.¹⁰ Jacques Delarue has established the link between St. Vincent's humility and his role as instrument in the hands of God.¹¹ There is often the danger of thus establishing a kind of catalogue of assorted virtues, each chosen because of a few facts or words without too much background or context and according to a certain hierarchy of values which is purely exterior.

With Jean Calvet and André Dodin we move a step upwards in quality. The former sees the point of support of Vincentian spirituality in action, and proposes a dynamic version of humility. All his life the Christian is continuously seeking to know the will of God, and in that search he is always on the alert to seize the moment of action with all that he has. But action is born from love and is constantly threatened by pride which devalues it: "it turns man into the end of the action, which cannot be but God alone."

St. Vincent's humility was humility of action, but at the same time humility of intelligence. The former leaves him, in his role of instrument, at the disposal of divine action. The latter empties his soul of the remnants of intellectual willfulness which would tend to put his charism at the service of personal success.¹²

Tracing the evolution in the saint's life, Dodin avoids speaking of "conversion" and prefers to suggest an action of structuralization between 1613 and 1616, an action of "re-creation," produced by grace. One of the decisive moments was the accusation of theft. St. Vincent did not

¹⁰ A. D'Agnel, *Saint Vincent de Paul, "directeur de conscience"*, Paris 1947, 7.

¹¹ J. Delarue, *L'idée missionnaire du prêtre d'après Saint Vincent de Paul*, Paris 1946, 216 ff. Cf. A. D'Agnel, *Saint Vincent*, 97 ff.

¹² J. Calvet, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, Paris 1948, 345-8.

rebel against the public humiliation which “made him part of the Community of the poor who know how to appeal to God, by-passing all sentences or judgments of men.”

Proceeding next to the systematic presentation of doctrine, Dodin sees the imitation of Christ as the source of humility. The Son of God shows his love of the Father in the self-humiliation of his incarnation and death, and in all the actions of his life. From the absoluteness of that love flows his contempt of the goods of the earth, of the pleasures, honors, and opinions of the world. On his way to God, man must live in a climate of self-obliteration and humility, insofar as humility is “the immediate source of all virtues and the direct origin of all good.” Thus, just as Christ is at the center of man’s dogmatic perspective, so humility is the preferred endeavor of his asceticism. For all that, the resulting action is not going to disperse it. He who walks in the footsteps of Christ clothes himself with the spirit of poverty. And thus Christ, poor himself, can preach the Gospel to the poor without having to get away from the world. He is, in fact, spiritually more present “with his love, his humble silence, and he reminds us that there is no life except in Jesus Christ, in the Christ of the poor who are the eternal delight of angels and men.”¹³

ST. VINCENT’S HUMILITY IN THE EYES OF A CONTEMPORARY, SAINT-CYRAN

In a new text, recently published by Jean Orcibal,¹⁴

¹³A. Dodin, *Spiritualité de Saint Vincent de Paul*. in *Mission et Charité*, I, (1961) 54-75; id., *Saint Vincent de Paul mystique de l’action religieuse*, ivi 8 (1968) 26-47. Texts: id., *Saint Vincent de Paul et la charité*, Paris 1960, 134-140.

¹⁴J. Orcibal, *Les origines du Jansénisme*, V, Paris 1962, 391-404 taken from the manuscript of the Library of Port Royal (Paris), ms. 31, 557-588.

Jean Duvergier de Hauranne (1581-1643), better known as "l'Abbé de St. Cyran," launches a violent attack on St. Vincent. It was written by Saint-Cyran a few months before his arrest, when St. Vincent had come to his home to submit to him his motivations for doctrinal disagreement. Such behavior on the part of the Saint was unusual, for generally suspicions with regard to a possible heretic were given expression in formal accusations before the authorities. They, in turn, would follow a line of conduct which aimed at obtaining a retraction rather than at shedding light on the truth.¹⁵

Relations between them [they were of the same age] had begun in 1629 and had been maintained for a few years. It is true that they both seemed to complement each other: Saint-Cyran was more cultivated, but St. Vincent was richer in human qualities and above all better equipped to mobilize the best powers of French Catholicism for the sake of action for human advancement and an evangelization program. Imperceptibly their paths had begun to part, and a rift had come between them which could not easily be repaired. One of the principal reasons for their disagreement was probably the direction which the restoration of the priestly ideal was to take. Bérulle's disciple was in favor of a priesthood that would contemplate the eternal truths, whereas St. Vincent rather emphasized the link between the clergy and the people.

¹⁵ During the process of beatification, a difficulty caused by the fact that Saint Vincent had not denounced Saint-Cyran to the Inquisition. On the problem of the relationship between Saint Vincent and Saint-Cyran: P. Coste, *Rapports de Saint Vincent de Paul avec l'abbé de Saint-Cyran*, Toulouse 1934 (offprint of the *Bulletin d'histoire et littérature ecclésiastique*); *Le Grand Saint du Grand Siècle*, III, 135-208; J. Orcibal, *Les Origines du Jansénisme*, vol. 5, Paris 1947-1962; J.S. Symes, C.M., *The Contrary Estimation of Saint Vincent de Paul on the Abbé de Saint-Cyran* (Dissertation, St. John's University) New York 1972; L. Mezzadri, *Fra giansenisti e antigiansenisti. Vincent de Paul e la Congregazione della Missione, 1624-1737* (in preparation).

Therefore, ascetic and pastoral formation of the clergy seemed to him a possibility for the salvation of the Church in France.

Although their relations had cooled, especially through new grounds for tension, their meeting was most courteous. And yet, Saint-Cyran had ample matter for disagreement on the very substance of the points of doctrine under discussion. St. Vincent saw an interpretation along the lines of radicalism and extremism [and in terms indicative of the coming break] of a thought which was nevertheless orthodox if read in the context of its author's life and cultural experience. By way of response, Saint-Cyran wrote a short essay¹⁶ which he confided to his disciples Antoine le Maître (d. 1658)¹⁷ and Claude Lancelot (d. 1695).¹⁸

Speaking of spiritual humility, Saint-Cyran founded this virtue on a consideration originating in Augustinian radicalism relating to the salvation of the "massa damnationis." Hence the need for a transmutation of values and the taking up of a docile and submissive attitude, for all is grace.

Humility was by nature tied in with the divine will. It was, he explained, "the only way to give to those consulting us merely what we have received from God."¹⁹ Starting from there, he introduced some considerations

¹⁶ According to the testimony of C. Lancelot, *Mémoires touchants la vie du M. de Saint-Cyran pour servir d'éclairissement à l' "Histoire de Port-Royal"*, 2 vols., Cologne 1738 (cf. *ibid.* II, 302)

¹⁷ Also connected with Saint Vincent, he was the first of the "solitaries" of Port Royal. On him, see: C.A. Sainte Beuve, *Port Royal* (Italian translation, Florence 1964); L. Cognet in *Catholicisme* 7 (1969), 268-271; J.R. Armogathe, in *DS* 9 (1976), 566 ff.

¹⁸ On him, see: L. Cognet, *Claude Lancelot, solitaire de Port-Royal*, Paris 1950.

¹⁹ Cited by J. Orcibal, *Les Origines*, V, 402.

which were aimed at St. Vincent. Humility would require a man in authority in the Church or in a community to be prudent when he has to give advice on matters beyond his competence. Yet, when one has gained a certain reputation for prudence or for piety without any merit, and particularly without the knowledge or the talents necessary for the administration of a house, there is frequently the temptation to set oneself up as a master. The reputation of being a director of souls is full of danger for someone who finds it almost impossible not to give in to hidden pride. This situation became alarming when it was necessary, as in the case of St. Vincent, to give direction to ordination candidates without comprehensive theological preparation.

This essay was not intended to be printed and was obviously unknown to St. Vincent, but it helped make the legend of St. Vincent's ignorance even stronger in Port-Royal circles. St. Vincent indirectly responded to it during the instruction for Saint-Cyran's trial by testifying in favor of his friend and thus sparing him a severe condemnation, which would have been the outcome if the testimony of the superior of the Mission had been merciless. As far as he was concerned, the Saint demonstrated that humility, lived in practice, has a way of placing adversaries in a positive light and of bringing them relief by forgiving and forgetting.

Later on, the heat of the controversy led St. Vincent to take a much more negative attitude towards St.-Cyran, and to interpret earlier affirmations of his friend as heterodox.²⁰

²⁰ Cf. the differing evaluations of J.S. Symes and L. Mezzadri in the works cited.

ST. VINCENT'S HUMILITY: THEORY AND PRACTICE

For anyone to try to study this topic by reviewing a collection of writings without outstanding highlights would be risky and terribly simplistic. For such an approach would fail to penetrate the fundamental structures of St. Vincent's thinking and experience, and would not allow them their proper place in a genetic study of Vincentian spirituality. The way we ought to go will in the first place have to throw light upon the evolution in the whole spiritual experience of St. Vincent. Given his character and personality, possible literary connections will acquire meaning and perspective because they are encased in a solid and logical framework.

In the second place, the concrete circumstances under which the Saint's life unrolled should not be forgotten. He was carried away by the whirlwind of activity in evangelization and human advancement. He was not a man of study and theory; he had to give his interventions a provisional character of immediate urgency. Consequently, he was never very anxious about increasing his reading, and therefore, after a period of gestation, exterior input was either assimilated or rejected as it suited his synthesis or was alien to it.

That is the reason why the greatest attention should be given to the study of the earlier years of his "conversion" [around 1609] up to the beginning of the twenties.

St. Vincent did not have a humble and submissive temperament. He was ambitious and enterprising, as is shown by his attempt at clearing a way for himself toward success. That was in the first place in "that trouble which my temerity does not permit me to name," and then in the

desire to realize his dream of an "honorable retirement."²¹ His association with Bérulle was decisive for his apostolic transformation and for his humility. A few years earlier, Bérulle had tackled this subject in a brief but important booklet, the "Bref Discours" [Short Treatise], a French adaptation of "Breve compendio intorno alla Perfectione cristiana" by the Italian Jesuit Achille Gagliardi (d.1607).²² This work had met with notable success; it had nine editions. In a letter of May 12, 1622, Jeanne de Chantal recommends its reading to the Visitation in Paris, whose superior St. Vincent had just been appointed to be [between September 21, 1621 and December 22, 1622].

On close consideration of these dates and of the condition of his soul, it would seem possible to affirm with conviction that St. Vincent had come under the influence of the "Breve compendio," and that not only by reading the original, but also through the translation and the work of Bérulle, who was in the process of exceeding the views of Gagliardi. In 1607, Bérulle had had the revelation of the central significance of the Incarnation, which is out of the question with Gagliardi. St. Vincent took this double lesson, that of Gagliardi and that of Bérulle, to heart. It

²¹ Saint Vincent to M. de Comct, July 24, 1607 (SV I, 3); Saint Vincent to his mother, February 17, 1610 (*ibid.* 18).

²² The best edition is: A. Gagliardi, *Breve compendio de perfezione cristiana e "vita de Isabella Berinzaga,"* edited by M. Bendiscioli Florence 1952 (first Italian edition, Brescia 1611; French translation, Paris 1596). For Bérulle's adaptation, under the title of *Bref discours de l'abnégation intérieure*, in P. Bérulle, *Oeuvres*, edited by F. Bourgoing, Paris 1665, 426-448. On Gagliardi, P. Pirri, *Il P. Achille Gagliardi, la Dama milanese, la riforma dello spirito e il movimento degli zelatori* in AHSI (1945) 1-72; also, *Il "Breve compendio" al vaglio di teologi gesuiti*, 20 *ivi* (1951) 231-253; also, *Gagliardiana*, *ivi* 29 (1960), 106-111; I. Iparragirre-A. Derville, in DS 6 (1967) 53-64 (in 1931 Viller had attributed the authorship of the work to Isabella Berinzaga). On the relationship between Gagliardi and Bérulle: Cf. J. Dagens, *Notes bérulliennes: la source du Bref discours de l'abnégation intérieure*, in RHE 27 (1931) 318-49.

called for a very low regard for created things, and therefore for a “renunciation” of self-love and a very high esteem for God. Hence three consequences:

1) the need for self-humiliation to the extent of creating a vacuum within oneself and of putting self-love to death;

2) caution with regard to ecstasies and extraordinary phenomena, which, as such, constitute a rather subtle but real danger to humility;

3) conformity to the will of God and trust in his providence in which the “renunciation of self” ends at the point where the soul adopts the reasons and views of God.

St. Vincent followed these two masters, but without assuming their schematic approach. In that as in other matters, he was very personal. He shared the need for “renunciation.” From Bérulle he adopted the Christocentric attitude by which a direct relation is established between the mysteries of Christ’s life on earth and the actual condition of both the glorified Christ and the Church. The mysteries of Christ are to an extent the principle of the mysteries of Christ in us. Man is called to “join the conditions of Christ.”

These “conditions” constitute a permanent disposition which establishes a new principle of operation in the soul. We hear, therefore, of conditions of abandonment, of affliction, of aridity, of poverty, of hidden life, of charity, of penance, of contradictions, of fatigue, of “non-doing.” All these elements must be acquired in our life by “honoring” them, that is to say, by participating in them with our whole being. From that developed St. Vincent’s predilection for the lowest-class people, the poor, in the conviction that human values are reversed in the “kenosis” of the Son of God, to the point of raising up the little ones to make them into great ones in the Kingdom of God.²³

²³SV I, 87, 153; VII, 391 ff.; VIII, 231; IX, 281, 184.

But it was personal experience far more than contact with Bérulle or reading him which guided St. Vincent into his own way to sainthood, and therefore to humility. He did not enter the Oratory [founded in 1611], but had the pastoral experience of Clichy, and after that he entered the household of the Gondis.

His two experiences of 1617 were decisive in making him discover his specific role: to be poor with the poor who are hungry [the Chatillon experience] and with those who are not evangelized [Gannes — Folleville].

The discovery of his vocation to the poor filled St. Vincent's heart with that need to serve and with that heroic charity which cause a man who makes himself the lowest to become the servant of all. Humility is a "disposition towards service" and "a way of being love" [Max Scheler]. This service manifests itself to the full as the work through which man is reconstructed, is seized again, by the acceptance of his weaknesses, after the pardon obtained from Christ, in an effort which restores his dignity to him. In this light we grasp the sense of such words as "love contempt, desire vilification . . . rejoice when that occurs, for the love of Jesus Christ."²⁴ There is no masochism here. According to St. Vincent, to empty oneself of self is the condition for giving birth to virtues²⁵ and for judging in accordance with the views of God.²⁶ This commitment has its roots in a baptismal spirituality which strips away the old man²⁷ and enables the two movements of "piety towards the Father and charity towards men"²⁸ to come to life. This stripping away

²⁴D. 619

²⁵D.627.

²⁶D. 628.

²⁷SV IX, 113, 127.

²⁸Ibid. XII, 108; VI, 393.

becomes a renunciation of self but also a “putting on” of Christ, a sharing in his mystery, a prolongation of his incarnation, an actual presence of Christ in man. St. Vincent grasped the profound significance of this orientation and emphasized the two terms in it: the evangelizer and the evangelized. The former is the poor Christ preaching the Gospel to the poor. This reference to Christ safeguards humility against every form of pure rationalism. The “ne quid nimis” [nothing to excess] of ancient wisdom, which developed from an objective and critical knowledge of self, could well lead to the acceptance of a mortal being’s limitations and to the fleeing from “hubris,” that folly of pride, namely, the challenge which one man throws at the others. But Christian humility is something more. The archetype of humility is to be found in Christ,²⁹ since the Son of God himself taught and practiced it³⁰ in his incarnation, his passion, and his death. “He was crucified by you, in order to teach you humility.”³¹

Yet, the “kenosis” of Christ does not merely amount to psychological sentiment, but consists in the fact that the Son of God has descended into the human state in order to become limited and mortal, and into a status of inferiority which can only be perceived by an intellect which is alert to the economy and the dynamism of the Incarnation.³²

²⁹S. Amabrose, *De fide*, III, 7, 52, PL 16,600.

³⁰Origin, *Contra Celsum*, VI, 15, *Sources chrétiennes* 147, 215 ff.; S. Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, II, 25, PL 10, 67.

³¹S. Augustine, Tr. in *Ioannes evangelium* 4, PL 35, 1391; cf. *Enarr. in ps. 93*, PL 37, 1203.

³²P. Lamarche, *Linno della lettera ai Filippesi e la Chenosi del Chisto*, in *L'uomo davanti a Dio* (Essays in honor of H. de Lubac,) Rome 1966, 201-218.

To St. Vincent, Christ's call for humility meant linking oneself to the Incarnation. "Human acts become acts of God because they are performed in Him and with Him."³³

In 1635, he wrote to Father Portail:

Keep in mind that we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ and that we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and that our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and full of Jesus Christ, and that in order to die like Jesus Christ we must live like Jesus Christ. Well now, once these foundations have been laid, let us surrender to contempt, to shame, to ignominy, and let us repudiate the honors rendered to us, the good reputation and the applause given us, and let us do nothing that is not to that end.³⁴

Our Lord's life [can be regarded] as a continuous act of esteem and affection for contempt. His spirit was full of it. And whoever would have made an anatomical study of it, as has sometimes been done on saints that have been opened up to see what they had in the heart . . . would undoubtedly have found that in the adorable heart of Jesus holy humility was particularly engraved, and perhaps I am not saying too much when I venture to say in preference to all other virtues.³⁵

If the life of Christ was a continuous exercise in humility, both active and passive, then the missionary should bring his own life into conformity with it. He wrote again to Father Portail: "Should not a priest die of shame for laying claim to a good reputation in the service he renders to God, and for dying in his bed while seeing Jesus Christ rewarded for his work with opprobrium and the gibbet?"³⁶

³³SV XII, 183.

³⁴Saint Vincent to A. Portail, May 1, 1635, *ibid.*, I, 295.

³⁵*Ibid.*, XII, 200.

³⁶Saint Vincent to A. Portail, May 1, 1635, *ibid.*, I, 294.

And this is the advice which St. Vincent gave Louise de Marillac: "When you are honored and esteemed, join, in your spirit, in the mockeries, the contempt, and the bad treatment which the Son of God has suffered."³⁷

Humility became like a form of evangelization. The vacuum it creates in us becomes space for God, the availability of a tool, and the flesh of the Incarnation: the "non-doing" of man is a condition for the action of God.

A missionary must put on that spirit, the spirit of Christ which is the spirit of humility and simplicity, in order to be capable of being an instrument of God's love. God blesses the humble, and not those who "ring the bells to publicize our 'committimus' [we are performing]."³⁸

Esteem and approval by authorities and by the people are obstacles.³⁹ St. Vincent reacted strongly when he saw Bernard Codoing begin missions on the territory of a cardinal: "God forbid that we should do anything out of such shortsightedness."⁴⁰

In fact, no advantage must be taken of that which is good. When someone is chosen for a mission which requires a particular gift of self, "Humility alone, sir, is capable of bearing such grace."⁴¹

With regard to the idea of evangelization, the reason for going to the poor is once again and always humility. A man shut in within himself is incapable of seeing the mystery of the poor. Only charity — and that means a love which is effective and not only affective — will open us. St.

³⁷ Saint Vincent to Saint Louise de Marillac, December 7, 1630, *ibid.*, I, 98.

³⁸ Saint Vincent to B. Codoing, November 21, 1642, *ibid.*, II, 314.

³⁹ Saint Vincent to R. Sergis, August 14, 1638, *ibid.*, 496.

⁴⁰ Saint Vincent to B. Codoing, August 5, 1642, *ibid.*, II, 281.

⁴¹ Saint Vincent to C. Nacquart, March 22, 1648, *ibid.*, III, 279.

Vincent borrowed this concept from St. Bernard⁴² and from St. Francis de Sales.⁴³ On his part, the latter had renewed the question by attaching humility to “generosity of spirit.” By making us contemplate the nothingness in man, humility brings us face to face with the reality which is ours, namely the good things which the Lord has put in us. For that reason we are able to say: “I can do everything in Him who gives me strength.”⁴⁴ The substance of this approach becomes rich in new possibilities: the poor are regarded as the mystery of a presence, namely the presence of Jesus Christ.⁴⁵

The cogency of the “leave God for God” is derived from that, and also the correlation between poverty and humility. The poor man is not attached to the goods of the earth, he is absolute detachment, he is close to God. But he also becomes the center of interest, the terminal point of an action for advancement which does not consist in the presentation of a commonplace ideal, petty because of its worldliness.

St. Vincent wanted to reverse the social order and involve the rich in the service of the poor and of those on the seamy side of life. An organic plan for a social overthrow was certainly far from St. Vincent’s mind, but his experience had bought him over to the class of the poor and had led him to devote his life to them by serving them, thus putting a new anthropology into practice. This kind of view of man made him place his ideal no longer in wealth and power but in poverty and humility, and in that respect it put him well ahead of his time.

⁴² S. Bernard, *Sermo 50 in Cantica canticorum*, PL 183, 1021.

⁴³ *Oeuvres IV* (ed. Annecy), 301.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, VI, 75 ff.

⁴⁵ SV IX, 252, 324; X, 680; XI, 32.

Detachment and the reduction to nothing of self-love⁴⁶ become the conditions for the perfection of charity; they imply the full acceptance of the other. Moreover, this disposition remains open to progress. St. Vincent's affirmation, "Hold all the states and all the holy orders of the Church in high esteem . . ."⁴⁷ does not lock a Christian into passive indifference. In and through humility, standards of judgment become realities insofar as they send forth all our energies to the service of our brethren.

In this way, humility, poverty, and action for advancement blend together in unity. And in fact, perfect freedom is achieved by radical detachment, and all action undertaken for others becomes an occasion of liberation, an unselfish offer, a serene seeking of the neighbor's good.

DEGREES IN HUMILITY

St. Vincent was always opposed to those vague and complicated schematic patterns which break the unity of life and make it artificial and uncertain. Where humility is concerned, he uses a fairly accessible and substantially very simple typology which in his hands becomes a flexible instrument, benefitting by his longstanding experience. That is the typology of degrees in humility, a theme found in all the authors who have written about humility, but with greater or smaller divergencies. St. Vincent depends on Rodriguez,⁴⁸ who, in turn, was inspired by David of

⁴⁶"Never think that you have made any progress until you feel that you are inferior to all others." (Imitation of Christ, Bk. II, Chap., 2, 2).

⁴⁷D. 621.

⁴⁸A Rodrigues, *Esercizio di perfezione e di virtù cristiane* Italian trans., Bassano 1747. (This work, which appeared at Seville in 1609, had an enormous success despite the fact that it was actually mediocre. Its practicality and adherence to reality made it popular).

Augsburg (d. 1272)⁴⁹ and by St. Bernard.

St. Vincent treats the subject of humility in the second chapter of the "Regulae seu Constitutiones communes," which amounts to the "Magna Charta" of the spirituality of the Congregation. He brings humility in connection with meekness, seen as a property of friendship, a propensity to non-violent action in total abandonment to God, as opposed to the harsh and violent action of the proud, the strong, and the powerful.⁵⁰

But this humility which Jesus so often recommends to us by word and example, and which the Congregation must make every effort to acquire, demands three conditions, the first of which is that we sincerely consider ourselves deserving of contempt; the second, that we be pleased when others recognize our faults and hold us in contempt for them; the third, that we conceal the little good that God will do through us or in us, in view of our own lowliness, and if this is impossible, that we then give the whole credit to the divine mercy and the merits of others. And this is the foundation of all evangelical perfection and the bond of the whole spiritual life. Whoever shall possess this virtue will easily acquire all others; but he who shall lack it will also be deprived of those which he seems to possess, and will live in continual anxieties.⁵¹

To St. Vincent, the first degree in humility is to consider oneself worthy of contempt. He shares this

⁴⁹David of Augsburg, *De exterioris et interioris hominis compositione*, critical edition, Quaracchi 1899. This work has been attributed to Saint Bonaventure, Saint Bernard, Saint Thomas, and Berthold of Regensburg.

⁵⁰Rules or Common Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission, c. 2, 6.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, c. 2,7; cf. SV XII, 195-210; D 612-628.

concept with St. Bernard,⁵² David of Augsburg,⁵³ and Jean-Jacques Olier.⁵⁴ The awareness of our sinful state draws the line at overstepping the Delphic tradition of "Know thyself!" without therefore falling into that excessive pessimism of an Augustinian or Port-Royal nature which was so characteristic of the seventeenth century. Indeed every age is marked by the reality that man is a sinner.⁵⁵

The second degree in humility should lead us to find joy in the possibility that our imperfections become known to others to the point of making them despise us. This concept, derived from David of Augsburg,⁵⁶ becomes

⁵² "Humilitas est virtus qua homo verissima sui cognitione sibi ipsi vilescit" (PL 182, 942).

⁵³ "Primus est ut homo se quod est vilem, infirmum, inopem boni, vitiosum, peccatorem, et si quos alios defectus habeat, agnoscat et sciat" (cited from S. Bonaventure, *De processu religionis*, in *Opuscula*, Venice 1485, 42v-43r; cf. id., *De Profectu religiosorum*, in *Opera omnia*, VII, Lyon, 1668. 589 ff.)

⁵⁴ "Il y a trois degrés essentiels de l'humilité: le premier est d'aimer notre humiliation, et de voir avec plaisir l'abjection qui nous est propre" J.J. Olier, *Lettres*, ed. E. Levesque, II, Paris 1935, 295.

⁵⁵ "Cognosce te infirmum, peccatorem . . . , cognosce quia maculosus es" (St. Augustine, *Sermo* 137, PL 38, 756). Laurent de Paris defines humility as "La vérité bien connue et bien aimée de l'abîme de son néant et misère." (*Le palais de l'amour divin*, Paris 1614, 734). Saint-Cyran had nuances of the deepest profundity: "Qui n'est pas humilié dans le cœur est toujours élevé et comme tenant toujours l'épée haute contre Dieu dans le cœur . . . Tout homme et tout chrétien et tout juste est toujours infirme et malade; il n'y a point de plus grande humilité que de le croire et d'avoir son cœur tourné vers Dieu en toute sa vie comme vers son unique médecin, . . . Celui qui aime l'humilité doit aimer l'infirmité et tous les maux du corps et de l'âme, hormis les péchés, et même il ne doit pas trop se déplaire de ses péchés, qui lui font connaître qu'il n'est pas ce qu'il pense être et les faiblesses et laideurs qu'il cache dans son âme." (J. Orcibal, *Les origines*, V, 395).

⁵⁶ "Secundus gradus potest dici, cum non solum agnoscens homo, spernit se pro vilitate sua, sed etiam ab aliis sperni se patienter accipiat".

more complicated in Rodriguez who divides it into four degrees.⁵⁷ To the view of David of Augsburg, St. Vincent adds the idea of joy in humiliation, which can likewise be found in St. Bernard and in Rodriguez. In fact, the latter writes that "Whoever is truly humble desires to be despised by others and rejoices in it."⁵⁷

In his sermon number 34 on the Cantic of Canticles, St. Bernard distinguishes three ways of meeting with humiliations: the first with rancor [and that is a sin], the second with patience [and that is a characteristic of innocence], and the third with joy [and that is the true sign of authentic humility].⁵⁸ Olier, on the other hand, differs from St. Vincent in that he makes a distinction between the acceptance of the fact our personal faults are known and the willingness to be treated accordingly. In actual fact, he does not reach the last degree which forms the complement of the process of self-abnegation by man.⁵⁹

In St. Vincent's view, the last degree requires hiding the good worked by God in man, or at least attributing it to God and to others.⁶⁰ This third degree involves a risk but also a positive result. The risk lies in keeping God's

⁵⁷ A. Rodriguez, *Esercizio*, II, 15, 130.

⁵⁸ "Vides quia humilitas justificat nos? Humilitas dixi, et non; humiliatio. Quanti humiliantur qui humiles non sunt? Alii cum rancore humiliantur, alii patienter, alii et libenter. Primi rei sunt, sequentes innoxii, ultimi iusti" (St. Bernard, *Sermo 34 in Cantica canticorum*, PL 183, 960).

⁵⁹ "Le second est d'aimer qu'on voie et qu'on connaisse la vileté et l'abjection qui est en nous, quand il plait à Dieu la manifester, ou que nous sommes obligés de la révéler nous-mêmes." J.J. Olier, *Lettres* II, 295.

⁶⁰ "Tertius gradus humilitatis est, quando etiam in magnis virtutibus et donis et honoribus homo nihil extollitur, nihil sibi ex hoc blanditur, totum illi refundens, et in integrum restituens a quo fluit omne bonum". Thus says David of Augsburg cited in St. Bonaventure, *De processu*, 42v-43r.

action hidden and locking the Christian into quietistic passivity. There is a certain pessimistic component here, originating in a pessimistic anthropology which is more inclined to lay great emphasis on what is negative in man than on the positive in God's action within him. However, the fact that St. Vincent gives top priority to this phase in humility leads us to correct a judgment which places too many limitations on St. Vincent's susceptibility and on the defects in such an attitude.

Here we fully perceive how rich in realizations his experience really is:

Humility brings all other virtues into the soul, and from the sinners we once were, we become pleasing to God precisely because we humble ourselves However charitable someone may be, if he is not humble, he does not have real charity. And without charity, even though he would otherwise have enough faith to transfer mountains and would give his possessions to the poor and his body to be burned, all that would be of no avail to him.⁶¹

The blending of humility and charity produces submission to the divine will and the concentration of all our strength on the service of our brothers. And this comes about without the obstacle of self-love, without the barrier of our shortsightedness, in the acquisition of a view of faith which gladdens man's heart and makes it like Mary of Bethany, who "quanto humilis sedebat, tanto amplius capiebat" [received the more, in proportion as she was sitting lower (*or*: as she humbled herself more)].⁶²

⁶¹D. 627.

⁶²St. Augustine, *Sermones moriniani*, in G. Morin, *Miscellanea agostiana*, I, Rome 1930, 545.

THE HUMILITY OF THE COMMUNITY

The aspect under which St. Vincent's originality manifests itself most clearly is in his manner of understanding humility for his congregation. As a man of experience, he had observation as his guide in this area as well. The religious of his time gave very little evidence in this field, not only on the personal level, but especially on the community level. Saints were numerous, but communities presented a spectacle which was hardly edifying, especially because they were failing in their role in the Church.

Consequently there was strong hostility towards religious. This had two sources, the first of which was of an ecclesiological nature: the religious, with their exemption and their superiors residing in Rome, represented Roman centralism and conveyed an ideal of Church in which the bishop played a subordinate role and had no other powers than those conferred on him by the Pope. Seeing that at the Council of Trent the question of the powers of the episcopacy had not been solved, the practice, namely the fact that the implementation of reform had been taken in hand by a largely renewed Curia which was generally efficient, had tipped the scales in favor of Rome. In the thirties of the seventeenth century, there had even been a debate on the possibility of a direct link between a given territory and Rome without the presence of a bishop.⁶³ At the time, Saint-Cyran intervened under the pseudonym of "Petrus Aurelius," and was the leader in the dispute on the relations between the states of life.

⁶³The problem arose because of the disputes of the English Jesuits, E. Knott and J. Floyd, with the titular Bishop of Chalcedonia, R. Smith, the friend of Berulle. The position of the English Jesuits was condemned by the Gallican bishops and by the Sorbonne. On Petrus Aurelius, cf. J. Orcibal, *Les origines*, II, 334-376.

In this view, the priesthood as participation in the priesthood of Christ in and through instruction and the administration of the sacraments at once raises priests to a level well above that of the vows, since they are a purely human act which leaves man in all the grossness of his imperfection and his sin.

The second source of hostility towards religious stems from a conception of the private character of the vows, of the religious life, and of the striving for perfection. Individualism had had far-reaching repercussions not only in social and economic life [capitalism], in philosophical thinking [nominalism], and in political doctrine [various forms of nationalism and of medieval universalism], but also in spiritual life and in theology.

With its marked individualism and its way of emphasizing personal salvation only, the "Devotio Moderna" gave indication of a dangerous situation. Just as the Church was absent from the visual range of the *Imitation of Christ*, so apostolic zeal was gravely impaired. Saint-Cyran had the stage set for him, therefore, when he wondered if it were not logical to conclude, from the fact that the law of the Gospel is based upon charity, that apostolic zeal was of greater value than striving for perfection, which, in this view, became selfish.⁶⁴

The distinctly unfavorable attitude towards religious should therefore not create any surprise; they were challenged, their privileges and their *esprit de corps* were resented. In particular the debate on the comparison between the states of life, which today seems rhetorical and very dull, often gave preference to the religious state in comparison with that of secular priests.⁶⁵ Assuming

⁶⁴J. Orcibal, *Saint-Cyran et le jansénisme*, Paris 1961, 17.

⁶⁵On the augument concerning "tria genera hominum," cf. Y. Congar, *Le laïcs et l'ecclésiologie des "ordines" chez les théologiens des XI^e et XII^e siècles*, in AA. VV., *I laici nella "societas christiana" die seculi XI e XII*, Milan 1968, 83-117.

that the lay-people were in the last place, it became the question, derived from a certain conception of spiritual anthropology, to determine who was capable of attaining the summit of perfection: the secular priests or the religious with their vows.⁶⁶ What is important in this dispute is not so much the arguments used, but the fact that a distinction was made between the pursuit of perfection and apostolic zeal. That means that the religious life had tumbled quite sharply in public opinion. This became even more serious as confrontations or oppositions surfaced among various orders. And what tended even more to provoke debate, and through that to strengthen the *esprit de corps*, was the absence of pluralism within the orders. In this way certain doctrines became irrefutable to the point of turning into fads, and free research and critical judgment on them were muddled by those strange preoccupations. Thus, whereas the Franciscans had adopted the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, the Dominicans did not accept it, just as they rejected Molinism, which, after initial hesitations, had become the characteristic doctrine of the Jesuits. Afterwards, because of the very close-knit structure of their order, the Jesuits were among the most tenacious defenders of the doctrine of their confreres, and thereby left themselves wide open to attacks by adversaries. One has only to think of the doctrine of regicide⁶⁷ or of casuistry.⁶⁸

⁶⁶Richard of Saint Victor assigns first place to virgins, while Saint Bernard assigns it to rulers* (then to contemplatives and lastly to married people), *ibid*, 86 ff. Saint Thomas puts preachers and doctors first, then contemplatives and lastly those who devote themselves to material works II-II, q. 188, 6).

*The footnote uses the term *rectores*.

⁶⁷Defended by J. Mariana, *De rege et regis institutione*, Toledo 1599.

⁶⁸With the attacks of Pascal in the *Provincial Letters* but also with the condemnations by Rome.

It did not take long for religious to be considered an obstacle rather than a favorable element in the formation of a man who was so sensitive to the universal moral values of the understanding of others, and of the greatness and the freedom of the mind.⁶⁹ Guy Patin made this comment: "Today, superstition . . . is prevailing in France, especially in the big cities where it is the product and the work of the monks."⁷⁰

St. Vincent knew how to take measures in order that his communities would not be hampered by this *esprit de corps*. On the occasion of a council meeting of the Daughters of Charity, he instructed them that the glory of God must have preference over the interests of the Community:

There are many communities that have no regard for anything but the interest of the Community, for this is so great that it includes the interest of God. But for my part . . . I arrive at the conclusion that the interest of God deserves to be considered before any other.⁷¹

In a letter to the Sister Superior of the second convent of the Visitation in Paris, St. Vincent puts her on guard against the temptation to build sumptuous buildings, a temptation into which many communities had fallen: "God does not consider beautiful buildings agreeable;"⁷² they are not in accordance with the religious state.

At this point one could think of a good dose of common sense, but St. Vincent himself affirmed that

⁶⁹L. Verga, *Il pensiero filosofico e scientifico di Antoine Arnauld*, I, Milan 1972, 8.

⁷⁰Cited by A. Adam, *Les libertins au XVII^e siècle*, Paris 1964, 156 ff. cf. P. Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne*, 2 vol., Paris, 1961.

⁷¹SV XII, 629 ff.

⁷²Saint Vincent to A.M. Guerin, July 20, 1659, *ibid.*, VIII-41.

humility is like a faculty of the soul of the Mission.⁷³ And the Community should apply to itself the definition of humility as the act of “annihilating oneself before God and of destroying self in order to prepare a place for God in one’s heart.”⁷⁴

When the Congregation was still in its beginnings, he feared that it might too readily consider itself great.⁷⁵ For some twenty years he had not dared to pray for the growth of a work for which Providence should suffice. After that, the needs of the works already undertaken and his own interior liberation convinced him that the humility of a community could go together with its growth.⁷⁶ But in moments when storms raged around the Mission, he stood firm in his demand of a waiting attitude full of faith.⁷⁷ Nevertheless he advised his missionaries to rejoice when they would see other communities being established,⁷⁸ and when they would meet with them at work in their own pastoral sector⁷⁹ and with greater success.⁸⁰ He even came to the point of recommending that they have a higher esteem for other communities than for the Mission,⁸¹ and never speak unfavorably of them.⁸² One incident is significant. In 1653, St. Vincent was requested

⁷³Rules or Common Constitutions, 2, 14, *ibid.*, XII, 298-311.

⁷⁴SV XII, 304.

⁷⁵Saint Vincent to A. Portail, October 16, 1635, *ibid.*, I, 312.

⁷⁶Saint Vincent to E. Blatiron, November 12, 1655, *ibid.*, V, 463, C. *ibid.*, XI, 324; VII, 541, 613.

⁷⁷Saint Vincent to A. Le Vazeaux, June 1652, *ibid.*, IV, 393.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, IV, 348, 363, 399.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, VII, 468; VII, 189, 308.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, VI, 400.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, II, 274; XI, 114 ff.; XII, 204, 438.

⁸²*Ibid.*, III, 168.

to open a house in Normandy. For the moment he did not have any personnel available, but towards the end of the year it would have been possible to arrange the matter. The reply that might have been expected from him could have been to allow for time. On the contrary, he advised his correspondent: "There are a good number of holy communities in Paris which are to be preferred to us."⁸³

For his two communities he had the same treatment in store as for his own person. He humiliated them, he spoke of our "paltriness"⁸⁴ and "our beggarliness,"⁸⁵ and called the missionaries the "poor tramps of the Mission."⁸⁶ In a letter to Jeanne de Chantal he avowed that "too good a reputation does much harm" and concluded: "If you were aware of our ignorance and the little virtue we possess, you would feel pity for us!"⁸⁷

St. Vincent's reluctance to allow the publication of writings which placed the Congregation in the limelight is typical. Thus he did not want the "relations" of the missionaries in Madagascar to be printed, fearing movements of complacency in such a publication of the graces of God.⁸⁸ It is easy to understand the Saint's reaction when a booklet was printed which brought the characteristics of the institute into relief.⁸⁹

⁸³ Saint Vincent to a gentleman in Normandy, October 23, 1653, *ibid.*, V, 35.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 409; V, 597.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, VI, 34; VIII, 22.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, VIII, 222.

⁸⁷ Saint Vincent to Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, August 15, 1639, I, 574.

⁸⁸ Saint Vincent to Fr. Get, July 14, 1656, *ibid.*, VI, 31.

⁸⁹ G. Delville, *Petit abrégé de l'institut de la Congrégation de la Mission*, Douay 1656.

I am so deeply saddened by it that I cannot put it into words for you, because it is a matter strongly against humility to publish what we are and what we do. If there is some good in us and in our way of life, it comes from God, and it is up to him to make it known if he thinks that appropriate. But as far as we are concerned, who are poor ignorant and sinful people, we should remain in hiding as without any useful good and not worthy that anyone should think of us. For that reason, sir, God has given me the grace to stand firm up till now not to allow anything to be printed that could cause the Company to be known and esteemed, even though I have been under strong pressure to allow it, particularly with regard to some accounts that have come from Madagascar, from Barbary, and from the Hebrides. And even less readily would I have permitted the printing of something about the essence and the spirit, the origin and the growth, the functions and the end of our Institute.⁹⁰



“When humble souls are ordered to do anything, they endeavor to do it cheerfully, no matter what may be its difficulties, and rely entirely on the strength of obedience; if they are assaulted by temptation, they ground themselves more in humility; and thus, the very attacks of the devil, make them triumph over pride, the last enemy whom they have to combat.”

⁹⁰Saint Vincent to G. Delville, February 7, 1657, *ibid.*, VI, 176 ff. Later, cf. the letter of November 9, in which he begins to waver. *Ibid.*, 592.