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The Phantom Five Years

Douglas Slawson, C.M.

In 1876 the worldwide communities of Vincentian Fathers and Daughters of Charity celebrated the tercentenary of the birth of St. Vincent de Paul. Now, in 1981 the same communities celebrate the quadrennial of the Saint's birth. By their very nature centennials occur at intervals of one hundred years. It takes no mathematician to reckon that the sons and daughters of Vincent took an extra five years getting to the present feast. How does one account for this extra half decade? Was it poor mathematics? Or forgetfulness? Did the last century really have five more years? Or was this just a quirk of history? Indeed, if one hopes to find these phantom five years, he had better research history or, more properly, historiography.

Contrary to all appearances, the hunting ground for these five years lies not within the last century but at the time of Vincent's death and the history written shortly thereafter. Vincent died at the age of eighty-five — at least that is what the Priests of the Mission said at the time. The funeral registry at the church in St. Lazare bears this age; the Community-inspired obituary in *The Gazette* proclaimed the same to all of Paris; and René Almeras, Vincent's successor as Superior General, had this carved into the stone sealing the burial crypt.¹ In the absence of birth and

¹Pierre Coste, C.M., "La Vraie Date de la Naissance De Saint Vincent de Paul," reprinted from *Bulletin de la Societe du Borda* (1922), 18-19.

baptismal records, simply subtraction of Vincent's age (85) from the date of his death (1660) provided the year of his birth: 1576. Accordingly, in 1664 Louis Abelly, the Bishop of Rodez and Vincent's first biographer, etched this date into historiography almost as firmly as Almeras had etched the Saint's age in stone.² Thereafter and for almost two and a half centuries the biographers of Vincent had unquestioningly accepted this as his birthdate.³ Ever since 1922, however, historians have held that Vincent was born in 1581. This change was owed to the research of Pierre Coste.

During the first half of the 1920s Coste, a French Vincentian, edited and published in fourteen volumes a collection of Vincent's letters, conferences, and other documents. As a bi-product of his efforts, Coste discovered that the Saint knew his age, was consistent in his computation of it, and freely mentioned it no fewer than twelve times.⁴ In April 1628 Vincent gave sworn testimony in the beatification process of St. Francis de Sales. He declared his age as "forty-eight or thereabout."⁵ Eleven years later, in April 1639, Vincent again testified

²Louis Abelly, *La Vie du Venerable Serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gaume, 1891), I, p. 18

³Cf., Pierre Collet, C.M., *La Vie de St. Vincent de Paul, Instituteur de la Congregation de la Mission, & des Filles de la Charite*, 2 vols. (Nancy: A. Leseure, 1748), I, p. 5; Emile Bougaud, *History of St. Vincent, Founder of the Congregation of the Mission and of the Sisters of Charity*, trans. Joseph Brady, C.M., 2 vols. (New York: Green and Company, 1899), I, p. 4; Emmanuel de Broglie, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, trans. Mildred Partridge (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1913), p. 2; J.B. Boudignon, *St. Vincent de Paul: Model of Men of Action*, trans. Patrick Finney, C.M. (St. Louis: The Vincentian Press, 1925), p. 3.

⁴Coste, "La Vraie Date," 1-9.

⁵Deposition for the Process of Beatification of Francis de Sales, 17 April 1628, Pierre Coste, ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul. Correspondance, Entretien, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1920-1925), XIII, p. 67.

before ecclesiastical authorities, this time in the investigation of heresy charges against the Abbe of St. Cyran. The Saint then gave his age as “fifty-nine or thereabout,”⁶ eleven years older than he said he was in 1628. Yet the catchword “thereabout” leaves some question as to the Saint’s exact age. Later in 1639 Vincent pinpointed his age and shed light on how he computed it. In October he wrote to Louis Lebreton, a Vincentian in Rome, telling him that “Next April I will enter my sixtieth year.”⁷ This indicates that, rather than give his age as the number of years he had completed, the Saint gave the year he was currently living. Accepting 24 April (his traditional birthday) 1640 as the day he would turn fifty-nine (or enter his sixtieth year), one can readily deduce that when Vincent testified early in April 1639, just before his birthday, declaring his age as “fifty-nine or thereabout,” he indicated by the catchword “thereabout” that he would soon enter his fifty-ninth year. The same holds true for his testimony concerning Francis de Sales early in April 1628. By process of simple subtraction one quickly concludes that Vincent was born in 1581 rather than 1576.

Nine other of Vincent’s references to his own age perfectly agree with a birthdate of 1581. In a letter to Pierre Escart written in July 1640, Vincent mentioned in passing that he was then sixty years old (or in his sixtieth year).⁸ Two years later the Saint wrote to Bernard Codoing, remarking on “the experiences which sixty-two years and my own faults have gained me.”⁹ In 1649

⁶Testimony of Vincent de Paul on the Subject of the Abbe of St. Cyran, 31 March and 1 and 2 April 1639, *ibid.*, p. 86.

⁷Vincent de Paul to Louis Lebreton, 12 October 1639, *ibid.*, I, p. 593.

⁸Same to Pierre Escart, 25 July 1640, *ibid.*, II, p. 70.

⁹Same to Bernard Codoing, 21 November 1642, *ibid.*, II, p. 314.

Vincent mentioned to Etienne Blatiron that he was then sixty-nine.¹⁰ Writing in 1655 to congratulate Alexander VII on his election to the papacy, Vincent said he was seventy-five years old.¹¹ During a repetition of prayer in November 1656, he exclaimed, "Alas! What is our life which passes so quickly? For me, here I am in the seventy-sixth year of my life, yet now all this time seems like a dream; all these years are vanished."¹² Two months later in a conference to the Daughters of Charity, Vincent again averred that he was seventy-six.¹³ In yet another conference to the Daughters given after his birthday in the same year, the Saint gave his age as seventy-seven.¹⁴ Twice in the year preceding his death Vincent wrote that he was in his seventy-ninth year.¹⁵ In every one of these instances, Vincent was unfailingly consistent in determining his age. When he died in September 1660, he was seventy-nine years old by modern reckoning and in his eightieth year by his own, having been born in 1581.

In light of the early and constant tradition that Vincent was born in 1576 and died at eighty-five, a birthdate of 1581 and death at age eighty raise serious questions. Could Vincent have been mistaken about his own age? Or did Almeras and Abelly have confused ideas

¹⁰Same to Etienne Blatiron, 17 September 1649, *ibid.*, III, p. 488.

¹¹Same to Alexander VII, 5 May 1655, *ibid.*, V, p. 368.

¹²Repetition of Prayer, 2 and 3 November 1656, *ibid.*, XI, p. 364.

¹³Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 6 January 1657, *ibid.*, X, p. 252.

¹⁴Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 17 June 1657, *ibid.*, p. 283.

¹⁵Vincent de Paul to Cardinal de Retz, 15 July 1659, *ibid.*, VIII, p.26; same to Francois Feydin, 24 August 1659, *ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

about it? If so, how did they come by these notions? Coste believes that the answer to these questions lies in another date intimately tied to that of the Saint's birth: the date of his ordination.¹⁶

Vincent was ordained a priest on 23 September 1600. The dimissorial letter issued the previous year declared him to be of legitimate age.¹⁷ According to the Council of Trent, the minimum legal age for ordination to priesthood was twenty-four. If Vincent really were twenty-four in 1600, then he would have been born in 1576. On the other hand, if the Saint correctly assessed his own age, then he was only nineteen at the time of his ordination — five years younger than church law required. Wherein lies the truth?

Coste has observed that ordination under falsified dimissorials and prior to canonical age frequently took place in France at the turn of the seventeenth century. Evidence amply substantiates this. As papal legate *a latere* to Henry IV, Cardinal de Medici of Florence traveled through the French countryside in 1596. On his return he reported to the pope that French bishops took little care regarding candidates for ordination. Hence, ignorant and beggarly priests, ordained before legitimate age without title or preparation, plagued France. In 1609 the papal secretary of state complained to the nuncio in Paris about the numerous demands for absolutions from irregularity for clerics promoted to orders prior to canonical age or with false dimissorials. The nuncio blamed this on a negligent and/or avaricious French episcopacy. He did admit, however, that fault did not always lie with the

¹⁶Coste, "La Vraie Date," 12-18.

¹⁷Letter of Ordination to Priesthood, 23 September 1600, Coste, *Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, XIII, p. 7; Dimissorial Letter for Priesthood, 13 September 1599, *ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

bishops. Sometimes the candidates themselves lied about their age.¹⁸

Coste argues that Vincent was one such candidate. Till the end of his life the Saint had in his possession the letters of his ordination and he kept these carefully guarded in his room. He never showed the letters to anyone nor did he ever say how long he had been a priest, even though the retreats for ordinands at St. Lazare offered him ample opportunities to do so. Coste believes that the Saint did not act out of humility in this matter, but to avoid scandal and to preserve the good name of the bishop who ordained him. With the letters of ordination in hand, Vincent could easily have calculated his correct age if he truly were ordained at twenty-four, but he always reckoned his age in such wise that he could only have been ordained at nineteen.¹⁹

Allowing that Vincent knew his correct age, was it possible that those living with him did not? If so, when the Saint died, the Community fell heir to the long coveted letters of ordination and Almeras used these to calculate Vincent's age. Assuming that the founder was of legitimate age at the time of ordination, as the dimissorials stated, Almeras concluded that his predecessor was born in 1576 and eighty-five at the time of his death. This would absolve Almeras and Abelly of any charge that they had altered the facts. Indeed, the contrary appears true.

Several times in the years prior to his death Vincent publicly mentioned his age. In a repetition of prayer given before the confreres of the Motherhouse in 1656, the Saint declared, "Here I am in the seventy-sixth year of my life."²⁰ Twice in the following year Vincent mentioned his

¹⁸Coste, "La Vraie Date," 15-16.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 17-18.

²⁰Repetition of Prayer, 2 and 3 November 1656, Coste, *Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, XI, p. 364.

age in conferences to the Daughters of Charity. In January he remarked that he was seventy-six and in June, after a birthday in April, he then told them he was seventy-seven.²¹ These closest to Vincent in the Community certainly knew his age. Brother Louis Robineau, who served as the Saint's secretary during his last years, noted that prior to his death the founder was nearly eighty years old.²² Vincent's age was a matter of public record. It stretches credibility to think that Almeras and Abelly did not know it, especially the latter who had known and worked with Vincent for many years.

Moreover, evidence indicates that in writing the biography of Vincent, Abelly either used doctored source materials or else doctored them himself. In a defense of his biography the good Bishop of Rodez explained how he came to write the life of Vincent. He averred that the Congregation had commissioned him to do the work and furnished him with copies of the sources. Abelly all but swore that he faithfully and accurately transcribed Vincent's own words. He even got a testimonial letter from Almeras confirming that the quotes had been checked against the originals for accuracy.²³ The blame for tampering with the sources, therefore, could rest with Abelly himself, Almeras, Brother Bertrand Ducournau who copied the materials used by the Bishop, or with all three.

The first instance of a cosmetic change in Abelly's biography revolves around the absence of a date. In recounting a conference the Bishop wisely left undated, he

²¹Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 6 January 1657, *ibid.*, X, p. 252; Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 17 June 1657, *ibid.*, p. 283.

²²Coste, "La Vraie Date," 10.

²³Coste, *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, trans. Joseph Leonard, C.M., 3 vols. (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1952), III, pp. 477-79.

quotes Vincent as exclaiming, "Alas! The seventy-six years of life I have lived now seem to me as a dream and a moment."²⁴ Some eighty years later Pierre Collet, a Vincentian, wrote his own biography of Vincent using Abelly's work, Abelly's own source materials, and the originals. Again without dating it, Collet quotes the same conference but has changed the Saint's age as follows: "Alas! The nearly eighty years I have lived now seem to me as a dream and a moment."²⁵ Obviously Collet felt constrained to add four years to Vincent's life for some reason. In all likelihood the reason lay in the date of the conference. In fact, the conference quoted was probably a different redaction of the above mentioned repetition of prayer Vincent gave in November 1656. Then the Saint exclaimed, "Alas! What is our life which passes so quickly? For me, here I am in the seventy-sixth year of my life, yet now all this time seems like a dream; all these years are vanished."²⁶ The material surrounding these three quotes makes it all but certain that their occasion was the same. In this instance Abelly gave the Saint's true age but left it undated. Collet used the same material, apparently dated 1656, and added four years to Vincent's age to make him approximately eighty-five when he died four years later.

The second instance of date tampering also rests on circumstantial evidence. Abelly quoted an entire letter

²⁴ Abelly, *La Vie*, III, p. 172. The French reads as follows: "Hélas! 76 ans de vie que j'ai passés ne me paraissent à present qu'un songe et qu'un moment."

²⁵ Collet, *La Vie*, II, p. 170. The French reads as follows: "Hélas! près de 80 ans que j'ai passés ne me paraissent à présent qu'un songe et qu'un moment."

²⁶ Repetition of Prayer, 2 and 3 November 1656, Coste, *Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, XI, p. 364. The French reads as follows: Hélas! qu'est-ce que notre vie, laquelle passé si vite? Pour moi, me voilà à la 76^e année de ma vie; et cependant tout ce temps-là à présent ne me semble quasi que comme un songe; toutes ces années sont passees."

which Vincent wrote in November 1659 to Father Toussaint Bourdaise, a Vincentian in Madagascar. The Superior General concluded the letter by telling Bourdaise, "Also, please pray our Lord for me because I will not be able to do it much longer due to my age which has passed eighty years [qui passe quatre-vingts ans]." ²⁷ The original of this letter has not come down to us; history knows it only from Abelly. Yet history possesses two other original letters written by Vincent in the same year and in which the Saint also gave his age. In neither of these letters did he say he was past eighty years old. In July 1659 Vincent wrote Cardinal de Retz, mentioning that he was then "in the seventy-ninth year of my age." ²⁸ A month later, writing to a confrere at Richelieu, Vincent urged him to "Remember . . . in your prayers an old man of seventy-nine years." ²⁹ Clearly, by the Saint's own words he was seventy-nine in 1659. Coste contends that in the letter to Bourdaise Abelly changed Vincent's age simply by deleting one word from the text of the now lost original. He believes that Vincent probably had written that he would not be able to pray much longer "due to my age which approached eighty years [qui passe à quatre-vingts ans]." ³⁰ By deleting the preposition "à," Abelly made Vincent an octogenarian of unspecified years rather than a man of seventy-nine.

That Abelly (or those who furnished him with materials) did actually tamper with texts is beyond dispute. During the 1940s the Congregation of the Mission

²⁷ Abelly, *La Vie*, II, p. 185. The letter can also be found in Coste, *Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, VIII, p. 160.

²⁸ Vincent de Paul to Cardinal de Retz, 15 July 1659, Coste, *Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, VIII, p. 26.

²⁹ Same to Francois Feydin, 24 August 1659. *ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 160n.

recovered several lost letters of Vincent. Again, history had already known one of these letters through Abelly. A comparison of the text in the biography with the text of the original clearly shows that the Bishop or his suppliers freely edited the material. Words have been changed, sentence structure transposed, a whole paragraph and part of another deleted, and some new material was added.³¹ Since Abelly' manhandled the source in this instance, Coste's contention that the Bishop deleted the preposition "à" from the Bourdaise letter gains even more force.

An even more certain instance of date tampering appeared in Abelly's use of Brother Robineau's recollections of Vincent. As mentioned above, Robineau was secretary to the Saint during his last years. After Vincent's death the Brother wrote his memoirs of the Holy Founder. At a point near the end of the Saint's life, Robineau expressed his surprise at Vincent's continued mortification: "So much did he water the wine he drank that oftentimes I was astonished to see that this old man who was nearly eighty was still able to make do with so little of it."³² When Abelly referred to this passage of Robineau's memoirs, he changed Vincent's age, again making him over eighty: "So much did he water his wine, he [Robineau] writes, . . . he was often astonished that an old man such as that could make do with so little of it, even at the age of eighty and more."³³ Abelly or his Vincentian backers were bound and determined to make the Holy Founder eighty-five at the time of his death.

Ever since Coste exposed this pious fraud, biographers of Vincent have accepted that the Saint came into the

³¹"Dix Lettres Inedites de Saint Vincent de Paul," *Annales de la Congregation de la Mission et de la Compagnie des Filles de la Charité* 112-113 (1947-1948), 117-23.

³²Quoted in Coste, "la Vraie Date," 10.

³³Abelly, *La Vie*, III, p. 417.

world in 1580 or 1581.³⁴ This latter discrepancy goes back to the Saint's method of counting his age. Some biographers believe that, when Vincent gave his age, he was speaking of years completed as we do today. That being the case, the Saint would have been born in 1580. The majority of biographers, however, accept Coste's opinion that Vincent gave his age as the year he was currently living. This being the case, a birthdate of 1581 would follow. In fact, a careful reading of the Saint's own testimony better bears up the latter date.³⁵

Although recent biographers have differed in reckoning Vincent's birthdate, all those commenting hold that the Saint's ordination date lay behind the cosmetic hagiographies of the first generations. The record of Vincent's ordination clearly indicates that he was ordained in 1600. In order to avoid the scandal that might ensue should it become known that the Holy Founder was ordained at nineteen, Abelly or Almeras (or both) added five years to Vincent's life, declaring that he was born in 1576.³⁶ In fact, they did not even reckon this properly. Although Vincent was ordained in September 1600, the diocese of Dax issued the dimissorials in September 1599, declaring him then to be of canonical age. Hence, Abelly should

³⁴Favoring 1581 are Antoine Redier, *La Vraie Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1927), p. 5; Iginio Girodani, *St. Vincent de Paul: Servant of the Poor*, trans. Thomas J. Tobin (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1961), p. 1; Leonard von Matt and Louis Cognet, *St. Vincent de Paul*, trans. Emma Craufurd (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1960), p. 21; Theodore Maynard, *Apostle of Charity: The Life of St. Vincent de Paul* (New York: Dial Press, 1939), p. 29. Favoring a date of 1580 are Henri Daniel-Rops, *Monsieur Vincent: The Story of St. Vincent de Paul*, trans. Julie Kernan (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1961), p. 15; Jean Calvet, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, trans. Lancelot C. Shappard (New York: David McKay Company, 1951), p. 11.

³⁵Cf. above pp. 2-3.

³⁶Redier, *Vincent de Paul*, pp. 5-6, 10; Maynard, *Apostle of Charity*, p. 29; Daniel-Rops, *Monsieur Vincent*, p. 16.

have said that Vincent was born in 1575 and his tombstone should have said that he died at eighty-six.

Theodore Maynard best explores the possible reasons why Abelly and Almeras engaged in this pious fraud. While the avoidance of scandal heads the list, two other motives press themselves to the fore. First, Vincent ardently opposed Jansenism and the Community did not want to give the Jansenists ammunition to use against him. Had Almeras and Abelly admitted that the Saint was born in 1581, the Jansenists would gleefully have pointed out that Vincent, a leader in the establishment of seminaries and the reform of the clergy, was himself ordained in violation of Church law. The second and perhaps more cogent reason for lying lay in the fact that the Community already planned to advance Vincent's cause for beatification. Certainly Almeras did not wish to give the Devil's Advocate anything he might use to thwart this purpose.³⁷

Without justifying these shenanigans with history, the modern reader must bear in mind that hagiographers of the seventeenth century wrote to edify. They neither knew nor practiced the modern scientific method of history. Nor did Abelly and Almeras stand alone in the field of cosmetic biography. The Trinitarian Fathers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries went well beyond anything done by the sons and friends of Vincent. Lacking any documents or information regarding their holy founders (John of Matha and Felix of Valois), certain men of the Order manufactured biographies for the two out of whole cloth. Apparently to ensure their cult, these hagiographers alleged that Felix belonged to the royal family of Valois. The royal connection appears to have had the desired effect. Although the Church never canonized John and Felix, it confirmed their cult in 1666. Now,

³⁷Maynard, *Apostle of Charity*, pp. 29-30.

some historians even doubt that Felix existed. If he did, they certainly do not believe he belonged to the Valois family; rather, he came from Valois.³⁸

This pious hoax by the Trinitarians makes changing the birthdate of Vincent seem slight, as indeed it was. Henri Daniel-Rops placed the issue in proper perspective when he wrote of the young Vincent: "Whether it was 1576 or 1580 or . . . 1581, and apart from the question of his precise age at the time of ordination, none of this was seriously to affect the future of this child."³⁹ Indeed, all it has affected is the date on which Vincentians and Daughters of Charity celebrate the birth of their Founder. In this year of our Lord 1981 the sons and daughters of Vincent are not celebrating the quadrennial of his birth five years too late. Rather, their predecessors celebrated the centennial, bicentennial, and tercentenary five years too soon.

³⁸ Herbert Thurston, S.J., and Donald Attwater, ed., *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, 4 vols. (New York: P.J. Kennedy and Sons, 1962), I, p. 277 and IV, pp. 392-93; *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967), s.v. "St. Felix of Valois," by A.G. Biggs.

³⁹ Daniel-Rops, *Monsieur Vincent*, p. 16.



Great designs are always bound to encounter obstacles and difficulties; flesh and blood will tell us to abandon them, but let us be on guard against listening to flesh and blood.