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The way of Vincent de Paul: introduction

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*May God instill in you . . . a deep love for Our
Lord Jesus Christ, who is our father, our
mother, and our all.*

SV V, 534

INTRODUCTION

*He just about transformed the face of the
Church!*

Henri de Maupas du Tour
Funeral Oration of St. Vincent¹

A few years ago, as I was preparing for a talk on Vincentian spirituality, I went to a wonderful exhibit of Claude Monet's paintings. Three of them intrigued me especially. Each showed exactly the same location on the Seine—one at dawn, one at midday, one at dusk. Each had a beauty of its own. In the first, gauze-like rays of light filtered through the heavy morning mist that lay on the river. In the second, the face of the river was bathed in sunlight, and the bright green of the trees and the yellow and red of the flowers on the river banks sparkled with light. In the third, long shadows stretched out over the river and only a gentle purple glow lit the evening sky. They were very different views of the same reality, and through them Monet was illustrating an important lesson: we cannot exhaust a reality by fixing on it at a single moment or from a single point of view.

It is much the same with the gospels. When they look at the rich reality of Jesus, they can only attempt to express it in pieces and from varying points of view. The Jesus of Mark is very human in his ignorance; the Jesus of John shares the knowledge of God as he reads the future. In the gospels we see Jesus as Lord, but we also see him as suffering servant. We see him forcefully confronting the Pharisees. We see him meek as a lamb led to the slaughter. We find an ascending Christology and a descending Christology, and several in-between.

The saints are similar. It is not easy to capture their richness in a single word or a single phrase. A still photo of St. Vincent or St. Francis of Assisi would not tell the whole story. They did not live merely at a single moment in time, nor in a single place. Neither were they influenced merely by one

1. This quotation is cited by André Dodin, in *St. Vincent de Paul et la Charité* (Paris, 1960) 103: "Il a presque changé la face de l'Eglise."

person. Nor did they perform merely one work. The saints' vision of Jesus was rich, and like the many facets of a bright diamond, their lives sparkle before our eyes in varying ways.

That is, of course, why people argue over what the core of St. Vincent's spirituality is. In describing it, some focus on doing the will of God, others on following providence. Some see the core as his way of integrating prayer and action; others stress simplicity and humility. Some, perhaps most understandably, say that service of the poor is everything for St. Vincent and is the driving force behind whatever else he did, including his work in forming the clergy. All speak an element of the truth. Yet all somehow fall short. Each expresses an aspect of St. Vincent's spirituality, but each fails to do justice to the whole, to the context into which the various elements fit.

So too, what I have written below is a partial, inadequate effort, as I attempt to describe the spirituality of St. Vincent.

The Christ of St. Vincent has long fascinated me. "He described himself as the Evangelizer of the Poor," St. Vincent writes.¹ It is this Christ who lies at the heart of St. Vincent's spirituality.

But that is to run ahead of the story. First, a very brief word about St. Vincent; secondly, a word about spirituality in general; and then finally, a word about Vincentian spirituality.

1. A word about St. Vincent

This remarkable man, born at Pouy in southern France in 1581, had a rather self-seeking start in the priesthood. Under the influence of spiritual directors like St. Francis de Sales, Cardinal Bérulle, and André Duval, he underwent a striking conversion, in which he gave his life over to God in the service of the poor. He founded the Congregation of the Mission (1625), a community of priests and brothers whose end is "to preach the good news to the poor" and the Daughters of Charity (1633), at that time a new form of community in which the sisters lived "in the world" to serve the sick poor spiritually and corporally. He also established the Confraternities of Charity (lay organizations, both of men and women, founded in parishes also to assist the poor spiritually and corporally) and the Ladies of Charity; these groups continue to the present day in very large numbers. Eager for the reform of the clergy, he organized retreats for ordinands and founded seminaries

1. SV XI, 32. *SV* refers to the fourteen volume French edition of St. Vincent's works, edited by Pierre Coste (Paris: Gabalda, 1920-25). I have used Joseph Leonard's translations as a starting point, but have often modified these in light of the original text.

throughout France. He gathered together many of the clergy of his day each Tuesday, both in Paris and elsewhere, for conferences. Born a Gascon peasant, he became the counsellor of King Louis XIII, to whom he ministered on his deathbed, and of Queen Ann of Austria, and was the friend and confidant of saints like Francis de Sales, Jane Frances de Chantal, Alain de Solminihac and Louise de Marillac. When he died on September 27, 1660, all of Paris mourned him. He is known throughout the world today as the Patron of Charity. His spirituality lives on in hundreds of thousands of lay men and women, priests, sisters and brothers who follow in his footsteps.

2. A word about spirituality

A spirituality is an energizing vision, a driving force. It is, on the one hand, the specific way in which a person is rooted in God. It is, on the other hand, the specific way in which he or she relates to the created world. It is insight as the source of action. It is a vision that generates energy and channels it in a particular direction, thereby enabling a person to transcend himself or herself. For the Christian, it is a way of seeing Christ and being in him that directs the individual's energies in the service of the kingdom.

Contemporary writers emphasize the transcendent thrust of all spirituality, both Christian and non-Christian. Sandra Schneiders describes it as "the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives."¹ The main characteristics of spirituality, largely agreed on by theologians today, are included within this definition: progressive, consciously pursued, personal integration through self-transcendence within and toward the horizon of ultimate concern, which in St. Vincent's case is Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor.

3. A word about Vincentian spirituality

Naturally, the spirit of the Vincentian family flows from the spirit of its founder. The Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission give a schematic description of that spirit, which is at the same time a very good description of St. Vincent's spirituality, though, for the reasons mentioned above, necessarily an incomplete one.

1. Sandra Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), 684; cf. also, by the same author, "Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?" *Horizons* 13 (1986), 266.

Here, let me offer a brief schema of that spirit based on articles 4-7 of the Vincentian Constitutions of 1984:

*THE VINCENTIAN SPIRIT IS THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST AS SENT TO
PREACH
THE GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR¹
AS EVIDENCED IN THE GOSPEL SAYINGS EXPLAINED IN THE
COMMON RULES²
CONCRETIZED PARTICULARLY THROUGH:
LOVE AND REVERENCE TOWARDS THE FATHER
COMPASSIONATE AND EFFECTIVE LOVE FOR THE POOR
DOCILITY TO DIVINE PROVIDENCE³
SIMPLICITY
HUMILITY
MEEKNESS
MORTIFICATION
ZEAL FOR SOULS⁴
"JESUS CHRIST IS THE RULE OF THE MISSION"⁵
AND THE CENTER OF ITS LIFE AND ACTIVITY⁶*

There is room for much meditation here, even for an entire retreat. Notice that, when the Vincentian Constitutions present a vision of the Vincentian spirit, it is *unified* in one respect: it flows from a vision of Jesus Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor. But it is *diversified* in another respect: the riches, the ramifications, of that vision are many.

It is evident that St. Vincent has made a clear choice. The vision he offers his followers is a vision of Christ not as teacher (as might be the vision of a Christian Brother), nor as healer (as might be the vision of a community dedicated to hospitals), but as the Evangelizer of the Poor. Vincentians are called to enter into the Lucan journey of the following of Christ in the very terms with which, in Luke's gospel (4:18), Jesus opens his public ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore, he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord."

St. Vincent's spirituality flows from his contemplation of *this* Christ. It is

1. C 5.

2. C 4.

3. C 6

4. C 7.

5. SV, XII, 130.

6. C 5.

the spirit of the Evangelizer himself, alive and acting in St. Vincent's and our world. It expresses itself in love and reverence for the father, compassionate and efficacious love for the poor, in docility to providence, and in the five missionary virtues of simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and zeal.

Those who live in the Vincentian spirit are called to contemplate *this* Christ again and again. He is the rule of the Mission.

This Christ of Luke 4:18 stands at the center of the spirituality of the members of the Vincentian family, calling them to walk with him on his journey. Without him, the journey is aimless, empty. Of this Christ, St. Vincent might repeat to his followers the striking words of Deuteronomy: "Bind his name on your hands. Let it be a pendant before your eyes. Let it be written on the doorposts of your houses so that you may see it in your coming in and your going out" (cf. Dt 6:8-9).

This book will attempt to speak about various aspects of a Vincentian spirituality, which I describe below in graphic form:

CHRIST THE EVANGELIZER OF THE POOR	
Gospels Common Rules	
Love and reference toward the Father	Simplicity
Compassionate & effective love for the poor	Humility
Docility to providence	Meekness
	Mortification
	Zeal for souls