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St. Vincent's Legacy: Prayer, The Soul of Ministry

Ignatius M. Melito, C.M.

Tradition has fixed in mind the image of St. Vincent de Paul as a "man of action." In the public eye he has ever been the Saint of a form of human misery and need — of the poor and the sick, the abandoned, the victims of war and famine, the foundlings, beggars, galley slaves, and a host of other clients.

In acknowledging this acclaim for his labors, Vincent would, with characteristic humility, be the first to state that the credit for his accomplishments and those of his early associates in charity stemmed from a source more profound than mere efficiency or managerial skill. "Give me a man of prayer," he declared in one of his best known maxims, "and he will be capable of everything." The easy confidence that radiates from this statement derives, said Vincent, from St. Paul's earlier boast, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me." (Phil 4:13)

In thus yoking the twin components of the apostolate — prayer and action — Vincent formulates what turns out to be a key concept for him. Prayer is not only a companion activity to ministry, it is indeed its very soul. Within the formula the operative word is *prayer*. The apostolate can take a thousand shapes ("everything"), which are governed by their own rules and styles. But whatever the faces ministry will assume, prayer must be their animating, common denominator.

Tested and validated by his own experience, this notion dominated much of Vincent's thinking about the active apostolate in which he was so widely engaged, especially as founder and mentor to his two canonical Communities, the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, as well as to the Confraternity of the Ladies of Charity — all of them dedicated to essentially active ministries: the men in evangelizing the poor country people by way of missions and in forming the clergy; the women in serving Christ “corporally and spiritually in the person of the poor.” Indeed, the Saint was so convinced about the necessity of keeping anchored in prayer that he was willing to declare that the Congregation of the Mission — and implicitly his other foundations, we may presume — would last as long as it was faithful to prayer.¹

Vincent was an indefatigable adviser to his sons and daughters on this prominent topic. His words stand as his legacy to them and still serve as viable, sensible guides to an effective apostolate. In the pages that follow we will explore the components of that legacy of Vincent. We shall examine the configurations of his vision of prayer and how the pre-eminence that he gave it makes a statement about its necessity for the apostolate. In addition, we shall

¹A notation about sources is in order here. The texts used are all English translations found in a variety of locations. Following each work listed is the abbreviated form by which it is identified in the citations: Pierre Coste, C.M., *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, 3 vols., translated by Joseph Leonard, C.M., Westminster: The Newman Press, 1952 (C,I,II,III); Pierre Coste, compiler, *Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul (to the Congregation of the Mission)*, transl. Joseph Leonard, C.M., Philadelphia, 1963 (M); Joseph Leonard, transl., *The Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity*, one-volume edition privately reprinted, 1979 (D); Joseph Leonard, transl., *St. Vincent de Paul and Mental Prayer: a Selection of Letters and Addresses*, London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1925 (V); *Common Rules and Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission* (CR); *Rules of the Daughters of Charity, Servants of the Sick Poor* (R). For the text cited, cf. M,49.

look at the manner in which he demonstrated its flow into the lives of the priests, brothers and sisters by fostering attitudes both for living community life and for functioning in ministry. As we go along, we shall concurrently examine Vincent's custom of providing practical training in prayer — his program of inservice education, if you will.

A useful point of entry into the mind of Vincent is the pair of documents, dating from his latter days, that crystallize his thinking. These are his Rules for his two Communities that were published in 1658 (for the Congregation of the Mission) and in 1672 (for the Daughters of Charity).² These rules are the expressions of several decades of the corporate, lived experience of the men and the women whom he guided. The burden of Vincent's instruction is an insistence on modeling the self on Jesus, Who first "advanced in wisdom and grace" before He set out on His public ministry. As the Saint's biographer, Pierre Coste, remarks, Vincent "was not accustomed to separate personal sanctification from works of charity, for he saw in such sanctification the necessary condition of zeal and devotedness." (C,I,271) In the men's Rules, therefore, Vincent portrays Jesus as one Who began to do (by way of learning virtue) before He set out to teach. (CR,1) The Daughters are likewise directed to imitate Jesus as "so perfect a model," and to "strive to live in a holy manner, and labor with great care to attain

²Although the latter did not appear until twelve years after the Saint's death, there had been some provisional rules as early as 1633, sketchy as they might have been. These were gradually developed into some fixed form, though still not written for general distribution. Vincent used some such formulation in his conferences on the Rules beginning September 29, 1665, and concluding on November 25, 1659. For an account of the evolution of the Rules of the Daughters of Charity, see Coste, I, 369-372.

perfection; uniting the exercise of a spiritual life with the exterior duties of Christian charity toward the poor, according to the present Rules, which they will endeavor to practice with great fidelity, as the surest means of attaining this end.” (R,I)³

Vincent’s many statements on prayer are usually conveyed through lively images, but he is fairly direct in one of his basic descriptions. Mental prayer, he says,

is an elevation of the mind to God by which the soul detaches itself, as it were, from itself, so as to seek God in himself. It is a conversation of the soul with God, an intercourse of the spirit, in which God interiorly teaches it what it should know and do, in which the soul says to God what He Himself teaches it to ask for. A great excellence which should make us esteem and prefer it to everything else. (D, 373)

On another occasion, addressing the Missioners, he reminds them that prayer is a gift, whose beginning function is combat “against the passion or evil inclination that devours us.” From that point, one proceeds “quietly and not to break [the] head through dint of application and a desire for over-subtle reasoning, [but] to raise the soul to God and to hearken to Him, because a word from God is far more efficacious than a thousand reasonings and all the speculations of our understanding.” (M,49)

To Vincent prayer was, above all, the essence, the index, and the guarantee of spiritual vitality. “Air is not more necessary for bodily life than is prayer for the life of

³This concern was directed equally to the Ladies of Charity, who in their early rules were instructed to “strive to acquire Christian perfection and the perfection appropriate to their condition; they shall make mental prayer for at least half an hour; they shall hear Holy Mass, read a chapter of the *Introduction to a Devout Life* or *A Treatise on the Love of God*; they shall make a daily general examination of conscience and shall go to Confession and Holy Communion at least once a week.” Cited in C,I,271.

the soul," he told his Daughters. As a person deprived of air soon dies, so "it is impossible for a Daughter of Charity to live without prayer." (D,1145) Similarly, "as the body cannot live without the soul, so the soul cannot live without prayer." (D, 1147) Prayer is regular nourishment and refreshment, "the daily manna that comes down from Heaven" to provide strength. (D, 358) The soul deprived of prayer is a garden whose plants are shriveled by drought. The custom of daily prayer, on the other hand, is like "a gentle dew [which] every morning moistens your soul by the grace which it draws down from God . . . [a] salutary refreshment which unceasingly imparts vigor to all your actions As the gardener day by day sees his plants growing" when they are properly watered, so the Daughter of Charity will "day by day grow in holiness" when she refreshes herself with this "sacred dew." (D,358-9)

In turn, this invigoration leads to further insight. In the conference last cited, Vincent declared that prayer renews the soul "far more truly than the fountains of youth the philosophers speak of rejuvenate the body. In prayer [the] soul, weakened by bad habits, grows quite vigorous; in prayer it recovers the vision it lost when it went blind; ears formerly deaf to the voice of God are open to holy inspirations, and the heart receives new strength, is animated with a courage it never felt before." (D,372) Prayer indeed is a mirror (like that which the fashionable lady consults before leaving her home) which the soul holds up to itself in order to note "what renders it displeasing to God; it arranges itself so that it may be conformable to Him in all things." God, in fact, "lets us know in prayer what we should do, and what avoid There is no action in life that makes [us] better, or shows us more clearly what is God's will, than prayer." (D,371-2) Thus adorned with this "ornament of the soul," the Sister "will be clad in the lovely robe of charity and God will look on [her] with pleasure." (D,1147-8)

In Vincent's understanding, prayer and the realities of service were integrated in such a way that, by their mutual interaction, both prayer and the apostolate were nurtured. Thus, he established a fixed place for prayer into the order of the day for both Communities, preferably as the first important action and performed in common. For the Missioners, one hour in the morning was prescribed (CR,X,7), and for the Sisters, two half-hour periods, one each in the morning and in the late afternoon. (R,IX,ii & iii) He valued beginning the day sharply, by rising immediately, "promptly and diligently going to converse with God Do not enter into an argument — with your mattress, turning over on the other side to see if you ought to get up." (D,1128-9) As part of this orientation toward upcoming prayer and the day in general, Vincent was also insistent on directing one's attention, by way of the Morning Offering, toward God as the first action of the day. "What happens to a Sister," he asks, "who works away from early morning without any other idea in her mind than that of getting on with her work and with no thought of God?" (D, 324) "We owe God all our thoughts, all our actions, and all that we are Even if you should only say: 'My God, I love you with my whole heart,' that is enough. Should you do that well, you are offering to God the first fruits of your thoughts, and that is what he asks of you." (D,1157)

Inevitably, questions would arise concerning conflicts between prayer and action. The demands of the apostolates of both the Missioners and the Sisters were such that occasionally they were called upon to forego a period of prayer or some other exercise in order to address an immediate need of a client. In such cases, Vincent allowed a postponement of prayer. He did so, moreover, not as a grudging concession, but as a response to a more urgent need of the poor or the sick, who demanded

priority. "If there ever is a legitimate reason" for such a delay, he once declared, "it is the service of the poor." (D,284) Or, if unable to make prayer in the usual place, a Sister might make her prayer while going through the fields to visit the sick. (D,1147) Again, if she finds herself in the country without the points of meditation — or worse, if she cannot read — Vincent simply says, "Meditate on the mysteries of the life of Our Lord . . . and all the other circumstances from his birth to his death." (D,1136)⁴

In addressing this tension that often existed in making a choice between prayer and action, the Saint verbalized his solution in another of his well known adages: "To leave God for God." At such moments prayer and service merge: God is experienced equally in the action of the moment as he is in formal prayer. "As Charity is the queen of virtues," he wrote to a Superioress, "all others must yield place to her." (V,247) This note is sounded as early as his first recorded conference to the Sisters:

My Daughters, remember that when you leave prayer and Holy Mass to serve the poor, you are losing nothing,

⁴The illiteracy of many Sisters was a very practical problem that Vincent had to deal with. In the context just quoted, he recommends: "It would be well to have some little pictures of the mysteries of Our Lord's life. I request Mlle. Le Gras to arrange that the Sisters who live away from here may have some, if she can manage. And when you go to pray, let those who cannot read take for the subject of their meditation the mystery shown in the little picture . . . Sisters, if you only knew how many great Saints there were who had the gift of prayer without any learning. Don't be discouraged because you cannot read; for it may well be that one who is ignorant may make a far better prayer than a person who knows a great deal." (D,1136) Cf. D,191-2, where he recommends as a regular topic, when reading is impossible, the Passion of the Lord, "a fountain of youth in which you will find something fresh every day." Where did many saints draw all their knowledge? "From the sacred book of the Cross. You will do well to habituate yourself to it . . . and then you will not fail at prayer for want of a reader." Cf. also, D,28

because serving the poor is going to God and you should see God in them. (D,4)

He constantly returned to this reassuring notion:

You must not disturb yourselves, nor think you have failed to observe rule if you omit your prayer, because it is not lost when one leaves it for a legitimate reason. And, my dear Daughters, if there ever is a legitimate reason, it is the service of the poor. To leave God only for God, that is to say, to leave one work of God to perform another, either of greater obligation or greater merit, is not to leave God What a consolation for a good Daughter of Charity to think: 'I am going to help my sick poor, but God will accept it instead of the prayer which I should be making just now,' and let her go off gaily to wherever God calls her.⁵

In any event, excusing oneself altogether from prayer should not be done casually, but only if "necessity or obedience dispose otherwise." (CR,X,I;R,VIII,i) Some judgment or discernment must be employed. The Saint saw value in making an effort to be present at exercises, especially at prayer. To a lay brother who had confessed the fault of too easily excusing himself, Vincent said, "Do not fail in the future to assist at community exercises, and you may be certain, Brother, that you will lose nothing thereby, and that God will make up for the time you have spent in his service by remaining here." (M,196) Vincent was very much aware of the hazard of neglecting self, as he reminded a newly appointed Superior of a seminary:

You should have recourse to God in prayer that you may preserve your soul in his fear and love for, alas, Sir, I am bound to tell you and you should know it, persons are often lost while contributing to the salvation of others. An individual may do well for himself and yet forget that self if engaged in external occupations. (M,213)

⁵D,284-5; Cf. also D,190; D,719, D,1107; V,269.

In fact, such a person can become only the shell of a missionary. "Is a man," Vincent asks in a conference, "who neglects mental prayer and the other exercises of his rule, a Missionary? No, he is wanting in the chief requisite, which is his own perfection. It is only quite just that persons called to such an important state as that of serving God in the way we do, and who have received of His goodness the grace of responding to the call, should render themselves agreeable in His sight and make a special profession of pleasing Him." (M,394)⁶

Having established the imperative of prayer, Vincent was equally solicitous in providing a method to facilitate its daily practice. He had such a methodology readily at hand in the system popularized by his spiritual director, mentor, and personal friend, St. Francis de Sales. Although Francis died early on in Vincent's career (1622), his influence was lifelong.

The source and the method were so familiar to his audiences that Vincent hardly needed to remind them, but he does so, nevertheless, as he said once, in a formal conference on prayer to the Daughters: "You know how to make it because you have often been told about it and learned it by rote; perhaps it is not much use for me to tell you of the method of the Blessed Francis de Sales; nevertheless, as it is the easiest, I will do so." (D,1148) Actually, many of Vincent's spiritual conferences to both the men and the women are excellent examples of the method, as he ranges over the multiple motives and the

⁶ Vincent issued a similar warning to the Sisters: "In so far as a Daughter prays as she ought to pray she will do well. She will not walk, she will run in the ways of the Lord, and will be raised to a high degree of God's love. On the contrary, she who does not pray, or who prays in a way that is not fitting, will barely drag herself along. She wears the dress, but has not the spirit of a Daughter of Charity." (D,1147)

means for practicing the virtues discussed, or for observing the Rules, or for living the apostolic life; he is generous, too, in offering possible resolutions that could issue from such considerations.⁷

The components of whatever process one uses, however, must never become ends in themselves nor interfere with the main purpose of prayer, which is to elevate the soul to God, “to show Him the love we bear Him” and to allow Him to speak to us “heart to heart.” (D,1148) Vincent cites with admiration the words of the Bishop of Geneva, “Oh I would not wish to go to God if God did not come to me!” (M,141) In order not to get entangled in process at the expense of prayer itself — or, to put it another way, not to let the method get into God’s way — Vincent often advised about the prudent use of techniques. For instance, the very beginnings of prayer might be difficult, simply because the person lacks “sufficient attention to the preparation for prayer,” (D,278) due, perhaps to a lack of recollection and silence, “for the words of God do not mingle with the words and tumult of men.” (D,715) Another instance: One can indulge in an excess of reasoning that exhausts the conceptual possibilities of the topic and leads to fanciful flights of the intellect but not to prayer. Or, to use a favorite metaphor of Vincent, “Why continue striking the flint once the flame is enkindled?” (M,160) On one occasion, responding to a priest who had declared in his account of his prayer that he had “chiefly devoted himself to affective acts,” the Saint responded: “That is what we

⁷“Prayer is the great book for a preacher,” Vincent declared to Father Durand, Superior at Agde. (V,210) The same simplicity that infused Vincent’s method for prayer was transferred to his instructions for preaching, which came to be known as “The Little Method.” Cf.M,161 ff. for a conference on the topic of preaching. For a full discussion of Vincent’s great reforms in preaching, see Coste, II, Chapter XXXII.

should do during meditation — that is to say, we should spend but little time in looking for reasons. We should rather make acts of the love of God, humility, contrition, etc. For why should we reason when we are already persuaded by the subject of our meditation?” (M244-5)

Indeed, according to Vincent, it is his constant wish that the Lord’s gift of prayer to his sons and daughters would go beyond that prayer “by way of the understanding” that we ordinarily call “mental prayer,” and lead to that prayer known as “contemplation.” In contemplation, he says,

the soul, in the presence of God, does nothing else but receive from Him what He bestows. She is without action, and God Himself inspires her, without any effort on the soul’s part, with all that she can desire, and with far more. Have you ever, my dear Sisters, experienced this sort of prayer? I am sure you have, and in your retreats you have often been astonished that, without doing anything on your part, God Himself has replenished your soul and granted you knowledge you never had before. (D,374)

According to Vincent, prayer is really not brought to completion unless it issues in resolutions for action. “To go away from prayer,” he said to the Sisters, “without making any such resolutions . . . is not to pray as we ought.” (D,1134) And yet, even that resolve is inefficacious unless the Sister settles upon some means for putting it into practice:

When you resolve to avoid a vice or practice a virtue, you should say to yourselves: ‘Very well! I resolve to do so and so, but it’s very hard to carry it out. Can I do it by my own strength? No, but by the grace of God, I hope to be faithful, and to that end I shall make use of such a means.’ (D,1134-5)

In a letter to St. Louise, as she was about to begin a spiritual retreat, Vincent had something to say about the

economy of resolutions: “You should not take too many practical resolutions, but . . . you should strengthen yourself to the utmost in carrying out those you have already made with regard to your daily actions and duties.” (V,86) Resolutions, indeed, must be infused with reality if they are to have any significance. In another letter to Louise he has this to say about practicality:

I am sending you back Madame N.’s resolutions, which are good; but they would be still better, if they were more detailed. It would be well to get others to make the exercise of the retreat with you to do the same; anything else is merely a production of the mind, which, having found some ease, and even some sweetness in the consideration of a virtue, flatters itself with the thought of its own virtue; but to grow solidly virtuous it is expedient to make good practical resolutions on particular acts of the virtues, and afterwards to be faithful in carrying them out. Without that we are often virtuous merely in our imagination. (V,111)

Resolutions are not for the day alone, but are to be enduring aids to sustain one’s resolve. In an exchange with a Sister during a spiritual conference which touched on fidelity in the midst of temptations, the Saint asked what she thought would be a suitable means to resist temptations, and she replied, “To re-read the resolutions taken during retreat.” To which Vincent enthusiastically responded:

Oh! my daughters, what an excellent means! For those were thoughts that came to us from God when we were dealing with Him most familiarly; they are provisions which He gave us for our time of need. And that is why it is well for us to gather them together that we may make use of them in time of need . . . You will certainly find that this is an excellent means to resume once more what you have begun. (D,319)

In addition to frequent instructions on the method of

prayer and an insistence on practical resolutions, Vincent employed a third practice in both Communities to foster the spirit of prayer. It came to be called "Repetition of Prayer," which he once described as "one of the most necessary means we have for mutually stirring up our devotion." (M,436) The process was simply a recital by some randomly chosen members of the local community, assembled for the regular spiritual conferences, of some of the thoughts experienced in prayer. In theory, it was not so much a recital of ideas, but an accounting of the movements of the Spirit within one's prayer. The practice was an integral part of the structure of Vincent's regular conferences or, in other instances, of those presided over by the local Superior. First, the Saint called upon a few Sisters (or priests or brothers) to recount their thoughts on the assigned subject, and sometimes this led to a dialogue to clarify or to elaborate a point. As the various persons spoke, their experiences became a catechesis for the others on the many possible modes of making prayer or on opening oneself to the action of the Spirit.

Unless he perceived obstinacy or ill-will in a person, Vincent was satisfied to hear whatever thoughts were proffered, however simple. Some people, he said, declare

quite simply the lights that God has given them, some more, some less, in accordance with the lights His Divine Majesty has communicated to them If anyone excuses himself for having no thoughts during his prayer, very well! On some other occasion God will give him something to say when he is asked to do so. (M,390)

More often, however, Vincent would be gleefully thankful: "Ah! Sister, you are quite right. O Savior, be Thou blessed for having given this thought to our Sister!" (D,655) "My Daughter, you are quite right. It is not you who say this; it is the Holy Spirit who has put the words into your mouth." (D,692) Following this part of the exercise,

Vincent would then proceed to the conference proper — sometimes quite lengthy — which was itself often a protracted reflection of his own prayer on the subject.

As we move toward the culmination of this discussion of St. Vincent and Prayer, there are two statements of his, one to the Missioners and the other to his Daughters, that are worth quoting as an apt introduction:

Those who pray well may be known, not merely from the way they speak of their prayer, but much more so by their actions and conduct, for then the fruit they gather from prayer is made manifest (V,277)

You should bring *two sorts of food to the sick poor: food for the body and food for the soul*, that is to say, you should speak a few words to them, the fruit of your mental prayer. (D,527)

These words, though casual parts of longer conferences, seem to capture the integral vision that Vincent had about prayer and ministry. Prayer, he implies, is not a self-indulgent exercise, but a prerequisite for vital living, whether in community or in the apostolate. In these final paragraphs we shall examine what he called the *fruits* of prayer, that is, the characteristic attitudes he proposed for his sons and daughters as their distinguishing marks. Their number is variable, but for practical purposes, we shall limit ourselves to four: Interiority; the Presence of God; The Maxims of Jesus Christ; and Providence.

Interiority. In the first of Vincent's final two conferences on the Virtues of Louise de Marillac (delivered after her death), he was moving among the Sisters asking them how they perceived Louise's virtues. One Sister replied: "She was of a most interior spirit and her mind was much occupied with God." Vincent was quite taken with this assessment and enthusiastically endorsed it.

Yes, [he said] her soul was raised to God, and this was because she had for a very long time created a deep fund of devotion in her heart. An interior spirit then consists in withdrawing one's affections from the world, from parents, country and all earthly things Sisters, an interior Daughter of Charity is one who devotes herself only to God. For what is the meaning of interior if not to be occupied with God? (D,1263-4)

Vincent was equally insistent with the Missioners "to become interior, to establish within us the reign of Jesus Christ." (M,310) Thus "interior" came to be equated with a total dedication to God's work, an inner commitment that issued in zeal for the apostolate: "Let us labor to become interior men, to conceive great and holy affections for the service of God We are His and not our own; if He increases our work, He will also increase our strength." (M,402) (These words came at the end of a long conference in which Vincent responded to complaints about the multiplicity of works that the Congregation had been assuming.) On an earlier occasion, while reporting to the Missioners the death of two Sisters (of four) who had been sent to Calais to nurse wounded soldiers, he declared: "Those Sisters will be our judges at the Judgment of God, if we are not prepared, like them, to risk our life for God. And, believe me, the man who has not yet reached this stage is still very far away from perfection." (M,291-2)

The Presence of God. In a comparable way, an ever conscious awareness of walking in the presence of God fosters interiority. Again, taking his cue from a Sister expressing herself at a repetition of prayer, Vincent said,

Our Sister has given us an almost infallible means of loving God; it is, she says, ever to walk in His presence; and that is most true; the more one sees a perfectly good person, the more one loves him. Now, if we have God frequently before our eyes, as God is beauty and perfection itself, there is no doubt that the longer we look upon Him the more we shall love Him. (D,420)

The practice of the presence of God was one that lent itself to mechanical aids and reminders, which were incorporated into the Rules and customs of both Communities. Thus, making God the first thought of the day and performing the Morning Offering set the keynote for the day. Again, the first step in mental prayer was a conscious placing oneself in the presence of God in order to establish the communication with Him that was being sought. God was invoked at the beginning of most spiritual exercises, and the regular strikings of the clock served to bring one's attention to His presence. (Cf. CR, X; R, IX)

The Maxims of Jesus Christ. What are called "the Maxims of Jesus Christ" are so central to Vincent's thinking that they are singled out prominently in the Rules of both the Missioners and the Daughters of Charity. (CR, II; R, I, v)⁸ Although such maxims are not statements as explicit as they might seem, what they amount to are the values that Jesus stood for and expected from His followers — "to clothe ourselves with the Spirit of Jesus Christ," as Vincent put it. (M, 411) In speaking of the maxims of Jesus, Vincent always adverted to the tension that existed between them and the maxims of the world, which is usually expressed by an inner warfare within the religious.

Vincent suggested means quite apparent that could be used to incorporate Jesus' maxims. The first is to read the Gospels "with attention and devotion," especially the fifth, sixth, seventh, and tenth chapters of St. Matthew. (M, 427) Each of the maxims, in fact, is a fit subject for personal prayer. A most effective means, he promises, is the recollection "that the Company [of the Mission] from the very beginning had the desire to associate itself with our Lord in doing what He did by the observance of His

⁸Cf. D, 752 ff. and M, 520 ff. for two lengthy conferences on the Maxims.

maxims, that it might, like Him, render itself pleasing to His Eternal Father and useful to His Church and strive effectively to advance and perfect itself therein” (M,427)

Ultimately, Vincent summarized the Maxims of Jesus Christ in the virtues that he established as characteristic for each of his Communities. For the Missioners, they were simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and zeal for souls, described by Vincent as “the five smooth stones of David, with which we shall conquer the infernal Goliath at the first blow and in the name of the Lord of Armies.” (CR,XII,12) For the Daughters of Charity he assigned as their fundamental virtues humility, simplicity, and charity, with the directive to them to perform all their exercises “in union with those which Our Lord Jesus Christ performed when He was on earth.” (R.I,iv)

Providence. It would be no exaggeration to say that the notion of Divine Providence dominated Vincent’s thinking and was as much an integral part of his daily discourse as the air he breathed. Because of its importance, it naturally was incorporated into the spirit of the Rules of both his Communities. To choose a characteristic passage, his Daughters are encouraged to have “great confidence in Divine Providence, committing themselves to it without reserve, as an infant to its nurse” (R.I,viii;cf. also CR,II,2-3) “To tell you the truth, my Daughters,” he boldly declared once in a conference, “I do not know what a Daughter of Charity who has not this trust in Providence is good for.” (D,1076) To his Missioners Vincent said that “doing the Will of God is the soul of the Company, and one of the practices it ought to have most at heart.” (M,338)

It was from his reading of Scripture that the Saint derived his vision, which, he said, is a motive that “obliges” us to trust in God:

We know that He is good, that He loves us most tenderly, that He desires our perfection and salvation, that He takes thought of our souls and bodies, that He intends to give us all we stand in need of both for one and the other If He is pleased to lead you by hard ways such as crosses, sickness, sadness, interior abandonment, let Him do so, and let us abandon ourselves with indifference to His Providence. Let us leave matters to God; He knows how to obtain His glory from them and will make all things work together for our benefit, because He loves us more tenderly than any father loves his child. (D,1074)

A simple word, "Providence" has many components. It is a kaleidoscopic notion that embraces a multitude of virtues: obedience, confidence and hope, holy indifference, and joy — to name a few. Most often Vincent connected the practice of obedience with "the Most Divine Providence of God." When the need for moving from one house to another arises, the Sister should respond in obedience, "reflecting that Providence has so ordained it Believe that Providence is taking care of you." In fact, Vincent exclaims:

You should have such great devotion to, such great confidence and love in, Divine Providence, that if Providence itself had not given you the beautiful name of Daughters of Charity, you should bear that of Daughters of Providence, for it was Providence that brought you into being. (D, 67)

If we could crystallize Vincent's teaching on Providence, we might reduce it to two words: *success* and *survival*, both personal and corporate. No one, of course, however saintly or visionary, could guarantee the apostolic success — or, what is more — the final perseverance of any other person. Nor would he guarantee the permanent survival of any human institute. Nevertheless, Vincent's faith in Providence brought a compelling assurance that, as long as his sons and daughters were faithful to their

missions, God's Love, Will, and Wisdom would carry them along in history for as long as they were useful for the Divine Plan. There is, basically, a peace of mind that attends conformity to God's Will: "Do you not perceive, my Brethren," he asked his Missioners, "how well those who practice indifference succeed? You will see them tomorrow, this week, during the whole year, and during their entire life, in peace, in fervor, in continual movement toward God, always spreading abroad among souls the sweet and salutary effects of God's operations in them." (M,367)

The path to "success" for both Communities, according to Vincent speaking in faith, is an unswerving reliance on performing God's Will — "the soul of the Company," as he reminds his Missioners:

It is intended to give each one a means of perfection that is easy, excellent and infallible and one that causes our actions to be no longer the actions of men or of angels, but the actions of God Himself, since they are performed in Him and by Him. What a life! Gentlemen, what a life will be that of Missionaries! What a Company will be that of the Mission if it be grounded on this practice! (M,338)

He expresses the same hope for his Daughters, within a lengthy conference on Providence:

Oh! blessed be God! There is reason to hope that the Company will do a great deal of good, provided it relies on Providence and does not interfere with Its guidance Let yourselves be guided by Providence, even though it may seem to you that everything is about to be lost; you then have all the more reason to hope that Our Lord is with you and will make everything turn out for your good. (D,1080)

To all who knew him, Vincent himself was an exact image of this dependence upon the Father. His own model, as he acknowledged, was Jesus Christ, Who "had

His Father with Him, Who led Him by the hand in the way of His Will and replenished Him and enveloped Him with the splendor of His glory.” As Vincent labored to direct his own disciples on their journey, it was his prayer that all entreat Jesus “to grant us the grace of placing us in this state, that we may ever be under God’s guidance, that He may hold us by the hand and conduct us before His Divine Majesty.” (M,368)

A man of many words and many works, Vincent was, above all, a man of prayer — the very person that he himself described as capable of “everything.” These pages have dealt mainly with Vincent’s utterances *about* prayer and its fruits and have said little about his own life of prayer. Indeed, except for what spontaneously escaped from his lips — and especially in the fervor that comes through in his conferences and letters — Vincent was generally reticent about his own inner life. (V,271) His credibility, nonetheless, is beyond question, for it is well known that he was faithful to all the practices and made use of all the helps that he recommended to others for fostering the life of prayer.

The focus here has been to trace the outlines of the Saint’s vision of prayer and the close relationship that it bears to the apostolate. It was a clear-sighted vision that he never relinquished: unless the apostolate is infused by prayer, ministry at best will be inefficacious; at worst, a sham. In order to be an authentic minister to preach Jesus and to serve Him, Vincent insisted, one must first come to know Him, primarily through prayer. Only then could one hope to imitate Jesus, to reflect Him, to see Him in the neighbor, especially the poor, and, in general, to make Him the dominant value in one’s life.

As his own life demonstrated, Vincent was a model for what he preached: Jesus was indeed the supreme value

in his life and, in turn, guided the Saint's varied apostolates. An apt conclusion for this study of Vincent de Paul's legacy on prayer and ministry would be an episode from his final hour of life. On his deathbed, the Saint struggled to repeat or to affirm the words and the prayers that were spoken to him by his companions, with a view to assist him in forming the proper dispositions for death. Before the end arrived, however, Vincent's last recorded word represented the simple, coherent vision that he had achieved as the focus of both his life and his work. That final word was *Jesus*. (C,III,397)



Here in our sacristy I sometimes notice the stone on which the water drips, and, although it is hard and the water falls only drop by drop, the stone is being gradually worn away; so we have reason to hope that by meditating over and over again on these matters, they may, with God's grace, make some impression on our hearts, though they were as hard as that stone.

It is the intention that gives value to all our works and renders them meritorious in the sight of God.

It is essential to be thoroughly united amongst yourselves and to be of one heart and mind so that you may be a living image of the union of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son.

If soldiers have the courage to expose their lives to win a city, why should not we do so for the glory of God and to win souls to Christ?

