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A New Portrait of St. Vincent de Paul



Maurice Picquard

Translated by John E. Rybolt, C.M.

The Mazarin Library has managed to preserve various collections of engravings which came to it as a result of confiscations during the French Revolution.¹ One of

¹Maurice Picquard, "Une Bibliothèque parisienne sous la Révolution, la Bibliothèque Mazarine," *Wolfenbuettler Forschungen* 2 (1977), 187-208.

them, marked Rés. 19089, belonged to the Oratory of Saint-Magloire, a house belonging to the Congregation of the Oratory.²

This collection, which has the handwritten notice, "Belonging to Fr. Charles Bordes, priest of the Oratory," was willed by its owner (1638-1793), along with his entire library, to Saint-Magloire.³ He had become librarian there at the end of his life.⁴

The volume was bound in a modest blackened vellum which dates from the end of the 17th century. It contains mainly portraits of cardinals, bishops and churchmen, engraved by Moncornet, Larmessin or Van Schuppen among others. While paging through them, one is surprised to find, at folio no. 130, a lead pencil drawing, at the bottom of which a librarian of the Mazarin Library, Lorédan Larcher, wrote the name of Saint Vincent de Paul.⁵ This was in 1856 when he counted the number of engravings which made up the volume.

This really is Monsieur Vincent. Only a great artist would have been able to capture and express the inner life of his subject with such intensity.

We know what obstinacy and even trickery St. Vincent's close associates had to use to have a portrait made of him.⁶ An artist or artists had to wait a long time

² It was on Rue Saint-Jacques, where the Deaf-Mute Institution is now.

³ Alfred Franklin, *Les Anciennes Bibliothèques de Paris*, 3 vols (Paris, 1937-38), Vol. 2, p. 367.

⁴ Fr. Bordes was well known for his violent attacks against the Jansenists; this attitude earned him a rebuke from Fr. de Sainte-Marthe, Superior General of the Oratory.

⁵ The portrait is on laid paper, unwatermarked, measuring 235x172mm (or 9¼x6¾ inches).

⁶ Pierre Coste, *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, Translated by Joseph Leonard, 3 vols. (Westminster, MD.: Newman, 1952), Vol. 3, pp. 376-384.

to get to observe the holy man from a secret vantage point during one of his conferences. Then they would quickly sketch his facial features, and later finish his portrait. Might this not be one of those sketches?

We do not know for certain whether the portrait or portraits, painted by Simon François de Tours, still exist,⁷ but all contemporary or subsequent engravings come from one of them.⁸ *That picture had been painted during the last year of St. Vincent's life.*

The portrait studied in this article differs considerably from preceding ones, since it seems to predate them by several years.

Monsieur Vincent is portrayed looking out, his face is narrow and thin. The nose is long, its tip less flat. The chin is square and less prominent; the beard and moustache are shorter. The liveliness of his look is reduced by the slightly lowered eyelids. His fine mouth shows no smile, but we find here the same deep wrinkles going from the base of the nose to the corners of his mouth. His nose has the same crease at the top that we see in all the early portraits. The old man wears on his head his famous black cap; above his temples, a few stray locks of hair have escaped and cover his ears.

This portrait confirms what Abbé Brémond wrote of Monsieur Vincent's physical appearance:

Legend and a traditional quasi-official presentiment have conspired to simplify, vulgarise and impoverish St. Vincent de Paul.

And he quotes the testimony of Abelly, who knew him well and was his first biographer:

⁷Bernard Dorival, *Philippe de Champaigne*, 2 vols. (Paris 1976), Vol. 2, number 2027.

⁸M. Candille, "Iconographie Vincentienne au XVII^e siècle,"

His head was somewhat fleshy and rather large, but well made in proportion to his body, the forehead broad and majestic, the face neither too fat nor too thin, his expression sweet and penetrating, his hearing keen, his bearing grave, his seriousness benign.

And Bremond adds:

This was not the 'good fellow' saint, the sly-boots of a peasant, the riotous and vulgar begging-brother, often represented to us.⁹

Also he selected to illustrate his work with a portrait of the Saint done in 1654 by Angélique Labory; it shows his eyes wide open, with a very vivid and penetrating look; while a smile plays about his mouth.¹⁰

If our portrait, with its look of great sadness, contrasts with the smile which lights up the portrait of Labory, we have to imagine that Monsieur Vincent's contemporaries had emphasized the mobility of his facial expression, alternately smiling or profoundly sad:

He is more than ordinarily impressionable. He cannot hear an unhappy person spoken of without a sigh, his face immediately changing to an expression of sympathetic sorrow.¹¹

Catalogue de l'Exposition du Troisième centenaire 1660-1960. Paris, 1960.

⁹ Henri Bremond, *A Literary History of Religious Thought in France*, Translated by K. L. Montgomery (London: SPCK, 1928-1936).

¹⁰ Louis Cognet, in his *Saint Vincent de Paul*, Translated by Emma Crawford (Chicago: Regnery, 1960), disputes the quality of this portrait and its date. He thinks that this portrait, also done in pencil and dated, and kept today at the Berceau of St. Vincent de Paul, comes from engravings made much later than the date indicated.

¹¹ Bremond, *History*, Vol. 3, p. 202, following B. Boudignon *Saint Vincent de Paul, modèle des hommes d'action et d'oeuvres* (Paris, 1886).

This portrait reflects just one of his states of mind.

Regrettably, the artist remains unknown, and at present it would be imprudent to advance even the least guess. Whoever it was, the unknown artist has left us a very different image from those which are still circulated, and one which conforms much better than previous ones do to the testimony of his contemporaries.¹²



I addressed myself to Our Lord, and I earnestly begged Him to change my austere and disagreeable disposition and to give me a meek and benign spirit. And by the grace of Our Lord, together with a little care, I have succeeded in repressing the impulses of nature, and I have thereby rid myself to a certain extent of my ill temper.

ST. VINCENT de PAUL

¹²I have to thank sincerely Fr. Chalumeau, who shared with me his knowledge and the riches of the library that he directs.



When you were received into the Ladies of Charity you heard said to you:

Accept this crucifix; wear it always upon your heart, and bear it with you wherever you may go, to be your strength, your consolation and salvation — in life — and in death.

*Like Simon of Cyrene, each Lady of Charity carries a cross. She carries it with her always. As she moves about her work, her greatest glory comes in assisting someone else to carry his or her cross, a cross that life may have given him, the beauty of which man may have been unable to discover. To you is given the priceless opportunity — because you wear the Cross — to understand the Cross and to make its beauty known to men. The arms of the Cross become your arms, as laden with gifts of love you walk among men. The foot of the Cross becomes the bulwark against which you in your own troubled life, or in encouraging others, can find rest and gain support**

*Alice R. May of Catholic Charities of Baltimore: Address given at the Centennial Banquet, September 29, 1957.