

1983

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Recommended Citation

Slattery, William M. C.M. (1983) "Gentlemen and My Dear Brothers...," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol4/iss1/4>

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Gentlemen and My Dear Brothers

I

It has been written: "The master that Saint Vincent is, himself has a Master, Who is Jesus Christ." Christocentrism, the imitation of Christ, was the touchstone of the spirituality of our Holy Founder. So, too, was it the criterion of his nineteenth successor as Superior General, Fr. William M. Slattery. His actions show this, his writings make it manifest to the members of the Congregation of the Mission. Two selections from his annual Circular Letters have been selected and reprinted in this issue for our edification, but more especially for our meditation and direction. In the first, written in 1962, Fr. Slattery urges us to be penetrated by the Gospels (Ed. note).

In my Circular Letter of last year I emphasized the most important fruit of the feast of the Tercentenary ought to be a great commitment to the school of Saint Vincent. By this resemblance of spirit and heart which we shall have with him, we shall justify more than by everything else this name of "children of Saint Vincent," which we are happy and proud to carry. By it we shall also labor successfully for the prosperity and development of the works to which our vocation applies us. By it we shall continue his radiance and we shall attract, without an indiscreet and too^r human propaganda, numerous and excellent vocations.

It is the entire life of Saint Vincent which radiates his spirit. He makes known to us his spiritual doctrine on each page of his discourses and of his letters. It penetrates as well all the prescriptions of our holy rules. But in this little book there is a summit which dominates everything, a heart which gives life to all the rest, a resumé which summarizes admirably all his teaching. It is the second chapter, consecrated to the "Evangelical Maxims." In their regard is especially verified the promise of Saint Vincent who says to us concerning our holy rules: "Keep them and they will keep you." The defections, at times especially sad, which we have sometimes to deplore, and the lukewarmness which progressively leads to it is explained by the fact that these evangelical maxims have ceased little by little to exercise their grip on the soul and that, at times, they have ended by running up against an arrant refusal to believe in them. Hence it seemed to me apropos to consecrate the present circular to the evangelical maxims. We shall view them today in their ensemble. We shall see that they constitute an infallible code of christian wisdom, that they must at every moment exercise an absolute authority over our minds, our hearts and our wills, and how we must react to the opposition which these maxims will necessarily meet in our nature vitiated by sin.

We are inclined altogether naturally to see in Jesus Christ primarily the Redeemer of humanity. And certainly the Passion of the Man-God holds in the history of our salvation a capital position. The "Credo" recalls it to us in few short but most expressive phrases: "Propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem descendit de caelis, et incarnatus est . . . crucifixus etiam pro nobis." But this salvation, realized by the sufferings and the death of Jesus, only becomes ours owing to a free acceptance on our part. We must adapt it by uniting ourselves to this passion and

to this resurrection of the Saviour by faith in their redemptive value. And this faith is the adherence of our minds and our hearts to the message of Jesus, the faithful echo of the word of God. This is what the beginning of the Epistle to the Hebrews recalls: "After having spoken throughout the centuries in many circumstances and in many ways through the prophets, God finally reveals Himself to us through His Son." Our first duty, therefore, will be to give a hearty welcome to this message. God the Father expresses it to the witnesses of the Transfiguration of Jesus so as to strengthen their faith which will soon be put to such a harsh test by His sufferings and humiliations: "This is my beloved Son; hear Him." And in closing his gospel Saint John emphasizes that in writing it he had no other end than that of bringing his readers to believe in Jesus and thus to possess eternal life.

And what then does the Incarnate Word come to teach us? He is not only a sage who recalls to men the precepts of the natural law. Nor does His role limit itself, as did that of the prophets, to echoing Yahweh, by protesting against infractions of the mosaic law, nor even to hinting sometimes that this law will be surpassed and replaced by something more perfect. Jesus clearly declares that to Him belongs this perfecting of the Law. "It is said in the Law. . . . But I say to you" Those whom He calls after Him, whom He wills to introduce into His Kingdom, are destined to become children of God, "dedit eis potestatem filios Dei fieri." And at once the demands of their moral life are going to be notably increased. In order to facilitate the understanding of this new code, to make it not only more acceptable, but more attractive, despite the renuncements and the sacrifices which it demands, Jesus illustrated it by His conduct. In order to know what we must do we have but to see Him act: "I have given you the example in order that you may do as you have seen me

doing." Hence it will be necessary to imitate Him in every detail of our life. But it will have to be done first of all by thinking like Him. He is the Master of our thought before being the Master of our conduct. And when He brings to a close the Sermon on the Mount, He declares with impressive solemnity that it is a matter of the success or the failure of our entire life. One has built on the rock a house sure against all the ragings of the tempest, if one has based all his conduct on faith in His maxims. To live in opposition to His maxims is to raise upon sand a tottering edifice which will tumble at the first assaults of the winds and the flood.

The chief teaching, however, of Jesus in moral matters is that our life is not a good which we possess as our own, which we can use at our good pleasure, without prejudice to the rights of another. Nor is it only a deposit to be guarded, and which it will suffice to restore just as received, as the servant whose master gave one talent pretended to conceive it. This deposit must be developed. We shall have to render an account of our management, and with the capital we shall have to turn over the interest which it has produced. For, whoever we may be, we are all servants of God not only by free choice of our will, but by the very nature of things. Nothing can free us from this service. While making us His brothers, children of God, Jesus has left us our condition as creatures and, consequently, as servants. He Himself, the Son of God by nature, is the most docile of His subjects. He tells us that His meat is to do the divine will; He has but one desire: to procure the glory of God. So should it be with us.

Consequently, our happiness can no longer be the supreme goal of our activity, but only the reward of our service, a magnificent reward, moreover, since it is out of His own happiness that God makes us happy: "Intra in gaudium Domini tui." Hence, pleasure no longer appears as

an end in itself. It must be taken with moderation, as a facility which God grants us in order to motivate us to action. Indeed, one must not go to the limit of what is permitted, lest he risk becoming the slave of pleasure. Mortification will be for all of us to the end of our life a necessary safeguard. It is a matter of our eternal destiny. And the salvation of our soul must be our primary care. In order to avoid compromising it one must be ready for all sacrifices. It is better to consent to the loss of a member and even of one's existence in order to avoid sin than to lose body and soul for eternity. These are the essential principles of the moral teaching of Jesus, those at least which will serve as a necessary introduction and an indispensable guarantee of a moral which is more specifically christian. From them will flow the evangelical maxims. A very austere doctrine, but, coming from such a Master, one which imposes itself on us.

At the very beginning of the chapter dedicated to the evangelical maxims by our holy rules, Saint Vincent tells us that before everything else we must strengthen ourselves in the conviction that the doctrine of Christ can never lead us into error, in contrast to the ever deceitful doctrine of the world. How easy it should be for us to convince ourselves of it, and from then on to stake our life with absolute confidence on the affirmations of Jesus Christ. We seek serious guarantees when it is a question of confiding to someone goods we prize. If we have a few personal resources and if we wish to invest them, we make inquiries about an absolutely secure investment; this merits reflection, for so many persons are daily the victims of swindlers and the improvident. Do we feel sick? Must we undergo a grave operation? We seek out competent, experienced and conscientious experts. But there is a supreme good whose loss would constitute the worst of evils, and it is our soul. To whom should we confide it? To

someone who offers to guide us with complete security on the road of life. He tells us that He is the Truth and the Way. By following Him, one does not wander, but succeeds in life. And everything He does guarantees that He speaks truthfully, especially the demands which He formulates, His absolute disinterestedness, the unique perfection of His moral life, and the perfect example of all that He has prescribed for us.

In order to lull our suspicion, those who wish to engage us in an affair where they will profit at our expense hide the dangers and difficulties. But nothing of the sort with Jesus Christ. He does not wish among His followers disciples whom a short-lived enthusiasm has stirred. This is not a light matter. To walk after Him one must be decided to practice total renouncement and to carry his cross. When certain disciples, discouraged by the difficulty of the undertaking, left Him after the discourse on the Bread of Life, He addressed Himself to the Twelve in these terms: "Do you also wish to go away?" For He would prefer to be abandoned by His most beloved friends than to retain them by sacrificng the truth.

As irrefutable proof of the truth of His teaching He appeals to His perfect disinterestedness. That He seeks neither money nor comfort as recompense for His labors goes without saying. One need only see how He lives in order to be convinced of it. But His detachment goes even further. It is a good which is renounced with greater difficulty: the esteem of another and the glory which comes from it. But Jesus can say that He sets little value on the judgment of men, for He seeks not His own glory, but the glory of God. And He will prove it by exposing Himself to the raileries, to the calumnious accusations of His enemies in order to remain a faithful witness of truth. One judgment alone has value for Him, one only is fully qualified, the judgment of God. This latter He can face in

complete serenity. For the holiness of His life allows Him to hurl this challenge at His adversaries: "Which one of you will convict me of sin?"

Behold the One Who offers to guide us on the way of life. And He does not do so only by His sovereignly authoritative directives. He places Himself at our head; we have only to follow Him. He knows what efforts, what heroism He demands of us at certain times. But when each difficulty is encountered, when we hesitate before a sacrifice, and when the sight of a suffering to be endured makes us tremble, He can say to us: "I know that it is hard. But it is for your good. For love of you I have done much more; My grace will help you."

There are some men who have in some sense cast a spell over their contemporaries, who have obtained from them a total adhesion to their directives, and for whom fanatic disciples have granted every sacrifice, including that of life. How heart-rending it would be if Jesus Christ did not exercise a still greater grip at least on His chosen disciples. Indeed, to follow Him like that, one is not degraded, one does not abdicate his personality as is the case of the bewitched followers of whom I have just spoken. The more one offers oneself to Him, and abandons to Him one's mind, heart and will, the more one realizes one's better self, as the example of the saints, particularly St. Paul and St. Vincent de Paul, shows us in a striking manner.

Why then is Jesus Christ so little and so badly followed? Because there is opposed to His appeal another which finds more resonance in man unbalanced by sin. Another doctrine is formulated in maxims which are a formal denial of the evangelical maxims and which seem to be the code of true wisdom for the "animalis homo"

which we are. This spirit of the world under its virulent form is at the basis of atheism and materialism. Let us listen as its tenets are expressed bluntly in the Book of Wisdom which recalls their proposals: "Our life is short and sad. There is no remedy at all for man when death comes, after which we shall be as if we had never been. Our body will crumble into ashes and our spirit will vanish like thin air." Epicurism flows naturally from this materialistic doctrine. "Let us enjoy the true goods with the ardor of youth. Crown ourselves with roses before they fade. Let us leave everywhere the traces of our gaiety. Such is our fate, such our destiny."

For people who think thus, the doctrine of Jesus Christ, particularly that which inspires the evangelical maxims, appears true folly, and they do not hesitate to say so. This doctrine is summed up actually in a gripping image: the cross of Jesus. Because he knew its fundamental character Saint Paul wished only to preach Jesus crucified at the beginning, whosoever might be his audience. Except for upright and humble souls, the pagans shrugged their shoulders and said: "It is folly!" The Jews became irritated. This poor, humbled suffering Messiah Who refused to proclaim Himself King and to free His country was a scandal. He ruined all the hopes which Israel had placed in Him for centuries. It is unthinkable that a disciple of Jesus would come to this, unless he has already apostatized in his heart. But it is inevitable that the evangelical maxims run up against much opposition in our mind, heart, senses and will. When we read them, if we never hear an inner voice protest and cry: "Durus est hic sermo, et quis potest eum audire? This is a difficult saying to hear, and who can accept it?", it is to be feared that we have not understood what we read or that we thought it

addressed to someone other than ourselves. There is also another explanation: our habit of sweetening the gospel. We speak immediately of hyperbole, of picturesque language. By this clever exegesis we render reasonable a language which cannot for all that preach unreason and foolishness, since it is the language of God. Then would life with our contemporaries be possible if one contrasted so strongly with them, or if one provoked at every moment their raillery and their anger by an attitude which would offend them, and in which they would see continual reproach and scorn.

Under this twofold influence of internal complicity and external pressure one runs the great risk of losing this unshakable and practical faith in the teachings of Jesus. Total isolation from the external world can offer a guarantee against this exterior danger. But our vocation imposes on us the obligation of living in the world of which we must be the salt and the light according to the Will of Jesus. Jesus also said to His Father concerning us: "I do not ask you to take them out of the world, but to preserve them from evil." There remains, however, the danger of being influenced rather than exercising an influence. We have had in recent years a sad and instructive example of it. We have seen ardent and zealous priests, whose faith, however, was not deeply rooted, nor whose interior life was profound enough, throw themselves into the midst of the working masses with the good intention of renewing it, or conquering it for Christ and His gospel, but who, alas, allowed themselves to be conquered by the milieu which they thought to transform.

This infiltration of the spirit of the world is the gravest danger which threatens our christian life. This is why Saint Vincent returns often to this subject in his conferences to the Missioners and the Daughters of Charity, at a time

when, it is to be noted, this spirit did not yet rage with the same virulence as today. There were certainly at that time libertines as audacious as our modern writers. But their activity could only be exercised in a certain clandestinity, for it collided with a public mentality still basically christian. In our time the family milieu where the first formation of mind and heart is received is not always impregnated with the christian spirit. Then comes school. If this is not a christian school, what danger it frequently constitutes for the religious faith of the child. At best, supposing that the teacher confines himself to a rigorous neutrality, will not the spectacle of his unbelief, of his indifference with regard to questions which, the child has been told, have primary importance, be a scandal for him? And if this teacher attracts his esteem and affection by his competence, his dedication or his real human virtues, how the child risks being satisfied with only this ideal of the naturally good man without the faith.

Even more than the milieu of the family and of the school, the social milieu attacks our faith in the evangelical maxims. Saint John already put the faithful on guard against the love of the world, a world completely immersed in evil, all of whose aspirations are summed up in the passionate seeking of riches, pleasure and complete independence. Let us not believe too easily that we have been immunized against this influence which exerts itself on us, very often without our knowledge, by what we see and hear. The spectacle of evil which displays itself without the appearance of any remorse, even of any uneasiness, already runs the risk of weakening in us the sense of sin. One is tempted to wonder if he has not taken the wrong path, let go of the substance for the shadow. Is it possible that the mass of our contemporaries are in error? One must then recall the small echo which the preaching of Jesus Himself ultimately found in hearts. Let

us recall the sorrowful reflections of Saint John before this unbelief, whose cause he points out in the attachments which have closed minds and hearts to the truth. And Jesus Himself, conjuring up the end of time, shows us the overflowing of sin which cools the charity of many of His faithful, and their faith feeling the consequences of it, to such a point that the Master cries sadly: "Do you think that the Son of Man at His return will still find faith upon the earth?" There is here a very distressing mystery. But it is one more reason for the true disciples of Jesus to compensate by the fervor of their faith for the refusal of others to believe. Like Peter who answered in the name of the Twelve the question of Jesus: "Do you also will to leave me?", we shall say to Him: "But, Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and we know that you are the Holy One of God." But conscious of our weakness, we shall immediately say to Jesus, like the man who came to ask the cure of his son, and from whom an act of faith was demanded: "I believe, Lord, but come to the aid of a faith which is very weak, which could be called unbelief."

We shall remember, then, that our faith in Jesus must be preserved and strengthened. We would accuse as folly the conduct of him who would pretend to remain chaste and would expose himself without just motive and prudence to dangers which threaten his virtue. We shall believe in his will to remain pure only if he keeps watch over his imagination, his heart and his eyes, only if he manifests in his relations with persons of the opposite sex a reserve which, without offending good manners, recalls continually to him who he is. Let us be not less jealous of the purity of our faith, this virtue whose loss would constitute a catastrophe worse still than the shipwreck of chastity. Let us know how to take cognizance of the dangers which menace it. Here again let us take our

inspiration from the example of Saint Vincent. He confessed at the end of his life that he always dreaded being carried away by the torrent of some heresy. How much greater danger threatens us in our times. This is particularly for those among us who, for different reasons, must inquire about contemporary thought in order to disclose the error it contains, denounce it and preserve minds from it. That a too steady dealing with the writing of unbelievers ends in being pernicious to the faith is not an illusory danger. In this domain let us also know how to have recourse to the light of another. Should the occasion arise, let us talk freely to our director of conscience, and follow his prescriptions and counsels. More than one sad defection would have been avoided by the faithful observance of this very wise prescription of our common rules.

Faith, however, is usually lost by anemia rather than by poisoning. Faith is not a purely intellectual adherence to truths without an influence on life. It commits our mind, heart and will to a new light which transforms everything, gives our life a new direction and should make its influence felt on our conduct at every moment. When one does not strive to live more and more according to his faith, its teaching ends up existing only in the memory in almost the same way as some historical fact, or the doctrine of any religion or philosophical system. Therefore a grave intellectual crisis is not necessary in order to lose the faith. One feels that it had been already extinguished for quite some time before breaking with it. First of all, then, one must live his faith and ask its increase of God as a particularly precious grace.

Let us, then, apply the teaching of Jesus Christ to ourselves even in the smallest details of our daily life. There is a christian way not only of praying, but of doing everything, even taking meals. Those who observe us must

be able to detect in our soul something which transcends them — an understanding of persons, things and events which is not their own. Our life should create a problem for them; and even those who have never read the gospel should be able to detect its teachings in our life. This is the first testimony which we must give to the person and doctrine of Jesus, one which will dispose upright and well-disposed souls to welcome a more explicit message. But, conscious of the weakness of our faith, we shall feel the necessity of a powerful grace which will give it this hold on all our life. In one of its prayers, Holy Mother Church has us implore from God an increase of faith, hope and charity. With what awareness do we recite this prayer? We easily confess our need of progressing in hope and charity. But is something wanting in our faith? And if it is somewhat deficient can we remedy it ourselves? Let us listen to Jesus saying to us: “No one comes to me, that is to say, no one believes in me, if My Father does not draw him.” What is true of the beginning of faith in a soul is no less so of its progress. It is always from the Father that the light comes which makes us adhere to Jesus by faith with greater firmness. In seeing the saints act, in hearing them, we sense quickly what is lacking to our faith. They are completely penetrated with the gospel. Nothing in their mind or heart escapes its hold. This was particularly true of our blessed Father. Let us apply ourselves constantly to imitate him in this point. Let us have recourse to his intercession to obtain the grace of a faith which resembles his. There is no prayer which he is more disposed to offer for his children.



Let us remain submissive to the good pleasure of God; let us be content in whatever conditions He may be pleased to place us, and let us never desire to go forth from these conditions, except in so far as we know it to be agreeable to Him. This is the most excellent and most exalted practice in which a Christian and even a priest may be engaged upon earth.

St. Vincent de Paul

The trial to which God has subjected you is extremely painful and apparently without consolation; however, you must find consolation in the assurance that you are doing the most Holy Will of God, and you can be certain of always doing it as long as you remain submissive.

St. Louise de Marillac

If some of you are the object of a call to a higher way, that of the apostolate of suffering, with all of my heart I wish and I beg for you the graces necessary to accept lovingly this special vocation.

Fr. Slattery