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Luigi Mezzadri C.M.

Luigi Nuovo C.M.

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The Directors of Saint Vincent

*Luigi Mezzadri, C.M. and Luigi Nuovo, C.M. **

It has scarcely ever happened that a great teacher had been a great disciple. The disciple who gives up his own personality and all initiative, who follows in all things the example of his master, will always be a follower. A good performer has rarely ever been a composer of genius. St. Vincent had some tutors: Benoît de Canfeld, André Duval, Bérulle, Francois de Sales, but he followed them for only part of the way on the path to sanctity. The originality of our Saint does not come from the fact that he had desired to assert himself at any cost; there was not in him any of the restlessness of the follower who wished to discard his masters. He had a very clear idea that God called him "by his name," that his vocation consisted in "being in Christ." If he borrowed some concepts from his directors, if he consulted them and associated with them, he did not hesitate to depart from them in order to dedicate himself entirely to following the unrivalled Master and Lord upon a course chosen solely by Himself.

Benedict of Canfeld (1562-1619)

He was an English Capuchin, formerly named William Filch. Having been converted from Puritanism,

*Frs. Mezzadri and Nuovo edited an anthology on St. Vincent which they entitled *Saint Vincent de Paul Lui Meme* (Rome: CLV Edizioni Vincenziane, 1981). "The Directors" is part of the second chapter, "The Discovery of God and Man." This excerpt, "The Directors," has been translated and edited by John W. Carven, C.M.

he took refuge in France. As early as the end of his novitiate he gave proof of a lofty spirituality and quickly became a sought-after spiritual director. Madame Acarie, the reformer of Montmartre, Marie de Beauvilliers, and Bérulle found themselves in various degrees touched by the light of this mystic. The principal work of Benedict of Canfeld is the *Règle de perfection avec un bref et clair résumé de toute la vie spirituelle réduite au seul point de la volonté de Dieu*.¹ In it he explained the idea that the whole spiritual life ought not to consist in any other thing than to do the Will of God. Man must open his mind to God Who works a kind of new incarnation in such a way that the disciple would say nothing else than "I am the Will of God." In a passage from a conference to the Missionaries, March 7, 1659, St. Vincent clearly summarized the ideas of the master:²

The Rule tells us, therefore, what helps us to reach the perfection of Christians and of Missionaries, that is, the exercise of the Will of God. It should be observed that there are diverse exercises proposed by the masters of the spiritual life and that they have been practiced in sundry ways. Some have proposed to themselves indifference in all things, and they have thought that perfection consists in desiring nothing, of rejecting nothing of anything which God sends.

Others propose to themselves to act with purity of intention, to behold God in all things which happen in order to do them and endure them in His sight.

If there were found in the Company some who were faithful to that, if the number in it were great, if we were all of this blessed number, O Savior! What a blessing! *Mon Dieu*, how the Mission would be pleasant for us! Good gracious, you know that! And we know, Messieurs, that our works have no value if they are not alive and animated by the Will of God. Behold this counsel of the

¹*Rule of Perfection with a Brief and Clear Resumé of the Whole Spiritual Life Reduced to the Sole Mark of the Will of God*. This work was published in Paris, 1608-1610.

²Pierre Coste, ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul, Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents* (14 vols., Paris: Gabalda, 1920), Vol. XII, no. 199.

Gospel which persuades us to do everything in order to please Him. We must highly extol His boundless Majesty which has caused the Company to undertake this practice which is entirely holy and always sanctifying. Yes, from the beginning we have completely desired to enter into this view of perfection which is to honor Our Lord in all our works; and if that has not been done with seemly perfection, it is not necessary to seek the cause, it is this miserable person who has not given the example.

O Messieurs, O my brothers, from now on let us give ourselves to God in that better way, tomorrow at prayer, in all things, everywhere and always, to hunger and thirst for this justice. Think about it; observe in particular what I have said tediously and so badly organized. Let us inflame our will to say and accomplish these Divine Words of Jesus Christ: "My meat is that I do His Will and that I finish His Work."

Andre Duval (1564-1638)

Theologian and jurist, valuable counselor of all the initiators of reform in France, in touch with Madame Acarie whose life he wrote, teacher of Bérulle and Condren, André Duval combined a profound interior life and a trustworthy doctrine. Opposed to all mystical exaggeration in character (the reason why he came into conflict with Bérulle), his thought was always very realistic. St. Vincent had assimilated it so well that, under the evident influence of the counsels of "the good M. Duval," he wrote to St. Louise: "With regard to the thirty-three acts in respect of the Holy Humanity and the others, do not torment yourself if you happen to miss them. God is love and wishes that one come to Him through love."³ M. Duval helped St. Vincent on several occasions, either in some juridical controversies or when he was attempting to

³*Ibid.*, Vol. I, no. 49.

give a definitive aspect to his Community. We give here a very interesting text written by Robert Duval:⁴

St. Vincent de Paul, Founder and Superior General of the Priests of the Mission, humbly said on different occasions that the origin and institution of his Company were due in great part to the venerable André. He recounted on this subject, relating what had transpired in the first missions, that this apostolic man began them with some other doctors and priests full of zeal for the salvation of men, particularly of the countryside. On hearing him speak of the spiritual necessities, in particular of the need for religious instruction in the rural parishes, of the hunger for the word of God in the people, of the benefit produced by these instructions and of the blessing which they would receive, the venerable André pronounced these words: "the servant knowing the Will of God and doing nothing will be flogged greatly."⁵

These words were scarcely uttered than Vincent de Paul felt himself interiorly moved and drawn by grace, and considered them as an order from the Divine Will, which, having made known to him the needs of the poor, called him to give himself totally with those who would join him to go throughout the country. It was necessary to announce the Word of God, to preach, to catechize, to hear confessions, to administer the Sacrament of Penance, to allay discords, and, in a general way, to offer to the people living in the countryside all kinds of spiritual services, without being a burden to anyone, without inconveniencing either the people or the priests, but rather bringing them help, and that with their assent and with the permission and the mandate of the bishops. As a result, he decided to give himself effectually to this work and to use in this suitable means, while consulting as was his habit the venerable André, for he undertook nothing without his advice. In the same way he wished that his companions appeal to him [Duval] for the solution of the difficult cases which were presented during the missions. Our doctor always responded quickly and with precision to these requests in a way that the Priests of the Mission have collected the greatest part of these responses in order to use them on similar occasions.

⁴Robert Duval, *La Vie de M. André Duval* (ms. du Carmel de Clamart); quote taken from J.M. Ibañez, *Vigente de Paul, y los pobres de su tempo* (Salamanca, 1977), p. 339.

⁵Luke XII: 47—"The slave who knew his master's wishes but did not prepare to fulfill them will get a severe beating." (NAB)

Pierre De Bérulle (1575-1629)

He had a prodigious influence on seventeenth century France, to the degree that one speaks of a "French School," as if it sprang from the direction of this man. Separating himself from the "abstract school," he gradually enriched his thought, thanks to the discovery, exciting for himself, of the Incarnation. The creature could reach God only in Jesus Christ. Thus, it is necessary "to adhere" to Him, to conform oneself to all His "conditions," and to be adorers of the Father.

Cardinal de Bérulle was not only a spiritual man, but also a diplomat and a statesman. The Counter-Reformation in France owes a great deal to him. In particular, he was engaged in restoring ecclesiastical order, chiefly by the establishment of a community of priests who were to combine holiness, knowledge, and missionary commitment.

During the first phase of his life, roughly up to the end of 1617, St. Vincent had in Bérulle an enlightened counselor. Later, he separated himself from him, perhaps because he found him a trifle abstruse, perhaps his encroaching ways did not please him. Whatever the reason, these disagreements had a positive effect for St. Vincent: he began in this way to follow his own path and had to listen to the advice no longer of a man but of His Divine Master.

In a conference in 1643,⁶ the Saint alluded to a community "destroyed in less than six years by this frenzy for knowledge and of wishing to heap knowledge upon knowledge." That could well be the Oratory of Jesus, which Bérulle founded in 1611 and which for some years

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⁶Coste, *op. cit.*, Vol. XI, no. 98.

had taken a pro-Jansenist orientation. In the same conference there is a passage which we cite in which the relationship between study and prayer is made conspicuous:

It is necessary to study in such a way that love harmonized with knowledge, especially for those who study theology, and as Cardinal Bérulle did, who, as soon as he had comprehended a truth, gave himself to God either to practice that virtue or to excite himself to such sentiments, or produce from it some acts; and by this means, he acquired a sanctity and a knowledge so solid that there can scarcely be found the equal.

Finally, St. Vincent concluded thus:

Knowledge is necessary, my brothers, and unhappy are those who do not use their time well! But let us fear, fear, my brothers, let us fear, and, if I may dare to say, let us tremble and tremble a thousand times more than I know how to say; for those who are of this spirit indeed have to fear: *Knowledge puffs up*; and those who do not yet have it, that is still worse, if they do not humble themselves.

Francis De Sales (1567-1622)

It is not difficult to understand why St. Vincent had such a great veneration for the Bishop of Geneva. He was a model bishop, full of tenderness and greatness of soul. He was a spiritual man who knew how to interpret the demands of his time, taking into consideration the request of numerous laypeople to be able to open themselves to a spirituality which would be adapted to them. Thus, with the establishment of the Visitation, he accommodated the desires of those who desired a model of the religious life based no longer on austerity but on a love which chose to be total and joyous, oblation and open-hearted.

St. Francis de Sales, when he came to Paris in 1618-1619, became acquainted with the rising star of the French

Church and entrusted to him the Visitation. The tests of the present anthology deal with a concept familiar to St. Francis, that of the distinction between affective love and effective love, which St. Vincent translated into practice in his works.

The Saint said to the Daughters of Charity:⁷

Affective love, this is the tenderness in love. You must love Our Lord tenderly and affectionately, like a child who cannot be separated from his mother and cries "Mama" as soon as she attempts to absent herself. So, a heart which loves Our Lord does not wish to suffer His absence and owes it to himself to cling to Him by this affective love, which produces the effective love, which is the exercise of works of the Charity, the service of the poor undertaken with joy, courage, steadfastness and love.

Or, as St. Vincent advised his Confreres:⁸

Love God, my brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms, let it be with the sweat of our brow. For very often such acts of love of God, of complaisance, of kindness, and other similar affections and interior experiences of a loving heart, although very good and very desirable, are nevertheless very suspect when a person is not led to the practice of effective love. "In that," says Our Lord, "My Father is glorified because you give account of much fruit." And this is why we must be very careful; for there are very many who, having well-composed exterior and an interior filled with great love of God, stop there; and when it comes to action and they find themselves in occasions of doing something, they stop short. They flatter themselves with their inflamed imaginations; they are contented with some pleasant conversations which they have with God in prayer; they even speak like angels; but, apart from that, when it is a question of working for God, of suffering, of mortifying oneself, of instructing the poor, of searching out the wandering flock, of loving one who lacks something, of receiving kindly illnesses or some other misfortune, *he las!* there is no longer anyone there, courage deserts them. No, no, let us not delude ourselves: *Our whole task consists in working.*

⁷*Ibid.*, Vol. IX, no. 51.

⁸*Ibid.*, Vol. XI, no. 25.



If God does not want you to do little or much for others, you do enough by adoring His orders and keeping your souls in peace. God often wishes to establish lasting good works upon the patience of those who undertake them, and for that purpose He tries them in many ways.

St. Vincent de Paul

We greatly need to accustom ourselves to let pass all vicissitudes, as well those caused by persons or external circumstances as those arising from our own interior dispositions, and be equally submissive to the guidance of Divine Providence.

St. Louise de Marillac

Those whose talents are of the ordinary kind are in general more suitable instruments in the hands of God for procuring the salvation of His people, because they have less confidence in themselves; they recur to God with more humility, and to Him alone they attribute the success of all their labors.

St. Vincent de Paul

I beg the Holy Spirit, Who is the bond of the Father and the Son, that He may unite you closely and preserve and increase in you strength of soul and body so that you may correspond with the designs of Divine Providence over the Company.

St. Vincent de Paul