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Stafford Poole C.M.

Douglas Slawson C.M.

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## A New Look At An Old Temptation

*Saint Vincent de Paul's Temptation Against  
Faith and Resolution to Serve the Poor*

BY STAFFORD POOLE, C.M., AND DOUGLAS SLAWSON, C.M.

One of the crucial events in the life of Saint Vincent de Paul is the history of how, when a doctor of theology suffered a prolonged temptation against faith, Saint Vincent prayed to have the temptation pass to himself, endured it for three or four years, and was finally freed from it only when he made a resolution (not a vow, as is often said) to spend his life in the service of the poor. For more than three centuries this chapter in the saint's life has been viewed as a major stage in his growth in holiness, one which opened to him his life's work and that of the Congregation he founded. In view of the importance that has been attached to the incident, it is surprising that it has never been given the historical study that it deserves.

### The Twofold Account

The full story was first related in two parts by Louis Abelly, author of the earliest biography of Saint Vincent. He began it with a long quotation from a conference on faith that the saint gave at some unknown time to the priests of the Mission.

I knew a famous doctor, who for a long time had defended the Catholic faith against heretics in his capacity as canon theologian<sup>1</sup> which he had held in a diocese. When the late Queen Marguerite called him to her service because of his learning and piety, he was obliged to leave his employment. Since he no longer preached or catechized, he was assaulted in his leisure by a violent temptation against faith. This, by the way, teaches us how dangerous it is to be idle, either in body or in spirit. For just as a field, no matter how good it may be, still if it lies fallow, quickly produces thistles and thorns, so our souls cannot remain for long in leisure and idleness without experiencing some passions or temptations that draw it toward evil. This doctor, then, seeing himself in this unhappy situation, came to me to tell me that he was disturbed by quite violent temptations against faith and that he had horrible thoughts of blasphemy against Jesus Christ, and even of despair, to such an extent that he felt

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<sup>1</sup>*Theologal*, a member of a cathedral chapter who was charged with teaching theology to candidates for clerical orders.

impelled to throw himself out a window. And he was reduced to such an extremity that it was finally necessary to dispense him from reciting his breviary and celebrating Holy Mass, and even of saying any prayer whatever, to such an extent that as soon as he merely began to recite the Our Father, it seemed to him that he saw a thousand specters that greatly troubled him. His imagination was so distracted and his spirit so exhausted by reason of making acts of resistance to his temptations that he could no longer make them. In this pitiful state, someone suggested this practice, which was that whenever he turned his hand or one of his fingers toward the city of Rome, or even toward some church, he signified by this movement and by this action that he believed everything that the Roman Church believed. What happened after that? When he fell ill, God finally had pity on this poor doctor. He was instantly freed from all his temptations [and] the blindfold was suddenly removed from the eyes of his spirit. He began to see all the truths of faith, but with such clarity that he thought he felt and touched them with his finger. And at length he died, giving loving thanks to God for having allowed him to fall into these temptations in order to deliver him from them with so much benefit and he exhibited the greatest and most admirable feelings for the mysteries of our religion.<sup>2</sup>

Abelly goes on to say that Saint Vincent made no mention of the means that he used to free the doctor from these temptations. It was only after Vincent's death that the other part of the story became known. According to Abelly, the testimony was given by a person worthy of belief (*une personne tres digne de foy*) who submitted it in writing and who had no knowledge of Saint Vincent's conference quoted above.<sup>3</sup>

When Monsieur Vincent was given the duty of consoling this man who had revealed his spiritual pains to him, he advised him to resist them and to do some good works in order to obtain the grace of being freed from them. Later it happened that this man fell ill and that in his illness the evil spirit redoubled its efforts to cause him to be lost. So Monsieur Vincent, seeing him reduced to this pitiful condition and fearing with good reason that he would eventually succumb to these temptations to infidelity and blasphemy and that he would die poisoned by that implacable hatred that the devil has toward the Son of God, turned in prayer to ask his divine goodness to be pleased to deliver this sick man from this danger and he offered himself to God in a spirit of penance to bring upon himself, if not the same pain, at least such effects of his justice as he would be pleased to have him suffer, imitating in this regard the charity of Jesus Christ, who was burdened with our infirmities in order to cure us of them and who satisfied the penalties that we had merited. God willed by his secret providence to take the charitable Monsieur Vincent at his word and

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<sup>2</sup>Louis Abelly, *La vie du venerable seroitteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul Instituteur et premier superieur de la Congregation de la Mission* (Paris: 1664), book 3, chapter 11, 116-17; Pierre Coste, C.M., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Conferences, entretiens, documents*, 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), 11:32-34, hereinafter cited as Coste, *CED*.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 117.

hearing his prayer, he freed the sick man completely from his temptation, returned calm to his spirit, clarified his troubled and darkened faith, and gave him sentiments of religion and gratitude toward Our Lord Jesus Christ, so filled with a tenderness and devotion that he had never had. But at the same time, O admirable way of the divine wisdom! God permitted that this same temptation should pass into the soul of Monsieur Vincent, who was then strongly assailed by it. He used prayers and mortifications to be rid of it, but the only result was to cause him to suffer those fumes of hell with patience and resignation, yet without losing hope that eventually God would take pity on him. Nevertheless, since he realized that God wanted to test him by permitting the devil to attack him with so much violence, he did two things. The first was that he wrote his profession of faith on a piece of paper, which he placed over his heart, as a specific remedy for the evil that he was experiencing, and making a general repudiation of all thoughts contrary to faith, he made a pact with Our Lord that whenever he put his hand on his heart and on this piece of paper, as he frequently did, he intended by this action and by this movement of his hand to renounce the temptation, even though he did not say a word by his mouth, and at the same time he lifted his heart to God and gently turned his spirit from his pain, thus confounding the devil, without speaking to him or paying him any heed.

The second remedy that he employed was that of doing the opposite of what the temptation suggested to him, trying to act by faith and to render honor and service to Jesus Christ. This is what he did particularly by visiting the sick poor of the Hôpital de la Charité in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, where he was living at that time. This charitable work being one of the most meritorious of Christendom, it was thus the most appropriate to testify to Our Lord with what faith he believed in his words and his examples and with what love he wanted to serve him, since he said that he considered as done to himself the service that is rendered to the least of his brothers. By this means God gave to Monsieur Vincent the grace to draw such great profit from this temptation that he not only never had any occasion to confess any fault that he might have committed in this matter, but even those remedies which he used were to him like the source of innumerable goods that they afterwards made flow into his soul.

Finally, after three or four years having passed in this violent condition, and Monsieur Vincent always groaning before God under the very fatiguing weight of these temptations, and nonetheless to strengthen himself more and more against the devil and to confound him, one day he decided to take a firm and inviolable resolution to honor Jesus Christ further and in order to imitate him more perfectly than he had yet done, which was that of giving his entire life out of love for him to the service of the poor. He had no more formed this resolution in his spirit than by a marvelous effect of grace, all those suggestions of the evil spirit dissipated and vanished; his heart, which had for so long been in oppression, was returned to a sweet freedom, and his soul was filled with such an abundant light that he admitted on different occasions that he thought he saw the truths of faith with a totally special light.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 117-19.

Abelly interprets this resolution as the source from which the great accomplishments of Saint Vincent's later life would flow: "It can be said that from it God, by his grace, later drew all the great works that were done by his servant for the help and salvation of an infinite number of poor."<sup>5</sup> He goes on to say that in addition to the person who gave this testimony, there were very many other persons of merit and virtue, still living, who had related the same story. They claimed to have heard it from Monsieur Vincent himself who told them about it in confidence in order "to have them make use of the same remedies in order to obtain relief and healing of similar pains of spirit."<sup>6</sup>

### Biographers after Abelly

This account has been accepted and repeated by subsequent biographers of Saint Vincent de Paul. After Abelly the first of these was the eighteenth-century French theologian Pierre Collet who admitted that "the event has so much of the extraordinary about it that I would have suppressed it, if it were not based on evidence that admits no exception or contradiction."<sup>7</sup> Collet described the account in more vivid language than the quotations given by Abelly.<sup>8</sup> He also said that it was Saint Vincent who advised the doctor to turn toward a church or Rome, an assertion that Saint Vincent did not make. Collet went on to show that Saint Vincent helped many persons who were tempted against faith, including a virtuous priest whose difficulty about an article of faith was resolved by the saint's words.<sup>9</sup>

Biographers after Collet have repeated this account, added details, and interpreted it as a decisive step on the road to sanctity and Vincent's future works. Among the more important of these authors were the Abbé Maynard,<sup>10</sup> Emmanuel de Broglie,<sup>11</sup> Émile Bougaud (who rather gratuitously states that the doctor was "a victim probably of his own pride"),<sup>12</sup> Arthur Loth (who speaks of it as "this marvelous grace from

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 119.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Pierre Collet, *La Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul, Instituteur de la Congregation de la Mission, & des Filles de la Charite*, 2 vols. (Nancy: 1748), 1:31.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 1:31-34.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 1:34; Abelly, *Vie*, book 3, chapter 2, 6.

<sup>10</sup>L'Abbe [Michel Ulysse] Maynard, *Saint Vincent de Paul: sa vie, son temps, ses oeuvres, son influence*, 4 vols. (Paris: 1860), 1:69-71.

<sup>11</sup>Emmanuel de Broglie, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, trans. Mildred Partridge, (London: 1906), 30-32.

<sup>12</sup>Émile Bougaud, *History of St. Vincent de Paul Founder of the Congregation of the Mission (Vincentians) and the Sisters of Charity*, trans. from the 2nd French edition by the Rev. Joseph Brady, C.M., 2 vols. (London, New York, and Bombay: 1899), 34-35.

on high that confirmed him in his vocation"),<sup>13</sup> Paul Renaudin (who apparently was the first to call the theologian a doctor of the Sorbonne),<sup>14</sup> Henri Lavedan,<sup>15</sup> M.V. Woodgate,<sup>16</sup> Pierre Coste,<sup>17</sup> Jean Calvet (who embellishes the story by saying that the doctor was also tempted "to commit sins of the flesh"),<sup>18</sup> Jean Mauduit (who also calls the theologian a doctor of the Sorbonne and identifies him with the noted Dominican preacher Nicholas de Coëffeteau),<sup>19</sup> Igino Giordani,<sup>20</sup> André Dodin,<sup>21</sup> and Luigi Mezzadri.<sup>22</sup> In addition to his biographers other students of Saint Vincent's life have found in the incident a key element in his spiritual development. Pierre Defrennes saw it as one of the steps in Vincent's discovery of his vocation, although he was dubious that Vincent's temptation against faith was connected with that of the theologian.<sup>23</sup> The preparatory committee for the Vincentian general assembly of 1980 included the episode in a description of Saint Vincent's spiritual journey. The committee's interpretation of the event reflects its importance to the hagiography of Saint Vincent and his community: "Vincent's faith was thus marked by this acute human crisis. The solution to it he found in the service of the poor, in the mystique of the poor. The price was three or four years of disarray and of interior darkness. Afterward Vincent became a model of faith. This was forged

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<sup>13</sup>Arthur Loth, *Saint Vincent de Paul et sa mission sociale*. (Paris: 1906), 50-53.

<sup>14</sup>Paul Renaudin, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, (Marseille: 1927), 41.

<sup>15</sup>Henri Lavedan, *The Heroic Life of Saint Vincent de Paul: a biography*, trans. Helen Younger Chase. (London, New York, Toronto: 1929), 67-79.

<sup>16</sup>M.V. Woodgate, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, (Westminster, Maryland: n.d.), 9. She has an unverified citation regarding the resolution to serve the poor, "he never had any particular devotion to the poor, nay, rather the opposite."

<sup>17</sup>Pierre Coste, *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, trans. Joseph Leonard, C.M. 3 vols., (Westminster, Maryland: 1952), 1:48-49.

<sup>18</sup>Jean Calvet, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard, (New York: 1948), 47-48.

<sup>19</sup>Jean Mauduit, *Saint Vincent de Paul* (Paris: 1960), 109. Coëffeteau (1574-1623) was court preacher to Henry IV, administrator of the diocese of Metz, and bishop of Marseille. Mauduit's identification of the theologian with Coëffeteau appears to be erroneous. Aside from the fact that it is highly improbable that a Dominican would have been a member of a cathedral chapter, the date of his death is too long after the events to tally with Vincent's account.

<sup>20</sup>Igino Giordani, *Saint Vincent de Paul: Servant of the Poor*, trans. Thomas J. Tobin, (Milwaukee: 1961), 15-16.

<sup>21</sup>André Dodin, "Saint Vincent de Paul, mystique de l'action religieuse," *Mission et Charité*, no. 29/30 (January-June 1968):33; "La misère vue par M. Vincent," *Mission et Charité*, no. 4:412.

<sup>22</sup>Luigi Mezzadri, *Saint Vincent de Paul (1581-1660)*, (Paris: 1985), 25.

<sup>23</sup>Pierre Defrennes, "La vocation de Saint Vincent de Paul," *Revue d'Ascétique et Mystique* 13 (1932):398-99. Defrennes accepts the reality of a prolonged temptation against faith, which he dates from 1613 to 1616, but is skeptical of the story of the transference. Despite this, however, he uses the time frame given by Abelly's unknown witness.

in the crucible of suffering. At the very moment of experiencing doubt and the attack of the evil spirit, he strengthened himself with decisive personal convictions."<sup>24</sup>

A number of writers in *Colloque*, the excellent publication of the Vincentian Province of Ireland, have testified to the impact that the account has had on present-day interpreters of Saint Vincent de Paul. Patrick McCrohan writes, "All his efforts to distract himself from temptations against his faith failed until he recognized that what God was doing was purifying him prior to calling him to find Jesus Christ in the Poor."<sup>25</sup> Padraig Regan describes how Vincent "slowly, painfully and persistently propels himself toward the light, senses rather than sees God's light in the ambient darkness, and ends by finding his life's vocation in this apparently endless night of evil."<sup>26</sup> Similarly Roderick Crowley calls the temptation "the real turning point" in the saint's life.<sup>27</sup> Biographers and commentators have been almost unanimous in viewing this episode as pivotal in Saint Vincent's discernment of his vocation and hence that of the Congregation of the Mission.<sup>28</sup>

The first person to express publicly a doubt about the historicity of the account was the French author Antoine Redier in 1927.<sup>29</sup> His biography, the so-called "true life" of Saint Vincent, was the first one to be based on Pierre Coste's publication of documents on the saint's life and works. It was criticized for its skeptical approach to some incidents in Vincent's life, such as the Tunisian captivity, and was banned from the houses of the Daughters of Charity. With regard to the account of

<sup>24</sup>English translation, *Saint Vincent's Spiritual Experience and Our Own* (Perryville, Missouri: n.d.), 7. The document was originally published in French in 1977. No single author was given. The members of the commission were Luigi Betta, René Dulucq, José M. Sánchez Mallo, Carey Leonard, Jean-Pierre Renouard, Ventura Sarasola, and Italo Zedde.

<sup>25</sup>Patrick McCrohan, "Vincent de Paul: Minister of Restlessness," *Colloque* 4 (Spring 1981):6.

<sup>26</sup>Padraig Regan, "St. Vincent and Discernment," *Colloque* 11 (Spring 1985):348.

<sup>27</sup>Roderick Crowley, "The Mystery of the Poor," *Colloque* 18 (Autumn 1988):408.

<sup>28</sup>No mention is made here of Henri Brémond, whose treatment of Saint Vincent is not biographical. He mentions the temptation against faith only in passing, when dealing with a similar episode in the life of Jean-Jacques Olier, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours*, 11 vols. (Paris: 1921-1933), Vol. 3: *La conquête mystique: l'école française*, 430-31.

<sup>29</sup>In the late nineteenth century a German author, Ernst Schafer, a Protestant who wrote a somewhat critical biographical notice on Saint Vincent, hinted at some skepticism about the transference of the temptation. He wrote that "whatever one is to believe of such a substitution theory, I think that not a word of this is to be lost." ("Vinzenz von Paul," in *Monatschrift für Innere Mission* [December 1893]:95, note 3). Apparently he meant that he was including the story for the sake of completeness. Schäfer gives two citations in this note. The first is to the article "Vincentius de Paulo," by Hollenberg and Zockler in the *Real-Encyclopadie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche* (Leipzig: 1885), 16:513-516. This article, however, expresses no skepticism about the story. The other citation is of Gerard Uhlhorn, *Die christliche Liebesthätigkeit*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: 1882-1884), 3:212, which says nothing about the temptation.

Vincent's temptation given by the unknown witness, Redier wrote, "A story like this needs refined and solid proofs in order to be believed, especially when there is a question of such a person [the unnamed witness]." He added that it would be a pleasure to believe such a thing of Saint Vincent but that it was necessary to forego the pleasure.<sup>30</sup>

A stronger position was taken in 1950 by Pierre Debongnie, professor of church history at Louvain University. After evaluating and rejecting an account of a retreat made by Pierre de Bérulle, Adrien Bourdoise, and Saint Vincent, during which the three supposedly formulated their plans for the reform of the French Church,<sup>31</sup> Debongnie turns to the story of Vincent's temptation.

This "moving tradition" is no more reliable than the preceding one. Abelly's testimony is not enough ... it is not supported by any declaration by the saint. Vincent never made any allusion to a vow [*sic*] of this kind nor to this heroic substitution. If he never spoke of it, who knew of it? Furthermore, where should these three or four years be placed? And here again one comes up against what is most certain in Vincent's spiritual psychology, the established principle of waiting for the indications of providence.<sup>32</sup>

Having challenged the story, Debongnie did not elaborate on or respond to the challenges. The traditional account held the field.

The author of the most recent major biography, José María Román, accepts and conflates the two accounts given by Abelly but adds a confusing observation: "The assertion that Vincent had asked God for the transference of the temptation comes from Abelly, who tells us that he received it from a person worthy of all credence and one who did not know of Vincent's account. On the basis of only this testimony it is of doubtful credibility. On the other hand, the historicity of the temptation itself ... is incontestable."<sup>33</sup> He does not try to reconcile the "incontestable" historicity of the account with the fact that the only evidence for it is of "doubtful ... credibility." In a paper given at the Vincentian Month in Paris in 1984 Stafford Poole expressed doubts about Abelly's addition to Saint Vincent's account.<sup>34</sup> Jaime Corera, like Defrennes,

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<sup>30</sup>Antoine Redier, *La vraie vie de Saint Vincent de Paul* (Paris: 1927), 52-54. As mentioned above Defrennes was doubtful that Saint Vincent's account and that of the unknown witness belonged together ("La vocation de Saint Vincent de Paul," 398, n.2).

<sup>31</sup>A story also rejected by Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:51-53.

<sup>32</sup>Pierre Debongnie, "Saint Vincent de Paul et Abelly," *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 45 (1950):693-94.

<sup>33</sup>Jose María Román, *San Vicente de Paul. I. Biografía*. (Madrid: 1981), 104, n.29.

<sup>34</sup>Stafford Poole, "Saint Vincent de Paul, 1595-1617," *Vincentiana* 4-5-6 (1984):439-40.



accepted the idea that Vincent underwent a crisis of faith but rejected the transfer from the troubled theologian as the source of it, despite the fact that the two rest on the same foundation.<sup>35</sup> The late Jean Morin, in a paper prepared for the Vincentian Month in Paris in 1987, showed some hesitation about accepting Abelly's account uncritically.<sup>36</sup> The historicity of the account was rejected by Douglas Slawson in an article in *Vincentian Heritage* in 1989.<sup>37</sup>

What Abelly presents in his biography is two different accounts which in his judgment belong together. The first is that of Saint Vincent himself, but it is in Saint Vincent's words as given by Abelly. The latter was not above altering the saint's words in order to make them sound more pious or genteel.<sup>38</sup> The second is the testimony of an unknown witness, submitted between the saint's death in 1660 and the publication of Abelly's book in 1664, which relates events of almost fifty years before. Both accounts deal with temptations against faith but in their present form the only connection between the two is made by Abelly himself.

Who was this unnamed witness? In dealing with testimony that is essentially hearsay, this is an important question. Both Loth and Lavedan state explicitly that it was Saint Vincent's friend, the Canon de Saint-Martin, who was the source of much of Abelly's information about Vincent's early life.<sup>39</sup> In view of Abelly's known reliance on Saint-Martin, this is quite possible. The canon was the brother of Louis de Saint-Martin, son-in-law of Monsieur de Comet the younger, Vincent's patron after the death of Monsieur de Comet the younger, Vincent's patron after the death of Monsieur de Comet the elder, and the person to whom the letters on the Tunisian captivity were addressed. It is not clear how long the canon had known Saint Vincent, but the latter's relations with the Saint-Martin family went back at least to 1610.<sup>40</sup> Coste, however, gives a negative verdict on this source.

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<sup>35</sup>Jaime Corera, *Diez estudios vicencianos* (Salamanca: Editorial CEME, 1983), 30-38. In this study Corera makes several references to a vow to serve the poor rather than a resolution.

<sup>36</sup>Jean Morin, "Les années obscures (1610-1617): la conversion," *Vincentiana* (1987):553-54

<sup>37</sup>Douglas Slawson, "Saint Vincent de Paul's Discernment of his own Vocation and That of the Congregation of the Mission," *Vincentian Heritage* 10, no. 1 (1989):11, n. 39.

<sup>38</sup>For examples see Coste, *Life and Works*, 3:485-86.

<sup>39</sup>Loth, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, 52; Lavedan, *The Heroic Life*, 78. Deffrennes, "La vocation de Saint Vincent de Paul," 398, n. 2, speculates that it might have been Saint Louise de Marillac but the only reason he gives is that she also suffered temptations against faith.

<sup>40</sup>Román, *San Vicente de Paúl*, 33-34. See Vincent's letter to his mother, from Paris, 17 February 1608, Coste, CED, 1:18.

Canon de Saint-Martin who was entrusted with the task of collecting information on the Saint's native district was not the man needed for such a work, for he had neither the taste for research, nor the knowledge of local history, nor the critical flair which every historian needs if he is to distinguish between truth and error in the evidence placed before him. The good old Canon's word is not authoritative; facts which he alleges and which have no other foundation rest on a very shaky basis, and it would therefore be wrong to regard them as indubitable.<sup>41</sup>

José María Román rejects this assessment, which he considers exaggerated, adding that it "has been repeated without critical judgment."<sup>42</sup> It should be noted, however, that there were major gaps in the canon's knowledge of Vincent's early years, for example, prior to the discovery of Saint Vincent's two letters on the Tunisian captivity of 1605-1607, Saint-Martin had been entirely ignorant of that episode in his friend's life.<sup>43</sup> Abelly's description of the witness as being totally worthy of credence is part of the standard formula he employed when referring to any of his sources. As Dodin has pointed out, this was common to hagiographic history in which religion and virtue in a witness were as important as veracity or knowledge.<sup>44</sup>

Even a casual reading shows that the two accounts cannot be fully harmonized. Saint Vincent clearly attributes the deliverance of the troubled theologian to the divine mercy and the practices that had been recommended to him. The testimony of the anonymous witness does not mention these. Saint Vincent says that the doctor was delivered as soon as he fell ill, whereas the second account states that the temptations threatened to follow him even to the point of death. Saint Vincent himself, in all his surviving writings and conferences, never alludes to his having suffered such temptations or made a resolution to dedicate his life to the service of the poor. The differences between the two accounts are not in themselves insurmountable, but they are sufficient to raise questions about the relationship of the second account to Saint Vincent's.

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<sup>41</sup>Coste, *Life and Works*, 3:483.

<sup>42</sup>Román, *San Vicente de Paúl*, 33, n.9.

<sup>43</sup>It is not clear just which parts of Abelly's account of Vincent's youth came from Saint-Martin, but several are demonstrably erroneous. These include the reference to a chapel at Buglose during the saint's youth, the chronology of his schooling at Dax, the date of his ordinations (all of which are in error but could have been easily verified), the reference to the vacant see of Dax in 1600, and the statement that Cardinal d'Ossat entrusted Vincent with a secret mission to King Henry IV at a time when the cardinal had been dead for six years.

<sup>44</sup>André Dodin, *Le légende et l'histoire: de Monsieur Depaul à Saint Vincent de Paul* (Paris: 1985), 107-115.

Also significant is the fact that Abelly does not relate the anonymous account to Saint Vincent's early years in Paris. In narrating those years in the first part of his biography he never mentions the temptation.<sup>45</sup> Rather, he puts it in the last third of his work with only the vaguest chronological reference and very little biographical context. In his description of Vincent's first stay in Paris Abelly's only reference to the saint's working at the Hôpital de la Charité is a passing one in a quotation from Queen Marguerite's secretary — and then it is mentioned as an example of his virtue, not in reference to any personal crisis.<sup>46</sup> The story of the temptation is presented as a somewhat isolated example of Vincent's virtue and seems appended almost as an afterthought.

The study that follows will address the two questions posed by Debongnie, that is, evaluating the episode from the point of view of Saint Vincent's spiritual psychology and its place in the chronology of his life.

### **Saint Vincent's Spiritual Psychology**

The first difficulty that arises in the account given by the unnamed witness is that it is not in accord with what is known about Saint Vincent's manner of acting, both during this period (1610-1617) and later.

Vincent de Paul was extremely reticent in talking about himself or his accomplishments. Some things were kept completely hidden during his lifetime: the date and place of his ordination to the priesthood, his supposed captivity in Tunisia, and the date and circumstances of his arrival in Paris. When in 1658 the Canon de Saint-Martin forwarded to Saint-Lazare the recently discovered letters of 1607-1608 that narrated Saint Vincent's Tunisian adventure, Brother Bertrand Ducournau, Vincent's secretary, wrote to Saint-Martin on behalf of some of the saint's closest associates:

They would like very much to know how he departed from the legate to Avignon who brought him to Rome, what he did at that court, where he went on leaving Italy, when and why he came to Paris, in what year and in what place he was made a priest. And if you know, Monsieur, any other

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<sup>45</sup>Abelly, *Vie*, book 1, chapter 5.

<sup>46</sup>"It is he [Monsieur Defresne, Queen Marguerite's secretary] who has given this testimony: 'from that time on, Monsieur Vincent seemed very humble, charitable, and prudent, doing good to everyone, and not being a bother to anyone, circumspect in his words, calmly listening to others, without ever interrupting them, and from that time on he was assiduous in going to visit, serve and exhort the poor sick of the Charite,'" (Abelly, *Vie*, book 1, chapter 5, 21).

particulars of his youth, you will do us a favor in telling us about them. He never speaks to us of himself except to his shame and never to make known the graces that God has given him.<sup>47</sup>

This letter makes clear the fact that persons who had known Saint Vincent for decades, in some cases for almost half a century, had only a scant knowledge of his early life. When he spoke of his childhood and youth, it was in stereotyped phrases that often put him in a bad light, for example, having been a swineherd or having been ashamed of his father.<sup>48</sup> Ducournau noted that “he has quite often told us that he was the son of a farm worker, that he tended his father’s pigs, and other humiliating things but he kept from us all those that would redound to his honor.”<sup>49</sup> Throughout his life, whenever he told his confreres anything that could have reflected credit on him, he recounted it in the third person. In light of this persistent reserve it is antecedently improbable that he would have told anyone, even in spiritual direction, of an incident that would have shown him in such an heroic light.<sup>50</sup>

In view of Vincent’s well established principle of not running ahead of providence, it is also improbable that Vincent would have taken such a serious step without seeking advice or spiritual direction. Private vows of various kinds were not unusual in the French religious milieu of that time, but they were usually taken only after a period of prayer and reflection. When Jean-Jacques Olier desired to make a vow of servitude to Christ in 1641, his confessor made him wait a full year before doing so.<sup>51</sup> Although in Saint Vincent’s case there is question of a resolution rather than a vow, it still was a serious step. During the time period under consideration his spiritual director was Pierre de Bérulle, the future cardinal and dominant figure of the French Catholic Reformation. Vincent did little or nothing without Bérulle’s advice, at least prior to 1617. Bérulle directed him toward his service in the Gondi household and arranged his pastorates at Clichy and Châtillon-les-Dombes. The saint consulted him before leaving the Gondis for Châtillon in mid-1617 and after returning later in the year. Though Vincent and

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<sup>47</sup>Ducournau to Canon de Saint-Martin, from Paris, August 1658, Coste, *CED*, 8:514.

<sup>48</sup>Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:13-14.

<sup>49</sup>Ducournau to Saint-Martin, Coste, *CED*, 8:513-14.

<sup>50</sup>Abelly himself commented on this aspect of Vincent’s character. “It is true that it will not be easy to narrate what this great servant of God always tried to hide, as much as he could, under the veil of a very profound humility. That is why we can say only what charity or obedience compelled him to make known exteriorly, of which the principal part, which is totally interior and spiritual, is unknown to us,” (*Vie*, book 1, chapter 18, 75).

<sup>51</sup>Christopher J. Kauffmann, *Tradition and Transformation in Catholic Culture: The Priests of Saint Sulpice in the United States from 1791 to the Present* (New York: 1988), 14.

Bérulle later parted company, with perhaps some ill feeling on Bérulle's part, during the years 1610-1617 Vincent would not have made any major decision without consulting him. In his later life the saint continued the practice of seeking advice as a means of discerning God's will, as when he consulted André Duval both about securing papal approval of the Congregation of the Mission and the acceptance of the priory of Saint-Lazare.<sup>52</sup> Yet in Abelly's account there is no indication of any recourse to another person. Saint Vincent is pictured as acting on his own.

It is highly unlikely that a prudent director like Bérulle would have allowed his directee to undertake something as irresponsible as the transfer of a temptation. It is even more unlikely that Vincent, as the unnamed witness claims, would have advised his own directees to take similar steps. It is contrary to what is known of the saint's prudence and aversion to the extravagant and singular in the spiritual life. This same aversion makes it improbable that Vincent would even have contemplated such an action for himself. For him the summit of virtue was to be found in responsiveness to the divine will and an unflinching devotion to the duties and works that this will imposed on an individual. His spirituality was based very much on the *via media*.

Viewed in themselves these objections are not sufficient to overthrow the Abelly account. A greater difficulty is that of situating the episode in the chronology of Saint Vincent's life.

### The Problem of Chronology

Some elements of this chronology are quite clear, others are less so. The exact date of Vincent de Paul's arrival in Paris is uncertain, but in all probability it was in 1609.<sup>53</sup> His first residence was in a small apartment near Saint-Germain-des-Près which he shared with a judge from Sore, in the Landes, who later accused him of theft.<sup>54</sup> He wrote to his mother on 17 February 1610, indicating that he had not yet been able to find a suitable benefice or employment.<sup>55</sup> Later he found a position since on 17 May 1610 he was mentioned for the first time as an almoner to Queen Marguerite de Valois, the repudiated wife of Henry IV, though the appointment was probably made earlier in the year.<sup>56</sup> From

<sup>52</sup>Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:158, 166, 168, 171.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:43.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 43-44.

<sup>55</sup>Coste, *CED*, 1:18-20.

<sup>56</sup>Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:45, n. 5. In the English translation the note incorrectly cites Coste, *CED* 1:8 as the source and says that the document mentioning Saint Vincent is a list. It is actually the conferral on Vincent of the abbey of Saint-Léonard de Chaume and is to be found in Coste, *CED*, 13:8.

17 May 1610 until 7 December 1612 Vincent was living near the queen's palace.<sup>57</sup> This was adjacent to the Hôpital de la Charité, where Abelly's witness says that Vincent worked. On 20 October 1611 the saint, probably acting as intermediary for the master of the Paris mint, presented a gift of 15,000 *livres* to the hospital.<sup>58</sup> On 13 October 1611 François Bourgoing resigned his parish at Clichy in favor of Vincent de Paul, who took possession on 12 May 1612.<sup>59</sup> In the following year, at Bérulle's urging, he entered the service of Monsieur and Madame de Gondi as tutor to their children, while administering the parish at Clichy through a vicar. One result of this was that Vincent was named pastor of the parish of Gamaches in the archdiocese of Rouen (28 February 1614), over which Monsieur de Gondi had the right of presentation.<sup>60</sup> It is not known how long he held the position, though he clearly must have been an absentee pastor. On 25 January 1617 he gave the famous sermon on general confession in the church of Folleville, a village situated on the Gondi estates. Though in hindsight he came to view it as the first sermon of the mission, it did not immediately lead to any organized work of evangelization. Some time between April and July Vincent was making secret arrangements to leave the Gondis and he soon fled their household to become pastor at Châtillon-les-Dombes.<sup>61</sup> In December 1617 he was compelled to return by the entreaties of Madame de Gondi and those she had enlisted to help her. He resigned

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<sup>57</sup>He was living on the Rue de Seine, according to three documents dated 17 May 1610, 20 October 1611, and 7 December 1612, (Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:50, n. 13). The last document presents a problem since Saint Vincent was pastor of Clichy at that time. Did he continue to maintain a legal domicile in Paris or was he still an almoner to Queen Marguerite, that is, a multiple office holder? Abelly, *Vie*, book 1, chapter 6, 24, says that Vincent lived with the Oratory for two years. The Oratory, however, had not yet been founded in France. Louis Batterel, *Memoires pour servir à l'histoire de l'Oratoire*, cited by Coste, *ibid.*, says that Vincent, Bérulle, and some other ecclesiastics led a semi-communitarian life near the Carmelite convent in Paris.

<sup>58</sup>Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:50, says that the money was given as a personal gift to Saint Vincent and he immediately turned it over to the hospital. The original document, however, is ambiguous on the point. See Coste, *CED*, 13:14-16.

<sup>59</sup>Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:54; *CED*, 13:17-18.

<sup>60</sup>Raymond Chalumeau-André Dodin, "Monsieur Vincent: Cure de Gamaches," *Mission et Charité* 8 (October 1962):495.

<sup>61</sup>The sequence of events between the sermon at Folleville and Vincent's departure for Châtillon-les-Dombes is not at all clear. The rector of Châtillon-les-Dombes resigned his position in favor of Saint Vincent (though he did not know his successor's name at the time) on 19 April 1617. The saint was named pastor on 29 July 1617 and took possession on 1 August, (Coste, *CED*, 13:40-45). On the basis of this document, Coste dates his departure in July, (*Life and Works*, 1:74, n. 4). One of the witnesses in the inquiry made of the inhabitants of Châtillon in 1665 stated that he arrived in Lent of 1617, (Coste, *CED*, 13:47). Román, *San Vicente de Paúl*, 122, n. 6, accepts this date and estimates the arrival at March or April 1617. The inquiry also states that the pastor of Châtillon had died and the post was vacant when Vincent accepted it. This document also credits Bérulle and the Oratorians with taking the initiative in offering it to Saint Vincent, whereas Abelly seems to place the initiative on Vincent's part.

his post in Châtillon on 31 January 1618. During his second stay with the Gondis he acted as their chaplain and began the process of rural evangelization that would lead to the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission.

The purpose of this chronology is to establish the framework within which the three or four years of the temptation should be placed. Since the doctor of theology in Vincent's account underwent his temptation as a result of entering the service of Queen Marguerite, this temptation should logically be placed between Saint Vincent's entrance into the same service (between February and May 1610) and his possession of the parish of Clichy (12 May 1612). Abelly's anonymous witness states that Vincent's temptation occurred when he was living in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, something that on the basis of known dates would bracket it between May 1610 and December 1611. The only known date for any contacts between Vincent and the *Fate ben fratelli* or Brothers of Saint John of God at the Hôpital de la Charité is October 1611. If, as Abelly says, this was to counteract his temptation against faith, then it would be necessary to situate the beginning of the temptation at least in mid-1611. If it lasted three or four years, then it would have begun no earlier than 1610 and no later than 1611, and would have ended no earlier than 1613 or later than 1615. This would mean that the temptation was raging during his year at Clichy (1612-1613), something that contradicts Vincent's own testimony that this was one of the happiest periods of his life.<sup>62</sup>

This gave me so much consolation and made me so happy that I used to say to myself: "My God! How happy you are to have such good people!" And I would add, "I think that the pope himself is not so happy as a parish priest in the midst of such goodhearted people." One day His Eminence, Cardinal de Retz, asked me: "Well, sir, how are you?" I told him, "My Lord, I am so happy that I cannot express it." "Why?" "Because I have such good people, so obedient to everything I tell them that I think to myself that neither the Holy Father, nor you, My Lord, is as happy as I."<sup>63</sup>

Those are not the words of a man "always groaning before God under the very fatiguing weight of these temptations" or with a heart "in oppression," as Abelly's witness claims.

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<sup>62</sup>Román, *San Vicente de Paúl*, 683, specifically says that the time at Clichy was also part of the time of the temptation.

<sup>63</sup>Coste, *Life and Works*, 12:57. This is quoted from a conference to the Daughters of Charity, 27 July 1653, (Coste: CED, 9:646).

If Vincent's temptation ended between 1613 and 1615 and did so because of a resolution to devote his life to the poor, then it would be logical to expect a major change at this time, a radical conversion in favor of the poor. All known evidence shows that this was not the case.<sup>64</sup> The decisions that he took during this time, all of them with Bérulle's approval or encouragement, cannot be reconciled with Abelly's assertion of a newly-found orientation toward the poor. Vincent's lifestyle was not substantially altered. He did not, for example, suddenly divest himself of the various benefices and employments that he had secured in order to obtain a comfortable living. On the contrary, it was a matter of years before those were phased out. Saint-Léonard de Chaume, which he received in 1610, was renounced in 1616, not as a gesture of self-sacrifice, but because of lawsuits and lack of revenue. About Gamaches, which he received in 1614, nothing is known except his appointment. Écouis, accepted in 1615, was given up at an unknown date. He remained the absentee pastor of Clichy until 1626, the year after the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission, and apparently continued to receive a regular income from it.<sup>65</sup> The most mysterious of all, Saint-Nicholas de Grosse-Sauve, was obtained in 1624, but nothing more is known about it. He also made an oblique reference to being prior of a chapter when he was pastor of Châtillon-les-Dombes in 1617.<sup>66</sup>

Neither was there any clear line of demarcation in his works. If Bérulle had counseled or approved this resolution (which, as Vincent's spiritual director, he surely would have known about), he did little or nothing to see that it was implemented.<sup>67</sup> In 1613, at Bérulle's urging, Saint Vincent became a tutor in an aristocratic family. When he left the

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<sup>64</sup>Corera explains Abelly's use of the temptation narratives in the following way. "Abelly uses it evidently in order to provide us with the exact key to the momentous change of direction that Vincent's life underwent after thirty years. Even Abelly, who seems committed to canonizing Vincent from his infancy, had to take into account the fact that the mature Vincent whom he knew had little resemblance, in questions of the vital perspective of faith, to the youthful Vincent of the first letters. He had to explain this change in some way and thought that he had found the explanation in the famous temptation against faith," (*Diez estudios*, 30). The difficulty with this explanation is that Abelly did not relate the temptation to Vincent's early life nor did he speak of any sort of conversion. Abelly obviously had a difficulty in attempting to reconcile the picture of Vincent as a saint from childhood with the reality of the youthful and somewhat turbulent priest. His solution was not to attempt any full reconciliation.

<sup>65</sup>It was not until 1630 that he received the final payment of income due to him from Clichy. See Coste, *CE* 13:85-86.

<sup>66</sup>Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 13 February 1646, Coste, *CE*, 9:243. None of the documents of appointment and resignation make any reference to a chapter.

<sup>67</sup>A similar point is made by Corera, *Diez estudios*, 33.



Gondis in 1617, two to four years after the resolution would supposedly have been taken, it was not to go to the poor but to the parish of Châtillon-les-Dombes, where Bérulle had arranged for him to be pastor.<sup>68</sup> This was not a village of paupers but a small walled town and market center. It was, wrote Coste, "beautifully situated in a smiling, fertile valley, diversified by woods, meadows and vine-clad hill-sides. . . . In those days it contained a working population of about two thousand souls, who left much to be desired both from the point of view of morals and religion."<sup>69</sup> While at Châtillon, Vincent continued to be the absentee pastor of Clichy and probably of Gamaches as well. His ministry in Châtillon was to the religiously abandoned, not the materially destitute, and consisted largely of reforming the local clergy, uplifting public morals, and converting heretics. Châtillon is remembered in his biographies as the locale where the first Confraternity of Charity was established. It should be noted, however, that the first Charity was a service to the helpless sick, not the poor. It is significant that those parishioners of Châtillon who later gave testimony for the process of Vincent's canonization emphasized his conversions of heretics, reconciliation of lapsed Catholics, and reform of the local clergy.<sup>70</sup>

When Vincent left Châtillon in 1617, it was not to dedicate his life to the poor but to return to the aristocratic Gondis, where he devoted his time to being their chaplain and to founding confraternities of charity, ministering to the galley slaves, and giving missions on the Gondi estates.<sup>71</sup> One of the conditions of this return was a promise to Madame de Gondi that he would remain with her until her death.<sup>72</sup> Six years later (17 April 1625) this condition was written into the contract with the Gondis which formed the basis for the foundation of the Congregation

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<sup>68</sup>The authors do not accept Corera's thesis (*Diez estudios*, 38-39) that Châtillon marked Vincent's attempt to reclaim his vocation to the evangelization of the rural poor, but "like Abraham (Hebrews 11:8) he set forth without really knowing where he was going." The authors believe that Châtillon was an effort to recapture Clichy, not Folleville. It should also be noted that Vincent then held two pastorates, Clichy and Châtillon.

<sup>69</sup>Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:72.

<sup>70</sup>Coste, *CED*, 13:45-54. Somewhat anachronistically the witnesses said that he established the Daughters of Charity in Châtillon to take care of the sick poor. This may have been a confused memory of the founding of the Confraternity.

<sup>71</sup>It is impossible to tell how much time Vincent actually devoted to these missions. Collet, *Vie*, 1:87-88, says that he gave missions throughout the dioceses of Beauvais, Soissons, and Sens, and that "he seemed tireless." Collet, however, gives no sources for this. Abelly says that after his return to the Gondis, Vincent gave missions in all the villages on the Gondi estates (*Vie*, book 1, chapter 13:53). On the other hand, there is documentary evidence for only one mission given by Vincent himself between 1617 and 1621. See Jules Melot, "Saint Vincent de Paul missionaire," *Mission et Charité* 11 (July 1963):249.

<sup>72</sup>Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:93.

of the Mission: "The said lord and lady understand that the said Sieur Paul will make his present and continual residence in their home in order to continue for them and their family the spiritual assistance that he has rendered to them for many years."<sup>73</sup> It was only after Madame de Gondi's death on 25 June 1625 that he went to live with the community that he had founded. There was no linear movement from the supposed self-dedication to the poor to an actual service to them.

The reality of Vincent de Paul's life is that his accomplishments did not grow out of a dramatic conversion that revealed his destiny to him but out of a response to happenings and needs in which he saw the call of providence. His works resulted from events that he did not anticipate and took directions that he did not foresee. The first sermon of the mission, delivered at Folleville on 25 January 1617, came about unexpectedly. So did the initial evangelization of the rural districts that followed his return to the Gondi household eleven months later. With considerable exaggeration Coste writes that "the mission at Folleville clearly revealed to Vincent de Paul what God expected of him ... After a long and terrible struggle, God had set him free from temptations against the Faith after he had made a resolution to devote the rest of his days to the service of the poor."<sup>74</sup> That, however, is not what happened. Saint Vincent did not follow up this event at Folleville nor do his biographers speak of any missions that he gave in its immediate aftermath, except for some scattered ones in the vicinity of Folleville.<sup>75</sup> It was only in hindsight that he came to view it as the first sermon of the mission. Within six months Vincent fled from the Gondis to return to the life in which he had previously found the greatest satisfaction, that of being a pastor in a small country town. After his return he resumed his association with the Gondi family and made a lifetime commitment to living with them as their chaplain, while at the same time inaugurating a program of rural missions. It was only with the passage of time and in response to the needs he encountered that Vincent de Paul eventually found his true vocation. And even then it was accepted slowly and with a certain reluctance, only after he had become convinced that no one else would meet the religious needs of the people in the rural districts of France.

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<sup>73</sup>Coste, *CED*, 13:199; Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:149.

<sup>74</sup>Coste, *Life and Works*, 1:70.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>75</sup>"During his first stay in the house of the Gondis up to 1617, what absorbed M. Vincent was not in any way the evangelization of the rural poor, but the education of the Gondi children, the spiritual direction of the lady, and the catechizing of their servants," (Corera, *Diez estudios*, 33-34).

This process of personal and apostolic discovery can be documented both from his life and his testimony, without any need to appeal to dramatic conversions. It is consistent with the Vincent of history and his lifelong process of discernment.<sup>76</sup> Although the account given by Abelly on the word of an anonymous witness has gained force through centuries of repetition, it is no stronger than the credibility of its source and its intrinsic reliability. A close and detailed analysis shows that it is historically doubtful at best and that there are substantial reasons for rejecting it. There is no reliable evidence of any prolonged temptation against faith at any point in Saint Vincent's life.

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<sup>76</sup>See Slawson, "Saint Vincent de Paul's Discernment," throughout.