

Spring 1991

# Illustrations in the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission

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## Recommended Citation

Rybolt, John E. C.M., Ph.D. (1991) "Illustrations in the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol12/iss1/1>

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## The Illustrations in the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission

BY JOHN E. RYBOLT, C.M.

Saint Vincent de Paul seems an unlikely subject for a review of works of art. Abelly tells us, for example, that the saint had only one picture in his room. Moreover, he says, Vincent had other pictures removed, no doubt pious ones, which one of the brothers of the house had placed there from time to time. Such superfluities ran contrary to poverty in his mind,<sup>1</sup> and he insisted that the confreres spend no money on embellishments.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the house of Saint Lazare was decorated with paintings. We know that, out of respect for his friend and confidant André Duval, Vincent had his portrait commissioned for Saint Lazare. Duval objected on seeing himself -- he had been painted without knowing it -- and Vincent had the canvas removed.<sup>3</sup> Besides Duval's portrait, the house had others, as Vincent mentioned in a conference: "While they were speaking, I glanced at the portraits of these holy persons which are in our room ..."<sup>4</sup> The refectory had at least one large painting.<sup>5</sup> Besides those of his own choosing, he received a painting sent him by Louise de Marillac in 1646, destined for the chapel,<sup>6</sup> and, in 1657,

<sup>1</sup>Louis Abelly, *La Vie du Venerable Serviteur de Dieu, Vincent de Paul* (Paris: Florentin Lambert, 1664), Book 3, Chapter 18, 273. (All references are to this edition.)

<sup>2</sup>Abelly, Bk. 3, chap. 24, sect. 2, 357.

<sup>3</sup>Jean Calvet, "Un confesseur de Saint Vincent de Paul," *Petites annales de St. Vincent de Paul*, 4 (1903):143. Duval died in 1638.

<sup>4</sup>Abelly, Bk. 3, chap. 13, sect. 2, 223. One of these was a portrait he had commissioned of his friend, Francis de Sales, as he remarks a few sentences later. Another was of Brother Antoine Flandin-Maillet, (1590-1629) known for his sanctity. (Abelly Bk. 3, chap. 23, 330.)

<sup>5</sup>"Regles du Séminaire, qui remont à 1652," manuscript at Archives of the Congregation of the Mission, Paris, p. 27: waiters are not to remove their headcovering when carrying the soup, but only to make an inclination "au grand tableau."

<sup>6</sup>Vincent to Louise, Letter 793a, Palm Sunday (25 March) 1646, published in *Mission et Charité* 19-20 (1970):55-57. Louise had it made and used some rings which she still possessed to pay for it.

one which Philip La Vacher had made for him to commemorate a particularly vicious martyrdom in Algiers.<sup>7</sup>

As an educated person of his time, and familiar with royal palaces and the houses of the nobility, Vincent encountered the works of great artists. For example, he mentioned Michelangelo in a conference to the Daughters of Charity.<sup>8</sup> In the same conference he also remarked on the halos and resplendent light with which painters depicted the saints.<sup>9</sup> He compared the life of a deceased confrere, Jean Pillet, to a large canvas, and his death to a miniature.<sup>10</sup> His approach in these issues, as in all things, was religious: he sought to turn everything to the glory of God and the advancement of the Church. He appreciated using pious symbols around a sickbed, not for themselves, but for their comfort of the sick.<sup>11</sup>

Aside from the visual arts, Vincent also appreciated music. Yet his interest, expressed in letters and conferences, seemingly did not extend beyond the liturgical music needed for solemn and correct celebrations or for the conduct of popular missions. His teachings and admonitions in correspondence with superiors at times also covered the issue of well-cooked food and proper drink, but again only for promoting the mission of the Congregation.

In the words of the traditional litany, Saint Vincent was *carne et spiritu mortificatus* (“mortified in flesh and spirit”). Coste notes that while traveling, Vincent never allowed his eyes to examine the beauties of nature. Neither did he go out of his way to observe the fireworks and other spectacles prepared in Paris for the populace, even though they were clearly visible from the house.<sup>12</sup> “He was never seen to pluck a flower to inhale its perfume.”<sup>13</sup> In short, he so mortified his senses that an indifference to beauty became part of his very existence. In keeping

<sup>7</sup>Abelly, Bk. 2, chap. 1, sect. 7, part 5, 114.

<sup>8</sup>*The Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul to the Sisters of Charity*, 4 vols., trans. Joseph Leonard (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1938), Conference 44, 7 August 1650, 136. (All references are to this edition.)

<sup>9</sup>*Conferences to Sisters*, #44, 139. See also a conference to the Vincentians, Abelly, Bk. 2, chap. 2, sect. 4, 231.

<sup>10</sup>Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1925), 2:349. (Cited below as CED.) This was a circular letter, 1 January 1643.

<sup>11</sup>Abelly, Bk. 3, chap. 23, 330. The text comes from a conference to the missionaries, 28 June 1658. See also the first rules for the Confraternity of Charity in Châtillon, where the use of images, a crucifix, or other images of saints is stipulated (Coste, CED 13:427).

<sup>12</sup>Abelly, Bk. 3, chap. 19, 299. But see also Bk. 3, chap. 6, 51, on the beauty of nature.

<sup>13</sup>Pierre Coste, C.M. *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, 3 vols., trans. Joseph Leonard (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1952) 3:300.

with his sense of simplicity, and possibly as a rejection of the increasing luxury and ornamentation in society, he preferred the simple and natural to the artificial and showy.<sup>14</sup>

Despite his apparent indifference to art, beauty, and sensual experiences, he spoke and wrote more than once about the usefulness of images in imparting the catechism, and he sought to have pious pictures printed for this purpose. He commented favorably on the use of images by the confreres in Madagascar,<sup>15</sup> although the recently republished Malgache Catechism (the first printed book in that language) does not mention their use. He also recommended to the sisters that the use of pious images could help their meditation, particularly for those who were unable to read. He regularly blessed the images of "holy protectors" distributed annually by Louise to her sisters.<sup>16</sup>

Vincent's best-known artistic interest was the "Lord of Charity," an engraving he had made for the benefit of the Confraternities of Charity. The founder wanted the Lord to reside in some visible way over the meetings of the Confraternities, and he sent the first copies of the engravings to Saint Louise, 28 January 1640. Several larger canvases were made from the engravings, but Saint Vincent's role in their production is unknown.<sup>17</sup>

Although not designed for artistic purposes, the seal of the superior general is probably related to the Lord of Charity. A conventional oval seal with the inscription on its border, "SUPERIOR GENERALIS CONGREG. MISSIONIS," it bears the figure of Jesus standing and facing forward, arms extended, legs bent as if walking. A halo surrounds his head, and a piece of ribbon or other material billows out behind. (This detail probably serves to fill in the space above the figure's right shoulder.) Saint Vincent used it to authenticate his letters, and this original seal may still be seen in the Vincentian motherhouse in Paris. This seal has been adapted to serve as the present general seal of the Congregation of the Mission. The figure of Jesus is undoubtedly intended

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<sup>14</sup>Abelly, Bk. 3, chap. 15, 245. This was the testimony of another, given after the saint's death.

<sup>15</sup>Abelly, Bk. 2, chap. 1, sect. 9, part 1, 158: "We will send you ... pictures of all our mysteries, which work marvelously to help these good people understand what they should learn, and which are delightful to look at."

<sup>16</sup>Sainte Louise de Marillac, *Écrits Spirituels* (Tours: Mame, 1983), Letters 360bis, 391, and *passim*.

<sup>17</sup>Coste, *Life*, 1:273-275, where there is a reproduction of one of them; André Dodin, *St. Vincent de Paul et la Charité* (Paris: Seuil, 1960), 67 for another version.



Title Page

as representing him in the act of preaching or evangelizing, doing the work of the mission.<sup>18</sup>

Less recognized than the Lord of Charity and Saint Vincent's seal are the two engravings, the title page and the frontispiece, produced for the edition of the Vincentian Common Rules of 1658. They deserve our study since Saint Vincent must have approved their production for the only book he wrote and published in his lifetime. Moreover, these illustrations summarize the leading themes of Vincent's spiritual teaching. Modern editions uniformly reproduce these original engravings, but probably without an appreciation of their importance in understanding the Founder's motivations.<sup>19</sup>

### Description

The original volume of the Common Rules is in a small format 4 3/8 x 2 3/8 inches (11.2 x 6.4 cm.). Despite the care which went into its contents, its form is popular in style and cheaply produced. Apart from the two illustrations under discussion, other ornamentation was kept to a minimum. This ornamentation consisted principally in occasional decorative headings and two elaborate initials beginning the founder's letter and the first chapter of the rules. These are more likely printer's devices than a deliberate choice on Vincent's part.

The title page of the rules, busy and complex, presents a traditional form of such introductory pages. Many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century books of piety and devotion had similar openings, and further research would help to clarify the relationships among these various productions.

This title page is divided into the words of the title, two ovals with quotations beneath, and two largely rectangular representations at top and bottom of the page. Joining these five sections are bands of foliage. The title, *Regulae Seu Constitutiones Communes Congregationis Missionis. Parisiis 1658* ("Common Rules or Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission. Paris. 1658") was engraved rather than typeset, as the somewhat awkward treatment of the final letters "es" of

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<sup>18</sup>The seal of the Daughters of Charity was probably designed by Louise de Marillac, an artist in her own right. Did she have any influence on Vincent's own seal? His influence on Louise in this matter could be investigated further.

<sup>19</sup>An unsigned notice, in *Annales* 73 (1908):179-80, presents an incomplete and confusing report on differences among editions of the Common Rules. The author holds that the two illustrations were the work of René Almérás, the successor of Vincent de Paul as superior general. He is surely in error, since a copy in my possession is clearly the first edition and has both illustrations.

“CONSTITVTIONES” shows. The final letters of “CONGREGATIONIS” are similarly cramped. The decoration with the faces of two cherubs, whose wings meld with the foliage, is characteristic of the Italian-influenced style of the period of Louis XIII. This, in turn, has its roots in the Renaissance employment of motifs from the late classical period.

The left-flanking oval with the legend *Verbum caro factum est* (“The Word became flesh,” John 1:14) is a traditional Renaissance representation of the Annunciation/Incarnation scene.<sup>20</sup> Mary is at prayer at a covered prie-dieu on a dais, with a book lying open before her. Behind her is a formally covered piece of furniture, undoubtedly a bed, whose pillows are roughly sketched in. Facing her is the Archangel Gabriel, in a posture of reverence. His hands are extended, and he has a traditional bouquet of three flowers in his left hand. He is vested in what appears to be a belted and buttoned cassock. Above the archangel’s head, amid rays of light, is a dove, the emblem of the Holy Spirit.

The right-flanking oval portrays two angels kneeling in prayer before a monstrance with an (apparently) oval host, and bears the legend *O salutaris hostia* (“O saving victim”). These were the opening words of verse five of the hymn *Verbum Supernum Prodiens*, attributed to Thomas Aquinas and traditionally sung at Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The angels are depicted kneeling, hands folded in a posture of prayer, wings in repose. An elaborate monstrance stands on an altar, depicted without reredos, gradines, tabernacle, candles or the other appurtenances of altars of the period, such as reliquaries. This leads to the supposition that it might be the “altar in heaven” (the *sublime altare tuum* of the Roman Canon). The host is noteworthy for the figure of Jesus crucified, surrounded by two indistinct figures, but undoubtedly representing John and Mary at the foot of the cross. An elaborate “glory” fills the rest of the oval space, recalling the rays of the halo of Mary and the divine rays descending from above in the left-hand oval.

The top register contains a depiction of the Trinity in traditional form. Seated to the viewer’s right is God the Father, with a triangular halo, possibly wearing a crown, and carrying a scepter in his right hand, with his left on the globe. His figure is that of an older man, bearded, fleshy, in full garments. Also seated and facing the Father in profile is God the Son, with a round halo, short beard, and probably balding. Suspended between them is God the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove,

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<sup>20</sup>The treatment of the letter “t” in *factum* is unusual, unlike any other “t” in either illustration. Despite this, it resembles contemporary handwriting, which employed more than one version of the letter.

*Sicut misit me Pater, et Ego mitto vos. Io. 20*



*Circuibant per Castella Euangelizantes &c. Luc.*

Frontispiece



also with a halo. Flanking them are angels in attitudes of worship, playing musical instruments, a small harp and probably a lute. They are carefully balanced, the harpist being right-handed and the lutanist left-handed. In front of them are three baby-faced cherubs on each side, just heads and wings. Above the heads of the musician angels are curtains drawn back to reveal the heavenly reality. The legend *Sancta Trinitas unus Deus* ("Holy Trinity, One God"), the usual invocation in official litanies, appears cramped, much like the main title below it. Its position on an unrolled scroll differs from the other legends, depicted on cloths knotted on the top corners. This recalls church decoration of the late-classic age represented in mosaics and also in the manuscript illumination of the first millennium.

The bottom register is given over to a representation of three other figures balancing the Holy Trinity, the Holy Family of Mary, Jesus, and Joseph left to right. Each figure is standing, clothed in classical garments, unshod, with halos. Mary appears standing still, her garments in repose, while Joseph is active, his tunic billowing. Mary carries a small bunch of lilies in her right hand, while Joseph's lilies are in his left, in artistic balance. The scene appears to present the return from the temple in Jerusalem after Jesus had been left behind there. Mary grasps his hand or arm, and Joseph points the way. The head of the young Jesus is turned respectfully toward Joseph. Balancing the worshiping angels of the top register is a woodland scene -- untypical of Palestine -- on either side of the three figures. The legend beneath is *Et erat subditus illis, Luc. 2* ("And he was subject to them, Luke 2").

A few pages later, facing the first page of chapter one is another representation, less complex in construction than the title page. The central figure of Jesus recalls the figure on the seal of Saint Vincent mentioned above, that is, Jesus standing, facing forward, arms extended. Here, however, the right hand is raised in blessing in the traditional fashion: thumb, index, and middle finger extended (traditionally a Trinitarian sign), and the ring and little finger bent touching the palm (regarded as a sign of the two natures in Christ in ancient iconography). The left hand points forward, although the object of the gesture is not immediately evident.

Jesus is here traditionally depicted as of young or middle age, with long curly hair, cleft beard, high forehead. His halo is divided into eight rays with seven blank spaces between, a traditional representation. He wears classical garments and is unshod. The scene represents the sending out of the apostles on mission after the resurrection, as the

legend at the top of the engraving shows: *Sicut misit me Pater, et Ego mitto vos. Io. 20.* ("as the Father sent me, so I am sending you. John 20"). The biblical account, however, has this event take place in the upper room, rather than in the open as might be gathered from the engraving. It is also noteworthy that Jesus has no traces of the wounds of his passion.

Kneeling about Jesus are twelve figures, although only ten were present at the event narrated in the Gospel -- lacking Thomas and Judas. Easily recognizable from traditional traits are, anachronistically, Paul at the Lord's right, balding and bearded, arms reverently crossed before his chest. Facing him is Peter, at the Lord's left, and behind him is John the beloved disciple, traditionally beardless, eyes cast down. The absence of Judas is expected, but the presence of a twelfth figure is surprising, dictated perhaps by the need to have twelve apostles. Thomas is depicted here, the top figure in the third row on the left. He alone appears to be glancing away, his face shaded.

The bottom legend reads *Circuibant per Castella Euangelizantes &c. Luc. 9* ("they set out and went from village to village proclaiming the good news, etc. Luke 9"). The full citation, possibly left out for lack of space, concludes "and healing everywhere" (Luke 9:6). This addition is important to understand the composition of the engraving, as will be seen below. The biblical account comes shortly after the naming of the apostles (Luke 6:12-16) and concludes with the missioning of the twelve. The artist has thus joined the pre- and post-resurrection accounts (Luke and John) in the same depiction.

Two other vignettes flank the figure of Jesus, but without being enclosed in the formal ovals used in the title page. On the left is a scene of Jesus teaching. He is recognized from his halo. His left hand reaches upward, and he faces a crowd of listeners seated in the open air. A large tree fills in the top corner of the composition. On the right is possibly a depiction of the Good Shepherd. Here, a naked man is being raised up, attended by three distinct and two indistinct figures. The treatment of the story here differs from the biblical account, in which only the Good Samaritan attends to the man (Luke 10:29-37). This depiction shows this action, whatever it is, taking place in the open air, perhaps on a road, in a forested area. Two other very indistinct figures may be part of the scene but fall within the heavenly light at the left side. A standing and a reclining figure (also naked) appear. Their relationship to the rest of the composition is uncertain.

Other readings of this scene are possible. For example, it may represent the raising of Lazarus (John 11) or the raising of the son of the

widow of Naim (Luke 7:11-17). The standing figure may be the man's mother, with Jesus grasping his hand. Also, it may represent the cure of the Gerasene demoniac (Luke 8:26-39). The detail of the cure happening on the cliff adds some possibility to this identification.

Even more compelling, however, is the possibility that the scene represents the apostles "healing everywhere," completing the quotation at the bottom of the picture (Luke 9:6). Here Jesus points to this scene, recalling what had happened previous to his resurrection and commissioning the apostles to carry on his work -- a favorite Vincentian theme.

Above the head of Jesus appears the dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit. Two rays of light stream from above the dove and represent the Father. This Trinitarian composition recalls the baptism of Jesus (as in Luke 3:22), with its presence of the Spirit in the form of a dove and the voice of the Father.

At the lower left corner appear the words "Cochin sculp.," that is, "Cochin engraved [this]." The name of the engraver of the title page is not given, but it could easily be supposed, at least based on style, that the same artist engraved both. The Cochin of this engraving is most likely Nicolas, born of a long line of artists and engravers in Troyes in 1610. He specialized in religious, biblical, and allegorical themes, but is best known as the engraver of a series of 200 depictions of the military campaigns of Louis XIV. His work resembled that of his more famous contemporary, Jacques Callot (1593-1635). Cochin died in Paris in 1686.<sup>21</sup>

The artistic antecedents of the various depictions chosen by Cochin to carry out the ideas of Vincent de Paul for the two illustrations remain a question to be researched. It seem probable that the artist did not copy specific artistic models of incidents from the life of Jesus, but simply used generally accepted artistic conventions.

### Spiritual Teaching

The importance of the analysis of the design of these two illustrations comes from the spiritual teaching which they represent rather than from other motives, such as artistic interest or the renown of the engraver.

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<sup>21</sup>Emmanuel Bénézit, *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs* ... 8 vols., nouvelle édition (St. Ouen: Librairie Gründ, 1966), 2:557. See also Jean Chrétien Ferdinand Hofer, *Nouvelle Biographie générale* (Paris: Didot, 1854), s.v. Cochin, N. See also Howard Daniel, ed., *Callot's Etchings* (New York: Dover, 1974).

The first general impression which one receives from the title page is the attitude of reverence, and the chief representational means for this is the presence of angelic beings. Counting the number of angelic figures reveals one, the archangel, in the left oval, two in the right oval, two singers in the top register, each with at least three accompanying cherubs, and lastly two cherub faces above and below the title itself, a total of thirteen. (There are none in the frontispiece.) In addition, the attitude of all the figures is one of worship, repose, or contemplation. Heavenly clouds fill parts of the design, and towering trees lend majesty to the composition. The legends are likewise static.

The general impression of the frontispiece is of more activity, either actual or potential. Jesus teaches and heals, and then sends out the apostles to begin their work in imitation of him. The two legends here both have verbs of action: sending, going about. These two attitudes, contemplation and action, fit very well the saint's well-known admonition to his confreres to be Carthusians at home and active missionaries outside the house.<sup>22</sup> The scene might also have the sense of the formation of the clergy, who partake in the mission of Jesus, once formed for that mission by the confreres in the work of seminaries.

The dominant theological impression shows reverence for the Trinity, present in different ways in each engraving. Saint Vincent called in the Common Rules for a special veneration of the Trinity (CR 10,2). In the same chapter he recalls the Bull of Institution of the Congregation, in which the community was also called to venerate the Incarnation (depicted in the left oval of the title page). In addition, his piety was, as we would say today, "incarnational," seeing Christ in others, particularly in the poor and most abandoned.

The next paragraph in the Common Rules (10,3) speaks of veneration for the Eucharist, whether as sacrament or sacrifice. The sacramental aspect is depicted in the right oval. That paragraph also links the worship of the Eucharist with adoration of the Trinity and of the Word Incarnate.

Paragraph Four speaks of devotion of the Blessed Virgin Mary, depicted in the bottom register of the title page. Alone of other figures, Mary appears three times in this illustration -- the Annunciation, at the foot of the cross, grasping the hand of the boy Jesus. The artist links her

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<sup>22</sup>Abelly, Bk. 2, sect. 1, part 3, 16.



*Et erat subditus illis.*

19th Century Title Page

with the attitude of Jesus, having reverence for his superiors, that is, Mary and Joseph.

Although Saint Vincent had broken many years previously with his one-time mentor, Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle, he continued in some of the spiritual paths which Bérulle had taught, particularly recommending that we should put on the attitudes of Christ at various periods in his life. One of these attitudes was submission to others, seen in Jesus' submission in the Holy Family, as a reading of the conferences to the Daughters of Charity makes abundantly clear (particularly concerning Saint Joseph). A further theological impression one has from the title page, besides attitudes of worship and veneration, is of order, hierarchy, and balance, beginning with the relations within the Trinity as the model of good relations on earth.

The frontispiece continues that same attitude of Trinitarian order and procession. According to the quotation from John 20:21 (with the sending of the Holy Spirit in vv 22-23), the Father sent Jesus, who sends the Holy Spirit for the apostles on mission. Traditional with Saint Vincent is his emphasis on the imitation of Jesus in his attitudes and particularly in his deeds done for others. Everything that the Community was instructed to do it should do to imitate Jesus. The biblical citations at the head of each chapter of the Common Rules are the best and most immediate witness to this.

### **Conclusion**

Saint Vincent was not one to pursue art for art's sake or merely for decoration, adornment, or sensual delight. He counseled against this in word and deed. Yet he knew of the value of images and sponsored their use in various circumstances. The attention to detail in the two illustrations found in the original edition of the Common Rules shows, I believe, in an unexpected way a summary of the saint's spiritual ideals. These illustrations might serve, therefore, as a source of reflection for his spiritual descendants today.

### Appendix

At least two other versions of the illustrations have appeared since the originals. The earlier was the Latin edition prepared in Lisbon in 1743. The engraver, D.F.L. Debrie, followed the originals carefully but had to enlarge the work since the book was more than twice the size of the 1658 version.

The illustration in a nineteenth-century edition of the rules, pictured here, shows further adaptation of the original design and has some interest, if only by way of comparison. Much as been simplified in the two ovals, the Louis XIII decorations and cherubs have, with one exception, been omitted. The worshiping angels have been joined by larger and more visible choruses. Jesus carries a cross, rather than a scepter, and the Father has given up the globe of the world. A somewhat more realistic landscape, with middle-eastern buildings surrounds the depiction of the Holy Family. Other editions have added engravings of Saint Vincent.