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The Cross In Vincentian Spirituality

BY
ROBERT P. MALONEY C.M.

Probably no spiritual reading book has been more widely read than the *Imitation of Christ*. Over the centuries millions of priests, brothers, sisters, and lay men and women have read it and meditated on it. Saint Vincent and Saint Louise recommended it often to their followers.¹ For a good number, at least until recent years, the daily reading of a small section of the *Imitation* was a part of life. Among its most eloquent passages are these famous words:

Jesus has now many lovers of His heavenly kingdom, but few bearers of his cross. Many he has who are desirous of consolation, but few of tribulation. Many he finds who share his table, but few his fasting. All desire to rejoice with him, few are willing to endure anything for him. Many follow Jesus unto the breaking of bread; but few to the drinking of the cup of his passion (Luke 22:42). Many reverence his miracles; few follow the shame of his cross. Many love Jesus so long as no adversities befall them. Many praise and bless him, so long as they receive any consolation from him. But if Jesus hide himself, and leave them but a little while, they fall either into complaining, or into dejection of mind.²

The gospel teaching upon which these stark words are based made a deep, lasting impression on Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. This article will focus on: (1) the cross in the New Testament; (2) the cross in the Vincentian tradition; (3) some problems in reflecting about the cross; (4) some reflections on the cross today.

¹See *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, C.M., 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), 1: 382; 6: 129; also, 5: 297. Hereinafter cited as *CED. Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac: Correspondence and Thoughts*, trans. Louise Sullivan, D.C. (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 434. Hereinafter cited as *SW*.

²*Imitation of Christ*, book 2, chapter 11.

1. The Cross in the New Testament

The cross and the resurrection stand at the center of the good news. For the New Testament writers, Jesus must not escape his hour. He must undergo the cross if he is to enter into his glory. His followers too must take up their cross daily. But the cross of Christ, as well as that of his followers, is always viewed from the perspective of resurrection faith.

The New Testament returns to the message of the cross again and again. Below I offer several of the most important texts in chronological order.

Some Fundamental Texts

Galatians 6:14: "May I never boast about anything but the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Through it the world has been crucified to me and I to the world." In this early letter, written to the Galatians probably around 54 A.D.,³ Paul enters into combat with the judaizers who boast of their circumcision and their observance of the law. He states that no external observance (the law, dietary rules, circumcision) is important; what is important is that one be created anew in Christ. He boasts only about the power of God, who exalts human weakness in the crucified Lord. In an earlier passage of the same letter, he writes: "I have been crucified with Christ. And the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me. I still live my human life, but it is a life of faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (2:19-20). Here and elsewhere, Paul affirms that through baptism the Christian has become identified with Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. The person who lives and dies with Christ has a new source of activity at work within him, the glorified Lord, who has become a life-giving Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 15:45).

Philippians 2:5-11: "Your attitude must be that of Christ. Though he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. He was known to be of human estate and it was thus that he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross! Because of this, God

³For data about the dating and authorship of the texts cited, I have followed *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R. Brown, J. Fitzmyer, and R. Murphy (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990).

highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name, so that at Jesus' name every knee must bend in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God the Father: Jesus Christ is Lord!" Writing probably sometime between 54 and 57 A.D., Paul uses a hymn to present a picture of the "self-emptying" Christ. This Christ becomes one of us. He freely takes on a slave-like condition and dies the ignominious death of those who have forfeited all civic rights: crucifixion. The self-abandoning act of Jesus receives an active response from God, who exalts him in his resurrection as Lord of the universe. Thus, God's rule over all creation is restored through Jesus's self-emptying.

1 Corinthians 1:18: "The message of the cross is complete absurdity for those heading for ruin, but for us who are experiencing salvation, it is the power of God." Addressing the Corinthians around the year 55 A.D. and knowing that the community is being ripped apart by divisions, Paul states that the standards of fallen humanity—the sort of power and the philosophical speculation that the world relies on—are utterly futile. God's power and God's wisdom are revealed in human "weakness." The power of suffering love, which human reasoning often fails to comprehend, is the genuine strength of believers.

Colossians 1:19-20: "It pleased God to make absolute fullness reside in him, and by means of him, to reconcile everything in his person, both on earth and in the heavens, making peace through the blood of his cross." In this later text, written in the Pauline tradition, probably between 70 and 80 A.D., the author uses an early Christian hymn to present a cosmic vision of Christ, who works in creation and in the Church. Where there is discord, Christ creates peace. He is the ultimate reconciler. He in whom the fullness of God and of God's creation dwells hands himself over to his Father in his dying. In doing so, he hands over with himself all creatures in heaven and on earth.

Luke 9:23 : "If anyone wants to be my follower, he must deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow me. Whoever would save his life will lose it. Whoever loses his life for my sake saves it. What does it profit someone to gain the whole world and to lose his very soul in the process?" Luke's gospel, probably written in 80-85 A.D., focuses on the following of Christ. As he writes, the author continually keeps in mind not only Jesus himself, particularly in his journey to Jerusalem, but also us, the readers, the disciples who will be following Jesus on the journey. The shadow of the cross lies across

the pages of Luke's "orderly account" (Luke 1:3), but it is brightened by the promise of the resurrection (see 9:23; 14:27; 17:25; 24:7; 24:26; 24:46). The cross plays a "necessary" role in salvation history.⁴ While Luke underlines the saving significance of Jesus's death strongly, his emphasis shifts subtly toward the saving power of the resurrection. Still, the cross looms large: its tragedy, its mystery. Using the word "cross" in a metaphorical sense, Luke highlights the utter necessity for the disciple to deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Jesus.⁵

Hebrews 12:2: "Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who inspires and perfects our faith. For the sake of the joy which lay before him he endured the cross, heedless of its shame." This text, whose date and authorship are uncertain, is a "word of exhortation" (13:22). The author presents Jesus, who now sits at the right hand of the Father, as the model for endurance of hardship. He uses this example to encourage the recipients to persevere until the triumphant end of the race. The prospective joy of the resurrection gives new meaning to the cross.

Some fundamental ideas in these texts

These texts highlight the cross, but of course their ultimate focus is on the person of Jesus crucified and risen. The cross is the symbol of his complete self-giving. It is Jesus himself who is our salvation, life, and resurrection. He is the ultimate revelation of the Father's love for us. He saves his people from their sins. He is the eschatological promise. In him the human person's longing for happiness is fulfilled.

As is evident in the texts, the New Testament writers developed various theologies of the redemption, with Paul as the pioneer, so to speak. The texts present Jesus as the center of salvation history, as the fulfillment of the prophets. Because there has been a history of sin, so also is there a history of redemption. Jesus expiates the sins of the human race. He is the sacrificial lamb, offering himself in atonement for sin.

The dying of Jesus is also presented as a cosmic event. The powers of evil at work in the world are defeated. Jesus overcomes them. He wins victory over sin, sickness, and death. His Father takes the side of the crucified one by raising him from the dead.

⁴See J. Fitzmyer, "The Gospel According to Luke I-IX" in *Anchor Bible*, vol. 28 (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 220-21.

⁵See A. George, "Le sens de la mort de Jésus pour Luc," *Revue Biblique* 80 (1973): 186-217.

But in reading these texts it is very important not to isolate the death of Jesus from his life.⁶ The saving significance of Jesus' death is related to what he proclaimed and what was rejected. Jesus identifies with the outcast, the poor, the powerless. In his death, as in life, he is one of them. There is, therefore, a clear continuity between his way of living and his way of dying, his proclamation and his rejection. Jesus' death on the cross flows from his option for the poor and the powerless. He shows himself wonderfully free before the powerful of this world. He criticizes those who lay oppressive burdens on others. But he himself is powerless. So the oppressors, the powerful, reject him. His death by crucifixion is that of those who have no rights.

Today we often speak of christologies, and theologies of redemption, as having "ascending" and "descending" forms. The synoptics, starting with memories of the concrete events "here below" follow Jesus's ascent through his life, death, and resurrection to the glory of the Father. In Johannine thought, as in much patristic and medieval christology, the starting point is "above," where the Word is with God in the beginning. Yet in all these theologies (ascending, descending, and many in-between) the focus is on the person of Jesus, whose sacrificial love moves him to lay down his life for his friends: his companions both then and now.⁷

In addition to this focus on the person of Jesus himself, through the symbol of his cross, there also appears, in the texts cited above, a metaphorical use of the word "cross," stemming from the sayings of Jesus. In this usage, the "cross" refers to the sufferings that the followers of Jesus experience. For the faithful follower, the cross:

- means giving one's life
- is to be taken up daily
- brings greater riches than "saving up" one's life
- can be borne only through the power of Christ in us
- seems foolishness to the "world"
- involves forgiveness of sin
- creates peace
- is the source of joy and leads to joy.

⁶See E. Schillebeeckx, *Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 124-25.

⁷In passing, it might be said Saint Vincent's christology, like that of most of his contemporaries, was decidedly on the descending side. See *CED*, 9: 640, "God died for us"; see also, *ibid.*, 12: 264.

2. The Cross in the Vincentian Tradition

In this age of hermeneutics we are increasingly conscious of how much our historical context influences us. Like all of us, Saint Vincent and Saint Louise were children of their times. In that context they were well educated, but neither was a speculative theologian. Both absorbed the "standard theology" of their era. Since they had an abundant measure of common sense, they avoided the extremes of some of their contemporaries. But like their contemporaries, both focus on the cross with little explicit reference to the resurrection. Strange as that may seem to modern ears, it is quite characteristic of seventeenth-century theology in France.

The Language of Symbols

Symbols often say much more than words. They express not only intellectual content but also the deeply personal, affective undercurrents that words have trouble communicating. Saint Louise and Saint Vincent both recognized the importance of the symbol of the cross as a way of communicating the depth of God's love for us.⁸

The seal of the Daughters of Charity, used since 1643, is one of the expressions of the importance of the cross in Saint Louise's and Saint Vincent's minds. The present-day Constitutions of the Daughters describe it this way: "The seal of the Company of the Daughters of Charity represents a heart encompassed by flames, with a crucifix superimposed. It is surrounded by the motto: *caritas christi urget nos. The charity of Jesus Christ crucified, which animates and sets afire the heart of the Daughter of Charity, urges her to hasten to the relief of every type of human misery.*"⁹

The conclusions to many of Saint Louise's letters, which were often sealed with the image described above, also expressed verbally her personal devotion to the crucified Lord, employing varying wording: "I am, in the love of Jesus crucified," "In his love and that of His crucified Son, I am . . ." ¹⁰

From the letters, moreover, that went back and forth between Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, and between both founders and the

⁸Naturally, the cross is not the only symbol of God's love; the heart of Jesus too expresses, with different overtones, God's love and Jesus' love for us. See *CED*, 11: 291.

⁹*Données à Dieu pour le service des Pauvres, Constitutions des Filles de la Charité* (Paris, 1983), 1.

¹⁰See *SW*, 54, 325, 349, 354, 424, 439.

two communities, it is quite evident that crucifixes played a significant role in the piety of many Daughters and Vincentians. The sisters often request them, and Saint Louise goes out of her way to obtain them.¹¹ Saint Vincent states that the missionaries should never be without one.¹²

The crucifix also plays a prominent role in the method of prayer that Saint Vincent taught, particularly to the Daughters of Charity, some of whom considered themselves too lacking in education to pray well, not knowing how to read or write.¹³ He assures them that praying well has little relationship with knowing how to read and write and encourages them to use images. "Where do you think the great Saint Bonaventure got all his wisdom?" he says to the Daughters. "In the sacred book of the cross!"¹⁴ He also tells them the story of a person who complimented Saint Thomas on the beautiful thoughts he had about God and recounts how Thomas told the admirer that he would show him his library, leading him then to his crucifix.¹⁵ He tells the Daughters that, while only some can use methods of prayer like those described in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, everyone can place herself at the foot of the cross in the presence of God. If she has nothing to say, she can wait until God speaks to her.¹⁶

In fact, for Saint Vincent, no prayer is more pleasing to God than daily meditation on the passion and death of Our Lord.¹⁷

The Writings of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise

The texts in which Saint Vincent and Saint Louise speak of the cross are far too numerous to cite exhaustively. Their references to the cross, moreover, are usually made in passing, without extensive development (though Louise reflects on the cross explicitly in a brief meditation written down in her later years).¹⁸ References to the resurrection, as mentioned above, are relatively few. I offer here, in a

¹¹See *ibid.*, 326, 332, 525, 530, 547, 635.

¹²*CED*, 11: 378.

¹³In this connection, one might also mention the sign of the cross, which Saint Vincent saw as a means of offering all one's actions to God; see *CED*, 10: 629-30. He saw it as the sign by which Christians, from ancient times, could recognize one another and a reminder of the mystery of the Trinity; see *CED*, 13: 159.

¹⁴*CED*, 9: 217

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 9: 32.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 9: 50.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 10: 569.

¹⁸*SW.*, 775-76.

synthetic way, a brief analysis of meaning of the cross as the two saints speak of it and write about it in very varied contexts.

For both Vincent and Louise, the cross symbolizes, in a pre-eminent way, God's love as revealed in Jesus. "May Your love and that of Jesus Crucified be eternally exalted!" Saint Louise exclaims at the end of an Act of Consecration that she signed.¹⁹ Both saints often dwelt on God's love for us.²⁰ The cross is the symbol of the Father's love, as revealed in the death of his Son. In their reflections both on the cross and on the heart of Jesus, the two saints often remind their followers of how deep God's love for us is. On 5 July 1641, Saint Louise writes to Sister Elizabeth Martin, "I beg our beloved Jesus Crucified to attach us firmly to his cross, so that we may be closely united to Him by his love and that our little sufferings and the little we accomplish may be in and for His love in which I remain, my dear Sister, your very humble sister and servant."²¹

"Our Lord had to predispose with His love," Saint Vincent writes to Monsieur Portail, "those whom he wished to have believe in him."²² The conviction of both Saint Vincent and Saint Louise was concrete and strong: we believe in and love those from whom we sense love. Jesus, in his dying on the cross, reveals God's love in its depths.

To be a Daughter of Charity is to be a Daughter of the Cross. Love of the neighbor, and particularly service of the poor, will inevitably involve the "cross," in the metaphorical sense. In fact, to be a Daughter of Charity, a Daughter of Love,²³ means becoming identified with the crucified Lord. Toward the end of his life, Saint Vincent writes to Avoie Vigneron, "Receive it (this suffering) as a gift from (God's) paternal hand, and try to use it well. Help your sister to carry her cross, since yours is not as heavy as hers. Make her remember that she is a Daughter of Charity and that she ought to be crucified with Our Lord and submit to his good pleasure in order not to be completely unworthy of so worthy a father."²⁴ He writes to Saint Louise during one of her sicknesses: "I learned of your illness upon my return. It has saddened me. I am begging Our Lord to restore you to that perfect

¹⁹Ibid, 694.

²⁰See CED, 9: 269.

²¹SW, 54.

²²CED, 1: 295.

²³Ibid., 9: 53; 10: 495, 474.

²⁴Ibid., 7: 241.

health which made me so happy the last time I saw you. Well, you are a daughter of the Cross. Oh! what a happiness!"²⁵

In a similar way, Saint Louise recognizes that her vocation means identifying with the cross. In a reflection on charity, she writes: "God, who has granted me so many graces, led me to understand that it was His holy will that I go to Him by way of the Cross."²⁶ At a much later period in her life, writing on the pure love we have vowed to God and the need to give ourselves completely to him, she states: "As proof thereof, I am going to follow You to the foot of Your Cross which I choose as my cloister."²⁷

One could imagine, particularly since there are so few explicit references to the resurrection, that this spirituality could take on rather gloomy tones. This is not the case with Saint Vincent. He encouraged the Daughters to be joyous, smiling in the service of the poor. Sometimes, though, he had to work at counteracting a tendency toward over-seriousness that he saw in Saint Louise, encouraging her, for instance, as she was about to journey with the more ebullient Madame Goussault, "Please be very cheerful with her, even though you should have to lessen a bit that somewhat serious disposition which nature has bestowed on you and which grace is tempering by the mercy of God."²⁸

Their thinking on the cross is closely linked with that on providence. Both saints have a deep devotion to providence. In the course of their lives, they become more and more convinced of God's love for them and grow in confidence that God is always at work in the events that occur, whether joyful or painful. Saint Vincent tells the missionaries in the year before his death: "My brothers, you ought to rest in the loving care of His Providence. . . . Do not trouble yourself about anything except seeking the kingdom of God, because His infinite wisdom will provide for all the rest."²⁹ Both he and Saint Louise see the cross as a part of that providence.

On 26 March 1653, Saint Louise writes to Sister Jeanne Lepintre: "It is perhaps for that reason, my dear Sister, that Our Lord inspires you to remain at peace at the foot of His cross, completely submissive

²⁵Ibid., 1: 342.

²⁶SW, 711.

²⁷Ibid., 828.

²⁸CEd, 1:502.

²⁹CEd, 12: 142; see also T. Lane, "She will find them again: Musings on Saint Louise " *Colloque* 24 (Autumn 1991), 416-18, where the author also points out Saint Louise's capacity to laugh.

to the guidance of His Divine Providence. It seems to me, my very dear Sister, that you have found the philosopher's stone of devotion when the firm resolution to do His will calms your anxieties."³⁰ Both saints are quick to remind their communities, during times of trial or calumny, that they are sharing, under God's providence, in the cross of Christ. Near the end of her life, Saint Louise writes to Sister Françoise Carcireux, "We, however, and especially the entire Company, must accept this trial as coming from Divine Providence as our share in the Cross of Our Lord and as an opportunity He has given you to enable all of us to follow Him."³¹ A year earlier Saint Vincent had published a similar statement in the Common Rules he gave to the Congregation of the Mission: "If divine providence ever allows a house or a member of the Congregation, or the Congregation itself, to be subjected to, or tested by, slander or persecution . . . we should ever praise and bless God, and joyfully thank Him for it as an opportunity for great good, coming down from the Father of lights."³²

Those who are united with Christ crucified live by the power of God. In her "Thoughts on the Cross," Saint Louise exclaims: "O Holy Cross! O suffering! How amiable you are, since the love of God has given way to you in His Son to gain through you the power to give paradise to those who had lost it by pleasure!"³³

It is only when one is willing to die with Christ that one finds the strength to live as his follower; conversely, it is only by living with Christ that we learn to die. "Remember, Father," Saint Vincent writes to Monsieur Portail, "that we live in Jesus Christ by the death of Jesus Christ and that we ought to die in Jesus Christ by the life of Jesus Christ and that our life ought to be hidden in Jesus Christ and full of Jesus Christ and that in order to die like Jesus Christ it is necessary to live like Jesus Christ."³⁴

Real holiness flows from the cross where the power of God works within us. In the midst of her worries about her son, Saint Louise asks Saint Vincent, "Do me the charity of asking our good God that, through His mercy, my son may participate one day in the merits and death of Jesus Crucified, the living source of all holiness."³⁵

³⁰SW, 416.

³¹SW, 668.

³²*Common Rules*, 2: 13.

³³SW, 776. An inordinate quest for pleasure has always been one of the roots of sin, but one cannot escape noticing that Saint Louise and Saint Vincent are both affected by the rather negative attitude toward created reality (and pleasure) that affected their era.

³⁴CED, 1: 295.

³⁵SW, 184.

In a touching letter to Jeanne Lepintre, she also writes: "Tell our sisters that the people of Nantes are clamoring against them more than they know, and in important matters. However, it is the evil one playing these games that he will not win, provided they gather together and unite near the Cross, like chicks under their mother's wing when the owl lies in wait."³⁶

Saint Vincent, in speaking to the missionaries about the martyrdom of Pierre Borguny, states: "Courage, my brothers! Let us trust that Our Lord will strengthen us in the crosses that come to us, great though they may be, when he sees that we love them and that we have confidence in Him."³⁷

It is a privileged way. Both saints were utterly convinced of this. They repeated it to each other and to their followers. In a letter written some time before 1634, Saint Vincent says to Saint Louise: "Our Lord will see to the matter, especially if you are happy at the foot of the Cross where you are at present and which is the best place in this world you could be. So be happy there, Mademoiselle, and fear nothing."³⁸

In a letter that combines several of the themes described above, Saint Louise writes to Charlotte Royer, using language reminiscent of the *Imitation of Christ*, "You are well aware, my dear Sister, that the path by which God wants you to go to Him is the royal road of the cross."³⁹ She tells Sisters Catherine Baucher and Marie Donio: "Yes, my dear Sisters, the greatest honor you can receive is to follow Jesus Christ carrying His cross."⁴⁰

In her "Thoughts on the Cross," she states that "souls chosen by God are very particularly destined to suffer."⁴¹ Meditating on charity, she says of herself: "God, who has granted me so many graces, led me to understand that it was His holy will that I go to Him by way of the Cross. His goodness chose to mark me with it from my birth and He has hardly ever left me, at any age, without some occasion of suffering."⁴²

They use the example of Jesus on the cross as a means of encouraging one another and others, especially those confronting unavoidable sufferings. The

³⁶Ibid., 213.

³⁷CED, 11: 392.

³⁸Ibid., 1: 152.

³⁹SW, 527.

⁴⁰Ibid., 535.

⁴¹Ibid., 775.

⁴²Ibid., 711.

two founders experienced abundant sufferings themselves: the distress of the poor; the ravages of war; the pains of giving birth to two new communities; the difficulties in community life as the years went on; criticism from within and from outside their communities their own interior struggles; sickness; the death of their closest friends; their own dying. They bore these crosses as part of God's providence.

But they also recognized that not every "cross" should be carried, since sometimes the sufferings involved could be remedied. Saint Louise, for example, writes to Sister Elizabeth Brocard, a new sister servant: "If some little cause for suffering arises, humble yourself and accept it as a cross to be cherished because Our Lord has permitted you to bear it. This does not mean, my dear Sister, that if your sufferings continue, you should not make them known to us or that we will not make every effort to meet your needs."⁴³

Other crosses should be borne with courage, since to lay them aside would cause greater pain for others. "It is much better to love one's distress when one experiences it," Saint Louise writes to Jeanne Lepintre, "and carry it to the foot of the Cross, or to let the Sister Servant know of it, than to look for a way to rid of it that could cost so dearly."⁴⁴

The cross comes up especially when Saint Vincent and Saint Louise speak about illness. Writing to Françoise Carcireux about the sickness that Sister Charlotte Royer was suffering, Saint Louise states "Our Lord may use them [her ailments] to sanctify her by the merits of His holy life and His precious death for us upon the Cross."⁴⁵ In describing the death of Barbe Angiboust, she writes: "During her illness, God honored her by the most excellent marks of a true Christian woman and servant of God by granting her the grace to conform her will to His, to raise her thoughts frequently to Jesus Crucified and to practice great patience."⁴⁶

3. Some Problems in Reflecting about the Cross

(1) The Jews and Gentiles have not been alone in finding the cross a "stumbling block" and "foolishness." On the theological level, there

⁴³Ibid., 449.

⁴⁴Ibid., 269.

⁴⁵Ibid., 526.

⁴⁶Ibid., 629.

have always been difficulties in dealing with the cross, and more generally with the problem of evil.

Some of the difficulties in developing a theology of the cross stem from differences in the way of perceiving God.⁴⁷ Both the Jewish and Christian scriptures praise God under two aspects. On the one hand he is above all creation, utterly transcendent. On the other hand, he is intimately involved with his creatures and feels their afflictions: God suffers in pain for his people.⁴⁸

When Christianity moved out into the Hellenistic world, it encountered a Greek conception of God that did not easily enter into a peaceful union with the immanent aspect of God's presence in the scriptures: the Greek God was totally self-contained, world-transcending, incapable of being touched by human action or suffering. Consequently, the marriage between the immanent aspect of the biblical view of God and the Greek concept of God has had a rocky history. By the time of the great scholastics the Greek view exercised a predominant influence: God as God cannot suffer; God suffers only in the humanity of Jesus. How different this is from the view of Hosea for whom God's bowels tremble with compassion as he decides not to give rein to the heat of his anger (Hosea 11:8).

But many modern minds and hearts find the Greek-influenced scholastic view difficult to accept. It seems to place God at a great distance from those who suffer. In the 1940s, shortly before his death, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that "only a suffering God can help." In the 1950s Jacques Maritain stated: "We need to integrate suffering with God, for the idea of an insensitive and apathetic God is revolting to the masses." In the sixties and seventies a series of essays by Karl Rahner further explored the question. In the 1980s both sides of the problem were given clear, forceful presentations in Jurgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God* and Edward Schillebeeckx's books *Jesus* and *Christ*.

Moltmann seeks to articulate a theology of a suffering God. God suffers, Moltmann holds, not out of a deficiency in his divine nature, but because he freely chooses to be affected by what affects others.

⁴⁷For a very good treatment of contemporary christology, and its historical roots, see Elizabeth Johnson, *Consider Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), especially the eighth chapter, on "God and the Cross"; also, K. Rahner, "On the Theology of the Incarnation," *Theological Investigation*, 4 (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1966), 105-20; also, K. Rahner, *Sacramentum Mundi*, 2 (London: Burns and Oates, 1969), 207f.

⁴⁸One might cite many texts indicating God's feelings in regard to his people. See Genesis 6:6; Joshua 24:19; Hosea 11:18; Isaiah 42:14; Psalm 103.

Schillebeeckx, on the other side, in an approach closer to the classical tradition, holds that God does not suffer. Rather, he resists evil in Jesus and is in solidarity with those who suffer, overcoming suffering through his compassionate presence. This presence is mediated "sacramentally" in Jesus and in those who, sharing Jesus' life, resist injustice.⁴⁹

Whatever side of the debate one might sympathize with, out of all this literature has flowed another title for Jesus, "Jesus, the Compassion of God."⁵⁰

(2) On a theoretical-practical level, there is a perennial danger, by no means absent today, that "the cross" might sometimes be used as ideology; that is, as an argument for justifying oppressive behavior. In an unjust society, for example, it can be used as a tool to motivate the poor to accept injustice silently.

In the years following the Medellín conference in 1968, a strong critique developed among theologians, particularly in Latin America, about the role theology and popular piety have played in supporting situations of injustice. Might not an over-emphasis on the crucified, dead Christ, who has gone meek as a lamb to the slaughter, legitimate suffering as the will of God? does it not cultivate a mentality that says: accept the cross meekly and you will receive eternal life? and does this not work to the advantage of the oppressor?

Surely, on the contrary, Christians must labor for the well-being of all and for liberation from structures that favor the few over the many, the rich over the poor, one racial or social or religious group over others. In fact, liberation from oppression is one of the signs of the Kingdom. The Christian cannot, therefore, stand by in silence in the face of injustice. Rather, he must be willing to suffer for justice sake. While one must certainly distinguish between material progress and the advent of the Kingdom of God, nonetheless the life of the Kingdom, already at work in believers, moves the Christian to work to "bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and release to prisoners" (Luke 4:18).⁵¹

Unfortunately, oppressive ideologies can be present not only in civil society but in the Church and religious life too. "Acceptance" can

⁴⁹See Johnson, *Consider Jesus*, 119; also E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroads, 1980), 728f.; J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

⁵⁰See Monica Hellwig, *Jesus, the Compassion of God* (Wilmington, Delaware: M. Glazier, 1985).

⁵¹See *Gaudium et Spes*, 39, 43, 57.

be eulogized rather than constructive criticism. Voices that call for repentance or needed changes can be marginalized or silenced.

(3) There is a third problem that can arise on the personal, ascetical level, that of distortion in the practice of asceticism. In the Vincentian tradition, self-imposed “crosses” are always to be used in moderation;⁵² they must always be seen as a function of one’s apostolic and community goals. They should help us to serve the poor well, to live together well, to pray well.

It was clear to Saint Vincent and Saint Louise that life’s most important “crosses” need not be constructed. They impose themselves. This is not to say that there is no place for personal discipline and for wisely-chosen practices that involve us in self-denial in order to reach the goals set before us. It is to say, however, that self-imposed mortifications must be tailored to the vocation of members of apostolic societies.

4. Some Reflections on the Cross Today

From what has been written above, I trust that it is evident that “devotion to the cross” is not merely an optional “private devotion” or a “personal ascetical practice.”⁵³ Rather, it touches on the core of the good news, since the cross is the symbol of Jesus’s saving love.⁵⁴

The historical reality of the cross is at the center of revelation; it is the “sacrament” of God’s love for the world and of the fullness of human response to that love.⁵⁵ The cross of Christ, therefore stands not at the periphery of Christian life, where it might be listed among a series of devotions; rather, it stands at the very core of the creed: “He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead.”

⁵²*Common Rules*, 10: 15.

⁵³In a similar way, Karl Rahner, in various articles in *Theological Investigations*, often argues that devotion to the Sacred Heart (symbol of God’s love) is indispensable. See “Behold This Heart! Preliminaries to a Theology of Devotion to the Sacred Heart,” 3: 321-30; “Some Theses for a Theology of Devotion to the Sacred Heart” 3: 331-52; “The Theological Meaning of the Veneration of the Sacred Heart,” 8: 217-28; “Unity-Love-Mystery,” 8: 229-47; “Devotion to the Sacred Heart Today,” 23: 117-28.

⁵⁴Some forms of devotion to the cross are, of course, quite “private.” A devotion like the “Stations of the Cross,” for instance, is just one means of focusing on the cross of Christ and is therefore quite optional.

⁵⁵K. Rahner, “The Christian Understanding of Redemption,” *Theological Investigations*, 21: 250.

The symbol of the cross, so central to the good news, speaks to our age, as to every age, but with different concretizations. It says forcefully to us at least the following.

The Crucified Jesus, in his suffering love, stands at the center of our faith, raised up by the Father, fully alive.

The author of the first letter to Timothy tells us that the fullness of the truth lies in "the man Christ Jesus, the self-giving one" (1 Timothy 2:5-6). All Christian spirituality, therefore, focuses on the crucified and risen Jesus. He is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through him.

The cross is the symbol of what is at the core of Jesus's person: "The way we came to understand love was that he laid down his life for us; we too must lay down our lives for our brothers"(1 John 3:16). The crucified Jesus proclaims that self-giving love is at the heart of being God and at the heart of being human. "God's love was revealed in our midst in this way: he sent his only Son to the world that we might have life through him. Love, then, consists in this: not that we have loved God but that he has loved us and has sent his Son as an offering for our sins. Beloved, if God has loved us so, we must have the same love for one another" (1 John 4:9-11).

Nothing will nourish the missionary or the Daughter of Charity more than focusing on God's love, of which the cross is the symbol. The missionary's personal experience of this love will move him to proclaim it as good news. The Daughter of Charity's personal experience of this love will move her to share it as healing.

The love that Jesus reveals through the symbol of the cross is:

- self-giving
- sacrificial
- forgiving
- healing
- unifying
- loyal to one's friends
- powerless
- in solidarity with the weak
- confident in the power of God.

In our Vincentian context, frequent meditation on the cross, as the symbol of God's love for us and of our love for God, has abiding importance. Let me suggest the meditative use of the following texts, which refer either explicitly or implicitly to the cross and which focus on God's love for us as revealed in the person of Jesus:

- * John 3:16-17
- * John 13:1-17
- * 1 John 4:9-10
- * Ephesians 1:3-14
- * James 1:17-18
- * Luke 9:23

As is evident from the texts, in the New Testament the cross is much more than an example.⁵⁶ It speaks of God's ways. It discloses the depths of his love. It proclaims that the power of God will prevail over what sinful men and women conspire to do. It reveals that true wisdom lies not with the forces of evil, but in suffering love. It initiates us into the mystery of the resurrection.

All missionaries, all Daughters of Charity—all persons—will suffer

Of course, some sufferings can, and should, be avoided. But the exceptionless rule of human existence, and of the following of Christ, is that there is inevitable suffering and death. The famous words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, written prophetically a few years before his execution, capture the reality very starkly: "When Christ calls a person, he bids him come and die."⁵⁷

Jesus's dying love gives meaning to the many "crosses" his followers are called to bear. In the life of a missionary and a Daughter of Charity, therefore, let me suggest that the "cross" today, in the following of Christ, may take the following forms especially:

- laboring daily, and perseveringly, in the service of the poor
- sharing the helplessness and pain of the marginalized⁵⁸

⁵⁶Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 105.

⁵⁷D. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 99.

⁵⁸CED, 11: 341; see *ibid.*, 12: 270: "It [charity] brings it about that one cannot see anyone suffer without suffering with him; one cannot see him weeping without weeping too."

- standing with the abandoned and suffering in solidarity with them for justice sake⁵⁹
- witnessing to gospel values in a non-supportive context
- accepting events that displease us, but that we can do nothing about
- sharing some of the privations of the poor⁶⁰
- bearing sickness, our own and that of others
- coming to grips with aging
- enduring the death of friends
- experiencing one's own dying.

Confronting inevitable suffering and death has always been, and will always be, a formidable task. But in an age that creates expectations of immediate gratification, the challenge becomes all the more difficult. Hard as it may be to accept—and though one may put this same truth in much more positive terms—dying is the focus of Christian spirituality, dying in order that one might live. One may surely dispute, in examining the “imitation of Christ” whether certain concrete practices described in the New Testament can be demanded of each Christian (going into the desert, spending the night in prayer, Jesus’s actual way of practicing poverty), but this proposition is certain: “Every Christian, at all times, follows Jesus by dying with him; following Jesus has its ultimate truth and reality and universality in the following of the Crucified.”⁶¹

The following of the crucified Lord is the supreme act of faith; it is a surrender in hope and love into the incomprehensible mystery of God.⁶²

⁵⁹See *ibid.*, 5:545: “It is a good sign when you suffer for justice sake.”

⁶⁰See *ibid.*, 11: 76-77. Abelly relates that Saint Vincent remarked, in a discourse to the missionaries, that they would be very happy if they became poor through having practiced charity towards their neighbor. Saint Vincent continued, “If God should permit them to be reduced to the necessity of going to serve as curates in villages in order to earn a living, or even if some of them were compelled to beg for their bread or sleep in rags frozen with the cold under a hedge, and if, in such a condition, a person were to ask them: ‘Poor priests of the Mission, what has reduced you to this extremity?’ what happiness, my brothers, if they were able to reply, ‘It was charity.’ Oh! how that poor priest would be esteemed before God and his angels.”

⁶¹K. Rahner, “The Following of the Crucified,” *Theological Investigations*, 22: 160.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 168.

The crucified Lord suffers in "crucified persons" and in the "crucified peoples"

Sin continues to work in our times, crucifying the Lord of history.⁶³ The Vincentian and the Daughter of Charity see the crucified every day. But it is easy for the "world" to forget them: the 5.7 million people of Haiti, who have been so poor for so long that their plight is no longer news; the 2.5 million Bosnian refugees who are victims of "ethnic cleansing"; the 1.5 million Somalians on the edge of death by starvation.⁶⁴

The challenge is to recognize the disfigured, crucified Lord and, like Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, to raise the consciousness of others to their plight. Contemplation of the crucified Lord cannot remain merely a pious exercise; nor can it be simply meditation on a past event. The Lord lives on in his members. He is crucified in individual persons and in suffering peoples. The call is to see him and serve him there.

One of the great gifts of the two founders was the ability to recognize Christ in the face of the suffering and to mobilize the energies of others in their service. They were extraordinary organizers. To aid the most abandoned of their time, they gathered together rich and poor, women and men, clergy and laity.

They knew, to use the eloquent phrase of Jon Sobrino, that the "crucified peoples" bring salvation to us, as we labor to take them down from the cross.⁶⁵

We are evangelized by the cross, and we evangelize by the cross

Jesus's dying love is at the center of the good news. It is the source of our deepest hope. He laid down his life for his friends—for us!

The cross, in the New Testament, is always seen in light of the resurrection. Without the resurrection, the cross remains darkness. But, equally in New Testament faith, there is no resurrection without the cross. The cross of Christ, therefore, stands with the resurrection at the center of the good news we believe in. Together, they tell us how deeply God loves us. They evangelize us.

⁶³See Hebrews, 6:6.

⁶⁴See *America*, 167, no. 8 (26 September 1992):179.

⁶⁵See "Los pueblos crucificados, actual siervo sufriente de Yahvé," in Jon Sobrino and Ignacio de Senillosa, *América, 500 años* (Barcelona: Cristianisme i Justicia, 1991), 28-36.

Yet, besides the cross of Jesus, the crosses of his members can evangelize us, too. Our lives can be transformed by the suffering love of Jesus's followers, who fill up his sufferings in their bodies: the sick, who bear illness with courage; the grieving, who hope against hope; the dying, who clearly trust in the resurrection.

And does not Jesus evangelize us through other, more "anonymous" crosses: the anguish of the starving in Africa, the deaths of countless martyrs and *desaparecidos* in Latin America, the loneliness of AIDS victims or street-people, the pain and abandonment of the elderly?

Do not these crosses, too, call us outside ourselves to solidarity with the suffering? Do they not proclaim to us that the heart of the gospel lies in compassionate love for the most abandoned? Do they not draw us out of our isolation toward self-giving love?

The "crucified peoples" have much to teach us: pardon for their oppressors, hope in seemingly hopeless circumstances, willingness to share the little they have, gratitude for the presence and support of others, and, in the words of Puebla, "solidarity, service, simplicity, readiness to receive the gift of God."⁶⁶ They evangelize us from the cross.

It is only when we have been evangelized by the cross that we, too, can evangelize by preaching the message of the cross. The "foolishness" of the cross will be credible on our lips only if we have learned its "wisdom" from sharing in the suffering of our brothers and sisters.

Have we learned to preach the cross without sounding hollow? Do our lives say that the cross has meaning? Do we find simple, clear words that encourage the suffering, or gestures that console the afflicted?

Within this much larger context, the self-imposed "crosses" that we often call "mortifications" play a functional, and sometimes important, role

From a theological perspective, today we recognize, perhaps more than ever (though a long theological tradition has expressed this truth in varying ways), that death does not coincide completely with a final medical declaration. Dying occurs gradually throughout life; it reaches its completion only at the end (and even there its precise occurrence

⁶⁶Puebla, 1147

is difficult to define). It was natural, therefore, that Christian piety, especially as it recognized that few would actually literally be "crucified with Christ," should seek to live out the following of the crucified Christ in life.

Consequently, Christian spirituality has acknowledged from the beginning that the heroic bearing of inevitable suffering is equivalent to bearing the cross of Christ. We die with Christ little by little, in installments, so to speak. The concrete challenge, therefore, is this: since these sufferings prefigure our death, are we able to "abandon with resignation what is taken from us, accept twilight as promise of an eternal Christmas full of light"?⁶⁷

Other "crosses" are taken on voluntarily, or at least more or less so, for a variety of ascetical reasons which cannot be treated at length here.⁶⁸ Saint Vincent and Saint Louise both recognized the value of such practices, while warning their followers that they must always be used with discernment and moderation.

The goal of such practices is to help the missionary or the Daughter of Charity live a fuller life, by "dying" and therefore "living" more fully. As Margaret Miles puts it, "The real point of ascetic practices, then, was not to 'give up' objects, but to reconstruct the self." They should always have a positive reference point, like growth in service of the poor, community living, prayer.

Examples of these might be:

ASCETICAL PRACTICE	GOAL
being ready to respond to the needs of the poor, particularly in accepting assignments; being willing to go even to foreign lands in their service	Service of the Poor
being faithful to the duties of one's state in life by giving preference to them when they conflict with other more pleasurable things	Service of the Poor Human Maturity Service of the Community

⁶⁷K. Rahner, "The Following of the Crucified," *Theological Investigations*, 22: 170.

⁶⁸See a very interesting treatment of this question in Margaret Miles, *Practicing Christianity* (New York: Crossroads, 1988), 94-104.

working hard as servants do	Service of the Poor Service of the Community
rising promptly in the morning to praise God and to support our brothers and sisters in prayer	Prayer Community Support
being sparing in obtaining or accepting material possessions	Service of the Poor Personal Freedom
being disciplined in eating and drinking; eating what is set before us; not complaining about food	Human Maturity Physical Health
employing moderation and a critical sense in using television, radio, movies and other media	Service of the Poor Human Maturity
being slow to ask for privileges or exceptions from reasonable communal norms	Life Together Human Maturity
seeking to be with those who are less pleasing to us as well as with those to whom we are more attracted	Life Together
giving generously of our time in order to take part in contemporary decision-making processes	Life Together
withholding negatively critical and divisive words	Life Together

In an age when scientific proof and experiential data are much emphasized, and in a climate where quick, satisfying results are much sought after, the cross is surely "foolishness." But has it not always been so? For the Christian the challenge is an abiding one: our faith places us "at the foot of the cross," to use the phrase Saint Louise liked so well. Surely that is the reason why the saints have so often recom-

mended meditation on the cross as a source for growth in the spiritual life.

Is the cross, viewed from the perspective of resurrection faith, still the nourishment that vivifies Vincentians and Daughters of Charity, as it did their founders? Is it a rich grace-giving font for their spirituality?

The message of the cross will always be difficult to hear, even for the messengers who proclaim it. While it is good news, when viewed from the light of resurrection faith, it costs dearly when lived out daily. It is life-giving, but its life comes through death. It stands at the center of Christian faith, yesterday and today.

How precious the gift of the cross, how splendid to contemplate!⁶⁹

⁶⁹From a sermon by Saint Theodore the Studite; Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* (dates and publishers vary), 99: 691.

God is very simple; rather, he is simplicity itself and so where simplicity is, there God is found also.

(Saint Vincent de Paul, extract of a conference to the Priests of the Mission, undated).

Prayer is an elevation of the mind to God by which the soul detaches itself, as it were, from itself so as to seek God in himself. It is a conversation of the soul with God, an intercourse of the spirit in which God teaches it in an interior way, what it should know and do, in which the soul says to God what he himself teaches it to ask for.

(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity, 31 May 1648).