

Fall 1995

The Core Values of Vincentian Education

Louise Sullivan D.C.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj>

Recommended Citation

Sullivan, Louise D.C. (1995) "The Core Values of Vincentian Education," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol16/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Digital Commons@DePaul. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@DePaul. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

The Core Values of Vincentian Education

BY

LOUISE SULLIVAN, D.C.

Introduction

The names of Vincent de Paul and, in recent years, that of his friend and collaborator of thirty-six years, Louise de Marillac, have become synonymous with charity. Together with their followers, the Priests and Brothers of the Mission, the Ladies of Charity, and the Daughters of Charity, they transformed the character of charitable activities in seventeenth-century France by establishing permanent works in health care, education, and social welfare which continue to our day on five continents. The magnitude of their accomplishments, their spectacular success in some areas, however, have, at times, submerged the historical figures of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac as well as the full import of some of their multiple endeavors. The result has too often been the creation of legend at the expense of reality or the concretizing of misconceptions.

One of the victims of such a phenomenon has been education. So numerous were the hospitals, so moving the works with abandoned infants, beggars, and wounded soldiers, that educational institutions — seminaries and schools — seemed almost prosaic and consequently of lesser importance. A study of the social order in seventeenth-century France can leave one with the impression that, while Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, and their followers were responding to the urgent cries of a suffering society, the Jesuits and the Ursulines were providing for the educational needs of its youth. Both these congregations arrived in France at the time to open schools for the sons and daughters of the bourgeoisie and the nobility, hence the perception that, for the Priests and Brothers of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, education was a relatively minor facet of their far more significant contribution to the evangelization of the rural poor, health care, and social welfare.

Historical studies dealing with the reform and formation of the clergy during the first half of the seventeenth century clearly acknowl-

edge the importance of the role played by Vincent de Paul through the retreats for ordinands, the Tuesday Conferences, and particularly the seminaries. Nevertheless there remains, within as well as outside the Vincentian family, the tendency to look upon these efforts as a secondary part of his life work. One can even quote Vincent himself to support such a view. To Philibert de Brandon, bishop of Périgueux, who, in 1650, had requested Priests of the Mission for a seminary in his diocese, the founder wrote, "You want a seminary and we are obligated to missions. Our principal work is the instruction of country people; the service we render to the ecclesiastical state is only secondary to it."¹

At the same period, Louise de Marillac, in consultation with Vincent de Paul, established "little schools," as they were called, for poor little girls, first in rural areas and later in Paris. These, too, receive little attention. As late as 1977, Jean Delemeau would acknowledge that only in recent years have historians become aware of "the considerable role that the Daughters of Charity played in overcoming illiteracy among the female population in France."²

A partial explanation for this phenomenon can be found in the fact that, unlike Charles Démi, Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, or Angela Merici, neither Vincent de Paul nor Louise de Marillac founded a teaching order nor did either of them write a treatise on education. What we know of their ideas, methods, and goals must be gleaned from literally thousands of pages of correspondence, conferences, and related documents. More importantly, the educational works they established, be they seminaries or "little schools," were not isolated but rather a natural outgrowth of a broader service of the poor from which they cannot be dissociated.

The above observation, however, does not mean that they were of lesser importance. On the contrary, both Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac were teachers and as such were keenly aware of the vital place of education in a holistic approach to service of the poor.

It may appear surprising to link seminaries and "little schools," nevertheless, an examination of the evolution of these works and of the documentation extant concerning them reveals common principles, methodologies, and values which, when combined, make them

¹Vincent de Paul to Philibert de Brandon, 20 July 1650, *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, C.M., 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), 4:42. (Hereinafter cited as CED).

²Jean Delemeau, *Le Christianisme va-t-il mourir?* (Paris: Hachette, 1977), 98.

uniquely “Vincentian.” As such, they remain the basis of the Core Values of Vincentian Education, whatever its form, and must be studied together, along with significant data from the lives and experiences of their founders.

It is not our purpose here to recount in any detail the lives of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, but it is essential to reflect briefly on the circumstances and events in them which directly or indirectly influenced their approach to education. Before doing so, one further observation appears useful. For both of them, everything was rooted in life, in events, and in their personal experiences, be they human or spiritual.

Any attempt to delimit or define their views and the resultant works must take into consideration, as applying to both of them and to all their undertakings, the oft-repeated statement with which Vincent de Paul concluded his letter of 5 August, 1642 to Bernard Codoing. After giving his advice to the superior in Rome, he said, “Such is my faith and such is my experience.”³ Despite their extraordinary intellectual and organizational abilities, they were, in the final analysis, a man and woman of faith seeking to discern the will of God and to find pragmatic solutions to the overwhelming needs of the poor of their era. They prayerfully sought to read the signs of the times and to discover the voice of God speaking to them in the sometimes banal, sometimes dramatic events in their own spiritual journeys.

Faith and Experience of Vincent de Paul, 1581-1617

Childhood—Studies—Travels—“Career”

Life would teach Vincent de Paul early the value of education and the poverty of ignorance. Born in 1581 in Pouy, a tiny village in southwestern France, into a family of simple, hard-working peasants, he, like all the children of his village, shared in the work of the farm

³CED, 2: 282. See also *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*. I *Correspondence*, vol. 1 (1607-1639), newly translated, edited, and annotated from the 1920 edition of Pierre Coste, C.M., ed. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., trans. Helen Marie Law, D.C., John Marie Poole, D.C., James R. King, C.M., Francis Germovnik, C.M., annotated John W. Carven, C.M., (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1985); vol. 2 (January 1640-July 1646), ed. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., trans. Marie Poole, D.C., Esther Cavanagh, D.C., James R. King, C.M., Francis Germovnik, C.M., annotated John W. Carven, C.M. (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1989); vol. 3 (August 1646-March 1650), ed. Marie Poole, D.C., Julia Denton, D.C., Paule Freeburg, D.C., Marian Hamwey, D.C., trans. Marie Poole, D.C., Francis Germovnik, C.M., annotated by John W. Carven, C.M. (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1992), 2:316. (Hereinafter cited as CCD)

and remained, for all practical purposes, illiterate until the age of fifteen. He himself tells us, "I am the son of a poor tiller of the soil and I lived in the country until I was fifteen years old."⁴ It is likely that he would have walked in his father's footsteps had he not been given the opportunity to study and to prepare for the priesthood. Louis Abelly, Vincent's first biographer, explains:

His father saw clearly that this child could do something better than shepherd animals. Thus he decided to send him to study. He did so even more willingly since he was aware of a certain prior from the area who came from a family which was not any better off than his but who had, nevertheless, contributed much to it from the revenue of his benefice in order to assist his brothers. Thus, in his simplicity, he thought that his son, Vincent, through his studies, could one day obtain a benefice and, while serving the Church, assist his family and be a help for the other children.⁵

One should not be too quick to judge Jean de Paul harshly. While his desire to see his son become a priest surely had human rather than spiritual motivation, it must be remembered that the Church was the sole means for a boy of his class to escape, if not poverty, at least a modest, difficult life. Moreover, if Vincent was hardly "Saint Vincent" at the age of fifteen and shared fully his father's ambitions for him, he was, nevertheless, a young man with solid faith and moral values which he had developed in the midst of his family. When speaking later of poor peasants, like those among whom he had spent his childhood, he exclaimed, "If there is a true religion . . . it is among them; it is among those poor people that true religion and a living faith are preserved."⁶ The grace of God and of vocation had good soil in which to grow.

Thus it was that, in 1595, Vincent was sent to the neighboring city of Dax to study at the Collège des Cordeliers. The school was small

⁴Ibid., 9: 81.

⁵Louis Abelly, *Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gaume, 1891)1:8; English translation, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul, Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*, trans. William Quinn, F.S.C., ed. John E. Rybolt, C.M., introduction by Stafford Poole, C.M., index by Edward R. Udovic, C.M., 3 vols. (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993), 1:36.

⁶Repetition of prayer, 24 July, 1655, CED, 11: 200-201.

and the curriculum limited but Vincent learned reading, writing, grammar, and Latin sufficiently well to enable him to begin his studies in theology two years later at the University of Toulouse. While a student in Dax, the young Vincent attracted the attention of a certain Monsieur de Comet, a lawyer at the Presidial Court of Dax as well as a judge in Pouy. The lawyer became his patron and brought him into his home as a tutor for his sons, thus introducing Vincent to teaching, an avocation at which he would excel. He was fully aware of his debt to Monsieur Comet who would encourage his vocation and urge him to continue his studies at the University of Toulouse. In a letter written in 1608, Vincent expressed his gratitude for the "paternal care" that Monsieur de Comet had taken of him and of his affairs and of his desire to repay him for "all the good that a father can do for his own son."⁷

With Monsieur de Comet's encouragement and the full support of Jean de Paul who made the extraordinary gesture for a "tiller of the soil" of selling a yoke of oxen to help to defray his expenses, Vincent set out for Toulouse. He was already a cleric, having received tonsure the previous year.

Vincent's decision to study at the University of Toulouse is worthy of note. His biographer, Pierre Coste, points out that, like many young men of the time, he could have pursued his theological studies close to home but that he did not do so because "he was ambitious to acquire knowledge and realized that, under the guidance of the learned and experienced masters of some famous university, his progress would be more rapid."⁸ The school of theology at the prestigious University of Toulouse, which was frequented by students from all areas of France and even abroad, corresponded perfectly to his desires. By selecting Toulouse, with the financial strain it would place on his family as well as himself, Vincent had determined not only to continue his studies but to obtain the very best education available to him.

This detail is significant for our purposes because it helps to dispel the all-too-pervasive view of Vincent de Paul as an "anti-intellectual." The seeming reluctance to explore his ideas on education in any comprehensive way may well be rooted in this image of the saint which some of his own words reinforce. He calls himself a "scholar of

⁷Vincent de Paul to Monsieur de Comet, 28 February 1608, *CED*, I: 14; *CCD*, 1: 12.

⁸Pierre Coste, C.M., *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, trans. Joseph Leonard, C.M., 3 vols. (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1987), I: 16.

the fourth form," the form he had completed when he left Dax, and he seemed to delight in shocking the great ones of his day by reminding them that he was only an "ignorant peasant." The decision to spend seven years at Toulouse in pursuit of a bachelor of theology degree, however, tells another story, as does a later letter to his mother in which he expresses the desire to have his brother send one of his nephews to study.⁹

It is certainly true that Vincent was not a theorist. He abhorred ideal speculation and lofty theories that failed to produce concrete results. He was essentially a pragmatist and a man of action. As few men or women have done before or since, he was able to read the signs of the times and to find practical, efficacious solutions to complex problems. Such theory as there was came after the fact and from experience and can be discovered only from the study of all available texts on a given topic. Moreover, the urgency and immediacy of his responses to pressing needs occasionally produce contradictory statements. However, none of this is a reflection of a lack of appreciation on his part of the value and importance of education. Vincent was too intelligent and too much of a realist not to realize that, without it, he would probably never have left his native village and the works of charity to which God was calling him might never have been accomplished. Upbringing, personality, and experience, not anti-intellectualism, were the basis of his preference for the concrete.

Peasant: Vincent constantly referred to his peasant origin. The thirteen volumes of Coste reveal the psychology and the mentality of the country. This is reflected in his slowness to act, his attitude toward money and toward the rich, his manner of speaking about his foundations and about Divine Providence but most particularly in his comfortableness with and his respect for peasants. In his famous conference "On Imitating the Conduct of Good Country Girls" he reminds the Daughters of Charity of his origins and of the fact that he knows peasants "from experience and indeed by nature."¹⁰

The simplicity he grew up with would lead him to prefer questions and answers in teaching rather than lecture/recitation, so sacrosanct in French education. Contrary to an opinion that is too often heard, Vincent's theological preparation during his seven years in Toulouse was solid. What distinguished him from his illustrious con-

⁹Vincent de Paul to his mother, 17 February 1610, *CED*, 1: 19; *CCD*, 1: 16.

¹⁰*CED*, 9: 81.

temporaries was his gift for translating theological truths into simple and dynamic language. This ability, in great part, was due to the fact that he always remained what he was: a peasant.

Gascon. Vincent de Paul was not only a peasant, he was a Gascon peasant. He was very conscious of this, and curiously for a man so humble, very proud of it. In a letter to Firmin Get, superior at Marseilles, he reproved his confrere for not telling him that he had borrowed money from the administrators of the hospital there. He said that he was surprised by this apparent attempt to conceal the truth, then he added, "If you were a Gascon . . . I would not find that strange."¹¹ More interesting, perhaps, than the letter itself, is the remark by the Vincentian scholar, Jean Morin, who cited it. He says, "We are not trying to prove from these lines that Monsieur Vincent generally only told half the truth. However, twenty-five years of living in the south-west have shown me that Gascons have a very particular way of regarding reality and of discerning the essential in that which is relative." Father Morin then adds, "In the writings of Saint Vincent there are many nuances that must be grasped and even some apparent contradictions which can surprise those who are not Gascon. When he was speaking, there can be no doubt but that the tone of his voice and his facial expression often modified the severity of what he was saying or clarified the content."¹²

In his remarks, Father Morin is echoing the words of one of Vincent's secretaries, Brother Bertrand Ducournau, who was himself a Gascon. In the conference of 6 December 1658, which he transcribed, he says apropos of Vincent's statements, "*Nota.* As he was saying this, he made certain gestures with his hands, movements of his head, and spoke in a rather disdainful tone of voice which expressed what he meant better than what he was saying."¹³

It is useful to bear this in mind when quoting the founder, particularly when using isolated statements to prove a point. To absolutize every word, to fail to distinguish between the essential and what, for him, was merely relative, in a word, to forget a fundamental facet of Vincent de Paul's character, namely his Gascon roots, is to risk a misunderstanding of the man and the message. Nowhere is there a

¹¹Vincent de Paul to Firmin Get, 16 October 1654, *ibid.*, 5: 198-99.

¹²Jean Morin, *Carnets Vincentiens*, 3 vols. (Toulouse: Animation Vincentienne, 1991), 3: 54-55.

¹³Conference to the Priests of the Mission, 6 December 1658, *CED*, 12: 93.

greater danger of this than in a study of his remarks on learning and education.

But let us return to Toulouse. Vincent's experience there would mark his attitude toward learning and his approach to education.

First, while at Toulouse, Vincent pursued his frenetic race toward early ordination. He was ordained to the priesthood 23 September 1600, eight months before his twentieth birthday, at Château-l'Évêque, near Périgueux, by the elderly and nearly blind François de Bourdelle, bishop of Périgueux. Following ordination he returned to his studies until he received his bachelor of theology degree in 1604. What is significant in all of this for our purposes is the fact that in later years Vincent would look back on his preparation for holy orders and would realize that, while his theological studies were solid, he lacked both spiritual formation and practical training for the functions of a parish priest. These he saw as grave deficiencies that he would work to remedy.

Second, the University of Toulouse was a hotbed of intellectual controversy. Most of it was in the school of law, but the school of theology was not exempt. While Vincent remained aloof from it, as much for practicality as for principle, he saw its divisive effects. Later he would seek to avoid it in the Congregation of the Mission and in the seminaries for which he was responsible. This is particularly evident with regard to Jansenism.

Third, during Vincent's first year at Toulouse, his father died. In his will, dated 7 February 1598, Jean de Paul urged his family to spare "no sacrifice"¹⁴ to help Vincent to continue his studies. His family, particularly his mother, was fully in accord but Vincent refused their assistance. Instead he turned to the means that had served him well in Dax, namely teaching.

When his financial resources were exhausted, he accepted the offer of a small academy for boys in Buzet, a village about fifteen miles from Toulouse. He received the young boarders and taught them himself. His reputation as an excellent teacher spread quickly. He soon had pupils from Toulouse as well as children of the local gentry. So successful would he be, that he was soon able to transfer the school to Toulouse where it continued to flourish until the end of his studies there.

¹⁴Abelly, *Vie*, I: 12; Coste, *Life and Works*, I: 40.

The conferral of the Bachelor of Theology degree upon Vincent de Paul gave him the right to expound the second book of the *Sentences* at the university. The text dealt with angels, creation, grace, sin, and free will, topics which aroused the passions of seventeenth-century theologians. There is no evidence to indicate whether he did so or not but, if he did, it could only have been for a short time, certainly not more than a year. The only other degree obtained by Vincent de Paul would be a licentiate in canon law from the University of Paris. He used this title for the first time 2 March, 1624.¹⁵ What we do know for certain is that, as Vincent de Paul came to the end of his studies in Toulouse, he was solidly grounded in theology and he was an excellent, experienced teacher.

Education, therefore, seemed to be the work of predilection for Vincent de Paul. Events would change that, at least temporarily. The next years in his life read like an adventure novel. For our purposes it suffices to say that, when he decided to seek his fortune in Paris in 1608, he was still in quest of an "honest retirement."¹⁶ He was twenty-seven! The conversion of 1617 was still in the distant future.

Of the multiple events leading to 1617, two are significant for our study of Vincent de Paul as educator, namely his tenure as pastor in Clichy (1612-1613) and his first period of residence with the Gondis (1613-1617). Both would come about through the influence of the future Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle, whom Vincent would meet when he became a chaplain in the household of Queen Marguerite de Valois in 1610.

Clichy. Let us look at the human as well as the spiritual influences that led Vincent to Clichy and to a realization of the true meaning of his priesthood. In this the role of Bérulle is of capital importance. It was precisely at this time that the future cardinal founded the Oratory for the reform of the clergy to which he wanted to restore "authority, holiness, and learning."¹⁷

The few months that Vincent spent with the Oratorians certainly raised his consciousness and reinforced his desire "to begin a truly ecclesiastical life."¹⁸ In 1656, he acknowledged that his realization of the grandeur of the priestly vocation, "the most sublime on earth,"¹⁹

¹⁵CED, 13: 60, note 1.

¹⁶Vincent de Paul to his mother, 17 February 1610, CED, 1: 18; CCD, 1: 15.

¹⁷See Paul Cochois, *Bérulle et l'École française* (Paris: Seuil, 1963), 25-30.

¹⁸Abelly, *Vie*, 1: 24; Coste, *Life and Works*, 1: 52.

¹⁹Vincent de Paul to the Canon de Saint Martin, n.d., CED, 5: 568.

came only with the passage of time. He wrote to the Canon of Saint-Martin, "if I had known what the [priesthood] was when I had the temerity to enter it, I would have preferred to till the soil rather than to commit myself to it."²⁰

If the concepts and goals developed under the influence of Bérulle were important, it was the lived experience—the first in Vincent's twelve years of priesthood—of sixteen months as pastor of Clichy that oriented his future work for the reform and formation of the clergy. The new pastor saw very quickly that, despite his solid theological preparation, he had no training for his role. Nor did most of the neighboring parish priests. Moving, as he always would, from perceived need to a practical solution, he collaborated with them to supply for this. His example and influence had a salutary effect. More importantly, for our purposes, he started a little school for ten to twelve young boys who aspired to the priesthood. This he later handed over to his successor, Father Jean Souillard, but he remained interested in it and continued, in later years, to send him pupils.

As Vincent de Paul moved closer to his conversion and to the total gift of himself to God for the service of the poor, the experience of Clichy would lead him quite naturally to include, in that service, the reform and formation of the clergy.

The tenure as parish priest in Clichy was a hiatus of calm and happiness in an otherwise turbulent era in Vincent de Paul's life. Looking back on it in 1653, when he and his Priests of the Mission were well established in seminary work, he told the Daughters of Charity, "I was once a country priest. . . . I was so happy that I used to say to myself, 'How happy you are to have such good people. . . . I think the Pope himself is not so happy as a parish priest in the midst of such good-hearted people.'"²¹ But the happiness would not last. Once again Bérulle would intervene in Vincent's life, this time asking him to become a tutor in the household of Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi, General of the Galleys.

First period of residence with the Gondis. Given subsequent events, it is easy to see the direct intervention of Divine Providence in this request. For Vincent, however, it was clearly a disappointment. Nevertheless, he acquiesced and thus, once again, became primarily a teacher.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 27 July 1653, *ibid.*, 9: 646.

The Gondis had three sons: the eldest, Pierre, was eleven; the second, Henri, two or three; and the youngest, Jean-François-Paul, only an infant. Thus it was for Pierre and not for the future Cardinal de Retz that a tutor was needed. Vincent assumed full responsibility for the child's intellectual, moral, and religious formation. He was also placed in charge of the large household staff. He gave them religious instruction, prepared them for the reception of the sacraments, and generally functioned as their parish priest. In 1614-1615, he became the spiritual director for Madame de Gondi. Contrary to a long held belief, Vincent also continued as parish priest of Clichy, returning there as often as his duties would permit.

Vincent's growing influence in the Gondi household would seem to have, at long last, provided him with the secure position he had been seeking since ordination. God, however, had other designs.

Conversion—Plenitude of Vocation

1617-1660

It is universally agreed that the year 1617 was the turning point in Vincent de Paul's existence. At the age of thirty-six, he abandoned his dreams of human success to dedicate himself totally to God and to the service of the clergy. Twice between January and late August of that year God intervened directly and perceptibly in his life.

Gannes—Folleville

During a stay on the Gondi estates in Picardy, Vincent was called to the bedside of a dying man whom everyone considered virtuous. After receiving absolution, the penitent professed his joy to all who would listen of at last being freed of the serious sins of a lifetime. The next day, 25 January, at Madame de Gondi's insistence, Vincent preached to the parish. A large crowd came to listen and to go to confession. Afterwards he would look upon this as the first sermon of the Mission and the beginning of the work to which God was calling him. It was also a conversion in the strict sense of the word. With shocking clarity he saw the mediocrity of his priestly life to this point. While he had been seeking a comfortable career in the chateaux of the rich, the poor of the countryside, the stock from which he came, were living and dying with no one, or practically no one, to evangelize them.

There would be no turning back but, lest he forget, he had another potent reminder during another stay on the Gondi estates, this time in 1620 at Montmirail-Marchais. A Huguenot, whom Vincent was trying to bring back to the Church, chided him with the scandalous state of the clergy. Years later, in a conference, he would recall the stinging attack.

Sir, you have taught me that the Church of Rome is guided by the Holy Spirit. However, that is something I cannot believe because, on one hand, I see the Catholics of the countryside abandoned to ignorant and vicious pastors. The people receive no instruction concerning their obligations. Most of them do not even know what the Christian religion is. On the other hand, I see the cities filled with idle priests and monks. Paris probably has 10,000 of them who leave these poor country people in this terrible ignorance which is causing their perdition. And you want to persuade me that all that is transpiring under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I will never believe it.²²

The Huguenot's accusations are the clearest formulation of the connection between the abandonment of the peasants and the lack of good priests. The excellence of the missionary vocation, born at Folleville, is that it seeks to remedy this double problem. The parallelism between the Huguenot's words and the "Contract of the Foundation of the Congregation of the Mission" and the bull *Salvatoris nostri* are striking.²³ They reveal the education of the clergy as an integral part of the original vocation of Vincent de Paul and of the Congregation of the Mission.

Châtillon

Let us turn now to the second significant event of 1617 for the future works of Vincent de Paul and for his personal conversion. The experience of Châtillon is more complex than that of Folleville. In July 1617, again at the request of Bérulle, Vincent left the Gondi residence

²²Fragment of a conference, *ibid.*, 11: 34.

²³*Ibid.*, 13: 197-98, 258-59.

and became the pastor of Châtillon-les-Dombes, a small village in Bresse, not far from the Swiss border. For the first time Vincent is faced by a social problem: material poverty. At Folleville, he had become aware of the full extent of the spiritual abandonment of the poor. At Châtillon, he is confronted by society's refusal to respond to their physical and material needs.

His immediate response is to preach and he obtains the desired result. The women of the parish rushed to the aid of the family where "everyone was sick."²⁴ The outpouring of generosity led Vincent to see the need for organization if charitable activity was to be long-lasting and effective. The result was the founding, a few days later, of the first Confraternity of Charity. Just as he will always refer to Folleville when speaking of the founding of the Congregation of the Mission, so he will refer to Châtillon when recalling the origin of the Ladies of Charity and, later, of the Daughters of Charity.

Important as this was, however, it is somewhat simplistic to limit Vincent's work in Châtillon to a response, albeit a far-reaching one, to the material needs of the poor. If Bérulle asked him to accept the parish, it was because Protestantism was making inroads there due, in large measure, to the neglect and scandalous behavior of the local clergy. Vincent was sent primarily to provide an example of a zealous priest "in the midst of [his] people"²⁵ that would lead his fellow priests to adopt a way of life more in keeping with their calling. In this he was remarkably successful, and it was this conversion which led to the conversion of the parishioners, thus permitting the birth of Vincentian charity. Once again we find the formation of the clergy at the root of Vincent's vocation and of his great works.

While it appears, from all that has been said, that the education of the clergy was an integral part of the Vincentian Mission from its origin, several years would still have to elapse before there would be any concrete initiatives. In a conference of 6 December 1658, the founder told his confreres that "in the beginning" there had been no thought of working at the formation of the clergy. The Company had been concerned only with the growth in holiness of its members and the evangelization of the poor. Then he added, in tones echoing Saint

²⁴Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 22 January 1645, *ibid.*, 9: 209.

²⁵Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 27 July 1653, *ibid.*, 9: 646.

Paul, "in the fullness of time [God] called upon us to contribute to the formation of good priests, to provide good pastors for the parishes, and to show them what they must know and practice."²⁶

The first initiative, following the founding of the Congregation of the Mission in 1625, would be an instrument intended for another purpose, namely the missions. We learn from Abelly that the missionaries were called upon not only to work with the laity during the period of a mission but also, by means of spiritual conferences, to assist the clergy.²⁷ In many instances they had a positive influence and conversions resulted. Nevertheless, experience soon taught Vincent that it was quasi-impossible to reform priests set in their ways and that formation for those not yet ordained was what was needed. From this notion, four forms of Vincentian formation for the clergy would be born: retreats for ordinands, Tuesday Conferences, spiritual retreats, and seminaries. Since Vincentian universities are an evolution of the seminaries, it is only with them that we will deal here.

In the beginning of his work with the clergy, Vincent used already existing works (the missions) or ones which could be accomplished quickly (retreats for ordinands). These latter, the result of a meeting between Vincent and Augustin Potier, bishop of Beauvais, during the summer of 1628, were an emergency solution. They were, quite simply, intensive spiritual and professional courses for the ordinands during the two to three weeks prior to ordination. A modest undertaking to be sure and hardly adequate, but there were few options. The Council of Trent had mandated the creation of seminaries in 1563, but its decrees were not formally accepted in France until 1615. With their limitations, the retreats were the most effective and practical way for improving the formation of the clergy. Their use spread rapidly. They became obligatory for the archdiocese of Paris and in 1659, by the order of Pope Alexander VII, for all those preparing for ordination in Rome. If we are to believe Abelly, 12,000 ordinands made these retreats at Saint-Lazare during Vincent's lifetime.²⁸

For our purposes, there are a few elements here calling for our attention since they show attributes of Vincent, the educator, and will

²⁶Ibid., 12: 84.

²⁷See Abelly, *Vie*, I: 129.

²⁸Ibid., 1, book 2: 116-17. Abelly speaks of the number of ordinations per year in Paris: six in 1631-1643; five thereafter with seventy to ninety participants in each, plus seminarians from other dioceses after 1638.

appear later in the seminaries namely *creativity* and *realism*. It must be remembered that there was no model. Vincent, with his practical sense, did not try to work alone nor even entirely within the Congregation of the Mission. Rather he turned to men he knew, respected, and had worked with: Nicolas Pavillon, bishop of Alet; François Perrochel, bishop of Boulogne; and Jean-Jacques Olier, founder of the Sulpicians. Together they composed "Notes for Ordinands." Anticipating possible criticism or opposition, they submitted the text to the theologians of the Sorbonne and obtained the assurance that they contained the essentials. The most learned and saintly men were asked to give conferences during the retreats.

Thus, the undertaking was collaborative and won wide support.²⁹ It was also costly, especially once the archbishop of Paris, in the transfer of the Priory of Saint-Lazare to the Congregation of the Mission, laid upon Vincent the obligation of providing them gratis "for all such clerics as [he] would send."³⁰ To defray expenses, Vincent turned, as he did for his works of charity, to the wealthy women of the capital. Their generosity helped to sustain the effort.

The method of instruction broke with tradition. There were certainly conferences, but the workshop format of small groups was widely used. Moreover, the curriculum was theoretical and professional. The ordinands were taught not only what to do but how to do it. Unlike Vincent arriving at Clichy, these young men were being prepared to function in the pastoral setting. The time frame was all too short, but creativity and flexibility fostered a holistic approach to the formation of future priests--a formation that would be maintained by the "Tuesday Conferences."

But Vincent did not need his Jansenist critics³¹ to know that something more was essential, that the young men preparing for the priesthood needed to spend a prolonged period in the seminary, if, as he told the Bishop of Dax, "the face of [the] clergy" was to be truly "changed."³² Thus, the work of seminaries began in earnest. It must be pointed out that Vincent de Paul was not the only one dedicated, at this period, to finding the formula for the reform and formation of the clergy. He labored beside Bérulle, Olier, and Adrien Bourdoise but,

²⁹See conference to the Priests of the Mission, 5 August 1659, *CED*, 12: 288-98.

³⁰"Approbation par l'Archevêque de Paris de l'union de Saint-Lazare à la Mission," 8 January 1632, *CED*, 13: 252.

³¹[Martin de Barcos], *Défense de feu Monsieur Vincent* (Paris: N.P., 1668), 74-80.

³²Vincent de Paul to Jacques Desclaux, bishop of Dax, 2 October 1647, *CED*, 3: 243; *CCD*, 3: 244.

perhaps, more than any of them, he “changed the face of [the] clergy” of France.

How did he do so? What essentially characterized a “Vincentian” seminary? There were twenty of them in France and three in Italy during Vincent’s lifetime. We also learn from a letter from Father Charles Nacquart in Madagascar that the Congregation of the Mission was involved in the formation of native clergy there.³³ The work continued to expand after the death of the Founder. On the eve of the French Revolution of 1789, there were 160 seminaries directed by the Congregation of the Mission in Europe. They also had one in Goa, one in Macao, and one in Peking for indigenous vocations.

Let us turn now to the program of study. Vincent’s first work in seminaries, properly so called, was at the Collège des Bons-Enfants in 1636. The students were “trained in piety and were also taught Latin and other branches of knowledge that then went to make up the *Litterae Humaniores*.”³⁴ Other than this we know practically nothing about the program except that Vincent was very dissatisfied with it. On 13 May 1644, he wrote to Bernard Codoing, “The ordinance of the Council of Trent is to be respected as coming from the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, experience has shown that it has not been successful either in France or in Italy in the manner in which it is carried out, as far as the age of the seminarians is concerned.”³⁵ Vincent then went on to list the problems that “experience” had taught him came from placing young men, ready for ordination, in the same institution with children. These were that “some leave before the time; others have no inclination for the ecclesiastical state; still others enter religious orders, while others flee those places to which they are bound by the obligations incurred by their education and prefer to seek their fortune elsewhere.”³⁶

It is debated whether or not Vincent was the first to recognize this seemingly obvious problem. What we do know with certitude is that he rectified it as soon as possible. In 1642, he separated the two groups. The older students were housed in a separate wing and had their own regulations as well as their own instructors and program of studies. These students would remain at the Bons-Enfants after the younger ones were transferred to “Petit Saint-Lazare,” later named Saint-

³³Charles Nacquart to Vincent de Paul, 9 February 1650, *CED*, 3: 583; *CCD*, 3: 573.

³⁴Coste, *Life and Works*, I: 259.

³⁵Vincent de Paul to Bernard Codoing, 13 May 1644, *CED*, 2: 459; *CCD*, 2: 505.

³⁶*CED*, 2: 459; *CCD*, 2: 505-06.

Charles. Thus, after 1642, the Congregation of the Mission was directing minor or college seminaries and major seminaries. With the passage of time, their work would be concentrated in major seminaries. What is significant for us here is the process of self-evaluation. Vincent was never satisfied that the work was the best it could be. He constantly examined it in the light of "experience" and sought to improve it. Just nine days before his death, he was still doing so.³⁷

Let us turn our attention now to the program of studies in the major seminaries. First, it should be noted that they were not, nor were they intended to be, complete schools of philosophy and theology. Rather they were centers of spiritual and pastoral formation. The emphasis was on the practical rather than the theoretical. This latter point needs to be examined particularly in light of some of Vincent's own words.

It is certainly true that he admired Bourdoise and the almost entirely practical approach of the seminary of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. However, in the text of 18 September 1660, where he said that the formation at the Bons-Enfants should be "practical" in "imitation" of Bourdoise, he did so only after he had stated that the instruction given at the Bons-Enfants in dogmatic theology was "inadequate" and, therefore, that the students should be sent "to the Sorbonne" for it.³⁸ Vincent is not advocating a program without a strong intellectual base, rather he is recognizing the deficiencies of the existing one and, with his customary realism, proposing a viable solution: the Sorbonne for what it did best; the Bons-Enfants for what it could do best. Given the resources at his disposition, this would insure the highest quality program possible.

A further remark on the intellectual formation of future priests, as envisaged by Vincent de Paul, is called for. In the beginning, he was a man in a hurry, striving to provide good priests as quickly as possible for a population in desperate need of them. The result was a somewhat limited intellectual formation. This would change, however, with the passage of time especially after the Congregation of the Mission assumed the direction of diocesan seminaries and had to provide them with well-prepared instructors.³⁹

³⁷*CED*, 13: 185.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹See Bernard Koch, C.M. "Saint Vincent et la science," *Vincentiana* 3 (1966):90-94.

In general, the Congregation of the Mission would strive to impart an intellectual formation that would produce competent parish priests capable of teaching Christian doctrine, administering the sacraments, and dealing effectively with moral questions. Such competency-based instruction required a new methodology. The question-answer approach—the only one Vincent would allow—replaced lectures and dictation of notes. By the active participation of the students, he sought to insure their clear understanding as well as their mastery of the material taught.

Vincent had never forgotten the stinging rebuke of the Huguenot at Marchais; therefore, all learning had to be allied to spiritual and moral formation. Hearts as well as heads had to be educated. Growth in virtue had to accompany growth in knowledge. On 6 December, 1658, he told his priests, “The third end of our little Institute is to instruct ecclesiastics not only in knowledge so that they may be learned but in virtues so that they may practice them. What do you do, if you give them one without the other? Nothing or practically nothing. Knowledge without virtue is useless and dangerous.”⁴⁰

Just as a priest had to have adequate knowledge and solid virtue, so too he had to be professionally prepared to fulfill his functions. The seminarians, therefore, had to have practical experience that would enable them later to preach, to administer the sacraments, and to accomplish effectively the multiple tasks which are the responsibility of a parish priest. Thus there had to be opportunities for “hands-on” experiences. In some places, the seminaries were attached to parishes and everywhere at least two priests who gave missions were in residence and could share their expertise and experiences with the students.

Central to this holistic program of priestly education was the quality of the teachers. On 18 August 1656, Vincent wrote, “As experience has shown, one of the most essential requirements in seminaries is to have [as instructors] interior persons of great holiness who can inspire this spirit in the seminarians.”⁴¹ Indeed, the seminary teachers had to be themselves solidly prepared intellectually, spiritually, and professionally for their task because, as Vincent pointed out in the same letter, “no one can give what he does not possess.”⁴²

⁴⁰Conference to the Priests of the Mission, 6 December 1658, *CED*, 12: 83.

⁴¹Vincent de Paul to Firmin Get, 18 August 1656, *CED*, 6: 61.

⁴²*Ibid.*

Such a program, administered by such teachers was to become a major factor in the reform and formation of the clergy in seventeenth-century France and subsequently throughout the world. Moreover, the principles and experiences which produced and maintained this educational endeavor are the ones that form the basis of every work of Vincentian education whatever its form or level.

It is significant to note as we conclude this first part of our study on the Core Values of Vincentian Education that Vincent de Paul's vision and efforts were narrowly focused. They included the religious instruction of the poor of the country areas as part of the missions and the education and formation of the clergy in seminaries and through the retreats for ordinands and the Tuesday Conferences.

The work of teaching boys not destined for the priesthood, in a school setting, he would leave to others. However, he was closely involved with the education of poor little girls and the preparation of their teachers through his collaboration of thirty-six years with Louise de Marillac with whom he would found the Daughters of Charity. In their combined efforts and in the faith and experience of Louise de Marillac we discover the second panel of the diptych of "Vincentian" education.

Faith and Experience of Louise de Marillac 1591-1632

*Childhood—Marriage—Meeting with Vincent de Paul—
Visits to the Confraternities of Charity*

The friendship and collaboration between Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, two widely differing personalities, began, somewhat inauspiciously, some time between the end of 1624 and the early part of 1625. Indeed it is difficult to image two people less likely to spend the major part of their adult lives working together. Their friendship, nonetheless, was to prove to be of incalculable significance for the Church and for the poor.

The first contacts would be difficult for the peasant priest and the aristocratic woman but they would both come to appreciate the need they had, spiritually and apostolically, for one another. The differences would remain and even produce some conflict over the years but they would also form the base of their complementarity as they combined their considerable gifts of nature and grace for the service

of God and the poor. According to Louise's biographer, Jean Calvet, Vincentian works became "what they were because Louise de Marillac put her hand to them."⁴³ Nowhere is this more evident than in "Vincentian" education.

Louise de Marillac's background and early life experiences were the antithesis of Vincent de Paul's. Born on 12 August 1591, the "natural" daughter of Louis de Marillac and an unknown mother, she never experienced the love and security of family life. Her health was delicate due, no doubt, at least in part to the conditions in war-torn France at the time of her birth. She was a member of the illustrious Marillac family, which held positions of power and influence in the court of Marie de Médici and Louis XIII, nevertheless, despite her father's love for her and her loyalty during periods of family crisis, she always felt herself an outsider. Her early life was lonely. In it, however, were two events which shaped her future and influenced her approach to education: Poissy and the boarding house of Paris.

Poissy. The exact date of Louise's arrival at the royal monastery of Saint-Louis of Poissy, like so much in her childhood, is unknown. She may well have been an infant but was most certainly no more than three years old when she was confided to the care of her aunt, another Louise de Marillac, who was a Dominican nun there. On 12 January 1595, Louis de Marillac remarried. His little daughter seems to have had no place in his new home. However, God, who often writes straight with crooked lines, provided her with a rich spiritual and intellectual environment that prepared her well for her future role as an educator.

While a cloister, albeit a regular and fervent one, was an abnormal setting in which to raise a child, nevertheless Louise's gifts of nature and grace flourished there. Poissy was not only a spiritual center, it was also a humanistic one. Through the years, guided by her aunt and the other nuns, Louise and other little girls of her social class learned to know God, to love him, and to discover him as Saint Louis, the patron of the monastery, had, hidden under the rags of the poor. This experience enabled her later on to live and work with equal ease with the rich and with the poor village girls who would be the first Daughters of Charity.

At the same time that she was learning reading, writing, literature, painting, and Latin, this little girl, who was mature beyond her years

⁴³Jean Calvet, *Louise de Marillac: A Portrait* (New York: Kennedy, 1959), 14.

because of the suffering she had endured, was developing a love for scripture, liturgical prayer, spiritual reading, and contemplation. It is not at all surprising that, as she grew older, she thought of entering the cloister. It is not difficult to imagine how shattered she must have been when Father Honoré de Champigny, provincial of the Capuchins, refused her request for admission. His reasons are not clear, but his words proved prophetic when he told her that God had “other designs” on her.⁴⁴

Nowhere do we have recorded Louise’s reaction to this unexpected rejection. Her spiritual crisis of 1623, however, showed the extent to which she had been marked by it. Moreover, her desire for a life dedicated to reading and contemplation perdured well into her widowhood. Events, Providence, and Vincent de Paul would alter that.

If Poissy provided Louise de Marillac with an intellectual formation well beyond that of the vast majority of women, even of the aristocracy of the era, it hardly seemed the appropriate preparation for a woman who would later be responsible for training young women in the practical aspects of health, education, and social welfare. That she would learn outside the walls of the cloister, in a humble boarding house of Paris.

Boarding House of Paris. It must be stated from the beginning that what we know of this period is limited and often contradictory. Notwithstanding, it seems that following the death of her father in 1604, Louise left Poissy and spent an indeterminate time in a boarding house in Paris run by a woman identified only as a good, devout spinster. Whatever the circumstances, during these years Louise learned the practical things that are so surprising in a woman who was both an intellectual and a mystic. The multiple details required to care for the sick and orphans, to educate little girls, or to form the first Daughters of Charity had to have been learned somewhere. The humble boarding house of Paris was likely the place.

Denied admission into the cloister, Louise de Marillac could but accept the only option open to her, marriage. The Marillacs, for their interests rather than hers, arranged Louise’s marriage, on 4 February 1613, to Antoine Le Gras, personal secretary to the regent, Marie de Médici. It seems, however, to have been a happy one especially after the birth of their son, Michel, whose education she undertook. This

⁴⁴Cited in M. D. Poinset, *De l’anxiété à la sainteté: Louise de Marillac* (Paris: Fayard, 1959), 33.

happiness, however, would prove short-lived. The prolonged illness of her husband, leading to his death in December 1625, and the limitations of her child, who would always be a source of anguish for her, plunged her into the dark night of the soul.

Relief would come only on Pentecost Sunday, 1623, when her doubts would dissipate and she felt assured that one day she would be able to give herself to God as she desired.⁴⁵ In the designs of God this would come about through her friendship and collaboration with Vincent de Paul who became her spiritual director sometime in the months prior to Antoine Le Gras' death.

1625-1632. Little by little, as their relationship grew, Vincent began to involve her in his charitable endeavors. Her contributions at first were modest but then, on 6 May 1629, he sent her to visit the Confraternity of Charity of Montmirail. Begun by Vincent in Châtillon in 1617, the confraternities had flourished in the beginning and had spread throughout France. With the passage of time, some of them had lost their original spirit. Someone had to visit them, study their activities, correct abuses, and rekindle the zeal of the members. In the eyes of Vincent de Paul, no one seemed better suited to undertake this task than Louise de Marillac who now felt confident enough to emerge from her solitude and engage in personal charitable activity. In her *Spiritual Writings* we find detailed accounts of these visits that spanned four years. They reveal her keen intelligence, organizational ability, and capacity for leadership. The transformation was startling. She had become a woman of decision, Vincent de Paul's collaborator and equal.

The role of the Confraternities of Charity, as originally conceived, had been to meet the needs of the sick poor in their homes. During her visits, Louise worked to help the members improve this service. Her ability to assess situations and to read the signs of the times was as great as Vincent's, and she quickly saw another unmet need: the lack of even minimal instruction for the little girls of the countryside. She immediately sought a remedy. Her first biographer, Nicolas Gobillon, tells us that she began teaching catechism to the children and, if there was no schoolteacher for them, she stayed long enough to train one.⁴⁶

⁴⁵See *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac: Correspondence and Thoughts*, Louise Sullivan, D.C., trans. (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 1-2.

⁴⁶See Nicolas Gobillon, *Vie de Mademoiselle Le Gras* (Paris: André, 1676), 33-35.

Vincent de Paul had surely shared with her his experience at Folleville, but she learned first hand of the spiritual poverty of country people when Vincent sent her young women to be trained to work in the confraternities of Paris. These were good, hardworking, honest, and frequently highly intelligent peasants, but most could neither read nor write and their knowledge of the Catholic faith was quasi-nonexistent. Forming them to serve and later to teach others was a monumental challenge for the future foundress and superioress of the Daughters of Charity. The resultant works for every category of poor testify to Louise de Marillac's extraordinary gifts as an educator.

Events moved quickly now. On 29 November 1633 a few of these young women would come together in Louise de Marillac's home to give themselves to God, in community, for the service of the poor. The Daughters of Charity were born.

Servant of the Poor 1633-1660

Louise de Marillac's awareness of the difference that education, however minimal, could make in the life of a young woman was reinforced by her experience with Marguerite Naseau whom Vincent de Paul would call "the first sister who had the happiness of showing others the way,"⁴⁷ although she died in February of 1633 some nine months before the founding of the Daughters of Charity. The details concerning her life and personality are scant. What we do know is that she was a peasant girl from Suresnes, in the Ile de France, who offered her services to Vincent to work with the Confraternities of Charity. She had arrived after a particularly frustrating meeting with the wealthy Ladies of Charity of the capital.

Until his encounter with Marguerite, Vincent had looked to the rich to serve the poor. For the first time he saw the potential for charity in this "good village girl" and others like her. He could but hear in her story echoes of his own. It was, indeed, a remarkable tale. On the ten occasions when he speaks of her, one can easily discern the qualities he so admired in her namely, her creativity in teaching herself to read while tending her flocks; her dedication to teaching others; her courageous even daring initiatives; her tenacity in face of the opposition of

⁴⁷Conference to the Daughters of Charity, July 1642, *CED*, 9: 77.

the illiterate men of the village who felt threatened by girls being taught to read; and finally her heroic death in the service of a plague victim.

Louise shared Vincent's affection and admiration for Marguerite. A letter from Vincent dated 19 February 1630 reveals that he had sent Marguerite to her immediately to be trained and formed for the service of the poor in the Confraternity of Charity in the parish of Saint-Sauveur.⁴⁸ Her example attracted the attention of the members of other Parisian confraternities and prompted them to seek the services of other village girls like her. And they came! Under Louise's tutelage they would learn to care for the sick and to teach country girls like themselves.

The first time that Louise spoke of education in a letter still extant was on 9 February 1641. However, the fact that it is only a passing mention in a post-script leads us to believe that schools were not a new undertaking for the Daughters of Charity. Louise told Vincent "the sister whom I am suggesting we send with Sister Marie Joly knows how to read, but Sister Marie does not. She could teach poor little girls."⁴⁹ What, then, do we know of these schools?

Characteristics of the "Vincentian" school. After their foundation, the Daughters of Charity collaborated in the work of the Confraternities of Charity. Vincent told them, in August 1641, "You have given yourselves to God for the service of the sick poor and the instruction of youth particularly in country areas."⁵⁰ Little by little, as the years passed, "little schools," as they were called at the time, directed by the Daughters of Charity, opened throughout France. In 1652, they would start one in Warsaw.

Louise also discovered that illiteracy was not limited to the country areas. Poor little girls in Paris also could neither read nor write. So it was that, in 1641, she sought authorization to open a school in the parish of Saint-Laurent where the motherhouse had just been moved. An attentive reading of the official documents dealing with this serve to give us a better understanding of the *raison-d'être* of the "little schools" and what made them "Vincentian." Let us reproduce them in entirety here.

⁴⁸CED, I: 68.

⁴⁹Louise de Marillac to Vincent de Paul, 9 February 1641, *Spiritual Writings*, 48.

⁵⁰Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 16 August 1641, CED, 9: 43.

*Request Presented to the Rector of Notre-Dame de Paris
by Mademoiselle Le Gras*

Monsieur,

Louise de Marillac, widow of Monsieur Le Gras, secretary to the queen, mother of the king, very humbly supplicates Monsieur des Roches, rector of Notre-Dame de Paris, informing him that the sight of the great number of poor in the Saint-Denis district leads her to desire to take charge of their instruction. Should these poor little girls remain steeped in ignorance, it is to be feared that this same ignorance will be harmful to them and render them incapable of cooperating with the grace of God for their salvation. Should you agree, for the glory of God, Monsieur, to give the above-mentioned suppliant the permission required in such cases, thereby allowing the poor the liberty of sending their children free of charge to schools where they would be unhindered by the rich, who do not want those who teach their children to accept and keep poor children so freely, these souls, redeemed by the blood of the Son of God, would be obliged to pray for you, Monsieur, in time and in eternity.

Response of the Rector

Michel le Masle, councilor to the king for both councils of state and private matters, prior and lord des Roches de Saint-Paul, rector and canon of the great metropolitan church of Paris, to our beloved Demoiselle Le Gras, residing in the parish of Saint-Laurent of Paris, greetings of Our Lord.

In consequence of our position as rector of the above-named church of Paris, we are charged with the licensing and administration of the elementary schools operating within this city and in its suburbs and environs. After our own inquiries, the report of your pastor and the testimony of other trustworthy persons who have knowledge of your life, morals and practice of the Catholic religion, you have been found worthy to operate schools.

Therefore, we grant you the necessary license and permit you to operate a school. This you shall do in the Saint-Lazare area of the Saint-Denis district on the condition that you teach poor girls only and do not accept others; that you educate them in good morals, grammar and other pious and honest subjects. You shall do all this after first swearing that you will faithfully and diligently operate these schools in keeping with our statutes and decrees. The present authorization shall be valid until our next synod. Given in Paris under our seal and that of Master Jean Le Vasseur, Apostolic Notary, our ordinary scribe and secretary, in the year of Our Lord sixteen hundred forty-one, on the twenty-ninth day of the month of May.

On the order of my Lord, the Lord Rector. Le Vasseur.⁵¹

From reading the above texts we learn that Louise de Marillac looked upon basic instruction not only as a benefit but as a right of which the poor were deprived precisely because of their poverty. They could not pay and their very presence in a school would offend the richer clientele. She also recognized what Bossuet would call the "Eminent Dignity of the Poor" who had likewise been "redeemed by the blood of the Son of God."⁵² The authorization granted was very precise concerning the specificity of the establishment: to teach poor children only (most likely to avoid competition with paying institutions) and to adhere to the directives given concerning the content of the instruction.

According to the custom in use at the time, Louise must have immediately affixed, to the door or a window of the house, a sign reading:

A LITTLE SCHOOL IS ESTABLISHED IN THIS BUILDING

LOUISE DE MARILLAC

SCHOOLMISTRESS

teaches young children: divine service, reading, writing,
composition and grammar

⁵¹*Spiritual Writings*, 50-51.

⁵²*Ibid.*

Before examining the program and methodology of this and other little schools, a few reflections on education in seventeenth-century France, particularly the education of girls, are in order. When the Venetian ambassador, Marino Giustiniano, visited France in 1535 he wrote that "everybody, no matter how poor, learned to read and write."⁵³ Employers who accepted children as apprentices or families who hired them as domestics had to pledge to send them to school. However, as a result of the devastation of a half-century of civil wars, Henry IV had to acknowledge in 1590 that illiteracy was spreading rapidly throughout the kingdom.

The first half of the seventeenth century would see the foundation in France of religious congregations whose work was the education of youth. However, most of their efforts were in urban areas and frequently with the moneyed class. Vincent would remind the sisters of this in a conference on 16 August 1641. He told them, "The city is almost fully supplied with sisters hence it is only right that you should go to work in the country."⁵⁴ Elsewhere he encouraged Louise to see to it that her Daughters learned "to read and to do needlework so that they might be able to work in the country."⁵⁵ Vincent had already discovered the deplorable state of religious instruction among country people. Moreover, the state assumed no responsibility for children in these areas. Thus it would be primarily (but not exclusively) there that the Daughters of Charity would labor.

The constant interest of Louise in the schools showed the importance she placed on the instruction of children. Her letters to the sisters employed in the schools provide us with significant information about them.

Pupils. The children taught by the Daughters of Charity were girls. The notes of the Council of the Company of 30 October 1647 show that the question of accepting boys was discussed at some length. However, all concerned had finally to admit that this was not possible because both royal and episcopal decrees forbade it. Provision, nonetheless, would be made for boys at the Foundling Hospital but they would not be taught in the same classroom as the girls.

It is interesting to note that there were two categories of girls, namely the little ones who followed the regular program and the older

⁵³Gustave Fagniez, *La femme et la société française dans la première moitié du XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Hambert, 1929), 12.

⁵⁴*CED*, 9: 43.

⁵⁵Coste, *Life and Works*, 1: 239.

ones. Louise's sensitivity to the needs of this latter group is striking. In her correspondence and in the "Particular Rules for the Sisters Employed in Schools" she urges flexibility in the program telling the sisters to seek out these young women and to fit their instruction to the circumstances of their condition. At a period when the horarium in religious houses was sacrosanct it reveals a willingness to adapt to the needs of the non-traditional student that is centuries ahead of its time.

The pupils in the schools were not only to be girls, they were to be poor girls. As we have seen earlier, congregations such as the Ursulines were appearing to instruct the daughters of the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy. Poor children were the ones most in need of instruction and this instruction was to be gratis. We find a reference to this concerning the school at Richelieu, "The Daughters of Charity received only poor girls into their school and their services were free. Girls who were better off went to the convent of the Religious of Notre-Dame."⁵⁶ Even here exceptions could be made. If "there is no schoolmistress for the rich" they may be accepted but "the poor must always be preferred" and "the rich may not look down on them."⁵⁷

The program of instruction. It must be admitted that the program was minimal. Its first and major goal was religious instruction. This was true in all educational institutions of the period be they for the rich or for the poor, for boys or for girls. If the Catholic Church hoped to recoup the losses of the Protestant Reformation, it had to be by the religious and moral education of its children.

The catechism that Louise de Marillac composed for use in the schools has been preserved.⁵⁸ It reveals her understanding of the faith but, more importantly, her understanding of children. An intellectual, whose personal meditations are highly abstract, she was able to simplify theological concepts for the young pupils and make them meaningful in their lives. Moreover, she insisted that the children be led to an understanding of the material through simple exchanges with their teachers. Mere recitation would not do. Learning required the active participation of each child. Like Vincent, she is well ahead of her time in this regard. In addition to the catechism children learned their prayers, how to receive the sacraments, and, in general, how to live a good Christian life.

⁵⁶Ibid., 1: 538.

⁵⁷Règles Particulières de la Maitresse d'école (Paris: N.P. 1672), article 28.

⁵⁸La Compagnie des filles de la Charité: Documents, Elizabeth Charpy, D.C., ed. (Tours: Mame, 1989), 958-69.

Reading was the second major subject in the schools. Louise tried to be creative in the methodology used and sought assistance from the Ursulines for this. She even wanted in the classrooms of the Foundling Hospital the same alphabet cards used in the convent school. Writing does not seem to have been part of the curriculum at least at the beginning. There is a curious reluctance on Louise's part to have even the sisters learn to write. With time, however, she would change her mind and recognize its importance.

Important as were religious instruction and reading and writing, they were not sufficient to enable these little girls to earn a living. For Louise their human dignity and their spiritual well-being required them to learn a trade. Thus, from the beginning, there was to be a professional component in the education provided. The children learned to sew, to make lace, and to make stockings. The education of these children, simple as it was by today's standards, was holistic, providing for the intellectual, spiritual, and professional needs of the young pupils. It would certainly evolve through the years but, at the time, it provided what was probably the best education available for poor girls and enabled countless ones to break the cycle of poverty and to live good, productive lives. As such, it was no small contribution.

Central to the success of this educational project was the quality of the teacher. Louise, later assisted by a young woman trained by the Ursulines, went to great pains to prepare the sisters for their roles as schoolteachers. They learned reading, writing, and Christian doctrine. Louise reminded them in the "Particular Rules" that the schoolmistress "must take great care to learn well herself what she must teach others, particularly in what pertains to matters of faith and morals."⁵⁹

On the other hand, she was afraid that the sisters might take themselves for theologians. Her fear is expressed in a letter to Sister Elisabeth Turgis concerning the catechism composed by Cardinal Bellarmine. She said, "it would be dangerous for our Company to aspire to such learned teaching."⁶⁰ An interesting outcome of this discussion is that, when it was raised at a council meeting, Vincent urged that the sisters in general use the Bellarmine catechism "because if they are to teach, they must know the material."⁶¹ Moreover, he urged Louise herself to explain it to the sisters.

⁵⁹*Règles Particulières*, 11.

⁶⁰Louise de Marillac to Élisabeth Turgis, 6 March 1648, *Spiritual Writings*, 239.

⁶¹Council of 22 March [1648], *CED*, 13: 664.

Climate of school. Once having assured a level of intellectual and professional competence for the schoolteachers, Louise turned her attention to the climate of the school. This may seem basic but one has only to recall the words of Montaigne who cried out against the torture of the schools of his time. He said, "I do not want to abandon [this boy] to the anger and melancholy humor of a choleric schoolmaster. . . . This institution should be run with firm gentleness, not as it is."⁶²

Louise, thus, urged the sisters to make school "welcoming," especially for the older pupils who found it so hard to go. She advised them to blend gentleness, patience, and cordiality with firmness so that they would be "feared and loved at the same time" and that the children would "have confidence" in them.⁶³ Only in such an atmosphere would children grow and develop as well as learn.

Such were the "little schools" of the Daughters of Charity. Although they dealt with a different clientele from the seminaries of the Congregation of the Mission, they shared many of the same values and goals. As such they form an integral part of "Vincentian" education whatever its form or level.

From all that has been said on both the seminaries and the "little schools" let us now try to determine the Core Values that flow from these original works.

Core Values

A thorough examination of the documentation relative to education in the lives and writings of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac revealed the following values as central to their common mission of evangelization and to the educational process.

(1) *Holistic*: Vincentian education seeks to respond to the intellectual, spiritual, moral and affective needs of the students--educates the heart as well as the head.

(2) *Integrated*: Vincentian education blends the humanistic and the professional, the abstract and the practical.

(3) *Creative*: Vincentian education is ever seeking new or renewed ways to meet changing needs among the student population while maintaining a clear "sense of the possible."

⁶²Michel de Montaigne: *Oeuvres choisies*, J. Radouant, ed. (Paris: Hatier, 1930), 95-96.

⁶³*Règles Particulières*, 10.

(4) *Flexible*: Vincentian education is willing to make the effort to adapt to the needs of the non-traditional student.

(5) *Excellent*: Vincentian education places quality at the center of its educational activities. It seeks this excellence in:

a. teaching: The instructor must not only be competent but must also be efficient, dedicated and reveal “all those virtues required of the students;”

b. methodology: the method employed must be active, challenging, competency based, and enable the student not only to learn but to enjoy doing so;

(6) *Person oriented*: the Vincentian educational institution must be one in which all—administration, faculty, staff, and most importantly, students—are respected and valued;

(7) *Collaborative*: Vincentian education seeks to collaborate rather than merely compete with other educational institutions;

(8) *Focused*: Vincentian education is ever viewed as central to the Vincentian mission of service to the poor. As such it strives to integrate this vision into the educational process and to keep the primacy of it alive among all those who share in this common mission.

Conclusion

The research conducted substantiates the major premise of this work namely, that education was central to the Vincentian mission of evangelization of and service to the poor and as such had values unique to it. Indeed, education was the most far reaching form of service since it enabled the poor to break the cycle of poverty, find meaningful employment, and thus enhance their self-respect and confidence. Moreover, by providing quality education to all, the Vincentian institution also was able to transmit this vision of service to others who would later carry it on in their own lives.

