

Spring 1997

The Icon of Saint Vincent

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Recommended Citation

Brusatti, Louis C.M. and Swift, James C.M. (1997) "The Icon of Saint Vincent," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol18/iss1/4>

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Iconography: (1) The Icon of Saint Vincent de Paul¹

COMMENTARY

BY

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AND

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This icon was commissioned by Rosati house, a residence for the Vincentian Community at DePaul University in Chicago, on the occasion of creating its new chapel. The icon was written by Meltem Aktas. Ms. Aktas, a native of Turkey, studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She has worked as a graphic designer and a gallery director and has exhibited in both Istanbul and Chicago. She recently taught icon painting to the monks at Christ in the Desert Monastery in New Mexico. Ms. Aktas began copying classic icons in order to learn and experiment with glaze-painting techniques. Writing icons soon became an experience of faith for her. Now it is out of deep faith and love that she continues to work in the classical mode, striving to give it contemporary incarnation. In preparing to write this icon of Vincent, Ms. Aktas read and studied about Vincent and developed friendships with a number of Vincentians in the Midwestern Province, listening to their own heartfelt stories about Vincent and his way of spirituality.

Central to an understanding of Vincent and Vincentian spirituality is the mystery of the incarnation. This icon of Vincent celebrates that mystery. Creation is diffused with the light of incarnation; there is little contrast between the heavenly plane and the plane of earth. And within this incarnational setting, the central action of the icon takes place.

Two figures interact, Vincent and a beggar. Yet, upon closer examination, the beggar is seen to resemble a Palestinian Jesus. These two interacting figures form the heart of the icon's message, the core

¹The text of this meditation is adapted from an article, "Reading the Icons at Rosati House," in *Environment and Art Letter*, 8, no. 6 (August 1995), 69-70. It represents a collaboration between Reverend Louis Brusatti, C.M., and Reverend James Swift, C.M.

of Vincentian spirituality, that we find Jesus in the poor and that our interaction with Jesus in the poor transforms us.

Knowing our own poverty, we assume the position of the beggar and with him look intently at Vincent. Vincent's eyes focus on the bread. While Vincent is probably giving the bread to the beggar, it is difficult to tell just by looking at the hands of the figures. It is possible that the beggar is about to place the bread in Vincent's hand. Here lies another truth of Vincentian spirituality, that, once we find Jesus in the poor, the poor have as much to give to us as we do to them.

A transformation has occurred: the poor person has become Jesus and we have become Vincent, receiving from the poor as much as we give.

The beggar's deformed hand parallels Vincent's awkward left foot suggesting a relationship between the poverty of the beggar and the poverty of Vincent. The tattered edges of Vincent's coat and the beggar's poor garb enhance the parallelism. Vincent stands with a listening attitude. He experiences something of his own weakness, brokenness, and poverty, an awareness affirmed as he enters the world of the beggar and hears his gift. Again, a transformation: in coming to the poor with our wealth, we encounter our own poverty. As Vincent remarked, "It is only because of your love, only your love, that the poor will forgive you the bread you have given them."

The sharing of bread evokes a eucharistic theme in the icon. The exchange of "bread" takes place literally against the backdrop of cloud-like divinization. God has penetrated the world of earth with bread from heaven. Jesus, the poor man, offers us in our plenty the true bread. The cluster of stones and barren branches at the far right recall the story of Jesus' temptation in Luke's gospel. The devil said to Jesus, "If you are God's Son, order this stone to turn to bread." Jesus answered, "The scripture says, 'Man cannot live on bread alone.'"² The bread the two figures exchange is more than earthly loaves. Vincentian spirituality leads from caring for physical needs to sharing the good news of our salvation in Jesus, the true bread from heaven. The green tree at left, positioned next to Jesus the poor man, recalls Jesus' revelation of himself as the vine and of ourselves as the branches, another sacramental reference.

Vincent and the beggar step out from three horizontal planes. The lower plane is the ground upon which they stand, ground suffused in

²Luke 4: 3-4.

the light of the eternal come down to earth. The middle plane, cloud-like in presentation, upholds Saint-Lazare, the motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission in Vincent's time. The top section is the realm of heaven. Saint-Lazare, represented in a stylized manner recalling the new, heavenly Jerusalem, seems to be coming down from heaven: the mystery of the incarnation is renewed in the charism of Vincent and his family. And against this backdrop occurs the exchange of bread between the beggar and Vincent, the transforming encounter between Jesus and the man or woman steeped in the Vincentian tradition and spirituality.

Heaven comes down to earth. Jesus takes flesh in the poor. Those who minister to the poor find Jesus, receive as much as they give, and are transformed. The eucharist becomes true daily bread. These are themes central to an understanding of Vincent and Vincentian spirituality. They focus on the mystery of the incarnation, and this icon of Vincent celebrates that mystery.