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# Christological Aspects Of Vincentian Leadership: The Christ of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise

BY  
KATHRYN LAFLEUR, S.P.

## *Introductory Remarks:*

I need to say that in reflecting on the Vincentian tradition, I will speak of both Saint Vincent and Saint Louise because I am convinced that for us today it is the complementarity of their individual and shared spirituality and mission that give us the legacy of the Christological aspects of their leadership. This, I think, is one of their great gifts to us and to our times.

### **“WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?” (MT. 16:13-18)**

When Jesus came to the neighborhood of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples this question: Who do people say that the Son of Man is? They replied, “Some say John the Baptizer, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “And you,” he said to them, “who do you say that I am?” “You are the Messiah,” Simon Peter answered, “the Son of the living God!” Jesus replied, “Blest are you, Simon son of John! No mere person has revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.”

This question which Jesus posed to his disciples is a question that at some point challenges the heart and spirit of every Christian. For each of us it is a question that if entered into deeply may call us to re-evaluate our ministry, our leadership, our lifestyle; it might well bid us to a greater depth of conversion in our lives.

Indeed, for both Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, the personal lived reality of the unfolding mystery of the answer to Jesus’ question “Who do you say that I am” became the focus and force of their spirituality, and in turn of their mission.

We are invited to reflect on two aspects of this gospel question as related to our Vincentian tradition: Who was Christ for Saint Vincent and for Saint Louise, and what perspectives of Christian leadership did Vincent and Louise emulate?

To embark upon this journey into the spirituality of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, I invite you to consider with me, first the spiritual milieu in which they lived, then to reflect briefly on who Christ was for Saint Vincent, who Christ was for Saint Louise, and finally to consider the legacy of some principles of the Vincentian tradition that animated their Christian leadership.

### THE SPIRITUAL MILIEU OF VINCENT AND LOUISE:

Vincent (1581-1660); Louise (1591-1660)

The seventeenth century in which Saint Vincent and Saint Louise lived is known historically as *Le grand siècle*, the great century; so too it might be termed *Un grand siècle*, a great century of spirituality.

The spiritual framework in which Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac lived in seventeenth century France was that which is known as the French School of Spirituality. It was during this century that numerous saints made outstanding contributions to the field of spirituality and during it that the division of theology and spirituality which had occurred during the scholastic period was reunited into an integrated whole.

Major figures of this period include Saint Francis de Sales, Saint Jane de Chantal, Pierre Cardinal de Bérulle, Charles de Condren, Jean-Jacques Olier, Saint John Eudes, Père Lallement, Blessed Marie of the Incarnation, Blessed Madeleine of Saint Joseph, Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque, Saint Louis Marie de Montfort, Saint Jean-Baptist de la Salle and of course Saint Louise de Marillac and Saint Vincent de Paul.

As well, the seventeenth century was a period in which lay leadership in spirituality was prevalent with such persons as Mme. Acarie and Michel de Marillac, uncle of Louise. Fruits of the period would include renewal of laity and clergy, foundation of seminaries, parish missions, spiritual direction, and the emergence of congregations devoted to apostolic works both within and beyond France.

Father Raymond Deville in his book, *L'école française de spiritualité* posits that a spirituality or spiritual tradition is a certain manner of hearing and living the gospel. This is conditioned by a time, a milieu, and some influential principles. This particular way of hearing and living the gospel is incarnated in a group of people and prolonged through history, enriching or impoverishing itself.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Deville, *L'école française de spiritualité* - Bibliothèque d'Histoire du Christianisme, n.11 (Paris: Desclée, 1987), 102.

Deville suggests that a particular school of spirituality or tradition has certain aspects of faith and life in the Spirit which it emphasizes and is distinguished by a certain manner of prayer and a certain approach to mission.

The basic aspects of faith and life in the Spirit which the French School of Spirituality emphasized are: Trinitarianism, Christocentricism, Marian, Pastoral and Ecclesial.

It is an accepted fact that the major initiator in the development of the French School of Spirituality was Pierre Cardinal de Bérulle.

The most characteristic principle of Bérulle's spirituality was its Christocentricism, which focused on the Incarnate Word, Jesus. Through Jesus' humanity, persons enter into a new order. Humanity is deified through Jesus, who became man to make us gods. For Bérulle the pre-eminent state of the human Jesus was that of his servitude because in emptying himself of his divinity to become human, he assumed the state of one who was to be God's servant. It is Jesus who has come to heal the rupture of the relationship between God and humans. He, as the perfect adorer and servant, incorporates humans into his life and love and empowers them to imitate him in adoration and servitude of God.

For the French School, experience of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God was fundamental to the reunion of spirituality and theology which Bérulle stressed and was central to all the ensuing doctrine of the school and its lived-out experience. Hence, praxis was regaining its importance in the field of theology. For Vincent de Paul particularly, the lived reality—the experience of Christ—was more important than theory.

As we have heard, Deville says that a spirituality or spiritual tradition is a particular way of hearing and living the gospel which is incarnated in a group of people and prolonged through history, enriching or impoverishing itself.<sup>2</sup> How has the gospel been incarnated in the Vincentian tradition?

Both Vincent and Louise exhibited in varying degrees, but with their own nuances, the principles of the French School of Spirituality and left to us the heritage of a Vincentian tradition—a certain manner of hearing and living the gospel, a certain approach to mission.

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<sup>2</sup> It is essential to recall that the French School of Spirituality is the term applied to the doctrine of spirituality developed in France during the Seventeenth Century. In the strict sense it is limited to the disciples of Bérulle who had an awareness of his originality and who followed the themes characteristic of his doctrine.

For our purposes we will focus on only one of these principles, the Christological aspect of their spirituality. Let us begin with Saint Vincent. Reverend Robert Maloney, C.M., states: "Vincent does not speak or write about Christology as such, but he often speaks and writes of Christ. Even more clearly, he develops a way of 'living' Christ and teaches it to his followers."<sup>3</sup>

In keeping with the French School of Spirituality, Vincent's Christ begins with the Trinity. Vincent's trinitarian theocentricism was expressed in his constant desire to do the Will of God, his complete trust in the Providence of God, his sensitivity to the Spirit and his imitation of Jesus. For Vincent, belief in the mystery of the Holy Trinity was necessary for salvation and he found and knew "his Christ" only in the union of the Son with the Father.<sup>4</sup> That the Trinity was central for Vincent is seen in his placing his congregation under the patronage of the Trinity and his frequent reference to the unity of the Trinity as the best model for a life of unity within Community.<sup>5</sup>

From within the Trinity, Christ was the foundational focus of Vincent's active spirituality, hence his Christocentricism.<sup>6</sup> In Jesus Christ, Vincent saw the Savior come to do the Father's Will which He accomplished through His self-emptying service to the poor and the salvation of all through His death on the cross. This mission of Christ the evangelizer fulfilling the Father's Will, was for Vincent, the beginning, the direction and the end of his spirituality concretized in deeds of charity and justice. Dodin writes:

The Christ whom Vincent contemplated and adored is not a representation of an eternal truth, but a living human being united with humankind in history, on a mission from his Father to save humanity.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Robert P Maloney, C.M., *The Way of St. Vincent de Paul*, (New York: New City Press, 1992), 20. Hereinafter cited as *The Way*.

<sup>4</sup> André Dodin, C.M., *L'esprit vincentien, Le secret de saint Vincent de Paul*, (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1981), 84. Hereinafter cited as *L'esprit vincentien*.

<sup>5</sup> Dodin, *L'esprit vincentien*, 84.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Morin, C.M., states that the fundamental trait of Vincent's faith was an adherence to Jesus Christ: "Nous avons trouvé là (Jesus-Christ envoyé pour évangéliser les pauvres) certainement, le trait fondamental de la foi de saint Vincent: une adhésion à Jésus-Christ...Jésus-Christ **envoyé aux pauvres!**" "La Foi de Saint Vincent," *Au temps de St. Vincent de Paul...et aujourd'hui, Carnet Vincentiens* (Toulouse: Animation Vincentienne, 1991), 3, 10. Hereinafter cited as *Carnet Vincentiens*.

<sup>7</sup> André Dodin, C.M., *Vincent de Paul and Charity*, (New York: New City Press, 1993), 56.

The primacy of Christ for Vincent is epitomized in his words to his community: "Jesus Christ is the rule of the Mission."<sup>8</sup>

### Who was the Christ of Saint Vincent de Paul?

The Christ that set Vincent on fire for the poor was Christ the evangelizer of the poor; the Christ announcing his public ministry in the words of Isaiah: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore, he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord." (Luke 4:18)

Saint Vincent's spirituality and mission flow from his contemplation of **this** "ChriSaint." In Christ the evangelizer, Vincent sees a loving, trusting relationship with the Father, compassion for the poor, love for the sinner, and particular interior qualities that speak to his own heart. It is Christ the evangelizer who came to liberate people from sin, from bondage of every type and to heal them spiritually and corporally that Vincent takes unto himself. The incarnate Jesus Christ of Vincent continues to live and to suffer in the poor. Vincent tells the daughters:

"In serving the poor, you serve Jesus Christ, O my Daughters, how true that is! ..."<sup>9</sup> and "... the poor represent for you the person of Our Lord, who said: 'Whatever you do for one of these, the least of my brethren, I will consider it as done to me.'"<sup>10</sup>

To his priests and brothers Vincent said: "Let us go then, my brothers, and work with a new love in the service of the poor looking even for the most poor and the most abandoned, recognizing before God that they are our lords and masters and that we are unworthy to render them our small services."<sup>11</sup>

In entering into the life and mission of Christ through prayer and lived experience, Vincent interiorized and held out to his followers

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<sup>8</sup> Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris, 1920-1925), 12:130, as cited by Robert P. Maloney, C.M. in *The Way of Vincent de Paul*, 21. Hereafter Coste will be cited as CED.

<sup>9</sup> CED, 9:252.

<sup>10</sup> CED, 10:332.

<sup>11</sup> CED, 11:257.

certain qualities, interior attitudes or virtues of Christ the evangelizer that were to be hallmarks of their spirituality—the lived reality of their faith.

Five of these virtues were to characterize the Congregation of the Mission and three the Daughters of Charity.

In Christ, Vincent saw the virtues of simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification and zeal as inherent in the spirituality of the missionary. In the Daughters of Charity he saw the principal virtues of simplicity, humility and charity as the essence of their spirit.

I am sure that another speaker will address these virtues so I will say only a word about each.

**Simplicity:** For Vincent, simplicity was his gospel. It was the virtue that Christ lived in word and deed. “I am the way, the truth....” In the Vincentian tradition it calls us to dedication to truth and to an avoidance of any duplicity, hence to singleness or purity of intention.

**Humility:** In his incarnation, and in his mission, Jesus exemplified the virtue of humility. Being God, he became like us in all things but sin. For us, humility calls us to recognize the gifts and talents that we have as coming from God, to acknowledge our weakness and to have a deep trust in God’s providence. Vincent lived this reality of humility and exhorted his followers to do the same. On the topic of motivations for humility, Vincent, in 1659 said to his missionaries: “But to honor the words and sentiments of our Lord, we shall merely say that it has been recommended to us by himself, ‘Learn of me who am humble.’”<sup>12</sup>

**Meekness:** For Vincent this virtue according to Father Maloney is the ability to handle anger either by suppressing it or by expressing it in a manner governed by love. It is approachability and affability. It combines gentleness and firmness.

In Vincent’s words: “Our Lord Jesus Christ is the meek master of human beings and of angels. By the practice of this same virtue of meekness you will go to him and bring others to him as well.”<sup>13</sup>

**Mortification:** Jesus is the example of mortification. To follow Jesus, Vincent reminds us that we are called to take up our cross daily. We are called to die to ourselves, to empty ourselves as did Christ in service to others. We die to ourselves in whatever ways call us to leave everything to follow Jesus, to put on Christ. Vincent wrote to Antoine Durand: “It is essential for you father, to empty yourself in order to put on Jesus Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Dodin, *Vincent de Paul and Charity*, 107. (To Missionaries, April 18, 1659, XII, 196).

<sup>13</sup> Dodin, *Vincent de Paul and Charity*, 105. (Abelly; III, 168).

<sup>14</sup> Maloney, *The Way*, 21.

**Zeal:** is the virtue of missionary action. Vincent said, "If the love of God is the fire, zeal is its flame. If love is the sun, then zeal is its ray."<sup>15</sup> Zeal is love in practice. Vincent writes:

Let us love God, my brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows. So very often many acts of love of God, of resting in his presence, of benevolence, and such interior affections and practices, although very good and very desirable, are nonetheless to be suspected if they do not reach the practice of effective love.

For Vincent affective love of God must find expression in effective love of neighbor. The virtue of charity for Vincent was primary and essential to all other virtues and the works of both the members of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity were to be rooted in the virtue of love.

Undergirding all of these virtues, is the reality of Vincent's great devotion to divine Providence. As Jesus trusted in his Father, Vincent always sought providence and trusted in providence. In a letter to Bernard Codoing, Vincent wrote: "The rest will come in its time. Grace has its moments. Let us abandon ourselves to the providence of God and be very careful not to run ahead of it..."

"The consolation that Our Lord gives me is to think that, by the grace of God, we have always tried to follow and not run ahead of providence, which knows so wisely how to lead everything to the goal that Our Lord destines for it."<sup>16</sup>

Vincent's Christology permeated his ecclesiology. For him evangelization of the poor is a sign of the authenticity of the church. For Vincent the mystical body of Christ was predominant: the poor Christ was present in the poor and the poor were present in Christ. The poor were the sacrament, the sign of Christ's presence, who in his Incarnation, his public life and his passion, took on the reality of the suffering poor. It was to the poor that Jesus had come to bring the good news and to minister.<sup>17</sup> This too was Vincent's call. For him service to the

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<sup>15</sup> CED, 12:307-308; 12:262.

<sup>16</sup> CED, 2:456.

<sup>17</sup> Jean Morin, C.M., "La Foi de Saint Vincent," *Carnet Vincentiens*, 3, 13: "La foi de saint Vincent a été la foi d'une Eglise, Ville des pauvres et Servante des pauvres..." "L'évangélisation des pauvres est un signe de l'authenticité de l'Eglise."



poor was similar in value to prayer and adoration of God. He counseled the daughters not to be afraid “to leave God for God”: “If you must leave prayer to attend the sick, leave it, and as you leave God in prayer, you will find Him with the sick.”<sup>18</sup> For Vincent it was essential to give oneself to God, to surrender to God for His service as did Jesus.

Practical love on fire with spreading the kingdom of God, is central to the gospel and so too it is the quality for which Saint Vincent is best known. Trusting in Providence and in imitation of Christ the evangelizer, servant of the poor, Vincent organized and animated numerous men and women to continue this mission and thus incarnated this particular way of living the gospel as the Vincentian tradition.

Pourrat in *Christian Spirituality*, speaks of the spirituality of Saint Vincent de Paul as Bérullian and also wholly practical, directed always towards action. Vincent looked at feelings as stimulants to the performance of duty. He said: “Let us love God, my brethren, let us love God, but let this be at the expense of our arms, and in the sweat of our brows.”<sup>19</sup> Inspired by its leaders and in varying degrees exhibiting the tenets of the French School of Spirituality, Vincent de Paul contributed to this age and thereafter the gift of his own particular spirituality. Pourrat expressed it thus: “The spirituality of Saint Vincent de Paul is entirely ‘informed’ by charity towards one’s neighbor and zeal for the salvation of souls. This charity is his dominant virtue. All his teaching is inspired by it.”<sup>20</sup>

The foregoing presents a brief overview of the Christ of Vincent de Paul that ignited within Vincent the zeal for charity and the salvation of all—Christ who came to bring the good news of freedom, healing and redemption for all, but especially for the poor in whatever guise they came. The lived reality of Vincent’s christology can be summed up best in his own words, “Nothing pleases me but in Jesus Christ”<sup>21</sup> and “Our Lord, [not evangelical quotations] is the rule of the mission.”<sup>22</sup>

For Vincent, the person of Jesus Christ is his driving force and for his Vincentian family is to be the center of their lives and activity. Each

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph Leonard, trans., *Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity* (Great Britain: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1979), IV: 169.

<sup>19</sup> *CED*, 11:40, cited by Pierre Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1953-55), 389.

<sup>20</sup> Pourrat, 393.

<sup>21</sup> Dodin, 55 (Abelly, I:78).

<sup>22</sup> Dodin, 55 (XII:30).

should “put on Christ.” Christ is the rule of the mission.

### WHO WAS CHRIST FOR LOUISE DE MARILLAC?

Let us now consider Saint Louise whose spirituality was also rooted in the principles of the French School of Spirituality. How did her life respond to the question of Jesus, “Who do you say that I am?” Who was Christ for Louise de Marillac?

As we have seen, the most characteristic theological focus of the French School of Spirituality was its Christocentrism which focused on the Incarnation of Jesus. This theological principle was central to the spirituality of Louise de Marillac. For her everything related to Jesus: He was the Word, the revelation of the Father, the second person of the Blessed Trinity. Louise emphasized his divinity, but simultaneously she stressed his holy humanity. She wrote: “I desired to admire on the one hand the true humanity of Jesus and, on the other, His divine works and the word of God which He spoke...”<sup>23</sup>

The humanity of Jesus became for Louise the ultimate model for her relationship with God and with her neighbor. Jesus was her way to the Father. Truly, the leit-motif of the French School of Spirituality became her own: “I live now, not I but Christ lives in me.” (Gal. 2:20) This idea is expressed in Louise’s own words when she wrote:

I desired no longer to subsist of myself. After having been continuously sustained by the grace of God, it seemed to me that all that I am is but grace. I implored God to draw these graces to Himself and thus I would be totally His.<sup>24</sup>

Another basic Christological characteristic of the French School was the imitation of the interior states of Jesus such as his humility, his simplicity and his hidden life. Louise wrote: “...my resolution to practice the most holy virtues of humility, obedience, poverty, suffering and charity in order to honor these same virtues in Jesus Christ who, in His love, has often called me to imitate Him.” For Louise the inner virtues of Jesus were important but as well she like Vincent concentrated on the imitation of Jesus’ actions.<sup>25</sup> She wrote: “Blessed are

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<sup>23</sup> Louise Sullivan, D.C., ed. and trans., *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac: Correspondence and Thoughts* (New York: New City Press, 1991), 702. A.9. Hereinafter cited as SWLM.

<sup>24</sup> SWLM, 702, A.9.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 718: “dispositions of hidden life.”

those persons, who, under the guidance of Divine Providence, are called upon to continue the ordinary practices of the life of the Son of God through the exercise of charity."<sup>26</sup>

Both Louise and Vincent stressed with their daughters that to truly imitate Jesus there must be the imitation of His spirit combined with that of His actions. For Vincent and Louise, the spirit of Jesus was expressed in the fundamental virtues of their congregations.

Louise's desire to imitate Jesus as fully as possible permeated her thoughts, words and actions. Jesus was the model, and focus of her life, through whom she related to God and to her neighbor. For Louise, the Incarnation of Jesus was the greatest gift of the Father. As Mary had given life to Jesus in her heart and her body, likewise Louise desired to give life to Jesus in her heart. In a retreat note she wrote: "I desired to give life to Jesus in my heart by love, thus rendering Him present in me..."<sup>27</sup>

In the true spirit of the spirituality of the French School, Louise was a woman of the Church and like Vincent, her christology permeated her ecclesiology. For Louise the Church was the Mystical Body of Christ through which she encountered Jesus sacramentally and in her neighbor, especially in the poor.

Of the Eucharist she wrote: "It seemed to me that it is in this way that the holy humanity of Our Lord is continually present to us... His presence is like air without which the soul is lifeless."<sup>28</sup>

Regarding her neighbor we read: "I felt a great attraction for the holy humanity of Our Lord and I desired to honor and imitate it insofar as I was able in the person of the poor and of all my neighbors."<sup>29</sup>

Louise's great social endeavors, rooted in the mission of Christ are well known.<sup>30</sup> As Christ came to minister to the poor, so too Louise, through the Mystical Body of Christ, the prolongation of Jesus' mission on earth, served the poor both corporally and spiritually. She always encouraged her sisters to do the same:

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 821, A.26, 6th med., 1657.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 702, A.9.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 784, A.14.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 820.

<sup>30</sup> For an excellent treatment of this subject see, *Louise de Marillac: Social Aspect of Her Work* by Margaret Flinton, D.C., (New York: New City Press, 1991).

Our vocation of servants of the poor calls us to practice the gentleness, humility and forbearance that we owe to others. We must respect and honor everyone: the poor because they are the members of Jesus and our masters; the rich so that they will provide us with the means to do good for the poor.<sup>31</sup>

It is evident that Christ lies at the heart of the spirituality and mission of Vincent and Louise. Christ was their energizing vision.

My favorite description of spirituality is that of Father Maloney in his book, *The Way of Vincent de Paul*. I quote part of it:

It [spirituality] is a vision that generates energy and channels it in a particular direction, thereby enabling a person to transcend himself or herself. For the Christian, it is a way of seeing Christ and being in him that directs the individual's energies in the service of the kingdom.<sup>32</sup>

Vincent saw Christ the evangelizer, come to bring the good news to the poor, to liberate, to heal, to save; Louise saw Christ, the humble suffering servant come to minister to the most destitute, the marginalized, the suffering. For her, "The Charity of Christ Crucified Urges Us."

For both Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, the internalization of their response to Jesus, "Who do you say that I am?" became the vision, insight and source of action that enabled them to transcend themselves to give their all in service of the kingdom.

In the words of Saint Vincent: "We cannot better assure our eternal happiness than by living and dying in the service of the poor and in the arms of Providence, genuinely renouncing ourselves in order to follow Jesus Christ."<sup>33</sup>

Let us now turn to the third area of our consideration: What perspectives of Christian leadership did Saint Vincent and Saint Louise emulate and how do we unfold this legacy? I have selected four characteristics that I think are reflective of the basis of Vincent and Louise's Christian ministry of leadership and which I think are also most applicable for our own Christian ministry of leadership. These

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<sup>31</sup> SWLM, 468, L.424, 1655.

<sup>32</sup> Maloney, *The Way*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Dodin, 90, (To Jean Barreau, Dec. 4, 1648-ET, III, 384).

are: Ministry rooted in the mission of Jesus, Sharing the Mission of the Church, A Life of Prayer-Contemplatives in Action, and Leadership of Service.

## 1. MINISTRY ROOTED IN THE MISSION OF JESUS

The ministry of Saint Louise and Saint Vincent was based on the mission of Jesus. For both of them and for their communities, Jesus was the rule and the model of their lives and service. It was the Incarnate Jesus in all the stages of his life that Louise loved and whose



Kathryn LaFleur, S.P., second from left,  
meets with participants in Chicago.

spirit she tried to imitate: the humble Jesus, the serving Jesus, the suffering Jesus, the dying Jesus, the Resurrected Jesus. For Vincent it was particularly Jesus who had come to evangelize and to set the downtrodden free. For both it was the public ministry of Jesus that inspired their lives of total dedication to the poor and suffering.

Vincent and Louise understood their call to follow Jesus as two-fold: the call to do the will of God and the call to imitate Jesus' ministry of loving service to one's neighbor. In and through Jesus, they lived out their mission of ministry of service to their neighbor in response to the needs of the times.

The mission of Jesus to the poor and suffering will be relevant as long as the world exists and we, as followers in the Vincentian tradition will be relevant as long as we live that mission, remaining rooted in the will of God, in Jesus and responding to the changing needs of the times in light of our Vincentian charism and mission.

## 2. SHARING THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Saint Louise and Saint Vincent realized and affirmed that their sharing in the mission of Jesus was rooted in the mission of the Church. Both impressed upon the daughters and the priests that their mission was that of Christ continued in the mission of the Church. Louise considered herself a daughter of the Church. She realized that within the Church lay the source of her Christian life and the vocation to which she had been called. Rooted in her baptismal commitment she endeavored to live out the mission which she came to believe God had entrusted to her. The many works of charity and services to the poor which she initiated and directed she saw in the context of the Church continuing the mission of Jesus Christ, the Lord of Charity.

Every Christian through baptism is incorporated into Christ's mission and is deputed to share in the ongoing unfolding of his mission in the Church.

Like Vincent, our mission too is carried out as the continuation of Christ's mission in the Church—"to bring the good news to the afflicted, to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed be free, to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord."

## 3. A LIFE OF PRAYER: CONTEMPLATIVES IN ACTION

Only the Provident Spirit of God alive in Vincent and Louise could accomplish the astounding works that they undertook. The fruit of their ministries was the result of lives rooted in the lifegiving soil of faith and nourished by the waters of prayer. In John's gospel we read the words of Jesus: "I am the vine and you are the branches, whoever remains in me, with me in him bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing." Vincent and Louise's ministry was founded in and nourished by their relationship with Jesus. It was their union with the Trinity that enabled them to transcend themselves in order to be the servants that they became. Yet, in a unique way, Vincent understood the words of Jesus, "Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters that you do unto me," as the basis for his oft-quoted words of "leaving Jesus for Jesus." For Vincent and Louise a life of deep prayer and communion with God was the essence of their ministry but when the demands of love of neighbor called them, they were to leave their formal prayer and go to others. Jesus was found in the poor as much as he was in prayer. Anyone who lives a

very active life of ministry is aware of the absolute necessity of solitude time with the Lord in order to remain centered and focused in one's life and ministry.

It is noteworthy that retreats which used to be mainly characteristic of religious life are now common within business corporations - not necessarily from a point of view of spirituality but from one of business acumen.

Reflecting this contemplative quality of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, we know that to be compassionate servants of the poor we need "to be educated in love by prayer."

As models in the ministry of Christian leadership, Louise and Vincent witnessed to faith, hope and love: Both grew to be faith-filled, hope-filled persons who came to trust totally in God's loving Providence and with this trust and practical wisdom ventured into uncharted waters. Their faith was expressed in their good works—especially towards the poor.

Both grew to be persons of profound charity who manifested the depth of their love of God in the compassionate service of their neighbor especially the poor and the most marginalized.

#### 4. LEADERSHIP OF SERVICE

Perhaps one of the outstanding characteristics of Vincent and Louise's Models of Christian Ministry was that of Leadership of Service. In recent years we see this idea expressed in various articles and church documents, but from 1620-1660 and onward, this was a prime characteristic of the leadership of Louise and Vincent. Even today in the Daughters of Charity, the Sister who serves as leader of the local community is called Sister Servant. Modern psychology may look askance at this, but we are dealing here with a community of faith whose mission is modeled on that of Jesus, who came among his own to serve. Hence a leadership of service must be characterized by Christian virtues. For Vincent and Louise their ministry of leadership in their communities was also rooted in the humility, simplicity and loving service of Jesus.

Two other aspects I would invite us to consider about the vibrancy of the mission of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise were their shared vision and their creativity.

It was Vincent and Louise's shared vision of mission that empowered them to collaborate so effectively in their ministries and to remain



Louise de Marillac  
Saint Peter's Basilica  
Rome, Italy

authentic models for today. We have seen how their dedication to the service of the poor, the sick and the suffering in imitation of Jesus was the focus of their ministry. It was for the fulfillment of this mission that Louise and Vincent collaborated with one another and with others, and from this collaboration came the results of their labours, personal enrichment and a legacy for all of Christian ministry and leadership.

Together they have been recognized by the Church as mentors and models for ministry of service and this I think in part because of their dedication to their shared vision for the continuing mission of Jesus.

- Vincent was named the Universal Patron of Charity (1885)

- Louise de Marillac was proclaimed the Universal Patroness of All Those Devoted to Christian Social Works. (1960)

Saint Vincent de Paul said: "Love is

inventive to the point of infinity."<sup>34</sup>

Vincent and Louise were creative in their response to the needs of their times. Their love for the sick, the poor and the suffering transcended inhibiting structures and permitted them to be visionary and revolutionary in their collaborative mission endeavors. Perhaps in our society today, we need to catch a bit of their fire. As followers of Vincent and Louise, this "inventiveness" must be part of the spirit with which we too live out our mission of loving service and leadership.

When I reflect on Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, I am struck by the far-reaching effects of their lives and spirituality and I am greatly challenged by the relevance of their legacy.

In summary, I offer four christological principles of their leadership of service.

<sup>34</sup> Maloney, *The Way*, 123, (CED, 11:146).



1. Like Jesus, Vincent and Louise were prophetic leaders who saw the needs of the times and addressed them.

2. Like Jesus, Vincent and Louise were models of collaboration in ministry so that the poor could be served and evangelized.

3. Like Jesus, Vincent and Louise focused on the dignity of the person, especially the poor, the sick and the suffering.

4. Like Jesus, Vincent and Louise served with humility, simplicity, charity and trust in Providence.

This is the torch that Saint Vincent and Saint Louise pass on to all of us their followers. Their spirit and vision challenge us to fan the flame of love and make it glow.

In Paris, there is a plaque to Saint Vincent which bears the inscription, "Your pain is my pain." As followers of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, we too are summoned by the Spirit to respond to the cries of the poor, to bear their pain. As leaders in the Vincentian tradition we are invited and indeed challenged to a leadership of loving service in imitation of Jesus, the Evangelizer, servant of the poor.

The question Jesus posed to his disciples, "Who do you say I am?", continues to be asked today. Who is Christ for each of us? Who will continue his mission of evangelization? Will we have the courage to answer with our lives as did Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, "Here I am Lord, I come to do your will."

## **CHRISTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES OF VINCENTIAN LEADERSHIP**

As leaders in the Vincentian tradition:

1. How can we be prophetic leaders?

In what ways can we address the discrepancies between the good news of Christ, the Evangelizer, servant of the poor and prevalent counter values of society?

2. How can we model and encourage collaboration with our partners in ministry so that the poor may be better served?

3. How can we, in our particular areas of ministry, promote the dignity of the person, especially the poor, the sick and the marginalized?

4. How can we witness to and encourage the spirit of humility, simplicity, charity and trust in Providence among those we serve and with whom we work?