

Spring 2005

Postcards from the Past: Berceau-de-Saint-Vincent-de-Paul

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Recommended Citation

(2005) "Postcards from the Past: Berceau-de-Saint-Vincent-de-Paul," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 25: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol25/iss1/5>

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Postcards from the Past —Berceau-de-Saint-Vincent-de-Paul—¹

BY

JOHN E. RYBOLT, C.M.

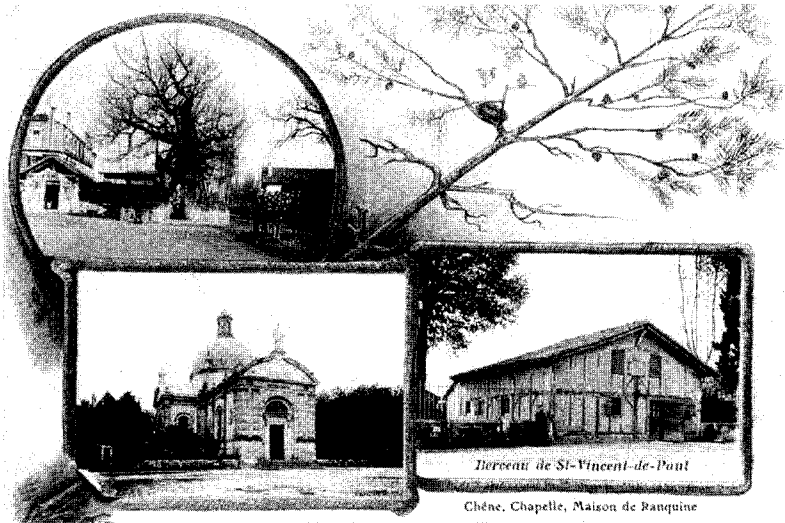
Vincent de Paul was born in the Landes of Gascony, in the diocese of Dax. The term "Gascony" refers to that region of southwestern France that extends from the Garonne river south to the Pyrenees, and "Landes" refers to a part of Gascony that is relatively flat and generally not fertile.

The Berceau

The Berceau-de-Saint-Vincent-de-Paul is officially part of the commune of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul. In the Berceau (cradle) is the farmhouse called *Ranquines*, perhaps from the Gascon term *ranqueja*, to limp. The name may recall the fact that Vincent's father limped, but it seems unlikely, the confusion coming from the fact that the property on which it stands is also called *Ranquines*. Vincent was born here, not in this same building but in an earlier one on the same site. He often described his father as a *pauvre laboureur*, meaning not a simple "laborer" or farm worker in English, but an owner of property who was able to work it. In this the De Paul family differed from many others who did not own land. The term *pauvre* here referred not to his poverty, which would be *laboureur pauvre*, but to his condition of having to work for a living. He once wrote: "it must be said that I am the son of a peasant [laboureur], and that I pastured swine and cows."² Although the family owned the property of *Ranquines*, they owed some feudal taxes, as Vincent recalled in later life to the duke of Ventadour, who was also the marquis of Pouy. Vincent himself inherited land from his father, as he testified in an early will written in 1626.

¹ The following is an edited excerpt from John E. Rybolt's forthcoming English language edition of *A Vincentian Guide to France*. Part historical overview, part travel guide, the book offers an extensive look at sites throughout France, both major and minor, related to the Vincentian Family. It will be published as a CD-Rom, featuring full-color maps and illustrations, and accompanied by a pocket-book. To be printed by the Vincentian Studies Institute, the expected date of release is 2005.

² Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre J. Gabalda, 1920-1925), Letter 1372. Hereinafter cited as *CED*.



"Berceau de St-Vincent-de-Paul. Chêne, Chapelle, Maison de Ranquine." French postcard. Dated 1920.

Vincentina Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois

Only 22 years after the death of Vincent did the question arise of the house where he was born. Guillaume Lostalot (b. 1660), a native of Dax, wrote to his confrere Melchior Molenchon (b. 1653), speaking of Bernard de Paul, Vincent's grandnephew. "He wrote me that the house of Monsieur Vincent fell to the ground, but that the room where he was born has been preserved intact." Another witness wrote that in 1682, when the house fell over, a cross was placed over the ruins.

On 14 February 1706, the ecclesiastical judge of Dax received in the presence of Father de Cès, who knew the area, four testimonies given under oath in preparation for the beatification and canonization of their countryman. Each one has its own interest, even now.

The first testimony came from Louis de Paul, grandnephew of the saint and owner of the Ranquines property. He was 66 years old, a farmer, and declared that: "Monsieur Vincent, [his relative], had never given anything to his relatives to bring them out of their poverty. I heard it said that when Monsieur Vincent was young, he gave away his clothes and a part of his bread to the poor. Monsieur Loustalot, pastor of the parish, had a cross placed over the site of the house where the late Monsieur Vincent was born to preserve the memory of his person, for whom he had a special devotion. I have seen several people cutting and carrying away bits of the wood from this cross because of their esteem for Monsieur Vincent.... The room where

Monsieur Vincent was born remained standing a long time after the rest of the house fell down and, since the room had been nearly ruined, Monsieur Loustalot had a small chapel built there where he placed an image of the Blessed Virgin. He had a picture of Monsieur Vincent painted kneeling before it. Many individuals, even the processions which go to Our Lady of Buglose, stop there to pray to God, to show the veneration which they have for the memory of Monsieur Vincent." It should be remarked, however, that this grandnephew was not well informed about Vincent's help. His official will, dating from 1630, bequeathed land and money to his family and to their children.

The fourth testimony came from Pierre de Pasquau Darose, inhabitant of Pouy, 70 years old, and a master carpenter. He said: "By order of Monsieur de Loustalot, pastor of Pouy, I myself made the cross and built the chapel which are at present on the place of the house where Monsieur Vincent was born. People come to cut off bits of wood from the cross and to pray to God, in this way showing their veneration for the memory of Monsieur Vincent."

Two traditions about the location of the family house exist. The older one, probably the more accurate, places it under the nave of the present large chapel. The more recent tradition separated the chapel from the house, and thus dictated the house's placement. In any case, the entire site is holy.

In its first position the present house was by the side of the road, turned toward it, facing east. The land on which the house stood was purchased only in 1841 to become part of the present Berceau property. In 1864 the house was shifted a little closer to the chapel, with the result that only a small part of the two placements remains the same. Also, it was then turned to face north for reasons of symmetry.

The current six-room house and loft, 12 by 8.5 meters in size, is a typical house of a Gascon landowner, with its exposed wooden joists and compressed earth floor. The marks of the original reeds left their imprint on the bricks that dried on them and, on the inside, only posts and joists were in evidence. In fact, even though this house was not the one that Vincent knew, it is certainly quite similar to it. It evokes him near the very place of his birth. Some of the old beams may have come from the De Paul house. The first crossbeam at the entry, however, has the date 1744 carved in it, coming from one of its reconstructions. Since the outer walls were unstable and frequently repaired, they have been filled with brick and plastered over. The



“Berceau de St-Vincent-de-Paul – Vue prise de la route Buglose.” French postcard.
Early twentieth century.

Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois

house had a kitchen (the main room) with a fireplace, rooms for the eldest son, the parents, Vincent and his brothers, the daughters, and a lean-to, now the oratory. Above is an empty loft. In an earlier time the front section of the loft was used to store hay, brought in through an opening in the front; and the rear held grains. In addition, the original house was another 1.5 meters wide on the west side – a space for animals and tools.

Some relics and other reminders of the saint are preserved below an old altar in the boys' room: a pair of his shoes, a standing crucifix (marked LA CROIX DE NOSTRE R. P. VINCENT DE PAUL), a white linen cloth used to bandage his legs, a fragment of a horsehair belt used as an instrument of penance, a red or violet stole said to have been used by him at Folleville, and two small physical relics. All these items came from the original Saint Lazare and were given to the Berceau by Father Jean Baptiste Étienne, superior general of the Congregation. A copy of a letter written to Vincent's mother, 17 February 1610, recalls that she most probably received it here. The furnishings of the house are not original.

The place where Vincent's birth is commemorated is now found under the sloping roof in the back of the house, where people come to pray and often to celebrate the eucharist. Because the positioning of



"Chapelle du berceau de St-Vincent-De-Paul (Intérieur)." French postcard. Photo-Albert, Dax. Early twentieth century.

Vincentina Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois

the house has been changed, this spot is where the second room on the left, the parents' bedroom, was originally located.

The kind of countryside that Vincent lived in during his childhood was not the extensive pine forest of the Landes that one sees today, since it did not exist in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The forest was planted in the nineteenth century to inhibit the spread of wind-blown sands from the Atlantic shore. Formerly, the Landes were very sandy and easily became marshy. The area of Pouy is located in a bend of the river Adour, still somewhat sandy,

which often has flooded pastures. This region, more than any other, resembles the land as it was in Vincent's day.

The family certainly owned what every small landowner had in the region: a farmyard for cows, pigs and sheep. The Ranquines property was very small, only 30 by 34 meters, but enough for a house, garden and one or more outbuildings. North of the property where the large chapel now stands was a commons, used by the family and their neighbors. Following the usage of these small pastures of olden times, Vincent used to walk along the dusty paths, perhaps using the stilts typical of the Landes, his eyes fixed on the animals confided to his care, and carrying his provisions in a sack. It is not certain that he returned home every evening. There were few large stretches of pasture, and so he would have had to go looking for more fertile land.

All his life Vincent showed the qualities typical of peasants: good sense, patience, confidence in Providence, hard work, and modesty. Like Jesus himself, Vincent was born among humble workers, and always demonstrated love for the poor, the little ones.

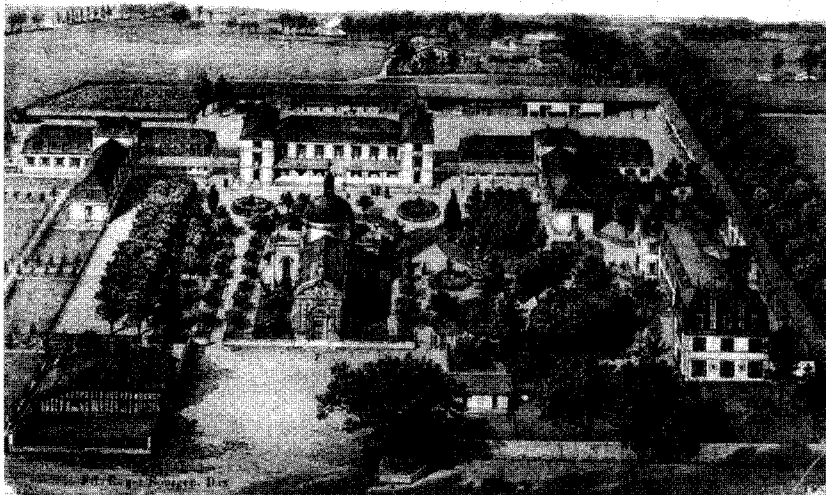
The first accounts of veneration for Vincent in his native area date from 1706 and come from his relatives. Louis Depaul, a farmer at Pouy and owner of Ranquines (mentioned above) and Jean Depaul, another grandnephew, aged 74, lived at Saint-Paul-lès-Dax. He testified, perhaps with some sourness: "I have heard it said by my father that he went to meet Monsieur Vincent while he lived in Paris, to ask his advice about a promise of marriage he had made to a girl whom he had abused. Monsieur Vincent told him that he was obliged to go and marry her. And he gave my father on his return only 10 écus and a letter for Monsieur de Saint Martin. Monsieur Vincent never gave us anything to help lift us out of the low condition in which we were living." Perhaps referring to the same period, Vincent himself admitted to his confreres that some of his relatives were forced to live on alms³ and still do.⁴ This condition might easily have been caused by the problems of the Fronde. During this time, some of Vincent's friends helped them, as he did himself.... It should be noted, however, that Vincent made a will three years after a visit home in 1624, and disposed of his property in and around Dax by giving it all to his family.⁵

³ CED, Conference 148, 1656.

⁴ CED, Conference 204, 1659.

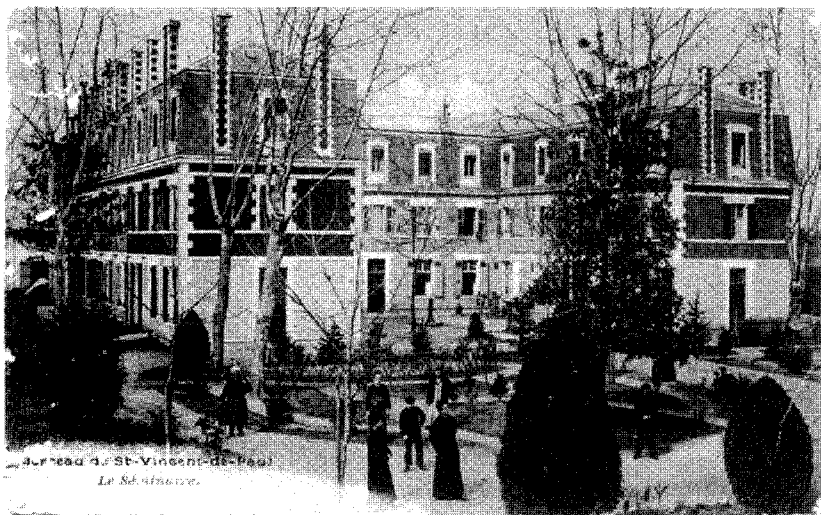
⁵ CED, Document 27.

Vue panoramique du Berceau de SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL



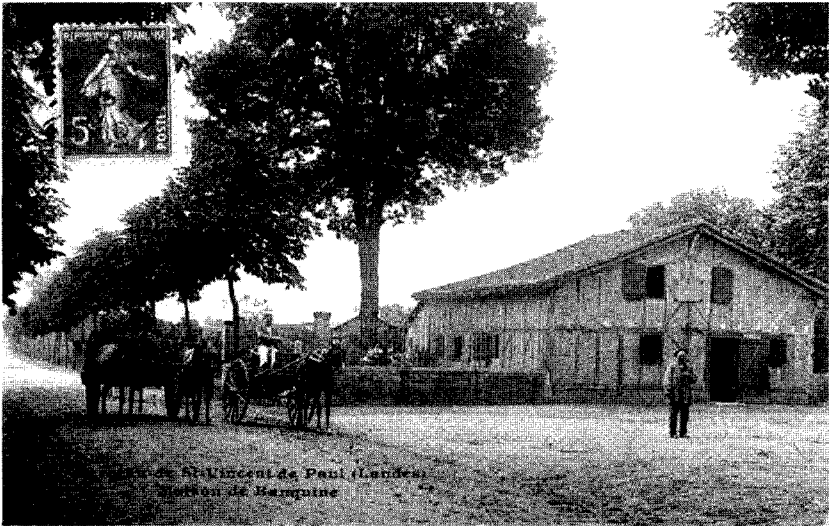
"Vue panoramique du Berceau de Saint Vincent De Paul." French postcard. Imp. C. Jeangette – Sannois. Early twentieth century.

Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois



"Berceau de St-Vincent-de-Paul. Le Séminaire." French postcard. Early twentieth century.

Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois



“Berceau de St Vincent de Paul (Landes). Maison de Ranquine.” French postcard.
Mid-twentieth century.

Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois

The great oak tree, called *Lou Bielh Cassou* (the old oak) in Gascon, is centuries old. The fall of one of its huge branches in 1939 allowed a piece of its wood to be sent for analysis in Bordeaux. The conclusions of specialists showed a planting date of between 1200 and 1230. Young Vincent certainly rested in its shade, although it was not a part of the family property, since the road passed it on either side. The oak is one of several ancient trees preserved in the Landes.

At the Revolution, agitators tried to burn it. The tree's worst enemies, however, have been indiscreet pilgrims who took away bits of the bark as a souvenir of the saint. We have such important witnesses as the duchess of Berry and the duchess of Angoulême. Even a spiritual son of Saint Vincent, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, wrote about events of 2-3 December 1852: “I send you, my dear friend, a leaf from a blessed tree. It will dry out in the book where you leave it, but charity will never wither in your heart... I saw in it a symbol of the foundations of Saint Vincent de Paul. They never seem held to the earth by anything human, and they nevertheless have been triumphing for centuries and growing amid revolutions.” The pastor of the place had an entire branch cut down for the founder of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, destined for their General Council. The Vincentians at Buglose gave a cross and rosary to Pius IX in 1856,



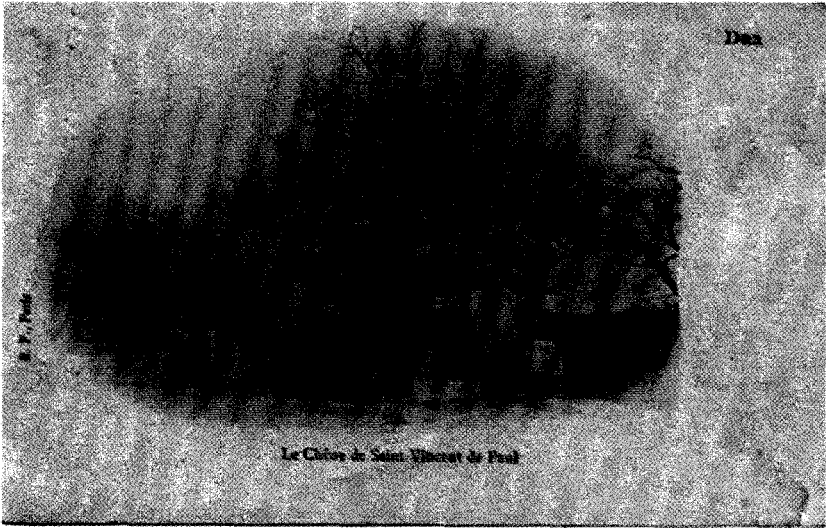
"Berceau de St-Vincent-de-Paul. Intérieur de la Maison où naquit St-Vincent-de-Paul."
 French postcard. Photo Albert – Dax. Mid-twentieth century.
Vinciantiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois

using wood from the tree. Such treatment clearly compromised the future of the oak. In earlier days a retired soldier was stationed to guard it. Protective enclosures were built in 1824 and 1857. In recent years a barrier has been built around it and the tree reinforced with iron rings and cement plugs. It measures about 12 1/2 meters (38 feet) in circumference.

In 1868 the oak was believed to be dying, especially since someone had set a fire in it in 1865 to rid it of hornets. Fortunately, the son (*Lou Hill* in Gascon) is vigorous. This sprout, planted in 1857, is taller than its parent and shades Ranquines. Some acorns have also been taken away and in many countries other descendants of the oak are flourishing.

In 1951 it was decided to make a selection of the best acorns. Experts performed what was called the "marriage of the oak," since they placed a huge white veil over the tree to assure that the tree would have acorns of a pure type. Ceremonies with music and dancing accompanied the event, but, mysteriously, that year, for the first and last time, not a single acorn appeared on the entire tree.

It is certain that oak trees were part of the countryside familiar to Vincent as a young boy. Calvet wrote in his biography of the saint: "Around each house a clump of oaks developed. They were protection



"Le Chêne de Saint Vincent de Paul. Dax." French postcard. B.F., Paris. Mid-twentieth century.

Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois

against the west wind, a shelter for pigs that fed on the acorns, shade in the summer, and a noble decoration in any season." The account of Vincent placing a small statue of Mary in a fold of the trunk and then praying there is legendary, dating only from the nineteenth century.

In 1706, a small chapel had been built next to the house. Then, to respond to the increasing devotion of the faithful after Vincent's beatification in 1727, another chapel opened in 1730, probably built on the site of his birthplace. Blessed at the end of 1751, it lasted for exactly a century. At that time it gave way to the present chapel, built on the same site. On 6 August 1851, the first stone was laid in the presence of the prefect of the Landes, and the bishop celebrated mass under the old oak. The chapel itself was loosely modeled on the Val de Grâce in Paris. Progress was slow because of a lack of funds. Contributions from the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity, together with a national lottery, allowed work to continue. A barely legible inscription over the main door recalls its inauguration thirteen years after construction began: ANNO DOMINI MDCCCLXIV DIE XXIV MENSIS APRILIS HOC SACELLUM D.O.M. FUIT SOLEMNITER DEDICATUM IN MEMORIAM ORTUS S. VINCENTII A PAULO ("On 24 April in the year of Our Lord 1864 this chapel was solemnly dedicated to God in memory of the birthplace of Saint Vincent de Paul.") The architect was



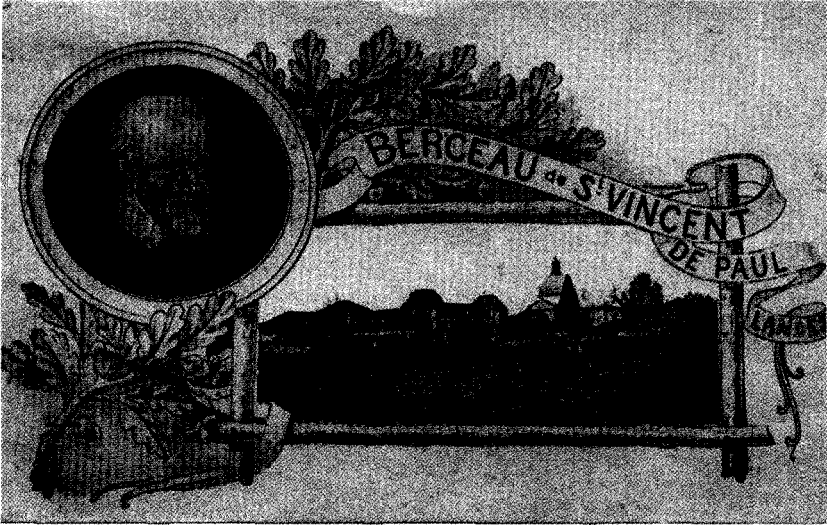
"Chapelle de l'Établissement du Berceau de St-Vincent-de-Paul." French Postcard.
Early twentieth century.

Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois

initially Jacques Ignace Hittorff, who had designed the great parish church of Saint Vincent in Paris. His elaborate plans were simplified by a disciple, Gallois, the architect of the Vincentian motherhouse chapel in Paris.

Over the main door of the chapel is a carving of the young Vincent aiding a poor man. The inscription reads *QUIS PUTAS PUER ISTE ERIT* ("Who do you think this boy will be?"), a citation from Luke 1:66. Above the door is a large statue of the saint similar to that in the Vincentian motherhouse. It shows him in a gesture of openhanded charity. Below are figures of faith, hope and charity, dated 1864. The text, *PERTRANSIIT BENEFACIENDO* ("He went about doing good"), is a citation from Acts 10:38. The sculptures are the work of M. Forget, a Parisian artist.

On 14-15 July 1947, a great fire broke out, destroying several buildings. Among them, the chapel burned and its dome collapsed. Because of the energy of two Vincentian priests, Fathers Pierre and Descamps, and the work of Nazi prisoners of war, it reopened 1 December 1948. A modern painting of Saint Vincent in heaven, with angels, now fills the dome. Various outdoor plaques honor former students of the Berceau who served in the second World War and Indochina as well as the many more who died in the first World War.



"Berceau de St. Vincent De Paul, Landes." French postcard. Dated April 1937.
Vincetiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois

Thanks also to the generosity of many donors, especially followers of Vincent, the chapel has taken on new life. The most recent altar, built of Bordeaux limestone, was consecrated 27 November 1980 by the bishop of Aire and Dax.

In 1980 Victor Feltrin of Paris carved a strong wooden statue of Saint Vincent. The same artist did a matching statue of Mary the following year. The inside decoration is relatively sober. The letters SV, either intertwined or separated, are nearly the only specifically Vincentian element in stone. The stained glass windows, dating from 1864, copy closely those in the Vincentian motherhouse, depicting incidents in his life and after his death. The central window behind the main altar depicts Vincent escorted by angels into glory. The transept windows, in the shape of a fan, recall his presumed birth date, 24 April 1576, and the dedication of the chapel, 23 April 1864.

A plaque in the right transept reads: "To the memory of the priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Mission and of the Daughters of Charity of the Berceau of Saint Vincent de Paul, who dedicated themselves to children and youth from 1864 to our days. Their Grateful Students." The first Vincentians and Daughters at the Berceau repose in a crypt under the chapel.

The small organ – one manual, seven stops – was the work of the famous builder Cavaillé-Coll. Jean Baptiste Étienne paid for it personally from his family inheritance, and it was installed in 1873. In 1998, it was renewed and enlarged.

The mission of the Berceau was developed early in the nineteenth century under the inspiration of the prefect of the Landes and the bishop of Aire and Dax. It perpetuates the memory of the saint in his birthplace. At the beginning, it was decided to have all his major works represented here. The first to open was a house for the elderly bereft of resources, and for poor orphans. The elderly would receive proper care, and the orphans would receive education and training. The Vincentians and Daughters of Charity were to assume charge of the work under the responsibility of a board. Frédéric Ozanam spoke enthusiastically of the project, and Napoleon III authorized a national lottery to help accomplish it. The work began in 1864 and received civil recognition the next year. The emperor had assigned a military architect to design the buildings, which explains their style – reminiscent of nineteenth-century military barracks from the Paris region. A modern Catholic school adjacent to the old buildings continues the primary and secondary schools begun in the nineteenth century. Its first student was one André Depaul, a distant relative of Vincent.

The hospice became a retirement center and has gradually been modernized. One of the wings admits aged sisters. The active sisters work in the retirement center and bring care to the homes of the needy.

After the other construction, the Vincentians had a minor seminary built in 1868. It also received émigré Spanish Vincentians in 1869 during a revolution and French Vincentian students during the wars of 1870 and 1939. This seminary graduated some 350 members of the Congregation of the Mission, including seven missionary bishops. The chapel, built in 1934, has several striking stained glass windows, particularly one of Saint John Gabriel Perboyre. After 1971, the building became a diocesan “collège” (a residential secondary school). The priests no longer have responsibility for it but continue as its chaplains. They do the typical Vincentian works and, with the sisters, receive pilgrims through the work of the Vincentian Center, located in two buildings across the road from Ranquines. These are arranged for groups and present exhibits.