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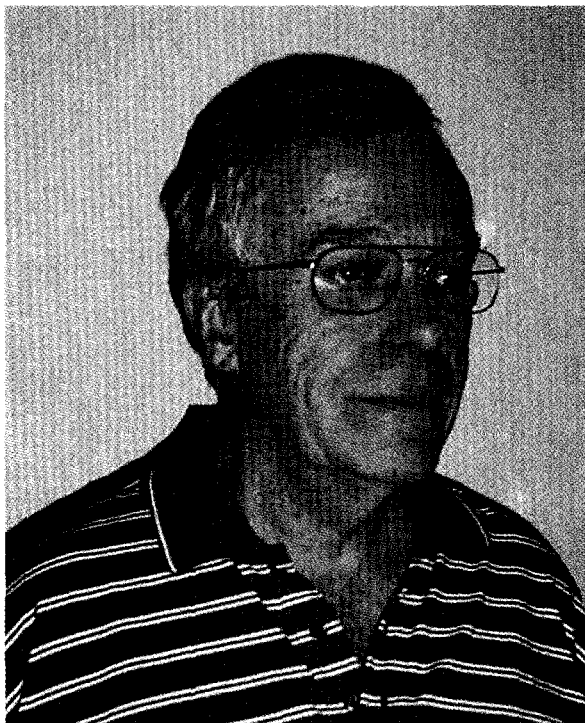
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Saint Vincent de Paul and Money

BY

JOHN E. RYBOLT, C.M., PH.D.



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Courtesy of The Hay-Vincentian Leadership Project

In the courtyard of the Vincentian motherhouse in Paris, standing above the main entry, is one of my favorite statues of Vincent de Paul. We see him there life-sized, gazing on those who enter, with his arms down and his large hands open but empty. This gesture is obscure and rare in religious art. One example is above the entry of the cathedral of Autun, a sculpture of Jesus the judge in the same attitude. Perhaps it is a gesture of welcome, Jesus welcoming the visitor to his house, to heaven. But I like to think of Vincent's gesture as having financial implications. There he is, son of landowning peasants and lord (*sieur*) of Saint-Lazare, through whom millions of livres¹ passed for the service of the needy, with none of it sticking to his hands. Even in the final month of his life, September 1660, finances were one of his concerns, as an examination of his last letters will show.²

¹ A money of account, the standard for France in Vincent's day. It did not circulate as a coin.

² All citations of Vincent's correspondence are taken from Pierre Coste, C.M., *Vincent De Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Marie Poole, D.C., trans. and ed., et al, Vols. 1-9, 13a&b (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1985-2005). Hereinafter cited as CCD. See letters 3254, 8:508-09; 3257a, 8:513-14; 3270, 8:527-28; 3280, 8:536-38. Louis Abelly, Vincent's first biographer, mentions 1.6 million livres for the relief of Lorraine, and 1.2 million in various amounts for ransom of Christian captives in North Africa. See Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul, Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission (Divided Into Three Books)*, 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, N.Y., 1993), book 1, chap. 35, p. 186, and book 2, chap. 1, sect. 7, part 12, p. 12.

This gesture contrasts with many others that have become associated with Vincent. There are two in particular. The first is Vincent with the babies, a sort of Santa Claus figure, round, chubby, kindly, even safe. The second is Vincent the preacher, generally with a crucifix in his upraised hand. Which gesture really depicts the genuine Vincent? We can make up our minds individually about this. My interest here is to focus, however, on the topic of Vincent and money: his world, his practice, and his theory.³

1. Economic structures of Vincent's time

One of the temptations in any study of Vincent de Paul, as it is of Jesus and other great figures, is to mold him into the person we want him to be: Santa Claus, missionary, whatever. Vincent, to be clear about it, was a male, born in France, in a particular time and place, who became a Catholic priest. This implies that he lived within certain structures, religious, social, political, and, for our purposes, economic. Although he worked to reform some structures, others were imposed on him, principally the following four.

First, the French lived largely upon earnings made from agriculture. Historians of early seventeenth-century France estimate the population at about 20 million, probably less.⁴ Out of those, 15

³ The most important published studies on this subject are: Jaime Corera, C.M., "Las bases económicas de la comunidad vicenciana," *Anales de la Congregación de la Misión é de las Hijas de la Caridad*, 85:4 (April 1977), 462-84, reprinted in his *Diez Estudios Vicencianos* (Santa Marta de Tormes, 1983), 129-57; Jaime Corera, C.M., "Bienes," *Diccionario de la Espiritualidad Vicenciana* (Santa Marta de Tormes, 1995), 43-46; Jean Jacquart, "La politique foncière de Monsieur Vincent," in *Vincent de Paul. Actes du colloque international d' des vincentiennes* [Paris, 1981] (Rome, 1983), 129-43; English version: Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., trans., "Saint Vincent's Real Estate Policy," *Vincentian Heritage* 7:2 (1986), 181-203; Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., "Vincentian Values and Fund Raising for the Mission," *Vincentian Heritage* 13:1 (1992), 13-35; Alejandro Rigazio, C.M., "L'administration des biens, selon l'esprit de Saint Vincent," trans. Georges Baldacchino, C.M., *Bulletin des Lazaristes de France* 113 (Février 1988), 21-37; and 114 (Avril 1988), 23-35; José María Román, C.M., *St. Vincent de Paul. A Biographé*, trans. Sr. Joyce Howard, D.C. (London, 1999), 293-95, chap. XVI, "The struggle to put the company on a more solid financial basis"; his "Las Fundaciones de San Vicente," *Vincentiana* 27:4-6 (July-December, 1984), 457-86; English version: "The Foundations of Saint Vincent de Paul," trans. Stafford Poole, C.M., *Vincentian Heritage*, 9:2 (1988), 134-60; and the dissertation by René Wulfman, *Charité publique et Finances Privées: Monsieur Vincent, Gestionnaire et Saint*, Villeneuve d'Ascq, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1998. Two unpublished studies should also be listed, both found in the Archives of the Congregation of the Mission, Paris, France: Félix Contassot, C.M., "La vie matérielle des Missionnaires," (1959); Bernard Koch, C.M., "Saint Vincent Gestionnaire," (1992).

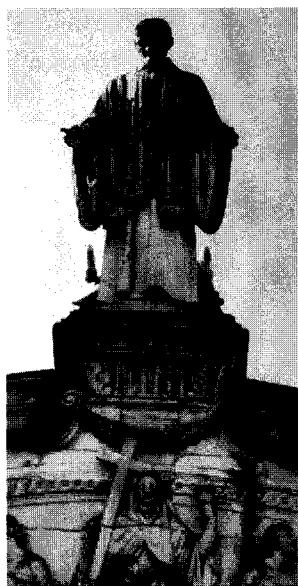
⁴ Corera, "Bienes," 43.

million lived in the country. In addition, there were about two million artisans of various kinds, both rural and urban. This total of 17 million people (designated the "third estate," the *roturiers*) generally lived from the land. Their labor supported the three million above them, the clergy (the "first estate") and the nobles (the "second estate"), the whole forming a theoretical pyramid with fixed membership and obligations, similar in some ways to the caste system in Hindu societies. A surprising statistic is, however, that the ownership of land is estimated to have been nearly equally divided between the peasants and other landowners. Vincent's family belonged to this class of landowning peasants. Serfdom had been eliminated from France by Vincent's day, although many unfortunates were effectively bound to the land through chronic indebtedness.⁵

The land that the French peasants worked provided, in the first place, crops (for food and drink) from fields, meadows and orchards. But it also gave wood products and wild game from forests and scrublands, minerals from mines, and pasture for domestic animals bred for work, food, and their products such as hides, wool and horns (horses, cattle, swine, poultry, sheep). In addition, fish came from the sea, rivers, lakes or ponds. As a general rule, farming peasants had additional skills beyond tilling the soil. Some were obliged to transport their goods to market, and even to manufacture the means of transportation, and so developed as wheelwrights, harness makers, carters and porters. Others finished and prepared their produce, such as butchers, millers, coopers, tanners, weavers and rope makers. They thus were laying the groundwork for small cottage industries. Many peasants, unfortunately, could produce only enough for their own consumption. By contrast, luckier or more industrious ones would be able to set aside a percentage for trade or sale in local fairs or distant markets, in which they often participated. Some rural dwellers enjoyed certain advantages by working for the lords as tenant farmers or servants in their country chateaus.

Despite periods of good weather and a concomitant increase of productivity, French peasants generally lived on the brink of famine because of occasional bad weather, crop diseases and animal pests. One of the greatest causes of disaster, however, was taxation,

⁵ General works covering the material are Françoise Bayard, *Le Monde des Financiers au XVIIe Siècle* (Paris, 1988); Fernand Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce*, vol. 2, *Civilization & Capitalism 15th-18th Centurés*, trans. Siân Reynolds (New York, 1982).



Vincent de Paul, his hands open.
Image collection of the Vincenitian Studies Institute

the second important financial structure. In general, all land belonged to a lord, a *seigneur*; and anyone who worked the land, whether they had unencumbered title to it or not, had to pay residual duties to the landlord. The produce of the land was likewise taxed, but the regions of France had various systems of taxation, with some peasants paying collectively as part of their village, and others paying individually. The Church too had rights to the fruits of labor, collecting annual tithes ostensibly to support their pastors and to care for the poor of the parish. Regrettably, large portions of that income went to support the lavish lifestyle of careless pastors. All this was bad enough. But to make matters worse, neither the Church nor the nobility paid taxes themselves, apart from feudal duties on some properties (*cens*). Because peasants found it extremely difficult to get ahead, many abandoned their farms. This iniquitous system led to migration to the cities and the increasing pauperization of the countryside throughout Vincent's life.⁶

⁶ Brian Nolan, C.M., "The Poor Country People of Seventeenth Century France," *Colloque* 5 (Spring 1982), 5-13.

The third element was the feudal social structure of peasants, nobles and clergy. The theory of the three estates worked well in an ideal order, but the fact was that the framework of social mobility was not evolving to accommodate the changes that the Renaissance introduced. It may seem that society was divided simply between rural and urban, rich and poor, but the reality was complex. In the cities, literally hundreds of specialties were developing in the professions, in manufacturing and in services, generally destined to support the upper classes. Just naming some of them will give us a sense of the vibrancy of life in Vincent's day. In the trades, think of workers in wood, metal, stone, glass, pottery, as well as laborers in construction, such as plasterers, painters, plumbers and roofers. Others worked in personal adornment: clothing and furnishings, as well as the luxury trade, such as goldsmiths, jewelers, silk weavers, shoemakers, fan makers and milliners. Other professional jobs developed as well, such as portrait and landscape painters, musicians, engravers, mapmakers, and printers. Architects and engineers always had a role, as did an increasing army of civil servants, moneychangers, and entrepreneurs, together with those in the legal professions: clerks, notaries, attorneys and judges. Think of health care, education, entertainment, information, food service, even soldiers and police. The church too had its own army of clerks involved in the management of what was becoming a chaotically complex entity. Since these persons were paid for their work, they were generally able to better their condition, and thus had funds to invest and hopefully to augment.

Continuing the catalogue of occupations, we can list others involved in services in the cities, such as messengers, coachmen, stable keepers, cooks, barbers, washerwomen, cleaners, peddlers and porters of all sorts of goods, not the least of which was water. They were poorly paid. And at a level below these were the abandoned and marginalized poor, the literal dregs of society, who made a living anyway they could. Here we find the chronically unemployed, beggars, drifters, criminals, prisoners, common prostitutes and pimps, demobilized soldiers, war refugees and economic migrants, plus the mentally and physically handicapped, and the homeless. Vincent, to be sure, moved in all these levels of society.

Apart from those living a truly isolated existence, all these persons, from the top to the bottom of society, lived within certain financial parameters, the fourth major structure we are considering. In rural France, many handled currency only rarely, living on the level

of barter or payment in kind. The nobles and clergy could receive what was due them in taxes through cash, labor (*corvée*), or payment in kind: crops, animals or finished products, such as wine or salted meats and fish. In the cities, however, the nobles and clergy mainly conducted their affairs with cash, namely coins. Now, the idea of a standard of coinage uniform throughout the kingdom was not yet operative, since many entities, civil and religious, had the right to their own mints; hence the importance of moneychangers. However, to ease transactions and avoid the danger of carrying large amounts of heavy coins, letters of exchange grew in importance.⁷ That is, a merchant or banker in one city could call on a trusted colleague known to him in another city to satisfy his debts, guaranteed by notarized letters, a service that entailed significant costs.⁸ Paper money was unknown in Europe, although at times letters of exchange would pass from creditor to creditor, serving as a preliminary to our banknotes.

Savings banks did not exist in France, and for this reason, those with surplus cash turned to other means to increase their holdings. Some lent their money to the state, which issued bonds guaranteeing future income. Others invested in various commercial colonial enterprises, such as the Company of the East Indies charged with the promotion of trade in Madagascar, or in financing real estate and housing developments in France, through the purchase of shares or mortgages. Those with less abundant means could invest in jewels or artwork, or even buy annuities or pensions, with a promise of regular future payment. The entire complex can be called incipient capitalism.

2. Vincent's responsibilities

These were, then, some of the socio-economic structures in which Vincent de Paul lived. He had responsibilities for the various organizations that he initiated, and each one followed a somewhat different method of financing. Even a rapid reading of his correspondence will show that he was involved in a multiplicity of financial undertakings and was well aware of their complexities.

⁷ Yves Leclercq, *Histoire économique et financière de la France d'Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1998), 132-37. See also relevant articles in Marcel Marion, *Dictionnaire des Institutions de la France aux XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles* (Paris, 1923), reprint 1984.

⁸ Vincent mentions this system occasionally in his later correspondence, Monsieur Simonnet, his banker in Paris (beginning in 20 November 1654), and the banking house of Louis and Jean Napollon in Marseilles (see CCD, letter 1802, 5:227; 2478, 7:7; among many others).

Confraternities of Charity

Historical overview. His earliest work was the Confraternities of Charity, a parish-based group of charitable persons organized to help the needy of their parish. He founded the first one in 1617 in Châtillon-les-Dombes, a town in the archdiocese of Lyons. The Charities came to be established in towns and cities alike, including Paris.

Sources of income. Vincent stipulated that they should operate from freewill offerings, often in the form of bequests. This meant that local charitable benefactors would be urged to give of their surplus as needed, and that the members would, if possible, pay dues.⁹ Cardinal Richelieu himself donated a sum to launch the Confraternity in the new parish at Richelieu.¹⁰ In addition, the Charities often received the right from municipal authorities to place collection boxes in public places, such as parishes and inns. The sisters or brothers of the Charity were also allowed to solicit funds at the parish church after Sunday or feast day mass, as well as to visit homes in town for the same purpose.¹¹

Living from donations alone is inherently unreliable in the long term, and the Charities often found themselves in difficulties. Some failed through lack of support or even mismanagement of resources. Expenses could be high, since many Confraternities had to support chapels for their use, and had to house the sick and the poor, particularly transients, in small hospitals. To redress their deficits, some Charities kept small flocks of sheep or goats to provide wool, milk and meat for the indigent.¹² The regulations Father Vincent designed for the Charities demanded good financial management, through regular reporting and checks and balances.¹³

In Paris, however, another kind of Charity developed by 1634, not parish based but more general in scope. Its forty to fifty female members, the "Ladies of Charity," came from the nobility and helped in special cases, like the general hospital (Hôtel-Dieu), disaster relief, help for indigent clergy, and impoverished rural nobles. Because of

⁹ CCD, letter 1154, 3:505.

¹⁰ CCD, letters 320, 1:458; 644, 2:406. In modern terms, this amounted to about a \$3 million endowment (see notes 27, 28 below).

¹¹ See, for example, CCD, docs. 125, 13b:7; 126, 13b:17; 127, 13b:24.

¹² See CCD, doc. 137, 13b:85.

¹³ CCD, doc. 109 (on financial reporting), 13a:402; and 125 (control of petty cash), 13b:6.

their social status, these women could solicit alms “in good houses,” and would supplement what they received with their own gifts.¹⁴

Congregation of the Mission

Vincent de Paul had quite a different idea for the Congregation of the Mission, his second foundation. His confreres were not to work for a living, that is, they should receive no salaries for their spiritual ministry. He wrote in the *Common Rules* of the Congregation: “Our ministry on missions could hardly be carried out if we lived in total poverty, since missions are to be given without charge.”¹⁵ In addition, he forbade begging or living off alms.¹⁶ With these three possible means ruled out, the only other way was to live off income from other sources.

Historical overview. The Congregation of the Mission began in 1625 with investments. Monsieur and Madame de Gondi, Vincent’s first great benefactors, were the true founders of the Congregation in the sense that they turned over to their chaplain, Monsieur Depaul, both cash and the promise of other income on condition that he invest the principle “on land investments or established revenues.”¹⁷ With this large sum of 45,000 livres, about \$2.25 million today, he would be able to support himself and five or six of his earliest companions for several years in their work of giving missions, without forcing the country poor to pay for the privilege of being evangelized. Nevertheless, the missionaries still had to eat, clothe and care for themselves, and travel. He explained: “Our situation is not like that of the Mendicants. All they have to do is pitch their tent and they are established. But we, who do not take anything from the poor, need revenue...”¹⁸

¹⁴ CCD, letter 2114, 6:58.

¹⁵ CCD, doc. 117, 13a:440, chap. III, 2. This practice was not original with Vincent, however.

¹⁶ The original rules of office in the *Codex Sarzana* contain two points pertinent to this discussion. The first is part of the obligations of the superior general: “...he has the right to ...enter contracts of buying, selling, exchanging, paying the annual rent due to some contract, and to redeem such rent. However he shall have no authority to sell immovable goods or to suppress houses, save with the consent of a general congregation [assembly]” (350). The second deals with the obligations of the local superior: “He shall add to and preserve the temporal goods of the house in such a way that the reign of God and his justice will be sought first” (388). “Codex Sarzana,” transcribed and edited by John E. Rybolt, C.M., *Vincentiana* 33:4-5 (July-October 1991): 307-406.

¹⁷ CCD, doc. 59, 13a:215. The total is calculated on a rate of return of about 5%.

¹⁸ CCD, letter 1553, 4:466.

As the Congregation grew, new financial concerns demanded his attention. The first was the priory of Saint-Lazare, the historic motherhouse of the Congregation. When he accepted it in 1632, his community was only seven years old and numbered nine priests, living with fourteen brothers and candidates, one of the smallest in Paris. But Saint-Lazare was one of the largest, if not the very largest, ecclesiastical property of the capital. The previous community of canons who had lived and worked there reasoned that Vincent and his missionaries would continue in some spiritual respects their centuries-old care for lepers. The relevant sentence of the contract for the union of Saint-Lazare to the Congregation of the Mission reads: "...since the revenues of the priory had been intended for the corporal relief and assistance of poor lepers, and since there were no lepers, it would be more normal and in conformity with the intention of the founders to apply those revenues to the spiritual assistance of poor people in rural areas far from the cities, tainted by the leprosy of sin..."¹⁹ Their donation, however, came with several strings attached: most buildings, in poor condition, would require expensive repairs; the contiguous farm and orchards, plus windmills and a quarry, would need workers; and the canons had a right to receive food, lodging and annuities from the new proprietors. Added to this, Vincent was becoming the owner of Saint-Lazare's rental property, consisting of entire streets and their buildings in Paris, plus extensive farms and mills in the country. It is no wonder, then, that he had hesitated more than a year before accepting the priory. In any case, the income from all these pre-existing sources would allow the Mission to continue.²⁰ Owning Saint-Lazare, however, changed the Congregation of the Mission forever.

At the beginning, only a few, all younger than Vincent, joined him to imitate Jesus, the "Evangelizer of the Poor."²¹ Brimming with zeal and mortification, they were little concerned about how they lived or maintained themselves. But once he moved to Saint-Lazare and the Congregation grew, Vincent found himself having to provide for his sick and elderly confreres, as well as for the novices and students swelling their numbers.²² Besides, he incurred obligations to

¹⁹ CCD, doc. 77, 13a:264.

²⁰ See the details in Wulfman, *Charité*, 284-91.

²¹ Abelly, *Life*, book 3, chap. 2, p. 20.

²² See CCD, letter 1527, 4:425.

his missionaries outside France, such as in North Africa, Poland, Italy, and, most famously, Madagascar. As superior general, therefore, he was responsible for the food, lodging, clothing, and medical care of his confreres, as well as for supplies for churches and chapels, and for the education of his junior confreres, with their needs for pens, ink, paper and books. Travel expenses for the older missionaries were not insignificant,²³ nor were those involved in the administration of a growing enterprise. On top of all this, Vincent had to provide hospitality at Saint-Lazare, as well as many other houses, for clergy and laity on retreat.²⁴ And then there were the poor who came to the door in search of help. It is no surprise, then, that Vincent insisted on stable financial foundations for any new apostolate²⁵ and, when he occasionally discovered that bishops were not honoring their commitments, he withdrew his confreres.²⁶

It is difficult to have a concrete idea of how much it cost to support one of his confreres each year. However, Vincent reported that an average of between 300 and 400 livres would suffice.²⁷ A comparison with US dollars for the support of one Vincentian in the United States today is likewise problematic, but appears to amount to a factor of between forty and fifty times the stated amount in livres.²⁸

Sources of income. Where, then, did the funds come from for this complex undertaking? Land and its produce accounted for a major

²³ He budgeted fifty livres for two Daughters going to Richelieu, more than twenty percent of their annual living expenses. *CCD*, letter 351, 1:499.

²⁴ He wanted to avoid charging room and board, but reluctantly agreed to do so. See *CCD*, letter 1975, 5:490.

²⁵ *CCD*, letter 2849, 7:581: "Then we see if that [a new foundation] is within our power and if the conditions are reasonable, and we do what we can to further the project, in so far as we see that God wills it." Also, *CCD*, letter 625, 2:343.

²⁶ *CCD*, letter 2624, 7:223; he withdrew his men from the seminary at Périgueux in 1651, for example. *CCD*, letters 1335, 1336, 4:174-75; 1450, 4:311.

²⁷ "...a thousand livres a year are needed to maintain two priests and a coadjutor Brother." *CCD*, letter 1972, 5:485; also 207, 1:298; 1917, 5:429. In Poland, one priest's maintenance required 400 livres; letter 2091, 6:2-3. The contract with the canons of Saint-Lazare offers similar data; letter 178, 1:250. Vincent calculated that 3000 livres would support eight nuns in Paris for one year, equaling 375 livres each; letter 2915, 8:48; and 300 livres would support an elderly woman; letter 1936, 5:446. The sum of 20 sous (or one livre) was needed daily to support the cost of ordinands on retreat at Saint-Lazare; letter 461, 2:89.

²⁸ Contemporary figures for comparison are difficult to verify, but see John J. McCusker, *Money and Exchange in Europe and America, 1600-1775. A Handbook* (Chapel Hill: 1978); and the information by Gerry Lalonde, in "Monetary Values in 1650-1750 in New France Compared to Today," online at <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~unclefred/MONETARY.htm>.

portion. Vincent remarked, probably as a result of meditation on the economic facts of his life, that the missionaries lived “on the patrimony of Jesus Christ, on the sweat of the poor.”²⁹ Income from poor farm laborers flowed in not only to Saint-Lazare but also to his other foundations.³⁰ A second source was income from real estate, whether buildings or farm properties, that he owned, managed and leased to others. At times, he shared this income with other beneficiaries, depending on the conditions of the contract.³¹ A third source was public services, such as tolls from bridges and mills, and especially from coach lines that carried both passengers and freight. The young king Louis XIV granted this surprising franchise to the Mission, certainly with his mother’s encouragement, as a charitable subsidy for Vincent’s many works. In this case, he allowed a benefactor, the duchess of Aiguillon, to lease the lines and apply income to various charitable works.³²

The founder engaged, fourthly, in investments, particularly in municipal bonds issued by the city of Paris.³³ Collection of future taxes guaranteed the dividends. He also enjoyed duty-free products, particularly the salt and wine destined for Saint-Lazare, a significant subsidy dating from long before the advent of the Congregation of the Mission.

He received income, fifthly, from civil offices. He personally drew a state salary of six hundred *livres* as Chaplain General of the Galleys, an office he began in 1619, before the foundation of the Congregation,³⁴ and continuing it until his last years. The income went, of course, not into his pocket, but to support the works of the missionaries serving the galleys. Another civil office was that of the consulates in North Africa. He purchased these offices from the state with funds made available by the duchess of Aiguillon. Named by him and approved by the state, the consuls served the interests of France

²⁹ Pierre Coste, C.M., *Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul*, trans. Joseph Leonard, C.M. (Philadelphia, 1963), 198, repetition of prayer, 24 July 1655. (Hereinafter cited as *Conferences*.)

³⁰ Copies of the contracts for the foundation of houses in his lifetime are found in the Archives of the Congregation of the Mission, Paris, France.

³¹ CCD, letter 1074, 3:380.

³² CCD, letter 659a, 2:430 (for general works), and 2112, 6:54, for the missions in Algiers and Tunis.

³³ CCD, letters 1368, 4:214; 1535, 4:438. For investments elsewhere, see letter 390, 1:567.

³⁴ CCD, doc. 23, 13a:58-59.

in modern-day Tunisia and Algeria, which included care for Christian captives, facilitated by the “benefits, revenues, and emoluments that come within its scope.”³⁵ A smaller source of income was a portion of the taxes paid from merchandise, salt, food and wine from certain areas,³⁶ as well as a percentage of the income of notarial offices, such as those near the house of Richelieu.³⁷

A similar source, sixthly, was ecclesiastical offices. These responsibilities, called “benefices,” entitled the holders to an income. Vincent often spoke against his confreres holding benefices in their own name,³⁸ and managed to have the first general assembly, held in 1642, decide that all the members would bind themselves by a simple vow never to seek any benefice. This extraordinary decision was apparently never implemented.³⁹ Nevertheless, the Congregation as a whole held several benefices, and they provided the income for many of its houses. For example, the abbey of Saint Méen in Brittany was assigned to the Congregation, and the income from the abbey’s lands went to support the Vincentians in the apostolate of seminary education there. Several priories, smaller foundations with their own income from lands, tithes, tolls and the like, supported other Vincentian houses.⁴⁰ Hospitals also provided some income, as did a series of churches, chapels and shrines. In fact, although Vincent did not want his missionaries to engage in parish ministry, since that would keep them from moving around on missionary journeys, he needed the income from the parishes. Interestingly, it appears that in these parishes he stationed his confreres who for reasons of health or even personality were unsuited for mission work.⁴¹

Of course, the Congregation of the Mission also lived from revenues provided by legacies and other gifts and grants, including

³⁵ CCD, doc. 94, 13a:346-47.

³⁶ CCD, letter 818, 2:662; appendices 9 and 10, 8:608-09.

³⁷ Pierre Coste, C.M., *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, trans. Joseph Leonard, C.M., 3 vols. (Brooklyn, 1987), 1:533. See also CCD, letter 1209, 4:8-11, which details many financial issues concerning the house at Richelieu.

³⁸ See, for example, the *Common Rules*, chap. III, 10: “No one, therefore, should covet any benefice...” CCD, doc. 117a, 13a:442. Also, CCD, letter 2607, 7:193. “You have taken Our Lord for your benefice and have renounced the goods of this earth to follow Him as a poor man and to serve Him in an apostolic life.”

³⁹ CCD, doc. 89, 13a:328.

⁴⁰ See, for example, CCD, letters 2674, 7:295-96; and 2699, 7:337-38.

⁴¹ CCD, letter 1613, 4:558-59.

mass stipends,⁴² but these generally produced income from the means listed above, like investments in bonds, rents from lands or public services such as taxes and tolls.⁴³

Daughters of Charity

Historical overview. The financial design of his third foundation, the Daughters of Charity, was much different. In 1633, with Louise de Marillac, Vincent organized a group of charitable women at first to help in the parish Charities of the diocese of Paris. Their title in French, *Filles de la Charité*, or “Servants of the Charity,” accurately explains their original function in relation to the parish Charities. Quickly, however, they came to visualize their purpose independently of them.

Sources of income. In 1646, Vincent described the ways in which the Daughters of Charity were supported. Those living in the home of Louise de Marillac received donations from charitable widows and others. Those at work in the parish confraternities were paid by the confraternities, and supplemented their income by handwork done in their leisure time, and by alms from the widows, the king and the duchess of Aiguillon.⁴⁴ Eleven years later, in 1657, the letters patent of Louis XIV approving the Company of the Daughters of Charity added details regarding these sources of income: (1) money granted by the king himself from his property at Gonesse in the outskirts of Paris, and an annual income from the Rouen coach line; (2) their own manual labor performed during their leisure time; and (3) contributions from benefactors, and alms.⁴⁵ He failed to mention their surplus income, handed in to the motherhouse.⁴⁶ Also, unlike nuns, the Sisters did not have to present a dowry at entry. The reality was, however, that the Sisters lived primarily from salaries coming from public funds.⁴⁷ We do not know much about the details, however, but the main lines are clear enough. To assure their service in the parish Charities, the Daughters received funds from the Charities, which, in turn, had come from the

⁴² CCD, letters 992, 3:245; 1125, 3:465.

⁴³ General permission to receive legacies and alms for the conduct of the mission was part of the initial approval granted by Louis XIII in 1627. See CCD, doc. 62, 13a:227.

⁴⁴ CCD, letters 773, 2:600-02; 860, 3:60-62. One enterprising Sister wanted to sell her cider to Saint-Lazare; Vincent declined. Letter 1797, 5:220. Another took in laundry; letter 512, 2:180.

⁴⁵ CCD, doc. 152, 13b:231.

⁴⁶ CCD, doc. 183, 13b:374.

⁴⁷ See CCD, letter 1208, 4:5.

sources mentioned in the letters patent. In the case of the hospitals, we are better informed since we can read the contracts that stipulate the means and sometimes the amount of their support. In Angers, for example, "They will be fed and furnished with all their clothing... at the expense of the hospital, and will be supplied with medicine and food if they fall ill. They will be considered members of the household and not paid workers."⁴⁸ Many hospitals were "founded" in the sense that they had their own endowments, guaranteed sources of revenue that included public funds. For their special ministries, such as service to soldiers in military hospitals or even on the battlefield, state funds provided their support. Of course, at times, expenses outran income in some houses, and the Sisters resorted to begging. Occasionally they raised money by, for example, bringing orphan babies to Notre Dame in Paris on Sundays to excite the charity of the parishioners. Monsieur Vincent, in addition, urged them to live poorly for the love of those whom they were sent to serve.⁴⁹ Toward the end of Louise's life, Vincent praised her skillful management of the finances of the Company. They had little debt.⁵⁰

Joint action for emergency relief

Aslightly different undertaking involved his three foundations together. In times of great need, such as civil war and invasions, the Ladies, the Missioners and the Sisters worked together, and Vincent undertook financial organization through fundraising.⁵¹ It is very instructive to read the lengthy description given by Pierre Coste of Vincent's aid to the devastated provinces to the north and east of Paris.⁵² Evidently, the founder, besides being spiritual, was charming and persuasive, since he could coax financial support from people of means. We know some of the most important, beginning with Anne of Austria, queen of France;⁵³ the charitable duchess of Aiguillon, widowed niece of Cardinal Richelieu, and other wealthy men and

⁴⁸ CCD, doc. 143a, 13b:115. See also 172, 13b:342.

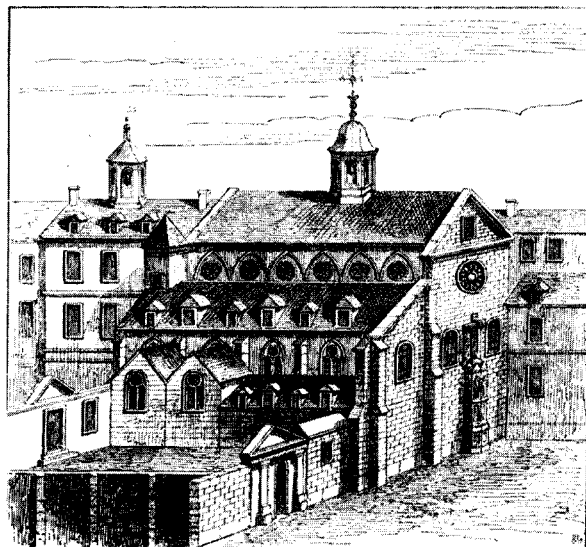
⁴⁹ CCD, doc. 143, 13b:109.

⁵⁰ CCD, doc. 183, 13b:374. Vincent was also able to borrow from Louise; see CCD, letters 217, 1:310-11; 506, 2:169; and Abelly, *Life*, book 3, chap. 11, sect. 3, p. 129.

⁵¹ For example, CCD, letters 459, 2:81; 1440, 4:300.

⁵² Coste, *Life and Works*, chapters 41, 42.

⁵³ She reportedly gave a valuable diamond and some earrings to Vincent for his charities, at a total value of 25,000 livres, or about 1 million US dollars. Abelly, *Life*, book 3, chap. 11, sect. 2, p. 122.



The church of Saint Lazare. Etching.
Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

women.⁵⁴ One of the founder's most forward-looking methods was supporting the publication of news reports designed to promote charity in times of public calamities. Since Vincent did not compose or edit these letters, they do not figure in the collection of his writings, but his influence is palpable. Those that have been preserved offer a horrifying catalogue of the miseries of his time, involving murder and mayhem, rape and pillage, descending even to cannibalism.⁵⁵ In case we find this hard to square this with prosperous modern-day France, the vivid contemporary engravings by Callot, an eyewitness, bring the human suffering to life.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ See, for example, CCD, letter 466, 2:102, where he explains that the house the Commander was giving was too grand for the priests of the Mission.

⁵⁵ The principal source is *Recueil des Relations contenant ce qui s'est fait pour l'assistance des pauvres. Entre autres ceux de Paris et des environs, ceux des Provinces de Picardie et Champagne, pendant les ann 1650, 1651, 1652, 1653 et 1654* (Paris, 1655). This work offered many details on a famous study of the period of the Fronde: Alphonse Feillet, *La misère au temps de la Fronde et Saint Vincent de Paul*, 4th ed. (Paris, 1868).

⁵⁶ Georges Sadoul, *Jacques Callot, miroir de son temps* (Paris, 1969, 1990). The engravings of Abraham Bosse, by contrast, illustrate the upper classes of society engaged in works of charity.

3. Vincent's theory of money and its management⁵⁷

With all these funds coming in to Saint-Lazare and his other houses, one might conclude that Vincent was living very comfortably and becoming wealthy in his own right. Certainly, his needs were met.⁵⁸ He probably continued to receive some income from family inheritance during his life.⁵⁹ He had a home and garden, transportation (horses at first, later a borrowed carriage), servants, clothing, medical care, reasonable food and drink.⁶⁰ He enjoyed contacts with the most influential members of society, such as royalty, members of the court, judges, academics, and particularly ecclesiastics: cardinals, bishops, nuncios, abbots and the leading reformers, both women and men. However, like them, he also experienced financial embarrassments and found that his credit was sometimes poor.⁶¹ In those cases, he even considered, perhaps rhetorically, selling crosses and chalices to support his confreres in need.⁶²

Although Abelly claimed that "money was of no significance for him," this judgment has to be nuanced in view of Vincent's financial responsibilities.⁶³ In managing money, his overarching principle was that his resources existed to serve the poor, and that money was not a thing in itself to be hoarded.⁶⁴ His sense of the vow of poverty for the Congregation of the Mission reflected the same beliefs. A member's personal income was destined to support the needy; it was the patrimony of Jesus Christ for His poor members.⁶⁵ This is still the meaning of the Vincentian vow.

⁵⁷ A contemporary appreciation of his financial management is found in Abelly, *Life*, book 3, chap. 24, section 2, pp. 293-322.

⁵⁸ He urged local superiors or treasurers "twice a week... [to] ask everybody what are his needs, and provide for them." *Conferences*, conf. 132, 243.

⁵⁹ See his last will and testament, dated 1630: *CCD*, doc. 31a, 13a:98-101.

⁶⁰ Referring to Saint-Lazare, he asked: "As for food, where can you find better bread, better wine, better meat, better fruit?" *Conferences*, conf. 132, 240.

⁶¹ *CCD*, letter 2637, 7:242: "Poor Saint-Lazare is too overburdened to be able to help other houses..."

⁶² *CCD*, letter 1125, 3:465-66: "If you need more money, let me know; we shall send some immediately and, if need be, we shall sell our crosses and chalices to assist you."

⁶³ Abelly, *Life*, book 3, chap. 18, p. 244.

⁶⁴ *CCD*, letter 1307, 4:140. Abelly, *Life*, book 3, chap. 19, p. 260, an instance of spending money to support missions and not to distribute it simply as a donation.

⁶⁵ On the other hand, he often encouraged his confreres "to spare neither the time nor expense it will take to be completely cured." *CCD*, letter 2410, 6:540.

To help maintain his ideals in practice, Vincent relied on managers and financial advisors, both members of the Congregation⁶⁶ and others, although we know little about the details. "Far from being a bad thing to seek advice, you must, on the contrary, do so when the matter is of any importance, or when we cannot come to a clear decision on our own. For temporal affairs, we consult a lawyer or some lay persons who are knowledgeable about them; for internal affairs, we discuss matters with the consultants and other members of the Company when we think it appropriate. I often consult even the Brothers and ask their advice on questions involving their duties."⁶⁷ In addition, he had administrators to track and collect the income due him, often a complex and delicate undertaking.⁶⁸ For example, some of his renters would sub-lease their building, and then his rent collectors would find themselves blocked in trying to get what was due them. Managing the income from the coach lines must have been a nightmare, since he had to control its flow, care for the horses and equipment, guarantee the honesty of the agents, and the like. Storing the goods paid in kind must have posed enormous problems at all points along the line of collection and distribution.⁶⁹

Further, he needed help in managing his other employees, such as the servants in various houses, the farm hands, and the stable keepers, to say nothing of supervising the construction contracts that he constantly entered into. He seems to have been somewhat embarrassed by the need for servants, as the following suggests: "We cannot send you right now the Brother you are requesting; I repeat my request that you hire a servant. We have some here in the kitchen and many in other duties. The Carthusians have several, and a Barnabite Father was telling me yesterday that they have the humanities in their colleges taught by outside professors whom they hire. It is very expensive to send Brothers so far away, in addition to the fact that we have none who would suit your purpose."⁷⁰ To add to his problems,

⁶⁶ CCD, letter 1175, 3:529, referring to the "Brother who takes care of business matters," otherwise unidentified.

⁶⁷ CCD, letter 1231, 4:41. Many of the financial records were destroyed during the sack of Saint-Lazare, 13 July 1789.

⁶⁸ He approved hiring a "salaried servant to look after your temporal affairs..." for the house of Le Mans. CCD, letter 2825, 7:533.

⁶⁹ See CCD, doc. 116a, 13a:423, a receipt for wheat. Also, letter 1175, 3:529.

⁷⁰ CCD, letter 2279, 6:338-39.

many of his debtors resorted to legal chicanery to keep from paying.⁷¹ The mild-mannered Vincent preferred to avoid litigation, settling “out of court” as we say.⁷² His maxim was that “peace is worth more than all worldly possessions.”⁷³ But he also realized that to enforce contracts he would have to go to court when all else failed.⁷⁴ In this, he relied on advice from attorneys and regularly employed a firm of notaries.⁷⁵ He reasoned that the income, after all, belonged to the poor, and his obligation was to defend not only his rights as superior general but also the rights of the poor.

One source of revenue that he had no control over was royal subsidies; his options were obviously limited. The concept of a guaranteed income from coaches, for example, was wonderful in theory but difficult in practice, since the king, who granted the concession in the first place, could always cut back on the percentages allocated to Vincent jointly with other communities. Also, to meet royal debts, the king occasionally needed to manipulate the income from bonds by changing the rate of return or simply by defaulting. Vincent’s bad experience came to the surface in the following: “Since it [the income] comes from a domain of the King, it is founded on quicksand and subject to frequent taxes, cuts, and surcharges, in addition to the rebates that have to be given to the farmers every now and again because they are prevented from getting their dividends.”⁷⁶

Interestingly, Vincent resorted, at least once, to using fluctuations in the value of coinage to increase his charitable funds. “The saving will not be small for your poor if we can change the silver money given to us into gold. There are 12,500 livres in silver money of rather poor coinage. Monsieur Chenevis will not be willing to give us coin for coin, I am afraid. He will give us pistoles for twelves livres there that he can get here for ten. Nevertheless, I have instructed our

⁷¹ See, for example, *CCD*, appendices 2 and 4, 2:684-87, 690-92.

⁷² *CCD*, letters 2104, 6:36; 2763, 7:439; and 2532, 7:96, where he speaks of using arbitrators to decide.

⁷³ *CCD*, letter 1198, 3:611-12.

⁷⁴ For example, *CCD*, letter 1926, 5:437-38. The case of being illegally deprived of the important farm property at Orsigny runs through many of his letters. See, for example, *CCD*, letter 2752, 7:422-25.

⁷⁵ Many of the papers of these notaries still exist in the “Minutier Central” of the French National Archives; they have not been systematically studied to uncover Vincent’s documents. See references to notaries in *CCD*, letters 138, 1:200, and 329, 1:475, among many others.

⁷⁶ *CCD*, letter 2191, 5:181. See also 2798, 7:488.

Brother Louistre to find out about it this morning.”⁷⁷ But above all, he regarded it as an obligation to augment available funds and the lands that guaranteed them.⁷⁸

Because of this difficult and unstable system, deficits easily arose, and Vincent often borrowed money. The philanthropy of his rich benefactors dried up in times of poor harvests or other natural occurrences such as fires, storms, and floods.⁷⁹ The cold winters and wet summers, typical of what has been called the “Little Ice Age,” further affected his ability to stay solvent, without even considering such man-made causes as war, vandalism, theft and looting, all of which he endured.⁸⁰

The practicalities of lending and borrowing money were very complex in Europe in his time. Canon law, drawn from a reading of the Sacred Scriptures, prohibited usury, that is, lending money at interest. French civil law made usury a crime as well. However, since civil and canon law allowed contracts of partnerships, and buying and selling, several systems developed for obtaining funds and paying interest while avoiding the accusation of usury. For example, the person in need of funds (the “borrower” in our terms) would promise to sell income to a buyer (the “lender”), calculated equivalently at a certain rate of return, with the understanding that the buyer could also rescind the contract and thereby repurchase his money. Reminiscent in some respects of traditional Islamic practice, this method is evident in at least one document involving the buying and selling of income guaranteed by funds put up as collateral by Louise de Marillac.⁸¹ We do the same thing today but use other names.

In all this, Vincent was acutely aware of his obligations to social justice. Although a strict employer and manager, his spiritual instincts led him to just wages, and even to charity above what was due in justice.⁸² For example, he looked to the medical care of his workers and provided for them if accidentally injured on the job. He

⁷⁷ CCD, letter 444, 2:55. Like any other person handling money, he needed to know exchange rates; 2333, 6:412.

⁷⁸ For example, for the Confraternities of Charity, see CCD, doc. 142, 13b:142; for the Congregation of the Mission, see the rules for the local superior, Rybolt, “Codex Sarzana,”# 388.

⁷⁹ CCD, letter 1936, 5:446.

⁸⁰ CCD, letters 1463, 4:328-29; 1519, 4:415.

⁸¹ CCD, doc. 76a, 13a:259-62.

⁸² CCD, letter 329, 1:475. He recommended also that “a founder who is in need should be assisted from the income of the foundation he has made.” Letter 847, 3:37.

was prompt and faithful in paying his obligations.⁸³ He practiced frugality and urged it on others⁸⁴ and, to maintain control, he insisted that the superiors of houses make no major financial decisions without the approval of the visitors (provincial superiors), and that these in turn obtain his permission.⁸⁵ He took care to urge budgets, good bookkeeping, and regular financial reporting.⁸⁶ These are simple matters evidently, but they show the mind of a good manager at work.

For Vincent de Paul, then, money was not dirty, something to be shunned. Rather, it was a God-given resource to promote charity. With his good sense wedded to an instinctive goodness of character, he was able to capitalize on his peasant upbringing with realism, practicality and simplicity, forgoing extravagant promises that he could not keep, tempering charity with justice.⁸⁷ Although conscientious and forgiving, he could be exacting and careful in the direction of his efforts for the evangelization of the poor. In negotiations, he worked to get a good bargain but was also discreet, and often called his confreres to maintain secrecy about cases in progress.⁸⁸

Unlike many of the clergy of his time, he was generous, overly generous in the opinion of some of his confreres, "always the first to give," as Abelly reports.⁸⁹ The first Vincentians feared that his charity would eventually bankrupt the Congregation, bringing everything down.⁹⁰ Vincent, however, had a deep-rooted trust in God's providence,⁹¹ but was careful not to tempt providence by inaction. "I admit that we can expect something from Providence, but we should not tempt God who, having provided you with reasonable means to begin and carry on an establishment while observing the

⁸³ CCD, letter 1529, 4:429-30.

⁸⁴ *Conferences*, conf. 132, 239, where he criticizes the need to have "upholstered chairs... beautiful books and beautiful furniture." See also *Common Rules*, chap. III, 7. (CCD 13a, doc. 117a, p. 441.)

⁸⁵ Rybolt, "Codex Sarzana," rules for visitors, 364; rules for superiors, 389. CCD, letter 1409, 4:260-62.

⁸⁶ See CCD, letters 625, 2:342-45; 1254, 4:75-76; 1528, 4:426-29; 1529a, 4:430; 1762, 5:170; 3116a, 8:336-38; 3191, 8:432-36.

⁸⁷ CCD, letter 452, 2:68.

⁸⁸ See, for example, CCD, letters 1074, 3:380-81; 1864, 5:367; 2362, 6:456.

⁸⁹ Abelly, *Life*, book 1, chap. 35, p. 188.

⁹⁰ See Coste, *Life and Works*, 2:150-51; Abelly, *Life*, book 3, chap. 11, sect. 2, p. 123.

⁹¹ "...if we are faithful to God, we will lack nothing." CCD, letter 2956, 8:112.

Rule of religious poverty, does not want you to make a superfluous expenditure and then to entrust yourselves to His Providence."⁹²

Vincent de Paul was a saint. That did not mean, however, that he lived outside the constraints of his time or remained oblivious to the social and economic factors that kept people poor. Those things he could not change. Instead, he applied his saintly character to managing well what divine providence gave him, and always looked at the abundant sums that passed through his large peasant hands as destined for the poor, those for whom Jesus had a special love.

⁹² CCD, letter 2915, 8:48-49.