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# Old Saint and New Beatus: Saint Vincent de Paul and Blessed Alain de Solminihac

Miguel Perez Flores C.M.

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**OLD SAINT  
AND NEW BEATUS:  
Saint Vincent de Paul  
and Blessed Alain de Solminihac\*\***

*Miguel Perez Flores, C.M.*

*Translated by Stafford Poole, C.M.*

On October 4, 1981, Pope John Paul II beatified Alain de Solminihac, Bishop of Cahors from 1636 to 1659 and friend of Saint Vincent. I had the good fortune to be present at the ceremonies of beatification held in Saint Peter's Basilica. The name of Alain de Solminihac has to be familiar to anyone who has read Saint Vincent's writings. Coste's edition contains seven letters, written and signed by Saint Vincent and addressed to the new Beatus, and forty-seven signed by the Bishop of Cahors and addressed to Saint Vincent. To this correspondence must be added the other references to the Bishop of Cahors that Saint Vincent makes in other letters and in his conferences to the priests and Daughters.

The topics that are dealt with in the mutual correspondence are quite varied and of great importance, but behind the entire correspondence can be seen the great friendship that bound them together and the concern for the reform of the Church in France.

We are celebrating the fourth centenary of the birth

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\*\*This article appeared originally in *Vincentiana*, 5-6 (1981), pp. 346-365: "El Beato Alain De Solminihac."

of Saint Vincent. The beatification of one of his good friends is not a matter of indifference. That is the reason for writing these lines, in which no other claim is made except to offer a simple homage to the “old” Saint and the new Beatus. They both lived in the same period, both experienced almost identical concerns, both assumed responsibilities over problems that concerned them. The differences in time were not very great. If Saint Vincent was born into this mortal life twelve years earlier, Alain preceded him in being born into the life of heaven by nine months. There is a greater difference in the official and canonical recognition of their holiness: that of Saint Vincent was recognized in the now distant eighteenth century (the Brief of his beatification was signed on August 13, 1729 and the Bull of his canonization on June 16, 1737); Alain de Solminihac had to wait more than three centuries to enjoy the liturgical honors of a Beatus.<sup>1</sup>

### **Details of the Life of the New Beatus**

The Saint Charles Borromeo of France — thus has the Bishop of Cahors been styled — was born on November 25, 1593, in the castle of Belet, some twenty kilometers from Perigueux. His parents formed part of the lower nobility, loyal to the monarchy and always ready to defend it. Perhaps for this reason the young Alain was educated for the royal service. While not refusing to offer this service, he also wanted to serve the King of Heaven. He wanted to be a Knight of Malta, a soldier and religious at the same time. Providence, however, disposed

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<sup>1</sup>I have gathered all the details referring to the life of Alain de Solminihac, the Bishop of Cahors, from the brief life written by the historian R. Darricau, *Alain de Solminihac, évêque de Cahors* (1980). The process of beatification was very long. Cf. Pierre Coste, *Saint Vincent<sup>de</sup> de Paul, Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents* (14 vols., Paris: Gabalda, 1920-1924). [All citations to Saint Vincent's letters are taken from the Spanish translation. The translation is sometimes rather free and the numbering of the letters and pagination differs from the French of Coste's edition.]

otherwise. One of his uncles was the mitred abbot of the Abbey of Chancelade and did not want his family to lose the honor and income that the abbey provided. For his successor, he chose one of his nephews, as canon law permitted. This nephew was Alain, for whom the prospect and possibility of being a mitred abbot was not unwelcome. He accepted, then, but at the same time he resolved to be a reforming abbot. He wanted to reform that abbey in order that it might attain the splendor that it deserved and overcome the state of material and spiritual ruin into which it had fallen at that time.

He spent nine years preparing himself to be a reforming abbot (1614-1622). On September 5, 1614 he received tonsure; on November 26, 1616 he made his religious profession; and on September 22, 1618 he was ordained priest. In that same year he went to Paris, where he lived until 1622, dedicating himself completely to his theological, canonical, and spiritual formation. In Paris he studied tenaciously. It is said that he spent fourteen hours a day in the study of the ecclesiastical sciences.

Among his teachers, two had a special influence. One was André Duval, Saint Vincent's advisor, who explained ecclesiology by emphasizing the primacy of the Roman Pontiff. From that time on, Alain would be a strenuous defender of the Pope's primacy, at odds with every idea of Gallicanism. Years later, Pius XI would make the following observation about the Bishop of Cahors, "He was a collaborator of the Holy See, a friend of the Pope, and not a lukewarm or timid or silent friend, but a friend such as was demanded by the circumstances and the times." The other teacher was Philippe de Gamaches, a famous and orthodox commentator on Saint Thomas. It was said of him that he was the surest interpreter of Aquinas.

Besides the study of ecclesiastical sciences, other concerns were active in the heart and mind of the future

reforming abbot, specifically his spiritual formation. His contact with the “spirituals” was continuous. He had the good fortune of meeting Saint Francis de Sales, who was in Paris from 1618 to 1619. The Carthusian house of Vauvent and the Jesuit novitiate were places he visited regularly. He had long and interesting conversations with Father Gaudier, the Jesuit novice master.<sup>2</sup> By reason of his vigorous and demanding spiritual formation, he practiced asceticism to a high degree. He has been considered one of the great French ascetics of the seventeenth century. Two small details of his asceticism are that he ate but once a day and then no more than a plate of vegetables and he slept on a coarse straw mattress. The fact is that his austerity became proverbial. The Daughters of Charity assigned to Cahors were to be to some extent the victims of this austerity, as we shall see later. More important than the manifestations of his asceticism was the source of his spirituality. This was nothing else than the imitation of Christ, bowed down before the will of the Father. Following Christ, he professed a singular devotion to the will of God. Once the will of God was known, there was no human force that could separate him from it. Nature and grace, if we may speak in this fashion, caused this man to possess a strong, hard, severe, sometimes intransigent, indefatigable character. He himself would say that God had given him the gift of strength. Saint Vincent knew that well and never forgot to tell the Daughters what kind of bishop they were going to encounter in Cahors.

There was a third concern that was the object of his labors in Paris: that of the reformer. The idea of reform was active in many of the hearts and minds of those men of France’s great century. It was not difficult to come into contact with them. Alain de Solminihac made friends

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<sup>2</sup>Darricau, *op. cit.*, p. 17. Father Gaudier was one of the great spiritual men of the Society of Jesus, together with Fathers Luis de la Puente, Alphonsus Rodriguez, etc.

with another friend of Saint Vincent, Cardinal de la Rochefoucauld, whom the Pope had entrusted with the reform of the Religious Orders in France. He not only received his advice but also unequivocal orientations for the reform that was taking shape in his mind for the Abbey of Chancelade.

It can definitely be said that at the end of his stay in Paris Alain de Solminihac had equipped himself well: abundant knowledge, a solid and demanding spiritual training, a clear idea of how he would be the reformer of his abbey, which was composed of Canons Regular. In substance it was nothing else than to reproduce the life of the Apostles, an harmonious combination of prayer and apostolic action within the framework of simple and honest fraternal relationships, all according to the rule of Saint Augustine.

By October of 1622 the young reforming abbot had already begun his work. And, strange to say, he began by constructing a beautiful building! The bishop who was invited to the dedication did not understand this manner of acting and so said to him, "Very well, Father Abbot, the pigeon-roost is beautiful but where are the pigeons?" In the bishop's mind there were no prospects for numerous vocations. The abbot saw things otherwise and answered the bishop, "Don't worry, Bishop, the pigeons will come." And so they did, because in 1636, some fourteen years later, there were more than fifty professed members of the abbey.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Meeting with Saint Vincent**

The beatification of the Bishop of Cahors means that he should not only be venerated but also studied. His life and work raise many questions. As a person he is, without

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20.

doubt, interesting and multi-faceted. I wish to concentrate solely on the relationship that he maintained with Saint Vincent and his two Communities, which had the honor of being called to work in the diocese of Cahors and to collaborate in the reforming work carried on by the Bishop.

It is quite possible that his first contacts with Saint Vincent occurred during his stay in Paris, between 1616 and 1622. In the first letter that we now possess, written by Saint Vincent on August 23, 1633, he says, "God knows well that you are one of the persons in the world in whom Our Lord has given me the most trust."<sup>4</sup> This is no "diplomatic" exaggeration by Saint Vincent, because the entire context of the letter shows clearly that this friendship and confidence were not of recent origin. Father André Sylvestre, C.M. has published a short work on the friendship between the two men.<sup>5</sup> It is a survey of their mutual correspondence. It highlights delightful details of that mutual friendship. One example is the concern that each had for the health of the other. Thus, on June 29, 1644, it is the Bishop who offers the advice, "I tell you what you have told me: take care of your health."<sup>6</sup> On one occasion he invited Saint Vincent to come to Cahors and take a vacation there because in Cahors the "air is very good and very healthy, one of the healthiest in the entire kingdom."<sup>7</sup>

In this regard the entire correspondence that they exchanged between Christmas of 1650 and April of 1651 is most interesting. The Bishop of Cahors had suffered a serious illness, a lung hemorrhage according to the

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<sup>4</sup>Coste, *op. cit.*, vol. I, no. 154, p. 257.

<sup>5</sup>A. Sylvestre, C.M.,<sup>†</sup> *Vincentiana*, 3 (1981), pp. 190-201.

<sup>6</sup>Coste, *op. cit.*, vol. II, no. 748, p. 391.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. III, no. 1174, pp. 425-425.

pronouncement of his physicians. Logically, he should have died. That was the opinion of the doctors and also of many others who began to pull strings in favor of their private interests. He did not die, however, although he found himself obliged to a period of absolute rest. This gave him the opportunity to reflect not only on death but on his death. In itself death did not worry him. In the end, at some time, everyone had to die. But he was very concerned about what would happen in his diocese after his death. He recounted all these worries to Saint Vincent but implored him not to say a word to anyone, not even to the Bishop's own secretary. As it turned out, the danger had passed. It was better that he should die unexpectedly in the performance of his duties. If it had not been for that — sudden death in the midst of doing his duties — it is certain that he would have lived for more than a hundred years.

*I am fifty-seven years old and I can assure you that I have never had such good health as I do now, aside, obviously, from the danger that has recently passed. I feel the strength and vigor to keep on working and to keep on suffering. The main thing is to carry out the will of God and to make one's own the statement of Saint Paul, 'For me to live is Christ, to die is gain.'*

Saint Vincent answered such sentiments, not without a touch of humor, with the wish that he might live for another half century. *Definitely, for the service of the Church.* And if the desire was not enough, he assured him that it was a favor that he frequently sought from the Lord. He, the Bishop, ought to collaborate with Divine Providence so that this might be achieved.<sup>8</sup> A thousand other details of the same flavor can be added if we read attentively the letters between the two. Without doubt they are details that give evidence of their great friendship and smoothed over the serious, painful, difficult

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<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. IV, no. 1376, p. 142; no. 1384, p. 153.



problems, the cause of so many headaches, but which these two men of God and of the Church neither skirted nor dealt with superficially.

### **The Seminary of Cahors**

In April of 1638, the Bishop of Cahors convoked a diocesan synod in which he outlined a pastoral plan. It is clear that in accord with the directions of the Council of Trent thought was being given to a diocesan seminary. That is what Saint Charles Borromeo had done in the diocese of Milan. We know that up to 1642 the pastoral plan of seminaries in France had not begun to emerge with any clarity. Even the Bishop of Cahors, in spite of his firm decision and his tenacious manner of acting, did not know which way to go nor how to carry out that idea demanded by the Council. His clergy were not enthusiastic about it and as a result he found no one in his diocese to help him put it into practice. Perhaps that was why he turned to Saint Vincent. Saint Vincent had undertaken this work not long before and apparently with some success. The fact is that in the spring of 1643 Saint Vincent sent three priests and two brothers, according to the contract signed a little earlier, to take charge of the seminary of Cahors. This latter was opened on June 15, 1643. From the correspondence it can be seen that the work proceeded very well. In 1649 it had thirty-five seminarians and even the Bishop was so satisfied with the progress of the seminary that he repeated, not without a certain satisfaction, what others were saying, that is, that it was one of the best in the kingdom and one of the most beautiful. The letter that he wrote to Saint Vincent on July 9, 1649 is worth citing at length. After the now familiar concern for his health — “when I learned that you had set out on a journey, I was fearful that your health might be hurt in the rough weather that we have been

having this winter” — the Bishop let him know of the joy that he felt because he had been told that he wanted to come to Cahors. It would be good there, the air was one of the best in the kingdom. He could take care of his health a little, and especially they could talk about a large number of things. Also, “I imagined that you would be very happy to see our seminary where you would find thirty-five seminarians who would give you great satisfaction. The fathers of your Community who have seen it say that it is the most beautiful in the kingdom and that good order is observed better than in Paris.”<sup>9</sup>

It was no easy task to reach this degree of satisfaction. Saint Vincent’s central idea about formation in the seminaries of that period seemed to be producing good results. In summary, what was intended was that the priest should come to live the priestly ideal profoundly, filled with a supernatural sense of his priesthood, to be exercised in the simplest but most realistic pastoral practice, that is, so that he could respond to the spiritual needs of the good people of the rural areas. According to historians, Cahors came to have one of the best Tridentine seminaries, comparable to the one in Milan planned and realized by Saint Charles Borromeo.<sup>10</sup> The history of the seminary of Cahors has been written.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, there is one aspect that has not been dealt with in detail. I refer to the relationship of the Bishop, so interested in his seminary, with the Missionaries who worked in it and who found themselves between two fronts: the Bishop and Saint Vincent. They had to satisfy the Bishop and they had to obey their Superior General. I will deal only with the

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. III, no. 1174, p. 426.

<sup>10</sup>Darricau, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup>Foissac, *Le premier grand séminaire de Cahors et les prêtres de la Missions* (Cahors, 1911).

relations with the Superiors of the seminary.

### **Father François Dufestel**

The first Superior of the seminary was Father François Dufestel.<sup>12</sup> The Bishop was happy with him and said so in a letter dated May 3, 1643. The date indicates that what he said about Father Dufestel was only a first impression since they had not known each other long. That is what he wrote to Saint Vincent:

Father Dufestel, with whom I have been speaking the most, seems to me to be a man of much experience and with very good qualities. He admitted to me, as I myself have told you on many occasions, that this foundation is one of the most important that you have and possibly will have in this kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

Two months later he spoke of him again. The letter is interesting for a number of reasons, most interesting of them is that, without any evasion, he tells Saint Vincent to use his influence with the Queen for matters more important than the granting of canonries. This in spite of the fact that he deals with a petition from his own secretary. "If I should find out," he said, "that my secretary has made use of my name in order to oblige you to get this canonry for him, I would easily dismiss him immediately." Afterwards he spoke of Father Dufestel, of the Missionaries and seminarians who believed that they were going to be able to offer themselves as a holocaust to God because of a fire [that threatened to destroy the seminary and those in it in July of 1643]. Of Father Dufestel, he said that he distinguished himself by his valor and courage. Certainly so much would not have been done without the tremendous fear that they had of seeing the house burned

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<sup>12</sup>Coste, *op. cit.*, vol. I, no. 382, note 2, p. 524.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. II, no. 687, p. 322.

down and themselves burned with it, and many thanks were also given to several barrels of wine for quenching the thirst of those who quenched the fire.<sup>14</sup> The mobility that Saint Vincent demanded of his Missionaries meant that Father Dufestel would not be Superior for more than a year. He ceased being so in 1644. It is certain that at that time there was also another Missionary at the seminary, Father Jean-Baptiste Gilles, a good moralist, defender of vows in the Congregation of the Mission during the Assembly of 1651, a fierce opponent of Jansenism, and who was proposed by Saint Vincent as Coadjutor Bishop of Babylon when the Nuncio asked him for names.<sup>15</sup> Of Father Gilles the Bishop of Cahors said:

He does very well at the seminary but since you want to remove him, anyone you send will be welcome. The only thing I mention is that this seminary is of great importance, as I have often indicated to you already, and it is good always to think of persons who have the qualities to direct it well.<sup>16</sup>

We know of no particular difficulties, either on the part of Saint Vincent or on the part of the Bishop, concerning Father Dufestel while he was Superior of the seminary of Cahors. The seminary began well and that was not a little noteworthy, considering the novelty of the experience.

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<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. II, no. 703, pp. 341-342. [The reference is to a fire that threatened the seminary building and those living within it. The Superior and others worked desperately to save the building. The others afterwards were rewarded with some barrels of wine. Perez Flores makes a pun out of the latter, using the same verb, *apagar*, for the dousing of the fire and the dousing of the firefighters' thirst.]

<sup>15</sup>*Notices sur les Prêtres, Clercs, et Frères defunts de la Congrégation de la Mission* (5 vols., Paris: Dumoulin, 1898), vol. III, p. 110; Coste, *op. cit.*, vol. II, no. 636, p. 242.

<sup>16</sup>Coste, *op. cit.*, vol. II, no. 732, pp. 372-373.

### Father Guillaume Delattre

The second Superior in charge of the Community and seminary of Cahors was Father Guillaume Delattre.<sup>17</sup> His term lasted two years, from 1644 to 1646. Saint Vincent said of him that he was “more spiritual and more observant” but more difficult in his dealings with those outside.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps that was the root and cause of his disagreements with the demanding Bishop of Cahors.

We know of three letters that Saint Vincent wrote to him. In the first, dated April 7, 1646, Saint Vincent complained that his explanations were not clear. The Saint also offered him an example:

...In this matter you did not tell me that you had gone to the Vicar General to ask him to pay the money, that he had received you coldly and had told you that he had no orders to pay you and that nevertheless two days later the money was delivered. You have told me nothing about whom it was delivered to and it would be good if you would say so....

Saint Vincent gave him advice on how to act with the Bishop, a clear sign that something was not going right between the two of them. “I think, Father,” Saint Vincent told him,

that it would be better if you spoke clearly, if you explained the situation in more detail, and if you acted with full confidence in and submission to the will of the Bishop. You have all the more obligation to do so since the Bishop likes you and esteems you very much, although he does not tell you so. The Bishop likes to be allowed to act, and he likes others to find that what he orders, what he does, and what he allows to be done, are good. That is only right. He has his reasons of which we are ignorant and which we must respect, especially when the will of God is fulfilled by so doing. I also think that it is not good to unburden oneself to a third or fourth person about those feelings that we sometimes have. A well-functioning stomach digests everything, a delicate one mangles whatever it receives and sometimes vomits it. How good it is to digest all matters between God and ourselves.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 636, note 7, p. 242.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. III, no. 1054, p. 244.

Other difficulties arose from more insignificant matters. Saint Vincent almost always gave in to the Bishop precisely because they were not important and cleared the way for more important matters.<sup>19</sup> In April of 1646 the Bishop of Cahors was in Paris and it is certain that he spoke to him about Father Delattre and his manner of governing. On April 19, Saint Vincent sent him another letter, the second that we know of. The Saint began by praising God because spiritual matters were going so well in Cahors and because Father Delattre was making good use of his admonitor, that is, of the priest in charge of informing him of his defects. He asked the Lord to continue blessing him constantly in his governance. But he returns to what we already know: when you write, explain things well, be clear, do not be independent and harsh. From the point of view of how one ought to govern, the letter is very interesting. The concrete directives show an admirable wisdom:

You ought to consult with the house consultors about ordinary things and if they are important, the Superior General. For matters outside the house you ought to consult the Bishop and his [chancery] officials. That is what I do and very rarely does it happen that I do anything on my own initiative.

And he also told him,

It is necessary to be mild in the manner of governing, mild as to the means, firm as to the objective when it is good and just, and it always is when it is according to rule and the orders of Superiors.... Meekness and patience are necessary in governance, leading us away from every obstinacy in our own opinions, just as Our Lord taught us by his dealings with people.

Becoming more specific, he told him that he ought to respect the orders of the Vicar General or of whomever the Bishop appointed to settle differences. He should not

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<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. II, no. 834, pp. 494-495.

make an issue of the fact that they did not consult him beforehand. The reason was that they did not know “his humble and docile spirit.” The letter contains nothing superfluous. It is possible that Saint Vincent was afraid of a negative reaction on Father Delattre’s part. For that reason he went on,

Do not be discouraged by what I say nor conclude from it that you are unfit for governance. It is the evil spirit who suggests that idea, but humility and confidence in the Lord will do everything that can be done. That is how the Bishop feels and I also.

But he had not said everything and with a certain humor which we do not know how Father Delattre received, he added:

I will take this occasion to give you some other advice that occurs to me and it is that you should make a habit of judging things and persons always and on all occasions in a good way. If an action has a hundred faces, you must look always for the best, as the Blessed Francis de Sales used to say.

Finally, some words of consolation, as Saint Vincent almost always did:

I also have the bad habit of judging things and persons wrong-headedly but experience tells me that there is great happiness in doing otherwise and that God blesses that way of acting.<sup>20</sup>

Father Delattre was also given to penance of a rigorous kind. He sought advice from Saint Vincent who told him to do penance but only for the length of a *Miserere* and without shedding any blood because merit was not to be found in pain but in love. He ordered him to follow the advice of Father Portail, keeping in mind that “obedience is the soul of your soul.”<sup>21</sup> Saint Vincent’s

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<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 498-499.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. III, no. 934, p. 107.

advice did not achieve what he sought, that is, to make of Father Delattre a good collaborator with the holy but demanding Bishop of Cahors. In fact, the Bishop asked Saint Vincent to remove the Superior. In this case, Saint Vincent, yielding to the wishes of the Bishop, also told him, in Father Delattre's favor, that he would not find another in the entire Community who could do as well.<sup>22</sup>

### **Father Charles Testacy**

Father Charles Testacy entered the Community at the age of thirty. Shortly after making his vows he was named Superior of the seminary at Cahors, replacing Father Guillaume Delattre.<sup>23</sup> He lasted only a year, from 1646 to 1647. For Saint Vincent he was a man "of good sense, very solid and well informed about affairs and, above all, faithful to his obligations."<sup>24</sup> When it came to appointing him Superior of Cahors, Saint Vincent hesitated after Father Portail, whom he had consulted, said no, that he was not qualified. Eventually he was appointed as a kind of last resort. The Bishop made an interesting observation. "Good Father Testacy is ecstatic at how well our seminary is doing but I would be happy if he had as much experience as he does goodness." In other words, Father Testacy was good but lacked experience, or that which he had was meager. For Alain de Solminihac there was no reason for his approaching Saint Vincent so often. He complained that Father Testacy and the other priests of the seminary were "breaking" Saint Vincent's head, as they did so many times, without necessity. He gave an example. The synod had determined that 100

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<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. III, no. 882, p. 29; no. 911, p. 75.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. II, no. 841, p. 503, note 3.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. III, no. 911, p. 72; no. 918, p. 82.



*livres* was enough to support the boarding students. The Bishop and his steward were of the same opinion, but Father Testacy and the Missionaries did not think so. Furthermore, it was a question of synodal decrees and it was necessary to observe them, even if the Missionaries should be right. There was no reason to turn to Saint Vincent with such problems. In the same letter he gave news about the number of seminarians, something that gave him the opportunity to ask Saint Vincent to send more personnel, especially someone who knew music. He had made this request to Father Portail and hoped that Saint Vincent would not forget.<sup>25</sup>

Relations with Father Testacy got no better. Saint Vincent himself, in a letter dated December 20, 1647, said that the Bishop was not satisfied, could not stomach him, and therefore had asked for Father Cuissot. Saint Vincent yielded, despite the fact that Father Cuissot was intended for another place. It was not easy to satisfy a Bishop like the one in Cahors.

### **Father Gilbert Cuissot**

Father Cuissot was to become an institution in Cahors. He was Superior of the seminary for many years and through many terms. Saint Vincent hit the mark with this appointment or, better, in yielding to the wish of the Bishop who explicitly wanted Father Cuissot as Superior of his seminary. He went to Cahors with a great deal of experience. He had been Superior of La Rose (1640-1644) and of the Collège des Bons-Enfants (1644-1646). In that same year he was temporarily at the seminary of Le Mans and at Saint-Lazare. He was probably in the latter place from 1646 to 1647, the date when he left for Cahors. For Saint Vincent Father Cuissot was a man who took good care of affairs outside the house but had little “unction” for

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<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. III, no. 955, p. 133.

those within, even though he was very much a man of God. For the Bishop of Cahors, famous for his gravity and severity, the lack of “interior unction” was no problem. For that reason the Bishop judged him in a very positive way. He said openly that he did his duty and that it was important that Saint Vincent not change him or move him to a different place.<sup>26</sup>

The important thing was that Father Cuissot understood the Bishop, accommodated himself to his zeal, and turned into an effective co-worker. The historian Chastenet has written that Father Cuissot was the corner stone and support of the seminary of Cahors.<sup>27</sup> It is necessary to keep in mind what has already been hinted, that is, that Father Cuissot spent a large part of his life in Cahors. His first term as Superior lasted from 1646 to 1662, two years after the death of Alain de Solminihac. He returned in 1666 and remained there till his death in 1684.

The seminary always did well in spite of these differences with some of the Superiors, differences that never reached the point of being insoluble, although in this case the balance favored Saint Vincent and the good dispositions of his Missionaries. In 1650 Alain wrote to his colleague, the Bishop of Beauvais. He explained to him the methods that he had used to carry out the reform of his diocese. After enumerating them all, he said:

When all is said and done, I have not found any better means for the reform of my diocese than the seminary established in this city of Cahors. Its direction has been confided to M. Vincent and his men.... By this means I have provided my diocese with capable ecclesiastics of exemplary life. In the end I do not know

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<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. III, no. 1174, p. 426; *Notices*, vol. II, pp. 79-147.

<sup>27</sup>Chastenet, *La vie de Msgr. Alain de Solminihac*, (1817), pp. 217-218.

how to tell you how much benefit I receive each day from the seminary. Ordinarily there are some thirty [candidates] there and I have united one of the principal parishes of Cahors to the seminary in order that they might minister in it.<sup>28</sup>

That the Missionaries in the diocese of Cahors did not give popular missions and that they accepted the parish to which the Bishop alludes was another problem that Saint Vincent, in spite of himself, had to resolve by once again letting the Bishop have his own way.<sup>29</sup>

Father Cuissot supported the material reforms that the Bishop wanted to make in the seminary. He had a happy idea. He wanted to leave behind, written on stone, a record of the Bishop's merits. After the latter had been informed of it, he ordered the writing to be obliterated. What seemed like a happy and appropriate idea has regained its value only through history, which has gathered together what happened.

The history of the seminary was not entirely smooth. The fierce criticism of Alain de Solminihac's reforming work also reached to the seminary. It was accused of being like a prison. Undoubtedly the entire reforming work of the Bishop of Cahors carried the mark of harshness because of his demanding nature. Out of this were born the revolts against him by some ecclesiastics and lay persons. In the end everything was resolved by the intervention of Saint Vincent.<sup>30</sup>

We can affirm that the Bishop died satisfied with his work in the seminary of Cahors and satisfied that he had helped his friend Vincent de Paul and his confreres, as he was accustomed to say. "My clergy has changed its face," he wrote to Saint Vincent, "and it has been thanks to the

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<sup>28</sup>Coste, *op. cit.*, vol. II, no. 743, p. 396; vol. IV, no. 1292, p. 46.

<sup>29</sup>*Notices*, vol. II, p. 106.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 127.

seminary, where there are at the present time some forty or fifty ecclesiastics.”<sup>31</sup>

The work of the seminary of Cahors, as a concretization of what was sought by the Council of Trent, was magnificent. That is undisputed. The collaboration offered by Saint Vincent and his Congregation not only in the beginning but throughout its course, up to the death of Alain de Solminihac and after, cannot be forgotten and in fact has not been forgotten. Saint Vincent put at his disposal all the resources that he had. If we have concentrated in a special way on the Missionaries who had the responsibility for the office of Superior, it must be said that there existed many other aspects that Saint Vincent put into action in order to achieve what the Bishop sought and what he himself wanted.

In the Saint’s correspondence we can find abundant evidence to affirm with all certainty that the Missionaries sent to Cahors were not the only agents of that work; they were aided by other Missionaries and persons whom Saint Vincent was able to use and whose efforts he could direct in favor of the reform of seminaries in France.<sup>32</sup> Cahors is a magnificent example, if one is wanted, but only an example. It was a model that Alain de Solminihac dared to put forth as worthy of being imitated by other bishops committed to the reform of their clergy.<sup>33</sup>

Apparently the Bishop of Cahors thought about a minor seminary but, either because he himself was not totally convinced or because Saint Vincent showed himself intransigent, given the negative results of what

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<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>32</sup>Pierre Coste, *Monsieur Vincent: Le Grand Saint du Grand Siècle*. Vol. II, pp. 75ff and pp. 357ff.

<sup>33</sup>Sylvestre, *op. cit.*, 198; Coste, *op. cit.*, vol. II, no. 743, p. 386; vol. III, no. 693, p. 141; no. 1217, p. 478.

had been experienced up to then in France, the fact is that the idea never came to be taken seriously and remained only as a possibility for later ages.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Daughters of Charity in Cahors**

A true reformer cannot forget the poor. Alain de Solminihac, as Bishop of Cahors, devised a good program for helping the poor. Among the poor were a good number of orphans who needed shelter and education. On July 20, 1654, according to the historian Darricau, he founded a home for orphan girls which he entrusted to the Daughters of Charity. Very soon, according to the same historian, they had accepted some one hundred girls. On October 16 he established a similar home for boys, which he also entrusted to the Daughters of Charity. Because of this it is necessary to take account of the role played by the Daughters of Charity in the pastoral plan of the Bishop of Cahors. The time for the expansion of the Daughters of Charity had not yet come. For that reason Saint Vincent and Saint Louise were cautious, but they were not able to withstand the insistence of the Bishop of Cahors, their holy and determined friend. From what was said above, the conclusion can be drawn that the Daughters of Charity had two establishments in Cahors. Such was not the case. It is certain that two establishments were planned but in reality only one was accepted: the home, as we would say today, for orphan girls.

Coste, in his work *M. Vincent: le grand saint du grand siècle*, gives us another version. It is certain that in 1654 the Bishop of Cahors asked Saint Vincent for Sisters to take charge of the girls' orphanage. And he wanted it all to be done quickly. But since Saint Vincent would not hurry, as was habitual with him, Saint Louise found no

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<sup>34</sup>Sylvestre, *op. cit.*, 198.

easy way to satisfy the Bishop. It was a question of a new work for the Community. It was necessary to think about it carefully although the Bishop might be irritated, as in fact he was.<sup>35</sup> Only in 1658 were the Founders able to send two Sisters. There was a mishap that delayed the departure of the Sisters for Cahors by almost a year. Sister Mathurine Guérin related it when she wrote about the virtue of hope in Saint Louise. She wrote to Sister Marguerite Chetif:

You have been able to learn that a Sister, for whom great hopes were entertained, having been designated for the establishment in Cahors, went away at exactly the moment when everything was ready for departure. I think that even the securities have been lost....<sup>36</sup>

Sister Mathurine does not give us the reason. Father Coste says that it was out of fear, we would say terror, of being sent so far away, 150 leagues from Paris, some 600 kilometers. The incident occurred in 1657 and so the Sisters were not able to leave until 1658. From the evidence we do not know if the Sister who fled out of fear of being sent far away was present at the conference that Saint Vincent, with great emotion, gave to the Daughters on September 29, 1655. He was explaining the rule and there came a moment when Saint Vincent told them that they had to be ready to go everywhere, because calls were coming to them from everywhere: Toulouse, Cahors, Madagascar.... The Sisters, easily aroused to enthusiasm, answered in chorus that they were ready. Twice Saint Vincent asked them and twice they answered yes, that they were disposed to go everywhere. Not satisfied with this enthusiasm, Saint Vincent added, "How unfortunate would she be who would chill the others and be the reason

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<sup>35</sup>Coste, *op. cit.*, vol. IX, p. 1111.

<sup>36</sup>Louise de Marillac, *veuve de M. Le Gras, sa vie, ses vertus, son esprit*, vol. II pp. 239-240. Coste, *Monsieur Vincent*, vol. II, pp. 239-240.

why they would become discouraged. She would be worthy of punishment....”<sup>37</sup> Undoubtedly the Sisters had to be prepared for more widespread missions and ones of greater responsibility.

There arose another organizational problem that was studied in the council meeting of April 5, 1656. Would it be better to establish a seminary or house, like that of Paris, closer to those places to which the Daughters were being called? The petitions of the Bishop of Cahors and the Bishop of Agde were the reasons for this new planning. New but important for the Community, as Saint Vincent noted when he proposed the question. The reasons pro and con were explained. In favor of it the following reasons were given: the distances, the long journeys as a result of the distance, the need to travel alone, the expenses, the ease of making changes. Against it there was only one, a doubt: would it not be undertaking too much, making themselves too widely known? Would it not be better to continue hidden from the eyes of the world? Saint Vincent appealed to humility, “Let us feel confusion, Sisters, on seeing that we are esteemed by so many and so noteworthy persons. Let us humble ourselves on seeing that God chooses the Community to serve him in such distant places. Who are we? Who am I?”

All those present at the council gave their opinions. All answered affirmatively, including Saint Louise, who added a special reason: it seemed that Providence wanted them because there were Priests of the Mission in the places in question. Father Portail, who was present at the council, also answered affirmatively, but added another consideration: we ought to pray that the Lord will show His Will more clearly. That was the conclusion that Saint Vincent drew, at least for the moment: one must pray.

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<sup>37</sup>Coste, *op. cit.*, vol. IX, pp. 743-744.

Therefore, “you, Portail, will say Mass for this intention and the Sisters will attend it. I will also say one....” He asked Saint Louise to recommend this very important matter to the Community. But almost as if he had said something wrong, he corrected himself. “No, don’t say that they should pray for an important matter. We have no important matters. Ask that they pray for a need of the Community.”<sup>38</sup>

The pressure from the Bishop of Cahors continued, now by means of the Bishop of Sarlat, Monseigneur Savin, who was present in Paris at that time. It is clear that Saint Vincent was very much concerned about this matter. Even in the repetition of prayer held at Saint-Lazare at the beginning of November, 1656 he asked for prayers:

You cannot imagine how God blesses them [the Daughters of Charity] and in how many places they are wanted. The Bishop of Tréguier has asked me for eight of them for three hospitals. The Bishop of Cahors is also asking for them for two hospitals. The Bishop of Agdc is also asking for them and Madame, his mother, insisted on it to me just a few days ago. But we don’t have enough....<sup>39</sup>

The decision was made to go to Cahors. The only question was how to do it. In April of 1657, Saint Louise wrote to Saint Vincent that he ought to look for another Sister for Cahors who could read and write, since their mission was to teach girls.

It is clear that she was busy with other details, such as expenses. She wanted to avoid difficulties. There is one very curious detail. Saint Louise said that it was easier to choose two Sisters for Cahors than four for any other place. For all of that, the necessary efforts had to be made and the reason was, she told Saint Vincent, his holy intention.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. XIII, pp. 711-714.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. V, no. 2164, p. 596; vol. XI, p. 252.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. VI, no. 2333, pp. 259-260.



The Sisters who were finally chosen were Sister Adrienne Plouvier and Sister Louise Boucher.<sup>41</sup> Sister Marie-Marthe Trumeau, who had to leave La Fère because of a slander, went later.<sup>42</sup> There was also a proposal to send Sister Françoise Carcireaux in order to make the Bishop of Cahors happy, but it never came about. Sister Carcireaux was assigned to Narbonne, another foundation at a distance from Paris.<sup>43</sup> Sister Anne Hardemont asked to go to Cahors but Saint Vincent, in a very interesting letter, told her no. "It is not good for you to leave Ussel, where you are working at the present time, and it does not seem good for you to go to Cahors." In reality, Sister Anne's reasons for leaving Ussel were not convincing. That is clear from a letter that Saint Vincent wrote to Sister Avoie, Sister Anne's companion, "If those wishes of Sister Anne came from God, she would not be so restless, but would put herself in the hands of those who direct her."<sup>44</sup>

The difficulties of selection were overcome. With regard to preparations we do not know a great deal beyond the instruction that Saint Vincent gave them on the eve of their departure and the plan for the rule. Saint Vincent bade them farewell and in this send-off to the mission, as we would say today, he gave them a very interesting talk. The date was November 4, 1658.

The person acting as secretary was very careful to title this instruction, *Instructions given by Mr. Vincent, our most venerable father, November 4, 1658, to our dear sisters Adrienne Plouvier and Louise Boucher, who are to leave on the following day for the foundation at Cahors.* As he almost always did, Saint Vincent explained the

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<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. VII, no. 2812, p. 300.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. VIII, no. 3157, p. 187; no. 3070, p. 101; vol. IX, pp. 1181-1182.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. VIII, no. 3070, p. 101.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. VII, no. 2739, p. 202; no. 2744, p. 210.

motives that they had for devoting themselves to God by serving him in the city of Cahors. The first was the belief that it was God who called them. When a bishop gives the call to work in his diocese, it is a clear sign that it is the Lord who is calling. But in this case, in addition, it is a holy bishop, one who is considered to be a saint. Saint Vincent did not hide the fact of the repeated calls of the Bishop of Cahors during the four previous years and that he had even become irritated because Mlle. Legras did not find a way to satisfy him. Another motive was what they were going to do there: instruct and educate orphan girls... a work new in the Community.

With regard to the means, the first was detachment. One needs to be detached from everything in order to belong to God. The second was humility, "because you are going to fight against the demon of that country, who is the demon of pride, of rage, of self-sufficiency, of anger.... You will see there persons who are almost always irritated, who become angry over the smallest things. They are arrogant, they like to talk a lot...." We can imagine how the citizens of Cahors would have reacted if they could have heard what Saint Vincent was saying about them, they who were so proud.

Another means was mutual tolerance and mortification. They needed to be tolerant of one another. Let the oldest Sister be convinced that she was full of defects and the youngest do the same. They needed mortification in order not to use words of praise of themselves or of the Community. They needed mortification in order to deal with the Bishop, to accept his advice and corrections humbly, since the austerity that he exercised toward himself made him somewhat severe. "That gentleman is a person who will have a problem of conscience over one flattering word.... Go then, my Daughters, with the conviction that the spirit of the Lord

goes with you. Do whatever the Bishop and Father Cuissot, the Superior of the small seminary that is there, tell you....<sup>45</sup>

The Sisters were in Cahors by Christmas. Saint Vincent had followed the whole journey closely. He wrote to different persons in the places they were to pass through and asked them to take care of them and give them what they needed. In Cahors they set to work. We know of a proposed rule that was found in the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale of France, dated July, 1657. It carries the title *For the orphan girls who are to be educated by the sisters in Cahors*. According to Coste, the rule showed the hand of Saint Louise. The "little sisters" (that was how they were to call the orphans) were to be treated like serious and religious persons. The religious practices and exercises of piety demanded of them were excessive: daily Mass, rosary, spiritual reading, half an hour's visit to the Blessed Sacrament, three examinations of conscience and seeking union with God on rising, cleaning, at work and at meals. Silence was enjoined while eating and working. They would have only half an hour of recreation after the meal at ten in the morning in order to honor the infancy of Our Lord. They were advised to eat what was necessary. The diet that was given to them left no room for excessive eating, as will be seen later. Other practices were suggested to them, such as having special intentions in their prayers and actions for peace in the world, Christian unity, the new-born, the afflicted, etc., the sick, the dying, sinners, prisoners, priests, superiors, religious. In the morning they were to offer all the works and merits of the day as a suffrage to save a soul in purgatory.<sup>46</sup> Our judgment today would not be very

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. IX, pp. 1111-1114.

<sup>46</sup>Coste, *Monsieur Vincent*, vol. II, p. 728. Louise de Marillac, *Pensees*, p. 259.

favorable to this rule. It was excessively monastic for the poor orphans. Rather, it seems to have been a plan for a novitiate. Coste, who considered it very burdensome, said that it was only a proposal that undoubtedly would have been very much modified and have undergone more than one retouching. We do not know if the austere Bishop of Cahors was involved in this proposal.

The Bishop did not spoil his orphan girls in any way. The food was not very delicate: black bread and occasionally bacon and beef. It seems that the Sisters followed the same diet. There is in existence a letter from Father Fournier, a professor at the seminary of Cahors, to Saint Louise in which he advises her of this situation. It is possible that after Father Fournier's letter the diet got better. On the other hand, the two Sisters were loaded down with work. Not only were the orphans the objects of the Sisters' care but also the local shut-ins. The excessive work and the concern for carrying out the rules given by the Founders created a difficult situation for the Sisters. The arrival of Sister Trumeau did not change the situation. In spite of everything, it does not seem that the Bishop was completely satisfied with the work of the Sisters, according to what Saint Louise said in a letter to Saint Vincent.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Direction of the Sisters**

We have seen that in the council meeting of April 5, 1656 Saint Louise gave as a reason for establishing a seminary or house at a distance from Paris the fact that in that place there would be a community of Missionaries. The relationship between the two Communities had a special value for Saint Louise. In the case of Cahors the situation was clear. For many years the Missionaries had labored there and labored well. The direction of the

<sup>17</sup>Coste, *op. cit.*, vol. VIII, no. 3182, p. 220; *Notices*, vol. II, p. 140.

Sisters was assured. The Superior, Father Cuissot, took charge of it, as was customary in the Community. But Father Cuissot found it difficult because of his excessive workload and he had Father Fournier take his place. He also, in turn, found it difficult because of the excessive work and because he did not think that he was qualified to give this service to the Sisters. Saint Vincent explained the situation in a letter to Father Dehorgny. "I have asked Father Fournier to help Father Cuissot in taking care of the Sisters in spite of his work and the fact that he does not consider himself fit for this ministry. I have encouraged him in it." Saint Vincent was precise. It was a question of *helping* Father Cuissot, *not of taking his place*, in this task or responsibility because "as Superior of the Missionaries he has to pay the same attention to the Sisters that he does to the seminarians." Still more, "those who are to instruct, confess, and direct them ought not to do it independently of him," that is, of Father Cuissot. Saint Vincent was clear and it is evident that Cahors was not an exception to the responsibility that the Superior of the Missionaries had for the Daughters of Charity who lived in the same area. He offered no difficulties to the fact that Father Bonichon, also at the seminary in Cahors, might lend a hand to Father Fournier if it was necessary.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Death of Alain de Solminihac**

Alain de Solminihac died on December 30, 1659. The Sisters had just one year under his vigilance in the work that he had entrusted to them. The Sisters continued at Cahors.

There is an interesting detail related by his biographers. Shortly before his death, Alain de Solminihac called in a notary in order to execute his last will. He wanted to leave everything to the poor and die in

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<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

absolute poverty. Afterwards he asked the Superioress of the Daughters of Charity for a sheet as a shroud and the religious of Our Lady the favor of being buried in their church.<sup>49</sup>

### **Other Relationships with Saint Vincent**

His relations with Saint Vincent were much wider than those that have been described. Every aspect of church life in which the Abbot of Chancelade and the Bishop of Cahors was involved also found Saint Vincent involved: the reform of the clergy, seminaries, reform of the religious communities, Jansenism, the appointment of bishops, the awarding of ecclesiastical benefices, etc., were matters, fields of labor, in which the work of these two great men was felt. At times they were on different sides but always they sought what was best for the Church. In order to have a detailed knowledge of the extensive relationships between Saint Vincent and the Bishop of Cahors one would have to do a wider and deeper study than this one. For me, as I said in the beginning, it is a question merely of paying respect with an affectionate remembrance to the "old Saint" and the new Beatus.

I would like to finish with a testimony by Saint Vincent to Alain de Solminihac, Abbot of Chancelade and Bishop of Cahors. "A great prelate of these times followed this same maxim" (to do the more perfect thing, like Saint Theresa, and to do all for the greater glory of God, like Saint Ignatius) "of animating all his actions and all his works with the intention of always seeking the greater good. It was the Bishop of Cahors, who always went after the more perfect thing and achieved it."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Coste, *op. cit.*, vol. VIII, no. 3182, p. 220; *Notices*, vol. II, p. 140.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

*A natural inclination makes us require that things which are advantageous to us should be done quickly. This, however, we should repress in order to accustom ourselves to the practice of holy indifference and to leave to God the care of manifesting His Will, being assured that when God wishes an affair to succeed, delays will not injure it.*

St. Vincent de Paul



*Do not become dejected about your trials, nor the lack of Divine assistance. Oh, if we knew the secrets of God when He places us in such a condition, we would see that this should be the time of our greatest consolation.*

St. Louise de Marillac



*Learning without humility always has been injurious to the Church, and as pride caused the fall of the rebel angels, so it is often the ruin of learned men. The most ignorant of the devils knows more than the most acute philosopher or the most profound theologian.*

St. Vincent de Paul