The way of Vincent de Paul: a contemporary spirituality in the service of the poor / Robert P. Maloney.

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The Way of

Vincent de Paul
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The celebrated French historian, Henri Bremond, in his study of religious movements and personalities of seventeenth century France was captivated by the attractiveness and depth of spirituality that he encountered in the writings of Saint Vincent de Paul. He did not hesitate, however, to chide gently the Community of Saint Vincent for having too carefully guarded the writings of the Saint and for not having made them available to the public at large. He subsequently retracted his complaint when on the eve of the publication of his own magisterial work in the 1920's, he learned that the first volumes of the project of publishing the fourteen volumes of Saint Vincent's correspondence and conferences had begun to appear.

Father Bremond, were he writing today, might be justified in thinking and regretting that the English-speaking world was not yet sufficiently familiar with the writings of Saint Vincent. Language is a formidable barrier and the work of translation is demanding and slow. Recent years, however, have seen an acceleration in the pace of translating Saint Vincent's writings, as well as a growth in the number of studies of the many faceted mind and heart of Saint Vincent.

Among such studies must be placed the present volume—*The Way of Vincent de Paul*—which Father Robert Maloney offers to all who would like to become more acquainted with the spiritual vision of this man whose name immediately conjures up, not only the poor but the challenge of serving them. In a very painstaking and thorough manner Father Maloney presents, with ample references to sources, the outlines of Saint Vincent's "way." A feature of this work are the very practical deductions and consequences which Father Maloney draws out from the vows and virtues which Saint Vincent considered to be so important for a person called to serve Christ in the poor. This practical aspect of the book would, I feel, appeal greatly to Saint Vincent who considered prayer to be largely ineffective if it was not backed up by concrete resolutions bearing on one's daily life.

In welcoming this book—and in thanking Father Maloney—I feel confident that it will draw its readers closer to Saint Vincent whom Pope John Paul II has described as "a man of action and prayer, of administration and imagination, of leadership and humility, a man of yesterday and of today"

27 September 1991

Richard McCullen, C.M.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Let me express my gratitude right from the start to the many people who helped me put this work together. Actually, most of the chapters originated in oral form in a series of conferences to the Daughters of Charity. Subsequently, using those materials, I published a series of articles in Vincentiana, whose immediate audience was the Vincentian community of priests and brothers. The reader will undoubtedly note remnants of both the original “oral tradition” and then the “written sources.” After some hesitation, I decided not to obliterate those remnants, since often their concreteness, though revealing that they were originally directed to a particular group (male or female), gives life to what otherwise might remain merely theoretical. All of the chapters have been revised—some extensively, some less so—in preparing this book. I address it primarily to the extended Vincentian family, which includes the members of the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, a large number of other communities of sisters, and hundreds of thousands of other lay Vincentians throughout the world, but I hope that it will also be of service to others who seek to give their lives in the service of the poor.

I want to express my sincerest thanks to those who assisted in the nitty-gritty labor of putting the book in its final form: to Julie Keating, Barbara Spigel, and Llewellyn Sasy, who did much of the typing in its early stages; to Fran Japertas, Colleen Kleintop, and Helen Neveroski, who typed the computerized version; to Jim Claffey and Pat Griffin, who lodged me and offered me generous computer services during the revision stage; and to my sister Marie, for proofreading the text. The simple truth is that without such help books do not get written.
May God instill in you . . . a deep love for Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our father, our mother, and our all.

SV V, 534
He just about transformed the face of the Church!

Henri de Maupas du Tour
Funeral Oration of St. Vincent

A few years ago, as I was preparing for a talk on Vincentian spirituality, I went to a wonderful exhibit of Claude Monet's paintings. Three of them intrigued me especially. Each showed exactly the same location on the Seine—one at dawn, one at midday, one at dusk. Each had a beauty of its own. In the first, gauze-like rays of light filtered through the heavy morning mist that lay on the river. In the second, the face of the river was bathed in sunlight, and the bright green of the trees and the yellow and red of the flowers on the river banks sparkled with light. In the third, long shadows stretched out over the river and only a gentle purple glow lit the evening sky. They were very different views of the same reality, and through them Monet was illustrating an important lesson: we cannot exhaust a reality by fixing on it at a single moment or from a single point of view.

It is much the same with the gospels. When they look at the rich reality of Jesus, they can only attempt to express it in pieces and from varying points of view. The Jesus of Mark is very human in his ignorance; the Jesus of John shares the knowledge of God as he reads the future. In the gospels we see Jesus as Lord, but we also see him as suffering servant. We see him forcefully confronting the Pharisees. We see him meek as a lamb led to the slaughter. We find an ascending Christology and a descending Christology, and several in-between.

The saints are similar. It is not easy to capture their richness in a single word or a single phrase. A still photo of St. Vincent or St. Francis of Assisi would not tell the whole story. They did not live merely at a single moment in time, nor in a single place. Neither were they influenced merely by one

1. This quotation is cited by André Dodin, in St. Vincent de Paul et la Charité (Paris, 1960) 103: “Il a presque changé la face de l’Eglise.”
person. Nor did they perform merely one work. The saints’ vision of Jesus was rich, and like the many facets of a bright diamond, their lives sparkle before our eyes in varying ways.

That is, of course, why people argue over what the core of St. Vincent’s spirituality is. In describing it, some focus on doing the will of God, others on following providence. Some see the core as his way of integrating prayer and action; others stress simplicity and humility. Some, perhaps most understandably, say that service of the poor is everything for St. Vincent and is the driving force behind whatever else he did, including his work in forming the clergy. All speak an element of the truth. Yet all somehow fall short. Each expresses an aspect of St. Vincent’s spirituality, but each fails to do justice to the whole, to the context into which the various elements fit.

So too, what I have written below is a partial, inadequate effort, as I attempt to describe the spirituality of St. Vincent.

The Christ of St. Vincent has long fascinated me. “He described himself as the Evangelizer of the Poor,” St. Vincent writes.¹ It is this Christ who lies at the heart of St. Vincent’s spirituality.

But that is to run ahead of the story. First, a very brief word about St. Vincent; secondly, a word about spirituality in general; and then finally, a word about Vincentian spirituality.

1. A word about St. Vincent

This remarkable man, born at Pouy in southern France in 1581, had a rather self-seeking start in the priesthood. Under the influence of spiritual directors like St. Francis de Sales, Cardinal Bérulle, and André Duval, he underwent a striking conversion, in which he gave his life over to God in the service of the poor. He founded the Congregation of the Mission (1625), a community of priests and brothers whose end is “to preach the good news to the poor” and the Daughters of Charity (1633), at that time a new form of community in which the sisters lived “in the world” to serve the sick poor spiritually and corporally. He also established the Confraternities of Charity (lay organizations, both of men and women, founded in parishes also to assist the poor spiritually and corporally) and the Ladies of Charity; these groups continue to the present day in very large numbers. Eager for the reform of the clergy, he organized retreats for ordinands and founded seminaries

¹ SV X1, 32. SV refers to the fourteen volume French edition of St. Vincent’s works, edited by Pierre Coste (Paris: Gabalda, 1920-25). I have used Joseph Leonard’s translations as a starting point, but have often modified these in light of the original text.
throughout France. He gathered together many of the clergy of his day each Tuesday, both in Paris and elsewhere, for conferences. Born a Gascon peasant, he became the counsellor of King Louis XIII, to whom he ministered on his deathbed, and of Queen Ann of Austria, and was the friend and confidant of saints like Francis de Sales, Jane Frances de Chantal, Alain de Solminihac and Louise de Marillac. When he died on September 27, 1660, all of Paris mourned him. He is known throughout the world today as the Patron of Charity. His spirituality lives on in hundreds of thousands of lay men and women, priests, sisters and brothers who follow in his footsteps.

2. A word about spirituality

A spirituality is an energizing vision, a driving force. It is, on the one hand, the specific way in which a person is rooted in God. It is, on the other hand, the specific way in which he or she relates to the created world. It is insight as the source of action. It is a vision that generates energy and channels it in a particular direction, thereby enabling a person to transcend himself or herself. For the Christian, it is a way of seeing Christ and being in him that directs the individual’s energies in the service of the kingdom.

Contemporary writers emphasize the transcendent thrust of all spirituality, both Christian and non-Christian. Sandra Schneiders describes it as “the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.” The main characteristics of spirituality, largely agreed on by theologians today, are included within this definition: progressive, consciously pursued, personal integration through self-transcendence within and toward the horizon of ultimate concern, which in St. Vincent’s case is Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor.

3. A word about Vincentian spirituality

Naturally, the spirit of the Vincentian family flows from the spirit of its founder. The Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission give a schematic description of that spirit, which is at the same time a very good description of St. Vincent’s spirituality, though, for the reasons mentioned above, necessarily an incomplete one.

Here, let me offer a brief schema of that spirit based on articles 4-7 of the Vincentian Constitutions of 1984:

**THE VINCENTIAN SPIRIT IS THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST AS SENT TO PREACH THE GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR**

**AS EVIDENCED IN THE GOSPEL SAYINGS EXPLAINED IN THE COMMON RULES**

**CONCRETIZED PARTICULARLY THROUGH:**

- LOVE AND REVERENCE TOWARDS THE FATHER
- COMPASSIONATE AND EFFECTIVE LOVE FOR THE POOR
- DOCILITY TO DIVINE PROVIDENCE
- SIMPLICITY
- HUMILITY
- MEEKNESS
- MORTIFICATION
- ZEAL FOR SOULS

"**JESUS CHRIST IS THE RULE OF THE MISSION**"

**AND THE CENTER OF ITS LIFE AND ACTIVITY**

There is room for much meditation here, even for an entire retreat. Notice that, when the Vincentian Constitutions present a vision of the Vincentian spirit, it is *unified* in one respect: it flows from a vision of Jesus Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor. But it is *diversified* in another respect: the riches, the ramifications, of that vision are many.

It is evident that St. Vincent has made a clear choice. The vision he offers his followers is a vision of Christ not as teacher (as might be the vision of a Christian Brother), nor as healer (as might be the vision of a community dedicated to hospitals), but as the Evangelizer of the Poor. Vincentians are called to enter into the Lucan journey of the following of Christ in the very terms with which, in Luke’s gospel (4:18), Jesus opens his public ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore, he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord."

St. Vincent’s spirituality flows from his contemplation of *this* Christ. It is
the spirit of the Evangelizer himself, alive and acting in St. Vincent’s and our world. It expresses itself in love and reverence for the father, compassionate and efficacious love for the poor, in docility to providence, and in the five missionary virtues of simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and zeal.

Those who live in the Vincentian spirit are called to contemplate *this* Christ again and again. He is the rule of the Mission.

This Christ of Luke 4:18 stands at the center of the spirituality of the members of the Vincentian family, calling them to walk with him on his journey. Without him, the journey is aimless, empty. Of this Christ, St. Vincent might repeat to his followers the striking words of Deuteronomy: “Bind his name on your hands. Let it be a pendant before your eyes. Let it be written on the doorposts of your houses so that you may see it in your coming in and your going out” (cf. Dt 6:8-9).

This book will attempt to speak about various aspects of a Vincentian spirituality, which I describe below in graphic form:

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CHRIST THE EVANGELIZER OF THE POOR

Gospels
Common Rules

Love and reference     Simplicity
  toward the Father
Compassionate & effective
  love for the poor
Docility to providence
  Humility

Meekness
Mortification
Zeal for souls
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