Chapter I

THE CHRIST OF VINCENT DE PAUL

Let us walk with confidence on this royal road on which Jesus Christ will be our mentor and guide.

SV XI, 52

A strong current in recent theological literature stresses the importance of the saints as a theological source. The saints, these writings emphasize, rescue theology from excessive abstraction. They root it in life and give it flesh. In doing so, they deepen and enrich it. In that sense, they are one of its most valuable fonts.

Other trends in contemporary theology reinforce this movement. We are more and more conscious today, first of all, of the inseparability of theology and spirituality, even though, since the fourteenth century (and all the more so since the time of the Reformation), each has tended to go its separate way. We profess today that healthy spirituality depends on valid theological underpinnings and that, conversely, healthy theology is continually revitalized by the insights of the spiritual masters. Secondly, we are increasingly aware that theology and praxis, or—to observe the order used by liberation theology—praxis and theology, necessarily influence one another. Thus, we find a renewed interest in the saints as known through critical biographies that employ scientific methodology; besides their value as hagiography, such works serve as sources for the contemporary “doing of theology.”

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the christological vision of Vincent de Paul. The reader will soon note that the evidence, as I read it, shows that the Christ of St. Vincent has a decidedly Lucan character. But to avoid confusion, let me make three clarifications about this right from the start:

1. First, by no means do I contend that Vincent’s view of Christ is exclusively Lucan. Like most saints, he drank from more than one source. One of his favorite texts, for example, is Matthew 25:31-46. In fact, he cites

Matthew’s gospel considerably more frequently than Luke’s and, as will be explained below, draws significant themes from both John (e.g., the stress on Jesus’ communion with the Father and on practical love of the neighbor) and Matthew (e.g., Jesus’ emphasis on truthfulness and gentleness).¹

2. Nor is it my contention that Vincent’s view of Christ is explicitly Lucan. No one would claim that Vincent de Paul was a systematic theologian. For him praxis was more important than theory. He had a distrust of intellectual curiosity² and encouraged action much more than scholarship.³ He employs a christological framework which he learned from masters like de Bérulle,⁴ Francis de Sales⁵ and André Duval,⁶ but it remains largely implicit. He does not speak or write about Christology as such. But he often speaks and writes of Christ; even more clearly, he develops a way of “living” Christ and teaches it to his followers. The vision he imparts is significantly different from that of his teachers.⁷

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¹ In the conferences to the missionaries, St. Vincent cites Matthew 199 times; Mark, 28; Luke, 84; John, 86; cf. A. Dodin, “La inspiracion evangélica de la doctrina vicenciana,” in San Vicente de Paul, Pervivencia de un Fundador. I Semana Vicenciana (Salamanca, 1972) 35.
² Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission XII, 8; henceforth, CR.
³ In a wonderful letter to François du Coudray, who was asking permission to remain in Rome to translate the Syriac Bible into Latin, he writes, with some considerable feeling: “Picture to yourself then, sir, that there are millions of souls with outstretched hands calling you saying: ‘Ah, M. du Coudray, you who have been chosen from all eternity by the providence of God to be our second redeemer, have pity on us. We are wallowing in ignorance of the things necessary for our salvation and in the sins that we have never dared to confess, and for want of your help we will certainly be damned’ ” (SV I, 252).
⁴ Cf. Michel Dupuy, “Le Christ de Bérulle,” Vincentiana 30 (1986), 240-52. Vincent was influenced by Bérulle particularly from 1609 to 1617. He learned from him especially a sense of the priestly ministry of Christ. Bérulle’s is an abstract, descending Christology, with a heavy emphasis on the divine attributes of Christ. Heavily influenced by Scotism, Bérulle characterizes Jesus as destined from all eternity, whether the human race should fall or not, to be the “perfect adorer of the Father.” He is totally ruled, possessed, penetrated by the Father. He is at once servant, priest, victim.
⁵ Cf. Hélène Bordes, “Le Christ de François de Sales,” Vincentiana 30 (1986), 253-279. From about 1618 until his death in 1622, Francis had a great influence on Vincent de Paul, who regarded him as a model of gentleness, joy, and affability. Much of Vincent’s teaching on detachment and indifference relies heavily on Francis’ doctrine. Vincent modifies Francis’ teaching about the practice of the presence of God and develops it into the practice of doing the will of God in all things. For Francis, Christ is the “perfect image of the divinity.” At the same time Christ lives the perfection of humanity in all the stages of his existence: his birth, his hidden life, his public life, his passion and death, his resurrection.
⁶ Antonino Oraojó, “San Vicente de Paul: fe y experiencia en una doctrina,” in Antonino Orcajo and Miguel Pérez Flores, San Vicente de Paul. II. Espiritualidad y selección de escritos (Madrid: BAC, 1981) 63-65, 101-102. Duval, whom St. Vincent described (SV XI, 128) as “so wise and at the same time humble and simple that you could not ask for more,” was also of the abstract school of Christology. He was St. Vincent’s counsellor from around 1617 until his death in 1638, a period marked by some of the most important decisions relating to Vincent’s foundations.
3. My objective in this chapter is to describe the Christ of Vincent, not to prove that this Christ is decidedly Lucan. But my reading of the evidence is that, while Vincent is influenced by many sources, Luke’s gospel plays an especially important role.

Since much of St. Vincent’s Christology is implicit, my aim in the pages that follow is to uncover, by making it explicit, the christological vision that grounds Vincent’s thought and action and that lies at the heart of his spirituality.1

As mentioned in the introduction to this book, a specific spirituality is a governing vision. But more than a vision, it is a driving force, enabling a person to transcend himself or herself.2 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 world-view that generates energy and channels it in a particular direction.

For Vincent de Paul, there is only one driving force: the person of Jesus Christ. “Jesus Christ is the Rule of the Mission,”3 he tells the members of the Congregation of the Mission, the center of their life and activity. “Remember, Father,” he writes to Monsieur Portail, one of the original members of the Congregation, “that we live in Jesus Christ by the death of Jesus Christ and that we ought to die in Jesus Christ by the life of Jesus Christ and that our life ought to be hidden in Jesus Christ and full of Jesus Christ and that in order to die like Jesus Christ it is necessary to live like Jesus Christ.”4

Vincent warns his followers that they will find true freedom only when Christ takes hold of them. He writes to Antoine Durand, the newly appointed superior of the seminary at Agde: “It is therefore essential for you, Father, to empty yourself in order to put on Jesus Christ.”5

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1. For other attempts along these same lines, the reader might wish to consult the articles by Dodin and Mezzadri cited above; cf. also C. Riccardi, “Cristologia e cristocentrismo vincenziani,” Annali della Missione 88 (1971), 51-76; I. Fernández-Mendoza, “La Cristología en la vida y pensamiento de San Vicente de Paul,” Anales 93 (1985), 598-612.
3. SV XII, 130; cf. also XI, 53: “Let us walk with assurance on the royal road on which Jesus Christ will be our guide and leader.”
4. SV I, 295.
5. SV XI, 343-44.
DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHRIST OF VINCENT DE PAUL

Jesus’ question to his disciples remains the fundamental christological question in every age. “And you?” he asks (Mt 16:15), “Who do you say that I am?”

The response of Vincent de Paul, framed in the conventional theological language of seventeenth-century France, is an existential one. It relates Jesus to his mission. In his writings and conferences, Vincent frequently uses the biblical titles “Christ,” “Lord,” “Son of God” to describe Jesus. In this, he reflects the accepted terminology of the day, almost always without analyzing it. But a study of Vincent’s works reveals that, moving beyond this terminology, his vision focuses on the missionary Christ.

How, then, does he answer the perennial christological question: who do you say that I am? In response, let me outline several of the most important characteristics of the Christ of Vincent de Paul.

1. Christ is the Evangelizer of the Poor

Vincent de Paul returns to this theme again and again. In perhaps his most famous conference, on “The End of the Congregation” (December 6, 1658), he states: “... to make God known to the poor, to announce Jesus Christ to them, to tell them that the kingdom of heaven is at hand and that it is for the poor. O how great that is ... so sublime is it to preach the gospel to the poor that it is above all the office of the Son of God.” In another conference, he says: “In his passion, he had scarcely the appearance of being human. In the eyes of the gentiles he passed for a fool. To the Jews he was a stumbling block. But with all that, he described himself as the Evangelizer of the Poor: ‘To preach the good news to the poor he has sent me.’”

Vincent makes a clear explicit choice. The vision he offers is not one of

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1. Nowhere, for example, do we find St. Vincent analyzing the origins of these titles (in Palestinian Judaism or in the Hellenistic world), their meaning, or their application to Jesus.
2. This approach is similar to that of much contemporary christological reflection. Cf. Elizabeth Johnson, Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology (New York, 1990), especially 51-57.
3. SV XII, 80.
4. SV XI, 32. While a given reader may doubt that this text (calling Christ “the Evangelizer of the Poor”), attributed to St. Vincent by Abelly, his first biographer (1664), conveys the ipsissima verba of the saint, the idea itself, nonetheless, seems to me indisputable, given St. Vincent’s repeated recourse to Luke 4:18.
5. Cf. also SV X, 123; XII, 262: “All aim at loving him, but they love him in different ways:
Christ as teacher,1 nor as healer,2 nor as “perfect adorer of the Father” (Béralle’s vision), nor as “perfect image of the divinity” (the vision of Francis de Sales), but as The Evangelizer of the Poor. Vincent’s disciples are called to enter into the following of Christ in the very terms with which, in Luke’s gospel, 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” (4:18).3

This is a distinctively Lucan theme. Luke deliberately transposes and edits the scene of Jesus’ visit to the synagogue at Nazareth, so that it takes place at the beginning of the public ministry. The result is a new composition which Luke makes programmatic for the rest of his account of that ministry, with Jesus applying to himself the words of Isaiah 61:1-2. Luke reiterates this theme and further develops it in 7:21-22. In Luke’s perspective, a new age is dawning. Jesus announces the good news of the kingdom to all, but especially to the poor, the weak, the lowly, the outcasts of the world:

* happy are you poor (6:20)
* the poor have the good news preached to them (7:22)
* when you go to a banquet, invite the poor (14:13)
* go through the streets and bring here the poor (14:21)
* a beggar named Lazarus lay at the door . . . this poor man (16:20-22)
* sell all that you have, give it to the poor (18:22)
* Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor (19:8)
* this poor widow put in more than all the others (21:3)

Because of this emphasis, Luke’s gospel is sometimes called the “Gospel of the Poor.”

St. Vincent’s spirituality flows from his contemplation of this Christ. The driving force that generates both the incredible activity and the gentle contemplation of this great saint is his vision of the Evangelizer of the Poor.5 He encourages his followers to contemplate this Christ again and again. “O how

2. This image of Jesus too was very important in the mind of the evangelists; cf., for example, Mk 1:29f.; Mt 8:1f.; 9:1f.; 9:18f.; Lk 7:1f.; 13:10f.; Jn 9:1f.
3. Scriptural citations are from the New American Bible translation. But scriptural texts within quotations from St. Vincent are translated directly from his French text.
5. Mezzadri points out how forcefully St. Vincent’s concrete vision of Christ as coming in the service of the poor influenced his view of the formation of the clergy; cf. op. cit., 330-32.
happy will they be who can repeat at the hour of their death those beautiful words of Our Lord: ‘He sent me to preach good news to the poor.’”

2. Christ comes to liberate his people, to release them from the bondage of their corporal and spiritual wounds

Vincent’s view of Jesus’ evangelizing activity is a broad one. This is clear in the mandates that he gives to the various groups he founded: the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, the Confraternities of Charity, and the Ladies of Charity.

Jesus comes “… to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord” (Lk 4:18). He comes to “save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21; cf. Lk 1:77). Both these aspects of Christ’s mission lie at the heart of St. Vincent’s ministry.

The mission was the primary work of the company of priests and brothers Vincent founded. It aimed at conversion and culminated in the sacrament of penance, particularly in the general confession. He presented this work to the members of his Congregation as the vocation of the Son of God.

Late in life St. Vincent recalled with warmth the event that inspired the founding of the Congregation of the Mission: “It was in the month of January 1617 that it happened. On the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, which falls on the 25th, this woman begged me to preach a sermon in the church at Folleville to exhort the inhabitants to make a general confession. I did so and pointed out to them the importance and usefulness of this practice. I then taught them how to make it well. God had such a regard for the confidence and good

1. SV XI, 135. Though he spoke at times in lyrical language about the service of the poor, St. Vincent had by no means a romantic view of this ministry. Cf. SV XI, 32: “I should not judge poor peasants, men or women, by their exterior, nor by their apparent mental capacities. All the more is this so as very frequently they scarcely seem to have the appearance or mental capacity of reasonable beings, so gross and earthy are they. But turn the medal and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, whose will it was to be poor, is represented to us by these creatures. . . .”

2. Cf. Evangeli Nuntiandi, 30-39; Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede, Istruzione su “Libertà cristiana e liberazione” (March 22, 1986) 99. While Vincent was very aware of the need to meet the social problems of his day with structured, institutionalized solutions (e.g., through the societies he founded), he was, nonetheless, like most of his contemporaries, largely unaware of what today we might call “sinful social structures.” For the most part, he accepted the existing political and social order as it was (as did St. Paul, for instance, in regard to slavery). Still, within that context, he saw the need for political action as he addressed the needs of the poor and used his influence in court and on the Council of Conscience to that end. Cf. Luigi Mezzadri, San Vincenzo de Paul (Edizioni Paoline: Milan, 1986) 69-79; 83-86.

3. SV 1, 58-59; 562-63.
faith of this woman... that he blessed my discourse, and all those good people were so touched by God that all came to make a general confession... That was the first sermon of the Congregation of the Mission...”

In his conferences and letters, he envisions a Christ who reaches out to sinners, with a confident hope in their forgiveness and amendment. “O Savior! How happy were those who had the good fortune to approach you! What a countenance! What meekness, what openness of manner you showed in order to attract them! With what confidence you inspired people to approach you! O, what signs of love!” He frequently focuses on the heart of Jesus: “Let us look at the Son of God. O, what a loving heart! What a flame of love.” It is because of his tender love that the Word becomes flesh: “Ah, how tender the Son of God was! This tender love was the cause of his coming down from heaven. He saw men deprived of his glory. He was touched by their misfortunes.”

Jesus’ tender love for sinners is another distinctively Lucan theme:

* the sinful woman (7:36-50)
* the lost sheep (15:1-7)
* the lost coin (15:8-10)
* the prodigal son (15:11-32)
* the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:9-14)
* Zacchaeus (19:1-10)
* the penitent thief (23:39-43).


But the liberation that Jesus brings to the poor is, in Vincent’s vision, integral. Consequently, he sends the Daughters of Charity to minister to the poor “spiritually and corporally.” He organizes the Ladies of Charity and the Confraternities of Charity to work toward the same end. He warns the members of the Congregation of the Mission, moreover, that they should not think of their mission in exclusively spiritual terms. Rather, they too should

1. SV XI, 4-5.
2. SV XII, 190.
3. SV XII, 264.
4. SV XII, 270-71.
6. SV IX, 59; IX, 593; XI, 364; XI, 592.
7. SV XII, 87: “If there are any among us who think they are in the Congregation of the Mission to preach the gospel to the poor but not to comfort them, to supply their spiritual but not their
care for the sick, the foundlings, the insane, even the most abandoned. In this way they will preach by both word and work. In this way too, their love will be both "affective and effective."  

These two dimensions of Jesus' mission often flow together in St. Vincent's writings; he sees evangelization and human promotion as mutually complementing one another. "In this vocation we are closely conformed to Our Lord Jesus Christ, who, it would seem, made it his principal task to assist and care for the poor: 'He sent me to preach good news to the poor.' And if somebody asked Our Lord 'Why did you come on earth?' (he would answer): 'To assist the poor.' 'For any other reason?' 'To assist the poor'... And so, are we not then most happy to be part of the Mission for the very same reason that moved God to become man?"  

3. Christ lives in the person of the poor  

While the Christ of St. Vincent remains "Lord" and "Son of God," he lives in the person of the poor. He continues to suffer in them. He says to the Daughters of Charity on February 13, 1646: "In serving the poor, you serve Jesus Christ. O my Daughters, how true that is! You serve Christ in the person of the poor. That's as true as the fact that we are here." He frequently cites Mt 25:31-46 to reinforce the identification of Jesus with the poor: "So this is what obliges you to serve them with respect, as your masters, and with devotion: that they represent for you the person of Our Lord, who said: 'Whatever you do for one of these, the least of my brethren, I will consider it as done to me.' "  

Because of this identification with Christ, the poor are our "lords and masters." In drafting the rule for the Daughters, he writes that they should: "... love one another deeply, as sisters whom he has joined together with the bond of his love, and that they should cherish the poor as their masters, since..."
Our Lord is in them, and they in Our Lord.”¹ He repeats the same theme to the priests and brothers of the Mission: “Let us go then, my brothers, and work with a new love in the service of the poor looking even for the most poor and the most abandoned, recognizing before God that they are our lords and masters and that we are unworthy to render them our small services.”²

The Christ of Vincent, his “lord and master,” is therefore to be found in the sick, the prisoner, the galley-slave, the abandoned child, those ravaged by the religious wars of the day.³

This identification of Christ with the suffering neighbor is a prominent theme in Luke’s Acts (9:4; 22:7; 26:14: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”). It is also related to the Pauline theme of the Body of Christ (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 10:17; Col 1:18; Eph 4:4; 5:23), and the Johannine theme of the unity of love of God and love of neighbor (Jn 13:34-35; 1 Jn 2:7f.; 3:11, 16, 18, 23-24; 4:20-21; 5:1-2; 2 Jn 5-6).

4. Christ has a universal outlook

Jesus wished the gospel to be preached “even to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8; cf. Lk 24:47). Vincent gradually became convinced of this aspect of the mind of Christ.⁴ “Our vocation, then, is to go, not into one parish, nor even to one diocese, but throughout the whole world. And to do what? To inflame the hearts of men and women, to do what the Son of God did. He came to cast fire upon the earth, to enflame it with his love.”⁵

Beginning in 1648 with the mission to Madagascar, he begins to send the members of the Congregation to various parts of the world. “Behold the beautiful field which God is opening up to us in Madagascar, the Hebrides and elsewhere! Let us beg him to enkindle in our hearts a desire to serve him. Let us give ourselves to him to do whatever he pleases with us.”⁶ Before the end of his life, Vincent also saw missionaries in Italy, Poland, Algeria, Tunis, and Ireland. He dreamed, as well, of sending them (or of going himself!) to the Indies.

Though this missionary work resulted in huge difficulties and loss of life, Vincent remained utterly convinced of its importance and, in the face of much opposition, defended it as the mind of Christ. “Some members of the

¹. SV XIII, 540.
². SV XI, 393.
³. SV X, 680.
⁴. SV XI, 257.
⁵. SV XII, 262.
⁶. SV XI, 74-75.
Company may say perhaps that Madagascar should be abandoned; flesh and blood will speak that language and say that no more men should be sent there, but I am certain that the Spirit says otherwise. . . . It would be quite some Company, that of the Mission, if, because five or six had died, it were to abandon the work of the Lord!"  

Once again, Vincent incorporates into his vision a strong Lucan theme, the universality of Christ's vision. In Luke's gospel, it is not just to his own that Christ has come, but to all the nations:

* Jesus is a light to illumine the gentiles (2:32)
* all humankind shall see the salvation of our God (3:6)
* there is more faith among the gentiles than in Israel (4:25-27)
* go along the streets and along the hedges and force them to enter (14:23)
* in his name conversion will be preached to all the nations (24:47)

This theme, sometimes called the "Gospel of Universal Salvation," is continued in Luke's second book, the Acts, where the disciples witness to the good news "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the world" (Acts 1:8).

5. Christ is characterized by five missionary virtues: simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and zeal.

In his important conference of August 22, 1659, St. Vincent focuses on these five virtues, which flow from the evangelical maxims, whose "author, who is Our Lord Jesus Christ . . . observed them." He tells the members of the Congregation of the Mission that these five virtues are to be "the faculties of the soul of the entire Congregation." In his conferences to the Daughters of Charity, he likewise focuses on simplicity and humility, in addition to charity itself. I will treat these five missionary virtues in much more detail in the next chapter. Here I will touch on them only briefly, as St. Vincent saw them in Christ.

a. The spirit of Jesus Christ is one of simplicity, which consists in

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1. SV XI, 420ff.; cf. also XI, 203-204, 402.
2. SV XII, 302: "Look at the force and power of the evangelical maxims, among which, since they are many in number, I have chosen principally those which are more proper to missionaries." Besides looking at the events in the life of Jesus, St. Vincent sees in the New Testament a series of maxims or sayings, of which Jesus is the "author." He asks his followers to do what Jesus did and to practice what he taught, either by direct command or through these maxims.
3. SV XII, 299.
4. CR II, 14; SV XII, 309.
5. SV IV, 486.
speaking the truth, in saying things as they are, without concealing or hiding anything, and in referring things to God alone. St. Vincent is so convinced of its importance that he calls simplicity “my gospel,” “the virtue I love most.” “Do you know where Our Lord dwells?” he asks the Daughters of Charity. “It is among the simple.”

Vincent emphasizes here a central New Testament theme: Jesus’ dedication to truth. John’s gospel in particular focuses on this characteristic of Christ:

- Jesus is the truth (4:6)
- those who act in the truth come into the light (3:21)
- the truth sets you free (8:32)
- Jesus testifies to the truth (18:37)
- anyone who is of the truth hears his voice (18:37)

Besides these and other Johannine texts (cf. Jn 1:17; 4:24; 5:33; 14:6; 16:13; 17:17), the New Testament accents dedication to the truth as a moral imperative based on a saying of the Lord that appears in several contexts: “Say yes when you mean yes and no when you mean no” (Mt 5:37; cf. Jas 5:12; 2 Cor 1:17-20).

b. Humility, the virtue of Jesus Christ, which he teaches us “by word and example,” entails the recognition that all good comes from God. It involves an acknowledgement of our own lowliness and faults, accompanied by exuberant confidence in God. Vincent urges the Company, above all, to consider “that admirable model of humility, Our Lord Jesus Christ.” He marveled how the Son of God “emptied himself” (Phil 2:7).

While humility is emphasized by the other evangelists (cf. Mt 20:28; Mk 9:35; Jn 13:12-15), as well as by Paul (cf. Phil 2:5-11), it is a particularly emphatic Lucan theme, connected with the coming of salvation to the poor. Beginning with the infancy narratives, Luke depicts the advent of Jesus among the humble. God “looked upon his servant in her lowliness” (Lk 1:48).

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1. CR II, 4; SV XII, 172.
2. SV I, 144.
3. SV I, 284; V, 464.
4. CR II, 4; SV, 172.
5. SV IX, 606.
6. SV I, 284.
7. SV X, 96.
8. SV XI, 56-57.
11. CR II, 7.
12. SV III, 279; V, 165.
13. SV XI, 394.
He “deposed the mighty from their thrones and raised the lowly to high places” (1:52). “For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled and he who humbles himself shall be exalted” (14:11; cf. also 18:14). Jesus reminds his disciples that the truly great are those who become the least (22:26) and that he is in their midst “as the one who serves . . .” (22:27). Luke also develops the theme of exaltation through humiliation (cf. 9:22; 12:50; 24:7, 26, 46). In the Book of the Acts, he repeats that this is the key to understanding the scriptures (Acts 8:26-40).

c. Jesus himself tells us that he is meek, St. Vincent writes. This virtue, for St. Vincent, is the ability to handle anger either by suppressing it or by expressing it, in a manner governed by love. It is approachability and affability. It combines gentleness and firmness. St. Vincent writes to St. Louise de Marillac on November 1, 1637: “If the gentleness of your spirit needs a dash of vinegar, borrow a little of it from the spirit of Our Lord. O, Mademoiselle, how very well he knew how to find a bitter-sweet remark when it was needed.”

It is Matthew’s gospel that Vincent usually quotes when speaking of Jesus’ meekness (Mt 11:29; cf. also 5:5; 21:5). But while Luke never uses the word “meekness” itself, the theme is so characteristic of the third gospel that Dante once described Luke as “the scribe of the gentleness of Christ.” Jesus’ mercy (Lk 7:36ff.), his love (15:1ff.), his gracious words (4:22), and his joy (10:21) in Luke’s gospel soften the starker portrait painted by Mark.

d. Jesus is the exemplar of mortification. “Let us never lose sight of the mortification of Our Lord, seeing that, to follow him, we are obliged to mortify ourselves after his example.” Vincent defines mortification as the subjection of passion to reason. It finds a very prominent place in his conferences. To motivate his communities to engage in it, he cites many of the New Testament sayings recommending it.

Once again the reader will note that this is a prominent Lucan theme:

* the disciples leave everything and follow Jesus (5:11)

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1. CR II, 6.
2. SV XII, 186.
3. SV XII, 187.
4. SV XII, 187.
5. SV XII, 188.
6. SV XII, 189.
7. SV VII, 226.
8. SV I, 393-94.
10. SV XII, 227.
11. SV X, 56.
* they must take up their cross daily (9:23)
* no one should put his hand to the plow and turn back (9:62)
* they should sell everything and give it as alms (12:33)
* they must hate father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, even their very life (14:26)
* they must renounce everything (14:33)
* Jesus must suffer much before the reign of God is established (17:25)
* it was necessary that he be crucified (24:7)
* the Christ had to suffer in order to enter his glory (24:26)
* he must suffer and rise (24:46)

Because of this, Luke’s gospel has sometimes been called the “Gospel of Absolute Renunciation.”

e. Zeal is the burning love that fills the heart of Jesus. “Let us ask God to give the Company this spirit, this heart, this heart which will make us go everywhere, this heart of the Son of God, the heart of Our Lord . . . which will dispose us to go as he went and as he would have gone if his eternal wisdom had judged it fitting to labor for the conversion of those poor nations.”¹ This fire of love enables the missionary to go anywhere and to do everything.² “The love of Christ drives us on” (2 Cor 5:14) becomes the motto of the Daughters of Charity.

Zeal is the virtue of missionary action. “If the love of God is the fire, zeal is its flame. If love is the sun, then zeal is its ray.”³ It aims “at extending the kingdom of God.”⁴ It is love in practice. “Let us love God, my brothers,” Vincent de Paul cries out to the missionaries, “let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows. So very often many acts of love of God, of resting in his presence, of benevolence, and such interior affections and practices, although very good and very desirable, are nevertheless to be suspected if they do not reach the practice of effective love.”⁵

Practical love, on fire with spreading the kingdom of God, is of course central to the New Testament. It is also the quality for which Vincent de Paul is best known and in the service of which he organized so many men and women. One could cite many New Testament texts (cf. Mt 25:31-46; Rom 13:8; 1 Cor 13:13) focusing on its importance. Perhaps clearest of all are those in the Johannine corpus (cf. Jn 3:16; 13:34-35; 1 Jn 2:10; 3:11; 3:16; 3:18; 3:23; 4:7-8; 4:11; 4:19-21; 5:1-2).

1. SV XI, 291.
2. SV XI, 204: “Yes, the Congregation of the Mission can do all things because we have within us the germ of the omnipotence of Jesus Christ . . . .”
3. SV XII, 307-308; XII, 262.
4. SV XII, 307.
5. SV XI, 40.
6. Christ is constantly before the Father in prayer

Jesus’ psychology, St. Vincent writes with precision in one of his letters, is caught up in two all-consuming directions, “his filial relationship with the Father and his charity toward the neighbor.”¹ In the midst of his missionary activity, Jesus is always united with his Father (cf. Jn 7:29, 33:17, 13, 18).² He recognizes that the Father is the author of all the good that he does³ and he constantly seeks his will.

In that light, St. Vincent tells the Daughters of Charity, “... Our Lord was, above all, a man of prayer.”⁴ In his Rule for the missionaries, he states: “Although we cannot perfectly imitate Christ our Lord who spent whole nights in prayer to God in addition to his daily meditations, nevertheless we will do so as far as we are able.”⁵

Vincent is utterly convinced of the importance of the union of action and contemplation that he sees in Christ. He tells his followers that vocational stability and the ongoing vitality of their works depends on prayer.⁶ He alludes repeatedly to a distinctively Lucan theme: that Jesus prays again and again, in the morning, at night, and on all the important occasions in his ministry:

* at his baptism (3:21)
* he withdraws to pray alone (5:16)
* he prays before he chooses the twelve (6:12)
* he prays before Peter’s confession (9:18)
* he prays before the transfiguration (9:29)
* he tells them to pray for laborers for the harvest (10:2)
* he teaches the disciples to pray (11:1)
* he teaches them perseverance in prayer (18:1)
* he teaches them humility in prayer (18:9)
* he prays at the Last Supper, to strengthen Peter’s faith (22:32)
* he prays during his agony in the garden (22:41-42)
* he prays on the cross (23:46)

In this sense, Luke’s gospel is the “Gospel of Prayer.” Luke’s Book of the

¹. SV VI, 393. The French reads: “… religion vers son Père.”
². Jesus’ special relationship with his Father is also a Lucan theme; cf. 2:49; 3:22, 9:35; 10:21-22; 23:46.
³. SV XII, 109.
⁴. SV IX, 415.
⁵. CR X, 7.
⁶. SV XI, 83: “Give me a man of prayer and he will be capable of everything. He may say with the apostle, ‘I can do all things in him who strengthens me.’ The Congregation will last as long as it faithfully carries out the practice of prayer, which is like an impregnable rampart shielding the missionaries from all manner of attack.” Cf. also SV III, 535; IX, 416; X, 583.

7. Christ shares his life with many others and engages them in his ministry

St. Vincent establishes communities, after the example of Christ, “who assembled his apostles and disciples,” for the sake of an apostolic mission. Believing that “love is inventive, even to infinity,” he founds the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. He organizes the Ladies of Charity and the Confraternities of Charity. He brings together men and women, rich and poor, learned and unlearned—all in the service of the poor.

He recognizes that women play a particularly prominent role in the ministry of Jesus. The same becomes true in his own life: Marguerite Naseau, Louise de Marillac, Jane Frances de Chantal, Madame de Gondi, to name just the most prominent. This, too, is a distinctively Lucan theme. Luke, more than any of the other gospel writers, emphasizes the important place that women have in the life and ministry of Jesus:

* Mary, Elizabeth and Anna, in the infancy narratives
* the sinful woman (7:36-50)
* the women who accompany him (8:1-3)
* the widow of Naim (7:11-17)
* the woman who praises his mother (11:27-28)
* Martha and Mary (10:38-42)
* the women on the road to Calvary (23:27-31)
* the women who follow him to the end (23:55)
* the witnesses to his resurrection (24:22)

1. CR VIII, 1.
2. Cf. SV XIII, 197-98; 423.
3. SV XI, 146.
4. SV IX, 208-209, 456, 601; XIII, 455, 809-10; XIV, 125-26.
5. SV IX, 77.
7. SV XIII, 125.
8. SV III, 399.
8. Christ trusts in the providence of his Father and exercises a providential care over the lives of his followers

While many of St. Vincent’s conferences and writings speak of the providence of God (implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, the Father¹), many others speak of Christ’s providence for his followers.² In a letter to Bernard Codoing he emphasizes the former: “The rest will come in its time. Grace has its moments. Let us abandon ourselves to the providence of God and be very careful not to run ahead of it. If it pleases God to give me some consolation in our vocation it is this. That I think, so it seems to me, that we have tried to follow his great providence in everything. . . .”³ Likewise he writes to St. Louise de Marillac: “My God, my daughter, what great hidden treasures there are in holy providence and how marvelously Our Lord is honored by those who follow it and do not kick against it!”⁴ Speaking of the providence which Jesus himself has for his followers, St. Vincent tells Jean Martin in 1647: “So, Father, let us ask Our Lord that everything might be done in accordance with his providence, that our wills be submitted to him in such a way that between him and us there might be only one, which will enable us to enjoy his unique love in time and in eternity.”⁵ In another letter to the impetuous Bernard Codoing in 1644 he states: “The consolation that Our Lord gives me is to think that, by the grace of God, we have always tried to follow and not run ahead of providence, which knows so wisely how to lead everything to the goal that Our Lord destines for it.”⁶ Three months later he adds: “But what are we going to do, you say? We will do what Our Lord wills, which is to keep ourselves always in dependence on his providence. . . .”⁷ One might argue that this, too, is a Lucan emphasis.⁸ The Spirit of the Father and of Jesus is active from the beginning in Luke, guiding the course of history. He anoints Jesus with power from on high and directs him in his ministry.

* the Holy Spirit will come down on you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you (1:35)
* having received baptism . . . the Holy Spirit descended on him (3:22)

¹. Cf. SV II, 473; III, 188; V, 396; VIII, 152.
². This may not always be an intentional distinction since in Vincent’s writings sometimes the actions of the Father are not clearly distinguished from those of the Son.
³. SV II, 453.
⁴. SV I, 68; cf. III, 197.
⁵. SV III, 197.
⁶. SV II, 456.
⁷. SV II, 469.
* Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit ... was led by the Spirit into the desert (4:1)
* Jesus returned to Galilee with the power of the Holy Spirit (4:14)
* the Spirit of the Lord is upon me (4:18)
* Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit (10:21)
* your heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him (11:13)
* whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven (12:10)
* the Holy Spirit will teach you at that moment what you should say (12:12)

The Book of Acts continues this theme of the “Gospel of the Holy Spirit.” The Spirit energizes and guides the Church in its apostolic mission.\(^1\)

**CONCLUSION**

Vincent de Paul’s vision of Christ is an original one.\(^2\) For him, Christ is most of all the Evangelizer of the Poor. He is a missionary Christ, coming from the Father and returning to him, emptying himself of his condition as Son of God in order to free his people from the bondage, both corporal and spiritual, in which they are chained. He identifies with, and makes his home within, the poor themselves. His vision is universal, impelling him to preach the good news to the poor even to the ends of the earth. This Christ draws others together, male and female, rich and poor, and forms them to share in his mission. The virtues that particularly characterize him are five missionary ones: simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and zeal. Even in the midst of great activity he stands before his Father constantly in prayer, seeking his will and trusting in his providence.

Need I add how strikingly contemporary is the vision of this seventeenth-century saint? Today we find Vincent’s preferential love for the poor echoed in one contemporary Church document after another.\(^3\) His stress on a broad concept of evangelization, including human promotion and liberation from various forms of human bondage, or what Vincent calls “serving the poor

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2. One might, of course, add other elements in St. Vincent’s vision of Christ (Christ as priest, Christ as living in poverty, chastity and obedience, etc.). In this article, I have focused only those which seem to me most characteristic of St. Vincent’s vision.
3. Cf., among many other texts, *Redemptoris Mater* 37; Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede, *Istruzione su “Liberà cristiana e liberazione*” (March 22, 1986) 68; *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 42.
both corporally and spiritually," are the centerpiece of the modern social encyclicals and numerous other episcopal and papal writings. The importance of lay involvement in ministry and the need to revitalize ministerial formation both of the clergy and the laity are themes that resonate throughout the Church. Renewed interest in apostolic spirituality and prayer is one of the signs of the times today.

In what ways will contemporary Christology pursue the path along which this wonderfully realistic man walked: focusing on Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor? How will it further articulate, and concretize, the ramifications of his vision? That is surely the contemporary challenge.

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2. Cf. Synod of Bishops 1987, “Message to the People of God” 12; *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 47.