Chapter II

FIVE CHARACTERISTIC VIRTUES: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

... we should look on them as the five smooth stones with which, even at the first assault, we will defeat the infernal Goliath in the name of the Lord of Armies...

CR XII, 12

I write this chapter with some hesitation, knowing that the task I am undertaking is a difficult, even if very important, one. For Vincent de Paul, simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and zeal were the characteristic virtues of a missionary. He saw them as "the five smooth stones by which we might conquer the evil Goliath." These virtues are so central to St. Vincent’s thinking that in efforts at renewal all those who share in the Vincentian tradition must grapple with their meaning and the forms they might take in the modern world.

This chapter is divided into three parts: 1) a study of the five characteristic virtues as St. Vincent himself understood them; 2) a brief description of horizon-shifts that have taken place in theology and spirituality between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries; 3) an attempt at retrieving the five virtues in contemporary forms.

I offer the research and theological reflection in this chapter especially to the members of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, but also to the many other groups of priests, sisters, brothers and lay men and women who walk in the spirit of Vincent de Paul. I hope that it will help in their efforts at ongoing renewal. I recognize the limitations of what I have written in the third part of the chapter. I trust that through dialogue the reflections that I have sketched there will be supplemented.
I - THE FIVE CHARACTERISTIC VIRTUES
AS TAUGHT BY ST. VINCENT

1. Simplicity

a. For St. Vincent, simplicity is first of all, speaking the truth (CR II, 4; XII, 172). It is saying things as they are (I, 144), without concealing or hiding anything (I, 284; V, 464). He expresses this in a letter to François du Coudray on November 6, 1634:

You know that your own kind heart has given me, thanks be to God, full liberty to speak to you with the utmost confidence, without any concealment or disguise; and it seems to me that up to the present you have recognized that fact in all my dealings with you. My God! Am I to fall into the misfortune of being forced to do or to say in my dealings with you anything contrary to holy simplicity? Oh! Sir! May God preserve me from doing so in regard to anything whatsoever! It is the virtue I love most, the one to which in all my actions I pay most heed, so it seems to me; and if it were lawful to say so, the one, I may say, in which I have, by God’s mercy, made some progress (I, 284).

The heart must not think one thing while the mouth says another (IX, 81; IX, 605; XII, 172). The missionary must avoid all duplicity, dissimulation, cunning, and double meaning (II, 340; IX, 81).

For myself, I don’t know, but God gives me such a great esteem for simplicity that I call it my gospel. I have a particular devotion and consolation in saying things as they are. (IX, 606)

b. Simplicity also consists in referring things to God alone (CR II, 4), or purity of intention (XII, 172). In this sense simplicity is doing everything for love of God and for no other end (XII, 174; XII, 302; II, 315). It entails

1. The author apologizes for the somewhat tedious, and at times schematic, treatment of what St. Vincent taught about the five virtues. I have attempted to give a complete account here of all that St. Vincent wrote and said on the subject, as found mainly in P. Coste’s fourteen volumes, supplemented principally by A. Dodin, as well as by several others. It seems to me that a foundational study of this sort is utterly necessary as one attempts to recapture these virtues in contemporary forms. All references in the first part of this chapter are to Coste’s edition, unless otherwise noted, and are designated SV. References to the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission are designated CR. For some interesting information on this same subject, as well as further bibliography, the reader may wish to consult: J.-P. Renouard, “L’Esprit de la Congrégation: Les Vertus Fondamentales,” Vincentiana XXVIII (1984) 599-615; cf. also T. Davitt, “The Five Characteristic Virtues,” Colloque XIV (Autumn 1986) 109-120. Cf. also Christian Sens, “Comme Prêtre Missionnaire,” in Monsieur Vincent, Témoin de L’Evangile (Toulouse, 1990) 133-151, esp. 140f.
avoiding “human respect” (II, 340). The missionary must never do good acts in one place in order to be recommended for an assignment in another place (II, 314).

c. Simplicity involves an unadorned lifestyle. We fail against simplicity, St. Vincent tells us, when our rooms are filled with superfluous furniture, pictures, large numbers of books, and vain and useless things (XII, 175). We must use with great simplicity the things that have been given to us (IX, 607).

d. For the missionary, simplicity also entails explaining the gospel by familiar comparisons (XI, 50), using the Little Method that was employed in the Congregation of the Mission at that time (CR XII, 5): preaching about a virtue, for example, by presenting:

- motives for living it,
- its nature or definition, and
- means for putting it into practice (SV XI, 260).

e. In St. Vincent’s mind, simplicity was very closely linked with humility (I, 144) and it was inseparable from prudence (CR II, 5), which for him meant always basing one’s judgment on the evangelical maxims or on the judgments of Jesus Christ (XII, 169; XII, 176). Both prudence and simplicity tend toward the same goal: to speak and to act well (XII, 176).

f. St. Vincent gives a whole series of motives as to why his double family should practice simplicity:

- God communicates with the simple (CR II, 4; II, 341; XII, 170; XII, 302).
- God himself is simple; so where simplicity is there God is too (XI, 50).
- The world loves simple people (XII, 171).
- Missionaries especially ought to love it (XII, 302), since it will help them in dealing with simple people.
- It is the spirit of Jesus Christ (IV, 486).
- God wants the Community to have this virtue (XII, 303), especially since it lives in a world that is filled with duplicity.
- Duplicity is never agreeable to God (IV, 486).
- It is the simple who keep the true religion (XII, 171).

g. St. Vincent also lists means by which simplicity is acquired:

- It is obtained by frequent acts (XII, 181).
- We should say everything openly to our superiors, without trying to hide what is embarrassing to us (IX, 606; X, 64; X, 96; X, 146; X, 355).
- We should obey the rule to please God, not the superior (IX, 444).
- We should carry out orders without asking why (IX, 605).
2. Humility

a. Humility, for St. Vincent, is the recognition that all good comes from God. He writes to Firmin Get on March 8, 1658: “Let us no longer say: it is I who have done this good work; for every good thing ought to be done in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ…” (VII, 98-99). “Be very much on your guard against attributing anything to yourself. By doing so you would commit robbery and do injury to God, who alone is the author of every good thing,” he writes to Jacque Pesnelle on October 15, 1658 (VII, 289). God pours out his abundant gifts on the humble “who recognize that all good which is done by them comes from God” (I, 182).

b. Humility is recognition of our own lowliness and faults (CR II, 7), accompanied by exuberant confidence in God (III, 279; V, 165; II, 233; II, 336; X, 201; IX, 382). In writing to Charles Nacquart on March 22, 1648 about the gift of vocation, he states: “Humility alone is capable of receiving this grace. A perfect abandonment of everything that you are and can be in the exuberant confidence in your sovereign creator ought to follow” (III, 279).

Our sins too should help us grow in humility (XI, 397).

c. Humility involves voluntary self-emptying (V, 534; XI, 61; XI, 312; XII, 200). This entails loving to be unknown and abandoned (VII, 312; X, 129; X, 152; XII, 709). It means avoiding the applause of the world (I, 496; IX, 605; X, 148). It involves taking the last place (IX, 605) and loving the hidden life (IX, 680).

d. Humility involves esteeming others as more worthy than yourself (V, 37; IX, 303). In this regard, it is a communal virtue not just an individual one. We are to regard the Company as the least of all (IX, 303; X, 200; XI, 60; XI, 114-15; XI, 434; XII, 438).

e. St. Vincent gives numerous motives for the practice of humility:

- He notes that Jesus was humble and happy to be seen as the least of men (I, 182; I, 534; XI, 400).

- It is the characteristic virtue of Jesus (XI, 400), and should be the characteristic virtue of the Congregation of the Mission (XI, 57): “Grant that humility may be the characteristic virtue of the Mission! Oh holy virtue, how beautiful you are. O little Company, how lovable you will be if God grants you this grace” (XII, 204). It is also the characteristic virtue of a true Daughter of Charity (X, 527).

- Saints too were humble: “It is the virtue of Jesus Christ, the virtue of his holy mother, the virtue of the greatest of the saints, and finally it is the virtue of missionaries” (XI, 56-57).
- God blesses humble beginnings (II, 281; V, 487).
- Humility is the origin of all the good that we do (IX, 674).
- God has called us, lowly people, to do great things (X, 128; X, 198).
- It is the arms by which we conquer the devil (I, 536; XI, 312), since the devil and pride are the same (IX, 706).
- We cannot persevere without humility (I, 528; X, 528; XII, 304).
- It brings all other virtues with it (XII, 210).
- It is the foundation of all evangelical perfection, the node of the whole spiritual life (CR II, 7).
- Everyone loves it (XII, 197), but it is easier to think about than to practice (XI, 54).
- It is the source of peace and union (XII, 106; XII, 210).
- If the Company possesses humility, it will be a paradise: "If you establish yourselves in it, what will happen? You will make of this Company a paradise and people will likely say that it is a group of the happiest people on earth..." (X, 439).
- Heaven is won by humility (CR II, 6).

f. St. Vincent suggested many means for acquiring humility:
- We should do acts of humility daily (IX, 680; XII, 716; I, 183).
- We should confess our faults openly (V, 164; XI, 54) and accept the admonitions of others (CR X, 13-14).
- We should desire to be admonished (IX, 382).
- We should pray to our Lord and the Blessed Mother as models of humility (IX, 680; XI, 56-57).
- We should believe that we are the worst in the world (X, 552).
- We should recognize that everyone has his faults; then there will be little trouble excusing others (X, 438).
- We should preach Jesus Christ and not ourselves (XII, 22).
- Superiors should so act that others will not be able to tell that they are superiors (XI, 346; IX, 302).

3. Meekness

What St. Vincent teaches about meekness is most clearly delineated in a conference given on March 28, 1659. We also owe much to his letters to Louise de Marillac, to whom he often speaks about combining meekness with strength.

a. Meekness is the ability to handle anger (XII, 186). One can do this either by suppressing it (XII, 186) or by expressing it (XII, 187), governed by love (XII, 188).
b. Meekness is also approachability, gentleness, affability, and serenity of countenance toward those who approach us (XII, 189).

c. It entails enduring offenses with forgiveness and courage. We should treat gently even those who do injury to us (XII, 191). "Meekness makes us not only excuse the affronts and injustices we receive, but even inclines us to treat with gentleness those from whom we receive them, by means of kind words, and should they go so far as to abuse us and even strike us on the face, it makes us endure all for God. Such are the effects produced by this virtue. Yes, a servant of God who truly possesses it, when violent hands are laid upon him, offers to the divine goodness this rough treatment and remains in peace" (XII, 192).

d. It is based on respect for the person (IX, 269).

e. It involves combining gentleness and firmness. He writes to Louise de Marillac on November 1, 1637: "If the meekness of your spirit needs a drop of vinegar, borrow a little of it from the spirit of our Lord. Oh, Mademoiselle, how very well he knew how to find the bitter-sweet when it was necessary" (I, 393-94). To Denis Laudin, superior at Mans, he writes on August 7, 1658: "Bear with him, therefore, Monsieur, but make him keep the rule as much as you can, according to the spirit of our Lord who is equally gentle and firm. If a man is not won over by meekness and patience, it will be difficult to win him over in any other way." (VII, 226)

f. St. Vincent offers many motives to the double family for practicing humility:

- He tells them that our Lord is eternal meekness toward us (IV, 53; I, 341; IX, 266).

- "There are no persons more constant and firm in doing good than those who are meek and gracious. While on the contrary, those who allow themselves to yield to anger and to passions of the irascible appetite are usually more inconstant, because they act only by fits and starts. They are like torrents, which are strong and impetuous only when in full flood but which dry up immediately afterwards, while rivers, which represent the meek and gracious, flow on noiselessly, tranquilly and unfailingly" (XI, 65).

- Where Daughters of Charity live in respect and meekness, it is paradise; it is hell where they do not (IX, 268).

- Charity consists of love and meekness (IX, 267); if a sister is not meek, then she is not a Daughter of Charity (IX, 268).

- Meekness disposes people to turn to the Lord (CR II, 6).

- Heretics, galley slaves, and those fallen away are won over by patience and cordiality (IV, 53; IV, 120; XI, 66; IV, 449; I, 341). Disputation
does not aim at truth but at resisting the arguments of others, whereas meekness aims at the truth (XI, 65).
- A missionary needs meekness if he is to be able to endure the roughness of poor people (XII, 305).
g. St. Vincent suggests many means for acquiring meekness:
- He tells the Company that the contrary vice can be overcome if one works at it, as he himself had to do (IX, 64).
- Before speaking or deciding or acting, the angry person should hold his tongue and cool down (XI, 67).
- We should refrain from invective, reproach and rough words (IV, 53).
- We should not speak too loudly, but modestly and gently (IX, 274).
- We should ask pardon readily (IX, 275).
- We should learn, like St. Augustine, when to tolerate evil rather than try to abolish all evil practices (IV, 121).
- We should learn to submit our judgments to others (XII, 318).

4. Mortification

St. Vincent has a very developed teaching concerning mortification which he explains in numerous conferences, particularly to the Daughters of Charity.

a. Mortification entails denial of the exterior senses: sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing (IX, 23; X, 59; X, 151; X, 246; X, 280; X, 399; XII, 215). He gives many examples in this regard. The Daughters of Charity, for example, should look at men only if this is necessary or useful. They should not be looking all around, but should keep their eyes moderately low (although service of the poor demands that they maintain a cheerful appearance). They should learn to endure bad smells especially when they are with the sick poor. They should mortify taste by not eating between meals. They should also eat foods which are not pleasing to them. They should not listen to gossip. They should not touch the neighbor nor allow themselves to be touched.

b. Mortification also involves denial of the interior senses: understanding, memory and will (X, 151; X, 246; X, 280). They should not want to know all sorts of curious things (scientia inflat). Nor should they be conjuring up, in their memories, pleasures that they had with their families, their romances, the caresses of their parents, etc. They should seek to come to a state of complete indifference, desiring only to do the will of God.

c. It entails denial of the passions of the soul. There are eleven of these,
according to St. Vincent, of which love/hate and hope/despair are the most important (X, 248).

d. Basically, for St. Vincent, mortification is the subjection of passion to reason (X, 56). A person has a lower and a higher part. The lower part makes him like an animal; the higher part tends toward God (X, 55). The lower wants to revolt against the higher (X, 56; X, 244-45).

e. Mortification aims at indifference (X, 282), detachment (XII, 20). It is a continual struggle, but the struggle does get easier as time goes on (X, 251; XII, 226).

f. St. Vincent proposes many motives to his double family for practicing mortification:

- He quotes scripture passages recommending mortification: Matthew 16:24; Luke 14:26; Matthew 10:37; Romans 8:13; 2 Corinthians 4:10 (IX, 170; X, 61; X, 398).

- Jesus did only the will of his Father, constantly mortifying himself (XII, 214): “Gentlemen, let us keep this example before our eyes. Let us never lose sight of the mortification of our Lord, seeing that, to follow him, we are obligated to mortify ourselves after his example. Let us model our affections upon his, that his footsteps may be the guide of ours in the ways of perfection. The saints are saints because they walk in his footsteps, renounce themselves, and mortify themselves in all things” (XII, 227).

- He tells them that, in the long run, it is necessary to suffer, so they should be sure to make good use of suffering (X, 186-87).

- He points out that the lives of some, like M. Pillé, are a perpetual mortification (II, 342).

- Mortification of the senses helps us in prayer (X, 279; IX, 427).

- Mortification and prayer are two sisters who always go together: “Mortification is another means, my daughters, which will be of great help to you on the road to prayer. Prayer and mortification are two sisters who are so closely united together that one will never be found without the other. Mortification goes first and prayer follows after, so that, my dear daughters, if you wish to become daughters of prayer, as you should, learn to mortify yourselves” (IX, 427).

- Mortification makes satisfaction for our sins (X, 61).

- It is not as demanding for a Daughter of Charity as for a Carmelite and others (X, 98).

- Many have lost their vocations because they failed to accept mortification from the hands of God (X, 186; XII, 320).

- If we do not continually work to get better, we will get worse; there is
no standing still (X, 245). Progress in the spiritual life depends on progress in mortification (XI, 70).

- It is a paradise on earth when we can accept mortification as coming from God (X, 284).

- To encourage the Company, St. Vincent tells the story of his own difficulty in separating himself from his relatives (XII, 219).

g. St. Vincent proposes a number of means for acquiring the habit of mortification:

- It is acquired little by little, through repeated acts: “In regard to what you have proposed about working hard to mortify the judgment and the will of your seminarists,” St. Vincent writes to Pierre du Beaumont on October 3, 1655, “I will say to you, Monsieur, that that cannot be done all at once, but little by little with meekness and patience. Mortification, like the other virtues, is acquired only by repeated acts” (V, 436).

- It involves:
  * bearing with one another (IX, 176),
  * accepting inconveniences in the house (IX, 188-89),
  * checking our tongues (X, 403), and
  * being careful and reserved in dealing with members of the opposite sex (XII, 21; X, 60; X, 151).

- The Rule asks for mortification in regard to:
  1) will
  2) judgment
  3) senses
  4) relatives and parents (CR II, 8-9), and, in a conference to the Company given on May 2, 1659, he adds, citing St. Basil:
  5) pomp
  6) the desire to preserve yourself and live long (XII, 220-23), and
  7) putting off the old man and putting on the new (XII, 224).

h. St. Vincent encourages his confreres to practice mortifications, under the guidance of their superiors or directors, to the extent that their health and their labors permit. But because of their continual labors as missionaries he does not wish that the Rule burden them with mortifications and bodily austerities (CR X, 15).

5. Zeal

St. Vincent speaks less frequently in an explicit way about zeal. He
touches on the subject in passing, however, and speaks about it eloquently on those occasions.

a. Zeal is love on fire. “If love of God is the fire, zeal is its flame. If love is the sun, then zeal is its ray” (XII, 307-08; XII, 262). “Charity when it dwells in a soul takes complete possession of all its powers. It never rests. It is a fire that acts ceaselessly” (XI, 216). It involves:

- a willingness to go anywhere to spread the reign of Christ: “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, the heart of the Lord, the heart of the Lord [sic] 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. He sent his apostles to do that. He sends us, like them, to bear this divine fire everywhere, everywhere” (XI, 291, cf. XI, 402; XII, 307);

- willingness to die for Christ: “You see, gentlemen and my brothers, we should all have in ourselves the disposition and desire to suffer for God and for our neighbor and to wear ourselves out for that. Oh, how happy they are to whom God gives such dispositions and desires. Yes, gentlemen, we should be completely for God and for the service of the people. We should give ourselves to God to that end and wear ourselves out for that and give our lives to that end. We must strip ourselves bare, so to speak, in order to put on the new man. At least we should desire to be so disposed if we are not so already: to be ready and disposed to come and go according to God’s pleasure, whether it be the Indies or elsewhere. Finally, we should be willing to devote ourselves to the service of our neighbor and to extend the rule of Jesus Christ in souls. And I myself, old and infirm as I am, should not cease to be disposed, yes, even to set out for the Indies to win souls for Christ, even if I should die on the way or aboard ship” (XI, 402; cf. XI, 371; XI, 415).

b. It entails hard work for the salvation of our neighbor (XI, 444-45; XI, 307). “Let us love God, my brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and with the sweat of our brows. So very often many acts of love of God, of complacency, of benevolence, and such interior affection and practices, although very good and very desirable, are nevertheless to be suspected if they do not reach the practice of effective love” (XI, 40).

c. It is to be contrasted with two extremes (CR XII, 11):

1) sloth, laxity, lack of fervor or sensitivity (XI, 193; XI, 17; XII, 321); and

2) indiscreet zeal (I, 96; I, 84; II, 140; X, 671).
The latter includes overwork (I, 84), unnecessarily exposing oneself or others to danger (IV, 121), being rigorous and overbearing with people as the young sometimes are (II, 70-71), and remaining too long with one sick person to the prejudice of another (X, 671). He urges Louise de Marillac (I, 96): “Be very careful to conserve it (your health) for the love of the Lord and his poor members and be careful not to do too much. It is a ruse of the devil by which he deceives good souls when he incites them to do more than they can in order that they might not be able to do anything.”

d. St. Vincent offers the double family several motives for zeal:
  - He tells them that Jesus’ love was so great that he was willing to die (XI, 415).
  - The blood of Christians is the seed of Christianity (XI, 415).
  - God allowed the deaths of many in the beginning of the Church (XI, 415, XI, 422).

e. He urges confreres to take the means to grow in zeal:
  - He writes to François du Coudray: “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 who grope in ignorance of the things necessary for our salvation in the sins that we have never dared to confess and who without your help will certainly be damned’” (I, 252).
  - He encourages M. Descart (II, 70-72) to grow in a charity that is nourished by experimental knowledge and that avoids rigor and excess.
One could write extensively on this subject. Here I will offer merely a brief description of some horizon-shifts that have taken place between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. Except for a few references to Church documents, I will not attempt to provide extensive documentation concerning these shifts, since I trust that the reader, whether he might react favorably or unfavorably to the shifts, will quickly recognize them as changes in thinking that have already taken place or are currently taking place. Only those horizon-shifts have been selected which have some impact on the way one views the five virtues.

1. A change in philosophical and theological methodology

The emphasis here has shifted from a classical to a more historical way of thinking. The classicist mentality is deductive. It emphasizes universal principles and necessary conclusions. Working, for example, from the datum that Jesus is God, it draws necessary conclusions about his certain knowledge of future events. Over the centuries a detailed Christology “from above” has been worked out through a rigorous application of the deductive process. The method tends to be abstract and a priori. It examines the nature of things and draws conclusions in regard to particular instances depending on whether or not they correspond to the abstract nature. The method has been applied systematically to dogmatic, moral, and spiritual questions.

The historical mode of thinking emphasizes changing circumstances and contingent conclusions. It begins with concrete data, employs an empirical method, stresses hermeneutics, and draws its conclusions inductively from its sources. This historical way of thinking has brought in its wake numerous changes in liturgical matters like the reform of the sacrament of penance, the restoration of communion under both kinds, the reception of communion in the hand, the use of eucharistic ministers, etc. It also has had great influence in the development of Christology “from below,” the question of religious liberty, and the contemporary discussion of many moral questions.

A significant consequence of this shift in emphasis in philosophical and theological methodology is that change has come to find a greater place in our expectations. People today are willing to accept fewer absolutes. They question absolute prohibitions which were formerly accepted. They em-

phasize that changing circumstances make one case different from another.

Another consequence of this horizon-shift has been increasing pluralism. Contemporary thinkers recognize the value of different cultures, philosophies, and theologies. The inductive method emphasizes the search for truth rather than the possession of truth. An obvious sign of this in ecclesial matters is the ecumenical movement.

2. Increasing consciousness of interdependence

Communication has been the key in this regard.1 When an event took place in the seventeenth century in Europe, it might take a year before the news reached the colonies in North and South America. Even more, many in the colonies never came to know of the event. In the twentieth century we know of events everywhere in the world seconds after they happen. Struggles in the Middle East have worldwide ramifications (e.g., because of the importance of oil throughout the world). People are increasingly conscious of their interdependence on one another.

An evident consequence of this change in horizon has been the emphasis on a global world view in the writings of John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II. While patriotism, for example, is still seen as a virtue, exaggerated forms of nationalism are viewed as an enemy to global solidarity. Episcopal and papal writings emphasize universal brotherhood and sisterhood. Social encyclicals criticize the widening gap between the rich nations and the poor nations. Critical voices note that some are rich because others are poor.

This horizon-shift has had great ramifications in religious communities. Young people especially seek new forms of community where there is real communication. They spurn formalized structures that sometimes thwart communication while purporting to promote it. They expect shared responsibility. They look for communal forms of prayer which are alive and which do not smack of formalism.

In the secular and religious spheres, the global community has also grown in consciousness of the implications of the arms buildup. The sale of arms remains one of the major factors in the world economy. Concomitantly a series of local conflicts (Iran/Iraq, Israel/Lebanon, Ethiopia/Somalia, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the US invasion of Panama, revolutionary movements in Central America, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, etc.) makes the international scene quite volatile, with the ever-present danger that these

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conflicts will escalate in an “all-out war” (as in the last instance). Young people attest to an uncertainty about their future because of the possibility of nuclear annihilation.

The United States Bishops’ Peace Pastoral has set off a broad series of discussions on the question of war and peace among episcopal conferences throughout the world. Numerous papal statements have likewise addressed the subject.

3. A changed paradigm for the exercise of authority

There has been a shift from a monarchical model of authority to a collegial model. Lumen Gentium has made this shift a part of official Church thinking.¹

The new paradigm brings with it new expectations: dialogue, questioning, shared decision-making, shared responsibility. It emphasizes that authority serves the community and seeks to empower the group and individuals within it.

This shift in horizon has also brought with it the current crisis of authority in the Church, as well as a crisis of authority in civil society. Dissent from official Church teaching has become fairly common (e.g., in regard to birth control). Civil unrest has become the inevitable response to governments that deny people a voice in regard to decisions affecting their future (resulting, for example, in an amazingly rapid change in the political situation of Eastern Europe, in ongoing turmoil in the Soviet Union, and in renewed oppression in China).

4. Emphasis on a Christology and an ecclesiology “from below”

This horizon-shift is related to the first and third shifts mentioned above.

The explosion in scriptural, linguistic, archaeological, and historical research in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as the development of hermeneutics, has led to a deeper understanding of the varying Christologies in the New Testament. These are often roughly grouped into the categories “from above” and “from below.”

Different from the classical Christology, a Christology “from below” focuses on data about the humanity of Jesus, while also affirming his divinity. It accepts the scriptural data about his weakness, his lack of knowledge about the future, his ignorance of events outside the scope of his experience, his anger, his deep human love, his feelings, his emotions, etc.

¹ Lumen Gentium 18-28.
An ecclesiology “from below” emphasizes base communities, the role of the lay person, shared decision-making and responsibility, varied ministries, the identification of the Church with the poor and their struggles, etc. Much of this shift in emphasis can be found in official Church documents such as those of Medellín and Puebla.¹

5. A shift toward a more positive attitude in regard to creation and toward less emphasis on sin

The struggle with Jansenism greatly influenced seventeenth century thinking. Theologians and spiritual writers, while combatting Jansenism, were influenced by many of its presuppositions. It was “in the air they breathed,” so to speak. Like Manicheanism and Albigensianism, two of its predecessors, it had a very negative view of created reality. It was overly rigorous. It focused on sin. The twentieth century has brought a renewed emphasis on the dignity of the human person and on the goodness of creation. This is particularly evident in Gaudium et Spes² and the writings of John Paul II.³ Theologians and spiritual writers take a much more positive attitude toward “the human.” The human person is seen as the center of creation. Created realities are extensions of his being and ways in which he celebrates and shares God’s gifts.

The shadow side of this horizon-shift is that it has brought with it a deepening loss of the sense of sin. Consequently, among young people especially, there is a diminished consciousness of the need for mortification and penance. The twentieth century has witnessed increased sexual permissiveness in society and a weakening of family structures. In some parts of the world, one out of two marriages ends in divorce. The number of single-parent families is huge. In some cities more than half the children are born out of wedlock. The extended family and its tight network of relationships is becoming much less common. Abortion is widespread.

Moral attitudes toward sexual behavior have changed very significantly since the seventeenth century. In many societies, divorce is now widely accepted as a way of terminating marital commitment. Birth control and premarital sex are engaged in extensively and frequently accepted as morally legitimate. Beyond efforts at eliminating prejudice against homosexuals, there is considerable agitation to accept the homosexual lifestyle as an alternative one.

¹ Puebla 188-197; 617-57.
² Gaudium et Spes 9, 12, 22.
³ Cf. Redemptor Hominis, passim.
6. A shift from the “era of Christendom” to the “era of the secular”

“Christendom,” where religious values and practice were reinforced by civic and societal structures, has gradually been disappearing. Church and state have become more and more separated. “Post-Christian” and “non-Christian” societies have developed.

Concomitantly, theology and spirituality emphasize a positive sense of the secular. Secular reality, as God’s gift in creation, has an autonomy and value of its own.1 It can be understood on its own terms. In ethical terms, what is truly human is perceived as a moral good. Consequently, what truly promotes humanity builds up the kingdom of God.

This shift in horizon has actually brought in its wake a movement toward unity in theological perspective. It displaces the “two-storied” approach to nature and grace. It sees them as coinciding in the concrete. It avoids the split between the religious sphere and the secular sphere or between religion and morality.

At the same time, however, on the negative side, the twentieth century has seen the widespread diffusion of “secularism” in the form of materialistic philosophies and attitudes. Marxism/communism came to dominate much of the world, even if today it finds itself in crisis. Capitalism too has had negative impact by its overemphasis on capital itself, productivity, and the amassing of material goods, with a consequent underemphasis on the human person and his or her labor, the universal destiny of material goods, the rights of the poor, etc.

In a rather unpublicized, but striking, way, there has also been a geographical shift of focus within the Church from the north to the south, away from the heartland of traditional “Christendom.” This is what Walbert Buhlmann calls “the coming of the third Church.”

By the year 2,000, there will be 153 million Catholics in Africa alone. The majority of Catholics will live in Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Among the peoples of these emerging nations, there is increasing emphasis on human rights, equality, and liberation. This is evident in the Puebla document and in the struggle of the churches of Latin America.

As a result of this horizon-shift, church life is strongly influenced by comunidades de base. Moral reflection emphasizes the need to liberate peoples from oppressive socio-economic structures. “Social sin” and “sinful structures” are much emphasized.

PART III - THE FIVE VIRTUES RETRIEVED

The third part of this chapter will be an attempt at retrieving the values underlying the virtues which St. Vincent left to the communities that he inspired. Put in traditional terms, the object of this section will be to uncover the substance of the five virtues, to put aside those forms that are no longer appropriate to the modern world, and to suggest contemporary forms which the virtues might take. Naturally, not all of the forms which these virtues took in the seventeenth century are irrelevant today. Many still apply. On the other hand, some forms, and the language by which they are described, are no longer relevant because of changing times and circumstances. Other new forms have arisen which embody the substance of the five virtues.

1. Simplicity

In some ways simplicity is the easiest of the five virtues to retrieve. Gandhi’s Truth, as the title of Erik Erikson’s psycho-biography puts it, speaks eloquently to young people in the modern world. The virtue which St. Vincent loved most, his “gospel,” so to speak, still appeals. In a contemporary context, it can take many forms, some of which are suggested below.

a. Speaking the truth. Simplicity today, as in St. Vincent’s time, means saying things as they are.

Simplicity is a keystone concept. It forms the basis of various philosophical and theological systems. For aristotelianism and scholastic philosophy, contemplation of the truth is the highest good. From a personalist perspective, truth is the foundation of trust, which is the basis of all human relations; falsehood, on the other hand, violates trust and makes genuine human relationships impossible.

Speaking and witnessing to the truth are central Christian values, especially in John’s gospel. Jesus is the truth (4:6). The person who acts in the truth comes into the light (3:21). When the Spirit comes, he will guide us to all truth (16:13). It is the truth that sets us free (8:32). The reason why Jesus has come is to testify to the truth (18:37). Anyone who is of the truth hears his voice (18:37).

But experience proves that it is very difficult to let our yes mean yes and our no mean no (Mt 5:37; cf. Jas 5:12; 2 Cor 1:17-20), as Jesus puts it. It is precisely because Jesus speaks the truth that his enemies give him no credence (Jn 8:44). Ultimately, he dies for the truth.

On the other hand, as St. Vincent reminds us, there is a great attractiveness about those who speak the truth. We sense spontaneously that they have nothing to hide, that they have no hidden agendas. They are truly free. Consequently, it is easy to relate to them.

Yet speaking the truth with consistency is an extremely difficult discipline. We are tempted to blur the truth when our own convenience is at stake or when the truth is embarrassing to us personally. It is also difficult to be true to one’s word, one’s promises, one’s commitments. When we make a statement in the present, it is either true or false right then and there. When we make a commitment for the future, however, it is true only to the extent that we keep it true. Truth, in this sense, is fidelity. It is in this sense especially that Jesus is true to us. He promises to be, and is, with us always, even to the end. It is in this same sense that we are called to be true to vows, to friendships, to our concrete commitments to serve.

Speaking the truth is especially important in the relationship we call “spiritual direction.” We choose a “soul friend” so that, with his or her help, we might grow in the Lord’s life and in discerning those things which promote his kingdom. It is imperative, therefore, that this relationship be characterized by free self-disclosure and by the avoidance of “hidden corners” in our lives. No one is an island. We need others to mirror back to us what is happening or not happening in our journey toward the Lord (cf. the second horizon-shift above). The quality of such relationships in spiritual direction will depend largely upon the simplicity with which we disclose ourselves.

b. Witnessing to the truth. This understanding of simplicity is most relevant. People spontaneously admire those who live out what they believe and say. A very comprehensive survey by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada disclosed that the quality people most sought in ministers was genuineness, authenticity. This seems to be a perennial desire. The reader will recall Chaucer’s praise of the parson in the Canterbury Tales:

>This noble example to his sheep he gave
That first he wrought and afterward he taught.

In an era when so many young people have lost confidence in civil and religious authorities because of corruption and proved duplicity (e.g., Water-

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1. Readiness for Ministry, published by the Association of Theological Schools in the U.S. and Canada (Vandalia, Ohio) 1975-76.
2. Canterbury Tales, prologue, description of the parson.
gate and Irangate in the USA, the disclosures about the lives and life-styles of the Marcos family in the Philippines and of the Ceausescu family in Rumania), those whose lives match their words speak more powerfully than ever.

This type of simplicity is also extremely attractive in the modern world. Young people love those who are "real," "genuine." These are contemporary names for simplicity.

Such genuineness comes across to others as personal integrity, or a transparency that discloses inner richness. It assures others that they can believe in us. As Shakespeare put it:

\[ \text{This above all: to thine own self be true} \\
\text{And it must follow, as the night the day,} \\
\text{Thou canst not then be false to any man.} \]

\[ \text{1. Hamlet, Act I, Scene 3.} \]

c. Seeking the truth. Being "real" or genuine today, as is evident from the first horizon-shift described above, may often demand our admission that we are groping to find the truth, that we are uncertain as to the truth, or that there are complementary truths. This is all the more necessary in a world where it is not longer possible to have universal knowledge.

We are conscious today of being wayfarers. Life is a journey, an ongoing process. So it is also with the quest for truth. We grasp the truth gradually. It is not captured in a single insight. Our verbal attempts at expressing it are always limited, perfectible. Nor is it possessed once for all. It is constructed bit by bit. The deeper we descend into the well, the deeper we know the well to be. So we must be dedicated to seeking, pursuing, finding the truth. This virtue, which Bernard Haring calls "dedication to the truth," takes the form of listening well, meeting and discussing with others, reading, ongoing education.

d. Being in the truth. This is what we might traditionally call simplicity of intention, purity of heart, referring all things to God. It is single-minded devotion to the Lord and his kingdom. In this sense, when the simple person labors, he labors because he loves God and he loves his people. He does not labor in order to be placed in high positions. Nor does he labor because admiration or money may come his way if he takes on extra work. When a simple person recognizes that his motives are mixed, he talks them out and seeks the aid of another to help him discern why he is really doing things. He knows that it is impossible always to have a single intention, but he seeks to make love of God and service of the neighbor the dominant motive in everything. If, as mentioned above in describing the fourth horizon-shift,
Jesus groped to know his Father's will and struggled with contrary desires as he resolved to do it, the simple person today will necessarily engage in and work through a similar struggle.

As an aid in growing in this type of simplicity it is helpful to survey the competing values in our lives from time to time. Comfort, power, popularity, and financial security can subtly compete with love of God and love of neighbor. Sometimes these secondary motives will coincide with purer motives (as when the people whom we serve admire us and give us lots of positive feedback). But when they conflict, are we willing to sacrifice?

e. Practicing the truth (in love). This means performing works of justice and charity, making the truth come alive creatively in the world. It means bringing the truth to completion in deed. It means making our word become flesh, giving the gospels concrete life-form. The truth cannot just be verbal; it must be lived. Commitments to do the works of justice cannot just be spoken; they must be kept, day in and day out. The gospels cannot just be preached; they must be practiced in love.

Simplicity, from this point of view, means that when we preach justice we must also live justice. When we preach solidarity with the poor, we must also live in solidarity with the poor. When we exhort others to a simple life-style, we must live simply ourselves. When we say that we are celibate, we must live as celibates. When we proclaim the ways of peace-making, we must act as peace-makers.

f. Integration. Simplicity in this sense means personal wholeness, the ability to bring together in a unified way the varied aspects of one's life: labor, prayer, community, solitude, leisure. Young people speak of "having it together." Formation literature today often stresses integration as the goal of the whole formation process.

Martin Buber tells a striking story that illustrates the importance of integration:

_A hasid of the Rabbi of Lublin once fasted from one Sabbath to the next. On Friday afternoon he began to suffer such cruel thirst that he thought he would die. He saw a well, went up to it, and prepared to drink. But instantly he realized that because of one brief hour he had still to endure, he was about to destroy the work of the entire week. He did not drink and went away from the well. Then he was touched by a feeling of pride for having passed this difficult test. When he became aware of it, he said to himself, "Better I go and drink than let my heart fall prey to pride." He went back to the well, but just as he was going to bend down to draw water, he noticed that his thirst had disappeared. When the Sabbath had begun, he_
entered his teacher's house. "Patchwork!" the rabbi called to him, as he crossed the threshold.¹

The truly simple person arrives at "being a united soul." His life is no longer "patchwork," but is "all of a piece." Love of God and love of neighbor come together in a single whole.

g. Simplicity of life. As in St. Vincent's time, simplicity today also has implications in regard to life-style. Some contemporary writers even prefer to use the terminology "simplicity of life" to "poverty" when speaking of the content of our vow. Regardless of the terminology, our commitment to community for the service of the poor necessarily involves a commitment to a simple life-style, in which we share, at least in some ways, in the experience of those in need. More will be said about this when speaking of mortification (and in a later chapter, when speaking of the vow of poverty).

But such simplicity of life must not be confused, as sometimes happens, with drabness or lack of beauty (or worse, with lack of cleanliness!). On the contrary, simplicity implies beauty and enhances it. Simplicity is one of the characteristics of genuine art. Masterpieces of painting, sculpture, design, and music, even when quite complex, maintain a radical simplicity that lies at the heart of their beauty. Consequently, it is important to foster a sense of "the beautiful" in our lives. Especially the places and the forms of our prayer (singing, methods of reciting the psalms, images, etc.), while simple, should be "something beautiful for God."

2. Humility

It is difficult for modern men and women to accept St. Vincent's language when he speaks about humility. We tend to cringe when he calls himself the worst of all sinners and speaks of his community as the most wretched in the world.

Yet when he emphasizes humility, prescinding from the language in which he speaks, St. Vincent penetrates a basic abiding New Testament truth. St. Luke's gospel, in particular, tells us that God comes to the lowly, the poor of Israel, those who recognize their need from him and long for him. In this sense, humility is "the foundation of all evangelical perfection, the node of the whole spiritual life" (CR II, 7). In this sense too, St. Vincent went to the core of the gospels when he said that "humility is the origin of all the good that we do" (IX, 674).

Moving beyond St. Vincent’s language and a rhetoric that was characteristic of the seventeenth century, it is important to articulate an understanding of humility and the contemporary forms that it takes.

a. Humility is a recognition of our creatureliness and our redeemedness, both being gifts of God’s love.

We are completely dependent upon the Lord. “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

There is nothing that we have not received. “Truly you have formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother’s womb” (Ps 139:13). Whatever we are, whatever we do, whatever we possess comes from the Lord.

We are also very much dependent on others. As mentioned in describing the second horizon-shift, the modern age is increasingly conscious of the interdependence of all men and women. The humble person recognizes interdependence both as a sign of his limitedness and as a source of enrichment. We need others and cannot do without them. In solidarity with them, we journey toward the kingdom.

Besides being creatures, we are sinners who have been redeemed through God’s gracious love. “All have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God. All are now undeservedly justified by the gift of God, through the redemption wrought in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:23-24).

Perhaps as a distorted reaction to an overemphasis on sin in the past, the modern age has difficulty sustaining a sense of sin (cf. the fifth horizon-shift described above). Yet sin, if we are alert to it, shows itself in numerous different ways in our lives: in our prejudices, in our tendency to categorize other people indiscriminately, in our speaking lightly about others’ negative points, in our slowness to pray, in our inability to get excited about gospel values, in our selectivity in reading the gospels, in our unwillingness to share what we have with the poor, in our hesitancy to divest ourselves of power and to stand with the needy in their misery, in our compliance with unjust social structures. In face of all this, the Lord forgives us eagerly and gives us life in Christ Jesus. It is not by the works we do that we are saved, but rather by the gift of God in Christ Jesus (cf. Gal 2:21-22). Otherwise grace is not grace (Rom 11:6).

b. Humility is gratitude for gifts. In the New Testament, gratitude is the opposite side of the coin from humility. The person who has received all stands before the Lord in a spirit of thanksgiving. In this sense, thanksgiving is the central Christian attitude, which we celebrate as “eucharist” daily.

Mary epitomizes this attitude in Luke’s gospel:

My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord.
My spirit finds joy in God my Savior for he has looked upon his servant in her lowliness.
All ages to come shall call me blessed. God who is mighty has done great things for me. 
Holy is his name. His mercy is from age to age on those who fear him. (Lk 1:46-50)

Mary cries out in praise and thanksgiving for the many gifts that God has given her. She recognizes God’s gifts, without diminishing or denying them, and responds with gratitude. In this she echoes the psalmist: “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good for his loving kindness endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods for his loving kindness endures forever” (Ps 136:1-3).

This type of gratitude characterizes the poor. Henri Nouwen writes:

Many poor people live in such close relationship with the many rhythms of nature that all the goods that come to them are experienced as free gifts of God. Children and friends, bread and wine, music and pictures, trees and flowers, water and life, a house, a room with just one bed, all are gifts to be grateful for and celebrated. This basic sense I have come to know. I am always surrounded by words of thanks, “Thanks for your visit, your blessing, your sermon, your prayer, your gifts, your presence with us.” Even the smallest and most necessary goods are a reason for gratitude. This all-pervading gratitude is the basis for celebration. The poor not only are grateful for life, they also celebrate life constantly.¹

Recognizing that all is gift, the humble person will be eager to avoid comparisons. He or she will receive life with gratitude, leaving judgment to the Lord, as the gospels frequently exhort us to (cf. Mt 7:1-5). Pride loves comparison. The avaricious person may be satisfied when he possesses much; the proud person remains restless as long as anyone else has more. Humility spurns comparison. It can focus on the good in others, just as in oneself, and thank the Lord for it.

c. Humility involves a servant’s attitude. This is central in the New Testament, especially for those who exercise authority. “If anyone wishes to be first, he must be the last of all and the servant of all” (Mk 9:35). In John’s gospel Jesus demonstrates this for his disciples through a parable in action when he washes their feet.

Do you understand what I just did for you? You address me as “teacher” and “Lord,” and fittingly enough for that is what I am. But if I washed your feet—I your teacher and Lord—then you must wash each other’s feet. What I just did was to give you an example: as I have done so you must do. (Jn 13:12-15)

We are called, like Jesus, “not to be served but to serve” (Mt 20:28). This is especially imperative in light of the third horizon-shift described above. The expectation of the Church in the modern world is that authority figures will be collegial, dialogic, humble servants. An ancient Christian baptismal hymn captures this insight into Jesus and applies it to his followers:

*Your attitude must be that of Christ. Though he was in the form of God he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather he emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. He was known to be of human estate, and it was thus that he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross. Because of this God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name, so that at Jesus’ name every knee must bend in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God the Father: Jesus Christ is Lord! (Phil 2:5-11)*

As servants, we must be willing to do humble things. With the changed paradigm for the exercise of authority (cf. the third horizon-shift described above), leadership tasks that were once prestigious, like administration, may today truly be humble tasks, exposing the servant-leader to much criticism while engaging him in many meetings and humdrum paper work that brings little positive feedback.

d. Today, humility also entails allowing ourselves to be evangelized by the poor (“our lords and masters” as St. Vincent liked to call them). This insight, already present in the early Church and echoed later by St. Vincent, receives great emphasis in Latin American theology and in an ecclesiology “from below” (cf. the fourth horizon-shift described above).

Not only do we as ministers teach others, we must allow them to teach us. As St. Augustine put it, there are seeds of the Word everywhere and in everyone.1 Only the humble can discern them. We must hear God speaking to us as we see the willingness of the poor to share the little that they have, as we see their gratitude to God for the simple gifts that he gives them, as we see their hoping against hope that God will provide, as we see their reverence and care and respect for us as well as for God. The poor will preach to us eloquently if we allow them.

3. Meekness

St. Vincent’s teaching about this smooth stone is perhaps the most easily

translatable into modern usage. His conference of March 28, 1659, as well as several of his letters to Louise de Marillac, contain a practical wisdom that is very relevant today.

a. Meekness entails the ability to handle anger positively.

Anger is natural. It is energy that spontaneously arises within us when we perceive something as evil. It helps us to deal with evil but, like all spontaneous emotions, it can be used well or badly. Concretely, all sorts of people have trouble handling it well. There are many “angry people” in the world as a whole as well as in religious communities.

As St. Vincent pointed out, handling anger well often involves expressing it. He himself was outraged at the plight of the sick and the hungry, so he established the Confraternities of Charity, the Ladies of Charity, the Vincentians, and the Daughters of Charity. Anger enabled him to react with vigor and creativity when confronted with the needs of the poor in his day. He also expressed anger directly when he perceived evil within his communities, but he learned to combine his anger with gentleness. He knew how to mix the bitter and the sweet, as he told Louise de Marillac (I, 292-94). He sought to imitate Jesus who was equally “gentle and firm” (VII, 226). The witness of Jesus in this regard is all the more evident today in light of a Christology “from below” (cf. the fourth horizon-shift above).

But if anger is handled badly, it can be terribly destructive. Unleashed, it can result in violence and injustice. Repressed, it can result in resentment, sarcasm, cynicism, bitterness, depression.

Anger must at times be controlled, moderated, even suppressed for a period of time, or sublimated. St. Vincent again often appeals to the example of Jesus who knew how to moderate his frustration in regard to the apostles but who could be very direct in expressing his anger in regard to the Pharisees who were laying unjust burdens upon others.

b. Meekness entails approachability, gentleness. These are especially important qualities in ministers. In this regard, St. Vincent encourages us to know that we can really change. He tells us that when he was young he was of choleric temperament, easily angered. He says that he was very moody for long dark periods. But he changed so much in the course of his life that all those who knew him later said that he was one of the most approachable men they had ever met.

He told the community that people are won over much more by gentleness than by argument. This advice is especially relevant when we offer the gift of correction (cf. Mt 18:15-18), whether the correction is done by peers or by superiors. Those corrected are much more able to hear works spoken gently than words of stinging accusation.
c. Meekness involves the ability to endure offenses with forgiveness and courage. St. Vincent based his teaching in this regard on respect for the human person. Even those who commit injustice, he told the double family, deserve respect as persons. The writings of John Paul II reiterate this theme in our day.

Naturally, having respect for the person of the offender does not prohibit us from channeling our anger with courage against the evils the offender is committing. But it does prohibit us from practicing injustice in the name of justice. St. Vincent also recognized clearly (and he reminded Philip Le-Vacher about St. Augustine’s teaching in this regard) that there are some evils that must be tolerated, since there is no practical possibility of correcting them. The wise man learns to live with them, and the meek man treats gently those whose lives are so entwined in them that the evil cannot be rooted out.

There is a delicate balance in this regard. At times one must suffer with courage. There are evils that cannot be avoided and that must be endured. On the other hand, one must avoid a false gentility, as Adrian Van Kaam puts it. At times one must cry out against injustice and channel all one’s energies into overcoming it. It takes great prudence to know the difference between the two cases.

In this time of transition in the history of the Church (cf. especially the first and sixth horizon-shifts described above), the combination of gentleness and firmness is especially necessary. This is particularly so in making decisions. As communities assess their apostolates with a view toward the future, they must have the courage to choose and act. At the same time, they must show gentleness toward those who have difficulty adapting. Likewise, individuals must have courage in setting growth-goals, but they must be gentle with themselves in recognizing that personal change does not occur overnight, but only gradually.

Ministers too must know that no matter how well they do their jobs, they will have to endure, with both courage and gentleness, their own limitations and the conflicting expectations of others. Religious superiors will experience that some in their communities see all things in black and white, while others love only what is grey. Some will use the past as their norm for decision-making, while others will look only to an uncharted future. Superiors will never fully satisfy all, or even any, of these different personalities. They must make decisions with courage and treat with gentleness those who disagree. They must combine in their lives two New Testament sayings: “With the strength that comes from God, bear your share of the hardships the gospel entails” (2 Tm 1:8), and “Learn of me that I am meek and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:29).
4. Mortification

It is unpopular to talk about mortification today. It is becoming what Karl Rahner calls a “forgotten truth.” Naturally, people shrink away from anything that connotes dying. Moreover, changes in perspective since the time of St. Vincent (cf. especially the fifth horizon-shift described above) have made some of the practices that he recommends seem irrelevant, even bizarre. These same changes have made young people question even the theoretical underpinnings of the traditional teaching about mortification. They question the clean-cut division of the human person into animal and rational, with sin dominating the animal side (and not the rational side?). They ask: why not stop to smell the flower along the roadside? Why not gaze at the beauty of God in creation? Why not think back in gratitude on the love our parents gave us?

At the same time, interestingly, some of the most popular modern writers recommend discipline, a form of mortification, strongly. Gandhi says that nothing is accomplished without discipline and prayer. Erich Fromm says that discipline is the first step in the practice of loving. Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes discipline as one of the stations on the way to freedom.

In retrieving the value involved in mortification, it seems best to admit frankly that a change in theological perspective (cf. especially the third, fifth, and sixth horizon-shifts above) has made some of the practices St. Vincent recommended irrelevant today and some of the theoretic involved in his teaching outdated and one-sided. St. Vincent had a much more negative attitude toward created reality than we would have. When he recommends bypassing the flower on the roadside as a way of mortifying ourselves, modern men and women rightly ask why they should not pick it up, smell it, enjoy its beauty and praise God as its creator.

Still, St. Vincent grasped how important mortification is. Along with all of the saints, he believed the Lord when he told them that, to be his follower, they must deny themselves. I offer the following perspective as an attempt at retrieving the value of mortification in the modern world.

a. Mortification involves renouncing one good thing in order to do a better thing.

In this sense, it is “functional asceticism,” to use Karl Rahner’s phrase.

1. Margaret Myles states: “Asceticism is one of the currently least understood and most universally rejected features of historical Christianity.” Cf. Practicing Christianity. Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality (New York, 1988) 94.
Mortification is always for the sake of something or someone else. It is "for my sake and for the gospels." We give up good things not because we think they are bad. We acknowledge that they are good even as we give them up, because we want something better. A person may decide to cut out smoking because he wants to be in good health, or to cut down on or abstain from drinking because he wants to be clear-headed and self-possessed in thinking, judging and acting. A person may embrace celibacy in order to be "free for the Lord" or in order to dedicate himself or herself single-mindedly to the service of the kingdom wherever the Lord asks them to go, or in order to give themselves over to a life of prayer. A person may renounce material possessions because he wants to share them with the poor or because he wants to enter into solidarity with the poor by sharing their lot. A person may renounce his freedom to choose whatever he wants to do because he chooses to live in community and to join with others in a common life and common project. In this sense, the real purpose of mortification is to choose and to construct one's real self.¹

b. Mortification involves recognizing our goals and channeling our limited energies into achieving them.

We cannot do everything in life. We are really very limited. It is the rare person who can be a great piano player, or a superstar in basketball, or a wonderful actor. No one combines all of these things. They all take time, practice, disciplined labor. The time needed to become a great piano player works against the time needed to become a basketball superstar or a great doctor.

Consequently, it is imperative that a person know what his goals are and that he give himself in a disciplined way to accomplishing them. That is why Jesus says that no one can be his follower unless he renounces house, wife, father, mother, brother, sister, all things for my sake and for the gospel. If our first goal is to follow Jesus, then our attachment to everything else must be modified in light of that goal.

c. Mortification is also "practicing for death," to use another of Karl Rahner’s phrases.²

We experience death as darkness. It is the ultimate renunciation. It demands that we let go of life, our most basic possession. The limitedness that we experience as creatures challenges us again and again to let go of one thing in order that we might pursue another more single-mindedly. Only the

1. Cf. Myles, op. cit., 96-97: "The same energy that originally organized the person's pursuit of sex, power, and possessions can be removed from the socially conditioned self and relocated in the religious self. . . . The real point of ascetic practices, then, was not to 'give up' objects, but to reconstruct the self."

person who is practiced in this art will be able to hand himself over to his Father in an act of final resignation, as Jesus did: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk 23:46). A Christology “from below” (cf. the fourth horizon-shift above) emphasizes the struggle that Jesus experienced in his dying and calls us to enter into it with him.

d. In light of what has been said above, let me mention some contemporary forms that mortification might take. The list is by no means exhaustive; on the contrary, the author hopes that the reader will find in it a stimulus for thinking about other forms.

1. Being ready to respond to the needs of one’s religious community and God’s people, particularly in accepting assignments. The calls of God’s people are very important. Our own gifts and talents are too. Most modern religious communities attempt to fit calls to the gifts and talents of their individual members. In this context, it is imperative for us to let ourselves be challenged. Often, responses to challenges draw forth from us resources whose existence we are even unaware of.

2. Being faithful to the duties of one’s state in life; preferring them when they conflict with other more pleasurable things. This is more difficult than may appear on first bounce. It is very important to know what the central values in our lives are: apostolate, prayer, community, study, etc. Experience teaches us that these often become less attractive than other options, especially in the long run and especially if the other options provide more immediate gratification. The modern era tends to despise delayed gratification. Options like watching TV passively or spending great amounts of time with comforting but unchallenging companions (what is commonly called today “protective partnership”) can easily distract us from the central values in our lives.

3. Working hard as servants do. Much of the work that religious are engaged in is non-structured. Our time is our own to be used responsibly. To do this requires discipline. Much time can be frittered away.

4. Rising promptly in the morning to praise God and strengthen our brothers and/or sisters by joining them in prayer. St. Vincent felt strongly about this. He judged that without prayer (and prompt rising for it) his community could not continue to exist. It is important to pray in a disciplined way, to set time aside daily, and to support others in the endeavor.

5. Being sparing in obtaining or accepting material possessions, like clothing, or money, or other items; in other words, developing a simple life-style. This is what Karl Rahner calls “consumer asceticism.” Such asceticism is very difficult in our society and very different from what
society propagandizes us to do. The contemporary world again and again in its advertisements tells us that it is always good to have more.

6. Being disciplined in eating and drinking, and avoiding all anxiety or complaint about what we shall eat or what we shall drink. The key here is moderation. It is good to avoid griping about food. St. Vincent felt strongly about this. He also recommended not eating between meals. This can still be a good ascetical practice as an aid in keeping one's weight down and staying in good physical condition.

7. Employing moderation and a critical sense in using television, radio, movies, and other media. There is much waste of time in the modern world. There is much passive entertainment. There is much uncritical drinking in of violence and sexual license. One of the consequences of this is that the lives of many people tend to become like those of characters whom they watch on the soap operas. What we take in through the senses, especially if it is a steady diet, inevitably influences our conduct bit by bit.

8. Being slow to ask for privileges or to be the exception from what is the norm. Norms are for the common good. In contemporary religious communities they are usually made after much consultation. They are also usually few in number. It is helpful to the common well-being if we allow ourselves to be supportive of the few norms that we do have.

9. Withholding critical and divisive words. This can be a great aid to charity. St. Benedict said that murmuring was the greatest vice of monasteries. St. Vincent felt similarly. It is a healthy norm to withhold critical words unless we can speak them constructively to those who can do something about them.

10. Seeking equally to be with those who are less pleasing to us as with those to whom we are more attracted. This is a great aid to life in common. We are brothers and sisters in the Lord. Naturally, we will always be closer to some people than to others. It is important to have good, intimate friends. Still, it is likewise important not to exclude others from our company and to have open-ended friendships that allow others to enter in.

11. Giving generously of our time in order to take part in contemporary decision-making processes (e.g., meetings, questionnaires, letters of consultation). This is very much a part of modern asceticism. It is, as some say, the "contemporary hair shirt." Part of obedience today is to participate (cf. the third horizon-shift described above). This is not simply a luxury. Nor is it the privilege of a few. All are called to take part in decision-making and responsible obedience. We are asked to
express our views openly. This is time-consuming and sometimes painful. As such, it is a mortification for most.

5. Zeal for souls

Because the modern age emphasizes promotion of the whole person and tends to avoid the body/soul dichotomy, St. Vincent’s phrase “zeal for souls” rings badly. Still, zeal is quite as important today as it was in St. Vincent’s time. It has very much the same meaning.

a. Zeal is love on fire. It is a willingness to go anywhere, even under difficult circumstances, to speak of Christ. It is a willingness to die for him. It involves not only deep human affective love for the Lord and for his people, but it also expresses itself in effective labor and sacrifice.

As in the past, zeal expresses itself in our own day in martyrdom (in Central America, for example), but zealous people, now as always, also recognize that it is sometimes harder to live for Christ than to die for him. Their zeal shows itself in a willingness to continue to labor in the inner city in the face of the discouragement that flows from dire poverty and from tangling with bureaucracy. It shows itself in the life and work of missionaries who struggle with language, culture, food, climate.

b. Zeal is persevering, faithful love. It is easy to love for a time. It is difficult to love for life. Permanent commitment is more fragile today than it was in the seventeenth century, especially since many of the societal supports that undergirded it at that time have disappeared (cf. the fifth and sixth horizon-shifts described above). So zeal shows itself today especially as fidelity. It is gold tested in the fire. It is creative in finding ways of loving both “in season and out of season.” As St. Vincent put it, “Love is inventive, even to infinity” (XI, 146). Zeal adjusts, finding new ways and developing professionally, especially through ongoing formation. In this era of second careers and early retirement, it seeks to find ways of expressing love for the Lord and love for the poor even in ministries that may be quite different from the ways in which one served in his or her youth. This challenge which zeal presents today was not unknown to St. Vincent: “As for myself, in spite of my age, I say before God that I do not feel exempt from the obligation of laboring for the salvation of those poor people, for what could hinder me from doing so? If I cannot preach every day, all right! I will preach twice a

week. If I cannot preach more important sermons, I will strive to preach less important ones; and if the people do not hear me, then what is there to prevent me from speaking in a friendly, homely way to those poor folk, as I am now speaking to you, gathering them around me as your are now?” (XI, 136).

c. Zeal shows itself in a willingness to seek laborers for the harvest. Love is infectious. Fire spreads. A love that is on fire will seek to communicate itself to others. It will seek to draw others into the same wonderful mission that it is carrying out.

A contemporary survey\(^1\) notes that the most significant single factor in hindering young people from entering religious life is lack of encouragement from religious themselves and from one’s family. One need hardly point out that there is a critical shortage of laborers for the harvest in many parts of the world today. The Church needs ministers. Zeal should impel us to encourage others to follow the Lord in various ministries. It should move us to speak to them directly and ask them if they have considered priesthood or brotherhood or sisterhood. Jesus did not hesitate to call the apostles directly. Nor should we, especially in an era when contemporary advertising bombards young people with numerous other calls and numerous other stimuli. If we really love what we are doing, then zeal will move us to involve others in doing it too.

d. The two extremes which St. Vincent contrasts with zeal also have contemporary forms that it may be helpful to say a word about.

1) The existentialists note that the great problem of modern men and women is inattentiveness. We live in a world filled with noise. So many sounds and stimuli break in upon us that at times it is difficult to distinguish the more important ones from the less important. As a result people’s sensitivities can be dulled. They can be blind to the glaring problems that exist, especially the ever-increasing disparity between the rich and the poor and the continuing expenditure of human and financial resources in the production and sales of arms (cf. the second horizon-shift above). “Inattentiveness” can be the modern form of what St. Vincent described as “laxity, lack of fervor and sensitivity, sloth.”

2) Indiscreet zeal likewise still shows itself in overwork and in what is often called “burn-out.” It is quite as important today, as it was in St. Vincent’s day,\(^2\) that we know our limitations, accept our creatureli-

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2. A Jesuit, who was working with the confreres, wrote to St. Vincent upon the death of Germain de Montevit: “Your men are flexible and docile about everything, except the advice they are given to take a little bit of rest. They believe that their bodies are not made of flesh, or that their life is supposed to last only a year” (SV II, 24).
ness, and develop a balanced life-style that includes sufficient rest and recreation. It is also important that we stay in good physical condition so that we will have the energy which characterizes zeal.

One final word. The word *character* usually denotes a seal, a sign, a visible mark by which someone or something can be recognized. The virtues described above in seventeenth and twentieth century forms are, to use St. Vincent's phrase, the *characteristic* virtues of his followers. They are the signs by which his followers are meant to be recognized. It is vitally important that each era reinterpret these signs in order that the spirit of St. Vincent might continue to live in a way that is relevant in each succeeding age. The author offers the preceding thoughts as a small contribution toward that end and welcomes the comments of others who might wish to advance the endeavor further.