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He hears the cry of the poor: contents and introduction

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Introduction

For many years biblical exegesis has intrigued me. As a young priest I was sent to study biblical languages. I listened eagerly as some outstanding professors lectured about the application of literary criticism and historical criticism to the Bible. I remember how fascinated I was as I read my confrere Bruce Vawter's book, *A Path through Genesis*. It opened up a new vision of the story of creation and supplied tools that were very helpful for interpreting many other Old Testament passages. Likewise, I recall how enlightening I found the application of redaction criticism to the New Testament, examining how each of the four gospels differed from one another and discovering the varying theological perspectives through which the four evangelists expressed their faith-vision of Jesus. In more recent times, the study of hermeneutics helped me uncover new depths of meaning in the pages of the scriptures. But I recognize that all of this is insufficient.

Helpful though the interpretation of texts may be, the New Testament calls us beyond that. It invites us to enter into the world of the scriptures. I do not mean the historical world at the time of Jesus. It is impossible to enter that, nor do I suppose that many of us would want to. Rather, the scriptures invite us to enter into a "new" world. The synoptic gospels describe that world as the "reign of God." Paul speaks of living "in the Spirit." John talks of being "born from above" or of our abiding "in the Truth." In other words, the New Testament encourages us not just to apply our intellects to an understanding of the text, but to give our whole selves to a new way of being, which is inaugurated in the person of Jesus.

It is the same with studying Saint Vincent. I find the volumes of his writings very inviting. His letters are filled with good humor, wisdom, spiritual insight, and sound practical advice. His talks to the Daughters of Charity have warmth and charm. His conferences to the Missionaries vibrate with Christ-centeredness and missionary zeal.

But it is not enough to study him. Saint Vincent too holds out an alternative world to us, and he asks us to enter into it. It is a world where the poor are the masters and where we are their servants. His is a particular

interpretation, and today an especially appealing one, of the world to which Jesus invites us in the gospel. It is a world where the key attitudes are simplicity, humility, and charity, and where the cross is the "royal road." It is a world where the last are first and the first are last. It is a world which, in some ways, is upside down. Saint Louise had a lovely way of putting it: "The poor person is first in the Church. He is the prince and master, being a kind of incarnation of the poor Christ. We must therefore serve him with respect, no matter what his character is like, no matter what his defects. And we must love him."¹

May I invite you to enter into Saint Vincent's world? I speak, of course, not of the world of the seventeenth century, but rather the world where the following of Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor is everything. In that world, values that have great importance in other "worlds"—wealth, power, sexual fulfillment, popularity, self-determination—occupy a very different position. For Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor, they are all relativized—they pale in light of the kingdom of God. Saint Vincent calls us not merely to study about this Christ, but to enter into his mind, his vision, his sentiments, his heart. For Saint Vincent *this Christ*, the Evangelizer of the Poor, is the center of the universe. He reveals to Vincent how to relate to God and his providence, how to serve the poor, how to live daily in communion with others, how to pray.

In offering you these essays and talks, I invite you not just to read them, but to enter into the world that Saint Vincent holds out to us. He calls us to walk in the footsteps of Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor, to "put on" his simplicity, humility, gentleness, self-denial, and burning love. He calls us to give the poor first place and to allow ourselves to be their servants. "There is no better way to assure our eternal happiness," Saint Vincent tells us, "than to live and die in the service of the poor within the arms of providence and in a real renunciation of ourselves by following Jesus Christ."²

A few apologies. The reader will surely "catch" me when in my talks I say the same things, on different occasions, to Vincentians and Daughters of Charity. There is, of course, much in the mission, tradition, and spirituality of our Vincentian family that overlaps, even though the

1. J. Calvet, *Louise de Marillac par elle-même, Portrait* (Aubier, 1958) 75.

2. SV III, 392. SV refers to the fourteen volume French edition of Saint Vincent's works, *Correspondence, entretiens, documents*, edited by Pierre Coste (Paris: Gabalda, 1920-25).

various branches have distinct charisms. As I put together this book, I considered eliminating completely the repetitions in the second and third sections. In the end, however, I decided to leave the talks more or less as they were given, since the repetitions are not numerous and the talks were written as a single piece. I trust in the reader's understanding in this regard.

I also ask the reader's indulgence in regard to my failure to use inclusive language consistently. As is evident, some of the chapters were originally addressed exclusively to men; others, to women.

I offer this small book to all those who are seeking to give their lives to God in the service of the poor. As is evident, the later chapters were originally talks given to groups of Vincentians and Daughters of Charity, but I trust that these too might be of some help to all those who walk in the footsteps of Saint Vincent de Paul.

Abbreviations

- AAS Acta Apostolicae Sedis
- C Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission
- CR Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission
- SV *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, entretiens, documents*, 14 vols., edited by Pierry Coste (Paris: Gabalda, 1920-25). All references in this book are to Coste's French edition. The translations, when they are not my own, are taken from the English edition of this work, *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, vols. 1-4 (Brooklyn/Hyde Park: New City Press, 1985-).
- SW *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, edited and translated from the French by Sr. Louise Sullivan, D.C. (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991).