Some Essays in Vincentian Spirituality
Listening as the Foundation for Spirituality

Each morning he wakes me to hear, to listen like a disciple. The Lord Yahweh has opened my ear.

(Isaiah 50:4-5)

Have you ever noticed how little explicit emphasis there is on listening in the “Rules” of communities, in the standard “manuals” on the spiritual life, and even in the classics? One searches in vain for a chapter on listening in the writings of Benedict or Ignatius, and even in the writings of very practically oriented saints like Francis de Sales and Vincent de Paul. The same is true for the writings of Luis de Granada and Rodriguez, or in later widely used treatises on spirituality like Tanqueray. It is true, of course, that listening enters the picture implicitly under many headings in these writings. But if one views listening as the foundation for spirituality, as is the thesis of this chapter, one might surely expect it to stand out in greater relief.

This chapter has a very modest goal. It proposes to offer some preliminary reflections on listening as the foundation of spirituality. I say “preliminary” reflections because all of the headings below could be much further developed, as will be evident to the reader. In fact, the author would hope that various readers, working from their own fields of expertise (philosophical, biblical, theological, as well as those of various religious congregations) might develop this thesis more fully.

To undergird and then concretize the thesis, the chapter will examine, in a preliminary way: 1) listening in the New Testament (Luke’s gospel); 2) listening as the basis for spirituality; 3) some echoes of the theme in the Vincentian tradition; 4) the contrast between an implicit and an explicit theme; 5) some ramifications today.

Listening in Luke’s Gospel

A broader investigation of the question would, of course, begin with the Old Testament, where the listening theme plays a vital role, especially in the Deuteronomic and prophetic traditions. There, Yahweh frequently complains that while he speaks his people “do not listen.” Conversely, the prophets are pre-eminent listeners; they hear what Yahweh has to say and then speak in his name. “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (Sam 3:10), says the boy Samuel as he begins his prophetic career.

The listening theme likewise recurs again and again in the New Testament, where a study of Johannine literature, for instance, would reveal listening as the key to eternal life. “Whoever is of God listens to every word God speaks. The reason you do not hear is that you are not of God. . . . If someone is true to my word, he shall never see death” (Jn 8:47, 51).

Here, however, I will offer just a brief analysis of Luke’s gospel, where the listening theme is quite explicit. For Luke, as for the entire New Testament, God takes the initiative through his word, which breaks into the world as good news; listening is the indispensable foundation for all human response to that word.

Mary, the model listener

As with almost all the important themes in Lucan theology, the listening theme is introduced in the infancy narratives. These narratives, by way of preface, provide a summary of the theology that Luke will weave through his gospel. The listening theme is among the most prominent Lucan motifs (parenthetically, one might add that in Luke’s gospel another theme is at work in many of the listening stories, since, contrary to the expected cultural patterns of the writer’s time, a woman is the model listener presented to the reader).

Mary is evangelized in Luke’s opening chapters. She is the first to hear the good news. She is the ideal disciple, the model for all believers. In the infancy narratives, Mary listens reflectively to:

Gabriel, who announces the good news of God’s presence and tells her of the extraordinary child whom she is to bear (Lk 1:26f);
Elizabeth, who proclaims her blessed among women, because she has believed that the word of the Lord would be fulfilled in her (Lk 1:39f);

Shepherds, who tell her and others the message which has been revealed to them about the child, the good news that a Savior is born! (Lk 2:16f);

Simeon, who proclaims a canticle and an oracle: the first, a song of praise for the salvation that has come to all the nations; the second, a prophecy that ominously forebodes the scandal of the cross (Lk 2:25f);

Anna, who praises God in Mary’s presence and keeps speaking to all those who are ready to hear (Lk 2:36f);

Jesus himself, who tells her about his relationship with his heavenly Father, which must take precedence over everything else (Lk 2:41f).

Mary’s attitude of attentiveness

When the word of God breaks in on Mary’s life, she listens attentively. Using a standard pattern, Luke pictures Mary as listening to the word with wonderment, questioning what it might mean, deciding to act on it, and then meditating on the mystery of God’s ways.

Listening: “Upon arriving, the angel said to her: ‘Rejoice, O highly favored daughter! The Lord is with you’” (Lk 1:28).

Being astonished: “She was deeply troubled by his words, and wondered what his greeting meant” (Lk 1:29).

Questioning: “How can this be since I do not know man?” (Lk 1:34).

Acting (accepting, obeying): “Be it done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38).

Treasuring and pondering: “Mary treasured all these things and reflected on them in her heart” (Lk 2:19, 51).
Stories of discipleship

Luke uses three brief stories to illustrate this central discipleship theme: namely, that it is those who listen to the word of God and act on it who are the true followers of Jesus.

His mother and brothers came to be with him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. He was told, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside and they wish to see you.” He told them in reply, “My mother and my brothers are those who listen to the word of God and act upon it.” (Lk 8:19-21)

In this story, Luke changes the Markan emphasis radically (cf. Mk 3:31-35). While Mark depreciates the role of Jesus’ mother and relatives, Luke extols it (echoing Luke 1:38; 2:19; 2:51): Jesus’ mother is the ideal disciple, who listens to God’s word and acts on it. Anyone who does likewise will be happy.

On their journey Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him to her home. She had a sister named Mary, who seated herself at the Lord’s feet and listened to his words. Martha, who was busy with all the details of hospitality, came to him and said, “Lord, are you not concerned that my sister has left me to do the household tasks all alone? Tell her to help me.” The Lord in reply said to her: “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and upset about many things; one thing only is required. Mary has chosen the better portion and she shall not be deprived of it.” (Lk 10:38-42)

Even though Jesus’ statement about the one thing necessary has been subject to innumerable interpretations, there is little doubt about the central point of this story in the context of Luke’s gospel. Mary has chosen the better part because she is sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening to his words, just as any true disciple does. While there are many other themes in the story (such as, once again, the role of women, and also the role of the home-church in early Christianity, which is reinforced here through a Lucan addition), Luke again emphasizes what ultimately grounds the following of Jesus: listening to the word of God. That is the better part (cf. Lk 8:4-21).
While he was saying this a woman from the crowd called out, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" "Rather," he replied, "blest are they who listen to the word of God and keep it." (Lk 11:27-28)

This passage interrupts, rather puzzlingly, a series of controversies that Jesus is involved in during the journey to Jerusalem. But Luke inserts it here as an occasion for Jesus to clarify the true meaning of discipleship once more: real happiness does not lie in physical closeness to Jesus, nor in blood relationship with him, but in listening to the word of God and acting on it.

Listening as the Basis for Spirituality

All spirituality revolves around self-transcendence. As a working definition for spirituality, we might use one proposed by Sandra Schneiders, who defines it as "the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives."

In the Christian context, spirituality involves "putting on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 13:14), "giving away one's life rather than saving it up" (Mk 8:35; Mt 16:25; Lk 9:24; Jn 12:25), and other phrases that imply self-transcendence. The self is not obliterated through self-transcendence; rather, it becomes fully actualized. That is the Christian paradox: in giving oneself, one finds one's true self. In that sense, authentic love of God, of neighbor, and of self come together.

Different contemporary authors put this in different ways. For Bernard Lonergan, self-transcendence occurs in the radical drive of the human spirit, which yearns for meaning, truth, value, and love. Authenticity then "results from long-sustained exercise of attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, responsibility." For Karl Rahner, the human person is the

3. Cf. Gal 2:19-21: "I have been crucified with Christ, and the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me. Of course, I still live my human life, but it is a life of faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." The Greek text identifies Jesus as the "self-giving one." It also makes it clear that self-transcendence does not wipe out true humanity, but fulfills it.
event of the absolute self-communication of God. In his foundational works, Rahner describes the human person as essentially a listener, one who is always awaiting a possible word of revelation. Only in Jesus, the self-communication of God, is the human person ultimately fulfilled. At the core of the historical human person is a gnawing hunger for the other, for absolute value. A particular spirituality is a way in which this longing for the absolute is expressed.\(^5\)

But this inner yearning for truth and love, this “reaching out,” as Henri Nouwen expresses it, can only be satisfied by a word from without—spoken or enfleshed—that reveals the meaning of what true humanity really is. In the human person the fundamental disposition for receiving that word or Word is listening.

It is worth noting here that the Book of Genesis, wisdom literature, and the Johannine tradition all seize on the concept of the “Word” as the way in which God initiates and breaks into human history. The creating word bears within it its own immediate response: “Let there be light, and there was light” (Gn 1:3). But the word spoken to the human person, who in God’s image and likeness rules with freedom over all creation, must be listened to and responded to freely.

Of course, listening here is used in the broadest sense. It includes seeing, hearing, sensing, feeling, perceiving. “Attentiveness” might serve as an umbrella term that encompasses the various ways in which the human person is open to grasp what comes from without. Listening in this sense is the indispensable pre-condition for self-transcendence. Without it, the word that comes from without goes unheard, the truth that draws the human mind to a vision that goes beyond itself goes unperceived, the love that seeks to capture the heart goes unrequited.

Is this why the saints have so stressed the importance of listening in prayer? Is this why obedience has played such an influential role in the tradition of religious communities? Is this why the seeking of counsel has always been regarded as one of the signs of true wisdom? Is this why the Word-made-flesh and the word of God in the scriptures are at the center of all Christian spirituality? Is this why the reading of the scriptures at the Eucharist and communion with the Word himself in his self-giving, sacrificial love are “the source and summit” of genuine Christian living?

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Some Echoes of the Theme in the Vincentian Tradition

The central place of listening, within the context of spirituality, is not explicit in the conferences and writings of Saint Vincent. But the spirituality proposed by Saint Vincent includes several key themes in which the importance of listening is evident.

Humility as the foundation of evangelical perfection

Vincent calls humility “the foundation of all evangelical perfection and the core of the spiritual life.”6 For him, the humble person, on the deepest level, sees everything as gift. The humble recognize that God is seeking to enter their lives again and again so that he might speak to them. So they are alert, they listen for God’s word, they are eager to receive God’s saving love. The humble know that the truth which sets them free comes from without: through God’s word, through the cries of the poor, through the Church, through the community they live in.

There is probably no theme that Saint Vincent emphasized more. He described humility as the origin of all the good that we do (SV IX, 674; cf. CR II, 7). He told the Daughters of Charity: “If you establish yourselves in it, what will happen? You will make of this Company a paradise, and people will rightly say that it is a group of the happiest people on earth” (SV X, 439).

Humility and listening are closely allied, in that listening is the basic attitude of those who know that fullness of life, salvation, wisdom, truth, love, come from without. Brother Robineau, Vincent’s secretary, whose reflections about the saint have just been published, notes that this attitude was especially evident in Vincent’s conversations with the poor, with whom he would sit and converse with great friendliness and humility.7

Saint Vincent loved to call the poor the real “lords and masters” (cf. SV IX, 119; X, 332) in the Church. It is they especially who must be listened to and obeyed. In the reign of God, the world of faith, they are the kings and queens, we are the servants. Recognizing the special place of the poor

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6. Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission II, 7; henceforth CR.
in the new order established by Jesus, the contemporary Vincentian heritage urges that the followers of Saint Vincent, like the founder, be “always attentive to the signs of the times and the more urgent calls of the Church,” so that not only will we attend to their evangelization (that of the poor), but that we ourselves may be evangelized by them” (C 12, 3°).

Reading sacred scripture

Saint Vincent was convinced that the word of God never fails. It is like “a house built upon rock” (CR II, 1). He therefore begins each chapter of his rule, and many individual paragraphs, with a citation from scripture. He asks that a chapter of the New Testament be read by each member of his community every day. Basically, he wants them to listen to the word of God and to make it the foundation of all they do:

Let each of us accept the truth of the following statement and try to make it our most fundamental principle: Christ’s teaching will never let us down, while worldly wisdom always will. (CR II, 1)

In a colorful passage, Abelly notes how devoted Saint Vincent was to listening to the word of God: “He seemed to suck meaning from passages of the scriptures as a baby sucks milk from its mother, and he extracted the core and substance from the scriptures so as to be strengthened and have his soul nourished by them—and he did this in such a way that in all his words and actions he appeared to be filled with Jesus Christ.”

In a conference on the “Gospel Teachings,” given on February 14, 1659, Vincent emphasizes how well Mary listened to the word of God. “Better than anyone else,” he states, “she penetrated its substance and showed how it should be lived” (SV XII, 129).

“Obeying” everyone

The word “obedience” (ob + audire = to listen thoroughly) is related etymologically to the word “listen” (audire). For Saint Vincent the role

8. Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission 2; henceforth, C.
of obedience in community was clearly very important. But he also extended obedience beyond its usual meaning, in which all are to obey the legitimate commands of superiors. Using a broadened notion of obedience, he encouraged his followers to listen to and obey everyone, so that they might hear more fully what God is saying and act on it.

Our obedience ought not limit itself only to those who have the right to command us, but ought to strive to move beyond that. . . . Let us therefore consider everyone as our superior and so place ourselves beneath them, and even more, beneath the least of them, outdoing them in deference, agreeableness, and service. (SV XI, 69)

Obedience, moreover, is not the duty of “subjects” alone, but of superiors too. In fact, superiors should be the first to obey, by listening to the members well and by seeking counsel.

There would be nothing more beautiful in the world, my Daughter, than the Company of the Daughters of Charity if . . . obedience flourished everywhere, with the Sister Servant the first to obey, to seek counsel, and to submit herself. (SV IX, 526)

An Implicit Theme versus an Explicit One

It is clear that listening plays a significant, even if unaccented, role in each of the themes described above. The importance of listening is not, therefore, a “forgotten truth” (to use Karl Rahner’s phrase) either in the writings of Vincent de Paul or in the overall spiritual tradition; neither, however, is it a central one. Therein lie two dangers.

First, truths that remain secondary or merely implicit run the risk of being underemphasized or distorted. The danger of distortion can be illustrated by using the same themes described above.

Reading a chapter of the word of God daily can degenerate into fulfilling an obligation or studying a text, unless the importance of listening attentively retains its pre-eminent place. Of course, in a healthy spirituality that will not happen, but distortion occurs when Spirituality begins to lose its focus.

Likewise, the practice of humility, when distorted, can result in sub-
servience to the voices without and deafness to the voices within, where God also speaks. In such a circumstance, “humility” might mask lack of courage in speaking up, deficient self-confidence, or a negative self-image.

A distorted emphasis on obedience can result in a situation where “subjects” are expected to listen exclusively to superiors, no matter what other voices might say, even voices that conscience demands we listen to. Conversely, it could produce a situation where a superior protests too loudly that he only has to “listen” to the advice of others, not follow it (whereas, in such instances, it may be quite evident that he listens to almost no one but himself).

But when listening retains a place at the center, the danger of distortion is lessened. Reading the word of God, practicing humility, and obeying are seen as means for hearing what God is saying. The accent remains on attentiveness.

There is also a second danger. When the importance of listening as such is underemphasized, there is a subtle tendency to focus on particular practices to the detriment of others, or to be attentive to certain voices while disregarding others. For instance, a member of a community might pray mightily, seeking to discern what God is saying, but pay little attention to what a superior or spiritual director, who knows the person well, is trying to say. He or she may listen “transcendentally” or “vertically,” so to speak, but show little concern for listening “horizontally.” Along similar lines, a superior might, to use an example coming from the other direction, be very confident that, because of the grace of his office, God lets him know what his will is, while other (more human!) figures, by the grace of their office, are desperately trying to signify to the same superior that God is saying something quite different. The simple truth is: there are many voices to which we must listen, since God speaks to us in many ways. Some of these ways are obviously privileged, but none has an exclusive hold on the truth.

Some Ramifications

In his wonderful book on community, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

The first service that one owes to others in the community consists in listening to them. Just as love of God begins by
listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is because of God's love for us that he not only gives us his Word but also lends us his ear. So it is his work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking. Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either, he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life.\footnote{Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together (London: SCM Press, 1954) 75.}

If listening is so crucial to healthy spirituality, then how might members of communities grow in it, both as individuals and in common?

\textbf{Listening as an individual}

From reflection on the Church's long spiritual tradition one might glean a number of qualities that characterize good listeners. Here I will touch briefly on four, which seem to me crucial for growth in listening.

\textit{Humility}

The indispensable quality for good listening is humility. It is "the foundation of all evangelical perfection, the core of the spiritual life," as Saint Vincent put it (CR II, 7). The humble person senses his or her incompleteness, his need for God and other human persons. So he listens.

Humility acknowledges that everything is gift; it sees clearly that all good things come from God. Saint Vincent writes to a priest of the Mission (probably Robert de Sergis or Lambert aux Couteaux): "Because we recognize that this abundant grace comes from God, a grace which he keeps on giving only to the humble who realize that all the good done through them comes from God, I beg him with all my heart to give you more and more the spirit of humility" (SV I, 182).
But consciousness of one's incompleteness has a further dimension. It is not only "vertical," so to speak, but "horizontal"; we depend not only on God directly, but on God's creation around us. Truth, then, comes from listening not only to God himself, but to the human persons through whom God's presence and words are mediated to us. The hunger for truth and love that lie at the heart of the mystery of the human person is satisfied only from without. We are inherently social, living within a complex network of relationships with individuals and with society.

**Prayerfulness and reflectiveness**

It is only when what is heard is pondered, that its full meaning is revealed. The quest for truth, therefore, involves prayerfulness and reflectiveness. While at times one can hear God speak even in a noisy crowd, it is often only in silence that one hears the deepest voices, that one plumbs the depth of meaning. The Psalmist urges us: "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10).

The gospels, particularly Luke's, attest that Jesus turns to his Father again and again in prayer to listen to him and to seek his will. Prayer is then surely one of the privileged ways of listening. But it must always be validated by life. One who listens to "what God is telling me" in prayer, but who pays little heed to what others are saying in daily life is surely suspect. Prayer must be in continual contact with people and events, since God speaks not only in the silence of our hearts, but also (and often first of all) in the people around us.

Moreover, since prayer is a meeting with God himself, what we say in prayer is much less important than what God says to us. When there is too much emphasis on what we say or do during prayer, it can easily become a good work, an achievement, a speech, rather than a grace, a gift, a gratuitous word from God. Naturally, prayer, like all human activities, involves structures, personal discipline, persevering effort. But the emphasis must always be on the presence of the personal God, to whose word we must listen attentively, as he speaks to us the good news of his love for us and for others.

In an era when there is much noise, where the media, if we so choose, speak to us all day long, we must ask ourselves: Are we able to distinguish the voice of God among the many voices that are speaking? Is God's word able to say "new things" to us? Are we still capable of wonder? As may
be evident to the reader, the word *wonder* has an etymological kinship, through German, with *wound*. Is the word of God able to wound us, to penetrate the membrane that seals us off, that encloses us within ourselves? Can it break into our consciousness and change us?

*Respect for the words of human persons*

It is here perhaps that the tradition was weakest. It did emphasize humility. It did accent the need to hear what God is saying and to discern his will. But it rarely focused explicitly, in the context of spirituality, on the central place of listening to other human persons.

Many contemporary documents put great emphasis on the dignity of the human person and on the importance of hearing the cries that come from his heart. *Gaudium et Spes* (particularly #s 9, 12 and 22) and *Redemptor Hominis* see the human person as the center of creation. In a slightly different context, *Centesimus Annus* puts it strikingly: “Today, the Church’s social doctrine focuses especially on *man*” (#54).

Respect for the human person acknowledges that God lives in the other and that he reveals himself in and through him or her. It acknowledges that words of life come from the lowly as well as the powerful. In fact, Saint Vincent became gradually convinced that “the poor have the true religion” (SV XII, 171) and that we must be evangelized by them.

Many of the recently published texts of Brother Louis Robineau attest to Saint Vincent’s deep respect for persons of all types. Robineau notes how well the saint listened to them: poor and rich, lay and clerical, peasant and royal.11

In this context, the process of questioning persons that is involved in the quest for truth takes on a new light. When there is deep respect for the human person, questioning involves a genuine search for enlightenment, rather than being, in some hidden way, refutation or accusation. Questioning is a tool for delving deeper, for unpeeling layers of meaning, for knowing the other person better, for digging toward the core of the truth.

As we attempt to develop increasing respect for the human person, surely we must ask some challenging questions. Are we really able to hear the cries of the poor, of the most oppressed: the women and children, who are often the poorest members of society; those discriminated against because of race, color, nationality, religion; the AIDS victims, who are

often shunned by their families and by the physically healthy; those on the "edges of life," the helpless infants and the helpless aged, who are unable to speak up themselves? Are we able to hear the counsel given to us by others: by spiritual directors, by members of our own communities, by the documents of the Church and the Congregation? Are we sensitive to the contributions that come from other sources of human wisdom (like economics, sociology, the audio-visual media, the massive data now available in computerized form) that often speak concretely about the needs of the poor, that can help us find and combat the causes of poverty, or that can assist us in the new evangelization called for by the Church? Are we alert, "listening," to the "signs of the times": the increasing gap between the rich and the poor and the repeated call for justice made by the Church; the movement toward unity within global society, which is now accompanied by an opposite movement toward separatism and nationalism; the growth of the Church in the southern hemisphere, which contrasts with its diminishment in many places in the northern hemisphere.

**Attentiveness**

One of the most important signs of respect for the human person is attentiveness.

The contemporary documents of both the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity put great emphasis on the need to be attentive. The Daughters’ Constitutions see it as the prerequisite for achieving the apostolic goal of the Company: "Attentiveness, the indispensable foundation of all evangelization, is the first step toward it [the service of Christ in the poor]."12

The Vincentian Constitutions emphasize it in the context of community life: "We should pay close attention to the opinions and needs of each confrere, humbly and fraternally" (C 24, 3°). The *Lines of Action* reinforce this: "Mutual communication is the indispensable means for creating authentic communities. For this reason, it is recommended that the confreres sincerely and diligently seek ways and means to listen to each other and to share their successes and failures."13

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Likewise, attentiveness as one seeks counsel is of the greatest importance. Robineau relates how often Saint Vincent asked others their opinion about matters at hand, "even the least in the house." He often heard him state that "four eyes are better than two, and six better than four."\(^{14}\)

Robineau relates an interesting incident in this regard:

One day he told me graciously that we must make it our practice, when consulting someone about some matter, always to recount everything that would be to the advantage of the opposing party without omitting anything, just as if it were the opposing party itself that was there to give its reasons and defend itself, and that it was thus that consultations should be carried out.\(^{15}\)

**Listening in community**

Meetings, along with consultations and questionnaires of various sorts, are among the primary means for listening in community.

Like most realities, meetings are "for better or for worse." Almost all of us have experienced that there are some that we find very fruitful; but there are others that we would be happy to forget about. To put it in another way, meetings can be a time of grace or a time when sin threatens grace.

Communities, like individuals, can become caught up in themselves. A healthy self-concern can gradually slip into an unhealthy self-preoccupation. Outgoing zeal can be replaced by self-centered security-seeking. Communities can be rescued from this state, in a way analogous to that of individuals, only through corporate humility,\(^{16}\) a communal quest to listen to God, and communal attentiveness to the words of other.

**Meetings as a time when sin threatens grace**

When there is no listening, meetings create strife and division. They disrupt rather than unify. They deepen the darkness rather than focus the

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16. Saint Vincent repeatedly emphasized the need for corporate humility if the Congregation is to grow. Cf. SV II, 233: "I think the spirit of the Mission must be to seek its greatness in lowliness and its reputation in the love of its abjection."
light. At meetings, much depends on the capacity of the members to listen. When listening wanes, meetings degenerate rapidly, with calamitous results.

Among the signs that sin is at work in meetings is fighting. When participants do not listen, there will inevitably be strife, bad feelings, disillusionment, bitterness. Fractious meetings result in fleeing. When participants do not listen, the group will back away from major decisions, especially those that demand some conversion; it will refuse to listen to the prophets; it will seek refuge in the status quo. A further consequence will be fracturing. When participants do not listen, badly divided splinter-groups will form; the “important” conversations will take place in the corridors rather than in the meeting hall; politics, in the worst sense, will take the place of discernment.

**Meetings as an opportunity for grace**

But meetings also provide us with a wonderful opportunity for listening and discernment. They enable communities to work toward decisions together, as a community. In order for this to happen, those who meet must be committed to sharing their common heritage, creating a climate of freedom for discussion, and planning courageously for the future.

*Recounting the deeds of the past (thanksgiving):* In meetings where God is at work, we recall our heritage in order to renew it. We listen to and retell “our story.” We re-count and re-hear the deeds of the Lord in our history. We celebrate our gratitude in the Eucharist and let thanksgiving fill our hearts, because we have heard the wonderful works of the Lord. We share communal prayer and reflection because we believe that the faith of others strengthens us.

*Creating a climate of freedom (atmosphere):* The atmosphere will be grace-filled, if all are eager to listen to each other. If all arrive without hardened positions and prejudices, convinced that the group must seek the truth together, then the groundwork for the emergence of truth has already been laid.

*Making decisions about the present (content):* The content, no matter how concrete or seemingly pedestrian, will be grace-filled, if all hear the word of God together, listen to each other’s reflections on that word, and make decisions on that basis. The decisions of a listening community will flow from its heritage, while developing it in light of contemporary
certain circumstances. Concrete decisions will not merely repeat the past. Rather, discerning the core values of our heritage, they will concretize them in a new context. ¹⁷

Planning for the future (providence): Meetings have an important role to play within God's providence. God provides for the growth of communities through wise decisions that govern their future, especially the training of the young, the ongoing formation of all members, and the care for the aging. But such decisions can be made only if the members of the community are willing to listen to the data that describes its present situation and projects its future needs. Communal decision-making, based on realistic projections, is one of the ways in which "providence" operates in community life. Failure to listen to the data—difficult though it may sometimes be to "hear" it honestly—will result in calamitous "blindness" and "deafness."

The listening individual and the listening community will surely grow, since listening is the foundation of all spirituality. To the listener come truth, wisdom, the assurance of being loved. To those who fail to listen comes increasing isolation.

Jesus, like the prophets, knew that listening was demanding and consequently often lacking. He lamented its absence: "Sluggish indeed is this people's heart. They have scarcely heard with their ears, they have firmly closed their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn back to me, and I should heal them" (Mt 13:15). He also rejoiced in its presence: "But... blessed are your ears because they hear" (Mt 13:16).

In recent years many congregations have attempted to assist individuals, local communities, and assemblies to listen better. In workshops, much effort has been put into fostering practical listening skills. But are there ways in which communities, particularly during initial formation, can better communicate the importance of listening as foundational for growth? If listening is the foundation of all spirituality, as is the thesis of this chapter, then it is crucial for personal growth and for the vitality of all communities.

¹⁷ In his essays on spirituality, Karl Rahner distinguishes between "material" and "formal" imitation of Christ. In "material" imitation, one seeks to do the concrete things that Jesus did, without realizing the extent to which everything he did was influenced by his social context. In "formal" imitation, one seeks to find the core meaning of what Jesus said or did and to apply it within the changed social context.
The Cross in Vincentian Spirituality

Probably no spiritual reading book has been more widely read than the *Imitation of Christ*. Over the centuries millions of priests, brothers, sisters, and lay men and women have read it and meditated on it. Saint Vincent and Saint Louise recommended it often to their followers. At least until recent years, for many the daily reading of a small section of the *Imitation* was a part of life. Among its most eloquent passages are these famous words:

Jesus has now many lovers of his heavenly kingdom, but few bearers of his cross. Many he has who are desirous of consolation, but few of tribulation. Many he finds who share his table, but few his fasting. All desire to rejoice with him, few are willing to endure anything for him. Many follow Jesus unto the breaking of bread; but few to the drinking of the cup of his passion (Luke 22:42). Many reverence his miracles; few follow the shame of his cross. Many love Jesus so long as no adversities befall them. Many praise and bless him, so long as they receive any consolation from him. But if Jesus hides himself, and leaves them but a little while, they fall either into complaining, or into dejection of mind.

The gospel teaching upon which these stark words are based made a deep, lasting impression on Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. This chapter will focus on: 1) the cross in the New Testament; 2) the cross in the Vincentian tradition; 3) some problems in reflecting about the cross; 4) some reflections on the cross today.

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2. Cf. SV I, 382; VI, 129; cf. also V, 297; *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, edited and translated from the French by Sr. Louise Sullivan, D.C. (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991) 434; henceforth, SW.
The Cross in the New Testament

The cross and the resurrection stand at the center of the good news. For the New Testament writers, Jesus must not escape his hour. He must undergo the cross if he is to enter into his glory. His followers too must take up their cross daily. But the cross of Christ, as well as that of his followers, is always viewed from the perspective of resurrection faith.

The New Testament returns to the message of the cross again and again. Below I offer several of the most important texts in chronological order.

Some fundamental texts

"May I never boast about anything but the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Through it the world has been crucified to me and I to the world" (Gal 6:14).

In this early letter, written to the Galatians probably around 54 A.D., Paul enters into combat with the Judaizers, who boast of their circumcision and their observance of the law. He states that no external observance (the law, dietary rules, circumcision) is important; what is important is that one be created anew in Christ. He boasts only about the power of God, who exalts human weakness in the crucified Lord. In an earlier passage of the same letter, he writes: "I have been crucified with Christ. And the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me. I still live my human life, but it is a life of faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (2:19-20). Here and elsewhere, Paul affirms that through baptism the Christian has become identified with Christ's passion, death and resurrection. The person who lives and dies with Christ has a new source of activity at work within him, the glorified Lord, who has become a life-giving Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 15:45).

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).

Writing probably sometime between 54 and 57 A.D., Paul uses a hymn to present a picture of the “self-emptying” Christ. This Christ becomes one of us. He freely takes on a slave-like condition and dies the ignominious death of those who have forfeited all civic rights, crucifixion. The self-abandoning act of Jesus receives an active response from God, who exalts him in his resurrection as Lord of the universe. Thus, God’s rule over all creation is restored through Jesus’ self-emptying.

"The message of the cross is complete absurdity for those heading for ruin, but for us who are experiencing salvation, it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18).

Addressing the Corinthians around the year 55 A.D., and knowing that the community is being ripped apart by divisions, Paul states that the standards of fallen humanity—the sort of power and the philosophical speculation that the world relies on—are utterly futile. God’s power and God’s wisdom are revealed in human “weakness.” The power of suffering love, which human reasoning often fails to comprehend, is the genuine strength of believers.

"It pleased God to make absolute fullness reside in him, and by means of him, to reconcile everything in his person, both on earth and in the heavens, making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col 1:19-20).

In this later text, written in the Pauline tradition, probably between 70 and 80 A.D., the author uses an early Christian hymn to present a cosmic vision of Christ, who works in creation and in the Church. Where there is discord, Christ creates peace. He is the ultimate reconciler. He in whom the fullness of God and of God’s creation dwells, hands himself over to his Father in his dying. In doing so, he hands over with himself all creatures in heaven and on earth.

"If anyone wants to be my follower, he must deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow me. Whoever would save his life will lose it. Whoever loses his life for my sake saves it. What does it profit
someone to gain the whole world and to lose his very soul in the process?"
(Lk 9:23).

Luke’s gospel, probably written in 80-85 A.D., focuses on the following of Christ. As he writes, the author continually keeps in mind not only Jesus himself, particularly in his journey to Jerusalem, but also us, the readers, the disciples who will be following Jesus on the journey. The shadow of the cross lies across the pages of Luke’s “orderly account” (Lk 1:3), but it is brightened by the promise of the resurrection (cf. Lk 9:23; 14:27; 17:25; 24:7; 24:26; 24:46). The cross plays a “necessary” role in salvation history. While Luke underlines the saving significance of Jesus’ death strongly, his emphasis shifts subtly toward the saving power of the resurrection. Still, the tragedy and mystery of the cross loom large. Using the word “cross” in a metaphorical sense, Luke highlights the utter necessity for the disciple to deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Jesus.6

“Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who inspires and perfects our faith. For the sake of the joy which lay before him he endured the cross, heedless of its shame” (Heb 12:2).

This text, whose date and authorship are uncertain, is a “word of exhortation” (Heb 13:22). The author presents Jesus, who now sits at the right hand of the Father, as the model for endurance of hardship. He uses this example to encourage the recipients to persevere until the triumphant end of the race. The prospective joy of the resurrection gives new meaning to the cross.

Some fundamental ideas in these texts

These texts highlight the cross, but of course their ultimate focus is on the person of Jesus crucified and risen. The cross is the symbol of his complete self-giving. It is Jesus himself who is our salvation, life, and resurrection. He is the ultimate revelation of the Father’s love for us. He saves his people from their sins. He is the eschatological promise. In him the human person’s longing for happiness is fulfilled.

As is evident in the texts, the New Testament writers developed various theologies of the redemption, with Paul as the pioneer, so to speak. The texts present Jesus as the center of salvation history, as the fulfillment of the prophets. Because there has been a history of sin, so also is there a history of redemption. Jesus expiates the sins of the human race. He is the sacrificial lamb, offering himself in atonement for sin.

The dying of Jesus is also presented as a cosmic event. The powers of evil at work in the world are defeated. Jesus overcomes them. He wins victory over sin, sickness, and death. His Father takes the side of the crucified one by raising him from the dead.

But in reading these texts it is very important not to isolate the death of Jesus from his life. The saving significance of Jesus’ death is related to what he proclaimed and what was rejected. Jesus identifies with the outcast, the poor, the powerless. In his death, as in life, he is one of them. There is, therefore, a clear continuity between his way of living and his way of dying, his proclamation and his rejection. Jesus’ death on the cross flows from his option for the poor and the powerless. He shows himself wonderfully free before the powerful of this world. He criticizes those who lay oppressive burdens on others. But he himself is powerless. So the oppressors, the powerful, reject him. His death by crucifixion is that of those who have no rights.

Today we often speak of christologies, and theologies of redemption, as having “ascending” and “descending” forms. The synoptics, starting with memories of the concrete events “here below” follow Jesus’ ascent through his life, death and resurrection to the glory of the Father. In Johannine thought, as in much patristic and medieval christology, the starting point is “above,” where the Word is with God in the beginning. Yet in all these theologies (ascending, descending, and many in-between) the focus is on the person of Jesus, whose sacrificial love moves him to lay down his life for his friends: his companions both then and now.

In addition to this focus on the person of Jesus himself through the symbol of his cross, there also appears, in the texts cited above, a metaphorical use of the word “cross,” stemming from the sayings of

8. In passing, it might be said that Saint Vincent’s christology, like that of most of his contemporaries, was decidedly on the descending side; cf. SV IX, 640: “God died for us”; cf. also XII, 264.
Jesus. In this usage, the “cross” refers to the sufferings that the followers of Jesus experience. For the faithful follower, the cross:

- means giving one’s life
- is to be taken up daily
- brings greater riches than “saving up” one’s life
- can be borne only through the power of Christ in us
- seems foolishness to the “world”
- involves forgiveness of sin
- creates peace
- is the source of joy and leads to joy.

The Cross in the Vincentian Tradition

In this age of hermeneutics we are increasingly conscious of how much our historical context influences us. Like all of us, Saint Vincent and Saint Louise were children of their times. In that context they were well educated, but neither was a speculative theologian. Both absorbed the “standard theology” of their era. Since they had an abundant measure of common sense, they avoided the extremes of some of their contemporaries. But like their contemporaries, both focus on the cross with little explicit reference to the resurrection. Strange as that may seem to modern ears, it is quite characteristic of seventeenth-century theology in France.

The language of symbols

Symbols often say much more than words. They express not only intellectual content, but also the deeply personal, affective undercurrents that words have trouble communicating. Saint Louise and Saint Vincent both recognized the importance of the symbol of the cross as a way of communicating the depth of God’s love for us.9

The seal of the Daughters of Charity, used since 1643, is one of the expressions of the importance of the cross in Saint Louise’s and Saint Vincent’s minds. The present-day Constitutions of the Daughters describes it this way:

9. Naturally, the cross is not the only symbol of God’s love; the heart of Jesus too expresses, with different overtones, God’s love and Jesus’ love for us (cf. SV XI, 291).
The seal of the Company of the Daughters of Charity represents a heart encompassed by flames, with a crucifix superimposed. It is surrounded by the motto: CARITAS CHRISTI URGET NOS. The charity of Jesus Christ crucified, which animates and sets afire the heart of the Daughter of Charity, urges her to hasten to the relief of every type of human misery. (p. 1)

The conclusions to many of Saint Louise’s letters, which were often sealed with the image described above, also expressed verbally her personal devotion to the crucified Lord, employing varying wording: “I am, in the love of Jesus crucified...” “In his love and that of his crucified Son, I am...”

From the correspondence, moreover, between Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, and between both founders and the two communities, it is quite evident that crucifixes played a significant role in the piety of many Daughters and Vincentians. The sisters often request them, and Saint Louise goes out of her way to obtain them. Saint Vincent states that the Missionaries should never be without one (SV XI, 378).

The crucifix also plays a prominent role in the method of prayer that Saint Vincent taught, particularly to the Daughters of Charity, some of whom considered themselves too lacking in education to pray well, not knowing how to read or write. He assures them that praying well has little relationship with knowing how to read and write, and encourages them to use images. “Where do you think the great Saint Bonaventure got all his wisdom?” he says to the Daughters. “In the sacred book of the cross!” (SV IX, 217). He also tells them the story of a person who complimented Saint Thomas on the beautiful thoughts he had about God, and recounts how Thomas told the admirer that he would show him his library, leading him then to his crucifix (cf. SV IX 32). He tells the Daughters that, while only some can use methods of prayer like those described in Francis de Sales’ Introduction to the Devout Life, everyone can place herself at the foot of the cross in the presence of God. If she has nothing to say, she can wait until God speaks to her (cf. SV IX, 50).

10. Cf. SW 54, 325, 349, 354, 424, 439, etc.
11. Cf. SW 326, 332, 525, 530, 547, 635.
12. In this connection, one might also mention the sign of the cross, which Saint Vincent saw as a means of offering all one’s actions to God (cf. SV X, 629-630). He saw it as the sign by which Christians, from ancient times, could recognize one another and a reminder of the mystery of the Trinity (cf. SV XIII, 159).
In fact, for Saint Vincent no prayer is more pleasing to God than daily meditation on the passion and death of our Lord (cf. SV X, 569).

**The writings of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise**

The texts in which Saint Vincent and Saint Louise speak of the cross are far too numerous to cite exhaustively. Their references to the cross, moreover, are usually made in passing, without extensive development (though Louise reflects on the cross explicitly in a brief meditation written down in her later years, cf. SW 775-76). References to the resurrection, as mentioned above, are relatively few. I offer here, in a synthetic way, a brief analysis of meaning of the cross as the two saints speak of it and write about it in very varied contexts.

**The cross—symbol of God’s love as revealed in Jesus**

"May your love and that of Jesus Crucified be eternally exalted!" Saint Louise exclaims at the end of an Act of Consecration that she signed (SW 694).

Both saints often dwell on God’s love for us (cf. SV IX, 269). The cross is the symbol of the Father’s love, as revealed in the death of his Son. In their reflections both on the cross and on the heart of Jesus, the two saints often remind their followers of how deep God’s love for us is. On July 5, 1641, Saint Louise writes to Sr. Elizabeth Martin: "I beg our beloved Jesus Crucified to attach us firmly to his cross, so that we may be closely united to him by his love and that our little sufferings and the little we accomplish may be in and for his love, in which I remain, my dear Sister, your very humble sister and servant" (SW 54).

"Our Lord had to predispose with his love," Saint Vincent writes to Monsieur Portail, "those whom he wished to have believe in Him" (SV I, 295). The conviction of both Saint Vincent and Saint Louise was concrete and strong: we believe in and love those from whom we sense love. Jesus, in his dying on the cross, reveals God’s love in its depths.

**To be a Daughter of Charity is to be a Daughter of the Cross**

Love of neighbor, and particularly service of the poor, will inevitably involve the "cross," in the metaphorical sense. In fact, to be a Daughter of Charity, a Daughter of Love (SV IX, 53; X, 459, 474), means becoming identified with the crucified Lord. Toward the end of his life, Saint
Vincent writes to Avoie Vigneron (SV VII, 241): “Receive it [this suffering] as a gift from [God’s] paternal hand, and try to use it well. Help your sister to carry her cross, since yours is not as heavy as hers. Make her remember that she is a Daughter of Charity and that she ought to be crucified with our Lord and submit to his good pleasure in order not to be completely unworthy of so worthy a father.” He writes to Saint Louise during one of her sicknesses: “I learned of your illness upon my return. It has saddened me. I am begging Our Lord to restore you to that perfect health which made me so happy the last time I saw you. Well, you are a daughter of the cross. Oh! what a happiness!” (SV I, 342).

In a similar way, Saint Louise recognizes that her vocation means identifying with the cross. In a reflection on charity, she writes: “God, who has granted me so many graces, led me to understand that it was his holy will that I go to him by way of the cross” (SW 711). At a much later period in her life, writing on the pure love we have vowed to God and the need to give ourselves completely to him, she states: “As proof thereof, I am going to follow you to the foot of your cross which I choose as my cloister” (SW 828).

Since there are so few explicit references to the resurrection, one could imagine this spirituality to take on rather gloomy tones. With Saint Vincent, this is not the case. He encouraged the Daughters to be joyous, smiling in the service of the poor. Sometimes, though, he had to work at counteracting a tendency toward over-seriousness in Saint Louise, encouraging her, for instance, as she was about to journey with the more ebullient Madame Goussault: “Please be very cheerful with her, even though you should have to lessen a bit that somewhat serious disposition which nature has bestowed on you and which grace is tempering by the mercy of God” (SV I, 502).

The cross and providence

Both saints have a deep devotion to providence. In the course of their lives, they become more and more convinced of God’s love for them and grow in confidence that God is always at work in the events that occur, whether joyful or painful. Saint Vincent tells the missionaries in the year before his death: “My brothers, you ought to rest in the loving care of his Providence. . . . Do not trouble yourself about anything except seeking the kingdom of God, because his infinite wisdom will provide for all the
rest” (SV XII, 142). Both he and Saint Louise see the cross as a part of that providence.

On March 26, 1653, Saint Louise writes to Sr. Jeanne Lepintre: “It is perhaps for that reason, my dear Sister, that our Lord inspires you to remain at peace at the foot of his cross, completely submissive to the guidance of his divine providence. It seems to me, my very dear Sister, that you have found the philosopher’s stone of devotion when the firm resolution to do his will calms your anxieties” (SW 416). During times of trial or calumny, both saints are quick to remind their communities that they are sharing, under God’s providence, in the cross of Christ. Near the end of her life, Saint Louise writes to Sr. Françoise Carcireux: “We, however, and especially the entire Company, must accept this trial as coming from divine providence as our share in the cross of our Lord and as an opportunity he has given you to enable all of us to follow him” (SW 668). A year earlier Saint Vincent had published a similar statement in the Common Rules he gave to the Congregation of the Mission: “If divine providence ever allows a house or a member of the Congregation, or the Congregation itself, to be subjected to, or tested by, slander or persecution . . . we should ever praise and bless God, and joyfully thank him for it as an opportunity for great good, coming down from the Father of lights” (CR II, 13).

United with Christ crucified and living by the power of God

In her “Thoughts on the Cross,” Saint Louise exclaims: “O Holy cross! O suffering! How amiable you are, since the love of God has given way to you in his Son to gain through you the power to give paradise to those who had lost it by pleasure!” (SW 776).\(^{14}\)

It is only when one is willing to die with Christ that one finds the strength to live as his follower; conversely, it is only by living with Christ that we learn to die. “Remember, Father,” Saint Vincent writes to Monsieur Portail, “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,

13. Cf. also T. Lane, “She will find them again: Musings on Saint Louise,” Colloque 24 (Autumn 1991), 416-18, where the author also points out Saint Louise’s capacity to laugh.

14. An inordinate quest for pleasure has always been one of the roots of sin, but one cannot escape noticing that Saint Louise and Saint Vincent are both affected by the rather negative attitude toward created reality (and pleasure) that affected their era.
and that in order to die like Jesus Christ it is necessary to live like Jesus Christ” (SV I, 295).

Real holiness flows from the cross, where the power of God works within us. In the midst of her worries about her son, Saint Louise asks Saint Vincent: “Do me the charity of asking our good God that, through his mercy, my son may participate one day in the merits and death of Jesus Crucified, the living source of all holiness” (SW 184).

In a touching letter to Jeanne Lepintre, she also writes: “Tell our sisters that the people of Nantes are clamoring against them more than they know, and in important matters. However, it is the evil one playing these games that he will not win, provided they gather together and unite near the cross, like chicks under their mother’s wing when the owl lies in wait” (SW 213).

Saint Vincent, in speaking to the missionaries about the martyrdom of Pierre Borguny, states: “Courage, my brothers! Let us trust that our Lord will strengthen us in the crosses that come to us, great though they may be, when he sees that we love them and that we have confidence in him” (SV XI, 392).

A privileged way

Both saints were utterly convinced of this. They repeated it to each other and to their followers. In a letter written some time before 1634, Saint Vincent says to Saint Louise: “Our Lord will see to the matter, especially if you are happy at the foot of the cross where you are at present and which is the best place in this world you could be. So be happy there, Mademoiselle, and fear nothing” (SV I, 152).

In a letter that combines several of the themes described above, Saint Louise writes to Charlotte Royer, using language reminiscent of the Imitation of Christ, “You are well aware, my dear Sister, that the path by which God wants you to go to him is the royal road of the cross” (SW 527). She tells Srs. Catherine Baucher and Marie Donion: “Yes, my dear Sisters, the greatest honor you can receive is to follow Jesus Christ carrying his cross” (SW 535).

In her “Thoughts on the Cross,” she states that “souls chosen by God are very particularly destined to suffer” (SW 775). Meditating on charity, she says of herself: “God, who has granted me so many graces, led me to understand that it was his holy will that I go to him by way of the cross.
His goodness chose to mark me with it from my birth and he has hardly ever left me, at any age, without some occasion of suffering” (SW 711).

*Jesus on the cross as a means of encouraging others*

The two founders experienced abundant sufferings themselves: the distress of the poor; the ravages of war; the pains of giving birth to two new communities; the difficulties in community life as the years went on; criticism from within and from outside their communities; their own interior struggles; sickness; the death of their closest friends; their own dying. They bore these crosses as part of God’s providence.

But they also recognized that not every “cross” should be carried, since sometimes the sufferings involved could be remedied. Saint Louise, for example, writes to Sr. Elizabeth Brocard, a new sister servant: “If some little cause for suffering arises, humble yourself and accept it as a cross to be cherished because our Lord has permitted you to bear it. This does not mean, my dear Sister, that if your sufferings continue, you should not make them known to us or that we will not make every effort to meet your needs” (SW 449).

Other crosses should be borne with courage, since to lay them aside would cause greater pain for others. “It is much better to love one’s distress when one experiences it,” Saint Louise writes to Joan Lepinpre, “and carry it to the foot of the cross, or to let the Sister Servant know of it, than to look for a way to be rid of it that could cost so dearly” (SW 269).

The cross comes up especially when Saint Vincent and Saint Louise speak about illness. Writing to Françoise Carcireux about the sickness that Sr. Charlotte Royer was suffering, Saint Louise states: “Our Lord may use them [her ailments] to sanctify her by the merits of his holy life and his precious death for us upon the cross” (SW 526). In describing the death of Barbe Angiboust, she writes: “During her illness, God honored her by the most excellent marks of a true Christian woman and servant of God by granting her the grace to conform her will to his, to raise her thoughts frequently to Jesus Crucified and to practice great patience” (SW 629).
Some Problems in Reflecting About the Cross

The Jews and Gentiles have not been alone in finding the cross a "stumbling block" and "foolishness." On the theological level, there have always been difficulties in dealing with the cross, and more generally with the problem of evil.

Some of the difficulties in developing a theology of the cross stem from differences in the way of perceiving God. Both the Jewish and Christian scriptures praise God under two aspects. On the one hand, he is above all creation, utterly transcendent. On the other hand, he is intimately involved with his creatures and feels their afflictions: God suffers in pain for his people.

When Christianity moved out into the Hellenistic world, it encountered a Greek conception of God that did not easily enter into a peaceful union with the immanent aspect of God's presence in the scriptures: The Greek God was totally self-contained, world-transcending, incapable of being touched by human action or suffering. Consequently, the marriage between the immanent aspect of the biblical view of God and the Greek concept of God has had a rocky history. By the time of the great scholastics the Greek view exercised a predominant influence: God as God cannot suffer; God suffers only in the humanity of Jesus. How different this is from the view of Hosea for whom God's bowels tremble with compassion as he decides not to give rein to the heat of his anger (cf. Hos 11:8).

But many modern minds and hearts find the Greek-influenced scholastic view difficult to accept. It seems to place God at a great distance from those who suffer. In the 1940s, shortly before his death, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that "only a suffering God can help." In the 50s Jacques Maritain stated: "We need to integrate suffering with God, for the idea of an insensitive and apathetic God is revolting to the masses." In the '60s and '70s a series of essays by Karl Rahner further explored the question.

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16. One might cite many texts indicating God's feelings in regard to his people; cf. Gen 6:6; Jos 24:19; Hos 11:8; Is 42:14; Ps 103.
In the 80s both sides of the problem were given clear, forceful presentations in Jürgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God* and Edward Schillebeeckx’s books *Jesus and Christ*.

Moltmann seeks to articulate a theology of a suffering God. God suffers, Moltmann holds, not out of a deficiency in his divine nature, but because he freely chooses to be affected by what affects others. Schillebeeckx, on the other side, in an approach closer to the classical tradition, holds that God does not suffer. Rather, he resists evil in Jesus and is in solidarity with those who suffer, overcoming suffering through his compassionate presence. This presence is mediated “sacramentally” in Jesus and in those who, sharing Jesus’ life, resist injustice.17

Whatever side of the debate one might sympathize with, out of all this literature has flowed another title for Jesus, “Jesus, the Compassion of God.”18

On a theoretical-practical level, there is a perennial danger, by no means absent today, that “the cross” might sometimes be used as ideology; that is, as an argument for justifying oppressive behavior. In an unjust society, for example, it can be used as a tool to motivate the poor to accept injustice silently.

In the years following the Medellin conference in 1968, a strong critique developed among theologians, particularly in Latin America, about the role theology and popular piety have played in supporting situations of injustice. Might not an over-emphasis on the crucified, dead Christ, who has gone meek as a lamb to the slaughter, legitimate suffering as the will of God? Does it not cultivate a mentality that says: accept the cross meekly and you will receive eternal life? And does this not work to the advantage of the oppressor?

Quite on the contrary, Christians must labor for the well-being of all and for liberation from structures that favor the few over the many, the rich over the poor, one racial, social or religious group over others. In fact, liberation from oppression is one of the signs of the kingdom. The Christian cannot, therefore, stand by in silence in the face of injustice.

Rather, he must be willing to suffer for justice’s sake. While one must certainly distinguish between material progress and the advent of the kingdom of God, nonetheless the life of the kingdom, already at work in believers, moves the Christian to work to “bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and release to prisoners” (Lk 4:18).

Unfortunately, oppressive ideologies can be present not only in civil society but in the Church and religious life as well. “Acceptance” can be eulogized rather than constructive criticism. Voices that call for repentance or needed changes can be marginalized or silenced.

3. There is a third problem that can arise on the personal, ascetical level: that of distortion in the practice of asceticism. In the Vincentian tradition, self-imposed “crosses” are always to be used in moderation (cf. CR X, 15); they must always be seen as a function of one’s apostolic and community goals. They should help us to serve the poor well, to live together well, to pray well.

It was clear to Saint Vincent and Saint Louise that life’s most important “crosses” need not be constructed. They impose themselves. This is not to say that there is no place for personal discipline and for wisely-chosen practices that involve us in self-denial in order to reach the goals set before us. It is to say, however, that self-imposed mortifications must be tailored to the vocation of members of apostolic societies.

Some Reflections on the Cross Today

From what has been written above, I trust that it is evident that “devotion to the cross” is not merely an optional “private devotion” or a “personal ascetical practice.” Rather, it touches on the core of the good news, since the cross is the symbol of Jesus’ saving love.

20. In a similar way, Karl Rahner, in various articles in Theological Investigations often argues that devotion to the Sacred Heart (symbol of God’s love) is indispensable. Cf. “Behold This Heart: Preliminaries to a Theology of Devotion to the Sacred Heart” (III, 321-30); “Some Theses for a Theology of Devotion to the Sacred Heart” (III, 331-52); “The Theological Meaning of the Veneration of the Sacred Heart” (VIII, 217-28); “Unity-Love-Mystery” (VIII, 229-47); “Devotion to the Sacred Heart Today” (XXIII, 117-28).
21. Some forms of devotion to the cross are, of course, quite “private.” A devotion like the “Stations of the Cross,” for instance, is just one means of focusing on the cross of Christ, and is therefore quite optional.
The historical reality of the cross is at the center of revelation; it is the "sacrament" of God's love for the world and of the fullness of human response to that love. The cross of Christ, therefore, stands not at the periphery of Christian life, where it might be listed among a series of devotions; rather, it stands at the very core of the creed: "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead."

The symbol of the cross, so central to the good news, speaks to our age, as to every age, but with different concretizations. It says forcefully to us at least the following:

1. **The crucified Jesus, in his suffering love, stands at the center of our faith, raised up by the Father, fully alive.**

   The author of the first letter to Timothy tells us that the fullness of the truth lies in "the man Christ Jesus, the self-giving one" (1 Tim 2:5-6). All Christian spirituality, therefore, focuses on the crucified and risen Jesus. He is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through him.

   The cross is the symbol of what is at the core of Jesus' person: "The way we came to understand love was that he laid down his life for us; we too must lay down our lives for our brothers" (1 Jn 3:16). The crucified Jesus proclaims that self-giving love is at the heart of being God and at the heart of being human. "God's love was revealed in our midst in this way: he sent his only Son to the world that we might have life through him. Love, then, consists in this: not that we have loved God but that he has loved us and has sent his Son as an offering for our sins. Beloved, if God has loved us so, we must have the same love for one another" (1 Jn 4:9-11).

   Nothing will nourish the missionary or the Daughter of Charity more than focusing on God's love, of which the cross is the symbol. The Missionary's personal experience of this love will move him to proclaim it as good news. The Daughter of Charity's personal experience of this love will move her to share it as healing.

   The love that Jesus reveals through the symbol of the cross is:
   
   - self-giving
   - sacrificial

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- forgiving
- healing
- unifying
- loyal to one’s friends
- powerless
- in solidarity with the weak
- confident in the power of God.

In our Vincentian context, frequent meditation on the cross, as the symbol of God’s love for us and of our love for God, has abiding importance. Let me suggest the meditative use of the following texts, which refer either explicitly or implicitly to the cross and which focus on God’s love for us as revealed in the person of Jesus: John 3:16-17; John 13:1-17; 1 John 4:9-10; Ephesians 1:3-14; James 1:17-18; Luke 9:23.

As is evident from the texts, in the New Testament the cross is much more than an example. It speaks of God’s ways. It discloses the depths of his love. It proclaims that the power of God will prevail over what sinful men and women conspire to do. It reveals that true wisdom lies not with the forces of evil, but in suffering love. It initiates us into the mystery of the resurrection.

2. All Missionaries, all Daughters of Charity—all persons—will suffer.

Of course, some sufferings can, and should, be avoided. But the exceptionless rule of human existence, and of the following of Christ, is that there is inevitable suffering and death. The famous words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, written prophetically a few years before his execution, capture the reality very starkly: “When Christ calls a person, he bids him come and die.”

Jesus’ dying love gives meaning to the many “crosses” his followers are called to bear. In the life of a Missionary and a Daughter of Charity, therefore, let me suggest that the cross today, in the following of Christ, may take the following forms especially:

- laboring daily, and perseveringly, in the service of the poor
- sharing the helplessness and pain of the marginalized
- standing with the abandoned and suffering in solidarity with them for justice sake

25. SV XI, 341; cf. XII, 270: “It [charity] brings it about that one cannot see anyone suffer without suffering with him; one cannot see him weeping without weeping too.”
26. Cf. SV V, 545: “It is a good sign when you suffer for justice sake.”
- witnessing to gospel values in a non-supportive context
- accepting events that displease us, but that we can do nothing about
- sharing some of the privations of the poor
- bearing sickness, our own and that of others
- coming to grips with aging
- enduring the death of friends
- experiencing one’s own dying.

Confronting inevitable suffering and death has always been, and will always be, a formidable task. But in an age that creates expectations of immediate gratification, the challenge becomes all the more difficult. Hard as it may be to accept—and though one may put this same truth in much more positive terms—dying is the focus of Christian spirituality, dying in order that one might live. One may surely dispute, in examining the Imitation of Christ whether certain concrete practices described in the New Testament can be demanded of each Christian (going into the desert, spending the night in prayer, Jesus’ actual way of practicing poverty), but this proposition is certain: “Every Christian, at all times, follows Jesus by dying with him; following Jesus has its ultimate truth and reality and universality in the following of the Crucified.”

The following of the crucified Lord is the supreme act of faith; it is a surrender in hope and love into the incomprehensible mystery of God.

3. The crucified Lord suffers in “crucified persons” and in the “crucified peoples.”

Sin continues to work in our times, crucifying the Lord of history (cf. Heb 6:6). The Vincentian and the Daughter of Charity see the crucified every day. But it is easy for the “world” to forget them: the 5.7 million

27. Cf. SV XI, 7677: Abelly relates that Saint Vincent remarked, in a discourse to the Missionaries, that they would be very happy if they became poor through having practiced charity towards their neighbor. Saint Vincent continued: “If God should permit them to be reduced to the necessity of going to serve as curates in villages in order to earn a living, or even if some of them were compelled to beg for their bread or sleep in rags frozen with the cold under a hedge, and if, in such a condition, a person were to ask them: ‘Poor priests of the Mission, what has reduced you to this extremity?’ what happiness, my brothers, if they were able to reply: ‘It was charity.’ Oh! how that poor priest would be esteemed before God and his angels.”

29. Ibid., 168.
people of Haiti, who have been so poor for so long that their plight is no longer news; the 2.5 million Bosnian refugees who are victims of “ethnic cleansing”; the 1.5 million Somalians on the edge of death by starvation.

The challenge is to recognize the disfigured, crucified Lord and, like Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, to raise the consciousness of others to their plight. Contemplation of the crucified Lord cannot remain merely a pious exercise; nor can it be simply meditation on a past event. The Lord lives on in his members. He is crucified in individual persons and in suffering peoples. The call is to see him and serve him there.

One of the great gifts of the two founders was the ability to recognize Christ in the face of the suffering and to mobilize the energies of others in the service of their service. They were extraordinary organizers. To aid the most abandoned of their time, they gathered together rich and poor, women and men, clergy and laity.

They knew, to use the eloquent phrase of Jon Sobrino, that the “crucified peoples” bring salvation to us, as we labor to take them down from the cross.

4. We are evangelized by the cross, and we evangelize by the cross.

Jesus’ dying love is at the center of the good news. It is the source of our deepest hope. He laid down his life for his friends—for us!

The cross, in the New Testament, is always seen in light of the resurrection. Without the resurrection, the cross remains darkness. But, equally in New Testament faith, there is no resurrection without the cross. The cross of Christ, therefore, stands with the resurrection at the center of the good news we believe in. Together, they tell us how deeply God loves us. They evangelize us.

Yet, besides the cross of Jesus, the crosses of his members can evangelize us, too. Our lives can be transformed by the suffering love of Jesus’ followers, who fill up his sufferings in their bodies: the sick, who bear illness with courage; the grieving, who hope against hope; the dying, who clearly trust in the resurrection.

And does not Jesus evangelize us through other, more “anonymous” crosses: the anguish of the starving in Africa, the deaths of countless martyrs and desaparecidos in Latin America, the loneliness of AIDS victims or street-people, the pain and abandonment of the elderly? Do not

these crosses, too, call us outside ourselves to solidarity with the suffering? Do they not proclaim to us that the heart of the gospel lies in compassionate love for the most abandoned? Do they not draw us out of our isolation toward self-giving love?

The “crucified peoples” have much to teach us: pardon for their oppressors, hope in seemingly hopeless circumstances, willingness to share the little they have, gratitude for the presence and support of others, and, in the words of the Latin American Bishops’ document at Puebla, “solidarity, service, simplicity, readiness to receive the gift of God” (#1147). They evangelize us from the cross.

It is only when we have been evangelized by the cross that we, too, can evangelize by preaching the message of the cross. The “foolishness” of the cross will be credible on our lips only if we have learned its “wisdom” from sharing in the suffering of our brothers and sisters.

Have we learned to preach the cross without sounding hollow? Do our lives say that the cross has meaning? Do we find simple, clear words that encourage the suffering, or gestures that console the afflicted?

5. Within this much larger context, the self-imposed “crosses” that we often call “mortifications” play a functional, and sometimes important, role.

From a theological perspective, today we recognize, perhaps more than ever (though a long theological tradition has already expressed this truth in varying ways), that death does not coincide completely with a final medical declaration. Dying occurs gradually throughout life; it only reaches its completion at the end (and even there its precise occurrence is difficult to define). It was natural, therefore, that Christian piety, especially as it recognized that few would actually literally be “crucified with Christ,” should seek to live out the following of the crucified Christ in life.

Consequently, Christian spirituality has acknowledged from the beginning that the heroic bearing of inevitable suffering is equivalent to bearing the cross of Christ. We die with Christ little by little, in installments, so to speak. The concrete challenge, therefore, is this: Since these sufferings prefigure our death, are we able to “abandon with resignation what is taken from us, accept twilight as promise of an eternal Christmas full of light”?32

Other “crosses” are taken on voluntarily, or at least more or less so,

for a variety of ascetical reasons which cannot be treated at length here. Saint Vincent and Saint Louise both recognized the value of such practices, while warning their followers that they must always be used with discernment and moderation.

The goal of such practices is to help the Missionary or the Daughter of Charity live a fuller life by "dying" and therefore "living" more fully. As Margaret Miles puts it, "The real point of ascetic practices, then, was not to 'give up' objects, but to reconstruct the self." They should always have a positive reference point, like growth in service of the poor, community living, prayer. Examples of these might be:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ascetical Practice</th>
<th>Goal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>being ready to respond to the needs of the poor, particularly in accepting assignments; being willing to go even to foreign lands in their service</td>
<td>Service of the Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being faithful to the duties of one's state in life by giving preference to them when they conflict with other more pleasurable things working hard as servants do</td>
<td>Service of the Poor Human Maturity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rising promptly in the morning to praise God and to support our brothers and sisters in prayer</td>
<td>Prayer Community Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being sparing in obtaining or accepting material possessions</td>
<td>Service of the Poor Personal Freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being disciplined in eating and drinking; eating what is set before us; not complaining about food</td>
<td>Human Maturity Physical Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employing moderation and a critical sense in using television, radio, movies, and other media</td>
<td>Service of the Poor Human Maturity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being slow to ask for privileges or exceptions from reasonable communal norms</td>
<td>Life Together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seeking to be with those who are less pleasing to us as well as with those to whom we are more attracted</td>
<td>Life Together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>giving generously of our time in order to take part in contemporary decision-making processes withholding negatively critical and divisive words</td>
<td>Life Together Human Maturity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

33. For a very interesting treatment of this question see Margaret Miles, *Practicing Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 94-104.
In an age when scientific proof and experiential data are much emphasized, and in a climate where quick, satisfying results are much sought after, the cross is surely "foolishness." But has it not always been so? For the Christian the challenge is an abiding one: Our faith places us "at the foot of the cross," to use the phrase Saint Louise liked so well. Surely, that is the reason why the saints have so often recommended meditation on the cross as a source for growth in the spiritual life.

Is the cross, viewed from the perspective of resurrection faith, still the nourishment that vivifies us today, as it did our founders? Is it a rich grace-giving font for our spirituality?

The message of the cross will always be difficult to hear, even for the messengers who proclaim it. While it is good news when viewed from the light of resurrection faith, it costs dearly when lived out daily. It is life-giving, but its life comes through death. It stands at the center of Christian faith, yesterday and today.

How precious the gift of the cross, how splendid to contemplate!34

34. From a sermon by Saint Theodore the Studite; Patrologia Graeca 99:691.
Providence Revisited

Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,
Lead thou me on. . .
Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.

John Henry Newman

Throughout his life, Saint Vincent spoke of providence with great conviction. He saw God's plan at work everywhere. He invoked providence to encourage those who found themselves groping in the darkness, to strengthen those experiencing pain, to slow down the hasty, to promote initiative in those planning the future.

This chapter will attempt: 1) an analysis of providence in the words, writings, and life of Saint Vincent; 2) a description of some fundamental shifts that have taken place in thinking between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries; 3) a "re-visiting" of providence today; 4) a parable.

Providence in Saint Vincent

As one reads Saint Vincent, it becomes utterly clear how important a role providence plays for him. At times his words are eloquent:

We cannot better assure our eternal happiness than by living and dying in the service of the poor, in the arms of providence, and with genuine renouncement of ourselves in order to follow Jesus Christ.²

Saint Vincent offers no systematic philosophical or theological analysis of providence. But the documents we possess, particularly his letters written to fit particular occasions and to respond to individuals whose

2. SV III, 392 (letter to Jean Barreau, French consul in Algiers).
personalities were quite varied, give us considerable insight into how he understood it. In differing circumstances, providence takes on different shades of meaning for him.

God's hidden plan works for good

We owe some of Saint Vincent's most striking statements on providence to Louise de Marillac. As she struggled, particularly in the upbringing of her son Michel, she disclosed her pain to Saint Vincent. He encouraged her to do her best, to be at peace, and to place the rest in God's hands.

He writes to her in 1629: "I wish you good evening and hope that you are no longer weeping over the happiness of your little Michel.... Mon Dieu, 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 try to get ahead of it!" (SV I, 68).

He tells Saint Louise in 1634, in a delicate situation involving the Bishop of Beauvais: "Follow the order of providence. Oh! how good it is to let ourselves be guided by it!" (SV I, 241).

He was convinced that, when he had to go away on business, God himself in his providence would provide spiritual direction for Saint Louise, and he assured her of this (cf. SV I, 26).

The need to follow providence comes up again and again as Saint Vincent writes to various confreres during his lengthy negotiations in Rome. In 1640 he tells Louis Lebreton, who was encountering obstacles in trying to get a house for the Congregation: "I know that nothing can be added to your diligence and that this [bad situation] is not due to you personally, to your zeal, nor your handling of the matter. Our Lord has given you both and is directing this matter according to the order of his eternal providence. Be assured, Monsieur, that you will see in this situation that it is for the best, and I think I can already see it as clearly as the light of day. O Monsieur, how good it is to let oneself be guided by his providence!" (SV II, 137).

Vincent is utterly convinced that for those who love God and seek to do his will, "all things work together for good" (Rom 8:28). "In the name of God, let us not be surprised at anything. God will do everything for the best," he tells Louise de Marillac in 1647 (SV III, 213). He tells Achille le Vazeux: "Let us place ourselves in complete dependence on God, with
confidence that, in doing that, everything which people say or do against us will work out for the good” (SV IV, 393). Just before his death he writes to René Alméras: “God be praised, Monsieur, for all that he allows to happen to us! Certainly I would have great difficulty bearing these things if I did not regard them as God’s good pleasure, which orders everything for good” (SV VIII, 376).

“The Lord does not allow anything to happen without a reason. We do not know it at present, but one day we will see it,” he writes to Jean Barreau, in 1658. In the same year he tells Edme Jolly, the superior in Rome, “His providence alone is what takes care of this sort of affair... The usage of the Company has always been to await and not to run ahead of the higher order” (SV VII, 385-86).

Saint Vincent appeals to God’s hidden plan in many varied circumstances: to explain the surprising success of the works he had started (SV XII, 7), to console the Company when speaking of the sickness or death of missionaries (SV XI, 47; XI, 100), to make sense out of the loss of the Orsigny farm (SV XII, 53), to encourage those who lost their parents (SV VI, 444), to find meaning in the sudden departure of Missionaries or Daughters of Charity from the Company (SV IX, 481-82), to urge the Company to accept calumny and persecution with courage (CR II, 13). He is so convinced of the importance of following providence for the Daughters of Charity that he even imagines their being called Daughters of Providence: “O my Daughters, you should have such great devotion to, such great confidence and love in, divine providence, that if providence itself had not given you the beautiful name of Daughters of Charity, you should bear that of Daughters of Providence, for it was providence that brought you into being” (SV IX, 74).

Peacefully and patiently waiting for God’s plan

This theme comes through very strongly in Saint Vincent’s letters to the impetuous Bernard Codoing, the superior in Rome, who often aroused the founder’s ire by moving too quickly or too brusquely. After rebuking Codoing rather sharply in a letter written on December 7, 1641, and after telling him to act with greater deliberation, Saint Vincent adds: “Reflect-

3. Cf. also SV V, 164; X, 506.
4. Cf. also SV IX, 113-114; IX, 243-46.
ing on all the principal events that have taken place in this Company, it seems to me, and this is quite evident, that, if they had taken place before they did, they would not have been successful. I say that of all of them, without excepting a single one. That is why I have a particular devotion to following the adorable providence of God step by step. And my only consolation is that I think our Lord alone has carried on and is constantly carrying on the business of the Little Company” (SV II, 208). On March 16, 1644, Vincent reprimands Codoing for interfering in matters that are not his concern: “In the name of God, Monsieur, stop being concerned about things happening far away that are none of your business, and devote all your attention to domestic discipline. The rest will come in due time. Grace has its moments. Let us abandon ourselves to the providence of God and be on our guard against anticipating it. If our Lord is pleased to give me any consolation in our vocation it is this: I think, it seems to me, that we have tried to follow divine providence in all things and to put our feet only in the place it has marked out for us” (SV II, 453).

In another letter to Codoing later 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” (SV II, 456). 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” (SV II, 469).

He summarizes the point for Codoing on August 6, 1644: “I have told you on previous occasions, Monsieur, that the things of God come about by themselves, and that wisdom consists in following providence step by step. And you can be sure of the truth of a maxim which seems paradoxical, namely that he who is hasty falls back in the interests of God” (SV II, 472-73).

There is a clear tension in Saint Vincent’s writings between activity and passivity. His attitude depended greatly on the circumstances. For instance, in trying to moderate the indiscreet zeal of Philippe le Vacher, he urges passivity: “The good that God wishes to be done comes about almost by itself, without our thinking about it. That is the way the Congregation was born, that the missions and the retreats to ordinands began, that the Company of the Daughters of Charity came into being. . . . Mon Dieu! Monsieur, how I desire that you would moderate your ardor
and weigh things maturely on the scale of the sanctuary before resolving them! Be passive rather than active. In that way God will do through you alone what the whole world together could not do without him” (SV IV, 122-23). He often emphasizes this theme to Louise de Marillac: “All things come to the one who waits. This is true, as a rule, even more in the things of God than in others” (SV I, 233).5

In all this, it is quite evident that Saint Vincent abhorred rushing. He tells others that “God’s spirit is neither violent nor hasty” (SV II, 226), “his works have their moment” (SV II, 453), they are done “almost by themselves” (SV II, 473, 466; IV, 122), they are accomplished “little by little” (SV VII, 216; II, 226). “In the name of God, Monsieur,” he tells Codoing, “if necessity urges us to make haste, then let it be slowly, as the wise proverb says” (SV II, 276).

But, as is suggested in the citation above, there is another side to this truth to be found in Saint Vincent’s teaching.

_God’s co-workers must make haste, even if slowly_

Saint Vincent takes the opposite side of the same passivity/activity theme with Étienne Blatiron, the superior in Rome in 1655. The emphasis shifts subtly as Saint Vincent makes it clear that he is eager for some action: “Do not stop pursuing our business, with confidence that it is God’s good pleasure. . . . Success in matters like this is often due to the patience and vigilance that one exercises. . . . The works of God have their moment. His providence does them then, and not sooner or later. . . . Let us wait patiently, but let us act, and, so to speak, let us make haste slowly in negotiating one of the most important affairs that the Congregation will ever have” (SV V, 396).

The tension between activity and passivity within Saint Vincent himself is evident in another letter he writes to Étienne Blatiron on November 12, 1655. In it he comments favorably on a practice that Blatiron had begun, namely to ask, through the intercession of Saint Joseph, for the spreading of the Company. He adds reflectively: “For twenty years I have not dared to ask that of God, thinking that, since the Congregation is his

5. In a similar vein, but in very different circumstances, in 1659 he tells Jacques Pesnelles, who was initiating one-day retreats for the local community: “Since God does not depend on time, he sometimes works more graces in one day than in eight” (SV VIII, 70).
work, we should leave to his providence alone the responsibility for its conservation and its growth. But, struck by the recommendation made to us in the gospel, to ask him to send laborers into the harvest, I have become convinced of the importance and usefulness of this devotion” (SV V, 463).6

Finally, if anyone should be tempted to interpret Saint Vincent’s teaching on providence too passively, he might recall the founder’s words to Edme Jolly: “You are one of the few men who honor the providence of God very much by the preparation of remedies against foreseen evils. I thank you very humbly for this and pray that our Lord will continue to enlighten you more and more so that such enlightenment may spread through the Company” (SV VII, 310).

**Following providence and doing the will of God in all things**

One of the early, abiding influences on Saint Vincent’s thought is Benedict of Canfield’s *Rule of Perfection*, in which doing the will of God in all things is described as the central element in the spiritual life.7

From many of the citations above, the reader has already noted how central doing the will of God is for Saint Vincent. In the period of Louise de Marillac’s anguish over her son Michel’s future, he writes to her about another problem concerning a small infant, and then adds: “In any case, God will provide for the child and for your son as well, without your giving way to anxiety about what will become of him. Give the child and the mother to our Lord. He will take good care of you and your son. Just let him do his will in you and in him, and await it in all your exercises. All you need to do is to devote yourself entirely to God. Oh! how little it takes to be very holy: to do the will of God in all things” (SV II, 36).

The close link between doing the will of God and following providence

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7. Benedict of Canfield, an English Capuchin named William Fitch (1562-1611), having been converted from Puritanism, took refuge in France. He had enormous influence on his contemporaries and was a much sought-after spiritual director. Bremond states that his *Rule of Perfection* was the manual for two or three generations of mystics, calling him “the master of masters.” Cf. *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* (Paris, 1916 and 1928), II:155-58, as well as VII:266. Cf. also T. Davitt, “An Introduction to Benet of Canfield,” *Colloque* 16 (1987) 268-82. Dodin points out that Saint Vincent read Canfield’s *Rule of Perfection* in the 1609 edition, which was considerably different from subsequent ones, and that he was inspired by it throughout his life, sometimes copying it even literally, as in SV I, 68-69.
is a recurrent theme in Saint Vincent's letters. He writes to René Alméras on May 10, 1647: "O Monsieur, what a happiness to will nothing but what God wills, to do nothing but what is in accord with the occasion providence presents, and to have nothing but what God in his providence has given us!" (SV III, 188).

The clearest influence of Canfield's doctrine on Saint Vincent is evident in the conference of March 7, 1659, where he describes the process of discerning and doing God's will (SV XII, 150-165).

We must "will what divine providence wills" (SV VI, 476) is one of the ways Saint Vincent puts it, combining the two themes. He tells the Missionaries: "Perfection consists in so uniting our will to God's that his will and ours, properly speaking, form only one will and non-will" (SV XII, 318).

The two foundations of Saint Vincent's teaching on providence

1) Confidence in God

Trust in providence is the ability to place oneself in the hands of God as a loving Father.

"Let us give ourselves to God," Saint Vincent says repeatedly to the Vincentians, as well as to the Daughters of Charity. He has deep confidence in God as his Father, into whose hands he can place himself and his works. The journal written by Jean Gicquel recounts how Vincent told Frs. Alméras, Berthe, and Gicquel, on June 7, 1660, just four months before his death: "To be consumed for God, to have no goods nor power except for the purpose of consuming them for God—that is what our Savior did himself, who was consumed for love of his Father" (SV XIII, 179).

Saint Vincent wanted love for God to be all-embracing. He writes to Pierre Escart: "I greatly hope we may set about stripping ourselves entirely of affection for anything that is not God, be attached to things only for God and according to God, and that we may seek and establish

9. Cf. SV I, 253; III, 221, 291, 403; V, 195, 233, 320, 425, 440, 484, 626; VI, 68; VII, 613; VIII, 463; XI 26, 157; XII, 166, 221, 291, 403. For a striking statement of Saint Vincent's attitude before God, cf. SV XII, 133-134, 146-147.
his kingdom first of all in ourselves, and then in others. That is what I entreat you to ask of him for me” (SV II, 106).

Saint Vincent is profoundly convinced that, because God loves us deeply as a Father, he exercises a continual providence in our lives. He writes to Achille le Vazeux: “[God] knows what is suitable for us, and if, like good children, we abandon ourselves to so good a Father, he will give it to us at the proper moment” (SV VI, 308).

Many of Vincent’s conferences and writings speak of the providence of God (implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, the Father);\(^{10}\) many others speak of Christ’s providence for his followers.\(^ {11}\)

He tells the Daughters: “To have confidence in providence means that we should hope that God takes care of those who serve him, as a husband takes care of his wife or a father of his child. That is how—and far more truly—God takes care of us. We have only to abandon ourselves to his guidance, as the Rule says, just as ‘a little child does to its nurse.’ If she puts it on her right arm, the child is quite content; if she moves him over to her left, he doesn’t care, he is quite satisfied provided he has her breast. We should, then, have the same confidence in divine providence, seeing that it takes care of all that concerns us, just as a nursing mother takes care of her baby” (SV X, 503).

Speaking of the providence which Jesus himself has for his followers, Saint 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” (SV III, 197). One notes here again the strong influence of Benedict of Canfield on Saint Vincent.

2) Indifference

Saint Vincent speaks at length on this subject in his conference to the Missionaries on May 16, 1659 (SV XII, 227-44). Here too the influence of Canfield is evident.

Indifference, for Saint Vincent, is detachment from all things that would keep us from God (SV XII, 228). It sets us free to be united with

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10. Cf. SV II, 473; III, 188; V, 396; VIII, 152.
11. 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.
him (SV XII, 229-30), disposing us to will only what he wills (cf. CR II, 10). It is indispensably linked with trust in providence. “Our Lord is a continual Communion for those who are united to what he wills and does not will,” he tells Louise de Marillac (SV I, 233). He repeats this advice to her again and again: “It is necessary to accept God's way of acting toward your Daughters, to offer them to him, and to remain in peace. The Son of God saw his company dispersed and almost wiped out forever. You must unite your will with his” (SV V, 420).

To a priest of the Mission he writes: “What shall we do in that regard but will what providence wills, and not will what it does not will?” (SV VI, 476).

He speaks lyrically to the Daughters of Charity on the theme: “To do the will of God is to begin paradise in this world. Give me a Daughter who does for her whole life the will of God. She begins to do on earth what the blessed do in heaven. She begins her paradise even in this world” (SV IX, 645).

Some Horizon-Shifts between the Seventeenth and Twentieth Centuries

The problematic which I have described in the previous chapter on the cross applies to providence as well; I will not, therefore, repeat it here. A theology of the cross and a theology of providence are closely inter-twined. This is evident in the writings of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, where the two themes often occur in the same context.12

Keeping in mind what has already been stated about the cross, here I will mention only briefly two other factors that influence the way one views providence; namely, two horizon-shifts that have taken place between Saint Vincent’s time and ours.

1. From an era of direct causality to one of secondary causes and autonomy of the human person

This shift was already taking place in Saint Vincent’s time. Today it is very much a part of the air we breathe. In a scientific era, one focuses

12. Cf., for example, Saint Louise's words to Jeanne Lepintre: “It is perhaps for that reason, my dear Sister, that our Lord inspires you to remain at peace at the foot of his cross, completely submissive to the guidance of his divine providence” (SW 416).
on empirical data. Both well-being and disease are attributed to discernible causes, rather than directly to God. Even when the cause of a disease is unknown, we search for it today with the conviction that it will eventually be found.

In that context, attributing good or evil to God’s providence can sometimes sound quaint, or occasionally, hollow. Even worse, when someone is confronted with serious problems, the exhortation to abandon oneself to providence may run contrary to prudence, which instead urges us to seek remedies for our ills.

Of course, this shift in emphasis is not entirely new. Catholic moral theology has, in fact, consistently placed strong emphasis on the role of secondary causes, since it has always placed great emphasis on human responsibility. Moreover, Catholic systematic theology, with its stress on mediation, has often similarly accented secondary causes.13

Particularly since Gaudium et Spes (cf. #s 4, 9, 12, 14, 15, 22), Catholic theology has emphasized the autonomy of the human person. One is surely slower today than in Saint Vincent’s time to attribute things directly to God when they are more evidently of human doing.

We are conscious too that this way of thinking lets “God be God,” so to speak. It recognizes his ultimate autonomy, his complete otherness. It recognizes too that his causality does not diminish human freedom, but is the ground for it; in fact, dependence on God and genuine human autonomy increase, rather than decrease, in direct proportion to one another.14 God’s power does not enslave human beings; it empowers them.15

In this same perspective, the human person is seen as being in process, as incomplete but open to the absolute. Change is accepted not only as inevitable, but as desirable. Rapid change, moreover, has become part of life, and its rate seems to be growing exponentially. In this age of computers, we are convinced that we can “make things happen” and that we can eventually find the solution to almost all problems that arise.

15. Cf. Gaudium et Spes, 34.
2. A shift from a static to a historical way of viewing the world

The ways in which we view the world, the human person, and God are intimately intertwined and affect our view of providence as well.

Different ways of viewing these realities characterize different epochs but sometimes also exist simultaneously within the same epoch. Here, let me briefly describe three. 16

In a static understanding, such as prevailed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and into Saint Vincent’s time, the view of the human person is a-historical. Society has established orders, which are accepted as divinely willed. External laws and rules prevail. The political, economic and social spheres are governed by the established laws. Within this context the emphasis in one’s view of God is on the Absolute, the All-Powerful, the Omnipresent, the Omniscient. In speaking of providence, one sees God as ruling over all and directing all. Faith in providence takes the form of abandonment and absolute confidence in God’s plan which never fails. As is evident, this perspective has brought rich benefits to the lives of many saints, including Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, but there is a danger, for some, that this understanding of God’s providence can lead to escapism or lack of responsibility.

In a personalist understanding of reality, which has emerged increasingly since the eighteenth century, as the “rights of man” have come to be emphasized, the autonomy and liberty of the human person come to the fore. Human responsibility and creativity are accented. In ethics the emphasis lies on interiorization and conscience. In theology, history and process are highlighted. The Church is seen as the body of Christ. In speaking of God one emphasizes his personal love as Father. In talking about providence, one sees God as guiding each of us in his or her personal history. God loves us; he walks with us and leads us. While there are many advantages to this perspective, particularly on the level of conviction about God’s love and the need for personal conversion, there is a danger that this understanding of God and providence can fall into “intimism.” 17

In a historical-social understanding of reality the emphasis is on the


17. Intimism is used here to describe a type of piety that focuses sharply on one’s personal relationship with God but fails to give sufficient attention to the social and societal dimensions of that relationship.
inter-relationship of people within a societal context and the building up of the human family. In ethics social responsibility is highlighted. The transformation of society and socio-political reality is underlined. Sin too is understood in a social context. There is a call to change unjust social structures. In theology the Trinitarian God is emphasized. The Church is viewed as the people of God, living in a permanent exodus. When one speaks of providence, one speaks of God as the liberator of his people, freeing them from the bonds of oppression. This perspective has the advantage of moving toward concrete and fundamental resolution of social problems, which keep the poor poor; for some, it bears the risk of falling into an activism that loses focus on God’s ways.

Re-visiting Providence Today

There is much re-examination of providence today, with a view toward articulating a theology that, while recognizing various levels of causality, accounts for both the rational and irrational within human existence and can find meaning where we experience chaos, disorder, violence and apathy. A theology of providence is at its root a theology of meaning. It seeks to bridge the gap between the polarities of human experience: design and chaos, health and sickness, life and death, grace and sin, care and non-care, plan and disruption, peace and violence. Ministers of providence are those men and women whose lives witness to meaning and who can speak meaning. Docility to providence is an attitude of reverent trust before the mystery of God, as revealed in Christ, in whom life, death, and resurrection are integrated.

Trust in providence means rootedness in a loving, personal God

Belief in providence shows itself throughout history not so much in credal statements as in the trusting words of daily prayer. It is inseparable from faith in a loving, personal God.

19. Cf. the entire issue of the Proceedings of the Forty-Fourth Annual Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America XLIV.
The human mind balks at mystery. Yet we encounter it again and again at the base of our deepest joys and our deepest sorrows. Birth, death, beauty, tragedy—all are shrouded in mystery. We continually struggle to reconcile opposites, to plumb the depths of life and death.

As early as the fifth century B.C., the Greeks, particularly the stoics, use the term providence to denote a rational order of things where a divine reason pervades everything. This term enters the Old Testament rather late in the books of Job and Wisdom, where it joins an earlier strain that focuses not so much on a philosophical concept of cosmic harmony, but on God as acting in history. This fundamental Old Testament belief sees God as allied with his people. He is active in creating, covenanted, chastising, forgiving, liberating. He is with his people both in their conquests and in their captivity. He goes with them into exile and he returns with them. “Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you. See, upon the palms of my hands I have written your name” (Is 49:15-16).

This provident God of the Hebrew scriptures is the God of Jesus Christ. He is the Father whom Jesus loves and who captures his entire attention. Jesus’ death and resurrection are the ultimate proclamation of providence.

At the heart of New Testament faith is belief in a personal God, who reveals himself as Father in his Son Jesus, who takes on human flesh. Jesus himself struggles with the mysteries of life, growth, success, desertion by his followers, pain, and death. He finds the resolution of the struggle, not in some clearly stated philosophy that he outlines for future ages, but in commending himself into the hands of his Father. He trusts that his Father loves him deeply and that he can bring joy from sorrow, life from death.

The New Testament, reflecting on Jesus’ experience, tells us again and again to focus on the personal love of God for us. Jesus extols, in a passage that Saint Vincent loved (cf. SV XII, 142), God’s providence for his children: “Consider the lilies of the field. They do not work; they do not spin. Yet I assure you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was arrayed like one of these. If God can clothe in such splendor the grass of the field, which blooms today and is thrown on the fire tomorrow, will he not provide much more for you, O weak in faith” (Mt 6:28-30; cf. Lk 12:27).

Luke’s writings highlight God’s providence in a special way.21 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 and his disciples in their ministry.\textsuperscript{22}

* The Holy Spirit will come down on you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you (Lk 1:35).

* Having received baptism . . . the Holy Spirit descended on him (Lk 3:22).

* Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit . . . was led by the Spirit into the desert (Lk 4:1).

* Jesus returned to Galilee with the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk 4:14).

* The Spirit of the Lord is upon me (Lk 4:18).

* Your heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him (Lk 11:13).

* The Holy Spirit will teach you at that moment what you should say (Lk 12:12).

One of the crucial signs of faith in a personal God is confident prayer. The very act of praying states that we believe that God is alive, that he relates to us, that he listens, that he cares about our journey, that he hears the cries of the poor especially, and that he responds. It is for this reason that Luke's gospel insists so frequently on trusting, persistent prayer (cf. Lk 11:1-13; 18:1-8).

\textbf{Hoping in God's wisdom and power}

Trust in providence implies trust in an unseen wisdom that guides the events of history and that is able to reconcile opposites.

We sometimes get glimpses of a larger picture where tragedy works for good. Destructive floods provide fertile land for the future. Enormous fires ravage forests, doing huge damage, but purifying them for luxuriant growth in the future. Pain and suffering at times mature a person and help him or her to grow in compassion and understanding for others.

In a striking Greek myth, the infant Demophoon is placed in the care of the divine mother Demeter, who caresses him, nurses him, breathes on him, and anoints him with ambrosia. At night she places him in a fire to make him immortal. When his mother discovers this, she cries out in fear. But Demeter responds: “You don’t know when fate is bringing you something good or something bad!” Demeter is giving a lesson in nursing. She shows that motherhood involves nurturing not only in human ways but also in divine ways. Holding the child in the fire is a way of burning away those elements that resist immortality.

The “hidden plan” of God is a theme that Saint Paul returns to frequently. It is revealed in Christ, who brings together death and life, but its fullness is revealed only in the end-time when all things are subjected to Christ (Eph 1:9) and through him to the Father (1 Cor 15:28). “God has given us the wisdom to understand fully the mystery, the plan he was pleased to decree in Christ, to be carried out in the fullness of time: namely, to bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one under Christ’s headship” (Eph 1:9-10). The Pauline letters speak of “the mystery of Christ in you, your hope of glory” (Col 1:27), “the mystery of God—namely Christ—in whom every treasure of wisdom and knowledge is hidden” (Col 2:2-3).

But, as the texts themselves state, God’s wisdom remains a mystery, “a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23). The mystery of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, the center of Christian hope and the symbol of God’s providence, provides no explanation of the reconciliation of opposites. It calls us, rather, to say with Jesus: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk 23:46). The cross proclaims that the power of God overcomes human weakness, bringing life from death, and that the wisdom of God surpasses the limits of human reasoning, bringing light to the darkness.

Prudence, patience, and perseverance

It is striking how often Saint Vincent emphasizes good timing. He is utterly convinced that grace has its moments. Some of the classical works of literature contemporary with Saint Vincent witness to the same truth in more secular language. “There is special providence in the fall of a

sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all," states Hamlet. In a more violent context, Brutus states in Julius Caesar: "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat, and we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures" (IV. iii. 217-23).

When used to describe a good sense of timing, docility to providence involves patient waiting, not in a passive sense, but with an active capacity for knowing the right moment to act. From this perspective, it is synonymous with prudence, patience, and perseverance. Sometimes the right moment comes quickly; at other times, it arrives slowly. Sometimes it arrives unexpectedly, with almost no preparation; at other times, it reveals itself only with considerable prodding.

Often only the persevering see the fruit of patient waiting. A good example of this was the successful, but painfully slow, series of negotiations concerning the vows of the Congregation, which Saint Vincent guided to their conclusion. The process took two decades to complete. Some of Saint Vincent’s most eloquent statements about the need to follow providence come from those years. But he also reminded his representatives in the negotiations that providence is honored by using the means that God places at our disposal for accomplishing his goals.

We are active sharers in God’s providence

Aquinas pointed out long ago that providence acts upon us not just as objects, but acts in and through us also as subjects: “The rational creature is subject to divine providence in a most excellent way, insofar as it partakes of a share of providence, by being provident both for itself and for others.” God acts not only upon, but in and through, free human beings. His freedom does not diminish but creates and enhances ours. His providence, then, works not only through the events of nature, through sickness and health, through life and death, through history, but through us personally. Not only God is responsible for the world, but we are too.

24. Hamlet V. ii. 229; cf. King Lear V. ii. 10-12: “Ripeness is all.”
25. SV V, 396: “Let us wait patiently, but let us act, and, as it were, let us make haste slowly.”
Each human person, therefore, bears responsibility in relationship to himself, to other persons, to groups within society, to the political order, to the natural resources around us. "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world" is one of the fundamental responsibilities of the Church and all its members today.  

Let me suggest four precisions about this responsibility:

a. Each person shares in it. All are called to work toward a more just social order. This demands foresight (providere = "to see beforehand") and action. The truly provident person can play a prophetic role within the human community by naming the ways of justice, even before society is ready to walk in them, and by calling for conversion to those ways. Charting the future and wise planning are a part of providence.

b. The responsibility of each person is limited. Some can do more, some less. In order to concretize one's personal contribution (and to avoid being overwhelmed by guilt or by the vastness of the world's problems), it may be well to select a single area where we can genuinely focus our energies and leave other areas to other persons. We are not alone in bearing responsibility.

c. An individual's responsibility fits, moreover, within the larger context of his or her other duties (such as taking care of one's own family, doing one's job, etc.), within which it must be weighed.

d. No matter how active one might be, there will always be much that must be left in the hands of God. There will be times when nothing can be done. There will be inevitable sickness and death. There will be moments of powerlessness before the violence of others or the misused freedom of others.

In this era when the Church makes a preferential option for the poor, one must ask the question: How will God's providence be shown toward them? It will be shown particularly when we provide for the needs of the poor. God's providence for them in their needs really becomes evident in a tangible way only when God's people are active in solidarity with the poor.

Saint Vincent was quite aware that trust in God's providence did not absolve him from his own responsibility to act. He was, in fact, very active, even while affirming that God was doing everything. Contempo-

rary theology emphasizes that God’s action will often coincide with our action, as is quite evident in Saint Vincent’s life and works.

Saint Vincent was also very aware, however, of the need for prudence and for a good sense of timing. Some are inclined to act too hastily, plucking the fruit from the tree before it is ripe. Others are inclined to wait too long, leaving the fruit on the tree until it falls and rots. Grace has its moments, Saint Vincent said. It is important to know when the right moment has arrived.

Our own providence takes nothing away from God’s providence. Rather, it manifests it. Even when we are very active, we can still thank God for the gifts that he works in and through us. “He who is mighty has done great things to me and holy is his name” (Lk 1:49). Providence today, therefore, can take the form of active concern for

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A Parable

I offer this parable, which I have freely adapted from several ancient stories, for all those who struggle to believe in providence.

Once upon a time in a far distant land, there lived a young man named Pilgrim. Filled with energy from birth, he seemed to leap from his mother’s womb.

One day, when the years of playing games and swinging from trees had come to an end, he set out in search of life’s meaning.

At that time, in a remote mountain village dwelt a man renowned for holiness. Pilgrim journeyed to the saint’s tiny abode and found him in deep prayer. “What must I do,” Pilgrim asked, “to live life to the full?”

The saint gave him a Bible and a sleeping mat and led him into the mountains until they came to a tiny cave by the side of a river. “Stay here, till I return,” the saint said, “and God will provide everything.” Then he left him.
Pilgrim found the autumn days long and lonely at first. Seated by the river he read his Bible and meditated on its words. He ate the abundant fish he caught and drank pure water from the stream. In the cold of the winter he stayed mostly in the cave, reading and praying by the fire. In the spring he transferred to a rock by the river where he saw the trees bud and the flowers bloom. He even slept there in the summer, the hardness of the rock being softened by the sound of the water's flow.

With the passing of a second year a deep peace welled up in Pilgrim's heart, but he did wonder why the saint delayed so long in returning.

Ten years went by, with the earth's rhythms of light and darkness, warmth and cold, blooming and withering. Pilgrim's body grew strong and hard; his spirit was tranquil.

One day the saint returned. Pilgrim baked a large fish, which they ate by the river, drinking from its plentiful waters. He noted that the saint now seemed much older. "Do you really think that there is life after death?" Pilgrim asked him. "The prior question," the saint replied, "is: is there really life before death?" That evening the saint led him back to the village and placed him at the head of a household with seven orphaned children. "Provide for them until I return," the saint said and left him.

The orphans ranged in age from seven to twelve, so Pilgrim set out to be a father and a mother to them. He made many mistakes at first since he knew little about parenting, but slowly the children began to love him, and he them. He prepared their meals, taught them to read and write, and advised them in the joys and pains of growing up.

As the years went on, the children matured well. Pilgrim found himself very happy. His reputation grew in the village and the people began to regard him as a holy man.

Soon many came from east and west to speak with Pilgrim and to consult him about their lives. His gentleness and
wisdom became renowned in the land. His family of orphans had grown up by now and had learned to take care of themselves, so Pilgrim devoted more and more time to those who sought him. Eventually, so many came that he had no time for anything else. Though he was tired, he sensed fulfillment within himself. His children urged him to rest more, to read and to cultivate the land as he had once done, but a drive to bear the burdens of others gnawed away within him.

One night a young woman came to seek his counsel. It happened to be his birthday, so his orphan children had brought him a feast of baked fish from the stream and rich new wine from the grapes just harvested in the mountains. They had eaten and drunk in abundance. The crowds visiting Pilgrim that day were great, so he could speak with the young woman only after the feast. A new passion stirred within him that night and, overcome with weariness and wine, he slept with her.

When Pilgrim awoke late the next morning, his family and the whole village knew. Filled with shame, he fled to his cave in the mountains. There he wept.

Another life began for Pilgrim that day. He gave himself to penance and to reading his Bible again and meditating on its words. He ate a single meal in the evening and slept on the hard ground of his cave. He cultivated a small field along the river bank and twice a year sent its harvest to the poor of the village, with a message to his orphaned children that he loved them.

After Pilgrim had lived thus for seven years, the saint returned to visit him again. He was very old now. As they sat at the fire that evening, eating a fish caught in the stream, Pilgrim asked the saint: "Have you finished your work here on earth?" "I have half finished," the saint answered. "I have proclaimed justice for the poor and liberty for the oppressed. The needy have listened eagerly, but I am not so sure that the well-off have heard my words."

The next morning the saint led Pilgrim to the village again. That year a terrible drought had brought famine upon the land.
“Provide food for the people,” the saint said, “and stay here till I return.” Pilgrim was perplexed at first, but he remembered that water flowed abundantly in the river near his cave in the mountains, so he led half the men and women of the village to go there to plant and harvest. They slept on the hard ground, rising each morning to praise God for his gifts and working till evening, when they baked and ate the fish they caught in the river.

The village lay five miles downhill from the river. The other half of its men and women worked there under Pilgrim’s oldest orphan son. They dug troughs over the sloping land until, a year later, water ran down into the village fields. That day Pilgrim led all the people in prayer, rejoicing in the gifts that God had given them.

From that time on, the crops sprouted regularly in the fields and the poor ate abundantly. And the renown of Pilgrim’s holiness grew greater than it had ever been before.

On the evening when the waters ran downhill, the saint came to visit Pilgrim a final time. He died in his house that night. His last words to Pilgrim were these: “Trust deeply in God, and the sun will shine on you even in the night.”

Pilgrim knew that God provides and that the saint had directed him well.
There is much that one could say about Vincent de Paul's relationship with women. Among his closest friends and collaborators were two women saints, Jane Frances de Chantal and Louise de Marillac. Other women played a very significant role in his life, and he in theirs: from the unlettered peasant girl, Marguerite Naseau, to the Queen of France, Anne of Austria.

Some have even suggested tentatively that, in his role as a leader, Saint Vincent related better to, and had a more significant influence on, women than men. While that judgment may be difficult to sustain, given Saint Vincent's formidable array of male friends and counselees, he surely did have an impressive list of female admirers and collaborators: Madame de Gondi, Jane Frances de Chantal, Louise de Marillac, Madame Goussault, Mademoiselle du Fay, Anne of Austria, Marie de Gonzague—just to name a few.

It would be a mistake to think that his relationship with these women was "purely business." He related to them with warmth and affection, without, as he might put it, "the slightest suspicion of unchastity" (CR IV, 1).

His letters contain some lovely passages filled with human warmth. In October 1627 he tells Louise de Marillac: "I am writing to you at about midnight and am a little tired. Forgive my heart if it is not a little more expansive in this letter. Be faithful to your faithful lover who is our Lord. Also be very simple and humble. And I shall be in the love of our Lord and his holy mother . . . " (SV I, 30). On New Year's Day 1638, he concludes his letter to her: "I wish you a young heart and a love in its first bloom for him who loves us unceasingly and as tenderly as if He were just beginning to love us. For all God's pleasures are ever new and full

of variety, although he never changes. I am in his love, with an affection such as his goodness desires and which I owe him out of love for him, Mademoiselle, your most humble servant . . . " (SV I, 417-18).

To Jane Frances de Chantal, he writes: "And now, my dear Mother, permit me to ask if your incomparable kindness still allows me the happiness of enjoying the place you have given me in your dear and most amiable heart? I certainly hope so, although my miseries make me unworthy of it" (SV I, 566). In another letter to her, he describes Saint Jane Frances as someone who is "so much our honored Mother that she is mine alone, and whom I honor and cherish more tenderly than any child ever honored and loved its mother since our Lord; and it seems to me that I do so to such an extent that I have sufficient esteem and love to be able to share it with the whole world; and that, in truth, without exaggeration" (SV II, 86-87).

From his writings, it is evident that Vincent's esteem for women was very high. He was inclined to think, for instance, that women are apt to be better administrators than men (cf. SV IV, 71). He had no doubts that God wanted them to have an equal role in the service of the poor. In his famous conference on "The End of the Congregation of the Mission," given on December 6, 1658, he states: "Did the Lord not agree that women should enter his company? Yes. Did he not lead them to perfection and to the assistance of the poor? Yes. If, therefore, our Lord did that, who did everything for our instruction, should we not consider it right to do the same thing? . . . So God is served equally by both sexes" (SV XII, 86-87).

But the purpose of this brief note is to focus not so much on Saint Vincent's way of relating to women as on one of his ways of relating to Jesus. To put it simply: While he comes among us as a man, Jesus, for Vincent, also has a maternal face.

Vincent writes to Nicolas Etienne, a cleric, on January 30, 1656: "May it please God to grant the Company to which you belong the grace . . . to have a deep love of Jesus Christ, who is our father, our mother and our all" (SV V, 534).

The following year, he writes to a priest of the Mission whose mother had died, saying that he has recommended to the prayers of the Community "not only the deceased mother, but also her living son so that the Lord himself might take the place of his father and mother and might be his consolation" (SV VI, 444).
In 1659, upon the death of the mother of Marin Baucher, a brother in the Congregation, he writes: "I ask our Lord to take the place of your father and mother" (SV VIII, 55).

The most striking passage of all appears in a letter to Mathurine Guérin, written on March 3, 1660, just after the death of Monsieur Portail and just before that of Louise de Marillac:

Certainly it is the great secret of the spiritual life to abandon to him all whom we love, while abandoning ourselves to whatever he wishes, with perfect confidence that everything will go better in that way. It is for that reason that it is said that everything works for the good of those who serve God. Let us serve him, therefore, my Sister, but let us serve him according to his pleasure, allowing him to do as he wishes. He will take the role of father and mother for us. He will be your consolation and your strength and finally the reward of your love. (SV VIII, 256)

Two ideas emerge from these texts:

1. **Vincent sees the maternal face of Jesus**

   Saint Vincent wrote to the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity, with his characteristic simplicity, about both the father and the mother in the human personality in Jesus. In doing so, he makes it evident that he had appropriated into his own spirituality a basic scriptural truth.

   The Old Testament unabashedly depicts God as a mother. "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you" (Is 49:15). Yahweh complains: "I have looked away, and kept silence, I have said nothing, holding myself in. But now, I cry out as a woman in labor, gasping and panting" (Is 42:14). The Psalmist rests in God with deep confidence: "I have stilled and quieted my soul like a weaned child. Like a weaned child on its mother's lap, so is my soul within me" (Ps 131:2).

   In the New Testament, Luke's gospel likewise does not hesitate to use the image of a mother in describing Jesus' deep sorrow over the infidelity of Jerusalem. Jesus laments: "How often I wanted to gather your children together as a mother bird collects her young under her wings, but you refused" (Lk 13:34).
In reflecting on the scriptures and seeing Jesus as a mother, Vincent was surely not alone among the saints. One is reminded of the striking words of Anselm of Canterbury:

But you too, good Jesus, are you not also a mother? Are you not a mother who like a hen gathers her chicks beneath her wings? . . . And you, my soul, dead in yourself, run under the wings of Jesus your mother and lament your griefs under his feathers. Ask that your wounds may be healed and that, comforted you may live again. Christ, my mother, you gather your chickens under your wings; This dead chicken of yours puts himself under those wings. . . . Warm your chicken, give life to your dead one, justify your sinner. 

In this age, when, under Jungian influence, people often speak of the animus and the anima within us, and when there is considerable writing on a male and female spirituality, it is interesting to note how naturally Saint Vincent wrote of both the father and the mother in Jesus.


4. While commonly employed, Jung’s analysis is much disputed today. Cf. Sandra Schneiders, Beyond Patching (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1991), 85-89; also, John Carmody, Toward a Male Spirituality (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1989) 94-108. Carmody wisely comments that “no single formula will set the sexes into tidy traffic patterns” (p. 94). So far, it seems to me, we have not come up with a proper analytical tool for speaking of masculine and feminine qualities, since it is not easy to discern what is in us “by nature” and what is “learned.” Nonetheless, almost everyone continues to use some conceptual framework for discussing this question. Non-scientific frameworks are usually based on our concrete experience of the persons we know. For a very interesting discussion of these issues, cf. E. Johnson, Consider Jesus 47-57.

2. Vincent’s view of providence has a maternal face

All of the letters cited above in which Vincent describes Jesus as a mother deal with tragic events. In some of them he appeals explicitly to the need to trust in providence; in others, the appeal is implicit. In each case, he is saying basically to his correspondent: God reveals, in Christ, that he loves you like a father, but also like a mother—like your own mother or like Louise de Marillac, the “mother” of the Daughters of Charity.

He is concerned to assure the readers of these letters that God accompanies them, in Christ, as a mother accompanies her child, that he is concerned about their future, and that his love is warm and ever present.

In a conference given on June 9, 1658, he tells the Daughters: “To have confidence in providence means that we should hope that God takes care of those who serve him, as a husband takes care of his wife or a father of his child. That is how—and far more truly—God takes care of us. We have only to abandon ourselves to his guidance, as the Rule says, just as ‘a little child does to its nurse.’ If she puts it on her right arm, the child is quite content; if she moves him over to her left, he doesn’t care, he is quite satisfied provided he has her breast. We should then have the same confidence in divine providence, seeing that it takes care of all that concerns us, just as a nursing mother takes care of her baby” (SV X, 503).

Reflecting on the texts cited in this brief note, one might suggest that Saint Vincent’s recognition of the father and mother in Jesus enabled him to develop both the father and the mother within himself. Like the Jesus he meditated on, he had a full share of the qualities usually associated with the “fatherly” side of the human personality (showing anger in the face of injustice, demonstrating formidable organizational skills in the service of the poor), but like him too, he could turn a warm, compassionate, provident “maternal face” toward the members of his congregations and toward the poor.

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6. As stated in note 4 above, I use the terminology “qualities usually associated” with being male or female purposely, since such attribution is quite culturally conditioned.
Mental Prayer, Yesterday and Today: 
The Vincentian Tradition

Saint Vincent and Mental Prayer

Some preliminary considerations

I use the phrase "mental prayer" purposely in this chapter, rather than "meditation." Saint Vincent rarely used the verb méditer. He ordinarily employed the phrase faire oraison.¹ I also recognize, however, the limitations of the phrase "mental prayer." Saint Vincent aimed not at a mental exercise, but at affective prayer and contemplation. The method he proposed, which involved use of the mind in focusing on a certain subject, was meant merely as a method. It aimed at higher things.

Few things were as important as prayer in Saint Vincent's mind.² Speaking to the Missionaries, he declares:

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 (SV XI, 83).³

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¹ Actually he uses faire oraison thirty times, while using méditer only six times in his writings, conferences or prayers.
² There have been a number of important studies on Saint Vincent's teaching about prayer. I offer here a brief, selected bibliography that may be helpful to the reader. André Dodin, En Prière avec Monsieur Vincent (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1982); Joseph Leonard, Saint Vincent de Paul and Mental Prayer (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1925); Arnaud D'Agnel, Saint Vincent de Paul, Maître d'Oraison (Paris: Pierre Téqui, 1929); Jacques Delarue, L'Ideal Missionaire du Prêtre d'après Saint Vincent de Paul (Paris: Missions Lazaristes, 1947); Antonino Orcajo and Miguel Pérez Flores, San Vicente de Paúl II, Espiritualidad y Selección de Escritos (Madrid: BAC, 1981) 120-135. Today, moreover, there are various collections of the prayers of Saint Vincent, in most of the modern languages. These are similar to those found in Dodin's work cited above.
³ Cf. also III, 539; IX, 416; X, 583.
It is interesting to note that the word he uses here is *oraison*. He is speaking about the importance of mental prayer. Saint Vincent states quite forcefully on a number of occasions, moreover, that the failure to rise early in the morning to join the community in prayer will be the reason why missionaries fail to persevere in their vocation.4

To encourage his sons and daughters to pray, he used many of the similes commonly found in the spiritual writers of his day. He tells them that prayer is for the soul what food is for the body (SV IX, 416). It is a "fountain of youth" by which we are invigorated (SV IX, 217). It is a mirror in which we see all our blotches and begin to adorn ourselves in order to be pleasing to God (SV IX, 417). It is refreshment in the midst of difficult daily work in the service of the poor (SV IX, 416). He tells the missionaries that it is a sermon that we preach to ourselves (SV XI, 84). It is a resource book for the preacher in which he can find the eternal truths that he shares with God's people (SV VII, 156). It is a gentle dew that refreshes the soul every morning, he tells the Daughters of Charity (SV IX, 402).

He urged Saint Louise to form the young sisters very well in prayer (SV IV, 47). He himself gave many practical conferences to them on the subject. It is evident from these conferences that many had difficulties in engaging in mental prayer (cf. SV IV, 390; IX, 216). He assures them that it is really quite easy! It is like having a conversation for half an hour. He states, with some irony, that people are usually glad to talk with the king. We should be all the more glad to have a chance to talk with God (SV IX, 115). He gives numerous examples of those who have learned to pray, in all classes of society: peasant girls, servants, soldiers, actors and actresses, lawyers, statesmen, fashionable women and noblemen of the court, judges. In the various conferences that he gave upon the occasion of the death of Daughters of Charity, he often alluded to their prayerfulness. Speaking of Joan Dalmagne on January 15, 1645 he observed: "She walked in the presence of God" (SV IX, 180).

He defines *oraison* as "an elevation of the mind to God by which the soul detaches itself, as it were, from itself so as to seek God in himself. It is a conversation with God, an intercourse of the spirit, in which God interiorly teaches it what it should know and do, and in which the soul says to God what he himself teaches it to ask for" (SV IX, 419).

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4. SV III, 538; IX, 29, 416; X, 566, 583.
Among the dispositions necessary for prayer he lists principally humility, indifference, and mortification. The humble recognize their absolute dependence on God. They come to prayer filled with gratitude for God's gifts and a recognition of their own limitations and sinfulness (SV X, 128-29). Indifference enables the person to live in a state of detachment and union with the will of God, so that in coming to prayer he or she seeks only to know and to do what God will reveal (SV XII, 231). Saint Vincent often returns to the need for mortification in order to pray well, particularly in getting out of bed promptly in the morning. He tells the Daughters on August 2, 1640 that our bodies are like jackasses: accustomed to the low road, they will always follow it (SV IX, 28-29).

The principal subject of prayer, for Vincent, is the life and teaching of Jesus (SV XII, 113). He emphasized that we must focus again and again on the humanity of Jesus. He meditated on what Jesus did and taught in the scriptures (CR I, 1), calling special attention, among Jesus' teachings, to the Sermon on the Mount (SV XII, 125-27). Most of all, however, he recommended the passion and cross of Jesus as the subject of prayer. Saint Vincent did not hesitate to recommend the use of images and books of prayer (SV IX, 32-33; X, 569). Among the latter, he was especially fond of the *Imitation of Christ*, Francis de Sales' *Introduction to a Devout Life*, and *Treatise on the Love of God*, Busée's meditations, and Louis of Granada's, *The Sinner's Guide, Memorial of the Christian Life*, and his *Catechism*, as well as Jean Souffarand's *L'Année Chrétienne* (SV VI, 632). It is evident that the Vincentians and Daughters used other meditation books too, such as those of Saint-Jure (SV IX, 109) and Suffrand (SV VI, 632).

**Affective prayer and contemplation**

Saint Vincent puts great stress on affective prayer, but, in doing so, he is very reserved about working oneself up into a highly emotional state.

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6. SV IX, 32, 217; X, 569; cf. also IV, 139, 590; I, 134; cf. X, 569: "Is it not a good meditation to have the thought of the passion and death of our Lord always in one's heart?"
7. SV I, 382; V, 297.
8. SV I, 155-56, 398; III, 551; IX, 13, 44, 50; XII, 2; XIII, 81, 435, 822.
9. SV I, 86; XIII, 71, 822.
10. SV I, 197; III, 283; IV, 105, 620; VII, 66, 274; VIII, 501.
11. SV I, 198, 382; cf. III, 282.
He recognizes that the feelings aroused by mental prayer (for example, sorrow at Christ's passion) can be quite advantageous, even though, in themselves, they are not the heart of prayer. The "affections" that he focuses on are geared primarily toward acts of the will. "Affective" love should lead to "effective" love. Our affective acts should tend to become simpler and simpler, leading eventually to contemplation.

Contemplation is a gift from God. While we engage in mental prayer and affective prayer by our own choice, we engage in contemplation only when grasped by God (SV IX, 420). In contemplation we "taste and see" that the Lord is good. Such contemplation, while a pure gift from God, is for Saint Vincent the normal issue of the spiritual life. It is quite evident from his conferences that he regarded some of the Daughters of Charity as contemplatives. He encouraged them to become other Saint Teresas (SV IX, 424). On July 24, 1660, when he spoke about the virtues of Louise de Marillac, he rejoiced at a sister's description of Louise: "As soon as she was alone, she was in a state of prayer" (SV X, 728).

The method

The method that Saint Vincent teaches is basically the same as the one given by Francis de Sales. He makes only slight modifications. While putting very high value on affective prayer, he insists again and again on the need for practical resolutions. Particularly in his conferences to the Daughters, there is a lovely mingling of spiritual wisdom and common sense. He is more restrained than Francis de Sales when speaking about the use of the imagination. He warns over and over again about regarding prayer as a speculative study. He cautions about its becoming an occasion for vanity or for "beautiful thoughts" that lead nowhere.

Saint Vincent suggested, by way of preparation for prayer, reading in the evening some points that will stimulate mental prayer the next morning (SV IX, 426; X, 590-91; XII, 64). He also regarded peaceful silence in the house at night and in the morning as the basic atmosphere for prayer (SV IX, 3-7, 120, 219).

The method he proposes can be presented schematically as follows (cf. SV IX, 420; X, 573; XI, 406):

a. Preparation. First, you place yourself in the presence of God, through one of several ways: by considering yourself present before our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, by thinking of God reigning in heaven or within yourself, by reflecting on his omnipresence, by pondering his presence in the souls of the just. Then you ask God's help to pray well; you also petition the help of the Blessed Virgin, your guardian angel, and patron saints. Then you choose a subject for meditation, such as a mystery of religion, a moral or theological virtue, or some maxim of our Lord.

b. Body. You begin to consider the subject (e.g., the passion of Christ). If the subject is a virtue, you reflect on the motives for loving and practicing the virtue. If it is a mystery, you think of the truth contained in the mystery. As you reflect, you seek to arouse acts of the will (e.g., love of Christ who suffered so much for us), by which, under the impulse of grace, you express love of God, sorrow for sin, or desire for perfection. You then make concrete resolutions.

c. Conclusion. You thank God for this time of meditation, and for the graces granted during prayer. You place before God the resolutions made. Then, you offer to God the whole prayer that you have made, with a request for help in carrying out the resolutions.

Two related teachings

Saint Vincent encouraged the members of his two communities to share their prayer with one another. He recommended that this be done every two or three days (SV IX, 421-22). He had learned this practice from others. Saint Philip Neri's Oratorians, for example, were already engaging in repetition of prayer (cf. SV XI, 293-95). When Saint Vincent recommends it to the Daughters, moreover, he cites the example of Madame Acarie (SV IX, 4). In his conferences to the Daughters, we find wonderful examples of the simplicity with which they shared their thoughts in prayer. He often notes, in addition, how well the brothers in the Congregation shared their prayer (SV IX, 421-22). He tells the Missionaries on August 15, 1659 that shared prayer has been a great grace in the Company (SV XII, 288).

Another teaching of Saint Vincent, frequently found in his conferences to the Daughters of Charity, is the practice of "leaving God for God" (SV IX, 319; X, 95, 226, 541, 542, 595, 693). The poor often arrived unexpectedly and made urgent demands on the Daughters. Saint Vincent encouraged
them to respond, telling them that they would be leaving God whom they were encountering in prayer in order to find him in the person of the poor. At the same time, Saint Vincent urged the Daughters and the Vincentians never to miss prayer (SV VIII, 368-39; IX, 426). It is striking that, though he was very firm about the rule of rising early in the morning and never missing prayer, Saint Vincent brings his usual common sense to the application of the rule. He tells the Daughters: "You see, charity is above all the rules and it is necessary that everything be related to it. She is a noble woman. You should do what she orders. In such a case it is to leave God for God. God calls you to prayer, and at the same time he calls you to the poor sick person. That is called leaving God for God" (SV X, 595).

**Horizon-Shifts That Have Taken Place Between Saint Vincent's Day and Ours**

Three changes in horizon significantly influence attitudes toward prayer today.

**The liturgical movement**

Saint Vincent was very concerned about liturgy. He noted that priests often celebrated Mass badly and that they hardly knew how to hear confessions. As part of the retreats for ordinands, he prescribed that they receive instruction on celebrating the liturgy well. But, within this positive context, he was still very much a man of his time. The emphasis of the era was on the exact observance of rubrics. There was little stress on liturgy as "communal celebration," with the active participation of all the faithful. Much of liturgy was private, as in the daily celebration of individual Masses, perhaps with a server. Liturgical celebrations were often regarded more as part of the priest's "personal piety," rather than of his leadership of a local community in prayer.

The liturgical movement, Vatican II, and the implementation of the Constitution on the Liturgy have changed attitudes and practices dramatically. The Constitution on the Liturgy proclaimed liturgy as the summit toward which the action of the Church tends and at the same time the fountain from which all virtue emanates.13 Of course, this implies liturgy

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is not all of prayer. As a “summit” it must rest on a solid foundation. Nonetheless, as is evident from the enormous energy that the Church has invested in liturgical reform over the last thirty years, liturgy plays an extremely important part in the life of the Christian community. Today we speak of a “liturgical piety.”

Renewed interest in personal prayer

At the very same time, and not just among Christians, enthusiasm for personal prayer is being revived. Courses in seminaries, novitiates, and institutes for spirituality are focusing on some of the classics that teach methods of prayer; for example, The Cloud of Unknowing,14 The Introduction to the Devout Life,15 The Way of a Pilgrim.16 There has been renewed research and interest in the prayer of oriental religions and the use of mantras. Thomas Merton called our attention to the rich tradition of the oriental Church in regard to contemplation and the “wisdom of the desert.”17 Karl Rahner too focused on the central place of prayer in Christian spirituality.18

Concrete signs of this renewed interest are evident in prayer groups, the charismatic movement, the rise of new communities, and the updated practices of many already existing religious communities.

From the personal to the interpersonal to the social

One of the persistent dangers in Christian spirituality is “intimism,” a kind of piety in which the individual becomes absorbed in himself and gradually cut off from interpersonal and social responsibilities. The person remains passive, almost immune from the contagion of the world.

Saint Vincent certainly avoided that temptation! But some of his contemporaries did not. Various forms of quietism were condemned in his day.19 Quietists stressed the exclusive efficacy of grace in a corrupt

world and advocated total abandonment to God’s action, with the individual remaining passive.

Much of the piety of Saint Vincent’s day, even when it took forms healthier than quietism, tended to be rather individualistic. In the twentieth century we have experienced greater emphasis on the interpersonal. Personalist philosophy has had profound influence on contemporary thought and practice. Martin Buber made the “I-Thou” a part of our vocabulary today.\(^{20}\)

Beyond that, we have seen an increasing emphasis on the social and societal, with a growing consciousness of the interrelatedness of all persons and of all human reality.\(^ {21}\) The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World proclaims that the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anguish of contemporary men and women, especially the poor and those suffering affliction, are the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anguish of Christ’s disciples too.\(^ {22}\) The social encyclicals over the last century have more and more emphasized Christians’ responsibility for justice in the world.\(^ {23}\) The Church's preferential option for the poor is stressed again and again.\(^ {24}\) Christians are encouraged to develop a global worldview and to play their part in working for the “transformation of the world.”\(^ {25}\)

These three horizon-shifts, of course, in no way negate the importance of mental prayer. Rather, they set the context for it. If liturgy is the “source and summit” of the Church’s prayerful action, then reflection on the mystery of Christ, the gospels, and the human condition is one of its foundation stones. If contemporary men and women, especially the young, are showing renewed interest in various prayer forms, then mental prayer, or “meditation,” is finding a significant place among these. If there is a sharp tendency to criticize “intimism” in spirituality and a movement toward emphasis on the interpersonal and the social, then these are ways of broadening the horizons of mental prayer, as well as sharpening its focus.


\(^{22}\) *Gaudium et Spes*, 1.


\(^{24}\) Cf. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 42.

\(^{25}\) AAS LXIII (1971) 924.
Mental Prayer Today

Karl Rahner puts the matter very clearly: "Personal experience of God is the heart of all spirituality." Saint Vincent knew this, so he encouraged the confreres and the Daughters of Charity again and again to pray.

The Common Rule which he wrote for the Congregation of the Mission called for an hour of mental prayer each day. The Vincentian Constitutions of 1984 have modified this, speaking of an hour of personal prayer daily according to the tradition of Saint Vincent (C 47). While this prescription is clearly broader than that of the Common Rule, it surely involves a significant period of mental prayer. The original Rule of the Daughters of Charity demanded two half-hour periods; their present Constitutions call for one hour of oraison daily.

Today, especially in light of the second horizon-shift mentioned above, a rich variety of methods might be proposed as a help in mental prayer. On the following page I have grouped these schematically under four headings.

27. CR X, 7; cf. also, SV I, 563; VIII, 368.
28. For a clear presentation of the history and an explanation of the context of Article 47, cf. Miguel Pérez Flores, "Oración personal diaria, en privado o en común, durante una hora," Anales 95 (#3; March 1987) 162-68.
29. Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission 19; henceforth S.
Prayer of the Mind

1. Nature—What is humility?
   • search the scriptures
   • search the writings of Saint Vincent
   • search some classical or contemporary writer

2. Motives—Why should I be humble?
   • search the scriptures
   • search the writings of Saint Vincent
   • search some classical or contemporary writer

3. Means—How can I grow in humility?
   • doing humble things
   • allowing myself to be evangelized by the poor
   • focusing on the good in others rather than their faults
   • developing a servant’s attitude

Prayer of the Imagination

1. Activate the imagination by focusing on a gospel scene.

2. Take the part of one of the persons in the scene.

3. Ask questions.
   • What?
   • Who?
   • Why?
   • How?

4. “Be there” in your imagination, returning to the scene as a bystander.

5. If the meditation is on a teaching, read the text three times, pausing after each reading.

Prayer of the Heart

1. At the beginning of prayer, take a minute or two to quiet down and then move in faith to God dwelling within you.

2. After resting a bit in the center of faith-full love, take up a simple word or phrase that expresses your response and begin to let it repeat itself within you.

3. Whenever in the course of prayer you become aware of anything else, gently return to the prayer word.

4. At the end of prayer, take several minutes to come out, praying the Our Father.

Lectio Divina

1. Lectio—What is the text actually saying?

2. Meditatio—What does it say to me?

3. Oratio—Speaking with God, using the text as a starting point.

4. Contemplatio—Becoming absorbed in the person of Jesus.
Let me illustrate each of these methods briefly.

1. **Prayer of the mind**

This is basically the method that Saint Vincent proposes. A Vincentian using this method to meditate on humility would proceed as follows:

a. **Nature—What is humility?**

He would search the scriptures for sections that speak of humility. He might reflect, for example, on Luke 1:46, the Magnificat, and Mary’s gratitude for God’s many gifts. Or he might turn to Philippians 2:5, in which Jesus takes on the form of a servant, humbling himself and becoming obedient even to death. Or he might focus on Mark 9:33, where Jesus speaks about the humility required of leaders. He asks: What is this humility that the gospels recommend? What does it consist of? Little by little, he may come to formulate personal convictions, such as: Humility is a recognition of my creatureliness, that I am totally dependent upon God. It is a recognition of my redeemedness, that I sin often and need God’s help to be converted. I am slow to get excited about gospel values. I speak too lightly about others’ negative points. I comply too easily with unjust social structures. But I also trust that the Lord forgives me eagerly, and I have great confidence in his power to heal me. Humility is also gratitude for God’s many gifts. The humble person cries out with Mary, “He who is mighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name” (Lk 1:49). It involves a servant’s attitude. We are called, like Jesus, “not to be served but to serve” (Mt 20:28). Humility also entails allowing myself to be evangelized by the poor, “our Lords and Masters,” as Saint Vincent liked to call them. It involves listening well and learning.

Another approach would be for him to search the writings of Saint Vincent, or the Vincentian tradition, concerning humility. He might look at the Common Rules II, 6-7 or X, 13-14, and ponder the steps Saint Vincent describes for acquiring humility. He could also look into what classical or contemporary writers say on the subject.

The starting-point for this method is thinking, reasoning. This is very important at some stage in the spiritual life, since a person must think through, in a reasonable way, his personal values and what they concretely mean; otherwise he might wind up with a fuzzy view of the gospels. It is important that a member of the community be able to
articulate, in a way that is coherent both for himself and for others, what his values are.

b. Motives—Why should I be humble?

The same sources mentioned above provide ample motives. Matthew 18:4 says that the humble are of the greatest importance in the kingdom of God. Philippians 2:9 says that it is precisely because of this attitude, which is found in Christ Jesus, that God highly exalted him. Saint Vincent states that humility is the core of evangelical perfection and the heart of the spiritual life (CR II, 7). He also states that it engenders charity (SV X, 530). Contemporary writers emphasize the need for us to recognize our utter dependence on God and to sing out our praise and gratitude for his gifts.

Once again here the emphasis is on thinking and reasoning, but these are geared toward acts of the will; e.g., trust in the Lord, love, gratitude, submission to his will.

c. Means—How can I grow in humility?

The missionary who is meditating might come up with a number of means, as described in the scheme above.

In all of this it is important to recognize that the goal is not merely reflection, mental exercise, or a sharpening of one’s reasoning or verbal skills. The immediate goal is affective prayer, letting one’s heart go and entering into conversation with the Lord. This conversation should result in concrete resolutions and change of life. It will, if we are faithful, become simpler, less verbal, and will lead to contemplation, where more and more God seizes the heart.

Prayer of the mind is very important at various stages in a person’s life. At the time of initial formation, especially, it is imperative that a young man or woman come to grips with the meaning of gospel values. Unless the person can articulate those values in a way that makes sense both to himself and to others, the gospels will eventually seem irrelevant. There is a whole series of topics that a Vincentian or Daughter of Charity might very profitably ponder. In fact, Saint Vincent led his communities through similar topics by asking them to engage in mental prayer and then joining with them in conferences and repetitions of prayer. At different stages in our initial and ongoing formation we might gain much by using prayer of the mind on the following themes:
— Jesus’ deep human love  
— his relationship with God as Father  
— the kingdom he preached  
— his community with the apostles  
— his prayer  
— sin  
— Jesus’ eagerness to forgive and his healing power  
— his attitude as a servant  
— his love of truth and simplicity  
— his humility  
— his thirst for justice  
— his longing for peace  
— his struggle with temptation  
— the cross  
— the resurrection  
— Jesus’ obedience to the Father’s will  
— Jesus’ gentleness and meekness  
— mortification  
— apostolic zeal  
— poverty  
— celibacy  
— obedience  
— Jesus’ joy and thanksgiving.

2. Prayer of the imagination

This is basically the Ignatian method. A Daughter of Charity using this method to meditate on the passion narratives, for example, might proceed as follows:

a. Activate the imagination

She goes, in her imagination, to the scene. She looks at the local setting, Jerusalem, teeming with people who have come to celebrate the Pasch. She tries to hear the sounds of the crowd, to feel the heat of the day, to sense the smells, to taste what the participants might have tasted. She looks around the scene to see who is there: the faces of excited pilgrims, the Pharisees, the scribes, the Romans, Jesus and his followers. She listens
to what they are saying. She feels what they are feeling. She notes their personal characteristics.

b. Take the part of one of the persons in the scene

Taking the part of Jesus, she imagines, even in the smallest details, what he is thinking, feeling, doing. She loves with him. She grieves with him. She has compassion with him. She aches with him. She is abandoned with him.

c. Ask questions

She puts a number of questions to herself. Which person am I in the scene? Why? What is it about Jesus here that captivates me, that draws me to love him? Is there some way he would like me to live out what he is doing in this scene? Who? What? Why? When? How? For whom? Does it all make a difference?

d. "Be there" in your imagination

The meditator returns to the scene, but this time as a bystander. She simply watches, listens, and lets the scene work upon her. She stands by the cross beside Mary and John. She takes her place with the spectators in the crowd. She is near Peter or the penitent thief.

e. Read the text three times, pausing after each reading

The first time she asks: What did Jesus say? Was I concentrating? She might examine some commentary too to find the precise meaning of his words. Who are the “poor in spirit”? What is the “reign of God” promised to them?

The second time she tries to listen more attentively. What does Jesus mean? What does he mean for me? Often the poor do not seem happy to me. Why does Jesus say that they are? Am I among the poor in spirit? Am I really happy?

The third time she speaks directly with Jesus or with his Father about the text. She may even visualize the conversation, sitting with Jesus and his followers by a fire at the lakeside in the evening, feeling some awe, but at the same time deep love. She says to him: “Lord, help me to understand what this is all about. I really want to be poor in spirit, to rely completely on you. I know you love me. Help me, please.”
3. Prayer of the heart

Today this is commonly called centering prayer. Its classical expression is found in works like the *Cloud of Unknowing* or *The Way of a Pilgrim*. One of its well-known contemporary proponents is Basil Pennington. It can be summarized in four rules.

Rule 1—*At the beginning of prayer, take a minute or two to quiet down and then move on in faith to God dwelling within you.*

A lay person or member of a community engaging in this type of prayer would seek first to find a quiet place. She then assumes a relaxed position. She might try to breathe deeply and regularly in order to calm down and then begin to focus on God. As a help, she might direct her attention to the words of Galatians 2:20: "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me. Of course, I still live my human life, but it is a life of faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Rule 2—*After resting a bit at the center in faith-full love, take up a simple single word or phrase that expresses your response and begin to let it repeat itself within you.*

She tries to do this simply, with no strain. She chooses a word or phrase that expresses what is deepest in her heart: God, love, the Jesus prayer. She repeats it slowly, gently: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Or perhaps: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam 3:9). Or: "I love you, Lord; thank you for your love." There are many possible mantric phrases: "There is nothing I shall want" (Ps 23). "A pure heart create for me" (Ps 51). "Give me the joy of your help" (Ps 51). "Live through love in his presence" (Eph 1:3-12). "Your love is better than life" (Ps 63). "You are precious in my eyes" (Is 43:1-5). "I came that they may have life" (Jn 10:1-10). "Be still! Know that I am God" (Ps 46:10).

Rule 3—*Whenever in the course of prayer you become aware of anything else, gently return to the prayer word.*

Other thoughts and images always intrude. The pray-er, for example, might find herself examining the prayer word for its meaning, but this should be avoided. She simply repeats the word and lets her heart go to God.

Rule 4—At the end of prayer, take several minutes to come out, praying the Our Father.

This type of prayer moves deeply into interiority. It is not good to be jarred out of it (this can be like waking up startled from a deep sleep). Rather, the pray-er should relax, be silent for a few minutes, say the Lord’s Prayer, recalling God’s presence, and then conclude.

4. Lectio divina

A fourth method of prayer, one commonly used in the Church’s long monastic tradition, is lectio divina. Classical expressions of this method can be found in the writings of the great monastic founders.

The scriptures are the primary, though by no means exclusive, source of lectio divina. Sacred scripture is central in the life of the Church. The Constitution on the Liturgy tells us that “in the sacred books the Father who is in heaven meets his children with great love and speaks with them; and the force in the Word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her children, the food of the soul, the pure and perennial source of spiritual life.” The Bible is, for all believers, the water that gives life to the aridity of human existence (Is 55:10-11), the food that is sweeter than honey (Ps 19:11), the hammer that shatters hardened indifference (Jer 23:29), and the two-edged sword that pierces obstinate refusal (Heb 4:12).

Saint Vincent’s prayer and spirituality were deeply rooted in the scriptures. Abelly, his first biographer, said of him: “He seemed to suck meaning from passages of the scriptures as a baby sucks milk from its mother. And he extracted the core and substance from the scriptures so as to be strengthened and have his soul nourished by them . . . and he did this in such a way that in all his words and actions he appeared to be filled with Jesus Christ.” He also often recommended the use of other books to aid in praying.

Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, the Archbishop of Milan, frequently proposes the use of lectio divina in his talks to young people. He describes its methodology as follows:

33. Dei Verbum, 21.
34. Louis Abelly, Life of the Venerable Servant, III:72-73.
a. *Lectio*. A young person should read the biblical text again and again, trying to understand it in its immediate context and within the context of the scriptures as a whole. The focus here is on the question: What is the text actually saying? Martini suggests to young people that they use a pen to underline significant nouns or verbs or adjectives or adverbs and that they make marginal notes. The text is read slowly so that the reader lets the Bible speak to him. It will often reveal different things at different times in the reader’s life.

b. *Meditatio*. If the emphasis in *lectio* is on what the text itself says, then the accent in *meditatio* is on a further question: What does it say to me? What are the values, the dispositions, the changes in my life, that it is demanding? What is it saying today, in the here and now, as the living word of God, as the voice of the Spirit?

c. *Oratio*. Here the focus is on praying. The biblical message arouses a response. It may be fear of the Lord because I am so far from living out what the word of God is actually asking of me. Or it may be adoration of the living God who reveals himself so graciously to me in his word. It may be a cry for help to put the word of God into practice better. In all cases *oratio* consists of speaking with God, using the text and its message as a starting point. The focus of *oratio* is: What does the word of God move me to say?

d. *Contemplatio*. Prayer becomes *contemplatio* when it goes beyond a particular passage and becomes absorbed in the person of Jesus, who is present behind and in every page of the scriptures. At this point prayer is no longer an exercise of the mind but is praise and silence before the one who is being revealed, who speaks to me, who listens to me, who is present to me as a friend, as a healer, as a Savior. In *contemplatio*, the pray-er tastes the word of God and experiences God’s life within himself or herself.

Cardinal Martini adds that those who enter into *lectio divina* will inevitably, as the Fathers of the Church often pointed out, experience four movements in the process. Actually, these terms, or similar ones, are commonly used to describe what goes on as one employs other methods too; e.g., Ignatian prayer.

a. *Consolatio*. Here one tastes God’s goodness, the grandeur of the world he created, his redeeming presence. The pray-er rejoices in the mystery of Christ, in God’s love, in the beatitudes. Consolation is the joy
of the Holy Spirit that fills the heart as we contemplate the mystery of Christ revealed in the scriptures.

b. *Discretio.* Consolation gives rise to spiritual discernment, the capacity to evaluate the various inner movements that I sense in my heart, to distinguish the good from the bad, to recognize my conflicting motives. It is the ability to identify, within my present situation (personal, ecclesial, social, civil), those things that resonate with the gospel message and those things that are discordant with it. It is the capacity to grasp the better, the more, the spirit of the beatitudes. It is the ability to think more and more as Christ did.

c. *Deliberatio.* Discernment leads to decision-making, life-choices, or a commitment to act according to the word of God. It is in the phase of *deliberatio* that *lectio divina* gives birth to concrete judgments based on the gospel.

d. *Actio.* This step is the fruit of one’s prayer. The prayer performs works of justice, charitable service, attentive listening, labor, sacrifice, forgiveness.

**Some Practical Rules for Praying**

I offer these “rules” for the use of those who seek to pray daily. They are not abstract principles; nor are they conclusions which are provable by some deductive method. They are simply a group of practical rules that experience teaches are helpful for those who want to pray. While I take responsibility for their formulation, I owe a deep debt of gratitude to others who have taught them to me.

1. Faithful prayer requires discipline. Saint Vincent alluded to this when he spoke of mortification as a prerequisite for prayer. It is important to fix a prayer time and to have a prayer place. Likewise, it is most helpful to go to bed at a reasonable hour if one is to rise early to pray. Today, when there are many diversions that can easily distract us from prayer time (e.g., television, radio, films, etc.), one must often renounce some good, interesting alternatives in order to be a faithful prayer.

2. Mental prayer demands quiet. Naturally, an apostolic community cannot be completely cut off from its contacts with the poor, as is evident in Saint Vincent’s conferences to the Daughters of Charity. Nonetheless, one should choose a prayer time when noise and interruptions are un-
likely, when telephones and doorbells will not be ringing. That is one of the reasons why communities have traditionally chosen to pray early in the morning before the busy pace of the day’s activities begins. Dietrich Bonhoeffer states: “Silence is nothing else but waiting for God’s word.”

3. It is important to be acquainted with various methods, by having, so to speak, a “prayer repertory.” The four types of prayer described earlier in this article may be useful in this regard. Different methods will be appropriate at different times in life. We may find ourselves, at later stages in life, returning to methods we used earlier.

4. The prayer needs to be nourished. Some of the principal elements in the diet are the reading of sacred scripture, good spiritual reading, and, especially in an apostolic spirituality, live, reflective contact with Christ in the person of the poor.

5. Prayer should result in renewed self-definition. Through it, our values should become redefined and take on an increasingly evangelical character. Prayer should lead to continued conversion. It should result in acts of charity and justice. This is why Saint Vincent insisted on “practical resolutions.”

6. The prayer should not focus too much on what he or she says. What God is communicating is more important. In the long run, prayer is a relationship. While words have a privileged place in a relationship, nonetheless communication goes far beyond words. Some of its deepest forms are non-verbal. Those who are deeply in love can often spend significant periods of time together while saying very little. “Mere” presence is a sign of fidelity. Jesus, in fact, warns us against the multiplication of words in prayer (Mt 6:7).

7. Since we are needy, our prayer will often be one of petition, but it is very important that our prayer also take on the other biblical “moods”: praise, thanksgiving, wonder, confidence, anguish, abandonment, resignation. Typically Christian prayer is filled with thanksgiving.

8. As Jesus recommends (Mt 6:10), we should often pray to do or accept God’s will, however it might manifest itself in our lives. This is

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36. Bonhoeffer, Life Together.
39. Cf. SV XII, 328, where, in the context of praying the office, Saint Vincent, following Chrysostom, compares mindless rattling of words to the barking of dogs!
what Saint Vincent meant when he recommended indifference as a predisposition for prayer. This is especially important in times of discernment.

9. Since we are human, and therefore embodied, physical and environmental conditions can help or inhibit prayer. Images, candles, incense, the beauty of the setting, a tabernacle, lighting, music—all can be aids to our praying.

10. Distractions are inevitable, since the mind is incapable of focusing on a single object over long periods of time. When distractions are persistent, it is often best to focus on them rather than flee from them, and to make them a topic of our conversation with the Lord.

11. Sharing prayer can be very useful. Each of us has limited insights. We can profit very much from those of others. The faith-witness of others can deepen our own faith. This is surely one of the reasons why Saint Vincent encouraged frequent repetition of prayer. Though that practice became over-stylized in the course of the years, it can find many more flexible forms today.

12. Faithful praying demands perseverance. The search for God is a long journey, in which the pray-er climbs mountains, descends into valleys, and sometimes gets stuck on ledges. Saint Vincent encourages the Daughters of Charity by telling them that Saint Teresa spent twenty years without being able to meditate even though she took part faithfully in prayer (SV IX, 424). Sometimes we may feel that we are “wasting time” (SV IX, 50) in prayer, or we may experience long-lasting “dryness” (SV IX, 634), and be tempted to quit. We should resist the temptation. The journey will bring great rewards.

13. The ultimate criterion of prayer is always life: “By their fruits you shall know them” (Mt 7:20, 12:33; Lk 6:44). Unfortunately, experience demonstrates that some of those who pray quite regularly may be very difficult to live with. One might, charitably, say that they would perhaps be even worse if they did not pray! But at the same time one might legitimately ask if their prayer has any real connection with life. Ultimately, one cannot judge, in an individual case, what is really going on between God and a person in the depths of his or her being. But one can surely conclude, in general, that there is something very much wrong with prayer that does not result in change of life.

“Let us give ourselves to God,” Saint Vincent says repeatedly to the
Vincentians, as well as to the Daughters of Charity. He has deep confidence in God, whom he sees both as father and mother, into whose hands he can place himself and his works. The journal written by Jean Gicquel recounts how Saint Vincent told Frs. Almeras, Berthe, and Gicquel, on June 7, 1660, just four months before his death: “To be consumed for God, to have no goods nor power except for the purpose of consuming them for God. That is what our Savior did himself, who was consumed for love of his Father” (SV XIII, 179).

This great man of action was also a contemplative, caught up in God and consumed by his love. His contemplation of God’s love overflowed into practical love for the poor. He encourages his sons and daughters:

Let us all give ourselves completely to the practice of prayer, since it is by it that all good things come to us. If we persevere in our vocation, it is thanks to prayer. If we succeed in our employments, it is thanks to prayer. If we do not fall into sin, it is thanks to prayer. If we remain in charity and if we are saved, all that happens thanks to God and thanks to prayer.

Just as God refuses nothing to prayer, so also he grants almost nothing without prayer. (SV XI, 407)

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40. For a striking statement of Saint Vincent’s attitude before God, cf. SV XII, 133-34, 146-47. 41. SV V, 534; VI, 444; VIII, 55, 256; X, 503.