Traits
Vincent, The Country Boy

Vincent de Paul was rooted in the country, and early in life he had every intention of staying fixed there. If he ventured beyond that setting after ordination it was to find clerical advancement, so he could return home more securely rooted. His hopes were not for himself alone, but for his family as well. In a letter to his mother about his search (in 1610) he apologized for his present inability to help her and the family, but he expressed confidence that God "will bless my efforts and will soon give me the means of an honorable retirement, so that I may spend the rest of my days near you."

That intention would not hold but would undergo some shifting to change the face of this simple ambition. In time Vincent's talents would gain him admittance into the highest civil and ecclesiastical councils of France, and into the company of people of social standing far above his own. His love for the country folk never diminished, but, in this upscale milieu, how did he maintain his perspective as one of them?

There were times when Vincent's background was indeed an embarrassment to him. One incident occurred during his adolescent days at the friars' school in Dax. It was an early event, to be sure, antedating his priestly ministry, but it exposed his vulnerability. In later years he recalled the incident, with deep regret, in a public confession to his confreres about his shame at being seen with his father in the town: "I was ashamed to walk with him and to acknowledge him as my father because he was badly dressed and a little lame." He had also shared this same regret with Madame de Lamoignon. A reoccurrence of this feeling threatened Vincent on the occasion of a visit by his nephew from Dax. "When the uncle reflected that the nephew was probably a badly dressed peasant," says Coste, "he experienced a momentary weakness and gave orders to have the youth taken secretly
to his room.” Vincent, however, resisted the passing impulse and welcomed the youth and introduced him to many of the residents and visitors at the College-des-Bons-Enfans.

It is not known how isolated these reactions were or how prolonged — his father died in 1598 — but eventually Vincent would shed this ambivalence and be open about his country origins. He could, for instance, talk easily about the simple, frugal meals that the peasants, himself included, usually ate. When people would make him more than he was, he would correct them as he did the poor old woman who asked for an alms on the score that she had been a servant of “Madame your mother.” He told her, “You are making a mistake, my good woman...My mother never had a servant, and she did all the work herself because she was the wife, just I am the son, of a poor peasant.”

If, in the future, Vincent distanced himself from family, he did so for reasons other than embarrassment. Like Abraham, he said in a conference on mortification, the missionaries must be ready to leave everything to answer the call to the service of God: “Country and kindred are obstacles to...perfection.” To illustrate, he recalled his pain and the turmoil following a visit that he made to his family in 1622, experiencing “so much grief at leaving my poor relatives, that I did nothing but weep all along the road; to these tears succeeded the thought of giving them assistance...”

He carried this burden for three months, praying all the time for deliverance from this “temptation,” as he called it. At the end he was indeed freed from “these soft affections for my relatives; and though they have been depending on alms, and are so still, God has given me the grace to leave them to his providence, and to consider them more happy than if they had been in easy circumstances.” Missionaries, he believed, can become so engrossed in their families’ affairs that they “are caught up in them like flies that have fallen into a spider’s web from which they cannot extricate themselves.”

The “softness” whereby he defined undue attachment to his family did not mean repudiation, for during the rest of his life he often expressed affection for them, but also an enduring, stern detachment. When once he was urged to do something for them, he replied: “Do you think I do not love them? I have all the affection for them that any man can have for his own. If I allowed myself to follow the natural course of my feelings, I would hasten to assist them, but I am bound to follow the movements of grace and not those of nature.”

In 1626, Vincent took a definitive — and symbolic — step that divested him of any further financial responsibility toward his family. Within the agreement signed by Vincent and his early companions to labor together for the service of the poor country people, he turned over to his relatives whatever monies or property he then possessed, declaring these goods irrevocably “given, ceded, quitted, conveyed, abandoned.”

St. Vincent de Paul
Throughout many of Vincent’s letters to bishops and nobles there runs a refrain that countered the widespread acclaim that he received. The saint once responded to a request to dedicate a book to him by saying: “I am utterly unworthy of praise. If you are to speak of me truly, you should say that I am the son of a husbandman, that I tended cattle and swine, and also add that this is nothing in comparison with my ignorance and malice.” For an explanation of this attitude we might say that it could have served to keep his accomplishments and his associations with the rich and the prominent in perspective by holding pride at bay. Or perhaps to maintain credibility. “Everybody loves those who are simple and sincere...who go straight on and speak without dissimulation, so that whatever they say they (do so) from the heart,” Vincent told his confreres, almost as if describing himself. “They are esteemed at Court (when such persons happen to be found there) with universal esteem. In good society, everyone shows them extraordinary affection. For, though all do not act simple, yet those who have no candor themselves, do not fail to love it in others.”

Again, it could be said that he used the device to counteract his early ambitions for himself and his family and to reinforce his regret for his past embarrassment on their account. It might simply be that, because his whole life was oriented toward serving the poor country folk, he wished to give witness to a lasting solidarity with them from birth, whatever other changes had occurred in his life. In any case, each utterance gave evidence of an abiding humility.

Vincent sought to communicate this personal perspective as the corporate identity, too, for each of his communities and for much the same reasons. He always rebuked any confrere who would praise the Company, by reminding the member of its humble origins. Following Jesus, who chose as his apostles “poor, sinful men, workmen of humble origins,” Vincent urged his sons to acknowledge themselves as “only wretched folk, poor peasants and husbandmen.” It is no coincidence that he chose as the distinguishing marks of the Company a group of virtues he called “little” — simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and zeal — to serve as a hedge against pride and pretense that could easily overtake his confreres as well as himself.

The countryside was indeed Vincent’s spiritual home. It was the ground of his identity, the source of his strength, a refuge from acclaim, and a defense against pride. Moreover, it gave vigor to his style. It nurtured his common sense and practicality, as well as his shrewdness, in judging people and in dealing with them.

From the countryside, too, he derived forthright, pointed expression, using homely realistic imagery. He would speak of the apple, beautiful to behold, but meant to be enjoyed by eating; of the shell of the snail to suggest narrowness of vision; of the immobility of the ass or the donkey, now to mean stubbornness, now
indifference; of the unchanging instincts of bees and pigeons to illustrate uniformity.

Vincent reversed the process of the vain person who never lets the world forget their exalted pedigree. He stressed his lowly origins in order to shed the pride that would obscure his true self and to remove the barriers that would prevent him from reaching others' hearts. Such a stance of humility disposed him for drawing God's grace on his work, very much like — in an image he used elsewhere — the valley that draws its fertility from the mountains above. God indeed did rain his blessings on the work of Vincent to make those lowlands bloom.

October-November, 1992
"I have traveled much in Concord," wrote Henry David Thoreau, who in his life scarcely ventured from the vicinity of Walden Pond. The inner journeys among ideas and imagination that this stay-at-home person undertook served him as a metaphor of far-ranging cosmic travel. This is an equally apt image through which to view the realities and the symbols of Vincent's activities and accomplishments.

Vincent did indeed travel much in his early life, setting forth to pursue education, ordination and ecclesiastical advancement in such places as Toulouse, perhaps Zaragossa, Bordeaux, Paris and Rome. After some years, he settled in Paris and its environs, which were eventually to become the center of his world.

Once thus established, his body stayed at home, but his interests and his zeal roamed the universal Church. Content at first with foundations in France and Italy, his missionary vision, in its last two decades, followed the trade routes around the world — to Poland, to England, Scotland and Ireland, to the Barbary Coast, to Madagascar. He included other fields in that vision. Given the opportunities, he would have sent missionaries to the Scandinavian countries, to Greece, Egypt, and Syria, and even to China and Australia and the New World.

The man who never moved without signs from providence found solid reasons for what was to become his missionary outreach. He was approached by the Congregation of Propaganda Fide in Rome and by missionary bishops to share the services of his Congregation. An equally profound impulse came from within. In addition to a natural zeal for spreading the gospel as extensively as he could, he harbored a curious notion that encouraged him to seek alternate apostolates. In a letter to Jean Dehorgny he confessed: "I have...a great affection for the propagation of the Church in infidel lands, which arises from the fear I entain that God may gradually bring her to naught in Europe and that little or nothing may remain of her here in a hundred years' time, on account of the corruption of our morals, the new opinions which are spreading more and more, and the general state of public affairs."
Lay much of the blame for this condition, Vincent said, at the feet of the dishonorable clergy. Nevertheless, he had no intention of abandoning Europe: its evangelization was as important as the missions ad gentes. He compared the home missions to a holding action, after the manner of “conquerors [who] leave some of their troops behind to guard what they already hold while they send on others to conquer new districts and extend their empire.”

Vincent’s voyages of the mind were not fantasy, however. Rather, they bonded him to the apostolic realities of the mission. As the missionaries traveled the world over, Vincent’s spirit accompanied them, giving encouragement and direction, mediating disputes, sharing their joys and sorrows. In turn, their superior’s interest kept them fraternally bonded with those at home, whom Vincent also kept current with accounts of the trials and the triumphs of those on the missions.

In offering these reports Vincent’s words are often tinged with envy and regret that he himself could not be at their side. To the bishop of Limerick he lamented, “And would to God, my Lord, I was worthy to be one of the band! God knows that I would go with my whole heart.” And to Charles Nacquart, preparing to depart for Madagascar, he wrote, “I now give myself absolutely, if not actually, to follow you, as indeed I am not worthy to do....”

Vincent’s zeal made him a restless spirit, anxious to follow wherever the call to evangelization beckoned. Confined to Saint-Lazare, he nevertheless ranged vicariously over a worldwide course, tramping in the footsteps of his missionaries. Their labors were as much a part of him, and he of them, as those taking place in the next parish. Through his missionary vision he was able to project his presence, his charisma, and his words to wherever his priests and brothers ventured.

“Success” did not always attend these journeys. Plague, shipwreck, and persecution were frequent companions. This mattered not to Vincent. To him the deaths of his sons were “the seed of a great number of good missionaries.” His words about the ultimate victory of his deceased missionaries are a key to the hope that he held for all those who labored in the Congregation, both at home and abroad. All the scattered missionary paths, his own included, led to a common destination, where all journeys come to rest. To use a favorite expression of his, that destination was “the mission of heaven.”

September, 1991
Patron of Refugees

The image that would best dramatize Vincent de Paul as the patron of charity would be to show him at the center of a whirlwind, its inner circle ringed with persons who defined his life: his missionaries and Daughters, his lay collaborators and benefactors, their energies spinning out into the multitudes of the poor, the sick and the abandoned, the beneficiaries of mercy.

This image best portrays Vincent the spontaneous benefactor in times of crisis. The poor were always with him, true, and he served them in orderly ways through established institutions and ministries of his missionaries and the sisters. In disasters that came without warning, though, he was at his most characteristic, responding instinctively, improvising, attending to thousands of details and adapting his strategy to them, and exhausting himself in personally working side by side with co-workers.

One such crisis that comes easily to mind was his response to the floods of refugees that streamed into Paris as a result of the mid-century civil wars of the Fronde. Springing into action he dunned the queen and her Court for aid to fill the endless needs. He served on committees of nobles, and other public officials, to work for peace and to dispense public aid to address the effects of wars, religious and political. He interceded with the queen for protection for the poor against pillaging soldiers, both friendly and hostile. Closer to home, he comforted his missionaries and sisters — and found relief or replacements for them — as they were beaten down by stress, disease and death in spending themselves in their missions.

Amidst all these events he was able to talk about these conditions, which he revealed as news items reported in letters to confreres who were far away from Paris and Saint-Lazare. Two correspondents in particular were Jean Dehorgny, superior at Rome, and Lambert aux Couteaux, superior in Warsaw. The reports, one would think, were more than news items. They seemed to be outlets for him to vent his anguish over all that was happening to the poor, and over the struggles of his communities to keep up with the desolation.
“Our little news is always the same,” he sighed to Lambert aux Couteaux. The poor people from the country have been scattered, some of them driven from their homes by fear of being mistreated by the soldiers and have taken refuge in Paris. There is hope that the prayers and good works of many have alleviated some of the suffering, and that some measures have been taken to bring about peace. He then recounts “the good works” that have been done in Paris: “(1) The daily distribution of soup to nearly fifteen thousand poor persons, both the bashful poor and the refugees. (2) About eight hundred refugee girls have been placed in private houses, where they are taken care of and instructed. You can imagine how much harm would have been done if they had been left wandering around.... (3) We are going to rescue from the same danger the nuns from the country, whom the armies have thrown into Paris. Some are on the streets, some are living in questionable places, and others are staying with relatives. Since, however, they are all in a state of dissipation and danger, it was felt that enclosing them in a monastery, under the care of the Daughters of Sainte-Marie [the Visitation Nuns], would be most pleasing to God.”

He extended a hand even to “poor pastors, curates, and other priests from rural areas who have left their parishes to flee to this city. We are getting some every day; they will be fed and will be trained in the things they should know and practice.”

Vincent pays special tribute to the Daughters of Charity in these “many holy projects.” The sisters are “more involved than we in the corporal assistance of the poor. They prepare and distribute the soup daily for thirteen hundred bashful poor, at the home of Mademoiselle Le Gras and for eight hundred refugees in the faubourg Saint-Denis. In Saint-Paul parish alone four or five sisters make the distribution to five thousand poor persons, in addition to the sixty to eighty patients they have on their hands.”

Throughout the massive program, Vincent is attentive not only to corporal assistance, but to spiritual needs as well, even though his action might seem to conflict with his established policy. As he tells Jean Dehorgny, “I have volunteered to have missions given to [the refugees], in line with the maxim which states that we should take our good wherever we find it. We are obliged to go and serve them in the rural areas, when they are there. They are our portion, and now that they are coming to us, driven out by the hardships of war, which is emptying the countryside, it seems that we are more obliged to work for their salvation in their present affliction in the place where they are now, subject, of course to the good pleasure of the archbishop.”

Some persons, Vincent was sure, would object that it was not the Congregation’s policy to give missions in episcopal cities. In the saint’s view, both obligations could still be honored in the present situation: “I have replied that the
submission we owe to the bishops does not allow us to dispense from such missions, when they instruct us to do so, and that you yourself have just finished one in Terni, where [the cardinal] had ordered you to work. Consequently, we could do the same here on the orders of the archbishop of Paris, especially since it will be only for these poor afflicted refugees here."

"We should take our good wherever we find it." Such is the instinct of the patron of charity — spontaneous, inclusive, selfless. Whatever the occasion demanded, Vincent would respond appropriately. "The prayers and good works of many" were always at hand as resources, but his zeal and his practical sense supplied the drive and the direction that effected the marvels of charity for which Vincent de Paul has become famous.

May, 1993
Saint-Lazare: The Theater of God's Mercies

As the headquarters of the Congregation in Vincent's lifetime, the house of Saint-Lazare in Paris served many clients — clerics and laity, saints and sinners, rich and poor, the sick and the healthy. There were some activities, though, that were close to the saint's heart: those were the retreats held for all kinds of groups. Because the action of God's grace during these events seemed so tangible, Vincent viewed Saint-Lazare as "the theater of his mercies...a house in which a place is prepared for the king of kings that he may dwell in those well-disposed souls who come here to make a retreat." In this setting, he claimed, the Holy Spirit "makes a continual descent...on the souls of men."

The ordinands there for retreats, and the ecclesiastics for conferences, were the best known groups in attendance at Saint-Lazare, but there were other segments of the clergy that used the house. These might be the priests who came "from all parts" and for a variety of reasons, some for personal renewal, for instance, "to reflect on the manner in which they are exercising the duties of their sacred profession and to advance in the spiritual life"; others perhaps to discern the direction they might wish to take with their lives. These clergy were an important clientele. The Congregation's work, the saint declared, is "not only to help to raise up fallen and profligate ecclesiastics but also to perfect the good [ones], which we see is done here."

There was variety among the lay guests as well. One retreatant that Vincent singled out as an example of visitors was a man newly converted from Protestantism, who was "working and writing just now in defense of the truth which he has embraced [so that] he may by this means gain many others to God." Interestingly, many were military men: one, for instance, an army captain who desired to become a Carthusian and was there for discernment; others were soldiers on their way to the front, one of whom told the saint, "I have come to dispose myself for whatever may be God's will in my regard."
Nevertheless, the one group especially dear to Vincent were the ordinands who came there for their ordination retreats. “In our own day [1655],” he was confident, “we see the ecclesiastical state on the way to recovery.” For this reason he felt that, unworthy of this mission though he considered himself and his Congregation, he must welcome those whom “providence has deigned to send us.” This being so, “it behooves us...to devote all our care and attention to bring to a successful issue this apostolic design which tends to dispose ecclesiastics for major orders and to acquit themselves worthily of their functions, for some of them will be parish priests, some canons...others abbots and bishops. Yes! bishops.”

Vincent considered that an important factor in achieving success was the attitude of the members of the house as perceived by the guests. “Above all, let...us strive to edify them by humility and modesty. They will not be won over by science or the beautiful things that will be said to them; they are more learned than we are; many of them are bachelors in theology...licentiates...doctors of canon law...They themselves tell us that [learning] is not what moves them but that they are affected by the virtues which are practiced here.” Indeed, Vincent tells his confreres, “How happy are you, seeing that by your devotion, meekness, affability, modesty and humility you spread the spirit of God in these souls [and that you] give them good example at conferences, ceremonies, in choir, in the refectory, in fact, everywhere.” Only an attitude of what he calls “laxity and laziness” by the residents will negate this positive impression.

Vincent’s attitude toward guests was reflected in the hospitality he offered. Visitors are to be served “not merely as men but as men sent to us by God.” Nor is there room for exceptions: “Let the poor man be as dear to us as the rich, and even dearer as being in closer conformity with the state of life which Jesus Christ led on earth.” Thus the priests and other ecclesiastics who came “from all over,” knew the welcome they could expect. “They [the priests] all come to us and do not trouble to bring money with them, for they know they will be heartily welcomed without it; in this connection a person said to me recently that it was a great consolation for those who have none to know that there is a house in Paris always ready to receive them out of charity, when they present themselves with a real desire to set themselves right with God.”

In praising the work at Saint-Lazare, Vincent created a mystique about the house, which is reflected in the images that he reached for to describe it, as, for instance, “the throne of [God’s] mercies.” “This house of the Mission,” he further declared, “is a fountain of salvation to which so many persons come to be bathed.” Saint-Lazare was both a symbol to him and, in practice, a workshop for hands-on opportunities to affect immediately the formation of priests, and through them, the Church. “...If a good priest can do great good, Ah! What harm does not a bad one effect! O God, how difficult it is to bring him back to a proper state...How earnestly
should not poor missionaries give themselves to you that they may contribute to the formation of good ecclesiastics, seeing that it is the most difficult, the most exalted and the most important work for the salvation of souls and the advancement of Christianity!

Few people would disagree with Vincent that “the well-being of Christendom depends on its priests,” for good priests nurture the life of the faithful. This conviction explains why the saint spent himself for so many years in fostering that good health. In this desire to revitalize the clergy, Vincent was aware of the important role that the activities of Saint-Lazare played. He connected the house’s patronal name with its mission to the retreatants. They are “dead men who come to life again. What happiness that the house of Saint Lazarus is a house of resurrection...Our Lord, who raised him from the dead, now bestows a similar grace on many who having remained here for a few days, as in the tomb of Lazarus, leave it with new life.”

*September, 1993*
In the account of the final illness of Louis XIII in 1643, during many moments of which Vincent was present, Louis Abelly quoted the dying king's words to the saint: "Monsieur Vincent, if I recover, bishops will spend three days with you." Abelly put this gloss on the king's words, that the monarch wished "to convey the thought that he [Louis] would require those named to the episcopal office be properly disposed and adequately prepared. He showed by this wish high regard for that office and the appreciation he had for Monsieur Vincent's projects for the training of the clergy, hinting they would be equally useful for the preparation of those called to the high dignity of bishop in the Church."

That bouquet tossed at Vincent fairly well reflected the esteem in which French society, from the king on down, had developed for the saint within the previous ten years for restoring faith in the clergy of all ranks. Abelly analyzed Vincent's contribution to the reform of the clergy with a holistic spin of cause-and-effect. Just as virtues are interconnected and lead one to another, and as the graces of God are similarly intertwined, he observed, so did Vincent's works have an inner connectedness. As Vincent began his successful work with the missions and with them the ordination retreats, so the goodness of providence, said Abelly, "moved Vincent to begin another service to the Church. This not only preserved and confirmed the grace received in ordination, but helped priests to exercise all the functions of their sacred ministry with dignity and fruit."

Vincent happily witnessed the good effects of the ordination retreats, but he was anxious about any adverse after-effects in the ordinands, such as a return to their "worldly ways," a loss of fervor, or a weakening of resolve for a zealous ministry. What might be done, Vincent must have wondered, to forestall these dangers and to confirm the clerics in their salutary resolutions? Because he never pushed ahead of
providence, he held back on any immediate action. Then in 1633, as if on cue from providence, one priest who had made his ordination retreat at Saint-Lazare proposed the formation of some sort of group for “alumni” clerics, “with the purpose of meeting there periodically to discuss among themselves matters that pertained to their ministry.”

Other such alumni wished to show their appreciation to Vincent for the renewal of their priesthood he had effected. For this reason they offered themselves for whatever ecclesiastical function Vincent would put them to. What he did was ask them to organize a mission to the workers, masons, carpenters and others who were building the chapel of the Visitation convent, whose superior and spiritual director he was. Without interfering with the construction, the priests gave lessons, prepared the workers to make a general confession and for leading good Christian lives.

Vincent further capitalized on that good will he found. He approached the clerics with his notion of bringing them together for mutual support. As a start, he invited them to come to Saint-Lazare for a meeting, where he outlined in more detail what he had in mind, which they received favorably. “He spoke,” said Abelly, “of the need of persevering and cultivating the holy dispositions God had inspired in them and the graces they had received in their ordination...[and of the need] to give themselves entirely to the service of God.” They would achieve this not by separating themselves from the world nor by living in the same house, but in their own settings, to serve in the Church, as Abelly put it, “as so many brilliant stars spreading the light of their good example in their families.”

The next step was a formal meeting to organize, to choose their officers, and to set the Tuesday of each week as the most convenient day to assemble to discuss the virtues and functions of their ministry. Vincent chose the topic of the first conference on 19 July as the spirit of the ecclesiastical state. Subsequent meetings continued each week on topics suggested by Vincent, similar to the first, and of a practical sort like the virtues or the functions proper to their calling. Abelly noted Vincent’s characteristic style in conducting the meeting: “He had a special grace which was effective and grace-filled when speaking...His language was simple and without display, but vigorous and from the heart.”

A salutary byproduct of this for the participants was having the saint model a simple style for communicating. They were encouraged “to speak the same way as himself, with humility, simplicity, and sincerity...No one strove to present learned discourses, or to be admired for his erudition...He advised the clerics to prepare themselves for their talks, but by way of prayer rather than study, if the subject did not demand a more detailed treatment or...the reading of some good book....” In actuality, said Abelly, the sole motives of the speakers were to be “the honor and
glory of God, the spiritual welfare of the audience, and their own humiliation [i.e. the self-minimized].”

II

The auspicious beginnings of the Tuesday Conferences delighted Vincent. He shared his elation in a letter to a confrere in Rome: “...A very special and unimaginable blessing [is granted] to our ordinands’ retreat...Almost all who have made the retreat are leading lives such as ought to be led by good and perfect ecclesiastics...[Back home, some] live by a schedule, make mental prayer, celebrate holy mass, and make their examens every day as we do. They work hard visiting the hospitals and the prisons, where they teach catechism, preach, and hear confessions....”

Nor did Vincent forget to acknowledge and thank the priest who initially proposed the idea: “Oh, how well the idea you so kindly shared with me some days past was received by the ecclesiastics, by all those we mentioned and in general and by each one in particular! ...O Monsieur, what reason there is to hope for much good from this group! You are its promoter and it is to your interest that it succeed for the glory of God.”

Vincent indeed fulfilled King Louis’ hope that bishops would come under the saint’s tutelage. The program, of course, was aimed mainly at the priests, deacons, and subdeacons, but as the program developed, many bishops, future bishops, and “notable persons, distinguished by their birth or their learning,” came to join. Abelly reported that in Vincent’s lifetime about 250 clerics had participated in the program. However, the attraction of “notables” to the group made Vincent uneasy, for he didn’t want the conference to become an elite company and negate a basic purpose “to honor the hidden life of our Lord.” However, his fears were unfounded, for no elitist tendencies ever materialized. Rather, Abelly reported, “they sought to remain unknown as much as possible. They worked humbly in the least esteemed positions, yet in those most useful and advantageous to the salvation of souls, particularly among the poor, catechizing and hearing confessions in the hospitals, prisons, and villages.” They even went out to join the missionaries in giving missions in the country or working in the large cities which the company avoided as a matter of policy.

From the first, Vincent engaged the members of his Congregation in the work and gave them a sense of pride in it. The superior general of the Company was always to be the director of the Conferences, and through him to form the bond between the priests of the Congregation and the Conferences. Vincent reminded his confreres that it was from the Congregation that came the method of discussing “virtues suitable to the ecclesiastical state and on how to lead a truly ecclesiastical life.” The conduct of these
conferences was a way “not only to serve as an antidote for good priests, who, while serving souls remain exposed to the corrupt atmosphere of the world, but also to help them to become perfect in their profession.” It was a divine inspiration, Vincent concluded, that the Congregation “love and promote in the way we do the practice of those virtues by means of these conferences.” He concluded, “What would become of us if we were the first to neglect these conferences? What an account should we not have to render to God if we were ever to despise [this method of ecclesiastical formation].”

Like charity, that tends to diffuse itself, Abelly noted, the ecclesiastics of the Conferences were eager “to extend to others the same sentiments God had inspired in them through Monsieur Vincent.” For this reason they lost no opportunities to propose the concept of the Conferences wherever they found themselves, and the idea found its way even into dioceses beyond France. (This growth was a separate story in itself.) Moreover, another by-product of the Conferences were the mutual, supportive bonds established among the “alumni.” That a zealous clergy was a godsend to a bishop is attested to by the example of Antoine Godieu, bishop of Grasse, who addressed his priests as he moved on to a new diocese. With regrets that he was unable “to say adieu” in person, he felt it as “a singular blessing to have been received among you. The memory of the good example I saw, and the excellent things I heard, will rekindle my zeal when it shall fade, and you shall be the model upon which I shall strives to form good priests. Continue, then, your activities in this same spirit, and respond faithfully to the designs of Jesus Christ upon you. He surely wills to renew the grace of the priesthood in his Church through you.”

Saint Vincent could wish no finer tribute to his ministry to the clergy.

April-May, 1996

St. Vincent de Paul
Vincent’s Shades of Tolerance

Vincent’s traditional position as the “father of charity” would depict him in art with a benign visage that reflects compassion and understanding. This would suggest that he smiled graciously upon everything. True, but how did he face people or events that were hard to take or that grated against his sensibilities or violated his principles?

Vincent was indeed a man of principle and opposed anything that was evil or that violated God’s honor or that of his people. Nevertheless, the saint showed a tolerance for coexistence with whatever unpleasantness he had to deal with. We might say that it was only in cases of “pure evil” that he was intolerant. Thus, he says, it might be necessary to adjust to others’ opinions “in things good and indifferent, ...but we should be on our guard against exercising condescension in things that are evil because this would not be virtue, but a serious fault, proceeding either from a latitudinarian spirit or from cowardice.” For Vincent adjustment of this kind meant following the proverbial course, “Do in Rome as the Romans do — conform to the customs of places [or to people’s ideas, he might add], provided they are not vicious.”

In cases other than these, Vincent’s tolerance had many shades. He did not advocate indifference, of course. “It is not proper,” he said, “that evil should be ignored by a lax and excessive tolerance, but an effort should be made to remedy it, with all meekness.” A key factor is the “meekness.” It minimizes wrangling or confrontation, for instance, as Vincent confesses, “Experience has taught me that minds are more surely gained by a process of simple proposals and persuasion than by urging them to adopt our views and by desiring to get the better of them.” Or it inclines one to allow concessions in favor of a greater good (or a lesser evil) but without compromise of principle: “I beg you to condescend as far as possible to the weakness of human nature. You should by no means show anger against abuses, when you have reason to believe that such a procedure would result in a greater evil.”
Tolerant stances like these reflect Vincent's pastoral approach toward handling differences and making judgments. “Certain evils must be endured,” he said, “especially if an attempted remedy would serve only to make them worse.” Indeed, he inherited from his mentor, Saint Francis de Sales, an attitude “to judge the best of things and persons at all times and under all circumstances.” Said Francis, “If an action has a hundred faces, look at the best.” Thus tolerance is linked with charity, which, Vincent knew from his own experience, could have a “softening” effect: “One of the acts of charity is to compassionate with the sufferings of our neighbor and to weep with him, because love gains for us an entrance into the hearts of others.” Superiors, too, he suggests, could profit from this approach: “Treat with gentleness those under your authority, ...continue to govern them with your customary wisdom and mildness.”

There was a peace-making slant to Vincent’s admiration for the tolerance that he promoted both in the field and at home. “Settling quarrels and disputes” was a regular activity of the parish mission regimen prescribed in the community’s Common Rules. In community he discouraged being “stubborn or argumentative in conversation, even if only in fun.” In ordinary disagreement he recommended ceding to another’s opinion “where freedom of opinion is allowed.” However, if one values the worth of his own opinion enough to insist on it, “he can put forward his point of view calmly and with humility.”

It was a personal dimension that affected his attitude toward tolerance and understanding: God’s own patience with Vincent, the sinner. The saint never considered himself in a position to cast the first stone. “As I am a great sinner,” he confessed, “I cannot reject those who are great sinners, provided they have good will.” For this reason he recommends a similar mindfulness in his disciples, that they “imitate the goodness of God, who never reproaches us with the faults he has forgiven us.”

The paths of Vincent’s ministry led him into the underworld of human poverty, degradation, and perversity. He had encounters there sufficient to cause in anyone disgust, revulsion, or even flight. But Vincent’s store of love and compassion for the person in need, poor or otherwise, held him to the task. His patience and forbearance restrained him from rash condemnation or judgment. In the end these qualities translated into a tolerance in the saint that gave him perspective in taking human weakness into consideration and in “judging the best of things and persons” — an attitude for ministry that gained for him “an entrance into the hearts of others.”

*October, 1993*
Vincent as a Countercultural Symbol

In an unsettled political climate the word “countercultural” tends to make some people nervous. To the timid imagination it suggests the radical, who is at best an agitator, at worst a terrorist. But the notion does not have to frighten. It means at bottom taking an active, conscious stance that is opposed to prevailing values and the wisdom underlying them.

To speak of Vincent as being countercultural is no more than to identify him with the mind and the practice of Jesus Christ himself. From the beginning, Simeon in the Temple pointed out Jesus as a sign of contradiction. Jesus himself later declared that his message would bring “not peace but the sword...[it would] set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother” and occasion other such conflicts. Jesus stood for things that the world found astonishing: “Love your enemies...Turn the other cheek...Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself.” What the world considered the foolishness of God, the apostle Paul would later declare, came through as his wisdom; what it viewed as weakness was his power. “God chose the lowly and the despised of the world,” Paul added, “those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something....”

The path of Vincent’s life and ministry ran along those lines in following a “subversive” course. He moved familiarly within a world that cherished power and ambition, whose riches fueled self-indulgence, and whose consequent social inequities bred injustice and widespread suffering. Given his credibility with the establishment and his acceptance by them, Vincent nevertheless identified himself with the victims of these social ills — the poor, the sick, the marginalized and the neglected — and directed his labors toward their physical relief, while working on their behalf for justice against the forces that produced these conditions. He did not act alone, but invited collaborators into his enterprises as advocates for the poor and as co-workers, both those formally committed within his communities and those associated with him in other degrees of discipleship.
Vincent’s living the Christian life in the midst of this disordered environment was itself a countercultural activity. It entailed embracing the values of Jesus and conforming himself to his example — “to clothe [oneself] with the spirit of Jesus Christ,” as Vincent put it — and thereby standing in witness against many of the values that seventeenth century French society represented. This direction that the saint took for his own life was also his legacy to his disciples. Thus, in the Common Rules that he provided for the missionaries, Vincent cited “a most fundamental principle” that the Congregation should make its own: “Christ’s teaching will never let us down, while worldly wisdom always will.” The wisdom of Jesus, Vincent declared, has the solidity of a structure built on rock. Consequently, “the Congregation should always try to follow the teaching of Christ himself and never that of the worldly-wise.”

Vincent depicted this opposition in terms of the “the maxims of Jesus Christ” and “the maxims of the world.” These “maxims” are not necessarily explicit statements, as one might think, but values that might or might not be formulated. In a conference touching on the passage above from the Common Rules, Vincent took time to describe those of “the world” by way of contrasting them with the attitudes of Jesus Christ. Thus, using the beatitudes as an anchor he observed: “The maxims of our Lord say, ‘Blessed are the poor’; and those of the world, ‘Blessed are the rich.’ The former tell us to be meek and gentle; the latter that we must stand fast and make ourselves feared... ‘Blessed are they that hunger and thirst, that are greedy for justice.’ The world laughs at that. ‘Blessed,’ says the world, ‘are they that are on the lookout for their temporal advancement, to make themselves great.’ ‘Blessed are they that curse you,’ says the savior. And the world says that an insult must not be tolerated. ‘Who makes himself a sheep is eaten by the wolf’; that one’s reputation must be maintained at no matter what cost, and that it is better to lose life than honor...”

“The mind of Jesus Christ” was an important notion by which Vincent lived. He judged his own behavior and the worth of all the daily practices of the Congregation according to this test. “It is not enough,” for instance, “to fast, to observe the rules, to fulfill our duties in the house. These must be done with the mind of Jesus Christ....” On another occasion, “It is not enough for us merely to celebrate mass...we should offer this sacrifice with as much devotion as possible for us. With the help of his grace, we must conform ourselves as much as possible to Jesus Christ.” Thus as Jesus, while on earth, “offered himself in sacrifice to his eternal father, [so] we must do our best...to offer our sacrifice to God in the same spirit that our Lord offered himself.”

Accordingly, a perspective that is weak in faith and unable to associate itself with the mind of Jesus courts disappointment and failure. Vincent once declared, “O God, how beautiful are the poor if we see them in God, and in light of the

St. Vincent de Paul

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esteem Jesus Christ had for them. If we see them only according to the flesh and with a worldly spirit, they truly seem miserable.” Indeed, Vincent said to his missionaries, there are many occasions when the members did not adhere to the perspective of Jesus’s wisdom. “The truth is we are not convinced and quickly turn to human prudence as our guide. Do you not see that we are to blame if we trust in human reasoning rather than the promises of eternal wisdom, to the deceitful disappointments of the world rather than the love of our savior, who came down from heaven to show us the right path?”

A countercultural stance will often attract unfriendly, even hostile, responses. As a sign of contradiction Jesus and his message certainly drew reactions of this kind. Vincent, too, experienced opposition, but the ultimate judgment on the saint from his contemporaries was admiration and reverence, even though his life was a standing rebuke to many of the values of his time. Thus, he stood a champion of the poor and an advocate for justice against the inequities and the excesses of the age. Conscious of the Church’s disorders and its agony of self-reformation, he became an example of fidelity to the institution and to his priesthood. Surrounded by a self-serving and self-aggrandizing society, he remained an example of humility and selflessness. Vincent moved in a world of political and ecclesiastical intrigue, but he retained his simplicity and transparency.

Vincent’s stance did not elicit disturbing effects, but his presence to his contemporaries was effective nonetheless. By his life and his values so contrary to what his society held dear, he bore quiet witness to the power of the gospel to effect good.

*February, 1994*
The traditional image of Vincent de Paul busily at work directing his collaborators and their activities sometimes obscures the personal, missionary dimension of his life. Indeed his introduction to the work of the parish missions was an important moment in his life and brought to an end his early search for a satisfying priestly ministry. It was only after, and because of, the success of this phase in life that the other apostolates associated with his name emerged.

The famous, providential moment that began it all crystallized in the event at Folleville in 1617, when Vincent gave the sermon on general confession, which followed upon his experience with the penitent on his deathbed. The saint called this moment “the first sermon of the Congregation of the Mission,” adding that “[God] blessed my discourse, and all those good people were so touched by God that all came to make a general confession.” The numbers were such that he had to call in additional priest-confessors.

The golden age for Vincent’s missionary activity would have been at this time of his career — say, from 1617 to 1625 — before he got involved in the mundane business of administering the multiple activities that followed the success of the missions. After Folleville, and because of it, the mission activities began in earnest, when Madame de Gondi commissioned Vincent to give the exercises on her considerable estates. For residence and home base, she gave to the saint and his associates, Monsieur Portail and another priest, the College-des-Bons-Enfants, whose key they left with a neighbor during their absences.

The saint’s biographer, Louis Abelly, calculated that Vincent gave at least forty missions during these years, considering that he visited each of the villages and towns of the Gondis’ holdings. From 1625 until the move to Saint-Lazare in 1632, Abelly contends, either Vincent or his confreres gave more than 140 missions, and from 1632 until his death there must have been at least 700 that missionaries from Saint-Lazare conducted, not counting all the others given by confreres from other
houses and in other dioceses.

Memories of his mission experiences were never to leave the saint, who constantly returned to the recollections of them. As late as 1658, two years before his death, on the occasion of his distributing the Common Rules, he fondly recalled the beginnings of the Congregation's early days: "We went plainly and simply, sent by their lordships the bishops, to evangelize the poor, just as our Lord did. That is all we did...[God] so blessed our work that other clerics joined us, asking to be received into our Company, not all at once, but from time to time."

In 1639, when the mission apostolate was flourishing, he wrote to his friend Jane Frances de Chantal, who requested an account of "our humble way of life," and gave a concise summary that reflected the practices on a typical mission: "...Our Little Company is established to go from village to village at its own expense, preaching, catechizing, and having the poor people make general confessions of their entire past life. We try to settle the disagreements we find among them and do all we can to see that the sick poor are assisted corporally and spiritually by the Confraternity of the Charity, composed of women, which we set up in the places where we give the mission and which desire it."

When Vincent's current responsibilities did not allow him to participate personally in conducting missions, or when he was incapacitated by age or sickness, he enjoyed vicariously the success stories of those returning from the field. Likewise, he enjoyed letters from grateful bishops telling of the blessings that his confreres' missions brought to their dioceses. In hearing these stories or on the occasion of sending missionaries to places like Ireland, Madagascar or the Barbary Coast, the saint was envious that he could not go, as they did, to preach the gospel and even possibly to give his life for the faith. "Ah, miserable man that I am," he lamented, "My sins have made me unworthy to preach the word of God to people who do not know him."

Even as he reflected at the end of his life, Vincent himself stood in amazement at the way that events happened. Very little was planned. As he reminisced with Monsieur Portail, "Did we ever think of the employments in which the Company is now engaged, for instance, the ordinands, who are the richest and most precious deposit the Church could ever entrust to our hands? ...Did we ever think of the Confraternity of Charity? How did it come about that we undertook to rescue poor foundlings?" It was the theme of wonder that he constantly played, "I do not know how all this came about...."

The missions occasioned many of Vincent's other works, but the missions would never have had lasting effects unless his other apostolates were there to support the success. One work seemed to have followed upon another. The confraternities, for instance, began as a response to a family laid low by sickness, and in time they became a permanent apostolate, usually established in the course of a
mission. The Daughters of Charity, in their turn, had their origins in association with the confraternities. Similarly, the formation of the clergy emerged as a priority for Vincent in order to ensure the lasting good effects of the missions, considering the wretched spiritual condition of so many parish priests.

With his repeated return to thoughts of the missions even after he was unable to participate, Vincent revealed the place they held in his heart. “Nothing is more Christian,” he claimed, “than to go from village to village, helping poor people in working out their salvation, even at the cost of fatigue and inconvenience.”

In recalling that at Folleville “God blessed my discourse,” the saint also recognized the source of the power that gave him success. With a heart thus filled with an assurance of the rightness of the missions and of the promise of God’s blessings on the work, Vincent could feel only hope that the work he handed on to his missionaries would flourish.

*June, 1994*
Vincent the Alchemist

I

Vincent had one excursion incomplete, if indeed it was real, into the pseudo-science of alchemy. In the first of his two letters to Monsieur de Comet he recounted descriptions of his activities with his first Barbary slave master, himself an unsuccessful alchemist. The historicity of the experience is beside the point here, but it might stand as an image of the apostolic career of Vincent. Paradoxically, while his experience in alchemy was inconclusive, even a failure, there was alchemy of another sort at work that caused many of the successes of his subsequent life.

Alchemy is a pseudo-science that until the eighteenth century had its zealous adherents. It was a body of lore driving the search for a mysterious element that would transmute base metals into gold. For the materialist, the end-product was literally the actual metal. For those with a more mystical bent the element pursued was a marvelous substance, whether solid, like “the philosopher’s stone,” or an elixir. Either of these could bring such intangible boons as success, wealth, and the like.

Vincent’s secretary, Brother Bertrand Ducournau, first hit upon the analogy in commenting to Canon Saint-Martin, the discoverer of the long hidden Comet letters. Adverting to the alchemy references in the letter, the brother indicated that Vincent’s Tunisian experience as described indeed transformed the saint’s surroundings, within which he “turned evil into good, the sinner into the just man, slavery into freedom, hell into paradise...He discovered the philosopher’s stone....”

The application is too narrow, for the metaphor has broader possibilities relative to the whole of Vincent’s activities. The saint did indeed have a lifelong magical touch that transformed many of the works he directed. Take the transformation of Saint-Lazare, for instance. At the time, this was an ancient priory, an almost abandoned edifice that presented “an aspect of lamentable decay” and
housed a community of only eleven residents. Its prior, Adrian Le Bon, offered it to Vincent, but the saint repeatedly refused it because its size exceeded the needs of his Congregation and, more so, it was inappropriate to its lifestyle. However, after his friends prevailed on him with the right reasons to accept the offer in 1632, he undertook to make the best use of it as the headquarters of his subsequent ministry, despite the high costs of physical renovation and maintenance.

In a short time it became a veritable “Noah’s Ark,” as he called it, for all the guests who would benefit from its hospitality. As Coste noted, Vincent was “the life and soul of the house,” and the force of his personality made it “the center of intense religious life whose influence was to make itself felt over the whole of France and even other countries.”

Saint-Lazare indeed might be considered the “laboratory” where the alchemist partially plied his trade, where he manipulated the “common elements” to transform them into something precious. Thus, as a center of education it was the matrix out of which came his labors to educate and to reform the clergy of France. Vincent was convinced that reform of the Church would not happen unless there was renewal among the clergy. The good effects of the missions among the people would not last, he knew, if there were no zealous parish priests left behind to nurture the benefits. For this reason he devoted enormous energy to modes of formation suitable for his time. In addition to the formation of his own missionaries, whom he moved from the College-des-Bons-Enfants with the acquisition of Saint-Lazare, he opened the residence as a place where diocesan clerics, before and after ordination, could come for retreats and renewal, and where ordinands, in preparation for orders, received instruction in ecclesiastical and spiritual subjects.

Saint-Lazare was the site of another agency of renewal, the Tuesday Conferences. They were the response to requests by worthy priests who were looking for some nourishment of their priesthood. Accordingly, Vincent admitted to the Conferences only the cleric who lived an exemplary life and committed himself to continue that example back at his parish. The ideal proposed to the member was “to honor the life our Lord Jesus Christ, his eternal priesthood, his holy family by procuring the glory of God in the ecclesiastical state, in their own families, in the poor, and even in poor country folk.” Whatever precedents there were in other times and places, Vincent recognized the present as the providential moment: “It was to this poor little Congregation,” he told his missionaries, “that God was pleased to turn, in this century, to establish and extend the practice [of conferences to clerics on the virtues of their state] not only as an excellent remedy for good priests, exposed in the service of souls to the corrupt atmosphere of the world, but also to assist them to perfect themselves in their own profession.”

And out of his personal experience of the effects on the clergy, Vincent
declared that “there is nothing so touching, nothing that moves me so deeply, nothing of all that I hear, read or see that goes to my heart like these conferences.” So remarkable were the effects of the Conferences on the clergy that Vincent was often asked by authorities to recommend participants who would be worthy candidates for bishops.

Another dimension of Vincent’s labors on behalf of the clergy was the reformation of preaching. The style of much contemporary preaching had become secularized, bombastic, and artificial. Allusions to classical authors and the use of Greek and Roman fables were a vain parade of learning and a far cry from simple proclamation of the Word of God. Even when the scriptures were used, the interpretations were often capricious, esoteric or far-fetched. Vincent asked his missionaries, “How many do we see converted by all those methods...that are now popular and fashionable? They always pass over men’s heads...simply raise a ripple...touch only the surface. A little noise, and that is all.”

Vincent joined his voice to others in calling for a return to simplicity in preaching. He began at home with his own confreres, in promoting what he called his “little method,” simplicity and directness in form, in language, in attention to the audience. Coste’s assessment of Vincent’s contribution was that “by his teaching, advice and example [he] succeeded in inspiring all those who were brought into contact with him and with his own love for the little method.” If to this direct influence be added that which he exercised indirectly by his own priests in missions and seminaries, and the members of the Tuesday Conferences, of whom Bossuet was one, there need be no hesitation in counting him among the chief reformers of preaching in the seventeenth century.”

II

Although Saint-Lazare indeed was a fruitful matrix of reformation of the clergy, Vincent’s touch was not limited to the mother house, but extended beyond its walls. These works reflected his gift for enlisting collaborators to address the religious and social ills of his age.

First of all, the wretched spiritual conditions of the poor country people touched Vincent’s heart. The major religious orders and other clergy cared for city dwellers, but the peasants suffered serious neglect. Thus, on his part, the saint from the beginning settled on evangelizing the poor country people as the focus for his new community of men. It was a special calling, he reminded his missionaries: “Our Lord asks us to preach the gospel to the poor...There is no Company in the Church of God whose inheritance is the poor, and which devotes itself so wholly to the poor as never to preach in large cities. That is what missionaries profess to do; it is their special mark to be, like Jesus Christ, devoted to the poor.” Accordingly, the
Congregation faithfully pursued that missionary calling. The blessings drawn down on clergy and people were of the kind that one bishop typically and gratefully expressed, whereby the missionaries "are presently doing in my diocese more than if I were given a hundred kingdoms."

At the same time, the saint utilized the zeal of the Tuesday Conference members by offering them opportunities to give missions, working either with each other or with members of the Congregation. They used many of the practices in vogue with the Congregation — sermons, general confessions, reconciliations, catechizing — and followed the same simple style of "the little method" as prescribed by Vincent for his own confreres. The missions of the Tuesday Conference members differed in that many of them took place in the cities, at Court or in other such places rather than in the country. For this reason, Coste observes, they were useful in that they "happily complemented the work of the Congregation of the Mission." With the help of these two societies, Saint Vincent was enabled to realize in all their fullness the words of Jesus Christ, *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me* [He has sent me to preach the Good News to the poor], which he adopted as the motto of his Company. "The poor are not only to be found in country places, but also in cities, and Jesus Christ preached to both townspeople and villagers."

In the world of the laity, Vincent transformed the landscape of charity by his practice of engaging and managing numerous collaborators who could address the physical needs of the poor. The Confraternities of Charity were a good example. The story of their beginnings is well known. As parish priest at Chatillon he learned while vesting for mass about the plight of a certain poor, sick family that was in immediate danger. He touched on it in his sermon, with the result that after mass there was an overwhelming response by the parishioners, who went out to the house with food and medicines to minister to the family.

Vincent recognized in this reaction the latent desire in people to reach out in charity to others in need, but that if efficiently managed, resources could be better used. "I suggested to all these dear, good people," he told his Daughters of Charity later, "whose charity had induced them to visit the family that they should take it in turn, day by day, to cook for them, and not only for these but also for other cases that might arise." Almost immediately after the event, a number of women who were interested in continuing the work met with the saint to inquire about the best way to help the poor and the sick of the parish. And within three months of activity, they found organized ways of helping, whereby Vincent could draw up a detailed set of rules for the group that he would call the Confraternity of Charity. The growth of the confraternities was facilitated by the priests of the mission, part of whose directions for each mission in a parish was to establish a confraternity.

As the priests of the Tuesday Conferences came to complement, in the city, the missionary work of Vincent's confreres in the country, so the confraternities, to which the cities did not seem congenial, eventually moved into the city and attracted
women of the upper classes. Although not Vincent's direct idea, the confraternities owed their urban beginnings to his zeal.

Suggested by a zealous widow, Madame Goussault, as a service to the poorly served sick of the Paris hospital, the Hôtel Dieu, Vincent was at first slow to respond, particularly on the score that he was reluctant to interfere with the current management of the institution ("not to use his scythe in another man's field," as Abelly put it). However, once the archbishop of Paris, at Madame Goussalt's behest, urged him on, Vincent saw the proposal as the will of God and was immediately responsive to cooperating with finding a way to serve the sick poor of the Hôtel Dieu.

He soon consulted the first volunteers to plan the management of their good works. A second meeting attracted a few others. And soon after, there was a large multitude, as Abelly describes their immediate growth and the quality of their membership: "The virtues and example of these first women attracted several others, so that soon more that two hundred women had enrolled, even some from the nobility, such as presidents' wives, countesses, marchionesses, duchesses and princesses, and all considered it an honor to offer themselves to God to serve the poor, recognizing them as the living members of his son, Jesus Christ."

Out of the work of these Ladies of Charity, Vincent, along with Louise de Marillac, fashioned another mode of charitable service for the good of the church and the benefit of the poor — the Daughters of Charity. In Louise, the saint had a partner compatible in service and like-minded in her vision of the poor. Thus, when they saw that some aristocratic Ladies of Charity could not perform certain unpleasant tasks of serving the poor and often delegated these duties to their servants, who were sometimes abusive, Vincent suggested offering these opportunities of service to some kind hearted girls who would not be put off by the coarseness of the poor. As this plan prospered and other women offered themselves for this kind of service, Vincent and Louise in time recognized the hand of providence leading them into a new avenue of service. They worked to give the girls some stability and supervision, and some religious and moral instruction. Out of a small core group of three or four young women came the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

Although the list of Vincent's enterprises is remarkable, he was not always successful in his engagements. For instance, consider Madagascar. Although Vincent was convinced that this mission was right, he did not transform it into the success that he experienced in other enterprises. Forces were against him, what with shipwrecks, disease, and an environment that was sometimes religiously or politically hostile. The mission was not able to take hold until centuries after his death.

And not all of his enterprises took off dramatically. Vincent's working style fit the image of the scientist in his laboratory — patiently at work, experimenting,
discarding, or confirming his "findings." There were probably few "Eureka!" moments. He was known for his care, indeed slowness, in coming to decisions, and he sometimes exasperated his associates by not acting as quickly as they would wish. But his reason offered was always a desire to authenticate his decision as being in conformity with divine providence.

Slow or fast in executing, dramatic or plain in his style, Vincent probably did not advert to circumstances such as these that attended the beginnings of his various works. As an "alchemist," his goal was transformation: that is, a change of the ordinary into something special and important. He accomplished that by inspiring hundreds of men and women of faith and zeal to join him in addressing the ills and injustices in church and society. The marvel is not that he accomplished these wonders, but that he was able to marshal and guide these collaborators so efficiently into a veritable army that swept across seventeenth century France.

*September-October, 1994*
The meekness of the lamb was the ordinary signature of Saint Vincent's temperament, but when a stance of mildness did not serve the glory of God, the good of the Congregation, or the welfare of the poor, the saint resorted to a more assertive mode. "If, in order to succeed in an enterprise," he once said, with a hint of this other side, "I were obliged to choose between fifty deer commanded by a lion, and fifty lions commanded by a deer, I should consider myself more sure of success with the first contingent than with the second."

There were many occasions when Vincent had to play the lion-leader, even with authorities of church or state. They did not intimidate him; he matched them power for power. Thus, recalling his intent to safeguard, from the start, the independence of his fledgling Congregation, Vincent recounted how he once had to deal with the archbishop of Paris (regarding the management of Saint-Lazare), who in the tradition of past prelates, demanded an annual account: "I earnestly entreated him to dispense us from this. He, however, not willing to do so, I told him that we should prefer to withdraw, and we certainly should have done so, had he persisted in his demands."

On another occasion, in confronting the queen about the desperate state of affairs in Paris and Cardinal Mazarin's part in it, he challenged her, to the detriment of his own position, "Is it just, Madame, that a million, who are innocent, should die of hunger for twenty or thirty who are guilty? Think of the miseries that will befall your people, of the ruins, the sacrilege, and the profanations that civil war brings in its train. And all this for what? To retain one who is an object of public hatred. If the presence of Mazarin is a source of trouble to the state, are you not bound to dispense with him, at least for a while?"

Even at home, in the governance of his own Congregation, Vincent was firm in demanding faithful performance of its members. He would not hesitate to take steps "to purge the Company," as he put it. "Ten such as it needs are worth a
hundred others; and a hundred who have not true vocations, or who do not respond to the designs of God, are not as good as ten.” Nor did he fear the consequences of reduced numbers. He had confidence that “[God] shall augment the Company and bless it.”

Yet, whatever the firmness or the drastic action that circumstances called for, Vincent was always attentive to the gentle dimension: “It is necessary to be firm and invariable with respect to the end to be gained, but meek and humble in the use of means. Herein is the soul of all good government.” He appealed to the example of Jesus as his precedent: “Remember that our Lord did not always deal meekly with his disciples; he spoke very severe words to them, even calling Saint Peter ‘Satan’...He also took up scourges against the profaners of his temple, in order to show those who have charge of others, that it is not always [wise] to be too indulgent toward them.”

For Vincent, in the end, firmness and gentleness must converge in relationships. “Let us hold firmly to the end we have proposed to ourselves in our good undertakings,” he insisted, “but let gentleness control the means we employ.” To follow this course is to imitate “the government of the divine wisdom, which accomplishes its ends mightily, while sweetly disposing the means whereby they are attained.”

*October, 1991*
"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...."

...because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

It was a dramatic moment in the synagogue at Nazareth when Jesus completed his reading of this passage from Isaiah and announced, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." Luke depicted it as a moment when Jesus inaugurated the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes and expectations. The whole of salvation history seemed focused in that utterance, and a mantle woven down the ages from threads of humanity's hopes and dreams of salvation might have descended upon Jesus, to define his messianic role as the fulfillment of those hopes.

In light of Vincent's regular practice of taking the imitation of Jesus Christ as the model of behavior, the saint, in Jesus' manner, chose Isaiah's words as the motto to define his life, his ministry and the mission of his Congregation. Jesus modeled doing before teaching. Accordingly, in the Common Rules Vincent noted that Jesus first integrated "fully into his life every type of virtue...." That was preparation, after which the Lord "then went on to teach, by preaching the good news of salvation to poor people, and by passing on to his apostles and disciples what they needed to know to become guides for others." The Congregation, Vincent says, "wants to imitate Christ the Lord...to imitate his virtues as well as what he did for the salvation of others. It is only right that if the Congregation is to do the same sort of work it should act in the same sort of way."

As a result, Vincent's earliest labors tended to follow that model, which he described in the earliest purposes of the Congregation: after "patterning ourselves, as far as possible, on the virtues which the great master taught us," the missionaries' tasks were "to preach the good news of salvation to poor people, especially in rural areas; and to help seminarians and priests to grow in knowledge and virtue, so that they can be effective in their ministry."
Without missing a note, today’s Congregation has taken up the chant. It is sounded in the opening paragraphs of the \textit{Constitutions}, which declare the purpose of the Congregation “to follow Christ evangelizing the poor,” and its spirit “a participation in the spirit of Christ himself,” as proposed by Saint Vincent: “He sent me to preach the good news to the poor.” Hence, Jesus Christ is the rule of the Mission and shall be considered as the center of its life and activity.” This purpose is specified and achieved in the direction to the members: (a) to “work at evangelizing the poor, especially the more abandoned,” and, (b) to “help the clergy and the laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelizing of the poor.”

A closer elaboration in time is the \textit{New Evangelization} derived from the \textit{Letter to the Confreres} that emerged from the 1992 General Assembly. It is really a call, say the writers, to “renew our convictions and our commitments for the mission.” And so “our fundamental mission will consist in announcing Jesus Christ sent into the world by the Father to proclaim the good news of salvation to the poor.” An integral dimension of that challenge for the mission is the call for renewal among the members as \textit{New Men} and for our communal groupings as \textit{New Communities}.

The missionary behavior of Jesus was a lifelong focus for Vincent. He offered it not only as the model for the Congregation’s way of life, but also as a motive to the members for observing the rules, which embodied the example of Jesus. Vincent made this clear in his conference of 17 May 1658, when he promulgated and distributed the \textit{Common Rules}: “Another reason to live faithfully according to the rules,” he stated, “is that they are drawn almost completely from the gospel...Our divine savior came and was sent by his father to preach the gospel to the poor: \textit{Pauperibus evangelizare misit me}.” Vincent savored the statement several more times, and then proceeded: “Yes, that is what we were founded for. Yes, gentlemen...our portion is the poor...To fulfill our ministry is to continue the work of the son of God, who went out to the countryside to seek out the poor. Our institute attempts to do the same, to serve and help the poor, whom we must recognize as our lords and masters.”

In Vincent’s appropriating Isaiah’s commissioning words after the manner of Jesus, the saint was donning the mantle modeled on that of Jesus and he was sharing it as a legacy to his missionaries and a mark of their identity. Indeed, fidelity to that legacy became a norm for the missionaries’ self-judgment, especially at the end. “How happy they will be at the hour of their death,” Vincent promised, “who will see accomplished in themselves these beautiful words of our Lord: \textit{Evangelizare pauperibus misit me Dominus!} See, my brothers how it seems our Lord wants to tell us by these words that one of his main concerns was to work for the poor. Cursed shall we be if we fail to serve and help them.”
Thus, in Vincent’s mind his ideal missionary would wrap himself in the mantle of Jesus and pray that the spirit of the Lord would indeed come upon him, the missionary, and anoint him: that is, to share the Lord’s mission and a portion of his holiness. The saint would hope, in turn, that the same spirit would make effective the missionary’s preaching of the Good News as to elicit reactions similar to those that the evangelist reported of Jesus’ listeners: “All spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”

February-March, 1995
Louis Abelly, near the end of his biography of the saint, has a chapter titled “The Leadership Style of Monsieur Vincent.” It is so placed to offer an underlying explanation for the remarkable success of his lifetime ministry in charity.

The most fundamental norm, or end, that the saint proposed whether for himself or others, says Abelly, was “always to act for the greater glory of God and to accomplish his most holy will...This goal dominated his thoughts, his desires, and his intentions...He strove for nothing but that God's name be blessed, his kingdom advanced, and his will accomplished on earth as it is in heaven.”

As a means of achieving this goal Vincent’s “main and nearly universal method was to conform himself entirely to the example of Jesus Christ.” There was no surer path to follow, or on which to lead others, than “that traveled by the word and wisdom of God.” Accordingly, the saint had “engraved [Jesus'] words and actions upon his own mind, modeling himself in all he did and said upon the prototype of all virtue and sanctity.” In first caring for his own salvation Vincent was ready to care for others: “He knew the truth that the proper measure that we must have for our neighbor is the love we have for ourselves.”

There were certain qualities of his leadership that were easily identifiable. The first of these was humility, whereby he was always open to consultation. Humility was, Abelly notes, “Monsieur Vincent's first and most faithful advisor. Although he had a clear and capable mind, he always mistrusted his own thoughts. He turned to God in every situation to ask for his light and help. Then he would seek the advice of others...and he advised his confreres to act in the same way.”

Another quality was firmness and consistency in following through, once the decision was made. Vincent told one of his superiors: “Once we have commended something to God and taken counsel, we should remain firm in what we have decided,
rejecting as a temptation all thought to the contrary.”

Although his decisions were firm, he made certain that they were considered and deliberate. It was a principle of Vincent’s, says Abelly, “that any advice given too quickly was an expression of one’s personal judgment rather than the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, whom he preferred to consult before responding.” If pressed for an answer with little time for delay, “[Vincent] would not answer until he had raised his mind to God and asked his light and help. Otherwise he would base his answer on some passage of holy scripture, or on some action of the Son of God that had a bearing on the matter under discussion.”

As one who regularly had occasion and need to expect certain behaviors of others, the saint was careful to maintain regularity and punctuality on his own part. Says Abelly, Vincent “used to say that those in charge of others ought to be firm in the observances, and be on their guard lest they be the cause of laxity of the community by their own lack of firmness or exactitude. Among all things that might hurt a community, nothing is more dangerous than a superior who is too soft, who wants to please others, and who seeks to be loved...A happy community is largely the result of a good leader.”

Even so, when Vincent had to be firm or insistent with his confreres, he always did it with “a mild grace.” Or sometimes he would be tentative or indirect in his response, as when he was obliged to refuse something, “he would prefer that his confreres would surmise as much, without obliging him to refuse outright for fear of giving pain.” When pressed to agree to something he did not think proper, Vincent would ask, “Would you be good enough to remind me of this some other time?” In any event, he was always aware of each person’s feelings or temperament in his responses.

II

*His Direction of People*

In exercising leadership Vincent himself heeded certain priorities regarding the people whom he shepherded. In the formation of seminarians, for instance — his own especially — he advocated a pattern of progression within their programs. The first task was purgative, that is, as Abelly says, “to destroy sin and the faults and failings in those under his care.” This occurred as they entered the Internal Seminary (the community’s novitiate), which represented “a school of virtue.” Then, as they moved along into higher ecclesiastical studies, the task was consolidation: to maintain faith and fervor and to caution against their opposites. The transition from the fervor of the Internal Seminary to advanced studies was an extreme step that warranted caution. “Going from one extreme to another is dangerous,” Vincent said. “A glass that comes from the furnace into the cold runs the risk of cracking.”

Nevertheless in dealing with his confreres generally, his aim was “to lead
them to the perfection of their state and to a most exact regularity," and not just to "[remedy] vice and [root] out faults." He took the lead by giving the example himself. "It might be said," observed Abelly, "that [Vincent's] example was one of the chief causes of the good order so much admired in the house of Saint-Lazare.

As leader Vincent had to monitor within his community such disorders as rivalry and slander, "vices more to be feared than others." In counteracting these, the saint was accustomed to remind the offenders, reports Abelly, that "the traits of envy and detraction pierce first the heart of Jesus Christ before reaching those against whom they are aimed." Vincent especially recommended fraternal correction as a remedy. To avoid inflaming the situation, it would be done ordinarily "not on the spur of the moment, and never in anger...[but with] grace filled with firmness...like the oil and the wine of the good Samaritan." Indeed, for success it should promise to be useful, helpful and agreeable to the person admonished. In all cases there should be consideration for the person, even to the point of asking him if he is willing to hear what will be said.

His Management of Temporalities

Abelly remarks that, although Vincent believed in the care that providence showed, he was careful about preserving and managing the temporal goods of the Congregation. "As the father of the family had the responsibility to feed his children...and heads of organizations to influence the spirit and life of their members...so Vincent saw himself as obliged to look after the needs of his community," said Abelly, reflecting Vincent's words.

In overseeing these needs he worked on an economy of time, money, and activity. Vincent was not capable of personal presence in all places, and so appointed "procurators and other knowledgeable people to handle these affairs," even though they stood by for his advice and approval. A function he observed was to see whether something once begun should be pursued to its conclusion. For assurance that some of the work get done, he used the lay brothers and other lay persons to perform duties on the Saint-Lazare farm and in the buildings.

He insisted that missions be given without charge, and that missionaries take neither money nor gifts from those evangelized: on occasion gifts or alms, perhaps, but only if given out of charity and not by way of salary or recompense.

Then, too, he wanted the provisions of food and clothing to be appropriate to the times and to the places where the community was situated. He urged everyone to be satisfied with what was given them. In bad years when prices were high, he tried to see if some cutting back of the usual portion of meat or wine could be made; he sought to share in the common suffering of the people by cutting back on the expenses of the house.
Vincent avoided superfluous expenses, spending only the least amount possible for necessities, and yet he spared nothing when it came to charity. He spent nothing on what he considered "embellishments, painting, ornaments, furniture, or niceties which were not strictly necessary." Only what was necessary for the service of God did he find valuable. In this regard even time was precious to him. Because of so many commitments inside and outside the community, he strove, said Abelly, "to lose not a single moment in doing anything useless."

As a conclusion to his treatment of Vincent's leadership Abelly provided a chapter that is a conversation containing the saint's advice to Antoine Durand, who was being named superior at the seminary at Agde. Abelly's intent is to show the correspondence between his outline of Vincent's "theory" of leadership and the saint's actual behavior in practice. Vincent ends with a few words of encouragement and a sense of his own needs: "That is enough for today...You are about to undertake a great work...I pray that our Lord will bless your leadership. Please join me in praying he will forgive me all the faults which I have committed in the position I now hold."

*April-May, 1995*
Radical Detachment

“W hen we have spent all we have for our Lord and nothing remains, then we will leave the key under the door and go.” How is that for radical detachment? Vincent de Paul uttered these words, according to Louis Abelly, in response to a priest-friend of the saint who inquired whether the expense of boarding ordinands at Saint-Lazare was such that the retreatants should be charged for their stay at the house. In that same vein, there was one occasion when the treasurer of Saint-Lazare reported that there was not a sou left to cover either the ordinary or the extraordinary expenses arising from an ordinands’ retreat about to begin. “What good news! God be blessed!” In that exclamation “he raised his voice,” Abelly noted. “Fine,” Vincent continued, “now we will see if we have confidence in God.”

Indeed, the debts incurred by Saint-Lazare from the clergy conferences and other works of charity there were a source of concern to his conferees because of the threat of financial insecurity. His response was: “The treasures of God’s providence are inexhaustible, and our distrust of God does him no honor. If our Company of the Mission is destroyed, it will not be by poverty but by wealth.” This situation at Saint-Lazare thus became a paradigm of the tension perceived between Vincent’s generosity for the mission — of training the clergy and serving the poor — and his abiding confidence in a benign providence to supply what would be needed.

Was this behavior extravagant, imprudent, indeed improvident? From a rational viewpoint some of his attitudes and activities might have seemed even self-defeating. The welfare of the Congregation and its continued progress were uppermost in his mind, but he took positions which, while relying upon providence, would work against the very welfare he wanted to foster. Thus, as Abelly observed, “To assure himself that this dependence was absolute and his confidence complete, [Vincent] never acted in any way to obtain benefices, houses, or establishments, nor even to attract any candidates for the Congregation.” For instance, Abelly continued, “When offered gifts, [Vincent] was more inclined to accept the lesser
rather than the greater. When there was a question of admitting someone to the
community he hesitated more to receive persons of some distinction or of some
renown in the world than he did for accepting those of the lower class."

In taking the “lesser” he wanted to avoid a pride that might dilute the purity
of his motivation or the appearance of circumventing the direction of the providence
of God. “If we place our confidence in men, or on some gift of nature or fortune,”
Vincent declared, “then God will withdraw from us...Would you like to know why
we will sometimes fail in what we do? It is because we rely upon ourselves...When
a preacher, superior, or confessor relies too much on his own prudence, learning or
his own gifts...God withdraws and leaves him to himself...He learns through his
own experience that no matter how talented he may be, he can do nothing without
God.” A contemporary prelate confirmed this policy of Vincent when he observed:
“This principle, introduced by him into the Congregation, of not favoring gifts of
nature or fortune unless they were joined to virtue and subservient to grace, was one
of the major means by which God inspired him to preserve his Congregation in the
purity of its spirit.”

In addition to shortages of materials for the mission, like money and
provisions, Vincent’s leadership suffered other restrictions or reversals, such as
diminished numbers of workers caused by sickness or death or by the need to stretch
his manpower to cover the Congregation’s many commitments. Despite the losses,
some superiors still clamored for help to accomplish their duties. To one who felt
the shortage because of deaths, the saint encouraged him to work with what he had:
“Believe me, three [men] can do more than ten when our Lord puts his hand to
things, and he always does so when he takes away the means of doing otherwise.”
Perhaps Vincent’s greatest struggle to stay fixed in the attitude of confidence in God
came at a time when he and the Company suffered major setbacks of this kind,
particularly the deaths of eight conferees from the plague in Italy and the deaths of
three missionaries to Madagascar, two on the journey and the other on the island.
That these losses affected him was evident from the repeated inclusion of the news,
almost as a formula, in many of the letters he wrote to conferees during 1657.
Despite his sorrow, he always found grounds for hope: “I am inconsolable at the loss
of so many good workers...but they are surely very happy because, having died for
the salvation of others, after the example of [Jesus], they saved their lives by losing
them...We have reason to hope that the ashes of these deceased men...will be the
seed for many fine missionaries.”

“Totally radical” sounds like teenage lingo, but that designation for
Vincent’s detachment is an accurate fit. In conducting his ministries he was
elemental in shunning the appearance of self-reliance and in asserting dependence
upon divine providence. He seemingly could stand apart and appear emotionally
disengaged from situations that would cause panic in superiors, treasurers, or others
with responsibilities to discharge. Not that he neglected to attend to the practical demands of such cases or was unsympathetic to them; he slowed his response in order to assure himself that his motivation was selfless or that self-confidence alone was not his assurance. He wanted certitude that his solution came from God.

That calmness arose from an unwavering faith in an all-inclusive providence of God. Little wonder that Vincent took his time to act, that in some instances he believed few hands could be as effective as many, that catastrophes did not always seem as disastrous to him as they did to others. Yet the saint did not encourage passivity in accepting reversals, as he noted in writing to many conferees about the death of his Irish conferee, Dermot Duggan, who was a great loss to the mission in England: “Since [God] is the master of the living and the dead, it is up to him to dispose of them as he wishes, and up to us to ask him to raise up new ones, according to his heart, to carry on his work.”

It is “up to us,” said Vincent, introducing the human element in the proper sequence. In his eyes, only after the vision and the acceptance of providence have first prevailed in all such cases can the individual proceed to take action.

*March, 1996*
“Thy Will Be Done.”

There are only two kinds of people in the end,” British writer C.S. Lewis wrote, “those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, ‘Thy will be done.’” That is, the saints, who will blossom outwardly toward God, and the condemned, who will be fixed in the hell of self-absorption.

Vincent de Paul’s life was a litany of invocations of the first kind. “The perfection of love,” he claimed, “does not consist in ecstasies, but in fulfilling the will of God.” That person is “most perfect...who has best conformed his own will to God’s in such a way that no distinction remains between his own and God’s.” Indeed, this approaches the condition of “the angels and the blessed in heaven [who] accomplish the holy and adorable will of God.” This might be an image of Vincent’s own stance before God.

Because Jesus was Vincent’s model in all things, the saint followed the Lord’s example — first to learn and practice virtue before attempting to preach it to others, in this case, correspondence to the will of the Father. Jesus came, said Vincent, “from heaven to earth just to do the will of God his Father in accomplishing the work of our redemption, and he delighted in doing what he knew to be most pleasing to God at the time and in the way he recognized as being in conformity with his will.” Jesus made this stance manifest in his life, which was “nothing else than a web of obedience,” in which “he willed to be subject to the Most Blessed Virgin, to Saint Joseph, and also to others placed in authority, good and bad....” Out of his own experience and practice Vincent offered to his missionaries a comprehensive vision of how the will of God manifested itself in these authorities. “It is the will of God and his good pleasure,” he said, “that we obey the prelates of his Church, kings, magistrates, when they command or forbid us to do certain things. It is his will that we obey the laws of the kingdom in which we live, that we obey our fathers, mothers, relations, and superiors. By acting in this way we do the will of God.” Indeed, he felt, this obedience can be directed even “beyond those who have the right to give us
orders”; that is, in submitting ourselves “to all human creatures...” by way of “condescension, deference and all sorts of services for others.” This attitude has special meaning for persons in community, in the members’ displaying tolerance for differences among themselves, in practicing forbearance, and in seeking mutual understanding.

The saint cautioned that recognizing and accepting so many instances as the will of God must come not in unthinking acquiescence. “Among the multitude of thoughts and inclinations that incessantly arise within us,” he said, “many may appear to be good but do not come from God and are not pleasing to him.” Rather, prudence would dictate that one would discern and discriminate, seek counsel and accept advice, pray for light, and above all, proceed slowly and never anticipate providence.

This conformity to the divine will brings its own rewards. God leads such a person “in everything and by everything.” Using an image from the psalmist (73:23), Vincent observed how “God holds him, so to speak, by his right hand, and [the person] accepts this divine guidance with complete submission. For tomorrow, the following week, the whole year, and his entire life you will see him living in peace and tranquility, and in an uninterrupted movement toward God.” That person, too, becomes a source of joy — to himself and to others as well: “Everywhere he spreads in the souls of his neighbor the happy spirit with which he himself is filled.” Add to that, being wise and effective: “All his words have strength and energy...The advice he gives to others and all his actions give great edification.”

That striking image — walking hand in hand with God, divine guidance in the lead — would seem to define Vincent’s own lifelong relationship to the will of God. It is little wonder, then, that the saint enjoyed the blessings that accompanied that conformity: peace and tranquility, an inner joy as well as a gift for sharing it with others, and finally, strength and energy in his words and actions that gave power to his service of the gospel.

October, 1996
"I Wish I'd Said That!"

That familiar refrain, an expression of regret that you were not first with the remark or the insight, reminds us that there is frequently someone who is quicker on the draw. It is not necessarily a begrudging sentiment. In fact, it is often spoken in a tone of admiration. Nor is the refrain always limited to words. Given the convention of seeing a person's life as a statement, one might also use the refrain as an expression of benign envy at the rich meaning of that person's life. This thought came to mind recently in witnessing the impact that the death of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin had on so many people, who admired him in both his life and his death. It is as if there was a communal, wistful desire on the part of his admirers that their lives might be as edifying as his. "I wish I'd said that!" they seem to exclaim.

This, we might suppose, is the basis for the cult of the saints. It is a kind of "holy envy" we experience when we see a person whose life, at least in its final stages, was the embodiment of the gospel ideal and becomes worthy of imitation. This certainly holds true for the life and the achievement of Saint Vincent de Paul. There are enduring ingredients in his story that give it a universal appeal that takes it beyond eras, beyond nationalities, beyond cultures. People see in his life the validation of the gospel — not only to believe, but to live its values, especially in its mandate of practical charity. "I wish I'd said that!" his followers exclaim.

Vincent himself had occasion to be edified by the exemplary lives of some of his own contemporaries. He viewed Saint Francis de Sales, for instance, who was his mentor and indeed his hero, as "the meekest and gentlest person I have ever met. The very first time I saw him, I saw from the outset that his expression, his way of speaking and conversing with others was an expression of the meekness of our Lord Jesus Christ who had taken possession of his heart." Another instance he found at home, in the case of one of his lay brothers, Pierre Sirven, a man whom Vincent considered "the living rule of the Company; a wise, intelligent man, benevolent
toward everyone.” Similarly, among the Ladies of Charity his admiration singled out one remarkable woman, about whom he observed that “if through some mischance the gospels were lost, their spirit and maxims would be found in the conduct and sentiments of Madame Fouquet. She makes devotion so attractive that she encourages everyone to be devout.” Vincent, too, was capable of uttering, “I wish I’d said that!”

The source and prototype for all such behavior — his own and others’ — was, in Vincent’s eyes, the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. That truth is central in all of these instances cited. The saint took this as a basic rule of his own behavior and left it as a legacy to his disciples. It is the driving spirit of the Congregation’s Common Rules, which he acknowledged in his letter of introduction: “I have tried to base all the rules, where possible, on the spirit and actions of Jesus Christ. My idea was that men who are called to continue Christ’s mission, which is mainly preaching the good news to the poor, should see things from his point of view and want to be what he wanted. They should have the same spirit that he had, and follow in his footsteps.” When the saint saw this ideal realized in zealous missionaries he said, “How blessed are they who give themselves to God in this way. They do what Jesus Christ did, and imitate him in his practice of poverty, humility, patience, zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls! In this way they become true disciples of the master...and live purely with his spirit.”

Others recognized in Vincent the embodiment of this ideal. One of his confreres reported the remarks of Monsieur Portail about Vincent (quoted by Abelly) that “Monsieur Vincent was the perfect image of Jesus Christ whom he knew upon earth, and that he had never heard Monsieur Vincent say or do anything except relating to him who said, ‘What I just did was to give you an example: as I have done, so you must do.’” Abelly himself observed that Vincent “had so imprinted the image of Jesus Christ upon his mind and was so penetrated with his holy maxims that he spoke, thought and acted only in view of God.”

It is possible always to have a sense of admiration and benign envy when we encounter persons whose lives approach the gospel ideal. “I wish I’d said that!” The refrain echoes, whether the life is that of Vincent de Paul himself or that of any one of his disciples who mirror his qualities. Such lives merit imitation as well. They are authenticated, moreover, by their roots in the model of Jesus Christ himself.

*December, 1996*
It is remarkable how much a person’s life could be programmed or be drained of spontaneity if he or she would let it happen. This is a hazard of the Christmas season, for instance, when the media offer pre-packaged sets of feelings about what the experience of the season should be. The resulting expectations grow to suggest the coziness of a Norman Rockwell Christmas. The same holds true of the gifts that are touted, expensive or exotic items to “make dreams come true.” Victims of such illusions have at the end only a handful of sadness, disappointment, and manufactured guilt. The same temptation is there during the rest of the year as well.

Without denying the value of some self-help manuals, there is a flood of such how-to books that stifle initiative — how to feel, how to relate, how to be happy, how to get mad, how to grieve, etc. — running the gamut, it seems, of every phase of living. With such pressures, where is the freedom, the variety, and the spontaneity? The pattern for such living seems as artificial as painting by numbers.

This is a risk within the Christian life, too: to guide one’s life by formalism and duty alone, in activities drained of enthusiasm or spontaneity, if not love. Thoughts of this kind call attention to the contrasting expansiveness, richness and variety of Saint Vincent de Paul’s apostolic life, which led him down a path wholly different from that other route. His life was defined by the diverse occasions he faced and by his willingness to adapt to what each one called for. The landscape of his ministries was variegated, filled with persons of all sorts and conditions: city and country dwellers, rich and poor, bishops and priests, cleric and lay, royalty and commoners, statesmen and peasants. There was but one way, of course, to deal with everyone — that is, in the spirit of the gospel — but the attention to each individual called for a unique response, each face that of Christ, calling to mind Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins’ image, “what in God’s eye he [the individual] is”:

...Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.
It was the poor who caught Vincent’s special attention, mainly because his ministry most often cast him into their midst. Their condition called him to a special way of seeing. Instead of viewing them in the mass, to him each person was evidence of God’s presence. The saint’s faith saw beyond appearances. “Often enough,” he said, “being so crude and earthy, [the poor] do not present themselves as respectable or reasonable beings. But turn the medal over and by the light of faith you will see that the Son of God, who chose to be poor, is present here in these poor people.” Far from looking down on them, Vincent took on a new relationship with the poor, privileged as they were in God’s eyes, as “our lords and masters...and we are unworthy to render them our small favors.” They were not to be taken for granted, and, indeed, they were an avenue to God, as Vincent frequently observed, “God loves the poor, and thus surely he must love those who love and serve them.”

Vincent’s attitude toward providence also affected the tempo of his life. That stance kept him off balance, as it were, and prevented him from taking predictable, measured steps. He must have felt, at times, a tension between his impulse to move forward energetically and the belief that he must await providence, that is, follow or accompany it rather than anticipate it. No matter how ripe for harvest a field might be, Vincent would not go unless the bishop invited the Congregation. Indeed, even the pastors were considered: “We take it as a rule to work for the good of the people, with the concurrence of the pastors, and never against their wishes. At the beginning and end of each mission we seek their blessing to show our dependence upon them.”

Even though the saint recognized the validity of his delays, they must have caused him some frustration, as they certainly did some of his contemporaries, who sometimes waited impatiently for him to act. His persistence just deepened his conviction, though. “What treasures are hidden in...providence. And how those who follow it and not stride before it honor the Lord.” His humility caused him to see himself “as a poor blind man, unable to take a step in the way of goodness unless [God’s] hand of mercy guide [him].” Conformity to providence, in Vincent’s mind, and a practice recommended to his missionaries, was “the one thing we should aspire to.”

In his service Vincent burned inside with a fire of zeal that energized his ministry. Those who were touched by this heat must have found it an enriching experience and accounted it a grace. As one religious said of him, “Who has not felt the charity of Monsieur Vincent in fulfilling the needs of their lives, whether of body or soul? Can anyone be found who had recourse to him and went away without receiving some help?” From another source, after an address to the Paris confraternity, one woman exclaimed, “Ah, ladies, can we not say, as did the disciples at Emmaus, that our hearts burned with the love of God while Monsieur Vincent spoke to us?” To which another woman replied, “You must not be surprised, for he
is an angel of the Lord. He allows the love of God which burns in his heart to appear on his lips as burning coals.”

The missionary vision that guided Vincent de Paul was wide and all-embracing: “Our vocation,” he told his missionaries, “is to go neither to a single parish nor to a single diocese. We are to embrace the whole world to gain the hearts of all.” History certainly played this out in the diversity of the works that providence set in his path and in the breadth of experiences they offered. His creative and zealous responses to such variety of offerings are his legacy to his followers. He taught them to think beyond boundaries or fixed positions, yet to watch for the proper signals from providence to set the pace. He offered insight into serving the poor, neither romanticizing them nor dismissing them, but viewing them in Christ’s eyes — an incarnational perspective that dominated his vision. This was a vision which could endure a lifetime, for Vincent held that serving the poor could be a barometer of one’s hope and a guarantee of perseverance. This was an assurance with which the saint consoled a missionary who was afraid of dying: “Those who love the poor in life will have nothing to fear in death.”

February-March, 1997
The months of May and June make up the season when fresh classes of the newly ordained are released to the Church at large. The numbers nowadays are not as expansive as once they were, but, whatever their sizes, they do represent infusions of new life.

The Midwest province, like so much of the rest of the world, has also experienced these meager harvests. The province still upholds, though, the tradition and legacy handed down from Saint Vincent of serving the clergy, whether in their initial formation in the seminary or in offering “spiritual assistance to priests both in the work of their ongoing formation and in promoting their pastoral zeal,” as the current Constitutions prescribe. With the diminishing numbers in the Midwest seminary apostolate this latter purpose takes on more immediacy. This mandate of “spiritual assistance” would show many faces of priestly ministry: working side by side with priests in the field, giving spiritual support in counseling and spiritual direction, offering retreats, or providing continuing ministerial, theological, and pastoral education. Added to this in the new text are fresh nuances. One of these is the direction “to encourage in them [the parish priests] the desire of fulfilling the Church’s option for the poor.” The other is “to devote themselves to motivating and suitably preparing lay people for ministries necessary in a Christian community.”

The list of services to the clergy would include even such a mundane activity as availability for pastoral relief to cover needed absences.

In addition to these services to fellow clerics, Vincent demonstrated for his missionaries another level of service in the form of hospitality. Visitors to Saint-Lazare, and any others who came across his path, were well aware of the saint’s attunement to their needs. Abel recites a litany of the many instances that Vincent responded to as such. Sickness of guests offered other occasions for hospitality, either because the person became ill while at Saint-Lazare or he came to Paris for medical help and needed shelter. Some even took advantage of the hospitality: one
priest, unknown to anyone and ill dressed, turned out to be a thief; while another got sick and became so demanding that the members of the house wanted to oust him (unlike the case of another priest who felt his sickness was a burden to the house). Vincent wished to take no action against either of these ungrateful visitors. Vincent welcomed priests from the country who sought aid for their parishioners devastated by the wars or some other disaster. The saint's universal stance, said Abelly, was "the great charity he displayed toward all clerics, [that] encouraged all poor priests to come to him as their father, full of confidence in him...Hardly a day passed that someone did not seek his aid."

Underlying Vincent's commitment to serving the clergy was a concern that the missionaries' own focus be clear. He articulated for them his goal in the area of evangelization — "to spread God's love in all directions...to bring fire to the world so that it would be on fire with [his] love." This notion converges with the mission of the Church in the modern statement of its mission of evangelization, as expressed in Paul VI's Evangelii Nuntiandi and incorporated into the province's own Statement on Evangelization: "To bear witness, in a simple and direct way to God revealed by Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit; to bear witness that in his son God has loved the world — that in his Incarnate Word he has given being to all things and has called men to eternal life."

The saint was further concerned that in offering service to others, the missionaries first be credible through their own examples of probity of life and zeal for the Good News. Given the mandate of "bringing fire," he wonders, on his own part, "How could I myself not burn with divine fire?" His frequent remarks about the formation of candidates could equally stand as a mandate to the missionaries for their service to the ordained, especially in modeling virtue to them. Beyond teaching them "chant, ceremonies, and a little moral theology," he wrote once to a seminary rector, "what is important is to form them in solid piety and devotion." In order to do this last effectively, however, the missionary "must be the first to be filled with the above, for it would be almost useless to instruct them on these things without giving example. We must be full reservoirs in order to be able to let our water spill out without becoming empty. We must possess the spirit with which we want them to be animated, for no one can give what he does not have."

Perhaps Vincent's distilled notion of how the missionary is both example and effective minister is best expressed within a long panegyric letter announcing the death of Monsieur Jean Pille, an early associate whom he regarded as "the happiness and blessing of the Mission." In more than fifteen pages the saint surveys the life and virtues of the priest and concludes, "There is a great deal to be learned and to profit from this for all categories of persons who make up our Congregation. The old will learn not to dispense themselves from the rule; the young, to be submissive; the sick, to be encouraged and to be patient; the healthy, not to pretend to be
working; the spiritual, to perfect themselves; and the sensual to be ashamed at the sight of a sick old man mortifying himself...Those who complain of being unfit for preaching, hearing confessions and carrying out other mission functions because of their infirmity or ailments of body or mind, or because they are left at home to work at something else that they do not like, will learn here that it is a great presumption to imagine that God needs their talent, as if he could not convert souls by some other means, and that obedience, mortification, prayer, patience, and similar virtues win souls better than the lofty sciences and all human industry...."

Recognizing the source of the priest's effectiveness in ministry, Vincent concluded, with extravagant praise, that Monsieur Pille “did more by his suffering than all of us by our activity.”

May, 1997
The Apostolate and Good Health

Good health is a hot item on almost everyone's list these days. There are so many built-in hazards to twentieth century living-stress, foul air, cancer-causing agents, to name a few — that many people are taking a defensive stance against these menaces to well-being. There is a special interest in the topic among religious communities, not only for their members' personal welfare, but, in view of diminishing numbers, for ensuring the reasonable continuance of their useful service in the apostolate.

Although Vincent lived almost eighty years, he had abiding anxieties about his health throughout. A minor current running through his correspondence with Saint Louise de Marillac is a lifelong mutual concern about their respective ailments. Their letters are an affectionate exchange of volleys about their health: fretting about each other ("Take care of yourself."), encouraging and reporting on each other's condition ("I am feeling better." "My catarrh seems to be letting up a little."), and offering commonsense advice or their sometimes quaint remedies. As motivation to her friend to "take care of yourself," Louise executed a clever spin on the Golden Rule that could not help catching Vincent's attention: "You should be kind to your body, as you would be toward that of a poor person."

These practical concerns about health he communicated to his missionaries, especially two extremes to beware of: a too delicate concern for one's health and an inordinate expense of energy that would endanger that health — both to the detriment of the apostolate. Thus, he cautions against the attitude that, "for a little health, an imaginary remedy, an infirmary where nothing shall be lacking, for a house that pleases...and a rest that indulges sloth, the missionary would deprive himself of the freedom of serving the Lord. On the other hand, "Be careful to preserve your health. It is a trick of the devil, which he employs to deceive good souls, to incite them to do more than they are able, in order that they may be no longer able to do anything."
Vincent's good sense navigated a reasonable course between these two extremes. Sickness, of course, was a reality, and in the face of it, the saint ordered that "nothing be lacking to [the sick confrere]...to spare no means to regain his health...[even] that the chalices [be] sold...to achieve this purpose." What he advocates in ordinary practice is a moderate care for oneself, succumbing neither to anxiety nor to overwork. He observes, taking the long view: "You will exercise greater charity by preserving yourself in order to serve your neighbor for a long time to come than by wearing yourself out very soon for the salvation of a few."

It comes to this: "Evangelical workers are treasures that deserve to be carefully guarded."

April, 1990