A Contemporary Tribute

Vincentian novices and scholastics of a bygone day will recall The Sinner's Guide, by Louis of Granada, O.P. as a daily part of the annual retreat. Few might know that it has a connection close to home, in that the French version (1645) was dedicated to Vincent by its translator, Simon Martin. Allowing for its baroque convolutions, we find the dedication not only a fitting personal tribute to the saint but also a worthy appraisal of the blessings that he had brought to the Church of France:

"It is most fitting that this instrument so useful to salvation be placed in the hands of a priest whose charitable actions reconcile not only the hearts of the common people but also of kings, and who, in the role of apostle which he continually carries out personally or through his confreres, extends the kingdom of our sovereign master even to places where his glory was, so to speak, buried and, to put it briefly, where the Lord's vineyard was lying fallow and fruitless, for lack of good workers, and who upheld, as it seems fit, the honor of their master.

"Thanks be to God, France is now more Christian than it ever was; darkness and ignorance are giving place there to the beautiful light of salvation and grace. The flocks, who walk according to the desire of their heart, hear the voice of their shepherds and are recalled to their sheepfold; and the gospel of the crucified one is as well taught to the simplest and most wretched people of the country as it is to the most self-sufficient and important persons in the best cities.

"This happiness comes from the fact that there is almost no corner of the kingdom, obscure as it may be, where these new workers called by your zeal and piety to the Lord's harvest, do not go to distribute the bread of heavenly doctrine and the sacred wine which makes virgins; and they do it with such good results that it is apparent that they are most worthy of the title of disciples of the great Jesus in the service of evangelizing the poor.

"It is then to you, Monsieur, as rightly as to anyone else, that this book
which daily makes so many conquests over the three great enemies of our salvation, should be dedicated, since sinners whose guide it is, receive no less instruction from the example of your life than from the truth of its teachings...."

October, 1990
Among the collection of Vincent's correspondence there is a rich vein of complimentary mail addressed to the saint about the striking effects of his missionaries' works throughout the nation. Vincent expected, as a matter of course, to receive reports from his confreres about the progress of their apostolates, favorable or otherwise, but these others — more than forty in number — are unsolicited tributes.

The letters came from beneficiaries of all kinds: bishops, noblemen and women, town magistrates, individual priests and groups of them, all of whom in some way profited from the services of the Congregation or who hoped to. Bishops valued the effects of the missionaries' presence, who, as one prelate commented, "are presently doing in my diocese more than if I were given a hundred kingdoms. I am perfectly satisfied at seeing all the people in my diocese disposed toward what is good and my pastors profiting greatly from the conferences your priests are establishing with success and with blessings."

Local conferences of priests themselves expressed similar reactions to the work of the missionaries in rejuvenating their local presbyterates. More than one individual priest took it upon himself to write to Vincent about the personal effects in his own life.

The successes of the missions and the retreats were such that their renown spread among the untouched dioceses. Some bishops, desperate to remedy the wretched conditions among their people and clergy, pleaded with Vincent to send them such help as the missionaries could give.

Imagine the plight of the bishop who was "horrified" at the thought of his "nearly seven thousand drunken or lewd priests who ascend the altar every day and who have no vocation." In another diocese, "the clergy are undisciplined, the people without fear and the priests without devotion and charity, pulpits without preachers, knowledge without honor, vice without punishment."
Another cause for appreciation was the help that Vincent sent, by way of alms and supplies, to various districts scourged by war, plague or famine. One such village, suffering from “severe measures from our creditors and acts of cruelty on the part of the soldiers, who forcibly deprived us of what little bread we had,” was saved by “one of your children in our Lord who arrived laden with alms and greatly mitigated the excess of our misfortunes and revived our hope in the mercy of the good God.” Other villages in similar straits made their pleas: “Your charity is so great that everybody has recourse to it. Everyone here considers you the refuge of the afflicted poor. That is why several persons have come to me, that I might refer them to you and so that by this means, they might experience the effects of your goodness.”

Vincent did not seek this acclaim. His formula for “success” lay in the very witness of the ministers and their labors: “Good living and the good odor of the Christian virtues put into practice draw the black sheep back to the right path and confirm Catholics on it.” Added to good example is “the exercise of our works, such as instructing the people in our ordinary manner, preaching against vice and bad morals, establishing and encouraging the virtues, showing their necessity, their beauty, their practice, and the means of acquiring them.”

*February, 1991*
Because the Double Family celebrates on 15 March the feast of Saint Louise de Marillac, friend and collaborator of Saint Vincent de Paul, it is fitting that both saints share the stage this month.

There was a relationship of many dimensions that developed over the long years of their association. It moved from the quasi-dominance on Vincent's part to a stage of mutuality. Thus, early on, Vincent was Louise's spiritual guide and her director in ministry. In time, their spiritual association developed into a close friendship. Similarly, in the apostolate, the relationship moved from Vincent's role as her supervisor in ministry to their equal status as collaborators and ultimately as co-founders and superiors of the Daughters of Charity.

These and other helpful insights into this association are offered by Father Hugh O'Donnell, C.M. and Sister Margaret John Kelly, D.C. in addresses delivered at the 1989 Symposium, "The Age of Gold." Rather than reinvent the topic we offer some excerpts that further illustrate the relationship. We trust that this does not oversimplify a subject that the authors treat at length in its complexity.

Focusing on the saints' mutual affection, Father O'Donnell cites Jean Calvet, who characterized it as "the very ideal of that friendship between beings with whom God always makes a third." Vincent confirmed this observation in a letter to Louise: "May our Lord be in our hearts and our hearts in his, so that they may be three in one and one in three and that we may wish only what he wills."

One way to approach their friendship, suggests O'Donnell, is "to consider the beneficent aspect of love, which is to desire and will the good of another. What did Vincent desire and will for Louise? There are a number of passages which make it clear that he rejoiced most in her conformity to the divine will, in her abiding in God's love, in her patient, peaceful, and joyful honoring of divine providence, and in her love for the poor."

Moving from beneficent love to friendship, O'Donnell asks the question:
"What was the good, what were the goods that they shared? In other words, what was the common ground of the relationship? It seems to me that each independently, and then both together, had in common the love of God and the love of the poor. They found God in their own hearts, in one another’s heart, and in the hearts of the poor. My image is of Vincent and Louise standing side by side, rather than face to face. Their love and communion were fired by two realities: the goodness of God and the mystery of the poor. They had a shared experience of God’s providential goodness welling up in their hearts and were of one heart in responding to the mystery of the poor."

Sister Margaret John considers the relationship from Louise’s perspective:
“The relationship of Vincent and Louise was extraordinary and was characterized by mutual development. The two were quite different in personality and leadership styles, but they shared the same core values and esteemed the same virtues. In their canon of personal virtues, they both gave priority to simplicity, respect, compassion, mildness or gentleness, and cordiality. Each had experienced and was humbled by a serious temptation against faith. Each was a sensitive self-aware individual. Both recognized their need for emotional support and professional affirmation, although Louise was more honest and direct in admitting this."

“They shared the charism of concern for the poor but their roles were complementary, or better, unitary in approach. Louise and the Daughters witnessed to Christ by serving the physical and social needs of the poor, while Vincent and the missionaries focused directly on evangelization. They were totally comfortable with each other, and despite temporary periods of dependence on Louise’s part, they enjoyed a spiritual, apostolic, and social interdependence. The experience of their own human solidarity strengthened their mission to the poor. When Vincent dropped the paternalistic ‘my daughter’ and replaced it with ‘Mademoiselle’, he signaled his perception that Louise was indeed his collaborator and his equal."

“Would Vincent have grown as he did without Louise? I do not think so. Would Louise have matured the way she did without Vincent? I think not. Can we precisely define this mutual influence? No, because it was multi-faceted and lifelong, but we can gain insights into the richness of the relationship...The relationship of Vincent and Louise was mutually productive and developmental; their friendship presented the lived ideal of the highest order of friendship but it was based in the reality of their humanity.”

It is impossible, Sister Margaret John concludes, to capture completely the meaning and the richness of this thirty-five year relationship: “the generative mutuality of their friendship and the enduring fruit of their shared spirituality and collaborative ministries.” And yet, she continues, “to reflect on these basic sources and the insights they offer is to evoke reassurance of these saints’ struggling humanity, to deepen the respect for their developing sanctity, and to express
gratitude for their vision which continues to inspire and motivate. We can conclude by echoing the Very Reverend Richard McCullen, successor of Saint Vincent, "Their collaboration...became one of the most marvelous and fruitful witnesses to the complementarity between a man and woman, between a male and a female saint who placed all the resources of their widely divergent personalities at the service of the ideal."

March, 1991

Windows on His Vision
The Resurrection of Louise De Marillac

The story of the widow Tabitha (or ‘Dorcas’ in Greek) is a happy choice as the second reading for the feast of Saint Louise de Marillac. Tabitha was “a woman disciple” revered in the Jaffa community, “who never tired of doing good or giving in charity.” In time she got sick and soon died, but was restored to life by the apostle Peter.

The fit of this story to that of Louise is a nice one. The match goes beyond the evident similarities between two women who are widowed, renowned for good works, and esteemed in the community. What is significant in the stories for the present purpose is the “resurrection” that each woman experiences. The modes are different, but the consequences are similar. Peter's action is a dramatic summons to return to life: “Tabitha, stand up.” In response, “she opened her eyes, looked at Peter and sat up. [He] helped her to her feet.” In addition to restoring Tabitha for further service to the Christian community, Peter acted in the event as a witness to the risen Christ and a sign to the wider community, because “the whole of Jaffa heard about it and many believed in the Lord.”

In Louise’s case, of course, there was no actual death nor even any single act that effected her transformation. Rather, it was a series of events that proved life-giving and in turn served to invigorate her spirit, confirm her in her gifts, and make clear the path toward which her true destiny pointed. Although more than one person on occasion shared in the process — Saint Francis de Sales, Pierre Camus, bishop of Belley, and her uncle, Michel de Marillac, for instance — it was Vincent de Paul who played a major, sustained role in the story. He indeed “helped her to her feet.”

In each case providence saw fit to place Peter and Vincent nearby in order to achieve its purposes. The apostle was at Lydda, not far from Jaffa, and when it was known that he was there, the urgent message arrived from the disciples at Jaffa, “Come and visit us as soon as possible.” Vincent, too, was at hand in Louise’s life.
at propitious moments to serve in her rebirth. In fact, even before anything happened, she was assured in 1623 that she would meet a proper director ("one whom God seemed to show me") who would lead her through the shadows. That person was Vincent de Paul.

As noted, the transformation was an ongoing process, not an instantaneous action. Although the route itself is not sharply defined, there were some clear markings along the way, the figure of Vincent standing nearby. The first might be Louise's Pentecost experience in 1623, with the reassurances that she experienced and the intimation about her future director; then her first serious encounter with Vincent in 1624-25; her husband's death in 1625, which freed her further for good works; her first participation in Vincent's charitable works for the poor beginning in 1626, which served to take her out of herself; her choice for the presidency of the Confraternity of Charity in her home parish of Saint-Nicholas-du-Chardonnet in 1630.

Vincent aided Louise's transformation in many ways by his presence and his counsel. Louise, in turn, responded well because she began to feel that she was understood. He helped her to deal with the demons that afflicted her, whether those from within her natural temperament or from outside. Thus, her disposition inclined her to doubts about faith and about herself; to scrupulosity, to melancholy. The more tangible demons that Vincent would have recognized were her chronic ill health and the anxieties connected with rearing her son, Michel.

She was searching, too, for enlightenment about her vocation, especially after her husband's death. She was knotted with persistent doubts about the vow to be a Capuchin nun taken before her marriage but continuing even during that time, despite advice given to allay her scruples. In this and other matters Vincent was able to direct her with a firm hand — leading her in a retreat; reassuring her with his ongoing practical advice; carrying her over disappointments; reining her in by tempering her excesses, whether in devotional practices or in austerities toward herself; encouraging her to wait for providence. As Vincent directed her more and more into works of charity he also was steering her away from thoughts of the contemplative life.

Vincent was also an enabler, playing to her gifts. He recognized in Louise a talented woman, intelligent and well read, genuinely spiritual and devoted to the poor. He appreciated, too, her organizational skills (her efficiently managed home and servants came to mind), her attention to detail, and her practical good sense.

He tapped a zeal for the poor that was evident from her earliest years, and he utilized her good example that tended to inspire other women for doing charity, whether they were her household servants or noble ladies. Vincent's confidence in her was such that he put her to work directing the Charities and serving as a troubleshooter to visit the various chapters.
The year 1633 might be considered the final threshold over which Louise crossed to enter new life. The date (29 November) marked the foundation of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, the achievement that henceforth would define her life. Many factors were converging to assure her about where God was leading her. She blossomed in self-confidence. The Confraternities prospered under her leadership. Along with Vincent she discovered a new kind of associate in charity — the Daughters — to collaborate with the Ladies of Charity and saw that these new women could be bonded as a “religious” community into an effective apostolic force for serving the poor.

Louise had indeed stepped into new life. She emerged more focused in vision and purpose, and renewed in confidence and energy. Led by providence, and accompanied by Vincent, she arrived at a moment in her journey when she was so confirmed in direction and commitment that she could first adopt as her own the motto used to characterize her Daughters, “Given to God for the service of the poor.”

March, 1992
Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, 
Friend and Confidante

Among the many friends in Vincent’s life, two stood out at its chronological and spiritual center: Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva, and Jane Frances de Chantal, co-founder (with him) of the Order of the Visitation of Saint Mary. It was an association of twenty-three years, beginning with their meeting in 1618-19 and ending with the death of Jane Frances in 1641. Although the bishop died in 1622, he remained the third member of their collaboration. Francis continued as the guiding spirit of his Visitation community, an abiding spiritual mentor for both Vincent and Jane Frances, and in general, a saintly hero to the age.

Vincent’s kinship with the spirit of Francis was such that he was a worthy steward of the legacy of the saint. Shortly before the bishop’s death he and Jane Frances prevailed upon Vincent to be the superior of the first Paris Visitation monastery (and the others at Paris later), despite Vincent’s fear that the commitment would detract from his service to the poor. Likewise, after Francis’ death, Jane Frances, recognizing a man who embodied the bishop’s spirituality, chose Vincent as friend, advisor and confidant, which he discharged until her death. She appreciated the wisdom of his spiritual direction, his practical sense, and his support over the years in guiding the Order through many canonical and political thicketts. “...God inspires in me a very special sense of support and peace regarding your judgment...,” she tells Vincent, for instance, in regard to the ongoing discussion about the “apostolic visitor” proposed for her houses. She viewed him in a special light: “Be always a true father and protector for us, I beg you...” Vincent found Jane Frances an impressive woman and a faithful friend. Because her duties called her away from Paris to Annecy and other foundations, their communications were conducted mainly by correspondence. Regrettably, most of her letters were lost. In a deposition after her death, Vincent declared that he was so touched by the depth of her humility, her openness and her holiness that he read her letters with tears. “I never
noticed any imperfection in her, but rather a continual practice of all manner of virtues...She was one of the holiest souls I have known on earth...I have no doubt that God will one day manifest her sanctity."

On her part, in addition to her devotion to Vincent, Jane Frances' bond of friendship and admiration extended to Vincent's family as well. In early 1640 Vincent assigned five missionaries to Annecy, in the diocese of Geneva, where the Visitation monastery was located. In the year before, Vincent responded with a chatty letter to her request to know more about his Congregation, its practices, the order of the day, etc. He asks her reactions to his account. Soon after, he wrote her again to temper what he thought was the too complimentary picture he drew of the Company. As she reports to the saint about the arrival of "your dear children, ...everyone is delighted with them in our Lord...It seems that they are our real brothers, with whom we feel a perfect union of heart, and they with us, in a holy simplicity, openness, and trust. I spoke to them and they to me as though they were truly sisters of the Visitation. They all have great goodness and candor." Indeed, as she proclaims in another letter, "They, the missionaries, are so good that it takes little to please them...I think this mission here will put more souls in paradise than many others, with the help of divine grace."

In turn, Vincent appreciated the goodness of Jane Frances and her daughters in welcoming the newcomers to Annecy, not only with good wishes, but also with "the incomparable kindnesses you unceasingly bestow on our missionaries and on me," specifically, some of the necessary furnishings for setting up the house.

One grace in particular that Vincent cherished was Jane's willingness and availability to receive the missionaries' "communications" (the practice in the Company of each member to disclose regularly to the superior the progress of one's inner life). Such was Vincent's confidence in her wisdom and good sense that he gave permission to his missionaries to discharge this spiritual responsibility as a regular practice. There was an ease in the saints' exchange of information about the confreres. Thus in her letter announcing their arrival at Annecy, she confides to Vincent a brief sketch of her first impressions of each of the men. In another letter Vincent discusses with her his own impressions of some of the issues the men are struggling with, and with which she was familiar.

Vincent's general estimate of Jane's warm relationship with the Company appears in the words by which he characterized it. Although he addresses Jane as "Mother," her religious designation as superior, he views her in another way relative to the Congregation. He sees her in a familial role, thanking her "for all your grandmotherly kindesses toward your dear sons, your missionaries...." Whether "motherly" or "grandmotherly," the message is clear about the mutual affection.

Many people touched Vincent in his lifetime — kings and queens, nobles

St. Vincent de Paul
and ecclesiastics, rich and poor, saints and sinners. The chapter of his life that contained Francis de Sales and Jane Frances de Chantal, however, marked a special association, whose memory never faded. Pilgrims who met at one point of the journey, they held true to their friendship to the end. Today, their spiritual sons and daughters still bask in the sunshine that beams from that remarkable circle of friendship.

(The liturgy honors Saint Jane Frances de Chantal on 12 December.)

December, 1991
Testimonial for a Saint

(The saint wrote this letter at the request of the superioress of the Visitation monastery in Paris. It is addressed to Pope Alexander VII as a testimonial on behalf of the canonization of Francis de Sales, who was bishop of Geneva, founder of the Order of the Visitation, and a great friend and mentor of Vincent. The canonization took place in 1665, and Francis was named a doctor of the Church in 1877.)

6 June 1659

To Pope Alexander VII

Most Holy Father, I know that all of France and many nations are urgently petitioning Your Holiness to deign to inscribe in the number of the saints the Most Illustrious and Most Reverend Francis de Sales, bishop of Geneva. I know also that Your Holiness, filled with admiration for the outstanding virtues that shone in him and the books of such lofty devotion that he composed, holds his memory in the highest veneration and, consequently, seems disposed to carry out this intention, with no need of petitions coming from others and especially from a man as wretched and unknown as I am.

Nevertheless, Most Holy Father, since I had a very close relationship with this excellent servant of God, who deigned to converse frequently with me, either concerning the Institute of the Visitation Nuns of Sainte-Marie, which he established and founded, or other pious matters, I admired in him so many great virtues that it is very difficult for me to keep silence on this occasion and to be the only person to say nothing.

Faith, hope, charity, and other cardinal and Christian moral virtues seemed almost innate in him. Taken together, they formed in him — at least to my way of thinking — such goodness that, during an illness that came upon me shortly after speaking with him, I took pleasure in turning over in my mind often his gentleness

St. Vincent de Paul
and exquisite meekness, repeating very frequently these words: “Oh! How good God is, since the bishop of Geneva is so good!”

If I were the only one in the world to think this of him, Most Holy Father, I might believe that I was deceiving myself; but, since everyone shares these sentiments with me, what more could be desired to complete such a holy work, Most Holy Father, than a word from Your Holiness, willing to place Francis de Sales in the catalogue of the saints and proposing him to the veneration of the entire world? This is what all the priests of our Congregation and I myself, prostrate at the feet of Your Holiness, ask of you by our most humble petitions. May God, who is the best and the greatest, deign to preserve you for many years for the welfare of his Church!

I am, Most Holy Father …

January, 1997
Bishop Louis Abelly: Vincent de Paul's Boswell

A ny reader in Vincentian history must acknowledge the presence and the name of Louis Abelly, whose biography, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul, Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*, is the doorway to much of the information that we have about Saint Vincent's life and his utterances. Others less familiar with the name might have a question: Who is this man?

The span of his life covers the years 1604-1691. Among the known facts, he was born in Paris and had his education at the Sorbonne, although seemingly without a doctorate. He was ordained to the priesthood in the vicinity of 1628-29. He was appointed bishop of Rodez in 1662, but, caught in the middle of political conflicts, he was not ordained to the episcopacy until 1664, when the *Life* was published. In September of that same year he had a stroke, which left him partially paralyzed. He retired to Saint-Lazare, where he died in 1691.

Abelly's life drew him into the magnetic field of Vincent's influence. Although the saint's first mention of him was in a 1638 letter, their meeting was probably earlier. Abelly was a member of the Tuesday Conferences. Another connection with Vincent was his participation in the anti-Jansenist wars with his writings. With Vincent's recommendation he became vicar-general of the diocese of Bayonne, whose bishop, François de Fouquet, was also a member of the Tuesday Conferences and whose mother was a Lady of Charity. On his journey to Bayonne, Abelly stopped in Dax and met many of Vincent's relatives. A remarkable coincidence during service in Bayonne was that he met briefly a man named Bertrand Ducournau, who was Fouquet's steward at the time and who later joined the Congregation of the Mission. Bertrand later served as Vincent's secretary and was able to help Abelly considerably with writing the biography.
Among the forty books Abelly wrote in his lifetime the one that is relevant here and his most famous was the Life. Its origins lay in a request from some "Gentlemen of the Mission," and the requests of "very many persons of quality who particularly honored [Monsieur Vincent's] memory." These reasons encouraged him to offer this history of the saint's life. There were questions of Abelly's part in the authorship. One extreme theory rose in the eighteenth century, and was dismissed by Coste in the twentieth, that the bishop merely lent his name to the work. Actually Abelly was in a unique position to be its author. He had known the saint personally for many years and he had the advantages of hearing the personal testimonies of Vincent's contemporaries and of having some letters of the saint and other authentic documentation that might not have been survived the French Revolution. In good faith the bishop submitted his completed text to Monsieur Almèras, Vincent's successor as superior general, and to others for examination.

The modern critic is concerned not so much with the author's role in the composition, never seriously doubted, but with the use that he made of these sources. In this respect Abelly differs from Boswell, who claimed that his biography of Samuel Johnson would be inclusive, "warts and all." There is a hagiographical bent to some of Abelly's early narrative, so that Vincent was virtually "Saint Vincent" from his birth. Perhaps this was to prepare for canonization and give a convincing account of his holiness. Perhaps it was a reluctance to admit that Vincent had faults. There are inaccuracies about dates (e.g. changing Vincent's birth date in order to accommodate his ordination date), or about incidents that were pious exaggerations or of questionable authenticity (e.g. the temptation against faith, the substitution for the galley slave), or about canonically questionable practices in which Vincent indulged, such as holding multiple benefices.

On the other hand, the writer took it upon himself to tone down other data that he felt were detrimental to the pious image of the saint. For instance, he did not hesitate to change documents to put Vincent's actions in a more favorable light, or to "improve" what he considered inelegant passages of Vincent's linguistic style. He sometimes was unwise in maintaining a proper proportion between significant and trivial details. As regards something that was beyond Abelly's culpability, he suffered the lack of historical distance and perspective on people and events. Thus, in some cases it was premature to make historical judgments on contemporary figures. For prudential reasons there is the temptation to eulogize those to whom one is beholden, or to be silent about those not worthy of honorable truth, or about whom it would be impolitic to tell the truth.

The critics agree in saying that Abelly is more trustworthy when he describes the later years of Saint Vincent than when he describes his youth. Even Vincent himself was reticent in speaking about those years. Nevertheless, says Coste, "whatever may be said of [Abelly's] imperfections, which are serious enough in form though trifling in

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matter, Abelly's life of Saint Vincent, in which we have almost verbatim accounts of persons who were actual witnesses of what they related, should and will, we trust, remain the chief source on which future biographers will draw."

"Unique and indispensable" though it is, the Life is "a source that cannot be used uncritically," say Abelly's modern editors. Much has happened since 1664, and even since Coste's day: advances in historical research; different approaches to biography (less hagiography and edification, more reality); the emergence of more letters and documents. "The change of approach has not diminished the saint's stature. Rather, it gives us a picture that is simultaneously more realistic and more appealing. Unfortunately, this fresh research and the insights it has engendered have not yet been incorporated into any modern biography. What an English speaking readership still needs is a new, comprehensive, accurate biography based on original documents and the most current research."

*December, 1994*
Heroes

As a saint-to-be, Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre, C.M. is the man of the hour, a cause for celebration, a hero whom the Congregation can toast. However, John Gabriel's martyrdom is but one moment in the long history of heroes of the Congregation, for every age has had its heroes who have made heavy sacrifices for the mission. Of course, anyone who has led the life of the missionary can claim a share of sacrifices, but there are some confreres who endured extraordinary sacrifices, either by way of extreme physical or moral suffering or of the ultimate sacrifice in death.

This parade began in Vincent's own lifetime, when he shared in spirit the many tribulations of his missionaries. The catastrophes of the Madagascar mission, for instance, are proverbial in Vincentian lore: an endless line of missionaries poised to join the mission but thwarted by so many obstacles: maddening delays in setting sail, losses to shipwreck, the hardships of the journeys. Arrival at the island promised equally disastrous sufferings — experiences of the deadly climate, of sickness, of hostile natives and sometimes their own French compatriots. Even after Vincent's death his successor, René Almèras, in the saint's name, pursued the mission — in 1663, 1665 and 1666 — by sending a total of eleven priests and seven brothers to the island, who according to Coste, fared no better: "One was poisoned, three were massacred, the others, for the most part died in the prime of manhood, the victims of the climate."

In other settings abroad, like Barbary, for instance, where they ministered to the Christian slaves imprisoned by the Turks, the missionaries lived almost equally at risk. Names like Guerin, Huigier, Philip and John Le Vacher, Husson, and Barreau were prominent in the correspondence of Saint Vincent — serving the wretched and plague-stricken slaves as their advocates with the authorities and as go-
between for the prisoners' families for handling ransoms. The missionaries lived in an uneasy peace, which they bought by holding political positions as French consuls, which made them politically acceptable. They were even able to do pastoral work among the galley slaves, being the only priests to minister, sometimes to the point of gaining the Turks' admiration. But there were hard times too: some died after being exposed to the plague; religious hostilities put some missionaries into prison and led to beatings; they were held hostage by reason of ransoms unpaid, or they suffered expulsion from the country. The ultimate sacrifice was that of John Le Vacher, who, many years after Vincent's death, died at the mouth of a cannon rather than apostatize.

The missions to the British Isles occasioned further anxieties. Vincent sent missionaries to Ireland in 1646 at the request of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide. The band of about nine—a mix of priests, clerics and lay brothers—were thrown into a setting of fierce religious persecution, war, plague, and famine. For the six years they worked there, despite dangers and anxieties arising from their public ministrations in a hostile environment, they enjoyed success and the appreciation of the people. As the bishop of Limerick remarked after seeing the missionaries attending to the persecuted and plague-stricken people, "Alas, even if Monsieur Vincent had done nothing else for the glory of God save the good he has wrought for those poor people, he should consider himself happy." Vincent's attitude was a bit different. To a priest who wanted to write a history of the mission there, the saint said, "It is enough that God knows the good that has been done; the Little Company should honor the hidden life of Jesus Christ. Let us put our confidence in the martyrs; their blood will be the seed from which new Christians will spring." One of the workers indeed did make the sacrifice: Thaddeus Lee, a cleric, who was massacred before his mother's eyes.

The activities of the missionaries in Scotland and the Hebrides were hardly less stressful. They too entered an environment of persecution and hardship in trying to reinforce the faithful or to reclaim those who had strayed from the Church. The closest they came to paying the ultimate price was the imprisonment of Francis White. He was released after five months because it could not be proved that he had engaged in such "forbidden" actions as celebrating mass or exercising any other ministerial functions. Although threatened with hanging if he would have returned after his expulsion, he did return and worked until 1679, when the mission to Scotland came to an end.

"At home," that is, on the continent, especially in France, plague, famine and other hardships from the wars of religion were habitual companions to many of the missionaries as they labored in Lorraine, Picardy and Champagne. In ministering to the refugees only one missionary is known to have died, and that from exhaustion, but there were others who were equally at risk from the stress of that
service. As the rector of the Jesuit college in Bar-le-duc told Saint Vincent, “Your priests are gentle and amenable in all things save in taking the advice given them to give their bodies a little repose. They think that bodies are not made of flesh and blood or that life should last only a year.”

There were other hazards to the missionaries just in providing materials to the refugees. Bandits and renegade soldiers preyed on the caravans carrying alms and supplies to the relief sites where the refugees awaited them. So great was the danger, especially at the beginning of the project, that Vincent was forced to request a royal decree of protection for the carriers. The proclamation had its effect in declaring that the priests of the Mission “shall have full and complete liberty to exercise their charity in those places and in whatsoever manner as may seem good to them.” Part of the lore of these times concerns a certain lay brother, Matthew Regnard who became legendary for his skill in evading capture or robbery, or even personal danger when he would be trapped by the bandits.

Working among the plague-stricken was almost an occupational hazard for some of the missionaries. They found these conditions in such varied places as Genoa, Rome, and Cracow. The mission in Genoa was the most intense locale of their service, where for a time six thousand persons a day were dying. The confreres there, fearless of infection, served selflessly and gave up their house for a hospital for the sick. They were zealous but not reckless. In fact, Vincent had to counsel prudence to one confrere: “You should say and do all that you can. God does not ask for more. He knows your dispositions and will certainly know how to summon you by name when the hour comes for him to employ you....” The missionaries eventually paid the price, in that seven of them died from the plague.

Thus in his own time Vincent came to know well the price exacted for preaching the gospel. His attitude provided a model of resignation and acceptance for future generations in facing the hardships and reversals in promoting the mission. This example was timely, for the price of preaching the gospel continued to be high and called forth many more heroes.

II

The parade hardly missed a step after Vincent’s death.

China

China was to be a new and consistent proving ground for heroes. The introduction of a Vincentian missionary to the country happened in the late 1690s when Ludovico Appiani, C.M., with a contingent of other religious, was chosen by the Congregation of Propaganda Fide to found a seminary for native clergy at either Beijing or Canton.
And the parade goes on. Vincent knew there would be challenging times for his missionaries. In fact, he once declared that “all who come to the Company [should do so] with the thought of martyrdom, with the desire to suffer death and to consecrate themselves totally to serve God either in a foreign land or here at home....” On his own part, Vincent often expressed envy of those who were engaged in perilous missions, as he confessed to a priest destined for Madagascar: “There is nothing I desire more upon this earth, if it were permitted, that I might be your companion on this mission.”

The times and the missions are still challenging. Maintaining the continuity, our superior general, Father Robert Maloney, C.M. has himself initiated such missionary enterprises around the world and has sounded the call for missionaries to carry them out. None will be easy, he promises, but for one, Rwanda, he even says “I feel as if I am calling for martyrs,” given the recent past history of that unfortunate country.

It is not canonical, but it almost seems that, given its consistency throughout the Congregation’s history, heroism could be a sixth characteristic community virtue.

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