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The Formative Years of a Saint: Vincent de Paul: 1595-1617

BY
STAFFORD POOLE, C.M.

Historical research during this century has added immeasurably to our knowledge of the early life of Saint Vincent de Paul. This development was inaugurated by Pierre Coste, C.M., in his pioneering treatise on the saint’s true birth date.¹ He carried it further with his biography, *Monsieur Vincent: le grand saint du grand siécle*, which corrected many of the inaccuracies of Vincent’s first biographer, Louis Abelly.² Subsequent studies by other authors have helped to clarify the extent to which Saint Vincent’s life prior to 1617 had become encrusted with pious legend, exaggeration, and speculation. The search for the historical Vincent must begin with these years. A careful analysis may deprive us of some familiar stories, hallowed by tradition and centuries of repetition. It will also show us a more human Vincent whose ascent to sanctity was based not on the miraculous and extraordinary but on an open, sometimes groping, response to God’s will.

The purpose of this study is to survey the formative years of Saint Vincent de Paul, with a special emphasis on his growth into sanctity. It consists of three parts. The first deals with his life from the time that he left his childhood home in the village of Pouy to attend school in Dax until his disappearance in 1605. The second deals with the missing years, 1605-1607, that is, the period of the controversial Tunisian captivity. The third covers his life from his arrival in Paris in 1608 or 1609 until the time of the famed sermon at Folleville on 25 January 1617.

¹Pierre Coste, C.M., *La vraie date de la naissance de Saint Vincent de Paul* (Dax: 1922).
1. 1595-1605

Jean de Paul, Vincent’s father, had decided on an ecclesiastical career for his son, and that meant that the boy had to be educated. Fortunately, the Franciscans had a secondary school or collège in nearby Dax. It was there that the young Vincent went. The question is: when?

Early Schooling in Dax

The chronology of these years is not always clear. Saint Vincent spoke of “having lived in the country until the age of fifteen." Coste interpreted this to mean that Saint Vincent went to school in Dax at the beginning of his fifteenth year, and so he favored the date of 1595. On the other hand, Louis Abelly, the saint’s first biographer, wrote that he began his studies in Dax “about the year 1588." Since Abelly dated Vincent’s birth in 1576, this would have meant that the future saint was about twelve years old. Abelly also said that Vincent spent nine years in his studies, that is, finishing them about the year 1597. The latter date seems certain since Vincent’s degree in theology from the university of Toulouse, dated 12 October 1604, stated that he had been studying there for seven years. The best that can be said is that Vincent probably entered the Franciscan school at Dax in 1594 or 1595, between the ages of thirteen and fifteen, and stayed there until he went to Toulouse in 1597. The only known incident from his years in Dax is the famous one that he related to Madame de Lamoignon. “I remember that once . . . at the college where I was studying, I was informed that my father, who was a poor peasant, was asking for me. I refused to go talk to him. In so doing I committed a great sin.”

Through the agency of the Franciscan guardian (superior), Vincent came to the notice of Monsieur de Comet, a lawyer of Dax and the district judge of Pouy, who became his benefactor and paid for his education. Vincent lived in Comet’s home during the rest of his stay in Dax and tutored the Comet children while pursuing his own studies. According to Coste, Vincent studied at Dax for two years and, by the

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4Coste, The Life and Works, 1:14.
5Abelly, Vie, book 1, chapter 3:11. Abelly is not reliable regarding the data of Vincent’s youth.
6Abelly, Vie, book 1, chapter 3:12; Coste, Life and Works, 1:14, n. 44, and 1:24, n. 68. In both notes Coste said that the university had granted the degree but gave no source for this.
7Coste, Life and Works, 1:14.
reckoning of the French system, finished the fifth and fourth grades or forms, thus completing the famous fourth form to which he was to refer in later life.8

Did He Study at Zaragoza?

On 20 December 1596, with the permission of the chapter of Dax (for the see was vacant at the time), Vincent de Paul received tonsure and the four minor orders at the collegiate church of Bidache at the hands of the bishop of the neighboring diocese of Tarbes.9 By modern reckoning he was fifteen or sixteen years old.10 The following year he left to begin his theological studies at the university of Toulouse. According to Abelly he interrupted his course of studies to spend some time at the university of Zaragoza in Spain. “It is true that during that time he went to Spain and stayed for a while at Zaragoza in order to do some studying there also.”11 Coste did not accept the story, which he considered unlikely for a young student in straitened circumstances—although such changes of schools were not uncommon in that century.12 José María Román, on the other hand, spends considerable time in trying to prove the likelihood of the account and showing that Saint Vincent had a first hand knowledge of Spain.13 Granted that some of the saint’s statements indicate a knowledge of things Spanish, this would not have been extraordinary for someone who was born fifty miles from the border and who had frequent contact with the Spanish born queen of France, Anne of Austria. He made one statement that is often thought to refer to Spain.

I was once in a kingdom where a religious, on his way to seek out the king, asked for news of the court, and the person he asked said to him, “What! Father, is it necessary that religious meddle in the affairs of kings!” The point is that in that kingdom no one talks about the king. And because his person is sacred, they have so much respect for everything that concerns

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8Ibid., 1:15-16.
9Coste, Life and Works, 1:16. The attestations of these ordinations can be found in CED, 13:1-7. Abelly gives the date as 19 September, but he is consistently wrong about the dates of the various orders (Vie, book 1, chapter 3:10).
10The precise age depends on whether one accepts 1580 or 1581 as the year of Vincent’s birth. Coste favored 1581 on the grounds that all the saint’s references to his age indicate the year as begun, not completed. For a discussion of the issue, see Douglas Slawson, C.M., “The Phantom Five Years,” Vincentian Heritage 2 (1981):81-93.
11Abelly, Vie book 1, chapter 3:10.
12Coste, Life and Works, 1:19-20.
him that they never speak of him. And as a result everyone in that
kingdom is closely bound to the king, and it is not permitted to say a word
against his orders. 14

One difficulty is that these assertions do not seem applicable to
Spain where there had traditionally been a great deal of freedom in
writing to the king, even though he remained a remote figure. Not long
before Vincent spoke those words, Spain had experienced two revolts,
a successful one in Portugal (a Spanish dominion since 1580) and an
unsuccessful one in Catalunya. 15 While it is remotely possible that Saint
Vincent was speaking of Spain, that does not demonstrate that he
pursued theological courses at Zaragoza. In general Spanish university
records of that time were well kept, and many have survived almost
intact. Unfortunately, those of the university of Zaragoza were de­
stroyed in the 1936-1939 civil war. In the present state of knowledge the
assertion that Vincent de Paul studied at Zaragoza is highly dubious.

Coste has given a rather complete description
of the university of
Toulouse and its “nations.” 16 As Román has pointed out, however,
these questions have distracted historians from a far more important
one: what kind of theological education was given at Toulouse? 17 What
school and system of theology predominated? Which teachers were
most influential, and how would they have affected the thought and
formation of the young Vincent? Unfortunately, these questions cannot
be answered because the matter has never been researched.

During Vincent’s first year at the university his father died. In his
will Jean de Paul urged his family to spare no sacrifice so that Vincent
could continue his studies. 18 Either these sacrifices were insufficient or
Vincent did not wish to be a burden to his family because he soon
accepted an offer to direct an academy for small boys at Buzet-sur-
Tarn, a short distance from Toulouse. 19 Vincent seems to have been a natural
teacher, for the reputation of his small school spread quickly. He soon

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14 Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 6 January 1658, CED, 10:446.
15 If he was not speaking about Spain, what kingdom was he referring to? Perhaps it was one of
those through which he passed on his journey to Rome in 1601.
16 Coste, Life and Works, 1:16-19.
17 Román, San Vicente de Paul, 51.
18 Abelly, Vie, book 1, chapter 3:12. The date of 7 February 1598 for the will, given by some recent
biographers, comes from Collet, who gave no source for it. See Pierre Collet, C.M., La Vie de Saint
Vincent de Paul, Institutrice de la Congregation de la mission, & des Filles de la Charité, 2 vols. (Nancy: 1748),
1:13.
19 Abelly calls it a régence and says that the boys lived as boarders, (Vie, book 1, chapter 3:12).
moved the school to Toulouse so that he could continue his studies. This combination of being a teacher and student was not unusual in that century. Despite the success of his school, Vincent's financial situation seems to have remained somewhat precarious.

The Road to the priesthood

On 19 September 1598, Vincent was ordained a subdeacon and three months later, 19 December, a deacon, both times by the same bishop of Tarbes who had given him tonsure and minor orders. The see of Dax was still without a bishop at the time of both these ordinations, and so the dimissorial letters were issued by the vicar general. Dimissorials for the priesthood were issued on 13 September 1599, also by the vicar general of Dax. It seems plausible that Vincent's intention was to be ordained at the following Quarter Tense (Ember Days), the traditional time for such ordinations. He waited more than a year, however, before seeking ordination. When he did so, he did not go to the newly installed bishop of Dax, his own ordinary, nor even to the neighboring bishop of Tarbes. Rather, he went to some distance and inconvenience to receive ordination from François de Bourdeilles, bishop of Périgueux. The ceremony was performed in the bishop's private chapel in what is now the village of Château-l'Évêque on 23 September 1600.

Why Périgueux? The bishop was old (eighty-four years of age), blind, and famous for the ease with which he performed irregular ordinations. He died a little over a month after Vincent's ordination. Coste says of Vincent that "the young priest was not twenty years of age." That, of course, is based on Coste's computation that Saint Vincent was born in 1581. From one point of view, the fact that he was under age should not have caused him to go to such trouble in seeking out a bishop. His dimissorials were in order, and there had been no problem of age in his previous advances toward the priesthood.

As for the reason why Vincent went to Périgueux, Coste writes "There is not the slightest ground for even a conjecture." That is not

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20CED, 10:4, 5-6; Román, San Vicente de Paúl, 58. Again, Abelly gives erroneous dates, 27 February for the subdiaconate and 29 December for the diaconate (Vie, book 1, chapter 3:10).
21Coste, Monsieur Vincent, 1:37-38; CED, 10:6-7; Román, San Vicente de Paúl, 53. On this point Joseph Leonard's translation of Coste's French is erroneous. Whereas Coste says, "Le jeune prêtre n'avait pas vingt ans," Leonard translates, "The young priest was only twenty years of age," (Life and Works, 1:21)
22Coste, Life and Works, 1:38.
correct, for the evidence does permit some plausible speculations. The Council of Trent had decreed twenty-four years of age as the minimum for the priesthood. The disciplinary decrees of Trent, however, were not accepted in France until 1615. Irregular ordinations were frequent and dispensations easy to come by, though there is no evidence for such dispensations in the life of Saint Vincent. Étienne Diebold, C.M., has shown that the newly appointed bishop of Dax, Jean-Jacques Dussault, was a reformer who attempted to put the Tridentine program of reform into practice. For that purpose he convened a diocesan synod on 18 April 1600, between Vincent’s dimissorials and his ordination. It is plausible that the bishop’s reforming tendencies obstructed Vincent’s progress toward the priesthood and caused him to go elsewhere. The young man was not yet a saint, and he was following a path common at the time, one that he had already followed in his earlier years.

It seems certain that in later years the memory of this method of attaining the priesthood was embarrassing to him. His closest associates, even those who had been with him from the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission, never heard him speak of his ordination nor did they know the date and place of it. In 1658 Brother Bertrand Ducoumau, Vincent’s secretary, wrote to the Canon de Saint-Martin in Dax to ask him for particulars on Vincent’s ordination and other events of his early life, because no one at Saint Lazare knew anything about them.

It was only at his death that the documentation of his various ordinations was found. The circumstances of his ordination, together with an exalted concept of the priesthood, may explain Vincent’s statement, repeated in various forms at different times, “As for me, if I had know what it [the priesthood] was when I had the rashness of entering it, as I learned later, I would have preferred to till the earth than to commit myself to such a redoubtable state.” Expressions such as this were the feelings of an old man, advanced in sanctity, looking back on the follies of youth.

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24Román, San Vicente de Paul, 53-54.
25Ducournau to Saint-Martin, from Paris, August 1658, CED, 8:514.
The Parish of Tilh

Whatever the circumstances of his ordination, it is difficult to say if they harmed his standing with his bishop. In 1607 he asked for a letter of recommendation from him, testifying to the fact that he had always enjoyed a good reputation.\(^{27}\) Almost immediately after his ordination, through the instrumentality of Monsieur de Comet, he received an appointment as pastor of the parish of Tilh. Again the uncertainties that surrounded Vincent’s early life arise. According to Abelly, the appointment was made by the vicar general of Dax because the see was vacant.\(^{28}\) In fact the see was not vacant. Even when it had a bishop, however, the vicar general could issue these documents. In the absence of the original documentation, there is no way of knowing for sure how the appointment was made.

Vincent never took possession of the parish. The appointment was contested by a certain Father Saint-Soubé, who was awarded the parish by the Roman Curia. According to Abelly, Vincent did not wish to enter into litigation over it because it would have meant discontinuing his studies.\(^{29}\) Román has cautioned that to see any special holiness in this is to project the later Vincent back into his youth.\(^{30}\) Vincent had against him his youth, the fact that the Roman Curia had made a decision, and perhaps the antipathy of his own bishop, who had had no part in either his ordination or appointment.

The Road to Rome

There is evidence, however, that Vincent did pursue the matter. It is incontrovertible that he went to Rome at about this time, and the affair of Tilh would be the only plausible explanation for it. In later life he made no less than five specific references to a stay in Rome. On 20 July 1631 he wrote to François du Coudray, one of the first Vincentians to be stationed in the Eternal City, “Oh Monsieur, how fortunate you are to walk on the ground where so many great and holy individuals have trod! This consideration moved me to such an extent when I was in

\(^{27}\)Vincent de Paul to M. de Comet, from Rome, 28 February 1608, *CED*, 1:15.
\(^{29}\)Ibid.
\(^{30}\)Román, *San Vicente de Paul*, 61-62.
Rome thirty years ago that, although I was burdened with sins, I could not help being affected, even, to tears, it seems to me.”

That Vincent was not using the term “thirty years” in a wide sense is shown by the other four references, all of which place the journey in the pontificate of Clement VIII (1592-1605).

I have seen a holy pope, who was Clement VIII, a most holy man, so holy that the heretics themselves would say, “Pope Clement is a saint.” He was so touched by God and had the gift of tears in such abundance that when he went up the way called the holy stairway [la scala santa], he completely bathed it in tears. 

Pope Clement VIII, whom I had the honor of seeing and who is a saint.

And that holy pope [Clement VIII], whom I had the happiness of seeing.

Pope Clement VIII, whom I had the honor of seeing.

Since Clement VIII died in 1605, it is certain that Vincent was referring to a visit to Rome prior to the one he claimed to have made in 1607-1608 after his return from Tunisia. This trip probably took place around 1601 in an attempt to win back the parish. It was a visit that Vincent remembered fondly, although he never explained why he had gone there, and obviously no one had asked him. Though this may seem to be a trivial point, it is of supreme importance in evaluating the veracity of his account of the Tunisian captivity.

Vincent returned to his studies, his boarding school, and his hope of eventually having a good benefice. In 1604 he received his degree of bachelor of theology, which authorized him to expound the second book of Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*. This and possibly a licentiate in

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canon law that he may have earned or been given in Paris at an unknown date were the only academic degrees that he ever had.\textsuperscript{36}

\textit{The Young Gascon Priest}

The year 1605 marks an important and crucial stage in the life of Vincent de Paul. At this point we can ask: what kind of man are we dealing with at this time? What kind of person was he at the age of twenty-four? The answer will have to avoid two extremes. The one is hagiographic, the tendency of biographers such as Abelly, Collet, and most of those before the twentieth century to find the holiness of the later years in his youth and young manhood. The other, toward which some modern authors have tended, is to see a wild and turbulent young priest who did not seem worthy of his calling.

Several characteristics can be discerned in the young Vincent. He was obviously intelligent. In an era of ignorant priests he was well educated. He must have had an attractive personality. Otherwise, it would be difficult to understand how someone like Monsieur de Comet could have become his benefactor or how his boarding school could have been a success. He was devout enough to be moved to tears by his experiences in Rome. He seems to have been a naturally gifted teacher, as the school and his later experience with the Gondis indicate. He also showed dedication to his family. The detachment of later years is not found in the young priest. That he was primarily interested in a respectable clerical career is beyond doubt. He was constantly looking for benefices, especially one that would enable him to lead the quiet life of a devoted but securely situated small town pastor. Though he had great potential, he was limited in his outlook and ambition. He seems

\textsuperscript{36}The circumstances surrounding this degree in canon law are obscure. In a document dated 20 October 1625 whereby Vincent acknowledged the receipt of a sum of money, he is styled "licencié en droit canon," (CED, 13:60). In footnote 1 on that page Coste says "the saint takes this title for the first time in an act of 2 March 1624. (Arch. nat. M. 105)," but he does not quote or publish that document. The other source for the degree is in the acts of Vincent's beatification. On 3 December 1710, Brother Pierre Chollier, the secretary to the superior general, testified that "by authenticated letters, which are also in the hands of that witness, he knows that he [Vincent] studied at Toulouse for the space of seven years and by the letters of the licentiate in law, that he studied canon law at Paris." (Sacra Rituum Congregatione Eminentij, & Reuerendijs, D. Card. de la Tremoille Parisien, Beatificationis, & Canonizationis Ven. Servi Dei Vincentij de Pavlis Congregationis Missionis, & Puellarum Charitatis Fundatoris: Pars 2: Informatio super dubio: Summariun ex processu ne percent probationes auctoritate apostolica fabricato, [Rome: 1710], p. 5). Coste is the only major biographer to make reference to the licentiate (Life and Works, 1:24). The degree may have been awarded \textit{honoris causa} when Vincent was named principal of the Collège de Bons Enfants. Whatever the story may have been, it lies outside the time limits of this study.
to have been in many ways a typical Gascon: lively, impetuous, given to dramatic exaggeration, a bit restless, and perhaps hot-headed and choleric.

Was he, however, even more roguish and turbulent? Was he capable of more impulsive and extreme behavior in his pursuit of a good living? And was he capable of lying, even to his benefactor? The answer to these questions will depend on one’s evaluation of the account of the Tunisian captivity.

2. The Missing Years: 1605-1607

By his own account Vincent de Paul was heavily in debt in the year 1605. Hence the first part of that year saw him involved in several attempts to obtain the money necessary to satisfy his creditors. Then, suddenly, in July 1605, he disappeared from view and was not heard from again until July 1607. These are the missing years of Vincent de Paul when, as Luigi Mezzadri has said, “he remains in a certain way outside of history.”

The Captivity Narrative

What had happened to him? One answer was given by Vincent himself in his two famous letters to Monsieur de Comet, the younger brother of his benefactor. The first was written from Avignon on 24 July 1607, the second from Rome in 28 February 1608. They describe what Henri Bremond has called “the last chapter of the Arabian Nights.”

The contents are familiar to all who have studied the saint’s life. He tells how he was left a legacy by a kindly widow of Toulouse and that this legacy included a debt of three or four hundred crowns (écus) owed to her by “a wicked rogue.” Vincent went to Toulouse but found that his man had fled to Marseilles. He went to Marseilles, jailed his quarry, and settled the debt for 300 crowns. A gentleman with whom he had been lodging persuaded him to return to Toulouse by taking a boat from Marseilles to Narbonne. Vincent did so, but the ship was captured by Barbary pirates who enslaved the passengers. Vincent himself claimed to have been wounded in the fighting. He recounted how the prisoners were sold in Tunis and how his first master, a fisherman, was

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38 The letters can be found in *SVP*, 1: 1-15.
compelled to get rid of him "because I found nothing so repugnant as the sea." He was then sold to an alchemist who taught him some of the tricks of the trade. The alchemist died soon after being summoned to Constantinople, and Vincent passed to the old man's nephew, who sold him when he heard that the French ambassador, Savary de Brèves, was coming to Tunis to ransom Christian captives.

His final owner was a Christian renegade from "Nici," (Nice or Annecy), in Savoy, whose Turkish wife befriended Vincent.\textsuperscript{40} It was through her instrumentality that the renegade decided to return to his religion and flee to Europe. He and Vincent escaped in July 1607, and after a journey across the Mediterranean in a small skiff, they arrived at Aigues-Mortes on the twenty-eighth of that month. The renegade was reconciled to the Church by the papal legate and then entered the \textit{Fate Ben Fratelli} (Hospitallers of Saint John of God). Vincent joined the legate's household and accompanied him to Rome, where he continued his studies and made strenuous efforts to obtain a good benefice.

Even a cursory reading of the two letters reveals inconsistencies and troubling questions. Vincent has the good fortune to fall in with people who esteem and befriend him: the kindly widow, the alchemist, the Turkish wife. In the first letter, the alchemist is described as "a most benevolent and amenable man" who transmuted mercury into silver for the sake of the poor. In the second letter he is "a scoundrel" who deceived people into thinking that "his god Mohammed" spoke through him. The belief that Moslems worshipped Mohammed was common among western Europeans at that time, but a person who had discussed religion with the alchemist, as Vincent claimed he did, would have known better. In the account of his escape to France, nothing is said about rescuing the renegade's Christian and Turkish wives, who disappear completely from the narrative. Though Vincent claimed that he found nothing so repugnant as the sea, he apparently encountered no difficulty in crossing 700 miles of the Mediterranean in an open boat—an incredible accomplishment of endurance and navigational skill that he narrates without detail or elaboration in one sentence. In his letter from Rome, Vincent speaks of sending documents by the Spanish courier—who in fact went to Paris and Bayonne but not to Rome.

\textsuperscript{40}On the problem of Nici, see Román, \textit{San Vicente de Paúl}, 71, n. 5. One puzzle is that though geographically Nice was not in Savoy, it was ruled by the house of Savoy. Annecy is in Savoy.
Some time in 1608 or 1609 Vincent went to Paris, which was to be the scene of his life’s work. There is no evidence that he stopped at Dax or Pouy, despite the fact that he would have passed close to both places. The younger Comet died in 1609, and another link with his native province was severed. Vincent’s last visit was in 1622, when he went south to give a mission to the galley slaves. For the rest of his days, Paris was his home.

After Comet’s death, the two letters passed to his sister, Catherine de Comet, the wife of Jean de Saint-Martin. In the years that followed, their existence was forgotten, even by Vincent himself. No tradition or memory of these extraordinary events lingered among Vincent’s friends and relatives—if they had ever known of them.

“That Wretched Letter That Makes Mention of Turkey.”

In 1658 the letters were rediscovered by Catherine de Comet’s son, Saint-Martin d’Ages, who had inherited them from his mother. Overjoyed by his discovery, he took them to his uncle, the canon de Saint-Martin, a close friend of Vincent’s. The canon thought that his friend would enjoy seeing them again and had copies forwarded to Paris. The response was not what the good canon had anticipated. Vincent burned the copies and wrote to beg the return of the originals. Brother Ducournau added a postscript to the letter to warn the canon that the letters would be destroyed if they fell into the saint’s hands. As a result Saint-Martin never answered the request. Ducoumau advised him to contact Father Jean Watebled, the superior of the Collège de Bons Enfants in Paris. This the canon did.

Watebled informed Antoine Portail, René Alméras, and others of Vincent’s associates of the discovery. The account of the captivity was a total surprise to all because Vincent had never mentioned a word of it. Ducoumau echoed the general astonishment in a letter to Saint-Martin in August 1658.

None of us had ever known for sure that he had been in Barbary and still less that he had converted his master. For me, Monsieur, I admire the conversion of that apostate, the humility of his slave, the assurance that he felt in his soul of having his liberty, and the grace that he had of making himself loved by the Turks… But I assure you that I admire still more the strength that he has had in never saying a single word of all these things to even one person of the Community, although he has had the opportunity to talk about them hundreds and hundreds of times when speaking
of the assistance to those captives that he has undertaken for the past twelve to fifteen years. . . . If those letters had fallen into his hands no one would ever have seen them.41

This testimony was corroborated by Saint Vincent’s other secretary, Brother Louis Robineau. “I would say only one more word, that having had the honor, during the space of about thirteen whole years, of being as near to him as anyone in the community, with the exception of only two or three persons, nevertheless he never said to me nor even hinted, either by word or in writing, that he had been a slave, although many times he happened to chance on the subject of Barbary, on the wretchedness of the poor slaves, and he wrote rather often to that country.”42

It is quite clear that Vincent de Paul, who was always reserved about himself, was quite reticent in speaking to his confreres about his early life. What he did say fell into the category of formalized statements about his poor childhood or work as a swineherd. Even for those who had known him the longest, his life prior to his arrival in Paris was a closed book. His ordination to the priesthood, his second trip to Rome in 1608, and the reasons why he went to Paris without a benefice from the papal legate were all things that were never mentioned. His silence about the sojourn in Tunis was to assume great importance in the controversy that eventually swirled around his account.

Saint Vincent continued his efforts to regain possession of the letters. On 18 May 1660, at the age of seventy-eight and with only six months to live, he wrote an anguished appeal to Saint-Martin, “I entreat you by all the favors that God has been pleased to give you to do me the favor of sending me that wretched letter that makes mention of Turkey. I speak of the one that Monsieur d’Ages has found among the papers of Monsieur his father. I beg you yet again by the heart of Jesus Christ Our Lord to do me this favor that I ask of you as quickly as possible.”43

Again, the canon did not reply. In the following centuries, after innumerable adventures, the two letters ended up in the possession of the Vincentian Fathers and the Daughters of Charity.44 The authenticity

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41 Ducournau to Saint-Martin, from Paris, August 1658, CED, 8:514-15.
43 Vincent de Paul to the canon de Saint-Martin, from Paris, 18 March 1660, CED, 8:271.
44 For the subsequent history of the letters, see Coste, Life and Works, 1:41-42.
of the letters has never been in doubt. They are clearly in Vincent’s handwriting, and he never denied having written them—nor for three centuries did anyone doubt the truth of their contents.

Although Abelly used the first letter and quoted from it in his biography of Saint Vincent, he did not give a complete account. He removed the references to the captives’ being stripped totally naked and suppressed Vincent’s participation in the experiments of the alchemist. Because Abelly’s work was written with an eye to future canonization, these omissions are understandable. Rather more remarkable is the fact that he made no reference whatever to the second letter or its contents.

Who Was Guillaume Gautier?

Abelly’s work was the basis for the second major life of Saint Vincent, that of the eighteenth century Vincentian theologian Pierre Collet (1693-1770). Collet was not an historian, and his work clearly reflected this. He was guilty of even more outrageous historical sins than was Abelly. With regard to the Tunisian captivity, Collet repeated Abelly’s account. Between the first and second editions of his work, however, Collet made some interpolations in the account that were to muddy the waters for centuries. Since the matter is rather complex, some preliminary points should be noted.

(1) In his letter of 24 July 1607 from Avignon Vincent did not mention the name of his last owner nor did he identify him in any way except to say that he was a renegade from Nici in Savoy. He said nothing about the man’s having been a priest or former religious.

(2) In that same letter he stated that he and his former master arrived at Aigues-Mortes on 28 June 1607 and very quickly thereafter (tôt après) went to Avignon for the renegade’s reconciliation and abjuration before an unnamed papal legate. In neither of his letters did Vincent mention the legate’s name. In the summer of 1607 the papal vice-legate in Avignon was Monsignor Pietro Montoro (written Montorio in many modern histories). He became vice-legate in 1604 to serve the customary three year term which expired on 24 June 1607, although he remained in Avignon until November of that year, awaiting the arrival of his successor, Monsignor Giuseppe Ferreri. When Vincent wrote in

\[45\text{Abelly, }	extit{Vie,}	ext{ book 1, chapter 4, throughout.}\]
his second letter that the legate, after learning some of the old alchemist’s tricks, was more delighted than if *io li avessi dato un monte d’oro* ("I had given him a mountain of gold"), he was apparently making a pun on the legate’s name.

In addition to these bare facts there are other references that date from the eighteenth century.46

(1) In the Musée Calvet at Avignon there is a manuscript entitled "Journal historique et recherches pour servir à l’histoire d’Avignon (1170-1740)" by Joseph-Laurent Drapier. It contains the following entry which the author said was taken from the register of the collegiate chapter of the church of Saint-Pierre, Avignon. "Monsieur Vincent de Paul, apostolic missionary, brought about the abjuration of a renegade before Monsignor Pietro Montorio, the vice-legate of Avignon. The ceremony took place in the parish of Saint-Pierre." In this passage the word "renegade" has been erased and the phrase “minister named Guillaume Gautier, who had been a priest and a Franciscan” substituted. After this entry, someone has added "Monsieur Vincent de Paul was afterward canonized." This last entry would obviously have to be after 1737. Drapier did not give a date for the abjuration, but the mention of Montorio puts it after 1604 and before November 1607. As will be seen, there is good reason to reject the interpolated identification of the renegade with Guillaume Gautier.

(2) Another manuscript history, "Notes sur l’histoire d’Avignon: dix-huitième siècle" by Canon Massilian contains the following: "1607. 29 June. Saint Vincent de Paul, having converted a renegade, brought about his abjuration in the church of Saint-Pierre, 29 June 1607, at the hands of Monsignor Pietro de Montorio, vice-legate of Avignon, who was present there, during the office of Saint Peter.” This entry, which was clearly written after 1737, gives a precise date for the abjuration.

(3) The *Deliberations du Chapitre de Saint-Pierre d’Avignon: registre du XVIIIe, siècle*, after describing some abjurations that took place on 29 June 1775, adds, “At the beginning of the last century, Saint Vincent de Paul brought about the same thing in our church, on the same day, before Monsignor Pietro Francesco Montorio, bishop of Nicastro, vice-legate of Avignon.”

All three of these documents agree in crediting Vincent de Paul with the reconciliation of a renegade, but without giving the penitent's name (if we temporarily leave aside the dubious insertion about Guillaume Gautier in the first entry), or the circumstances of the abjuration. All three agree that the abjuration took place during Montorio's term, and two date it on 29 June 1607. All three documents date from the eighteenth century and are based on a common source, the book of deliberations of the collegiate chapter of Saint-Pierre for the seventeenth century, a book now lost. Hence the three documents are no more reliable than their source, though they do give an idea of what the original contained.

At this stage of the discussion, two points must be stressed. First, the date of 29 June 1607, if accurate, presents grave difficulties for Vincent's account. It would mean that Vincent and his companion, after an exhausting and lengthy journey across the Mediterranean in a small boat, went immediately from Aigues-Mortes to Avignon where, without any investigation, the renegade was reconciled in a formal ceremony. Secondly, the insertion that identifies the renegade as Guillaume Gautier is a later addition.

Where did this Guillaume Gautier come from? In a book called Conclusions capitulaires du Chapitre de Saint-Pierre, which was discovered in the eighteenth century, is to be found the following entry: "On Saint Peter's day, 29 June 1608, the Most Illustrious and Most Reverend Monsignor Giuseppe Ferreri, archbishop of Urbino and vice-legate of Avignon, chanted the pontifical mass and presided at second vespers, having beforehand publicly received in the same church a Calvinist minister named Guillaume Gautier, who had been a priest in the Franciscan order."

The differences are immediately clear. (1) This entry identifies a renegade named Gautier as a Franciscan who had become a Calvinist, or Huguenot, minister, not a Moslem. (2) It dates the abjuration a full year after Vincent's return, at a time when he was supposedly in Rome. (3) It says that the abjuration took place before Montorio's successor. (4) It makes no mention of Vincent de Paul.

How, then, did this Gautier become identified with the renegade in Vincent's account? This was entirely the work of Pierre Collet. In 1757 he visited Avignon and made the acquaintance of a prominent local historian, Joseph-Louis-Dominique de Cambis, the marquis de Velleron. The latter showed Collet the entry concerning Gautier and perhaps some of the others. Whichever ones Collet may have seen, he quickly
concluded that Gautier was Vincent’s renegade. It is now impossible to say what led him to make the identification. In an abridged edition of his biography of Saint Vincent, published at Avignon in 1762, Collet identified the renegade as Gautier and added, “I learned this bit of information on the spot in 1757 from the virtuous and learned Monsieur le Marquis de Cambis. Gautier was reconciled to the Church on 29 June 1608. Monsignor Ferreri had succeeded Pietro Montorio in 1607.”

Cambis was taken aback by this identification and hastened to disabuse Collet. He pointed out that the date of 29 June 1608 made it impossible because it was a full year after the return. Equally impossible was the date of 29 June 1607 because it would have meant that Vincent and his convert, after their Mediterranean journey, set out for Avignon on the very day of their arrival at Aigues-Mortes, “a good twelve leagues away.” Even in the eighteenth century the journey was a day and a half by coach. Cambis also pointed out that it would be doubtful that such a reconciliation would have taken place without extensive preliminary investigation. Cambis added that he had found no trace of the abjuration of Vincent’s renegade in the records of the Inquisition. He did not mention two other obvious facts: Vincent’s renegade was reconciled from Islam, not Calvinism, and he entered the Fate Ben Fratelli instead of returning to the Franciscans.

Collet was now faced with an insuperable problem of chronology but was unwilling to give up the identification. His solution was simplicity itself. In the next edition of the abridged life (Paris: 1764), he arbitrarily backdated Saint Vincent’s arrival at Aigues-Mortes to 18 June. This identification has had remarkable staying power and can still be found in even recent histories.

The following conclusions can be drawn from all this.

(1) There is no way of knowing the name of Vincent’s renegade or the precise day when his abjuration took place. If it did occur, it was during Montorio’s term.

(2) There is later evidence the Vincent was responsible for the reconciliation of a renegade at Avignon on 29 June 1607. There is no way of evaluating the validity of this evidence, but if it is true, it casts suspicion on Vincent’s claim to have arrived at Aigues-Mortes on 28

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June. The insertion of Gautier's name was probably the result of Collet's identification of him with the renegade. There the matter stood until the twentieth century.

The "True Life" of Vincent de Paul

In 1926 a young French author named Antoine Redier was searching for a subject for a biography. Since biographies of saints were fashionable and potentially profitable, he decided to write a life of Saint Vincent de Paul. He acknowledged that his motives were less than spiritual and that he hunted for the topic as he would for an apartment. In search of information, he sought out Pierre Coste, C.M., the acknowledged authority on the saint. Coste has recently published his monumental edition of Saint Vincent's correspondence, conferences, and documentation, thus bringing together for the first time the primary sources of the saint's life. Five years after this he published his classic biography, *Monsieur Vincent: le grand saint du grand siècle*. Redier, whose own account of his dealings with Coste is manifestly self-serving, said that he was the first person to make of the *CED*, that he worked under Coste's direction "in his cell and under his gaze," and that Coste told him that he would have the unique privilege of writing the "true life" of Saint Vincent de Paul. And that is what Redier titled his book, *La vraie vie de Saint Vincent de Paul*.

In search of background, Redier went to Dax and to the Vincentian house at the Berceau, Saint Vincent de Paul, outside of Dax, where he was a guest of the Vincentians. One day, as he and one of his Vincentian guides were strolling along a country road, the priest asked him suddenly, "And has Monsieur Coste confided to you what he thinks about the story of the captivity in Tunis?" Redier replied that he had not. "Ah well, there are the famous letters of Monsieur Vincent in which he tells with a thousand details about his captivity among the Turks. Monsieur Coste doesn't believe a word of it." Redier asked if the letters were fakes. "Not at all. . . . The letters are genuine, but in them Monsieur Vincent said only what he wanted, and his story of capture by the Turks and of captivity in Tunis and elsewhere, my dear sir, is a tall tale [galéjade]."

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49Ibid., 193.
When Redier returned to Paris and asked Coste about this, the Vincentian replied that there were reasons for doubting the account. The strongest one was that

never, during his entire long career, in his letters, conversations, recommendations to his priests or his good Daughters, especially to those whom he was sending the infidels in Tunisia itself, did the first superior of the Mission make one allusion, however remote or vague, to the time that he would have spent there. Not once did this eloquent man, who was endowed with a vast memory and who knew how to use it, tell anyone to visit the people, great or otherwise, or to reside in the places that he would have known there. This silence is total and absolute, an inexplicable silence, which can be explained only if he had never seen those people or walked along those shores.50

Given the many opportunities and reasons that Vincent had for breaking, or at least modifying, this silence, wrote Coste on his deathbed, the argument was more a positive than a negative one. Nor did Coste think that humility, the reason most frequently alleged for this silence, was persuasive. When Redier eventually published his biography, however, he contented himself with saying that the letters contained a mingling of the true and the false.

The "So-called Captivity"

Redier’s comment caught the attention of Pierre Grandchamp, a prominent historian who in 1927 was preparing to publish the sixth volume of a series called La France en Tunisie a la fin du seizième siècle et au dix-huitième siècle. He obtained a photocopy of Vincent’s letters from Coste and put his evaluation of them into the forward to his book. It was later printed separately as La prétendue captivité de Saint Vincent de Paul à Tunis (1605-1607).51 Though he was careful to emphasize that his rejection of the truth of the account did not reflect on the later Vincent, who was indeed a saint and a French national hero, his work aroused heated controversy. The first response was in newspaper and journal reviews and later in letters, articles, and books. That the debate should have been found in the pages of L’Ami du Clergé is understandable but

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50Ibid., 194.
that it should also have agitated *La Tunisie Socialiste* is a remarkable
testimony to Saint Vincent's stature in France. So strong were the
reactions that in 1929 Grandchamp had to publish a sequel to his first
work. 52

When Coste's biography of Saint Vincent appeared in 1931, the
controversy aroused by Grandchamp's articles was at full heat. Coste
dealt with the question in a lengthy footnote. 53 His rebuttal of
Grandchamp, for that is what the note is, is quite confusing, especially
with regard to the identification of the renegade with Guillaume
Gautier. The strongest argument that Coste used against the
Grandchamp thesis was the one that troubled him the most: the
psychological one. What was the motive that Vincent would have had
for such a complex web of deceit, especially when it would have
involved deceiving not only his benefactor but even his own mother? In
general, however, Coste did what he supposedly told Redier he would
do in order to make sure that his book was published: he gave a weak
defense of a position that he did not believe.

The first lengthy attempt at a rebuttal by a Vincentian was the book
*Captivité et œuvres de Saint Vincent de Paul en Barbarie* by Raymond
Gleizes, published at Paris in 1930. The book dealt with the controversy
over the captivity and with the other works of Saint Vincent in North
Africa. Though Gleizes had had personal experience there, he was not
a professional historian, and so the book was not very effective. In 1937
Joseph Guichard attempted a more thorough refutation in his work
*Saint Vincent de Paul, esclave à Tunis*. 54 The book was massive and
detailed but was justly criticized for being a collection of undigested
data. Grandchamp replied with a harsh review in the *Revue Tunisienne*
(January 1938). A more persistent critic of Guichard was Pierre
Debongnie, professor of church history at the university of Louvain,
who wrote a series of articles on Saint Vincent for the *Revue d'Histoire
Ecclésiastique* from 1936 to 1963. 55

The cudgels were taken up anew in 1960 by G. F. Rossi, C.M., of the
Collegio Alberoni in Piacenza, Italy, in an article whose title translates

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53Life and Works, 1:40, n. 24.
as “The slavery of Saint Vincent de Paul is a historical fact.” The article was verbose, and Rossi showed little historical awareness or critical sense in the use of data. Worse is the polemical and personal tone of the article. It was also in 1960 that André Dodin, C.M., published Saint Vincent de Paul et la charité, in which he somewhat tentatively allied himself with the revisionist school. He appears to have been the first Vincentian of scholarly repute to have doubted in print the veracity of Vincent’s story. In 1966 the controversy came full circle when the Cahiers de Tunisie reprinted all of Grandchamp’s articles. In the following year Guy Turbet-Delof of the university of Bordeaux published the first of two articles on the captivity in which he maintained that the Tunisian adventure could well have occurred as Vincent described it and provided a plausible explanation for Vincent’s desire to destroy the two letters. Of the more recent biographers, Mezzadri views the question as open, whereas Román strenuously defends Vincent’s account.

The Arguments

What were Grandchamp’s arguments that provoked what one anonymous critic called “this painful polemic?” They can best be considered by dividing them into three categories.

The first are the arguments from silence, that is, from the lack of references, supporting documentation, or expected results. Thus, Grandchamp pointed out that there were no written references to the combat in the waters off Provence, nothing further was said about Vincent’s companions (including the gentleman who persuaded him to make the voyage), no mention of the subsequent fate of the ship that he was on, Vincent’s failure to make contact with the French consul in Tunis, and the failure to say anything further about the Turkish wife who aided his escape. Grandchamp’s critics were not slow to point out the weakness of such argumentation. Coste, on the other hand, believed that the accumulated silences amounted to a positive argument.

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58Mezzadri, Vincent de Paul, 19; Román, San Vicente de Paúl, 74-88.
59L’Ami du Clergé 54 (9 September 1937):342.
60Cited by Grandchamp, Observations nouvelles, 70-71.
The arguments in the second category were based on Vincent's supposed ignorance of Tunis and things Moslem: the freedom with which the Moslem wives of the renegade spoke to him, the fact that his description of the acts of the corsairs did not tally with known data, Vincent's description of Tunis as a seaport when it was actually situated on an inland lake, his statement that all land belonged to the sultan, and his use of the word *temat* to signify a non-hereditary fief.

The third category, and probably the most damaging, included the difficulty of reconciling Vincent's account with known data, specifically in the chronology of his sale to the renegade and his escape. He stated that the French ambassador, Savary de Brèves, "was coming" (*venait*) to ransom captives when in fact he had already departed from Tunis.

One thing that most of the arguments, both for and against the veracity of Vincent de Paul's story, have in common is that they are based on internal evidence, that is, on the intrinsic reliability, accuracy, and probability of what is found within the letters themselves. Thus authorities have been able to look at the same data and arrive at diametrically opposed conclusions. Will it ever be possible to arrive at a resolution of this problem? An affirmative answer can be given only if it is possible to link Vincent's account to known facts. Further research may do this.

*Does the Answer Lie in Rome?*

The key may be found in the question of Vincent's visit to Rome in 1608, as described in his letter of 28 February of that year. If it can be demonstrated that Vincent was not in Rome at that time, then it can be presumed that the story of the Tunisian captivity is equally false.

As was mentioned above, Vincent de Paul definitely visited Rome before the death of Clement VIII in 1605, most probably in 1601. He made five different references to that visit but not a single one to a second journey in or about the year 1608. Vincent's silence on this score is as absolute as his silence about the captivity. The most commonly alleged motive for the latter silence is humility. This reason would not apply to his silence about the second Roman stay. He did not explain to anyone why he went there the first time nor did anyone ask him. The same could easily have been done with the second journey. This silence is even more inexplicable than that about the captivity.

In his letter of 28 February Vincent wrote, "There is nothing new that I can write to you about except for the conversion of three Tartar
families, who came to this city to become Christians—His Holiness received them with tears in his eyes—and the conversion to Catholicism [catholisation] of a bishop who was an ambassador for the schismatic Greeks." While the conversion of three Tartar families may not have left a permanent imprint in Vatican records, surely the reconciliation of a schismatic bishop who was also acting as an ambassador for Orthodoxy must have been noted somewhere.

The fact is that such events reflect the Rome of Clement VIII in 1600-1601 rather than the Rome of Paul V in 1608. Pope Clement proclaimed a jubilee from January 1600 to January 1601. He was deeply involved in efforts to bring about reunion with the schismatic churches. Conversions and reconciliations were major features of the jubilee. There is no evidence of such activity, at least to the same degree, in 1608. If Saint Vincent’s second letter is not truthful and he was not in Rome, it may well be that he inserted an event from his first visit in order to give verisimilitude to his statements. Hence it would be more probable that the pope who received the Tartar families “with tears in his eyes” would be Clement VIII, who had the gift of tears in such abundance that he bathed the Scala Santa with them.

In the current state of knowledge, the preponderance of evidence indicates that Vincent de Paul was never in Tunis and never made a second visit to Rome, that the letters were a hoax designed to cover up his disappearance at a time of heavy debts.

3. The Road to Sanctity: 1609-1617

Some time between 1608 and 1610 Vincent de Paul went to Paris. Between his arrival and the sermon at Folleville on 25 January 1617, he underwent a period of accelerated spiritual growth that set him firmly on the road to sainthood and that some have called a conversion. Is there justification for speaking of a conversion in the life of Vincent de Paul? Until the twentieth century biographers did not even consider the question, since they assumed that he was a saint from his youth. Most modern scholars, in contrast, answer in the affirmative. There is less agreement, however, about the nature of his conversion, when it occurred, or under what circumstances.

Coste did not deal with the question as such. He did write that "Vincent de Paul was not, as we may see, the same sort of man in 1611

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61SVP, 1:14.
as he is revealed to us by his letter to his mother written in the preceding
year. The reference was to Vincent's letter to his mother, 17 February
1610, in which he spoke of his concern for his family and for securing a
good benefice.

Redier saw the conversion as taking place in the years 1610-1611,
after Vincent had become chaplain to the retired Queen Marguerite, at
which time he began to have a sharper view of the vanity of the world.
Debongnie cited the incident of the false accusation of theft as the event
that set Vincent firmly on the road to sanctity. He dated this some time
in late 1610 or early 1611, not 1609 as did Abelly, and viewed it as a
complete rupture with the past. Pierre Deffrennes considered the key
event to be the long temptation against faith, possibly for three or four
years, that followed on the help given a doctor of theology who had
suffered a similar temptation. Other authors have concluded that it
cannot be dated so precisely. Brémond situated it generically between
1610 and 1620. Dodin believed that it was rash, in the present state of
knowledge, to attempt to fix the date with exactitude. He saw it as
happening between 1613 and 1617 and believed that it was an accelera-
tion of an evolutionary rhythm already at work.

To study this matter in more detail, it is necessary to examine the
known events in Vincent's life between 1610 and 1617. We begin with
those that can be dated and then proceed to those whose dates are
uncertain or unknown.

In Search of a Benefice

The date of Vincent de Paul's arrival in Paris is not clear. Abelly put
it in late 1608, Dodin and Mezzadri date it in autumn of that year, Coste
at some unknown time in 1608, and Román simply says the date is
unknown. Most modern authors join Coste in rejecting Abelly's story
that Vincent went to Paris on a secret mission form the Pope to King
Henry IV.

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62Coste, Life and Works, 1:50.
63SVP, 1:15-17.
64Redier, La vraie vie, 49-50.
65Debongnie, "La conversion de Saint Vincent de Paul," Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique 21
66Deffrennes, "La vocation de Saint Vincent de Paul," Revue d'Ascétique et Mystique 13 (1932):389-
441.
67Brémond, Histoire littéraire, 3:246.
68Dodin, Saint Vincent et la charité, 150.
69Abelly, Vie, book 1, chapter 5:20; Dodin, Saint Vincent de Paul et la charité, 16, 147; Mezzadri, Saint
Vincent, 2; Coste, Life and Works, 1:42; Román, San Vicente de Paul, 90.
70Coste, Life and Works, 1:42.
The first sure date for his Paris stay is 17 February 1610, the date of the letter to his mother mentioned above. In it he expressed his desire to obtain a good benefice and live out the rest of his days near her. In sharp contrast with his attitudes in later life, he was very concerned about his family and the fortunes of his brothers, sisters, nephews, and other relatives. By the following May he had been enrolled as an almoner to the retired Queen Marguerite of Valois, the repudiated wife of Henry IV.\textsuperscript{71} His principal duty was to distribute alms.

On 17 May Vincent finally received a benefice, the abbey of Saint Léonard de Chaume, but it was so encumbered with lawsuits and returned so little income that he resigned it in 1616.\textsuperscript{72} The next dated occurrence is more important. On 20 October 1611, almost a year and a half after he gained the abbey of Saint Léonard, Vincent made a gift of 15,000 livres to the hospital of the Charité in Paris. The money had been given to him by Jean Latanne (or de la Thane), the master of the Paris mint. The question is whether Vincent was acting on his own or as Latanne’s representative. Was this done merely in his capacity as chaplain to the queen (the certification of the gift is the last document to identify him as an almoner), or had the money been given to the Abbé de Paul for his own personal use? If the latter is the case, then this would be striking evidence of an advance in sanctity. Even if, as seems more likely, the former is the case, it still bears witness to a high degree of trust and some sort of association of Vincent de Paul with a charitable donation.

Less than a month later the Abbé de Paul was appointed to the parish of Clichy. The pastor, François Bourgoing, like Vincent a disciple of Pierre de Bérulle, had resigned the parish in Vincent’s favor at Bérulle’s suggestion. The new pastor did not take formal possession of the parish until 2 May 1612, though he may have taken up residence earlier.\textsuperscript{73} For Vincent his brief stay in Clichy was a happy and rewarding experience, and he was a devoted pastor.\textsuperscript{74} It was at Clichy that he first met Antoine Portail, one of his earliest disciples. In 1613, on Bérulle’s advice, Vincent accepted a position as tutor to the children of the aristocratic Gondi family, although he did not resign the pastorate at

\textsuperscript{71}Ibid., 1:45. In the French original Coste writes that this happened a few days after Vincent’s letter to his mother, but in note 55, we are told that his name appears for the first time “in a document dated 17 May 1610. (Saint Vincent de Paul, 13:8.)” Leonard mistranslates document as “list” and cites Saint Vincent de Paul, Vol. I, p. 8. The document cited was the acceptance of a benefice.

\textsuperscript{72}CED, 13:8-13; 37-39.

\textsuperscript{73}CED, 13:17-18; Coste, Life and Works, 1:54.
Clichy until thirteen years later. During that time he directed the parish through an administrator and although he made visits, he was essentially an absentee pastor, a not uncommon occurrence in those times.

In 1614, through the instrumentality of Monsieur de Gondi, who had the right of presentation, Vincent was given the parish of Gamaches in the diocese of Rouen. Very little is known about this appointment, though again he must have been an absentee pastor. In the following year he was appointed treasurer and canon of the chapter of Écouis, another position over which Monsieur de Gondi had the right of patronage. Vincent took possession of the position through a procurator and was an absentee canon, a fact that brought complaints from the chapter. There is no documentation as to when he resigned this benefice. Coste said that he probably did not hold it long, but Debongnie claimed that he kept it for thirty years. On 29 October 1616 Vincent resigned the abbey of Saint Léonard for reasons given above.

Undated Events

Although it is impossible to date precisely the first meeting of Vincent de Paul with Pierre de Bérulle, it seems that it was no later than 1610. The future saint took the great reformer as his spiritual director, or at least as his adviser, and the influence was strong and lasting. Close to this time also we can place his first contacts with André Duval, whose influence may have been even more significant than that of Bérulle. There is no doubt that both men were important during these formative years of Vincent’s vocation.

Beyond this, there are two other accounts that are difficult or impossible to date and that have traditionally been credited with important roles in the saint’s development. These are the false accusation of theft and Vincent’s prolonged temptation against faith. Unfortunately, neither one stands up to careful historical scrutiny.

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75Coste, Life and Works, 1:54-59.
76[Raymond Chalumeau, C.M., André Dodin, C.M.] “Monsieur Vincent, Curé de Gamaches (Eure) (28 février 1614), Mission et Charité 8 (October 1962), 495.
The False Accusation of Theft

There are three different versions of this story: one by Saint Vincent to his community at Saint Lazare on 9 June 1656; the second, Abelly's version of that same conference; the third, an account given to Abelly by the Canon de Saint-Martin. The three accounts are here given in full.

There is a person in the community who, when he had been accused of having stolen from a companion and others, was denounced in the house as a thief. Although the accusation was not true, nevertheless he refused to justify himself and thought to himself, seeing himself thus falsely accused, "Will you justify yourself? The charge brought against you is not true! Oh, no," he said, raising his mind to God, "I must bear this patiently." And he did so. What happened subsequently? Gentlemen, this is what happened. Six months afterward, the person who had stolen and who was living in a place a hundred leagues from here, recognized his fault, wrote to admit it and to ask forgiveness.  

Abelly's Version of Saint Vincent's Conference

I knew a person who, accused by his companion of having taken some money from him, told him very gently that he had not taken it. But seeing that the other persisted in accusing him, he turned aside, raised his mind to God, and said to him, "what shall I do, my God, you know the truth?" And putting his confidence in him, he resolved to make no further answer to these accusations which went to the extent of securing a monitoire of the robbery and having it served. Now it turned out, and God permitted it, that at the end of six years, the one who had lost the money, being more than 120 leagues from here, found the thief who had taken it. See the care that providence has for those who abandon themselves to it. This man, then, realizing the wrong that he had committed in acting with such heat and slander against his innocent friend, wrote him a letter in order to ask his pardon, telling him that he was so unhappy about it that, in order to expiate his fault, he was ready to come to the place where he was in order to receive absolution on his knees.

Saint-Martin's Account as Given by Abelly

During Monsieur Vincent's first stay in Paris, a strange mishap happened to him, which God permitted in order to prove his virtue and which became known only after his death by means of M. de Saint-Martin, canon of Dax, who has given a faithful and sure testimony of it. It was in the year 1609 that, while he was still lodging in the Faubourg Saint-Germain in the same room with the judge of the place of Sore, which is a village located in the Landes and in the jurisdiction of Bordeaux, he was falsely accused of having stolen 400 écus. This is how it happened.

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80CED, 11:337.
81Vie, book 1, chapter 5:23.
One day the judge arose very early and went into the city on some business and forgot to close an armoire where he had put his money. He left Monsieur Vincent in bed, somewhat indisposed and waiting for some medicine that was to be brought to him. When the apothecary's boy came with his medicine, he found this money while looking for a glass in that armoire, which he saw was open and without saying a word he put it in his pocket and made off with it. This confirmed the proverb, the opportunity makes the thief.

When the judge returned, he was very surprised not to find his purse. He asked Monsieur Vincent for it, but he did not know what to say, except that he had not taken it nor seen it taken. The other shouted, stormed, and wanted him to make good his loss. He compelled him to leave the lodging, denounced him everywhere as a scoundrel and a thief, and carried his complaints to everyone who knew him, and with whom he could learn that he had any contact. And since he knew that at that time Monsieur Vincent sometimes saw the Reverend Father de Bérulle, then superior general of the Congregation of the Priests of the Oratory and later a cardinal of the Holy Roman Church, he went to find him one day when he was with him in the company of some other persons of honor and piety and in their presence he accused him of this theft and even had him served with a monitoire. But this man of God without troubling himself nor showing any resentment at such a painful affront and without taking any pains to justify himself, was content to tell him simply that God knew the truth. And preserving his equanimity of spirit amid the opprobrium of such a shameful calumny, he greatly edified the company by his reserve and humility.

But what finally happened after this unhappy encounter? God permitted that the boy who had committed the theft was arrested some years later in Bordeaux for some other crime. He was in those districts and even in the jurisdiction of that judge of Sore. Burdened by remorse of conscience, he had him come to see him in prison, where he confessed that it was he who had stolen his money and promised to make restitution, fearing that God wanted to punish him for that wretched theft. But if on the one hand this judge was happy to see his loss regained, something he no longer expected, on the other hand he was also seized by such a great regret for having defamed an ecclesiastic as virtuous as was Monsieur Vincent that he immediately wrote him a letter to ask his pardon. But he begged him to give him this pardon in writing, telling him that if he refused, he would personally come to Paris to throw himself at his knees and ask his pardon with a rope around his neck.82

The three accounts agree only on certain fundamentals: there was a false accusation of theft; the person falsely accused refused to justify himself and relied on God to prove his innocence; and the guilty person was in some way found out at a later date and at a distance from Paris. Beyond that, however, there are major disparities. The most notable

82Vie, book 1, chapter 5:21-23.
difference is that Saint Vincent's conference of 9 June 1656 places the incident within the context of his community, specifically, a house of the Congregation of the Mission. This account also speaks of more than one theft, and the accuser is not an actor in the drama. It is the thief himself to who seeks forgiveness. The two versions given by Abelly agree substantially but indicate only one thief. They both emphasize the role of the accuser, though Abelly's version of Vincent's conference says nothing about the repentance of the thief. Saint-Martin dates the episode in 1609, long before the founding of Vincent's community and very soon after his arrival in Paris. Vincent says that the thief's change of heart took place six months after the incident, whereas Abelly says six years, and Saint-Martin an unspecified number of years. Abelly says that the incident became known only after Saint Vincent's death but then quotes one of the saint's conferences that describes it.

Saint-Martin's version includes many more details than the other two. It relies heavily on fortuitous circumstances and coincidences: Vincent's illness, the judge's forgetfulness, the apothecary boy's happening on the money, the arrest of the thief in the judge's own jurisdiction, and the boy's repentance. Credibility is further stretched by the boy's recognition of the judge, whom he had supposedly never seen. The judge, in turn, is able to locate Saint Vincent without difficulty and beg his pardon. In addition, Saint Martin was writing of an incident that would have taken place perhaps half a century earlier in Paris, not in Dax, where the good canon was living. It should be remembered that when Saint-Martin was given Vincent's two letters on the Tunisian captivity, he was totally ignorant of that part of his friend's life. Clearly, Saint-Martin's account cannot be reconciled with Vincent's original one. In form his description of the episode is a classic morality story of virtue rewarded with many dramatic elements added.

In addition there is difficulty in his dating of the incident in 1609. That reflects a high degree of sanctity at a very early stage of Vincent's stay in Paris, before he took Bérulle as his spiritual director and before he showed any indisputable signs of growth in holiness. It seems premature to look for such virtue at that point in Vincent's life.

There are difficulties, though not so serious, in Abelly's version of Saint Vincent's conference. He quotes it in wording that cannot be independently corroborated. Either he was citing a conference different from that of 9 June 1656 (or a different manuscript source) or he embellished this conference in order to harmonize it with Saint-Martin's account. The latter hypothesis gains plausibility from the fact that
Abelly's version says that the boy's arrest and repentance came after six years rather than the six months given by Vincent. This was probably a clumsy attempt to harmonize Vincent's "six months" with Saint-Martin's "some years." Abelly was not above changing words and events to suit his hagiographic purpose.

Under the circumstances it seems best to reject both Abelly and Saint-Martin and to rely solely on Vincent's own words. These, however, take the incident out of the period we are dealing with and situate it some time after 1625, that is, the establishment of the Congregation of the Mission and its first houses. It is also unclear whether the incident occurred to Saint Vincent or to another. The saint was very much in the habit of relating events of his own life in the third person, but it would be rash to presume that every such usage was a disguised way of referring to himself. Why, in this case, was it necessary to specify a locale in which, Vincent seems to imply, the falsely accused was still living? This could easily have led to the identification of the virtuous person involved. If the incident had occurred to Vincent himself, he would most likely have taken more care to avoid identification. It defies belief, however, that anyone would have accused the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission of a series of thefts.

In summary, this story is far less dramatic and detailed than in its commonly received version. Outside of the bare facts given by Vincent, it is dubious at best. And even granted that the story as related by Vincent may be his own experience, it lies outside his spiritual development between 1609 and 1617.

The Temptation against Faith

The divergence between Saint Vincent's account of an event and Abelly's emerges even more strongly in the story of the temptation against faith of a doctor of theology and Vincent's acceptance of the temptation for himself as a means of delivering the afflicted theologian. This story has been studied in detail elsewhere. There are a number

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83 This point seems to have bothered the anonymous editor of the 1891 edition of Abelly's Vie, for he changed the wording to "six months" (Louis Abelly, La vie de S. Vincent de Paul fondateur de la Congregation de la Mission et de la Compagnie des Filles de la Charité, nouvelle edition complète annotée par un prêtre de la Mission, 3 vols. [Paris: 1891], 1:42. Coste takes the editor to task for this since Abelly clearly wrote "six years" (Life and Works, 1:44, n. 2.

of difficulties in Abelly's account of this famous incident, which is at variance with Vincent's own narration of it. The bishop of Rodez, writing half a century after the supposed incident, depends on unnamed witnesses. His account runs directly contrary to what is known about Vincent's spiritual outlook and psychology at that time and later. It is also impossible to fit the story into any part of the time frame of 1609-1617. Hence it is necessary to reject Abelly's elaboration and to conclude that Vincent never prayed for a transfer of a temptation to himself nor did he himself ever undergo a lengthy temptation against faith.

Conclusions

How, then, is one to judge the incidents of Saint Vincent's life in the years 1610-1617 in terms of conversion? More importantly, how is this to be done while at the same time rejecting some of the most hallowed traditions and stories, some of which have been viewed as key elements in his spiritual progress?

Clearly, what is left is a far more natural and evolutionary process. The extraordinary and dramatic were not characteristic of Vincent's spiritual development or his spiritual doctrine. His road to sanctity did not originate in a blinding light on the road to Damascus but in a gradually accelerating process of spiritual growth, ever greater openness to the directions of providence, and an increasing response to apostolic needs. It seems probable that the principal lines of his spiritual growth were fixed by the time he went to Clichy in 1612. The change, however, was neither complete nor final. The old ways, especially the accumulation of benefices and attachment to his family, were slow in dying. There would be detours, such as the flight to Châtillon-les-Dombes in 1617, but he was on the road to sainthood. The years between 1595 and 1617 show us not the Vincent de Paul of the hagiographers but a more human and appealing figure.
What do you think is the meaning of this beautiful title, Daughters of Charity? Nothing else than daughters of the good God, because whoever is in charity is in God and God is in him.

(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity, 6 January 1642).

We should not, indeed, be doing enough for God and our neighbor if we supplied the sick poor only with nourishment and medicine and if we did not assist them, according to God’s designs, with the spiritual services we owe them.

(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity, 9 March 1642).