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Vincent de Paul and Jean-Jacques Olier: Unlikely Friends

By
ROBERT P. MALONEY, C.M.

It was a dramatic moment. Eleven days after the death of their Society’s founder, the priests of Saint-Sulpice gathered to elect his successor. Just as, on 2 April 1657, Vincent de Paul had been invited to accompany Jean-Jacques Olier at his deathbed, so too, on 13 April, had he been asked to accompany Olier’s young community at this momentous meeting. We possess only a fragment of the discourse that Vincent delivered. It is written in the hand of M. de Bretonvilliers, who would soon be elected as Olier’s successor. Speaking of their founder and his friend, Vincent said to the grieving Sulpicians: “The earth holds his body, heaven his soul, but his spirit resides in you.”

Surely Vincent himself felt much the same grief as did the members of Olier’s society. He had known the founder for twenty-five years. They had collaborated on missions and in the formation of the clergy. Vincent had once been Olier’s spiritual director. Later, he was often his advisor. They were close friends who had great admiration for one another.

But, from many points of view, they were unlikely friends. Vincent was 27 years older, and eventually outlived Olier by three years. Vincent was a peasant from southern France; his father, a swineherd. Olier was a Parisian; his father, a well-to-do lawyer. Personality-wise, Vincent was a practical type; Olier, a mystical type. As a decision-maker, Vincent was slow, but firm. Olier tended to be quick, responding with an enthusiasm that sometimes later dissipated. Ironically, in the latter stage of his life, Vincent, the peasant, had great influence at the French court; Olier, whose parents longed for him to have such influence, never had it, nor wanted it. Vincent did not quite fit into the “French School” of spirituality. He broke away from Bérulle, its driving force; he was eclectic, borrowing from many sources as he founded the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, and the Daughters of Charity. Olier stands in the mainstream of the “French School;” many of his writings and the practices he recommended to his followers are among the clearest examples of that school’s spirituality.

But, of course, beyond these differences, the two friends had many common bonds. Both gave popular missions, working on teams in the French countryside. Both dedicated their lives to the renewal of the diocesan clergy. Both sent missionaries to distant lands and yearned to go there themselves. Canada had a special place.


2 Many authors cite, for example, how Olier, in 1653, volunteered to go to Cochinchina with Alexander of Rhodes, although he was already quite sick. Cf. Michel Dupuy, Se laisser à l’Esprit (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1982), 343, 397.
in Olier’s heart; Madagascar, in Vincent’s. Both promoted the apostolic activity of women, founding or encouraging the growth of new communities. Each was strongly influenced by women: Vincent de Paul by Jeanne de Chantal and Louise de Marillac; Olier by Agnes de Langeac and Marie Rousseau. Both men were remarkably energetic and active, while remaining deeply prayerful.\(^3\)

Their relationship was not always smooth. Olier chose Vincent as his spiritual director, but left him after three years and moved to Charles de Condren. He admired de Condren so much that he found it puzzling that Bérulle’s successor as head of the Oratory was not as renowned as Vincent de Paul. A curious analogy, found in Olier’s memoirs\(^4\), depicts Vincent as John the Baptist, preaching only repentance, and de Condren as Christ, proclaiming the Good News of God’s love.\(^5\)

It would require a book to compare these two extraordinary men adequately. Below, for the sake of brevity, I will focus only on: 1) their contacts in life; and 2) a few notable similarities and differences in their spirituality.

I. Their Contacts
The early years of their relationship

They may have met as early as 1630 at meetings of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament. Olier was discerning a vocation to the priesthood at that time and soon found himself attracted to Vincent, who then served as his spiritual director from 1632 to 1635. Olier was one of the first to participate in the retreats for

\(^3\) Cf. CED, 12:131. Vincent states: “We need an interior life! If someone lacks that, he lacks everything.”

\(^4\) Autographes de M. Olier, Mémoires, 2 (1642), 254. I am very grateful to the Sulpicians for the opportunity to examine these in their archives at 6, rue du Regard in Paris.

\(^5\) Historians agree that Olier misread Vincent in this regard. On the one hand, Vincent did state (CED, 12:8): “Everywhere, I’ve used a single sermon, which I’ve twisted a thousand ways; it was on the fear of God.” On the other hand, Vincent often spoke of the love of God, about exuberant confidence in God’s forgiveness, about focusing one’s life on the person of Christ, and about practical charity.
ordinands that Vincent initiated, which became immensely popular in Paris and in other places.\footnote{Abelly, La vie, I, xxvii, 123.} Vincent helped him overcome some initial hesitation, and Olier was ordained a priest on 21 May 1633. With several others he assisted Vincent in writing a "model" series of talks to help prepare future priests for ordination.\footnote{Abelly, La vie, II, i, sect. xi, §3, 32; cf. also, Pierre Collet, Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul, 2 vols. (Nancy, 1748), 2:351; cf. CED, 1:332; CED, 15:14. CED, 15, refers to a fifteenth volume of Saint Vincent's works, published by André Dodin, C.M., in Mission et Charité (1970), n° 19-20.}

Olier was also one of the first to take part in the Tuesday conferences organized by Vincent at Saint-Lazare, the motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission, for the ongoing formation of the clergy.\footnote{Abelly, La vie, II, i, sect. xi, §3, 32; cf. also, Pierre Collet, Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul, 2 vols. (Nancy, 1748), 2:351; cf. CED, 1:332; CED, 15:14. CED, 15, refers to a fifteenth volume of Saint Vincent's works, published by André Dodin, C.M., in Mission et Charité (1970), n° 19-20.} Within this group he came into contact not just with Vincent, but with many other deeply spiritual men, some of whom eventually became the leaders of the church in France.

Even before his ordination to the priesthood, Olier was among the volunteers who joined the priests of the Congregation of the Mission in giving missions in the French countryside. From 1634 to 1641, he dedicated a large portion of his time to missions: in the Auvergne region in 1634, including the parishes that depended on the Abbey of Pébrac, which had been commended to him as a benefice; at Cressy in January 1635; in Paris at the Hospital of la Pitié during Lent in 1636; in 1637 at Saint-Ilpise, after which he wrote a long account for the members of the Tuesday Conferences;\footnote{Abelly, La vie, II, i, sect. xi, §3, 32; cf. also, Pierre Collet, Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul, 2 vols. (Nancy, 1748), 2:351; cf. CED, 1:332; CED, 15:14. CED, 15, refers to a fifteenth volume of Saint Vincent's works, published by André Dodin, C.M., in Mission et Charité (1970), n° 19-20.} and at La Motte; in the area of Nantes in 1638 and 1639; at Montdidier in 1639; and in the Diocese of Chartres from 1639 to 1641.

\textit{Olier's move from Vincent to de Condren as spiritual director}

After Olier placed himself under Vincent's guidance as spiritual director, Vincent quickly recognized his qualities. Eager to have good bishops named who would promote the reform of the clergy, Vincent proposed to recommend Olier\footnote{Mémoires, 14-16.} as a candidate for the episcopacy.\footnote{Henri Bremond, Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux (Rédition Million, 2006), I:1184.} Olier found himself agitated over Vincent's proposal. At precisely that critical time he came under the influence of Agnes de Longeac, who played a significant role in shaping his spirituality. She assured Olier: "Père de Condren will put you at peace.\footnote{Mémoires, 1:1, 52.}"\footnote{De Condren, who regarded Vincent de Paul as the most prudent of men, apparently felt that Vincent had erred in his assessment of Olier.} Olier went to de Condren, who counseled him not to accept the bishopric of Langres.

This difference of opinion over whether Olier should accept the episcopacy seems to have been the principal reason for Olier's leaving Vincent as spiritual director and moving to de Condren. In retrospect, one might wonder whether other factors related to personality and outlook might also have been involved. Vincent tended to discern God's call through life's events; de Condren looked
for the movement of the Spirit in people’s inner dispositions, an approach that corresponded more to Olier’s personality.

To put Olier’s decision to change spiritual directors in perspective, three other things might be said:

First, de Condren was a very popular spiritual director at that time. Many sought him out, including the king’s brother Gaston, the Duke of Orléans. Olier was not the only person to prefer de Condren to Vincent as a spiritual director. Etienne Meyster, who entered the Congregation of the Mission in 1634, left it in 1636 to join Olier and chose de Condren as his spiritual guide.\(^\text{15}\)

Secondly, Vincent had the highest regard for de Condren, and vice-versa. On this subject, Olier himself tells us: “(M. Vincent) spoke with me about him in terms that seemed incredible, and I remember well his saying to me, ‘I’ve never met anyone like him (\textit{non est inventus similis illi}),’ and a thousand similar things, even to the point where, when he learned of his death, he threw himself on his knees and, beating his breast, accused himself, with tears in his eyes, of not having honored this holy man as he merited to be.”\(^\text{16}\)

Thirdly, as to the substance of the matter, Vincent and others remained convinced that Olier would be a good bishop, even though they were aware of his psychological/spiritual struggles, and his physical difficulties too. Olier was asked to be a bishop on several other occasions.\(^\text{17}\) As late as 1654, when Olier was already quite infirm, Pierre Scarron, the bishop of Grenoble, wrote to Vincent asking him to use his influence with the queen to get Olier named a bishop. It was all to no avail.\(^\text{18}\)

Olier remained under de Condren’s direction from 1635 until the latter’s death on 7 January 1641. Toward the end of this period, from July 1639 to July 1641, he underwent the severe spiritual/psychological crisis of which many have written and from which he emerged a new, more resolute person.\(^\text{19}\)

After de Condren’s death, Olier turned to two Benedictines for spiritual direction, Grégoire Tarrisie and Hugues Bataille, both of whom were well known to Vincent.

\(^{14}\) Dupuy, \textit{Se laisser}, 34.

\(^{15}\) De Condren was so impressed by Meyster’s preaching that he called him “a man to oppose the antichrist!”

\(^{16}\) \textit{Mémoires}, 2:255.

\(^{17}\) In 1639 Richelieu asked him to be the coadjutor bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne. In 1645 the bishop of Rodez, seeing the difficulties occurring at Saint-Sulpice, wanted Olier to take his diocese. In 1646, Olier was also offered the mission and bishopric of Ispahan in Iran.

\(^{18}\) \textit{CED}, 15:99-100.

\(^{19}\) Cf. Bremond, \textit{Histoire littéraire}, 1185-97. Bremond’s observations about Olier’s crisis and the failed attempts to compare it with the difficulties Vincent experienced as a young man are quite astute. Interesting too is a chapter written by Bremond, but not originally published, which now appears in the re-edition of his \textit{Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux}. It is entitled “Les singularités de M. Olier,” and treats not only Olier’s inner struggles but also, at considerable length, his relationship with Marie Rousseau.
Ongoing collaboration

Olier’s leaving Vincent as his spiritual director does not seem to have harmed their relationship. They continued to collaborate closely, sought one another’s counsel frequently, and held each other in high esteem.

Their correspondence, only a small part of which has been preserved, shows many instances of collaboration. In October 1642, Olier wrote to Vincent to ask him to send M. Lucas to instruct him and to help him deal with a heretic. In June 1643, he asked Vincent, who had just been named a member of the Council of Conscience, to speak with the queen in regard to a priest who was being badly treated. At the end of 1643, he invited Vincent to come to speak at the Confraternity of Charity at Saint-Sulpice. One might list many other contacts.

Like Vincent, Olier, recognizing that it was local priests who had daily, ongoing contact with the people, became convinced that missions would have a lasting influence only if accompanied by the reform of the diocesan clergy. He obtained permission from the bishop of Saint-Flour to introduce retreats for the diocesan clergy in the Abbey of Pébrac, for which he was responsible; he also began retreats for ordinands, after the model he had learned at Saint-Lazare.

As he focused more and more on the renewal of the diocesan clergy, Olier

20 Of the 30,000 letters which it is estimated that Vincent de Paul wrote, only about 3,000 have survived.
21 CED, 1:44. M. Lucas must have grown in sensitivity as time went on. In 1635 Vincent blamed him for starting a riot, by the disdain he showed for heretics. Cf. CED, 1:299.
22 CED, 2:403.
23 Ibid., 430.
24 Ibid., 33-34.
decided to begin a seminary at Vaugirard. He spoke with Vincent before doing so. Likewise, when he was offered the parish of Saint-Sulpice, he consulted Vincent before accepting it. In fact, seeking Vincent’s advice became a pattern in his life. He wrote in 1649: “For extraordinary affairs, we do not fail to consult M. Vincent; for ordinary affairs, we consult all our brothers at a meeting.”

In 1645, when a dispute arose between Olier and the former pastor, Julien de Fiesque, some of the people of the suburb of Saint-Germain, where the parish was located, took up arms against Olier and tried to drive him out of Saint-Sulpice. Vincent, who was already a well-respected personage in Paris, defended Olier publicly and intervened at the royal court on his behalf. Some at the court mistakenly thought the riots centered on Vincent himself because the crowds were calling the members of the Community of Saint-Sulpice “the missionaries,” which was the name traditionally given to Vincent’s community, the Congregation of the Mission. When Vincent intervened during a session of the Council of Conscience, several members blamed him for the riots. He remained silent about the accusations and simply spoke well of Olier and his companions. The members of the Council who knew the truth soon came to Vincent’s defense and also joined him in supporting Olier. Once vindicated, Olier, over a ten-year period, transformed Saint-Sulpice into a model parish, focusing his community’s energies on liturgical prayer (especially Eucharistic devotion), catechetical instruction, and works of charity.

Soon after the riots ceased, Olier began the construction of the seminary at Saint-Sulpice. The Sulpicians, the society he founded, like the Congregation of the Mission, the society Vincent had already founded, would eventually sponsor many other seminaries in France and throughout the world.

Vincent and Olier joined forces in fighting against Jansenism, and both earned the wrath of Jansenist leaders. Olier struggled to keep Jansenist-infected preachers out of his parish and neighboring parishes. Vincent used his influence at court to try to prevent the awarding of benefices to Jansenists and their promotion to the episcopacy. Olier was more outspoken. Vincent spoke clearly when he felt it necessary, but also refrained from speaking when he thought that controversy was not necessary. 

might cause harm. Both found themselves in delicate positions: Vincent, because of his friendship with the Abbé de Saint-Cyran, with whom he tried to maintain an ongoing dialogue; Olier, because of his deep debt of gratitude to the Oratorians, a number of whom became passionate Jansenists.

**Mutual esteem**

Over the years, Vincent maintained the highest regard for Olier. He spoke of him as “the thoroughly good M. Olier” and described him as “a man given over to the grace of God and completely apostolic.”

The admiration was mutual. Olier told the members of his community: “M. Vincent is our father.”

It would appear that Vincent so esteemed Olier that in February 1644 he risked Mazarin’s ire by obtaining a benefice for Olier that Mazarin was seeking for the son of the Duke de la Rochefoucault.

And, as previously mentioned, Vincent was there on Easter Monday, 2 April 1657, when Olier died. In a talk given at Saint-Lazare the following month, Vincent stated that the members of the Tuesday Conferences had met to meditate on Olier’s life, and had then shared their thoughts. They had spoken especially of his humility.

It is clear that Vincent regarded Olier as a saint. Writing to Mademoiselle d’Aubrai on 26 July 1660, just two months before his own death, Vincent stated that he had “asked God for great graces through the intercession of M. Olier.”

**II. Similarities and Differences in their Spirituality**

Berulle had an enormous impact on both Vincent and Olier, but Olier, through de Condren’s influence, was the more steadfast disciple. Berulle, de Condren, and Olier stand as the purest examples of the “French school.” Olier provided its most eloquent voice.

Vincent’s spirituality is not nearly so easily characterized. Long before Olier left Vincent as spiritual director, Vincent had left Bérulle. Over the succeeding years he gleaned from many sources, turning especially to Francis de Sales and André Duval for guidance. In the Rules that he wrote for the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, he borrowed significantly from Ignatius of Loyola and others. Still, a basic Bérrulian accent is evident in Vincent’s clear emphasis on the incarnation and his focus on the humanity of Jesus.

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30 Mazarin, in fact, in his secret diary, listed Vincent among his enemies.
31 *CED*, 2:500.
34 Bremond, _Histoire littéraire_, 1204, 1221.
There are considerable obstacles to comparing Vincent's and Olier's thought. While Vincent was a prodigious letter-writer, he wrote no books. His letters are astute, clear, practical, often exhortative, and sometimes corrective. But they rarely treat topics analytically at any length; nor do they engage in theoretical discourse about theology or spirituality. Yet we know that Vincent could be quite analytical. People of all ranks sought his opinion. His precision and clarity are evident in his testimony during the inquest concerning the Abbé de Saint-Cyran, in the study he wrote about grace during the Jansenist controversy, and also in the many legal documents he drafted. Vincent composed detailed Rules for the many groups he founded; these provide a brief, clear statement of his thinking. He gave conferences commenting on those Rules and spoke frequently on other topics, but for the most part we have only copyists' accounts of what he said on those occasions. We possess none of the many conferences he gave to the Visitation nuns, whom Francis de Sales, when he died in 1622, entrusted to Vincent's care and to whom Vincent gave regular talks for the following 38 years.

Olier, on the other hand, was an influential author. Besides letters, which reveal his strength as spiritual director, he wrote four books intended for his parishioners: La journée chrétienne (1655), a Catéchisme chrétien (1656), L'Introduction à la vie et aux vertus chrétiennes (1657), and L'Explication des cérémonies de la grande messe de paroisse (1657). These books, written in the years immediately before his death, are all the more remarkable as Olier was partially paralyzed at that time. Through the letters and the books, we gain significant insight into Olier's thinking, though the books tend to be more pessimistic in tone than the letters. His most intimate thoughts, however, lie in his Mémoires, eight volumes containing approximately 3000 pages, which have never been published. Because of the condition of the manuscripts, they are not easy to research. Nor is it easy to interpret them, since they express a "stream of consciousness" not meant for publication. However, the Mémoires are invaluable for understanding Olier fully, although the researcher must be careful in forming judgments from them. Who, after all, would like to be judged by what he wrote unguardedly in his diary!

Given these limitations in examining the works of both Vincent and Olier, it is still possible to discern many similarities and differences in their thinking. As an article must be brief, several examples will suffice to illustrate this.

*Their Christocentrism*

In the Berullian tradition, Olier and Vincent propose to their followers a deeply Christocentric spirituality. Both spoke and wrote frequently, and at times eloquently, about the mystery of the incarnation. Both honor and meditate on the “states” of the life of Jesus: his hidden life, his silence, his active ministry, his suffering, his death.

Vincent urges his followers to make the thoughts, sentiments, spirit and actions

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of Christ their own. He tells the members of the Congregation of the Mission that "Jesus Christ is the Rule of the Mission." To one of his closest collaborators, Antoine Portail, he writes: "Remember, Father, that we live in Jesus Christ by the death of Jesus Christ and that we ought to die in Jesus Christ by the life of Jesus Christ, and our life ought to be hidden in Jesus Christ and full of Jesus Christ and that in order to die like Jesus Christ it is necessary to live like Jesus Christ."

Olier is similarly Christocentric. He writes: "The Seminary of Saint-Sulpice... is dedicated to Jesus Christ Our Lord," so that the Church might be renewed in "the love of Jesus Christ and his filial relationship with his Father" (la religion vers son Père). Vincent uses the same language, stating that the two great virtues of Jesus Christ are "his filial relationship with his Father and his charity toward men and women" (la religion vers son Père et la charité vers les hommes). The first chapter of Olier’s *L’Introduction à la vie et aux vertus chrétiennes* centers on "la religion de Jésus-Christ," a favorite theme of the French School.

The opening of Olier’s *Directoire spirituel de Saint-Sulpice* wholly summarizes his teaching: "The primary aim of the Institute is to live completely for God in Christ Jesus our Lord so that the interior dispositions of His Son may permeate the deepest recesses of our souls and enable each of us to repeat what St. Paul confidently said of himself, 'It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me'" (Gal 2, 20).

But there are two notable differences in their christology: 1) Vincent’s perspective is more concrete: he sees Christ most of all in the face of the poor person; 2) Olier places much more emphasis on the Holy Spirit.

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38 *CED*, 12:151.
39 Ibid., 130.
40 *CED*, 1:295.
41 *Divers Écrits*, 1, 67.
42 *CED*, 6:393.
Vincent focuses again and again on Christ in the poor. This is one of the key elements in the spiritual legacy he left to the groups he founded. Speaking with enthusiasm to the Daughters of Charity on 13 February 1646, he stated: “In serving the poor, you serve Jesus Christ. My Daughters, how true that is! You serve Christ in the person of the poor. That’s as true as the fact that we are here.”

Olier speaks more often of the Spirit than Vincent. In fact, Vincent is somewhat reticent in that regard. He invokes the Spirit when he prays for peace and union in community life. He refers to the Spirit as speaking through the scriptures, through the Fathers of the Church, and through church councils. But he says little else. This is rather remarkable, since Louise de Marillac, his closest collaborator, speaks again and again of the Spirit, so much so that one of her most important biographers, Calvet, writes: “I dare to risk the word ‘pneumo-centrism’ to characterize the spirituality of Louise de Marillac.”

One gathers the impression that Vincent felt appeals to the Holy Spirit often came from those who were seeking to do what they wanted rather than what their superiors asked. On 12 November 1656, he told Pierre le Clerc to read the 15th chapter of the Imitation of Christ, where “you will see that all desires, even good ones, are not always from the Holy Spirit, and that you are very far from the indifference or resignation that it teaches.” Vincent says of himself: “I am a child of obedience.”

One senses that he was slow to affirm independent-minded spirits.

Olier, on the other hand, refers constantly to the Spirit, so much so that one of his present-day biographers, Michel Dupuy, entitles his work Se laisser à l’Esprit. Olier even interpreted his terrible crisis of 1639-41 in that light. Looking back, he stated, “I had to confess: ‘It is the Spirit of God.’”

By way of contrast to Olier’s “Se laisser à l’Esprit,” a constant refrain of Vincent’s is “to give oneself to God.” He often adds phrases such as “and serve him in the person of the poor.” This type of phrase is so characteristic of Vincent that it has become the title of the current Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity: “Given to God for the Service of the Poor.” Addressing the Daughters on 22 October 1650, he said to them: “If someone asks you who you are, say to him that you are poor Daughters of Charity and that you are given to God for the service of the poor.”

Their devotion to Providence

Both men possessed a deep devotion to providence. Vincent wrote to Jean Barreau, the French consul in Algiers: “There is no better way to assure our eternal happiness than to live and die in the service of the poor, within the arms

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44 CED, 9:252; cf. 10:123.
45 Jean Calvet, Sainte Louise de Marillac par elle-même (Paris: Aubier, 1958), 204-205.
46 CED, 6:129.
47 Ibid., 1:511.
48 Dupuy, Se laisser; cf. especially p. 354-55.
49 Mémoires, 2:143.
50 CED, 9:592; cf. CED, 13:582, 709.
51 Ibid., 9:533-34.
of providence, and in a real renunciation of ourselves by following Jesus Christ.”52
He urged Louise de Marillac: “Follow the order of Providence! Oh! How good it is to let ourselves be guided by it!”53 “What great treasures there are in holy providence,” he says to her, “and how marvelously Our Lord is honored by those who follow it and do not tread on its heels (qui n’enjambent pas sur elle)!”54

Similarly Olier warned against the danger of getting ahead of providence, but it is noteworthy here that he interchanges “the Spirit” with “providence.” He writes: “Follow the Spirit, and do not get ahead of him” (ne pas le devancer).55 Vincent uses precisely the same expression on two occasions when writing about providence. He writes to Mère Catherine de Beaumont: “We try in everything to follow the adorable providence of God and not to get ahead of it” (ne la pas devancer).56 He tells Bernard Codoing: “Grace has its moments. Let us abandon ourselves to God’s providence and be very careful not to get ahead of it” (ne pas le devancer).57

Their methods of prayer

Even though, at first glance, the methods of prayer they taught seem quite different from one another, there is some similarity between them. Both Olier and Vincent recognized the limits of all methods, yet each offered one to his followers. Each, in his teaching on prayer, focused on the mysteries of the life of Jesus.

Vincent used what he called a “little method,” a three-step approach in which a person reflects, for example, what the virtue of humility means, why he should acquire it, and how he can obtain it. The method can be summarized simply as: what, why, and how; or, nature, motives, and means.

Olier also taught a three-fold method, which is more explicitly christocentric: Jesus before my eyes, Jesus in my heart, Jesus in my hands.58 Initially, this method seems more mystical than Vincent’s (and Olier’s explanation of it sometimes is), but when Olier applies it to meditation on a virtue, like repentance, it is very similar to Vincent’s method.59

Still, Olier’s approach is more affective, more contemplative; Vincent, though he insists that one should always move toward “affections,” is more intellectual, more practical, more voluntarist. He puts much more emphasis on results.

Reflecting on Olier, a contemporary writer concluded: “We consider that the most practical contribution to Catholic spirituality by the French school has been its resolutely Christ-centered approach to prayer, as aptly illustrated in what is called the ‘Sulpician method.’”60

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52 Ibid., 3:392.
53 Ibid., 1:241.
54 Ibid., 68-69.
56 CED, 3:194.
57 Ibid., 2:453.
58 Cf. Gilles Chaillot, Monsieur Olier, Maître spirituel, La vie d’oraison (Rédédition: Langeac, 2005).
Their Marian devotion

The difference in their approach to Marian devotion, a keystone in French School spirituality, is very notable. Both expressed their devotion to Mary clearly, but Olier was effusive, at times even lyrical, in his approach. Today, some might judge that he was excessive, as in his vow of servitude to Mary. Vincent’s devotion, conversely, was sober, especially when one considers the context of the time. In Vincent we find nothing like Olier’s beautiful prayer/hymn, “O Jesus, vivant en Marie;” nor do we find anything like a vow of servitude. Vincent encouraged devotion to Mary, referring to her simply as the Mother of Christ and our mother, and he spoke of her as the one who, more than all others, penetrated the meaning of the gospel and lived out its teaching.

“O Jesus living in Mary,” the prayer that Olier learned from Condren and further adapted, is a prayer that, in a certain sense, sums up the teaching of Bérulle. Henri Bremond wrote that “it would be difficult to imagine a more perfect epitome of the French school.”

Their attitude toward vows

The difference in Olier’s and Vincent’s attitude toward vows is paradoxical. Olier’s life abounds in personal vows. He pronounced a vow of servitude to Mary in 1633, and to Jesus in 1642. In 1644 he took a vow of victimhood, and in 1652 a vow of total oblation to the Trinity through Mary. One finds no inclination toward such vows in Vincent. On the other hand, Vincent, after much discussion, insisted that the members of the Congregation of the Mission, which today we call a Society of Apostolic Life, make vows. But the community which Olier founded, the Sulpicians, also a Society of Apostolic Life, takes no vows. As such, the two communities reflect the diversity among Societies of Apostolic Life envisioned in the new Code of Canon Law.

Conclusion

Much more could be written about these two extraordinary men. One could speak of the similarities and differences in their teachings on priesthood, the Eucharist, spiritual direction, and any number of other topics, including the formation of the diocesan clergy, to which both dedicated their lives. More too could be written about significant contacts between the Sulpicians and the communities founded by Vincent de Paul over the centuries: M. Emery’s direction of the Daughters of Charity during the turbulent years of the French Revolution when the Vincentian Superiors General were in exile; his influence over his godchild, Blessed Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity who became renowned in

63 CED, 12:129.
64 Bremond, Histoire littéraire, 98.
65 Cf. Canon 731.
19th-century Paris; Bishop Dubourg’s call of the Vincentians to the United States; the influence of Simon Bruté and John Dubois on Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, from whom the Daughters and Sisters of Charity in the United States sprang. However, these must be subjects for another day.

As we celebrate, on 20 September 2008, the 400th anniversary of Olier’s birth, so too do we celebrate the affective and effective bonds that, for so many years, united these two unlikely friends.