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Saint Vincent's Real Estate Policy*

Jean Jacquart

Translated by Sr. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C.

Every daring social plan costs a great deal, a fact well known by those in government who run into the problem of the resources necessary for the efficient management of hospitals, social security, or assistance to the most deprived. The multiplicity of works created and set into motion by M. Vincent obviously demanded considerable capital, sufficient and regular revenue, and wise and careful spending. A good manager, even though he had not read the famous French agronomist, Olivier de Serres (1539-1619), the Founder of the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity knew this better than anyone. The son of a peasant, he was undoubtedly in a position to know the value of money, more so than a Bérulle or a Frances de Chantal, who had come from the higher middle class. Among the virtues attributed to him by his first biographer, a concern for stewardship and the will to assure insofar as possible the sustenance of his own and the efficient running of his works appear near the top of the list. "To achieve those ends," Abelly tells us, he did two things: "the first was to raise the value of the few

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assets they possessed, and the second was to manage well any revenue coming from them.”¹ It does not, I believe, not, I believe, diminish the radiant personality of the “Saint of the Great Century” to see him personally occupied with these material details, considering, again according to Abelly, “nothing unworthy of his direction.” Skillful at arousing the necessary generosity in the privileged milieu of the royal court and the legal profession, Saint Vincent knew how to assure the future by choosing the safest investments, by keeping an eye on everyday expenses, and by seeking the best administration. In order to limit my remarks here, I will confine myself to the patrimony of the Priests of the Mission, studying its formation, growth, and development.

I. THE PATRIMONY OF THE PRIESTS OF THE MISSION

From 1625 on, the contract signed with the De Gondis, which established the first Missionary priests, assured M. Vincent a capital of 45,000 livres,² a considerable sum for that period. The gift stipulated that this sum should be used for land or invested in stock.³ Those were, in fact, the two possible forms of long-term investment. The first had the disadvantage of making landowners of a Congregation vowed to the poor, with all that that could bring of compromise with the century. The second ran the risk of

¹Louis Abelly, *La vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu...*, bk. III, chap. 24.2: “His management of the temporal goods of the houses of his Congregation.”

²An old French monetary unit whose value varied according to the period and the locale; it has been replaced by the franc. [Trans. note.]

³Vincent de Paul, *Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, ed. P. Coste, vol. XIII, p. 197.

being subject to the hazards of inflation and, where state stocks were concerned, to irregular payments. In a letter of 1637, with regard to a projected foundation, M. de Paul did not conceal his preference for real estate: "In order to preserve the work, the revenue must be in land, otherwise, fifty years from now, the foundation will be reduced to half. The cost of things doubles every fifty years at least."⁴ An astute observer, M. Vincent wrote these lines at a time when the great secular movement which was drawing prices up was still going on. The saintly man could not foresee that things would change after his death and that a period of depression after 1670 would give an advantage to investments in stock over land investments.

We are aware of the difficulties M. Vincent met in 1633 in obtaining from Rome the approbation of the Congregation. That decision had been preceded by a major event for the young company: the uniting of the Saint-Lazare priory, together with its buildings and patrimony, to the Congregation. The generosity of Adrien Le Bon and the friendly insistence of André Duval thus assured for M. Vincent and his first companions a location for their common life and the consequent revenue, a solid core around which the fortune of the Lazarists would be formed. I evoke here only as a reminder the protestations of the religious of Saint-Victor, historically bound to the priory, against what they considered to be robbery....⁵

⁴*Idem*, vol. I, p. 394.

⁵For more on this affair, see P. Coste, *Monsieur Vincent, Le Grand Saint du Grand Siècle*. (3 vols., Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1931), Vol. I, Chap. X. In his *Mémorial* (Bibl. nat., ms. fr. 24080), Father Jean de Toulouse has no sympathy for Adrien Le Bon, whom he accuses of having sought "to free himself from rendering an account of the administration of the said priory" and of having sold "his house for money," not for M. Vincent and his Missionaries.

In what did the patrimony of the priory consist? First of all, of the "manor-house and estate" of Saint-Lazare, with its buildings and a field of about 74 acres surrounded by walls; and then, some "marshes," situated in very good locations in the Paris faubourgs and rented out at good prices. The priory owned two farms in the country at Gonesse and Le Bourget, each of about 100 acres. There were also some houses in Paris and in the faubourgs, rents from various places, and tithing rights. In 1632, the Prior had reserved for himself lifetime possession of the farm of Rougemont, in Sevrans, with its cultivated land and woods.

This original patrimony was to increase, both during and after the lifetime of M. Vincent, through speculation with the gifts given to the Congregation in the form of real estate, acquisitions representing the use of cash donations, and finally through the ecclesiastical benefices which were joined to the temporalities⁶ of Saint-Lazare. For example, in 1643, the Duke de Retz, who wished to establish the Missionaries in Montmirail permanently, obtained from the King and from the Bishop of Soissons the assignment of the Hôtel-Dieu and the Maladrerie to the Lazarists. As a result, the patrimony was increased by the farms of La Chaussée, the Maladrerie, and Chamblon. Several priories in the provinces, which were destined to permit the creation of a mission house or a seminary, were also added to the patrimony in the same way, such as those of Couches, in the Evreux diocese, and of Saint-Pourçain sur Sioule.

Gifts of landed property were quite substantial. On July 23, 1635, Charlotte de Ligny, the widow of Michel Vialart de Herse, in view of the spiritual misery of the "poor people of the fields" living "in ignorance of the matters necessary for salvation," gave up her two farms in Beauce—Mespuits

⁶Ecclesiastical properties or revenue. [Trans. note.]

and Frenneville—one of about 188 acres, the other 140. These farms were made up of cultivated fields of diverse quality, several forests, and a few vineyards. In return, M. Vincent took upon himself the giving of a mission every five years on that Lady's lands and estates.⁷ In May 1644, the secretary of the Duke de Retz, M. Toublanc, brought the estate of Montmirail to completion by the gift of his two farms of Fontaine-Essart and Vieux Moulin.⁸ Several months later, in October, when he was coming back from Chartres, M. Vincent wrote to Louise de Marillac that he planned "to stop off at the home of M. Norais in Saclay to see the farm that he is offering to us and that the Prior (A. Le Bon) is so affectionately advising us to take."⁹ The contract of relinquishment in exchange for a life annuity and the hunting rights was signed December 22, 1644.¹⁰ This contract was the origin of the troubles we shall mention further on, but it was also the starting point for the formation of an immense tract of property on the rich plateau of Saclay. In February 1645, the former Prior of Saint-Lazare gave the Congregation the farm in Sevran that he had reserved for himself in 1632.¹¹ Finally, immediately after the Fronde, during which the Lazarists had given so much of themselves to relieve the misery of the peasants around Paris, Nicolas Le Camus, the former secretary of Michel de Marillac, gave them his farm in Grigny on January

⁷ Arch. nat., S 6723, Inventaire des titres de Frenneville et Mespuits, f° 1.

⁸ *Idem*, S 6708 (May 12, 1644).

⁹ Vincent de Paul, *Correspondance...*, vol. II, p. 486.

¹⁰ Arch. nat., S 6687. Jacques Norais reserved possession of the main section of the house for himself and received a life annuity of 1800 livres.

¹¹ *Idem*, S 6698 (February 11, 1645).

21, 1635.¹² M. Vincent was quite familiar with this village, in which Geneviève Fayet, the widow of Antoine Goussault, had her country house. He and Louise de Marillac came there often to visit Madame Goussault until her death in 1639.¹³

To the primitive endowment, which came from the priory, to these substantial accessions procured from the gifts of those who were using "the mammon of iniquity to make friends for themselves in heaven," the peasant wisdom of M. de Paul knew how to add other properties as money was available through a systematic and skillful procedure. He combined considerable acquisitions, authorized by a substantial legacy, purchases of plots of land that rounded out estates already owned, and finally, exchanges that permitted the regrouping and concentration of farm land so as to facilitate its development and increase its profit-earning capacity. Thus he wrote in 1659 to the Superior in Montmirail, concerning the offer of an exchange, that he ought to get advice from someone in the area and make the exchange, if he was so advised. "Give him the twenty rods of meadowland from the farm of Viemoulin, which are in the middle of his meadows, provided he gives you a like quantity, as good as yours and in a place that is to your advantage."¹⁴

I shall take two definite examples, in Beauce and on the

¹²*Idem*, S 6663 (file 2). The obligations were rather burdensome: two "annuals" of 365 Masses and a life annuity of 600 livres. [In ecclesiastical usage the term "annual" indicates the saying of a requiem Mass daily for a year. (Trans. note.)]

¹³These trips and sojourns are mentioned numerous times in the *Correspondance*, for example, vol. I, pp. 235, 325, 327, 359, 481, 546.

¹⁴Vincent de Paul, *Correspondance...*, vol. VIII, p. 192.

Saclay plateau, thanks to the wealth of archives for these properties.¹⁵

We have seen that it was in July 1635 that the President de Herse's wife had given M. Vincent the two farms of Mespuits and Petit Frenneville, which had come to her in the division of her husband's estate. The policy of purchasing around Frenneville begins immediately within the following months. The purchases are made in two stages, from 1635 to 1638, and then from 1645 to 1658. The contracts are signed, either right there in Valpuiseaux—sometimes by M. Vincent himself, who frequently spent some time there,¹⁶ at other times by a Lazarist equipped with the power of attorney—or at the Châtelet¹⁷ in Paris. These purchases are closed by the exchanges of plots of land with neighboring landholders.¹⁸ Usually the contracts deal with small quantities and are arranged at prices that appear normal, taking into account the frequent mediocrity of the land. However, two large purchases in 1637 and 1638 are also mentioned. The first case concerns a small 67 acre farm,

¹⁵The fine Inventaire des titres de Frenneville et Mespuits (Arch. nat., S 6723) corresponds to boxes S 6666 to S 6668. The complex file of the properties on the Saclay plateau fills boxes S 6679 A to S 6687.

¹⁶Sojourns authenticated by the *Correspondance...* in 1636, 1644, and 1647. In January 1649, after his unsuccessful steps to reestablish civil peace in Rueil, he arrived in Frenneville accompanying a flock of sheep from the Orsigny farm, which had been pillaged by soldiers. Caught by the cold weather, he remained there until February 22, after which he went to Orleans and then to Anjou.

¹⁷A court of justice in Paris. [Trans. note.]

¹⁸All these transactions are summarized in chronological order in S 6723, f° 6 to 100.

held on lease by a Valpuseaux tillage farmer in Grand Frenneville, a distance of a few hundred meters. M. Vincent took his place paying the 75 livres rent to the former owner, M. Hurault de Boistailié, and, in addition, paid 300 livres to the landholder, who found himself being offered the opportunity to remain as a tenant where he had been the proprietor. In 1644, M. de Paul will lift the mortgage, paying off the capital of 1200 livres. In the second case, M. Vincent acquires joint ownership of another farm of about 120 acres, in Petit Frenneville, from Pierre Guillotin, the son of a lawyer in the Parliament;¹⁹ his sister Marie kept the other half. At an unspecified date, M. Vincent wrote to his intermediary, informing him of a trip to Rueil: "I most humbly entreat you to offer our apologies to M. Guillotin of Etampes, who is supposed to come and see you this afternoon about the farm in Frenneville, and ratify or, rather, sign the contract, if you think it is all right. M. de Marceille (the procurator of Saint-Lazare) will bring you the money and will specify the conditions, if necessary. The price is 1200 livres. It would be well to get the letters that he has (that is, the titles to the property) and to have the number of acres of land specified. There are said to be 150, a great number of which are lying fallow."²⁰ Evidently they were not able to agree that day, seeing that the contract was not signed until August 18, 1638, and then by M. Vincent in person and at a cost of 1400 livres. We can see the

¹⁹The French Parliament refers to the judicial system. At the time of Saint Vincent, France had eight Parliaments, each with its own legal jurisdiction, chief of which was the Parliament of Paris. These bodies registered or gave sanction to the King's edicts, ordinances, and declarations, and supervised the implementation thereof. [Trans. note.]

²⁰Vincent de Paul, *Correspondance...*, vol. I, p. 485.

care taken by M. Vincent. He is present in Frenneville from November 3 to 8, 1636, where he signs three contracts of sale and nine of exchanges. Better still, once more in Valpuseaux, he signs no less than nine transactions on one day alone, December 15, 1636: small purchases—among which are three plots of land “near the fruit trees in the walled garden of the house of the above-mentioned gentlemen” of Saint-Lazare—and mainly exchanges. M. Vincent is rather generous, usually giving a little more land than he receives, but it is always a matter of plots of land that adjoin the property of the farm on one or several sides. We even find one piece that is entirely hemmed in.

A new series of acquisitions begins in 1645 and continues until 1648. Again it is a matter of small fragments, with the exception of a beautiful plot of 36 acres (about a dozen hectares) in 1656 for the tidy sum of 1200 livres.

In all, M. Vincent spent more than 7200 livres to round out the two farms in Frenneville to about 223 acres. A comparison between two surveys made of the Petit Frenneville in 1602 and 1645 will allow us to grasp the results of this effort.²¹ In 1602, the 134 acres surveyed were divided among an enclosure of 14 acres—with its buildings—and 59 plots, the largest of which covered 7½ acres. In 1645, the area surveyed had changed to 160 acres, the enclosure covered 18 acres, and the rest was divided into only 35 plots, the largest measuring respectively 14, 27, and 31 acres: growth and concentration.

After the death of their Founder, the Lazarists carried on his real estate policy in Frenneville. In 1687, the two farms, surveyed more carefully, covered 427 acres and 85 rods.²²

²¹Arch. nat., S 6723, f^o 262 and 269.

²²*Ibid.*, f^o 306.

The original nucleus given in 1635 had tripled in half a century. On the other hand, M. Vincent initiated no purchases at all at Mespuits, more remote as it was. Only in 1666 and 1700 did the Congregation proceed to large purchases there which brought the area of their farm from 188 acres in 1635 to 280 acres in 1706.²³

The history of the Lazarist estates on the Saclay plateau is also very significant. It also permits us to grasp as historians the distortions of reality brought about by hagiography. Throughout the biographies of Abelly and Coste an edifying story unfolds, which I shall summarize.²⁴ In 1644, yielding to the insistence of his friends, M. Vincent agreed to buy — with a life annuity for Jacques Norais, the King's secretary, and his wife, Elisabeth Mérault — a 120 acre farm in Orsigny, a hamlet in the parish of Saclay. The annuity was rather burdensome (1800 livres), but the Norais were benefactors of Saint-Lazare. This farm was a result of the successive divisions of an immense estate put together at the end of the sixteenth century by the Méraults. The farm of the "Mariettes" adjoined either farms belonging to other descendants of the Méraults or farms that had already passed out of the family. The Lazarists entered into peaceful possession (if that can be said, because the farm was pillaged in 1649 by the members of the Fronde), and improved the buildings. However, in 1658, some cousins of the Norais instituted proceedings to repossess the farm by right of being

²³*Ibid.*, f° 410 and 622. The first purchase was made from Lubin Bonnard, the tenant at Mespuits from 1649 to 1662. He still owed 1987 livres 17 sous in back rent. The sale went through for only 800 livres, but the Congregation granted lifetime possession of the property to Lubin Bonnard to enable him to pay his debts.

²⁴Abelly, *op. cit.*, bk. III, chap. 18, and Coste, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 58 ff.

lineal relatives. One of the plaintiffs who had gotten back the cousins' property was a counselor in the Rouen Parliament, a man, as M. Vincent wrote, "extremely clever in proceedings at law."²⁵ He knew how to present the brief. Did the Parisian parliamentarians have a grudge against M. Vincent because of his proceedings at the Court in 1649 and his familiarity with Mazarin? Did they wish, as the Saint said, to put a limit to the extension of clerical property? The fact remains that a judgment on September 7, 1658, declared the donation invalid and dispossessed Saint-Lazare. Abelly shows us the Saint thanking God for this trial and refusing to appeal the decision. Two conferences given at Saint-Lazare and a few letters refer to this trying outcome. To better emphasize the Divine Mercy, Abelly notes that the Mission received another farm as a gift shortly thereafter, and that the very one that had been taken away "came back to the Company several years after the death of M. de Paul."

An examination of the voluminous brief permits a better understanding of the facts. Having taken possession of M. Norais' farm in the autumn of 1644, M. Vincent sought at once to enlarge the property. An opportunity presented itself almost immediately. In December 1645, the Mission, through the instrumentality of a straw man—which no doubt implies an unfavorable climate—acquired joint ownership of a third of the buildings on the farm of the Mallards in Orsigny, along with 44 acres of cultivated land. A year later, the owner of the other two-thirds sold out. Thus the Norais farm was joined to another farm of the

²⁵Vincent de Paul, *Correspondance...*, vol. VII, p. 404, letter of December 21, 1658. Two "conferences"² given at Saint-Lazare (vol. XII, pp. 52 and 114) recall this affair.

same size.²⁶ In 1651, the Hospital for Incurables sold to the Mission a 175 acre farm in Plessis-Trappes, on the soil of Toussus-le-Noble, a little more than a kilometer from Orsigny.²⁷ It cost 1000 livres rent, which had been invested thanks to the bequest of the Marquise de Maignelay (sister of P-E de Gondi) and transferred to the Incurables, and a balance of 1400 livres. That is not all. In 1655, Father Menant of the Oratory sold 35 acres of cultivated land that he owned in Villedombe, another hamlet in Saclay; and, a few months before the decision of the Parliament, M. Vincent bought the buildings of the farm and about 23 acres of land and woods from that gentleman's nephew.²⁸

In 1658, far from being driven away from the rich alluvium of the Saclay plateau by the Parliament decision, the Lazarists retained more than 350 acres there. This property, situated in a marvelous location, was to grow still more after the death of M. Vincent with the purchase in 1663 of a new farm in Orsigny which covered 205 to 210 acres; and in 1668, of the farm of Villetain with 150 acres of cultivated land and 16 acres of woods.²⁹ Thus a land-survey in 1672 reached a total of 643 acres. Finally, in 1684, in a just reversal of affairs, the Lazarists would come forward as

²⁶Arch. nat., S 6681 A, contracts of December 6, 1645, and December 10, 1646. M. Vincent paid 5900 livres for the first third, and for the other two, he paid with a 1500 livres certificate for stock in the Hôtel de Ville in Paris.

²⁷*Idem*, S 6679 (file 1). The Governors of the Hôtel-Dieu for Incurables had acquired the farm in 1650 for 950 livres rent at an interest rate of 5% (or 19,000 livres). They received 19,400 livres from the resale to M. Vincent.

²⁸*Idem*, S 6680 (file 1), March 18, 1655 and June 17, 1658. The buildings were destroyed when the Buc aqueduct was constructed, and the lands were added to Orsigny.

²⁹*Idem*, S 6681 B (December 29, 1669 and March 23, 1668).

highest bidders for the Norais farm, auctioned by court order, and would join its 160 acres to their domain.³⁰ At the time of the Revolution, and in spite of the expropriations brought about by the collecting of the plateau waters to supply the ponds at Versailles, the Lazarists would still possess in Saclay and its environs 880 acres of land, divided into three farming properties. Orsigny, with its 593 acres, was one of the great farms in the region, a distant result of the policy inaugurated by M. Vincent and continued by his successors.

Other examples could bear witness to the wisdom of M. de Paul and his care to increase the patrimony of his house, particularly in the vicinity of Saint-Lazare: enlargement of the enclosure, purchase in 1644 of another nearby walled property for the establishment of the Saint Charles Seminary, and houses in Paris.³¹

II. THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE LAZARIST PATRIMONY

Thus constituted, the patrimony was made up of extremely diverse elements, whose administration was conspicuous for the variety of its methods and posed problems of a diverse nature. Let us leave aside the aspects bound to the feudo-seignorial regime. Several of the properties were the lands of nobles. For those tracts of land, M. Vincent had to deal with the lords to whom they belonged about relief³² rights and amortization. Often enough, having taken into

³⁰*Idem*, S 6681 B (September 6, 1684).

³¹We can get some idea of the extent of these purchases from a report dated February 19, 1691, which recounts the transactions of the Congregation from 1640 on (Arch. nat., S 6590).

³²Relief was a payment made by a feudal tenant to his lord upon succeeding to an inherited estate. [Trans. note.]

account the influence of the Superior of Saint-Lazare, these rights were reduced or rather given up entirely.³³ But the Celestines of Paris, to whom the small fiefs on the Saclay plateau were subinfeudated,³⁴ received compensation without fail. Other pieces of land were fiefs and M. Vincent was a conscientious tenant-farmer.

He was a no less attentive landlord and tithe-owner. In three letters addressed to the Superior of the house in Saintes, whose right to collect tithes was being contested, M. Vincent advised him to demand his due, but to try to avoid getting involved in any legal proceedings. However, he adds, if agreement is impossible, you will have "to sue those who refuse to pay" because "as far as tithes are concerned, that is a privileged case which binds in conscience."³⁵

But it was from the cultivation of the country properties that M. Vincent derived the major portion of the Congregation's revenue. Just like any landowner, the Superior of Saint-Lazare was faced with two modes of development: direct management with the assistance of paid workers (or

³³By way of example, the purchase of the Plessis-Trappes farm was followed by several settlements with different lords who owned the land (S 6679 file 1): July 19, 1653, a transaction with the viscount of Châteaufort: 450 livres for repurchase and "a vicuña felt hat" (for which we even have the price: 15 livres); November 27, 1653, payment of 108 livres to Monsieur de la Perruche, owner of 6 acres; October 7, 1653; agreement with the lady of Voisins-le-Cuit to reduce to 516 livres the amortization indemnity for 32 acres of a fief; finally, on November 11, 1659, receipt from Escoubleau de Sourdis for the amortization of 11½ acres.

³⁴Subinfeudation was the granting of feudal lands by a vassal lord to another to hold as vassal of himself rather than of his own superior. [Trans. note.]

³⁵Vincent de Paul, *Correspondance...*, vol. V, p. 613 (May 1656); vol. VI, p. 377 (July 1657) and p. 423 (August 26, 1657).

in this case, of the brothers), or fixed-time leasing. M. Vincent always seems to have hesitated between these two methods. He probably, as the son of a working tenant-farmer, preferred the first type. Abelly notes: "He developed a few of the Saint-Lazare Community farms through the labor of the brothers in his Company. Along with them, he employed servants on these farms to do the plowing so as to have a supply of wheat. He also maintained flocks and domestic animals on these farms."³⁶ However, direct development required qualified personnel, technical means, and constant supervision. Monsieur Vincent used it consistently as far as the property within Saint-Lazare was concerned, part of which was regularly tilled and sown under the direction of the Superior, who "from time to time examined the account of the small profit from the farm-yard." The farms of Rougemont, in Sevran, and of Orsigny, in Saclay, were likewise managed in this way. Direct development was also used temporarily between the departure of a tenant-farmer and the signing of a new lease. M. Vincent advised the Superior in Montmirail to do this in February 1652: "Working that land with your own hands, you would have lost nothing; it was an easy matter for you, provided with horses, equipment, and everything to be desired in order to make the most of a farm."³⁷ Then again, he had to find the necessary assistance. Certain of the brothers manifested little enthusiasm for working in the fields. In the same letter of February 1652, M. Vincent wrote to M. Delville: "I am astonished that Brother François objects to taking care of your farm-yard and the things that

³⁶Abelly, *op. cit.* bk. III, chap. 24, sec. 2.

³⁷Vincent de Paul, *Correspondance...*, vol. IV, p. 324 (February 29, 1652).

depend on it, such as the cows and the dairy,” and he recalled that he did make a vow of obedience. Attentive to everything, the Superior of the Congregation appreciated the difficulties that could arise from the presence of women workers on those farms cultivated directly: “It is not advisable to have women in our country houses.... There was an old woman at Orsigny who was respectable and of great service, but people began to talk because our brothers were there, and we dismissed her at once.”³⁸

It remains no less that the majority of the Saint-Lazare properties, in conformity with the custom of non-peasant owners in the Ile-de-France, were rented out for a fixed time and sum. In these cases, M. Vincent found that he lost control of the daily administration, but he remained no less attentive to the signing of the leases, the conditions of the contracts, and the difficulties that might arise.

As a good administrator, M. de Paul wanted to get some competition going and find the best farmers. After the Hôtel-Dieu in Montmirail was added to the patrimony of Saint-Lazare, he wrote to Guillaume Delville in November 1644 to ask him to wait for the writ of possession before arranging the contracts and to “publicize the farms before giving them out.”³⁹ In June 1638, he complained that they had signed the Le Bourget lease before his return from a trip and without his advice.⁴⁰ Likewise, in 1652, he reproached Delville for having settled the Montmirail leases too quickly: “Notwithstanding the reasons you may have had for hurrying to sign the farm leases, I shall persist in

³⁸*Idem.*, vol. IV, p. 313 (January 25, 1652).

³⁹*Idem.*, vol. II, p. 492 (November 20, 1644).

⁴⁰*Idem.*, vol. I, p. 487 (June 14, 1638).

telling you that you should have told me about them and waited for my response.”⁴¹

Accountable before God for the goods of his Congregation, and thereby even for the property of the poor, M. Vincent was a landowner who did not give in to excessive partiality. But also, as we are going to see, he was a profoundly human landlord who faced the adversities of the time with understanding and intelligence.

An exacting, but just landlord. He sought, of course, to extract the best return from the property at his disposal and regulated his dealings with the farmers very carefully. With regard to the farms that he received as gifts or that he bought, he had to take into account the existing leases. At times he allowed them to run to their term: such was the case with the Norais farm, which the farmer Jacques Beaugrand kept until the expiration of the six years laid down in his lease of 1640.⁴² However, most often, he preferred to allow himself a free hand by obtaining the voluntary departure of the tenant for some compensation. Thus, after the De Herse donation, M. Vincent negotiated on December 29, 1635, with Philippe Morize, who was occupying the farm without a lease in proper form. “Nevertheless, the above-mentioned M. Vincent de Paul has consented and agreed that the said Morize may harvest the fruits that will issue from the wheat and grains he has sown.... But he will have to vacate the buildings of the farm at Easter, with the exception of one room, a barn, and two stables.”⁴³ In 1658, when he bought Villedombe, the

⁴¹*Idem.*, vol. IV, p. 324 (January 25, 1652).

⁴²The keeping of Jean Beaugrand on the premises was provided for in the deed of donation, dated December 22, 1644 (Arch. nat., S 6687).

⁴³Arch. nat., S 6723, f^o 336 (agreement of December 29, 1635).

property had been rented out to Liénart Audry since 1653. That gentleman gave up his lease and promised to move out within two weeks. The 21 acres that he had tilled and sown in the fall were estimated at 693 livres 15 sous, which M. Vincent was to pay him. But since he owed some rent, which he should have paid to Father Menant for his jointly owned portion of the farm, he was to receive only 141 livres 5 sous.⁴⁴ This agreement permitted the immediate addition of the property to the great farm of Orsigny. In Grigny, after its acquisition, M. Vincent started off by working the property directly with the assistance of a farmer from the locality employed as a servant. Having no doubt appreciated his services, he signed a lease for him two years later.⁴⁵

When compared with the contemporary practices in the Parisian region, the clauses of the leases signed by M. Vincent or his procurators do not seem especially favorable. It happened that he brought up to date a rent that was too low: Adrien Le Bon, the Prior of Saint-Lazare, had rented the farm of Gonesse in 1629 for 4 barrels of wheat and 1½ barrels of oats; M. Vincent, in 1637, signed the new lease at 7 barrels of wheat, to which was added a small rent in grains for Saint-Victor and a few days of cartage.⁴⁶ From lease to

⁴⁴*Idem*, S 6680 (file 2), agreement of January 7, 1659. The farming advances totaled 693 livres 15 sous. The rent due was 612 livres 10 sous, or a difference of 81 livres 5 sous. M. Vincent added 60 livres to this sum "as his compensation."

⁴⁵*Idem*, S 6663 (file 2), lease of December 30, 1655. The lease provided for the growth of the leased area "if the above-mentioned gentlemen of the Saint-Lazare Mission purchase 80 acres of arable land, as they hope to do." The farm lease was joined to a lease of livestock (123 sheep), and the relinquishment of a ploughing team for a payment of 390 livres. M. Vincent also leased two milch-cows. Thus the "servant" turned farmer possessed every resource needed to cultivate the land.

⁴⁶*Idem*, S 6661 (file 3), leases of 1629 and 1637.

lease, the ground rent exacted by Saint-Lazare followed the general trend of rentals.

What appears to be original, on the other hand, is first of all the extreme preciseness of the riders in the leases and secondly the facilities granted the incoming tenant to help him make a success of his establishment.

Extreme preciseness of the riders? M. Vincent often wished to reserve the possibility of a lodging for himself and his confreres whom he sent regularly to inspect the properties. Everything was provided for, including food for the men and the horses, and the possibility of using the kitchen.⁴⁷ The lease for Mespuits in 1641 provided for the delivery of 60 pounds of butter a year and the precise contract: "Nevertheless, the above-mentioned gentleman or those whom he shall order to go to the aforesaid place will be able to receive from the said quantity 1 pound per week, which the above-mentioned lessee will be held to supply and which will be allowed him as a previous deduction from this quantity." He also provided for the planting of fruit trees within the enclosure, the days by carriage, the number of horses harnessed....⁴⁸

But it is also evident that M. de Paul tried to facilitate the settlement of his tenants. The farming lease was often accompanied by a lease of livestock, that is, M. Vincent supplied a flock of sheep and sometimes a few cows—an advance in capital that the majority of the farmers could not provide and which would assure the fertilizer necessary to

⁴⁷*Idem*, S 6723 f° 214 (October 8, 1641): reservation of the room above the stable, of the chapel, use of the kitchen, and the planting of four dozen fruit trees.

⁴⁸*Idem*, f° 425 (October 8, 1641): planting of four dozen fruit trees, reservation of a room for lodging, and a supply of fodder and stable-litter.

raise a good crop.⁴⁹ At the end of the lease, the increase in the flock was shared according to custom. He likewise often advanced grain to assure the sowing, an advance whose reimbursement was spread out for the duration of the lease. More rarely, he even went so far as to grant an advance in cash. Thus, in 1647, he deferred the payment of 90 livres in rent for the new tenant at Petit Frenneville "to be used to help him do a good job of cultivating and sowing the above-mentioned property."

In his dealings with the farmers on the Saint-Lazare properties, M. Vincent had to take into account the increasing difficulties of the rural world, which, from 1630 on, was crushed by the taxation demands of Richelieu and then of Mazarin, and still more by the dramatic consequences of the activities of the Fronde in the region of Paris.⁵⁰ Involved in debts, unable to meet their obligations, numerous farmers had to withdraw during the course of their lease. Therefore, negotiations were begun to try to save what could be saved and to protect the interests of the Congregation. François Hervé, who had been the tenant at Mespuits since 1641, was doing very badly. In 1644, M. de Paul had to threaten him with a repossession of grain and livestock. An agreement was reached in September. Hervé, whose rent was 9 barrels of wheat and rye mixed, and who

⁴⁹Numerous examples. To the one concerning Grigny, cited in note 38, we can add the leases of Frenneville and Mespuits. In 1641, Etienne Rochet received a flock of 100 sheep, to be returned at the end of the lease without the increase, a great advantage for him. His successor in 1647 did not enjoy the same benefits: the 100 to 120 sheep entrusted to him were leased for half the increase in the flock, according to the custom. In 1653, immediately following the Fronde, the new tenant at Frenneville received an advance of 3 barrels of oats and 1 barrel of wheat (Arch. nat., S 6723, f^o 214, 218, 226).

⁵⁰On the regional context,²see J. Jacquart, *La crise rurale en Ile-de-France (1550-1670)*, Paris, 1974, part IV.

had received an advance of 4 barrels of oats, owed more than 25 barrels of wheat (practically three years rent) and all the oats. He left behind for Saint-Lazare all the crops that had been garnered, gave up his lease, and promised to leave the farm "the following Sunday." He returned the sheep and cows that had been consigned to him. At that season, Hervé had ploughed the grain fields. All the tilling was estimated. Two days later, a new lease was signed; however, M. Vincent did not disregard the experience: the rent dropped from 9 barrels to 6 and the reimbursement for the tilling and the fertilizer was to be spread out over the six years of the contract.⁵¹ The discussion had been tight. On October 21, M. Vincent wrote to Antoine Portail from Frenneville: "We finally came to an agreement with the farmer at Mespuits by the grace of God."⁵² The tenant-farmers on the Montmirail properties seem to have caused M. Vincent a good bit of trouble. When he was reproaching M. Delville in 1652, in a letter already quoted, for having signed the leases without consulting him, M. Vincent added: "because they are farmers who will not pay, as is usual in that region."⁵³

Abelly gives his hero credit for his understanding attitude with regard to those farmers who were in debt. He preferred, he tells us, "to give them new advances and put himself in danger of losing everything rather than make use

⁵¹Arch. nat., S 6723, f° 433 (agreement of September 15) and f° 435 (lease of September 17).

⁵²Vincent de Paul, *Correspondance...*, vol. II, p. 485.

⁵³*Idem*, vol. IV, p. 324.

of any constraint or pressure in their regard.”⁵⁴ In fact, in 1657, when the woman who was the tenant on the farm in Montmirail offered to give up several acres of land to rid herself of her debt, M. Vincent wrote to the Superior that it would be better “to give them a delay of two or three months to find the money rather than touch that land.” Two years later, to save the interests of his house, he did accept a meadow however, “reserving the right to return to her the overvalue if it is worth more.”⁵⁵

The consequences of the Fronde were grave for Saint-Lazare and its tenant-farmers. Besides the ravages caused by the troops lodged in the priory and by the pillage of Orsigny, it was necessary in the following years to agree to considerable reductions in rents when signing new leases. Thus the farm of Mespuits, whose rent had already dropped from 9 to 6 barrels, was let out in 1655 for only 5 barrels.⁵⁶ The farmers of La Chaussée and Vieux Moulin in Montmirail asked for a reduction, which M. Vincent advised that they be granted “so that they will continue their leases at the same price.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴Abelly, *op. cit.*, bk. III, chap. XI, sec. I: “when one of the Community’s tenant-farmers was unable to pay what he owed, Monsieur Vincent gave him another gift of money, and we have no idea how charitable his support was for all the farmers, tenants, and debtors of his Community who were behind in their payments.”

⁵⁵Vincent de Paul, *Correspondance...*, vol. VI, p. 290 (May 3, 1657); vol. VIII, p. 4 (July 4, 1657).

⁵⁶Arch. nat., S 6723, f^o 440, lease of September 13, 1655.

⁵⁷Vincent de Paul, *Correspondance...*, vol. VI, p. 290. On November 6, 1653, M. Vincent wrote in the same vein to the Superior in Montmirail: “It would be unfortunate were you obliged to repossess the farm of the tenant in La Chaussée; those poor people are already suffering too much for anyone to hurt them more” (*idem*, vol. V, p. 43).

It would be fitting to close these remarks on these images of charity and understanding with regard to the miseries of that time. I shall choose another way, anchored more in the material reality of the affairs of life. A letter of June 1638, probably written from Frenneville, presents the profile of a Vincent de Paul such as I have tried to picture him here, infinitely attentive to the most humble details:

Please send someone tomorrow morning to the Courcelles farmer to tell him that I am asking him to send me one of his sons-in-law. He can leave late that same day, spend the night at Saint-Lazare, and set out early the next morning so as to be here Tuesday evening. The season for sowing the farmer's oats is growing short. He has only fifteen more acres left to do. Also, please send for the farmer's eldest son, the married one in La Chapelle. Find out from him how M. Bienvenu, our farmer in Gonesse, had him harrow, twice at the same time, the wheat-field in which the Prior had his sainfoin sown—the one behind the barn. It seems to me that the first time the harrow was turned over on one end, and the other time through the field the harrow was not turned over but used in the usual way. I entreat you, Monsieur, to find out about this from that young man....⁵⁸

⁵⁸*Idem*, vol. I, p. 486 (June 1638).

We cannot make a better use of earthly goods than to employ them in works of charity; by this means we make them return to God Who is their source and Who is also the last end to which everything should be referred.

St. Vincent de Paul



I beg you, Sir, to allow me to ask you for what reason you concealed from me that you have borrowed twelve hundred livres? I confess to you that I was more surprised at this than at anything that has happened to me for a long time.

St. Vincent de Paul



You must not undertake any building or major repairs without an express order from the General, nor minor repairs without the permission of the local Superior; this is conformable to the Rules and Customs of the Company.

St. Vincent de Paul