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“Saint Vincent on the Road of the Poor in Africa.”  
Carving by Chrisantus Momanyi.  
Ravasi Hall, DePaul Centre, Nairobi, Kenya.  
*Courtesy of the author*

# The Journey *of and to* the Poor

BY

W. BARRY MORIARTY, C.M.

## Introduction

I have discovered over the years that a work of art can help to build, deepen, and interpret our collective identity. A practical illustration of this thought is exemplified in a work of art depicting Saint Vincent de Paul that hangs in the students' residence building, Ravasi Hall, at DePaul Centre in Nairobi, Kenya. This image of Saint Vincent was carved by a local liturgical artist, Chrisantus Momanyi. When I asked him to produce a panel of Vincent in an African setting, he told me that he knew very little of the saint and so I gave him a short biography of our Founder to supply him with some background. Several months later he came back to me with a proposed sketch of his idea for a wall hanging. He told me "I had this dream about Saint Vincent, and after I woke up, I developed this sketch." Chrisantus entitled his picture, "Saint Vincent on the Road *of* the Poor in Africa."

The artist begins this depiction with an African village. At the top of the panel coming out of the village is the winding road of the poor. Chrisantus believes that Vincent and all of us who follow him are on this winding road of the poor, and as we journey with him, "we meet all those are who forced to travel this path."

## I. The Road *of* the Poor

The first figure on the road is a refugee. Kenya alone has nearly a half million refugees living within its borders, and this number continues to grow daily. Three years ago, in early 2008, when the election upheavals took place, 600,000 more people became Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).<sup>1</sup> The number has been reduced, but thousands of Kenyans are still among the displaced. With Vincent we will meet these refugees on the road of the poor. In Vincent's time he spent years dealing with the refugees victimized because of the civil, political, and social unrest of the Fronde.

As the road continues to unwind, Vincent meets a man in chains, a prisoner. Kenya has a prison capacity of approximately 17,000, yet is now holding approximately 50,000 inmates. The man in chains can also be anyone spiritually, psychologically, or economically incarcerated. All of our

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<sup>1</sup> As defined by the International Committee of the Red Cross, IDPs "...have not crossed an international frontier, but have, for whatever reason, fled their homes..." [and] "are at risk or have been victims of persecution." See: <http://www.icrc.org/eng/war-and-law/protected-persons/refugees-displaced-persons/index.jsp> (accessed 2 December 2011).

students at DePaul Centre spend their first apostolic assignment working with prisoners in the remand prison in the industrial area of Nairobi. This is never an easy task for them, but in time they come to love the work, and they learn that the road to the poor is filled with these people. When we read Vincent's story, we admire his continuing care for those imprisoned, especially the galley convicts.

Finally, we meet Vincent himself on the road of the poor. He is feeding a poor, desperately sick man. He holds his head and gently feeds him. The artist, Chrisantus, portrayed him kneeling because as Vincent says: "The poor are your masters."

Next to DePaul Centre is the central house of the Daughters of Charity, Chanzo, where the Dream Center is located. Today the facility cares for over one thousand patients suffering from HIV/Aids. We know of Vincent's continuing concern for the desperately ill, and how he sent the Confreres, the Daughters and the Ladies of Charity on mission to address what was an overwhelming problem of his times. That work continues today.

This was Chrisantus' interpretation. However, over the years that I lived with this image of Saint Vincent I began to interpret it another way. I think that the work could also be called "Saint Vincent on the Road to the Poor," as it depicts his autobiographical journey, and his personal and spiritual road to the poor.

## II. The Road to the Poor

The picture begins with Vincent's leaving the village of Pouy as a young boy. At home he was a shepherd who daily led his sheep and pigs to pasture. He was a Gascon of peasant stock whose father sold a yoke of oxen for his son's studies at the University of Toulouse. The intent was to put him on the road to success, and his father believed in this enterprise enough to sacrifice his oxen. Vincent was restless and ambitious, driven to succeed, and, at nineteen, he was ordained to the priesthood. But soon the road took an unexpected turn.

As the journey progresses, we see Vincent's own captivity in his mid-twenties. He detailed the experience of his Barbary captivity in a letter to Monsieur de Comet.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand the letter conveyed a melodramatic adventure. On the other, what the true and exact details of these events were will never be known. What we can say is that it was an experience of either literal or figurative incarceration.

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<sup>2</sup> Letter 1, "To Monsieur De Comet, In Dax," *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. by Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., et al, 1-13a & 13b (New York: New City Press, 1985-2009), 1:1-11.

Ultimately, the road leads to Vincent's conversion to the poor. This was not the road he thought he was on when the journey began. As he traveled, he was moved in an entirely different direction. He initially wanted to achieve position and fortune and an early retirement. The road he was traveling, he thought, led away from the poor. However, the road the Lord put him on instead led circuitously to the poor.

### III. The Epic Journey

Something further can be said about this image. Several years ago I read Bernard Pujo's *Vincent de Paul: The Trailblazer*, and I was struck by the title of Chapter three, "Odyssey on the Barbary Coast."<sup>3</sup> Pujo constructs his narrative of Vincent's captivity in the context of the epic journey. In many ways Vincent's story is a variation of the hero's epic journey. The writings of Joseph Campbell on myth and the adventure of the epic hero, particularly in



Vincent's departure. Detail of "Saint Vincent on the Road."

*Courtesy of the author*

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Pujo, *Vincent de Paul: The Trailblazer* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2003), 23.

*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, lays the foundation for examining Vincent's story, as illustrated by Chrisantus Momanyi, as a variation on the hero's journey.<sup>4</sup> As his artwork portrays, it is a journey in three parts: *departure*; *initiation*; and *return*. As Daniel M. Pink remarks in *A Whole New Mind*, "It is this structure that underlies Homer's *Odyssey*, the story of the Buddha, the legend of King Arthur, *Huckleberry Finn*... and just about every other epic tale."<sup>5</sup>

The story begins with *departure*. The hero hears a call to leave home, and in Vincent's case, he dutifully responds, crosses the threshold and enters into a new world. Vincent departs Pouy as a young boy. He is urged by his family to make his way in the world, and to establish himself in an ecclesiastical career in order to help himself and the family. And so the journey begins.



Vincent's *initiation*. Detail of "Saint Vincent on the Road."  
 Courtesy of the author

<sup>4</sup> See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New World Library, 2008), 432 pp. First published in 1949, Campbell's acclaimed work asserted the hero's journey was culturally universal, and follows a prescribed single, identifiable narrative pattern.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel M. Pink, *A Whole New Mind* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), p.105.



As the journey unfolds, there is a period of *initiation*. The hero encounters many challenges: imprisonment, shipwreck, isolation, and even abandonment. The initiation phase can extend over a long period of time. During this, the hero is helped by many mentors. In the myth stories, the mentors give the hero a divine gift which transforms him, and he becomes at one with his new self. As in the epic narratives, Vincent's initiation extended over many years. His initiation begins with the lost years, 1605-07, which is a time of captivity or incarceration. What transpired during that time, we will never know. But something decisive and dramatic occurred. What followed the experience? He continued to wander. But as in all hero stories, he began to meet mentors. Some of the mentors were men: Pierre de Bérulle, Francis de Sales, André Duval, Charles de Condren, the Abbé de Saint-Cyran, as well as the Christians of Clichy. Other mentors were women: Madame de Gondi, Jane de Chantal, Louise de Marillac, even Anne of Austria. These men and women would turn his life in a different direction, and they were



Vincent's return. Detail of "Saint Vincent on the Road."  
Courtesy of the author

instrumental in leading him to the poor. They helped to transform Vincent. His identity as a priest, his understanding of the priesthood, his ambitions and his values, all began to evolve during these years of initiation.

Finally, the *return* occurs. When he fully returns to the world he left behind, the hero has changed. He is now not only one with the new world but with the old world of his past as well. The return in Chrisantus' work depicts Vincent kneeling before the poor. When the journey began, he intended to leave the world of poverty behind. Yet, on his return, it is that world, that of the impoverished, Vincent embraced. And one of the lessons learned was that the world of the affluent and powerful should be invited along the road *of* the poor, to help transform and alleviate their terrible, desperate conditions.

Vincent's ambition, his drive to succeed, was refocused into an ambition to liberate the poor from their degradation and enforced enslavement. On his return from the epic journey, he saw the poor as his masters. He, and we, their servant.