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Vincent de Paul: What Moved Him? And What Moved Him Toward Those Who Are Poor?

THOMAS F. MCKENNA, C.M.

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There are few questions more mystifying than those about motivation: what is it that moves people to do what they do? Things become doubly mysterious when looking at the reasons for the wider patterns that flow through a life. Why go in this direction and not that? With that in mind let us shine a light into the shadow land of motivations that drove Saint Vincent de Paul.

I'll begin by telling you something of my own history that leads into our question. Ever since boyhood, I've been attracted to stories of great people. I remember reading simple biographies of Davey Crockett, Abraham Lincoln, Abigail Adams — then, as the years went by, of Harry Truman, Teddy Roosevelt, George Washington, Catherine the Great and many more. For a long time I could not tell you why I was attracted to the stories of these luminaries. I just knew I liked the accounts of their lives, that I was drawn to and even fascinated by their biographies.

One day I came across a fable that helped me understand this attraction. From the Hindu tradition, it zeroed in on a conversation between a villager who lived in a remote section of India and a traveling holy man. The conversation turned out to be what today we would call a game-changer in the life of the villager.

The holy one had reached the outskirts of the village and settled down under a tree for the night when a villager came running up to him and said, "The stone! The stone! Give me the precious stone!"

"What stone?" asked the holy one. "Last night the Lord Shiva appeared to me in a dream," said the villager, "and told me that if I went to the outskirts of the village at dusk I should find a holy one who would give me a precious stone that would make me rich forever."

The holy one rummaged in his bag and pulled out a stone. "He probably meant this," he said, as he handed the stone over to the villager. "I found it on a forest path some days ago. You can certainly have it." The man looked at the stone in wonder. It was a diamond. Probably the largest diamond in the whole world for it was as large as a man's head.

He took the diamond and walked away. All night he tossed about in bed, unable to sleep. Next day at the crack of dawn he woke the holy one and said, "Give me the wealth that makes it possible for you to give this diamond away so easily."¹

There are two aspects to this tale that I would point out, and a third I would add.

There is the obvious aspect of meeting an interesting character; the traveling holy man has an aura about him. He's not your bland vanilla type; he's interesting.

¹ Anthony de Mello, *The Song of the Bird* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1982), 182-83.



Vincent de Paul confides a foundling to a Daughter of Charity. Oil on Canvas.
Given to the chapel of Thibouville by the Emperor Napoleon III.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
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The second thing is that more than just interesting to the villager, he is fascinating to him. The guru's action raises a question in the man's mind — and especially in his heart — that intrigues. His freedom in giving away the priceless diamond makes the villager not only scratch his head in curiosity, but lie awake all night — and then get up and return to him the next day. Who is this holy one and what lets him do what he does? What does he know that I don't and what is he in touch with that lets him be so free?

There is a third aspect to this holy man's actions, one I could well be imposing on him but that speaks to our point. What he does shows a predilection for a certain social class, the ones on the bottom of the ladder. His handing the diamond to the villager demonstrates compassion for people less fortunate, those up against it. Rather than the rich and famous, his action benefits the poor and unknown.

What did this fable tell me about my interest in biographies? That I get hooked on people who are interesting, but especially on those whose lives raise the fascination question. What moves them? What are they in touch with that they can do the out-of-the-ordinary things they do? Or, to put a finer point on it, what is this "wealth" they are motivated by, and why did it take them in the direction it did?

This insight in-hand, we turn to St. Vincent.

Vincent de Paul is surely interesting. Coming from modest means, he wound up mobilizing tens of thousands of people to follow his vision: a world in which the people on the bottom rung of society are singled out, valued, and helped. When the saint died, the preacher at his funeral claimed that he had changed the face of the Church in his time.²

But what of our issue of motivation, the underlying why of his activity? What would be the mainspring for all his activity? What got him moving? The allied question sits there too. Of the roads he could have moved down, why did he take the one that led to "the least of the brothers and sisters," to the poor people of the world?

² For a definitive study of the oration, see Edward R. Udovic, C.M., *Henri de Maupas du Tour: The Funeral Oration for Vincent de Paul, 23 November 1660* (Chicago: DePaul University Vincentian Studies Institute, 2015), 223 pp.

To engage these questions of why and where, we look to a particular time in Vincent's life, mostly through his thirties, which we might call his bridge or awakening years. Hugh O'Donnell, C.M., characterizes them as the transition times between "Vincent 1" and "Vincent 2."³ Vincent 1, the younger man, was likeable, talented, and indeed ambitious. At nineteen, he was ordained a priest and right away set his sights on moving up not only through the ranks of the clergy but also through the layers of society, especially by networking with the upper class. He worked hard, became a credentialed and competent teacher, ingratiated himself with a number of nobility of the day, and before long was well on the way to making his mark — and his fortune. If you had only known Vincent in his twenties, this is how you would have described him.

Coming back ten or so years later, however, you would have found yourself in the company of a markedly different man. He would strike you as somehow deeper, more grounded, with a new and indeed surprising set of interests, another way of looking at the world, a revised estimate of what mattered and what did not, especially in the social realm. If you listened hard, you would begin to pick up the sounds of two new frequencies: God's love, as poured in Jesus Christ; and that same astounding love as it reaches down to the least of our brothers and sisters. This was Vincent 2, matured, a turned-around-version of his earlier self, somebody whose foundations had been re-sunk, so to speak, so that he approached life with a completely new source of energy. What happened to him?

To make sense of it we go back to our fable, specifically to that point in the story in which the action and person of the holy man have their effect on the villager. What occurs there? The villager feels a kind of gravitational pull from the holy man — or more accurately, feels the pull of what was moving him. It is as if that villager stuck his toe in the shallows of a fast moving river, stepped out further and further into its current until he began to feel himself being swept along in the river's direction, held up by its power.

Vincent had a similar experience caught up in a kind of surge over those transition years. Through an intermixture of spiritual counseling with a number of godly people (Pierre de Bérulle, Francis de Sales, André Duval, and others), and an engagement with those mired on the underside of society (the sick-poor in welfare hospitals), Vincent began to apprehend the deeper forces at work in his relationship with God. Prodded by these people and situations, he started to wake to the magnitude of what God has been doing for the entire human race in his Son, Jesus Christ. In a tangible way, Vincent intuits that God is pouring out His own goodness on the world, giving away His very Self to rescue the human race and to have it flourish. As if feeling this for the first time, Vincent knows the fuller warmth, and even fire, of God's love in giving His Son. But more to our point, he becomes fascinated ("drawn," as John's Gospel⁴ would have it) by the overwhelming

³ Hugh F. O'Donnell, C.M., "Vincent de Paul: His Life and Way," *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: The Classics of Western Spirituality*, John E. Rybolt and Frances Ryan, eds. (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 13-38.

⁴ Jn. 6:44.



Vincent de Paul introduced by St. Francis de Sales to St. Jeanne de Chantal.
Etching by Restout.
Original in church of Ste. Marguerite, Paris.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
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generosity this “sending” shows.⁵ He wants to be near it, part of it, in it. And thus, dipping his toe in the water, Vincent is swept into the powerful movement of the current.

In Jesus, God is sending His own self out to the edges of creation, or perhaps better in Vincent’s intuition, down to its bottom, to the lowest ranks where the forgotten, unvalued people live and die. God is “commissioning” His Son to bring back the poor and marginalized, to reach out to those who in society’s eyes are farthest from the center and there give them the assurance that they are loved. Looking at it this way — Vincent being bowled over by the sheer goodness of what God does in Jesus, and then becoming caught in the floodtide of this goodness — it is clear why a certain Gospel scene begins to shine through for him.

The scene is in the fourth chapter of Luke’s Gospel, and it pictures Jesus coming back to his hometown and being invited to comment on the Scriptures. Standing there in the synagogue, Jesus opens the scroll and fingers his way to one particular verse from Isaiah: “He has sent me to ...bring the good news to the poor.”⁶ Putting the book down, he announces, “Today, right here and now in this room, this scripture passage is being fulfilled — in me.” To paraphrase, “I am the working, the putting-into-action, the taking-on-flesh of this sheer goodness of God coming to the poor. What is going on inside of God (the cherishing of his creatures, particularly the poorest among them) is going on through me — and indeed in me. I am the bringer of this Best-of-All-News to you: you’re being loved by God.” Or as the gospel words it, “I am evangelizing you;” i.e., I am engaged in the very act of bringing you the Good News.

Probably occurring over a considerable length of time, the scales begin to fall off

⁵ “Observance of the Rules,” 17 May 1658, in Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. by Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., Ann Mary Dougherty, D.C., et al., 1-14 (New York: New City Press, 1985-2014, 12:4. Hereafter, *CCD*).

⁶ Is. 61:1-2.

Vincent's eyes and he catches the profundity, the fire, of this passage. "This is what it's all about," he realizes, "God's love and goodness, arriving in His Son to this world and in particular to the poor people in it. This is at the heart of it all. God is pouring out His love and care on humankind, and especially on those of its number who are looked upon as its least members."

Other Gospel passages also resonate for Vincent:

- Philippians, where Jesus is depicted as the one who came down from God and took on the lot of the lowest of the low, a slave — all to bring everyone back into God's loving embrace.⁷
- The scene in Matthew wherein Jesus says he is one with the least of the brothers and sisters.⁸
- The many accounts of Jesus' interaction with society's outcasts, his showering acceptance and forgiveness on sinners, tax collectors, and unbelievers.⁹

Vincent gives talk after talk on treating these so-called unworthy ones with the very love with which God favors men and women.

Recently, a number of writers have focused on this interior experience of Vincent.¹⁰ Rather than look at all the great accomplishments of his life, they raise our motivation question: what happened inside of him that supplied the dynamism to start all of this moving forward, particularly in the direction of people who were poor? Granting there is always a necessary interplay between the outer and the inner (between praxis and prayer), they think this question is a good corrective to the many treatments of Vincent, which paint him mostly as an activist and founder of institutions.

The heading they use is the slippery one of mysticism. While the word has many (mystifying) meanings, here it means simply the lived contact a person has with God. It can bring in such things as visions and ecstasies, but these writers pass over such phenomena and look simply to Vincent's inner experience of the divine. What was its texture, shape, and direction? What was that interchange that so fired up his heart?

Guiseppe Toscani in particular turns attention from Vincent's deeds to their wellsprings, to the fuel in his engine, so to speak: the underlying and mighty fascination that God's love, better, God's loving has for Vincent. Vincent was swept up into the force field of that ever-flowing love. Over time, he became more and more enthralled with the pure giving of God, with what Saint Paul calls the lavish outpouring of God's Spirit.¹¹

⁷ Phil. 2:5-11. Cf. "On Uniformity," 23 May 1659, *CCD*, 12:205; "To A Priest of the Mission in Agen," May 1656, *CCD*, 5:609.

⁸ Mt. 25:31-45. Cf. "Love For The Poor," January 1657, *CCD*, 11:349.

⁹ Cf. "Letter to Anton Fleury," 6 November 1658, *CCD*, 7:356.

¹⁰ Pierre Deffrenes, S.J., published four articles on Vincent's vocation in *Revue d'Ascetique et de Mystique* (1932): pp. 60-86; 164-183; 294-321; 389-411. They have been translated by Hugh O'Donnell, C.M., as *The Vocation of Saint Vincent de Paul: A Study in the Psychology of Holiness*, available from the translator. See, Myles Reardon, C.M., "Climbing the Mountain: Introducing the Writings of Guiseppe Toscani, C.M.," *Colloque* 53 (Summer 2006): 335-42. See also, Guiseppe Toscani, C.M., *The Mystique of the Poor*, with an introduction by Luigi Mezzadri, C.M., trans. by Myles Reardon, C.M. (Commission of Charism and Culture in Asia Pacific, 2011).

¹¹ Rom. 5:5.

To use a still more vigorous expression, Vincent was “drawn into” the Sending that is always radiating out from God. The Father is at all times sending forth, commissioning, giving over His very Self in His Son. In fact, that pouring-out is precisely who Jesus is, the making-present/sacrament of God — more accurately, the presencing of God’s loving. It was this facet within God, the Sending, that so captivated Vincent, and that took him further into God’s own life.

But there is the further note to Vincent’s religious experience. He sees where that love is going. He is taken by its direction, and that is out to the farthest reaches and down to the lowest levels. He comes to appreciate that the divine loving in Jesus is directed particularly to the people on the bottom rungs. And so those who are poor become those to whom Vincent feels especially sent to love. Just as importantly, they are a window to him onto where God’s love is appearing in the world. As the least of the brothers and sisters to whom Jesus is sent, they are the ones in whom the Savior lives.

So, when the fascinated Vincent asks Jesus to “give him the wealth that lets him do all these things,” he feels summoned along Jesus’ own path. As Vincent engages with the downtrodden, he senses being a part of that current of God’s out-flowing love to these men and women. It is this attraction to divine loving that informs Vincent’s intuitions about where to head in life, and how to make his choices.¹²

Toscani uses the expression “mystique of the poor” to drive home the point. Vincent sees the Father, Jesus, the poor, and his own self all caught up together in God’s loving of humanity.¹³ He grasped and was grasped by the pure generosity that is sending the Word to the poor, the Sending to which Jesus gives flesh. The fuel for Vincent’s engine is provided by just this experience of God. His motivation is fed by this fiery lived contact with the divine. Fire enkindles fire.

Writing about the saints, Hans Von Balthasar¹⁴ touches on this point. The most important thing about these holy people is not their heroic, personal accomplishments, but their firm obedience (or listening), coupled together with a total commitment to their mission. He moves on to identify this interplay of listening and commitment as *the* essential ingredient of what many would recognize as contemplation. It is in this contemplative stance that the saints experience what Von Balthasar tellingly terms “a great commissioning,” a growing urge to go out from God to the world. Is this not indeed the case with Vincent? Does he not experience, in Jesus, just that “great commissioning?” And to repeat, there is the direction in which missioning moves — toward the poor people of the world, trying to be God’s love for them, and at the same time finding in them God’s love.

As is clear, it is not an easy thing to find language for a person’s “lived contact with God.” This is so private, so beyond all words. Add to that the difficulty in trying to lay hold of this shifting reality, a conversion as it is happening, a relationship as it is blossoming.

¹² “Go first to the poor and help them. If you can do other things, fine.” “On Uniformity,” November 1657, *CCD*, 10:289.

¹³ “It is His good pleasure that we always remain *in* (emphasis mine) the holy joy of His love.” “Letter to St. Louise,” 9 February 1628, *CCD*, 1:36.

¹⁴ As quoted in Harvey D. Egan, S.J., *What Are They Saying About Mysticism?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 93.



Vincent de Paul with clergy members of the Tuesday Conferences. Oil on canvas. Originally in Toul, France, seminary, now in Crézilles.

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That is the challenge of appreciating Vincent's motivations, of coming to know what was moving him inside.

An insight offered by Hugh O'Donnell, C.M., comes to mind regarding an earlier translation in the *Constitutions of The Congregation of the Mission*¹⁵ of the verse from St. Luke's fourth chapter, so revelatory in Vincent's calling. In this first rendition the English read, "[We too are to] ...follow Christ, the evangelizer of the poor." "Evangelizer" was a noun, a descriptor of Jesus as the one who brings the best of all news, that God loves them, to the poor. But Fr. O'Donnell notes that in the final edition the text reads "...to follow Christ evangeliz-ing the poor," the word now transformed into a participle. It describes Jesus' very act of bringing the Good News.

So the disciple of Vincent is called to be not only an imitator of what Jesus did, but more than that he/she is to be swept up into bringing the love Jesus offers, taken into that act of Sending always going on in God. This is to follow Vincent as he follows Jesus Christ, by stepping into the very activity and dynamism of evangelizing the poor. This is to get caught up in that "mystique of the poor," that lived contact with God as God is pouring God's own Self into the world, reaching down to lift up the least of our brothers and sisters.

We began with a story about a master and would-be disciple who became fascinated by the master's motivations: "give me the wealth that makes it possible for you to give that diamond away so easily." Inasmuch as every master wants to lead his disciple to the source of this wealth, Vincent is no exception. Through his writings, his works, and indeed, his spirit alive in present-day followers, he continues to invite others to step into the current. He would take us to the wellsprings of his actions, to the ever-flowing source that shapes his view of how things really are in the world.

¹⁵ *Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission* (Rome: 1984; English Translation, Philadelphia: 1989), 27.

Let Vincent himself have the last word. In a talk on the supremacy of love (loving), he insists: “We really must give ourselves to God to imprint these truths (about loving) on our soul, to organize our lives according to this spirit, and to do the work of this (God’s) love.”¹⁶ Here we see Vincent’s counsel to begin from the inside of God.

In the same conference Vincent warms up this advice, so to speak, with another Lucan verse in which Jesus declares, “I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing.”¹⁷ Vincent then challenges his listeners: “So our calling... is to do what? It is to set people’s hearts on fire, to do what the Son of God did. He came to set the world on fire to inflame it with His own love... If our calling is to go throughout the world and spread the divine fire...how I must burn with this same fire!” Here, again, Vincent is not only moving in a current or sharing a wealth, but is burning with a spark of the same fire as burns in God.

St. Vincent de Paul is not only interesting. He is fascinating. We honor him in opening ourselves to the same wealth that came to fascinate him — that fathomless and fiery love flowing from the heart of God in the person of his Son, sent to bring the Wonderful News of just that love to all of us, especially to persons who are poor.

¹⁶ Conference 207, “On Charity,” May 1659, *CCD*, 12:214-5.

¹⁷ Lk. 12:49.





Vincent de Paul confides a foundling to a Daughter of Charity.
Oil on Canvas.
Given to the chapel of Thibouville by the Emperor Napoleon III.

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*B. Vincentius à Sancto Francisco Salesio
'Monialibus' Visitationis proficitur*



Vincent de Paul introduced by St. Francis de Sales to St. Jeanne de Chantal.
Etching by Restout.
Original in church of Ste. Marguerite, Paris.

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