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Vincent de Paul’s World of Animals

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The late André Dodin, a Vincentian scholar, began a study on the animal world during the time Vincent de Paul lived. Incomplete and unfinished at Dodin’s death, it came to me. The purpose of this study is to expose a single aspect of Vincent’s world: animal life. It is amazingly rich, since analysis of Vincent’s texts has shown more than 650 animal citations, sometimes with several mentioned in the same passage. In all he referred to more than one hundred animals, either directly by name, or indirectly either by citing their actions (such as bark, bite, gnaw, peck), or where they were kept (such as a stable, barn, or pen). To place some limits on such a large block of passages, it was necessary to omit animal products (such as eggs, honey, milk), along with other agricultural products.

To start with the results of the research, the majority of passages come from the founder’s conferences to the Daughters of Charity or the Congregation of the Mission. In those cases, the references to the animal world are used to offer examples for living, much as fables still do, now mostly through children’s television. In so doing, Vincent was following his regular practice, which he even urged a confrere to follow in Madagascar: to use “arguments taken from nature.”¹ Many passages, often repeated, cite biblical expressions for this same purpose.

Reading these texts reveals Vincent’s awareness of the natural world around him, something that certainly had roots in his rural childhood along with his ministry among the country folk of his later life. His care and even respect for the animal world, while not a major theme, is evident in his writings. We likewise see aspects of a scientific knowledge rooted in antiquity, now regarded as folk medicine (see his anxiety over an elk foot). He did not hesitate to cite non-existent animals, like the dragon, basilisk, and monsters, or to cite ancient fables in Aesop’s collection.

Interestingly, the papal bull of canonization, Superna Jerusalem, alluded to an aspect of his character that shows up in his citation of animals, namely contemplation of the world around him. In paragraph 30, Pope Clement XII linked Vincent’s devotional practice of the presence of God to the contemplation of nature: “Whatever his saw with his eyes, with diligence and holy industry he saw to it that they would recall the creator of all to his mind. They sing the glory and praise of God in their own way, and arouse the contemplation of heavenly beauty.”²

The most frequently cited animals were the most common types found in his era: the horse, cow, sheep, swine, poultry, and even wolves. He mentioned animals generically quite often, usually to draw a distinction between how animals live and how humans should live. He referred to himself in pejorative terms (a worm, a beast), as everyone knew who met him. Some of his expressions grew out of his own observations, in fact, his contemplation of the world around him coupled with his daily meditation. His observations on loaded


pack animals waiting patiently for their owners to arrive are a classic of this type, since he drew a moral lesson about waiting on divine providence from what he saw.

**Domesticated animals**

_Horse:_ Vincent lived in a world of horses. It is little wonder, then, that references to them are frequent in his writings. These can be divided into two major categories. The first deals with actual mentions of the animals, their use and importance, their effect on his life and health, and their role in the life of the Congregation. These references are often found in his letters. The second category primarily appears in his conferences, either simple mention of horses or references to them for some spiritual or moral lesson.

The earliest mentions come in Vincent’s first letter, where he mentions his criminal sale of a hired horse and his treatment in the slave market in Barbary.³ Two letters also track his accidents involving horses, including a kick from a horse (1631), and falling under a horse (1633).⁴ He was quite cautious about allowing houses to own a horse. He knew of cases when a superior with a horse would “go riding, make visits, waste time,” something he could not abide. Instead, he wanted houses to hire a horse as needed.⁵ He was also generous in proposing suitable (and more expensive) means to transport the furniture needed for the Missioners to conduct a mission.⁶ Based on his own experience, he freely allowed those who needed better transport to secure it, mainly for the sake of the individual

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(including Louise de Marillac). “Hire a stretcher and rent two good strong horses. I would have sent you a litter, but I do not know which you need, a litter or a stretcher. I entreat you, Mademoiselle, to spare nothing and, whatever it may cost, to get what will be the most comfortable for you.”

In his younger life, Vincent was an accomplished rider. As Antoine de Gramont related to Antoine Durand, Vincentian pastor of Fontainebleau, he and some friends had chased Vincent, riding a white horse, from Saint-Denis to Paris, shooting their pistols and shouting after him as if they were robbers. He outrode them and entered the first church he saw, thanking God for his miraculous escape.

In Vincent’s later life, he appreciated the contradiction and bad example between his having a carriage and houses not being allowed even to own a horse. “I am well aware that you can say to me, ‘Physician, heal yourself,’ because I used a horse in the past and now I use a carriage. This is true, to my great shame, but it is true also that necessity has obliged me to do so. However, if you advise me to act otherwise, Monsieur, I shall do so.”

Later on, he had horses and a coachman at Saint-Lazare, used often for his own trips in the city and for Louise’s. He also recommended use of a carriage for Missioners who needed one.

During his conferences, Vincent continued to refer to horses, such as comparing their obedience to their rider to the obedience expected of a Daughter of Charity to Divine Providence or to her superiors. He recommended to both the Sisters and his confreres the practices of three saints that involved horses. St. Charles Borromeo often meditated and even went to confession to his chaplain while riding. St. Isidore the Farmer regularly left his plow horses in the field so that he could attend Mass, an action pleasing to God. Even before his baptism, St. Martin of Tours, also while riding, performed an act of charity to a poor man, another action pleasing to God. More than once Vincent told the story of the

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13 See CCD, Conference 105, “Rising, Prayer, Examination of Conscience, etc.,” 17 November 1658, 10:468-88; and Conference 78, “Recommendations for Conduct while Traveling,” 11:85-86.


Count of Rougemont’s conversion, riding his horse, meditating on his life, and deciding to break his attachment to his sword.\textsuperscript{16}

In one particularly charming and revealing incident, he suggested to his confreres how they could open a conversation with simple and uneducated persons, leading them from ordinary matters to more important and spiritual ones. He recommended a practice surely his own in asking: “How are your horses getting along? How’s this? How’s that? How are you doing?”\textsuperscript{17}

He recommended the holy indifference practiced by the saints, such as Paul the Apostle. Although the biblical text does not support the affirmation, Vincent claimed that “God knocked him off his horse,” and Paul sought only to do the divine will.\textsuperscript{18} Vincent reflected on the same indifference by interpreting Ps 73:23 (“I was like a brute beast in your presence”) as referring to Jesus speaking through the prophet (the psalmist). If Jesus was like an indifferent brute beast, a jument or mare, so should the members of the Congregation be.\textsuperscript{19}

Plow horses could also symbolize the coordinated activities required of the confreres at times, the necessity of pulling in the same direction.\textsuperscript{20} On the other hand, there could

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{17} Conference 161, “Duty of Catechizing Persons Who are Poor,” 17 November 1656, \textit{CCD}, 11:344.
\end{thebibliography}
also be negative connotations: horse-love or donkey-love being what those Sisters practice in exclusive relationships with one another; and those confreres given to drinking in excess live like horses or pigs, incapable of moderation.²¹

He referred metaphorically to bridles to signify the need to control persons or passions.²² Many other citations exist, particularly in his correspondence, but they largely refer to ordinary events involving horses, mares, mounts, coaches, saddles, riders, and stables.

Donkey (ass), mule: In his letters, Vincent occasionally mentioned the need to hire a donkey, most likely to pull a small cart for Sisters traveling to a mission.²³ Vincent also referred to the biblical account of Balaam and his donkey, who spoke to him in God’s name (Nm 22:28-30). He similarly described the Muslim wife of his supposed owner in Tunis although she was not a believer, God still used her to convince her husband to return to his faith. Vincent also referred to himself in this manner: although a donkey, he could still have something to say.²⁴ Moreover, in another biblical reference, he considered the story of Saul: he sought his she-ass but he found a kingdom.²⁵

During the assembly of 1651, to make the point that it is impossible to please everyone, Vincent referred to the classical folk tale from Aesop, concerning the man, the boy, and the donkey.²⁶

In his usual contemplative fashion, Vincent returned three times to one experience. “I saw ten or twelve heavily-laden mules halted near the door of a tavern, waiting for the men in charge of them, who very probably were drinking inside this same tavern. I kept thinking about those poor beasts, with their burden on their back, standing there without moving, waiting for their master and leader.”²⁷ The lesson was patience and a readiness to obey. In another conference, he reflected on how the animals were caparisoned, as with gold, feathers, and ornamental carpets. The lesson here was not to become puffed up with

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²⁵ Letter 71, “To Saint Louise,” [Before 1632], CCD, 1:110-11, referring to 1 Sm 10:16.
Besides these moral lessons, he described the use and value of mules in daily life, and he used a common expression (“shoe the mule”) to refer to profiting from a purchase made for someone else. He hoped that no Sister ever engaged in such a practice.

Sheep, lamb, shepherd, goat: Vincent made the standard references to sheep and lambs when citing the scriptures: the sacrifice of a sheep in place of Isaac (Gn 22:13); Jesus sent to the lost sheep (Mt 15:24); the sheep know the Good Shepherd’s voice (Jn 10:27); sent as lambs among wolves (Lk 10:13 and Mt 10:16); sent as a lamb to the slaughter (Isa 53:7, and Acts 8:32); feed my lambs, feed my sheep (Jn 21:15-17); and falling down in worship before the lamb (Rv 5:8). He cited these without any special extraordinary moral lessons, apart from comparing the sheep to the flock of his two congregations.

Several times, Vincent called on his own experience regarding a sheep infected with scabies, a contagious disease capable of destroying a flock. He used the comparison as a justification for ridding his two congregations of unsuitable members. He regarded

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Huguenots as black sheep to be drawn back into the fold through good living and virtues.\footnote{Letter 667a, “To Guillaume Gallais,” [Around 1643], \textit{CCD}, 2:441-42.} Indeed, he summarized the vocation of the Congregation as “to lead the lost sheep back into the fold.”\footnote{Conference 86, “Perseverance in Vocation,” 29 October 1638, \textit{CCD}, 11:98.} Vincentian fundamentalism might latch onto these words as justification for the Congregation’s not being concerned about the materially poor, but this would be misplaced.

He also used the example of a wolf in the sheepfold to show that Jansenism must be opposed:

This, Monsieur, is what has come into my mind to make you see our reasons for declaring ourselves on this occasion opposed to these new opinions. I see no objections to them, except for two. First, there is the reason to fear that, by attempting to stem this flood of new opinions, we may stir people up more. My reply to this is that, if this were the case, heresies should not be opposed nor should those who are determined to rob people of life or property, and the shepherd would do wrong to cry “Wolf!” when he sees one about to enter the sheepfold.\footnote{Letter 1043, “To Jean Dehorgny,” 25 June 1648, \textit{CCD}, 3:326.}

Since shepherds were often poor and neglected, Vincent showed his respect for them. He praised the simplicity of the shepherds in Bethlehem at the birth of Jesus, the shepherds living in remote areas who needed catechizing, and those shepherds in the fields around Rome in whom the Missioners took a special interest.\footnote{See \textit{CCD}, Document 16, “Sermon on Holy Communion,” 13a:38-42; Letter 202, “To Antoine Portail,” 10 August 1635, 1:289-90; and Letter 496, “To Louis Lebreton,” 14 November 1640, 2:154-57.}

Vincent also took care to assure that the members of the Confraternities of Charity would serve good food to the sick and to soldiers, often mutton, with sufficient bread and wine.\footnote{See \textit{CCD}, Document 125, “General Regulations for Charities of Women – II,” 13b:5-8; Document 126, “Charity of Women - Châtillon-les-Dombes,” November-December 1617, 13a:8-23; and Document 127, “Charity of Women - Joigny,” September 1618, 13a:23-28; et al.} He also used goats, very likely as a source of milk for the foundlings.\footnote{See \textit{CCD}, Letter 1290, “To Saint Louise,” [January 1638], 1:410-12; Letter 295, “To Saint Louise,” [February 1638], 1:423-25; Letter 349, “To Saint Louise,” [1638], 1:497-98; and Letter 375, “To Saint Louise,” [between Sept. 1638 and Sept. 1639], 1:537-38.} For some reason, these animals occur only in his early letters, except for the story of a poor goatherd in the mountains of the Auvergne whose prayer was so intense that neither a bishop nor theologian could speak of God as he did.\footnote{Conference 36, “The Good Use of Instructions,” 1 May 1648, \textit{CCD}, 9:305-20.}

\textit{Cattle:} Vincent constantly referred to his youth to humble himself in the presence
of others. He clearly regarded his adolescent duty of guarding animals (cattle, swine) as humiliating work, as he reminded the Sisters. In their case, the first Daughter of Charity, Marguerite Naseau, pastured animals, as did some of the Sisters before they entered the Company. Nevertheless, his experience must have served him well, since several references occur in his letters about providing a cow to have milk for the foundlings as well as for sale. He even put the sick confreres in Saint-Lazare on a strict diet of milk and bread in hopes of strengthening them.

Beef also appears in his writings. Vincent sought the advice of the duchess of Aiguillon in the matter of a new tax on animals that was making it prohibitive for butchers to purchase beef. As a result his animals, kept too long in his fields, were destroying them, uprooting trees and the like. He referred occasionally to the food given to confreres and Sisters, generally beef or mutton, just as the poor ate. Jean Le Vacher, ministering to the Christian slaves in North Africa, was praised for purchasing fat cattle for the prisoners. Vincent also left instructions about the amount of meat (beef, veal, and mutton) to be given to the sick and the poor. Relying on a donation he received for his family, Vincent saw to it that one poor farmer would receive a pair of oxen, another would have his house rebuilt, and a third would receive clothes and tools. His instructions served the poor in very concrete ways.

Vincent had very little to say about cattle of any sort based on scriptural passages. He urged the Ladies of Charity to get rid of useless trinkets and jewelry to support the foundlings, just as the women of Israel gave up their jewelry to make the golden calf (Ex 32). He cited Is 1:3 (“An ox knows its owner”) to illustrate that their owner fed them. In the same way, the poor would feed the members of the Congregation, to whom they should be devoted. He quoted 1 Cor 9:9 (citing Dt 25:4, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain”) to grant liberty to a poor priest who often came to Saint-

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Lazare looking for aid. Finally, he cited the story of the prodigal son (Lk 15:23), in which the father gladly slaughters the fatted calf. Vincent’s lesson here was to urge the Sisters to avoid envy if one is shown some special kindness and another is not.

In one interesting passage, Vincent compared the Carthusian hermits of Paris to cattle (probably oxen). “One day, someone said to me, ‘Look at the Carthusians, they’re like cattle; they walk the same way; and if you see one, you see them all.’” Vincent urged his confreres to imitate them by their solidity and prayerfulness.

Swine: Vincent had a low opinion of swine, reflected as humility in his letters and conferences. To this description, he added other terms such as detestable, poor, pitiful, and ignorant. When the queen began to think of having Vincent made a cardinal, he replied, according to Brother Robineau: “Alas, Madame, what is Your Majesty thinking? Does she realize what she would be doing if she did this? Quoi, a poor beggar, son of a peasant, a man who herded cows, a swineherd—to make him a cardinal!”

To show how low swine ranked in his thoughts, Vincent recalled that in Canada, pigs were treated as goods or property. He was astonished that people were attached to them and urged the Missioners to break off any attachment to possessions, no matter how low and vile. He seemingly pointed out how worthless human beings were by recalling that pigs have the same internal organs as humans: heart, lungs, liver, etc. As additional proof, he recalled to the Sisters that God ordered Satan to enter a pig (misreading Mt 8:31, which speaks of a herd of pigs), and that the prodigal son in the Gospel was forced to live on pig food. He ranked swine with “beasts,” while speaking about moderation: “What is it, brothers, if not an animal state, living like a beast, following one’s inclination like an animal, like a horse, like a pig—yes, like a pig—and worse than animals?”

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50 Abelly, Life of the Venerable Servant, vol. 3, ch. 11, sect. 5, pp. 139-47.
52 Conference 206, “Uniformity,” 23 May 1659, CCD, 12:211.
compared them with venom, dogs, and even Antichrists.\footnote{Letter 1064, “To Jean Dehorgny,” 10 September 1648, \textit{CCD}, 3:358-67.}

Finally, as if this were not bad enough, Vincent never mentioned or even suggested eating pork.

\textit{Dog, cat:} A dog is often depicted in paintings of young Vincent caring for his father’s flocks. In his later life, however, few mentions occur. A little dog destined to be sent to the queen of Poland appears three times in his correspondence. When Louise brought him over to Saint-Lazare, the dog missed a Sister and kept whining. Vincent followed his usual pattern of contemplating the situation: “This little creature has made me very much ashamed, when I see his singlehearted affection for the Sister who feeds him but see myself so little attached to my Sovereign Benefactor and so little detached from all other things.”\footnote{See \textit{CCD}, Letter 1861, “To Charles Ozenne,” 9 April 1655, 5:364; see also Letter 1810, “To Charles Ozenne,” 4 December 1654, 5:238-40 (translated puppy).}

He drew a similar lesson from the case of a woman very devoted to her dog. When the animal died, she was inconsolable and even feared that, in her grief, she was losing her mind. Vincent mentioned this in two conferences to the Sisters.\footnote{See \textit{CCD}, Conference 73, “Indifference,” 6 June 1656, 10:126-46; and Conference 89, “Mortification, Correspondence, Meals, and Journeys,” 9 December 1657, 10:318-30.}

John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople, offered another lesson. Vincent referred to it in two separate conferences to his confreres on speaking about prayer. Chrysostom believed that a cleric who said the Divine Office negligently was like a dog barking. The comparison changed in the second mention, where the archbishop said that God prefers the barking of dogs to the praises of someone who does not utter them as he should. “God prefers the barking of a dog! Of a dog!”\footnote{Conference 213, “Praying the Divine Office,” 26 September 1659, \textit{CCD}, 12:267.}

Vincent also cited two common phrases: fighting like cats and dogs (even the Sisters
could do this), and the enemy (the demon) can bark but not bite if God is at one’s side.⁶³

Vincent refers to cats only twice. The first becomes a lesson for Sisters in a rational
detachment from worldly possessions: “they attach themselves to anything that gives them
some satisfaction—to a cat, for instance, to having the house keys, or to any number of
things that really don’t deserve to occupy a mind that’s the least bit rational.”⁶⁴ The second
is a peculiar and obsolete word, rechignechat, which could be paraphrased in English as
“grumpy cat”: someone who is sullen or quarrelsome.⁶⁵

_Poultry:_ Vincent referred only to chickens, never to ducks or geese. He was interested
in having the Charities raise hens for the poor to eat (either their meat or their eggs, which
could also be sold to bring in some income).⁶⁶

After the death of Louise, plucking a chicken symbolized the possibility of Sisters
who might tear “the Company to pieces…. Daughters tearing their mother to pieces.”⁶⁷
A hen constantly pecking in the same area became a symbol of the constant need to wash
one’s hands, and to read and reread the rules.⁶⁸

He also used the expression “wet hen” to refer not to someone who was angry (as in
English) but to Missioners who were timid or weaklings, unwilling to take risks. For him,

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⁶³ See _CCD_, Letter 386, “To Saint Louise,” [1639], 1:56-61; and Letter 903, “To Jacques Tholard, 8 [December 1646], 3:138-
et al.
such behavior was not “reasonable,” an adjective he uses several times.69

Birds and invertebrates

Ant: In a conference to the Sisters, Vincent speaks about sloth in community life and cites the example of ants:

[God] refers the slothful to the ants: “Go, you sluggard” He says, “and learn from the ant what you should do.” [Prv 6:6] The ant, dear Sisters, is a little creature to which God has given such foresight that it brings to the community all it can amass during the summer and harvest time, to be used during the winter. You see, dear Sisters, the ant doesn’t appropriate it to his personal use but brings it to the little community storehouse for the others.70

He also used ants and mites in his contemplative fashion to teach the meaning of God as creator of all things: “Yes, it is true that he created the mite that scurries between the flesh and the skin, and those little ants you see running around; God created all that.”71

Bee: Vincent’s treatment of bees is complex. His belief that bees gathered honey from flowers to feed others mirrored the need for Sisters to bring their surplus to the community. Another product, the “honey of the sacred words she has heard at a conference,” was to be shared with others. Bees were also provident, operating with foresight, and given to us by God as an example. Vincent urged his confreres to adopt his contemplative behavior to draw lessons from nature around them: “Take, for example, the pigeons72 of a dove cote: they look alike, they all have the same little ways of acting, they do the same things, and what one does, the other does; they all have the same characteristics. And look at the bees in a hive; they’re like a little community; they have the same form, the same activity, the same purpose.” From this examination, his men would learn a lesson on the importance of uniformity of thought and action in the Congregation.73

Finally, in a letter to Etienne Blatiron, the superior in Genoa (1648), Vincent refers again to honey by praising him for his efforts with the mission and in the house. In praising him publicly at Saint-Lazare, he notes “the honey from your hive flows even into this house

71 Document 49, “Instruction to the Residents of the Nom-de-Jésus, (Summer 1653), CCD, 13:177.
72 See Abelly, Life of the Venerable Servant, vol. 1, ch. 50, p. 252, on Vincent’s care in not killing a pigeon to use its blood to cure his eye infection.
and serves as food for its children.”

_Capon, partridge, woodcock_: These three rare and expensive birds appear in Vincent’s commentary too. In general, he wanted the Sisters and the Missioners to avoid them as special treatment, or “singularities.” “[Superiors] must never allow any individual to have special food, like capon or partridge, etc., at his meals.” In the case of the Sisters, it was a matter of life style, since in their illnesses they should be treated like the sick poor. They were to have meat and bread, but as he stated regarding one Sister who had refined taste and special needs: “[she] would like to be treated to partridge, woodcock, and other fine food! That’s not for you.”

_Eagle, quail, swan_: Vincent refers to each of these three birds with a classical story attached to it. Although the references are brief, they show the quality of his knowledge of animal life in the seventeenth century. Vincent cited an ancient fable from Aesop about the tortoise and eagle, one that spread through the world in various forms. “To escape the prediction that had been made to him that a house would fall on his head, a man went off to the country. A tortoise being carried off by an eagle fell on his head and killed him. So much for being in a safe place, Sisters!” One wonders if they laughed at his remarks.

He used the popular belief that “mother quails… allow themselves to be captured by hunters in order to save their chicks,” to urge the Sisters to show similar care to the foundlings.

In a circular letter on the death of Jean Pillé (1643), Vincent compared his vigor on his deathbed to the song of a dying swan, an ancient story, also found in Aesop. “What is most admirable is that often he spoke and prayed with more vivacity and vigor than before, especially when he was told that it was by this illness that God intended to put an end to his temporal sufferings so that he could go and delight in eternal joys. It was then that, like a swan, he began to sing more sweetly than before.”

Discussing spiritual illusions in a conference based on the _Common Rules_ (2:16), Vincent explained that the devil can twist reality around. He spoke in the name of a questioner: “You’re saying that what’s as white as a swan is as black as a crow, and what’s black as a crow is as white as a swan!”

_Crow, owl_: Vincent linked these two birds together as representatives of ugly animals. His purpose was to show that, just as a formerly fine castle can collapse and become the

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haunt of unpleasant animals, such as the owl, a harbinger of death, so the Community’s houses can collapse morally and become the haunt of pitiful persons. “Formerly [the castle] was seen to be inhabited by virtuous, God-fearing persons of quality; and who do you think inhabits it today? Toads, crows, owls, and other ugly animals.”

**Birds:** Vincent referred to birds in both biblical and natural terms. He felt divine providence was evident in its care of birds (Mt 6:25) and with the ease with which they created nests, and yet Jesus had no place to lay his head. This example called the Sisters and Missioners to appreciate and experience poverty (Lk 9:58; Mt 8:20). Observing birds also taught other important lessons: birds eating the grain sown on the road were like distractions in the moral life (Mt 13:4); just as birds have wings, so the Sisters had their rules, like wings with which to fly to God; a bird finds air everywhere just as the soul will always find God; birds pick up only enough food to satisfy their need, a moral lesson about temperance; and although their call is beautiful, Sisters should mortify themselves to sight and sound, turning away even from bird song. He also referred to the seasonal migration of birds, applying it to the order of God’s creation. For the Sisters to ignore their rules, they would have replaced order with disorder. He once compared grace to water for a bird: it drinks only enough, just as God gives only sufficient grace to one who needs it.

Although Vincent did not mention birds specifically in the following passage, he applied their ability to fly to contrast a free person with one enslaved to worldly possessions. “Those are the persons who are free, brothers, who have no laws, who fly, who go to the right and to the left; once again, who fly, who can’t be stopped, and who are never slaves of the devil or of their passions.”

Another important reference is found in this example of a bird trapped in a snare. It should remind the Sisters of their need to struggle to escape undue attachments. This surely came from his own experience (“Isn’t it pitiful to watch”), which he reflected on and drew spiritual meaning:

Sisters, a little bird caught in a trap struggles day and night, without flagging, to escape from it and, as long as it’s alive, will keep struggling to get free. And shall we be caught up in a bad attachment without bothering to escape from it?

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We’ll be guilty before God and left without any excuse if we don’t make use of this example. *Quoi,* Sisters! Isn’t it pitiful to watch a bird doing all in its power to escape from a snare, while a Daughter of Charity who sees that she has an attachment for something does nothing to free herself of it!\(^2\)

A similar example came from his own experience, which he used, he said, “to inject a little humor” in a meeting:

Sisters, sometimes there are passing temptations, as in the case of a good Capuchin I used to know. Once, while he was still a novice, he was attending Vespers. Since he had been a famous hunter, the pleasures of the chase came to his mind. All he did was think about horses, hounds, and birds; he was pursuing a hare. In a word, that’s how he spent the time of Vespers. When he came to himself, he was really amazed. “What’s this?” he said. “You want to be a Capuchin and here you are, returning from the chase. You’re not fit to be a Capuchin; you should leave.” And off he went to find his Prior saying, “Father, have them give me my clothes; I want to leave.” “What’s wrong, Brother?” said the Prior. “O Father, I’m not fit to be a Capuchin; I just came back from Vespers; and all through the Office I never left the hunt.” “What, Brother? You went hunting during Vespers? And were you in the choir?” “Yes, Father, but all I could think about was the chase. That’s why I beg you to have them give me my own clothes, for I’m not fit to be a Capuchin.” “Well, tell me, Brother,” said the Prior, “when you were hunting like that, when you were pursuing the hare, did you cry out, ‘Oh! greyhound!

Oh! greyhound!” “Oh no! Father; I didn’t say a word.” “Well then, it’s nothing, Brother. You’ll make a fine Capuchin.” And so he remained, lived to a ripe old age, and attained great perfection.  

Butterfly: Vincent referred twice to butterflies, using the same experience in two conferences to his confreres. He warned them against desiring honors as “the greatest of all follies. Chasing butterflies!” His later conference returned to the same theme, that those who chase after benefices are often frustrated, a laughing stock, “like children who have run after butterflies.” His observation of children at play must have led him to contemplate an inner meaning of what he perceived exteriorly.

Sparrow, dove: These two birds figure in the Gospels (the simplicity of the dove, Mt 10:16; caring for the sparrow, Mt 10:29), and Vincent cited them as models of behavior for his men. He also considered the dove as a good provider for its young, thus the confreres should work diligently to show that they love God.

Pheasant: This account of Vincent and the pheasant chicks appears only in Abelly, which he characterizes as “an incident so insignificant that few persons would ever have bothered themselves about it.” A brother at Saint-Lazare found some pheasant eggs on the property, had them hatched by a hen, and when they had grown brought them in a cage to Vincent, thinking that he would enjoy them. However, the founder looked at them differently. He explained that the king had forbidden pheasant hunting, and consequently

he and the brother set them free. Vincent’s lesson was that one could not disobey the king without displeasing God.\textsuperscript{86} The brother was greatly disappointed.

*Insect, spider:* Vincent’s contemplative gaze included insects. While in a room lined with mirrors, he realized that not even a fly could escape notice. He concluded, in Abelly’s version: “If men have found a way to see everything that happens, even to the smallest movement of a tiny insect, how much more must we believe that we are always in the sight of the divine mirror of God’s all-seeing vision.”\textsuperscript{87}

Vincent’s hearing must have been acute, inasmuch as the Common Rules, as well as his primitive rules, referred several times to maintaining quiet in the house. In his conferences, he reflected on silence and noise: in the Louvre, packed with people, it was so silent that one could hear a fly buzzing from one end of the hall to the other; at the Bons-Enfants, for ordination retreats, it was the same in the early days.\textsuperscript{88}

Vincent also reflected on spiders, but in different ways. While spiders can draw poison from flowers, the Sisters should not take badly the good behavior of others. Similarly, his reflection on seeing a spider’s web on a crucifix in the room of Michel de Marillac, St. Louise’s uncle, was not that Marillac was a poor housekeeper, but rather that he would not dare set his eyes on the crucified Jesus out of respect and reverence. Even midges (or gnats), mites, and grubs (or vermin) entered Vincent’s consciousness; his perspective being that divine providence extends even to the smallest creatures. As God provides for mites, so superiors should provide for their confreres.\textsuperscript{89}

*Snail:* Vincent restricted his reflections on snails to a moral lesson, that of withdrawing into one’s shell in the face of difficulties. He used this idea in three of his letters, as well as conferences to the Missioners.\textsuperscript{90} The confreres recording his conferences thought it important to preserve the following note about their lazy and fearful brethren, like snails in their shells. “Note: In saying this, he made certain gestures with his hands, moving his head around and speaking in a certain contemptuous tone of voice, which conveyed even better what he was trying to express than what he was actually saying.” He then mentioned similar weaknesses in himself: “Yes, Messieurs, just getting up in the morning


\textsuperscript{87} Abelly, *Life of the Venerable Servant*, vol. 3, ch. 6, p. 57; Coste’s version mentions the motion of a finger instead, see Conference 169, “Repetition of Prayer: Various Topics,” 24 August 1657, *CCD*, 11:362-64.


\textsuperscript{90} See *CCD*, Letter 716, “To Bernard Codoing,” 15 July 1644, 2:514-15; Letter 2824, “To Guillaume Desdames,” 25 April 1659, 7:531-32; and Letter 2898, “To Edme Menestrier,” 9 July 1659, 8:17 (although he recommends the practice: “Just leave things as they are,” or, to figuratively: “Just stay in your shell”).
seems a great affair to me.”91 Again, perhaps smiles or laughter.

Worm: One of Vincent’s classic comparisons derives from Psalm 22, which the Gospels cite as part of the Passion of Jesus. Vincent used “I am a worm and no man” (Ps 22:6) in various forms to show the greatness of God and the smallness of humans. In his early sermon on communion, he attains rhetorical heights, “we are only earthworms, a puff of smoke, a sack of rubbish, and the cave of a thousand bad thoughts.”92 Vincent also used the earthworm to characterize himself. In addition, he used the worm as a symbol of conscience, as bad thoughts, temptations, or envy gnawing at the heart.93

Speaking in a more natural sense, he used the worms found during the autopsy performed on Louis XIII to draw the lesson that people try to please kings, who are merely human, but they should strive harder to please God.94

Others: A single mention of scorpion oil comes as a surprise. It was the product of European scorpions, much less dangerous than those found in the tropics. Brother Alexandre Veronne, the community pharmacist, wanted some to concoct his medicines.95 Vincent is recorded as using what was a common and ancient expression, a “flea in the ear.” In this case, he meant that this distraction was the source of new ideas, sometimes less than moral

ones. Vincent also cites a comparison taken from Francis de Sales. He mentioned the apodes (literally, footless), birds (perhaps the sea swallow) with rudimentary feet. Francis de Sales and Vincent see in them a comparison with an individual who refuses to be moved by grace.

**Aquatic creatures**

*Herring, cod:* These two types of fish were quite desirable, and Vincent recommended them, along with butter, fruit, and the “four beggars” (a dessert with four types of dried fruits and nuts), to strengthen hardworking missionaries. He also told the Sisters that a fisherman whom he had met returning from whale hunting told him that Turks were generally healthy. He judged that the reason was that they avoided alcohol, and their diet was primarily cod cooked in milk. The Sisters should learn from this that they should avoid wine.

*Whale, dolphin:* Vincent engaged in a popular retelling of the Jonah story for the sake of the Sisters. In so doing, Vincent reversed some of the incidents: Jonah knowing in advance what he is to preach in Nineveh, then thrown into the sea and carried away by a whale. The saint sees here a parable of sin and forgiveness. “It’s greatly to be feared that those as unfortunate as Jonah may, like him, fall to the bottom of the sea, into the belly of a whale—I mean, into sin and the incapacity to escape from it except by a remarkable miracle. And God doesn’t do that every day.”

He returned to the same theme in a later conference, this time using Jonah’s reluctance to go to Nineveh as a lesson for Sisters. Those who do not want to go on mission will be like Jonah, “not in the belly of a whale, but in herself, in a cadaver, or perhaps in a place where she’ll be lost.”

Dolphins appear only once in his writings, wherein he admitted to his confreres that seeing dolphins playing in the water gives pleasure. For someone who suffered from seasickness, this must have been the only positive memory of a voyage. Which one and where are unknown.

*Fish:* Fish in general appear several times: simply as food, especially for the sick.

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or being like a fish out of water, that needs water to survive, which parallels the need for prayer in a soul. Vincent turned to the Gospel parable concerning the net that catches both good and bad fish (Mt 13:47-48), to provide another lesson from fishing. God’s goal is not for the person to catch the fish (that is God’s responsibility), but rather to cast the net in the first place.

In a remarkable piece of exegesis, Vincent claimed that Jesus ate meat only once, the Paschal Lamb at the last supper. He ate fish only once, too, at the shore after the Resurrection. The basis for these readings was that Jesus was not shown to be eating meat or fish apart from these two occasions. However, that did not move Vincent into asking the Missioners, devoted to doing what Jesus did, to become vegetarians.

Other animals, real and mythical

Basilisk, dragon, ape, monster: Vincent used a mythological creature, the basilisk, to speak to the Daughters of Charity about temptations. Traditionally, the basilisk could harm humans in various ways, such as a poisonous breath or a killing glance. Instead, Vincent said: “They’re basilisks that put up lovely pretenses in order to seduce you.” He must have been thinking of the passage from Ps 91:13 (Vulgate, 90:13): “super aspidem et basiliscum calcabis,” in modern translation: “You can tread upon the asp and the viper.”

Similarly, for his confreres he cited the dragon’s stinking breath to symbolize a proud person who raises himself up through his search for worldly honors. He also compared such a person to an ape, whom he also called a monster.

A common comparison for him was monster, usually a misshapen and evil creature. He called Jansenism a monster, as he did ignorance and sin, since they were all destructive of the Church. “Oh, Sisters! slay those monsters by abstaining from even legitimate contacts,” a reference to tendencies to self-gratification, even through legitimate means. He made the same comparison for the Sisters as he did for his confreres in search of honors.


106 See CCD, Conference 196, “Members of the Congregation and Their Ministries,” 13 December 1658, 12:83-98; see also Conference 182, “Detachment from the Goods of This World,” 8 June 1658, 12:21, where the confrere became a monster through prideful desires.

107 Conference 182, “Detachment from the Goods of This World,” 8 June 1658, CCD, 12:21, translated as “ugly person.”


or offices: “exorcise that demon, censure that monster.” Later in the same conference, he labeled as a monster a Sister who was externally but not internally “a monster that horrifies God and your Guardian Angels!” For his men, he saw greed as “that horrible monster, the most terrifying that hell can produce,” and continued by relating the story of two confreres who stole funds from the house, victims of this monster.\textsuperscript{110}

\textit{Lion}: A more common reference was the lion. Vincent cited biblical passages mentioning them. He provided two comparisons of the devil with a roaring lion, citing 1 Pt 5:8, and in one case locating the devil as prowling around the bed in the morning to keep his confreres from attending morning prayer.\textsuperscript{111} In another citation, he compared St. Paul with a roaring lion, persecuting Christians. Although he began badly, he ended well.\textsuperscript{112} The founder twisted the biblical text to his own use more than once, as mentioned above. Here he used the ancient idea of lions among lambs, not coexisting peacefully as in Is 11:6 or Rv 5:5-6, but as devouring the lambs. He tried to console the superior of St. Méen, a former Benedictine abbey, in this manner, whose difficulties there were devouring him.\textsuperscript{113}

Vincent also added a strange twist to the story of Daniel in the lions’ den by remarking that the prophet Habakkuk, taken there by an angel to feed Daniel, was returned to his place but thought that the whole event was a dream. The biblical text does not support this.\textsuperscript{114}

Other citations were based on a common understanding of a lion’s behavior. A lion will not attack a person, or another animal, that humbles itself before it: “When a ferocious lion, ready to devour another animal that might try to resist him, sees it... humbled at his feet, he immediately calms down.”\textsuperscript{115} In a passing reference, he mentions how a lion cub grows imperceptibly. This reflected for him the indiscernible growth of the desire for the finer things of life.\textsuperscript{116}

Finally, he cited instances in Church history, for example, wherein a bishop of Rome, Pope Marcellus, was condemned to care for “lions, leopards, and other similar beasts that would serve as entertainment for those infidel Princes.” In this same way, the confreres assigned to serve the mentally ill or depraved boarders confined at Saint-Lazare could take comfort in sharing a similar duty.\textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{112} Conference 54, “Fidelity to God,” 3 June 1653, \textit{CCD}, 9:490-505.
\textsuperscript{117} Conference 13, “The Mentally Ill or Depraved Boarders Confined at Saint-Lazare,” \textit{CCD}, 11:18.
Wolf: Vincent was clearly concerned about wolves, literally and figuratively. They were widely found in France and often preyed on livestock. Vincent mentioned this danger several times to draw moral lessons, with the wolf serving as the evil figure. He believed that as Jesus sent the disciples as sheep (or lambs) amongst the wolves, so should the Sisters and the Missioners bear up under their difficulties. Another biblical reference was the proverbial wolf in sheep’s clothing (Mt 7:15). Vincent used this narrative to warn the Sisters against those who would endanger them in matters of poverty, and against outsiders who did not support their commitments. Crying “Wolf!” should be the practice if a wolf enters the sheep pen; in the same way, heresies should be identified and extirpated. Vincent explained how problems can arise in houses, noting as when the shepherd is away, the wolf can easily enter; so too when the superior is absent, little quarrels can erupt among the confreres.

More characteristically, he pointed to aggressors as wolves. Clement VIII admitted that he dreamt that God had condemned him for entrusting the care of the flock, the Church, to the wolf, Henry IV of France, whom the pope had reconciled. Vincent likewise asserted that he would never abandon the twenty or thirty thousand Christians in Tunis by throwing

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Wolves also symbolized problems for the Sisters (one who wanders away from her vocation can become prey to a wolf), and for his men (the desire for riches). Vincent also referred to two other sayings. The first is attributed to John Chrysostom: “as long as we remain sheep by a genuine, sincere humility, not only will we not be devoured by wolves but we’ll even convert them into sheep.”\footnote{See Homily 33, on Mt 10:16.} The second is an ancient proverb: “The person who makes himself a sheep will be eaten by the wolf,” a stance he rejects.\footnote{Conference 197, “Gospel Teachings,” 14 February 1659, \textit{CCD}, 12:103.}

\textit{Snake, serpent, viper, asp, venom:} One of the saint’s common allusions dealt with snakes/serpents and their poison. Vincent employed various biblical references for this purpose, such as the serpent in the Garden of Eden (while referring to temptations), as well as the prudence of the serpent (in connection with the simplicity of the dove, in the Vincentian \textit{Common Rules, II:5}).\footnote{See \textit{CCD}, Conference 62, “Temptations,” 24 August 1654, 10:7-20; Conference 67, “Obedience,” 23 May 1655, 10:62-76; and Conference 201, “Simplicity and Prudence,” 14 March 1659, 12:139-51, referring to Mt 10:16; also, Letter 1595, “François Charles to Saint Vincent,” 14 March 1653, 4:532-36.} For the Sisters’ rules, he had a more menacing view regarding participation in conversations that reveal the faults of others: “they will do their best to prevent this, or else leave quickly, as if they heard the hissing of a serpent.” In this, he was perhaps recalling a passage from Sirach: “Flee from sin as from a serpent” (Sir 21:2).\footnote{See \textit{CCD}, Document 149a, “Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity,” 13b:158; and Conference 87, “Uniformity, Chastity, and Modesty,” 18 November 1657, 10:293-307.} He used the poisonous serpent in many ways. It was a symbol of an attachment to some person, its poison keeping one from paying attention to teachings heard in conferences. Or, it could be a Sister who, like Judas, sets out to ruin the Company.\footnote{See \textit{CCD}, Conference 24, “Love of Vocation and Assistance to the Poor,” 13 February 1646, 9:190-201; and Conference 70, “Explanation of the Common Rules,” 29 September 1655, 10:86-100.} The figure of Judas also let him reflect dramatically on the traitor’s death (Acts 1:18), which he attributed in some way to a serpent. The lesson being that a confere who begins to fill his life with small pleasures will eventually die of this, through the bursting of “the entrails of the one who raised and hatched it in its womb.”\footnote{Conference 132, “Poverty,” 13 August 1655, \textit{CCD}, 11:225.} He also referred to a tapeworm, literally a serpent, as a symbol of growing envy in a person.\footnote{Conference 60, “Envy,” 24 June 1654, \textit{CCD}, 9:548-60.}

Vincent mentioned the scandal of people being driven in their poverty to skin and eat snakes, yet he somehow heard that while eating a viper is deadly, it can be prepared correctly and could be very delicious. His lesson was that temptations can and should
be endured, properly prepared. He also heard that those bitten by an asp, a venomous snake, could kill it and use it to heal the wound. In this case, his point was that Huguenots use a catechism (the bite of the asp), but Catholics should use their catechism to heal the wound.

Vincent made use of the terms venom and poison in many ways that reveal an astute awareness of psychology. He often linked them with the activity of the demon. In one instance, he said to the Sisters: “there’s a poison between the sexes that’s imperceptibly conveyed from one to the other.” The lesson was to avoid conversations with men. He also urged the Sisters to avoid one of their members who was damaging others by the poison in her heart. For him, various defects were a sign of venom in a person: treating the word of God by focusing on personal moods or whims; nursing vain complacency or a desire for possessions; spreading bad feelings and detraction in a community; and several other cases. He was particularly harsh on the “pernicious venom” of Luther and Calvin, sucked in by those wanting “to taste the false sweetness of their so-called Reformation.”

Others: Foxes occasionally appear, mainly as part of Gospel passages (Lk 9:58; Mt 8:20). Vincent refers to the animals in connection with the observance of poverty. The slyness of foxes appears both in a reference to the person who swindled him out of his inheritance, and in a French figure of speech, “like foxes” (en renards).

“Better fifty deer led by a lion than fifty lions led by a deer” is an old maxim which Vincent used to justify the appointment of candidates as bishops who had “competence, virtue and other necessary dispositions.”

A virtually unknown reference to hedgehogs appears in a manuscript memoir drawn up in 1662 by Michel Alix, the diocesan pastor of Saint-Ouen-l’Aumone, not far from Paris.

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137 See CCD, Conference 22, “Monsieur Vincent’s Fear for His Faith,” 11:30; see also his comments on a “sweet venom that kills,” a reference to holding on to the property at Orsigny (Conference 189, “Loss of the Orsigny Farm,” [September 1658], 12:51.


He undoubtedly offered these few recollections, drawn up in 1662, for Abelly’s biography. He wrote:

Speaking one day on the charter of the Mission and on its spirit, he [Vincent] said to me: “We are by no means to be compared to any of the religious communities in the Church; we are but poor hedgehogs to run through the fields to seek poor misguided souls. This is the core of the preservation of the charter to remain in its spirit.”

Whether the saint was joking in his reference is unclear, but his close friendship with Alix makes this likely.140

Vincent cites Mt 19:24 (“It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle…”) to illustrate the means that Jesus used in his preaching style of nature-motives-means, Vincent’s Little Method.141 A strange elk foot also makes its appearance. The duchess of Aiguillon was searching for one to use as a remedy, and Vincent’s correspondence with the superior in Warsaw, Poland, reflects upon the search for it. “According to a legend widely prevalent at the time, the Scandinavian elk, hunted especially in Poland and in the North, was very susceptible to epilepsy. It was said that it stopped the seizures immediately if it could put its left foot in its ear; hence the belief that elk’s foot was a specific cure for this illness.”142

“Vermin” was a figure of speech used in Vincent’s time to refer to a “good-for-nothing,” an expression he used to describe a superior living above the standards of community

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140 “Mémoire de Monsieur Alix …Mémoire de ce que j’ai peu remarqué sur la vie de Monsieur Vincent,” original manuscript in the Vincentian Archives, Paris, Contemporaries of St. Vincent, I, p. 149.


In the famous letter announcing his captivity, Vincent described his captors as “criminals worse than tigers.” He continued in his Gascon exaggerations by claiming that the captors had hacked his ship’s pilot into a hundred thousand pieces.\textsuperscript{144}

### Generic references

**Animals:** There are far too many generic mentions of animals to list each one here. In general, however, it should be said that Vincent regularly referred to animals in his conferences to the Sisters and to the Missioners. In so doing, he urged his listeners to reject the lower, or animal, nature that each one has, and to aspire towards the life of Christ. This life, the chief focus of much of his comparison, is especially rational and controlled. During a conference, he prayed: “Grant, Lord, that we may no longer live like animals but like rational creatures.” Persons without a vital principle are like dead animals, to be thrown on a dump. Sisters without charity are like animals. Living without mortification and for the sake of gratification is to live like animals. Someone who does not keep his or her word is like an animal, undeserving of human society. Drunkenness is an animal state, as is living enslaved to oneself and for oneself.\textsuperscript{145} These comparisons are only a selection of his moral observations.

Vincent’s other observations arose from daily life or his spiritual reflections: prisoners being treated like animals; a nun who died with small coins in her possession being buried with the animals instead of in consecrated ground; and God’s providence caring for animals and making them talk.\textsuperscript{146}

**Beasts:** A similar observation can be made about the term beast, which Vincent used quite often in his conferences, basically as a synonym for animal, and sometimes in the same phrase or sentence. As above, he contrasted the life of beasts with rational human life or being reasonable, a principal goal of his formation program.\textsuperscript{147} At the same time,


\textsuperscript{146} See \textit{CCD} 10, confs. 71, 76 (referring to Balaam’s ass, Nm 22:28-30).

he admired certain qualities in animals, such as their obedience and indifference to the wishes of their masters, or their readiness to suffer. One difference is that Vincent referred to himself as a beast (*bête*), even as a big fat beast, a means for him to practice humility.\(^{148}\) The saint also used the related term *bêtise*, stupidity or ignorance, to describe himself.\(^{149}\)

_Carrion:_ Vincent must have taken a liking to comparing the human body to carrion, the stinking flesh of dead animals. Three times he urged the Sisters to be confident and patient, since their bodies would someday be carrion, the food of worms.\(^{150}\) In a particularly disgusting reference, he reported that he knew from his own experience that the Carmelites — undoubtedly those in Paris founded by his mentor Pierre de Bérulle — had soup to eat, made with rotten eggs that stank like carrion.\(^{151}\) This may well be one of his exaggerations, since such eggs would make the Sisters gravely ill.

UNUSED TERMS: One might expect to see references in his writings to several other common animals, but they are not there. For example, rabbits, sparrows, fleas, squirrels, rats, and mice lived in the cities and towns, and boars, bears, bulls, weasels, and beavers were found in rural and wooded areas. Yet, these animals were never mentioned.

**Conclusion**

Besides Vincent’s letters, the Sisters and his confères loved the conferences enough to write them out as best they could. One of their reasons was the holiness shining through his words, and the example his life provided. Another must have been the quality of his message, often sparkling with stories and these examples drawn from nature. In making use of the _exemplum_ characteristic of classical rhetoric, and in relating his words to the world of animals, he must have drawn smiles and the nodding of heads from his listeners. The stories still do.\(^{152}\)

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\(^{148}\) Conference 134, “Method to be Followed in Preaching,” 20 August 1655, _CCD_, 11:250, translated as “a coarse brute.”


\(^{152}\) A more detailed study of his style is found in Luigi Chierotti, _Antologia poetica vincenziana_ (Chieri, Italy: Vita Vincenziana, 1965), 226 pp.
The chase.

*Courtesy of Laura Williams*
“How are your horses getting along?”

Courtesy of Laura Williams
Beasts of burden patiently waiting outside the tavern.

Courtesy of Laura Williams
A dog and his ball.

Courtesy of Laura Williams
Attachment to a cat.

Courtesy of Laura Williams
Chasing butterflies.

Courtesy of Laura Williams
The spider’s web.

Courtesy of Laura Williams
“We are only earthworms…”

Courtesy of Laura Williams
Shepherd the herd.

Courtesy of Laura Williams
Divine Providence, evident in its care of birds.

*Courtesy of Laura Williams*