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Vincent De Paul and Catechetical Renewal*

Sr. Grace Dorr, D.C.

One of the most sharply criticized results of Vatican II, which closed some twenty years ago, was the effort of theologians and teachers of religion to reformulate the Gospel message and means of living it into a language understandable to the people of this turbulent period in history. Although catechetical renewal had begun much earlier in this century, the Council and its aftermath brought the problem to the forefront and so pressing did it become that the fourth Roman Synod, convened as a result of the Council, debated the goals and methods of Catechesis. Pope John Paul II then issued in 1979, at the request of the Synod members, the Apostolic Exhortation “Catechesi Tradendae.”

The debate over content and method still continues, with those nourished on the catechetical formulations and approaches of Trent wary of those who wish to use the formulations and approaches of Vatican II. It would be helpful for both groups to realize that a revolution in catechetics followed the close of the Council of Trent in 1563 and to appreciate the work of the leaders of catechetical renewal in the years that followed, one of them named Vincent De Paul. He, too, had to come to grips with the question of how to present the “truths of religion” to all classes of society in a new era, that of the Counter-Reformation. His contribution to the development of catechesis was significant and he considered it an important component in the work of Church renewal.

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A review of his work as catechist and with catechists is not simply timely; it is also helpful because in many respects the needs of the Church in seventeenth-century France are similar to our own. Despite the fact that almost everyone was baptized, there was a crying need for evangelization — a zealous proclamation of the Gospel message and a call to conversion. The vitality of the parishes was at a low ebb. The reforms of the Council of Trent had not improved conditions appreciably because they had not been officially promulgated. A letter from Cardinal de Medici, written to Pope Clement VIII in 1597, reveals the situation of the clergy in France:

Over one hundred and forty bishoprics and forty-three Sees are vacant. Several prelates formerly inclined to schism have not returned. Not many of them are intelligent; the greater number never shave; they are negligent as far as conferring Holy Orders is concerned, and hence the number of ignorant, mendicant priests, with no ecclesiastical titles.¹

Vincent’s most active years, 1617 to his death in 1660, were a period of renewal and reform in the French Church. They were the decades when, according to Jean-Claude Dhotel, the tradition of teaching the catechism was established in France.²

Early in his career, about the time he was undergoing a religious conversion (1613-1615), Vincent served as chaplain to a branch of the powerful de Gondi family. In addition to the spiritual needs of the de Gondis and their household staff, he felt responsible for the peasants on their vast estates. As chaplain he learned at first hand of the widespread ignorance and spiritual misery among the peasants. He considered the sermon on general confession

which he preached in Folleville, near Amiens, as a turning point in his career. The response of his listeners impelled Vincent to draw up plans to evangelize and alleviate the spiritual and corporal destitution of the poor.

Henceforth Vincent’s life was to be simultaneously haunted and inspired by his perception, “the poor are being lost because they do not know what is necessary for salvation.” He looked back on the sermon at Folleville as his first “mission.” In time he enlisted others in the work and eventually established the Congregation of the Mission, a group of priests dedicated to the task of evangelizing and renewal. (Known in the United States as Vincentians, in Europe they are referred to as Lazarists from the priory of Saint-Lazare in Paris, which became their headquarters until the French Revolution.)

It was also in 1617 that Vincent, during a brief sojourn at Chatillon-les-Dombes near Lyons, founded the first Confraternity of Charity, an association of pious laity who ministered to the poor and sick. All were people of means and many were well educated. In 1629, when there were a number of such Confraternities throughout the country, Vincent sent Louise de Marillac (1591-1660) to visit them and encourage them in their work. A few years later she opened her own home in Paris to a number of peasant girls whom she instructed in piety and trained for service to the poor. It marked the beginning of the Daughters of Charity. Louise devoted the rest of her life to formation of the Daughters and to collaboration with Vincent in work with the poor and disadvantaged.

Parish Renewal

The Folleville sermon of 1617, actually a catechesis on sacramental confession, gave the impetus to a series of more than 800 parish missions between 1625 and 1660 under the direction of Vincent and his collaborators. The missions lasted 15 to 60 days, depending on the size of the parish. They touched on every aspect of Christian life and
put great emphasis on different forms of catechesis. Jean Calvet, one of Vincent’s biographers, describes the mission as “something quite unique”:

On receipt of the bishop’s orders the Missionaries arrived in a parish with a small cart loaded with their little bits of furniture; they would establish themselves in a house in the parish, preferably in one of the poorest, together with a lay brother who did the housework and helped in all the material cares entailed by the spiritual undertaking. Generally, the parish priest left the parish; if he had a mind to he went into retreat at Saint-Lazare. The work began. It began at the beginning with an explanation of the catechism given morning and evening to all the parishioners as well as to the children. That was Vincent’s method and there lay his originality. There were no full-scale sermons but popular talks on elementary matters, in a homely style which sometimes included questions with answers from the audience to make certain that all was understood.3

The primary aim of the mission was evangelization, but for Vincent evangelization, catechesis, and service were complementary and inseparable. He knew instinctively that the work of renewal meant building a community base for Christian life. Another biographer describes the activities which went on during one of his missions:

... preaching, giving catechetical instructions to children and adults, reconciling enemies and restoring peace in families, visiting the sick, establishing or consolidating Confraternities of Charity, holding meetings of the local clergy, interviewing schoolmasters and mistresses to instruct them in the duties of their states.4

The mission concluded with a liturgical celebration which included a procession before the reception of Solemn Communion by first communicants, who renewed

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their baptismal vows. The children could wear cassocks and surplices or other special dress, if this was the custom and approved by the parish priest, but is was to be done "without display and without any of the children being dressed up as angels as is done in some places."

Vincent's method for parish renewal, then, was three-pronged. Religious instruction adapted according to circumstances was given to the total parish. The mission built up community through service and by training lay leaders for the work. It encouraged continued education for the clergy. For his program to succeed, there had to be simultaneous movement on all three fronts. Catechesis had to be community based; the well-being of the community depended on the leadership of the clergy; parish priests were recognized as leaders in their preaching and catechizing.

Clergy Education

The situation of the lower clergy was desitute. Pierre Coste, Vincent's definitive biographer, described the state of priests in seventeenth-century France as follows:

At that time it was asking a good deal of a priest to require that he should know how to read and write and have a little knowledge of plain song . . . . They (priests) were so ignorant of the mysteries of our religion that some were even found who did not even know Jesus Christ and could not tell how many natures were in Him. 

Vincent was not the only one of that time concerned about preaching. Pierre de Berulle, founder of the French Oratory and Vincent's spiritual director, took a lead in implementing the decrees of the Council of Trent, especially those concerning the education of the clergy. Another friend of Vincent's, Jean Jacques Olier, founder of the Society of St. Sulpice, also worked to upgrade the spiritual

formation and pastoral skills of the priests.

Between 1631 and 1659 Vincent organized seminaries, retreats for ordinands and ecclesiastics, and weekly training conferences for priests as part of his effort to reform the clergy. Pastoral theology rather than speculation was his main concern, and it was for this reason that he praised the curriculum at St. Nicholas du Chardonnet for

... they do not aim so high, but are directed toward the labors of the Lord’s vineyard and at producing hard-working pastoral clergy ... . They do no dogma but only moral theology and practical conferences, and thus I am much inclined, if it please God to grant us the grace, to follow them.7

In his later years Vincent reminisced about sessions in the early days of the Congregation when

... their Lordships of Boulogne and Alet and the Abbe Olier used to be present at our meetings. Somebody proposed a question relating to a virtue or a vice. Each one took paper and ink and wrote down the motives and reasons for shunning the vice or embracing the virtue, and then sought for a definition of it and the means. Finally, all that had been written was collected and a discourse was composed. This was done without books; everyone cudgelled his brains.8

These brainstorming sessions with their emphasis on “applied theology” were in stark contrast to the fashionable preaching of the time. The sermon had become an ornate literary form embellished with Latin quotations and allusions from classical antiquity. Vincent described them as “a little noise and that is all ... a rhetorical display.”9 In his conferences to priests he often mentioned “preach-

7Calvet, p. 120.


9Calvet, pp. 213-14.
ing and catechizing together."

Service to the Poor

A man of great vision and determination, Vincent had a natural talent for administration. He understood that the clergy could not do everything and that the success of his programs depended on enlisting a great number of co-workers. His sermons and example moved many well-meaning men and women to help the poor. He organized them into the "Confraternities of Charity" mentioned above — the forerunners of the modern St. Vincent de Paul Society. Though autonomous, each confraternity was guided by exact rules governing its work. The president of each group acted as spiritual guide as well as administrator. The members cared for the sick and poor. They taught them their prayers and helped them prepare for Confession and Holy Communion.

Madame de Goussault, president of one confraternity, wrote to Vincent in 1633 describing conditions she had encountered on a journey through the valley of the Loire:

I spent the time in the church and, on coming out, found a number of poor people waiting for me, as well as some children and adults, all of whom manifested surprise. I began by getting them to make the Sign of the Cross, but most of them did not know how to do so, and this filled me with the greatest pity . . . . We slept at Artenay where, as I think I told you, I gave a catechetical instruction in the church.¹⁰

Elsewhere in the same letter she commented further on her work in catechesis:

It occurred to me that I might speak about teaching catechism in the presence of the ladies here (Angers), who I imagine are in great need of it . . . . Well, since then these

good ladies have come and prayed together with me to
God; every time I suggest a subject for mental prayer.\textsuperscript{11}

The Daughters of Charity

Another of his collaborators, Louise de Marillac, was
assigned to travel across the country to visit the confratri-
ternities. She found herself in the role of master catechist
and quasi superintendent of schools.\textsuperscript{12} Louise and Vincent
trained girls from the villages in spirituality and methods
of catechesis, sending them throughout France to care for
the sick and establish free schools for girls. Thus the
Daughters of Charity were born to provide continuity and
spiritual substance to the missions.

Vincent composed their rule, watched over their
formation, and directed their activities. He insisted that
they become accomplished catechists. The Common Rules
for the Daughters of Charity stipulated that on Sundays
the Sisters were to “practice catechism among themselves
in order to be capable of instructing the poor and children
in things necessary for salvation.”\textsuperscript{13} In a conference given
to the Daughters the year before his death, Vincent further
explained how the Sisters were to conduct these Sunday
in-service sessions. One Sister was to prepare a catechism
lesson; the others were to ask questions. Afterwards, the
senior Sister in charge was to report on the meeting to
Louise. Praising this method, he compared it to that then
currently in use in seminaries: “Two persons hold a
disputation: one brings forward objections and the other
maintains the true doctrine. It is one way to become
learned . . . . If you make a good use of it, you will be able

\textsuperscript{11}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 91

\textsuperscript{12}J. Dirvin, \textit{Louise de Marillac} (New York: Farrar, Straus and
Giroux, 1970), p. 82.

\textsuperscript{13}“Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity” (Emmits-
(Privately printed translation of the seventeenth-century rules
presently in the Archives of the Daughters of Charity, 140 Rue Du
Bac, Paris.)
to teach catechism to the poor.”

As a follow-up to the parish mission, the Daughters were sent to the villages to set up free schools for poor girls and assist the sick. If room remained after the poor were admitted, children of wealthy families could attend. When girls could not get to school, the Sisters would go to their homes to teach them the rudiments of reading, writing, and catechism. Sisters who worked in the schools were told,

> Be more anxious to teach these children the articles of faith, the practice of piety, modesty, obedience, purity, and other necessary virtues than to make them answer well at catechism on things of less importance, or which are above their understanding, or to teach them pieces to be recited from memory with a certain studied manner, which often excites vanity, both in the pupils and teacher. However, such means are not to be neglected inasmuch as they serve to encourage the pupils, provided the requisite caution and moderation be observed.

Vincent de Paul, Catechist

Despite his administrative duties, Vincent never completely delegated pastoral responsibility. Throughout his life he sought opportunities to catechize. Tradition has it that as a young priest working on the de Gondi estates near Amiens Vincent went through the village of Montmirail ringing a bell to gather all and sundry to the city hall. He then stood on the steps and began to teach.

When the Hospice of the Name of Jesus for elderly men and women opened in 1652, Vincent wanted to give the first talk himself. Aware of how fond old people are of

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children, he summoned a little boy to help refresh memories rusted by time. The elderly listened attentively as the little fellow answered Vincent’s questions:

“Who is God, my child?”
“Father, He is the Creator of heaven and earth and Lord of all things.”
“Good, that’s a good answer: He is the Creator of heaven and of earth. What do you understand by these words: Creator of heaven and of earth?”
“I understand that it is He Who made all things.”

Vincent then went on to develop these truths in his simple and life-like way: “There is no creature, be it ever so little, that God has not made. He created that insect that is running here, and these little ants you see running: He created all these!” Vincent did not grow tired repeating and having his listeners repeat, all the while explaining the doctrine. Then he turned to one of the old women:

“Who is God?”
“He is the Creator of heaven and of earth,” she answered.
“What does it mean: Creator? What does it mean, creating something?”
“It means making something out of nothing.”
“Oh! You are a smart one, my dear.”

After dealing with the highest mysteries, he turned to practical conclusions. Since God has made all things, then it is from Him that the inhabitants of the hospice have received all they have.16

The above incident illustrates his style as a catechist, but what were the truths that he stressed in religious instruction? He gives us a clue in a letter he wrote to Francis du Coudray, a Priest of the Mission, in 1631:

A man remarkable for his piety and learning said to me, yesterday, that it is the opinion of St. Thomas that

16 M. Flinton, *Sainte Louise de Marillac: L’Aspect Social de*
whosoever is ignorant of the mystery of the Trinity and the mystery of the Incarnation, and dies in that state, dies in a state of damnation; and he also maintains that this is the basis of Christian doctrine. Now, that made a deep impression on me, and does so still, as I fear I may be damned myself, because I have not devoted myself unceasingly to instructing the poor.\textsuperscript{17}

Again in his "Particular Rules for the Sisters of the Villages," he wrote,

They should endeavor to teach these poor girls the mysteries of the most Holy Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Holy Sacrament of the Altar; how to make the Sign of the Cross, to pray to God both morning and evening, and how to make a good confession and Communion. In a word, all that a Christian is obliged to know and to do in order to be saved, all this according to the age and capacity of each one and so far as time will allow.\textsuperscript{18}

Vincent was sensitive to language. In an instruction to his priests on the method to be followed in preaching, he discouraged the use of "beautiful ideas" and the citing of "authorities taken from the Fathers and General Councils."\textsuperscript{19} "Descend to particulars," he said, "indicate the circumstances, places and times when virtuous actions are to be performed."\textsuperscript{20} Citing Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, he encouraged his priests to speak from life experience: "You must speak like this if you want the people to understand, those people to whom you announce God's word."\textsuperscript{21} Preach the "pure Gospel


\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Letters of Saint Vincent de Paul}, p. 110.


\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Conferences to the Congregation of the Mission}, p. 282.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 432.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 602.
truth,” he said, “in the way our Lord Himself taught it, so that everybody may understand us and profit by what we have to say.”

In his own preaching and teaching, Vincent used example, humor, and animation. Sometimes he apologized for using too many gestures. He drew analogies from a vast field; he could use comparisons from painting and music as well as from farmyard and village. Adaptation to the situation of the people is one of the outstanding characteristics of Vincent's pedagogy. He encouraged the Daughters of Charity to teach the foundlings about God in “simple little words, according to their capacity.” In his “Particular Rules for the Sisters Employed in Schools” he advised, “She shall teach the catechism to her pupils making them thoroughly understand the meaning of the answers, and for this purpose she shall ask them various familiar questions in other words than those of the book.”

In his “Particular Rules for the Sisters of the Villages” he showed even greater sensitivity to the feelings of the learner. He knew the working conditions on the farms and the natural shyness of many village girls:

They shall also have the care of instructing poor girls, not only those who attend their school but also those of whatever age they may be and at what time so ever they may come, and they shall receive them, if they are unable to wait, even when they come during meals. Those also who through shame or timidity dare not come, they should win through cordiality and receive them with the utmost kindness, even taking them into a place apart from the others out of condescension for their weakness.

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22 Ibid., p. 432.

23 Ibid., p. 358.


25 “Particular Rules for the Sisters Employed in the Schools,” p. 133.

26 “Particular Rules for the Sisters in the Villages,” p. 128.
If language had to be adapted to the learner, method was dictated by the material. “There is one method,” he said, “of dealing with the feast of a saint, another for dealing with a mystery, a third for dealing with a parable, a fourth for dealing with a text, a fifth for the Gospel of the day.” Sermons oftentimes required a modo instructivo but, as we have seen, Vincent also recognized the value of a modo disputato for the inservice training of the Sisters. Nor did he hesitate to train some of the priests in the methods of controversy in order to prepare them for debate with Huguenots.

Vincent’s Catechism

To counter the growing Huguenot influence Vincent looked to the newly popular catechism genre as an effective tool. Early in his career he told a Catholic audience.

Do you know how very carefully the Huguenots, our enemies, teach and learn the catechism? . . . Those who have been stung by an asp take the same asp and crush it on the wound and cure themselves by this means. The Huguenots make use of their catechism to ruin our faith. Let us take the same catechism and crush it on the wound.

Although Vincent did not allow professors in the seminary to compose their own manuals of theology, he permitted greater latitude in the matter of catechisms. He composed two catechisms of his own. They show the influence of Peter Canisius, Bellarmine, Charles Borromeo, Francis de Sales (a friend of Vincent’s), and Adrian Bourdoise, a contemporary and pastor of Saint Nicholas du Chardonnet, as well as of the Catechismus ad parrochos mandated by the Council of Trent. Vincent did not intend

27 Conferences to the Congregation of the Mission, p. 266.
his catechism to be complete syntheses of the faith. They were designed to be used by priests who were preaching the parish missions. Like many other catechisms of the time, there were two versions, a large one for the adults and a small one for use by children and the unlettered. According to Andre Dodin, current authority on Saint Vincent, the catechisms were distributed "by the millions."\(^{29}\)

By 1652 it is probable that most Missionaries used the "Cathechism for Every Month of the Year," an adaptation of Vincent's work prepared by his disciple, Adrian Gambart. Gambart's catechism had a program of adult catechesis which included family instruction. The priests on the missions would talk with adults in the presence of children and then ask the children about the main points. The catechist was advised to begin the session with a little chat and to end with some edifying story and lesson. (The originality of Gambart's work consisted in a radical reordering of material according to the seasons of the year.)\(^{30}\)

While these catechisms were for use by priests and catechists in connection with the missions, Vincent urged that the Daughters of Charity use the Bellarmine catechism for their own formation. This caused a minor flap which began when one of the Sisters wrote to Louise inquiring whether she might use Cardinal Bellarmine's catechism to instruct children. Louise replied, "I know of no catechism more thorough than Monsieur le cardinal Bellarmine's, but it would seem that Monsieur Lambert does not think it wise for us to make use of it to teach little children or even older girls, advising me that it is suitable only for curés." In any case, Louise resolved to take up the matter with


\(^{30}\) Dhotel, pp. 245-47.
Monsieur Vincent. His reply probably surprised her.

There is no better catechism than Bellarmine’s, Mademoiselle, and when all our Sisters are familiar with it they will teach only what they should teach since they are called to teaching and will know what the curés should know.31

After asking Louise to be sure that the Sisters absorbed the material in the Bellarmine catechism so that they would be capable of teaching it, he concluded his discussion with Louise by saying of the Sisters that “they could seize upon nothing more solid than that book. I am very happy that we have spoken about it.”32 Nevertheless, Louise continued to have difficulty adapting the Bellarmine catechism to the needs of country girls who did not have much formal schooling. In time she composed a manual of her own.

For Vincent, however, catechisms were tools, means to an end. In his hierarchy of values, he was more concerned with the formation of catechists than the writing of catechisms. He saw the need for Priests of the Missions, the Daughters, members of the Confraternities of Charity, and all who collaborated with him to be informed about Christian doctrine and trained in catechetical methods. He advised the study of the post-Tridentine catechism and the works of Binsfield and Becan. For the more industrious he suggested the works of Saint Thomas, Saint Bernard, Peter Lombard and the Church Fathers, especially Saint Augustine and Saint John Chrysostom.33 Vincent encouraged catechists to assimilate what they had studied in order to be able to make it understandable to others. And above all, he wanted them to master the best ways to catechize children and the poor.

31 Dirvin, p. 270.
32 Ibid.
A Lesson for Today

It is hard to say what direction Vincent might take if he were alive today. The post-Tridentine period is not the post-Vatican II period. Nonetheless, he relied on certain principles that seem to be valid for all seasons. First there was the point just mentioned; he recognized that well-trained catechists (which for him implied deep faith) are more important than catechetical materials. Second, he instinctively knew there is a hierarchy of truths and values. He emphasized basics, the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation, the Eucharist and simple prayers. Vincent was not opposed to higher studies, but he complained about the "undigested theology" of the classroom which he heard preached in churches. Third, there had to be a renewal of parish life, which included remedial studies for the clergy, if results were to be lasting. Fourth, Vincent's concern for the catechesis of children was as much for the sake of their parents and their families as it was for their own. No one was too old, too destitute, or too ignorant to escape his ministry and that of his co-workers. Finally, Vincent realized early in his career that the corporal works of mercy were essential to preaching and teaching. Evangelization, catechesis, and Christian service depend on one another. When one is neglected, the others suffer.

How faithful we should be to God Who is so good to us! Let us spare nothing to show our readiness to fulfill the commandment His goodness gives us of loving Him.

St. Louise de Marillac

33 Dodin, p. 37.