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# RELATIONSHIPS WITH ISLAM IN THE TIME OF ST. VINCENT.

## History and Attitude of St. Vincent and his Missionaries to Moslems.

*by A. Moussali, C.M.*

St. Vincent was confronted by the reality of Islam very early on in his career. We will not go over the question of the accurate historicity of the facts; "*related in the style of a storyteller*" as they are set down in the two letters of Fr. Vincent to M.de Comet (1607 and '08). Pere Dodin following Coste, has dealt well with this. One thing, however, is certain. These letters show a kind of fear of Islam which manifests itself to him in the very faces of people as he presents them to us; the pirates, his "*master*", the Turkish "*woman*". Sporting a passion for the Gospel (before later actually becoming that passion, as he did, under the influence of experience, through Christ Evangeliser of the Poor) the young priest Vincent could not have avoided being struck by the incredible onward march of Islam. Out of countries with a massive Christian presence, Islam had created, in the East, countries with a massive Moslem presence and, in North Africa, countries with an exclusively Moslem presence. How had regions, like the Magreb, been able to so change, as though bowled over by a blind and irresistible destiny? It had once been so illumined by great champions of the Faith, like Tertullian (+155), Cyprian (+260), Augustine (+430). These martyrs had poured out their blood which, in the words of Tertullian, "*had been the seed of Christians*"; martyrs like the deacon James; the lector Marcian; Nemesianus and Maximillian; Crispin and Marcian; Priscilla and Aquila and their companions; and so many innumerable others . A considerable number of bishoprics had flourished there; about 700 by the time of Cyprian's death. The Magreb had given popes, like Victor I (189-199), Miltiades (311-314) and Gelasius I (492-496), to the Church. Vincent could not have avoided being "*bowled over*" by this, just as the plough up-turns the earth. Christian there, in penal colonies, in the land of Islam (Dar-es-Islam) suffered and died. But let us come to the facts.

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

It was in 633 that Islam divided by conquest the land we call the Fertile Crescent and which, in the space of 12 years, from 633 to 645, became the land of the Crescent.

From 647, the Arabs, in successive waves, entered North Africa. Aided, from the eighth century, by the Berbers, they, between 695 and 708, were to conquer all the Magreb, cross the straits of Gibraltar (Jabal Tariq=the mountain of Tariq) under the leadership of that self-same Berber, Tariq Ibn Ziyad (711), occupy Cordoba and then Toledo and push onwards even as far as Poitiers (732).

In the seventeenth Century, it was the Ottomans, descendants of a small Turkish tribe (Bani uthman), who extended their supremacy over the Moslem Empire, as much in the East as

in the West. The Ottomans, having defeated the Abbasides in the fourteenth century, had regained the Moslem glory and had made themselves champions of Islam. Their hegemony stretched, in the East, from Arabia to China; in the West, from Egypt to the Atlantic ocean; and, in the North, to the Balkans, whence they threatened Europe. The Mediterranean had become the "*lake of Islam*"<sup>2</sup>, whose corsairs, sailing the waters, laid heavy hands on goods and people alike, in their desire to show the superiority of the Moslem over the Christian civilisation and, especially, over the Spanish Empire then at its height. This habit of "*hunting*" for game reached its height between 1577 (after the battle of Lepanto) and 1713-'20 (after the treaty of Utrecht), assuring the Moslem galleys of precious metals, men and also furnishing ransoms.

It should be noted that the Ottoman Empire had, from the start, taken on specific new characteristics. Firstly, conquest had been undertaken in the name of propagating Islam in infidel territories (*dar-el-harb*). To undertake this conquest the Ottomans availed of an army driven by the spirit of "*ghazi*" (religious conquest) and which was, as a consequence, made up in part of the "*devchirme*" (the gleanings) - young Christians from the Balkans, taken from their families and then "*Moslemised*" and "*Turkishised*". These were the janisseries (*yeni tcheri*; the new brigade) who, for more than two centuries, assured the supremacy of the Ottoman armies.

In the sixteenth century, events of great historical significance occurred. One concerned the Sultan Selim I (1512- '20) who assumed the title Caliph (derived from the arabic word *khelifa*=Lieutenancy) which had not been held since the fall of Granada in 1492. The other was the taking of Algiers by the turkish pirate, Aroudj, called Barbarossa, which opened the gateway to all Algeria for him (1516). His successor, Kheyreddine Barbarossa, was to push the conquest forward as far as the Western Mediterranean and was to hand over this sea to the piracies of the Berber corsairs.

On coming to power, the sultan Suliman the Magnificent (1520-'66), son of Selim I, having seized a part of North Africa, in Europe reached the Adriatic, the outskirts of Vienna and the borders of Poland. But two major events, two victories, thwarted his plans. The first, at Lepanto (1571), a maritime victory, went to the allied navies of the Pope, Venice and the king of Spain. This provoked the Turks to take revenge by taking Tunis from the Spanish (1574). The second, a land victory, was not to take place until 1583. Thanks to the intervention of the Polish cavalry led by Jan Sobieski, the Turks were forced to lift the siege of Vienna. These two victories were to act as a barrier to the hitherto triumphant advance of Islam and were also to hunt the Turks out of Hungary .

In the Magreb, from the twelfth century, the Christian presence was reduced to merely merchants and captured galley slaves, Genoans, Pisans, Florentines and French. On the coast there were permanent establishments belonging to the Christian nations. Living there were commercial representatives and consuls to protect the interests of these nations and to look after their affairs. Chaplains were attached to these bases to serve the consuls, the merchants and, eventually, the christian captives in the prisons of Tunis and Algiers.

In the thirteenth century the first Franciscans arrived in Tunis (1219) to be followed by the Dominicans (1234) who were to be joined by the Trinitarians of St. John of Mata and the Order of Mercy of St. Peter Nolasco, both founded expressly for the "*redemption of captives*".

In the sixteenth century the Spanish set up in Orania with the taking of Oran (1509) and Bougie (1510). This presence was to continue in north Africa until the eighteenth century.

As one can easily imagine, relationships with Islam varied according to alliances of economic interests and political changes. As regards the native population, they had only a regal disdain for the Christians, whom they had classed into three categories: latins, rumis (byzantines) and afariqa (natives) . The collective memory firmly held within itself the remembrance of the terrible punishments exacted by the Franks against the Moslems at the time of the Crusades (1096-1270). Kept alive also was the memory of the repression exercised by the Reconquista which had driven the Moslems out of Spain. In the middle of the thirteenth century the Moslems only held the Kingdom of Granada which was to resist until the end of the fifteenth century. In just the same way they kept alive the memory of the war-like undertakings of the Norman sovereigns of Southern Italy and Sicily who had gone into combat in Ifriqya without returning with the sought-after successes, just as happened to the King of France, St. Louis, in Egypt and Tunis.

Yet the Christian imagination was also marked by the persecutions to which the Christian populations of the Orient had been subjected. Hadn't Selim I, in the sixteenth century, conceived the plan of out-lawing the Christian religion and of putting to death those Christians who refused to convert? And he did not stop there! He declared that all churches that were still functioning in Istanbul must be converted into mosques. New churches that the Christians would build had to be of wood. His predecessor, Mohammed II, had already transformed the principal churches of the city, like Santa Sofia, into mosques. In 1562, the Basilica of the Apostles, where the remains of Constantine lay, was destroyed. If some churches were maintained, it was thanks to the huge sums of money paid by the Christians. In 1595 it was the turn of the churches in Chios. It was this which provoked the intervention of France.

Nor can one forget the situation of the Christians of the Orient subjected to the condition of "*dhimmidude*" (under moslem protection). The dhimmis were subject to the law of the Koran. Looked upon as second-class citizens, they had to pay a special tax, the "*jizya*", had to wear a distinctive yellow turban and belt, which left them open to the derision of passers-by, could only travel by donkey (the horse being considered as a noble animal reserved only for Moslems), had to give way in public to a Moslem, could not bear witness in court against a Moslem, could not be recruited into the armies...

Add to that the well entrenched dogmatic positions of both sides; "*Outside the Church there is no salvation*" to which the others responded with the opposing slogan "*No salvation outside the Umma*" (antum khayru ummatin).

In order to assess the relationships which existed between the two communities, one must take into consideration this history of mutual interference and analyze the concrete human reality. It was in the context of these conflicts and these historical oppositions that

relationships between the religions took root in the seventeenth century. These are realities which put a strain on peaceful relations and lead to strategies which feed on competition and conflict, be it ideological, religious, economic or political. It was still going to be a long road which would lead to the shores of Vatican II.

### **THE ATTITUDE OF ST. VINCENT AND HIS MISSIONERS WITH REGARD TO THE MOSLEMS**

Thus, the question of a missionary presence in the territory of Islam arose for St. Vincent in a very precise context. It was not, directly, to win back captives. Others had made that their particular charism. Nor was it concerned with converting Moslems. Others had tried that, and in vain. St. Vincent would have remembered St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) and his abortive journey to face the Sultan of Egypt, Ala'ddin (1199-20). St. Vincent's goal was to bring material, moral and spiritual support to the captives in the prisons, both in the cities and the countryside, in order to assure them that there would be permanent source of comfort and consolation at the heart of the very citadel of Islam.

At the request of Propaganda Fide, he had once conceived the idea of a missionary project to bring aid to the Christians in Lebanon . This plan would not be realised during his life. It was not able to take shape until after the suppression of the Society of Jesus by Clement XIV, in 1773.

On the other hand, on the far side of the Mediterranean, in the Magreb, there were Christian populations, either in the prisons of the towns or serving in the galleys. Other individuals were in service to great men in the towns of Algiers, Bone, Tunis... and in the countryside. Religious services were provided for these groups by slave-priests, and, for simple visits, by religious.

St. Vincent saw the great suffering of these Christians and deplored the "*the great degree of dissoluteness that reigned among church people*"... A permanent presence was required which would provide the longed for material, moral and spiritual help. He was to be supported in this by Pope Urban VIII (1623-1644) and the Duchess d'Aiguillon.

The contract of foundation of a house at Marseilles was signed on 25 January 1643. From thence the priests and brothers of the Mission would set out "*to console the poor Christian captives and to instruct them in the faith, in love and in fear of God, to give Missions and Catechesis, instructions and the usual exhortations*".

But the Turks did not accept any chaplains other than the slave-priests. That plan would never hold. The Duchess d'Aiguillon bought the consulates of Tunis and Algiers in 1646 and made a gift of them to M. Vincent. By these means, a permanent missionary presence could be assured.

Thus it was decided, in 1646, to send Br. Barreau, a former parliamentary barrister, to Tunis, accompanied by M. Nouelly. So they set off, armed with a sort of charter, which we

would do well to glance over as it reveals an attitude drawn directly from the Gospel. The text is to be found in Coste XIII, 306.

The reflection goes in concentric circles. One easily reaches the kernel, the Incarnation, which has such an immense charge of energy that it diffracts and crystallises in a series of brilliant ideas which are the key-concepts. The kernel is the focal point from which the thought develops and, step by step, examines the consequence which will arise in the light of a missionary presence that exists in time and space.

"*You must*", it says, "*have a particular devotion to the mystery of the Incarnation by which Our Lord came to earth to help us in our slavery*". The Incarnation is the locus in which thought, action and contemplation find their deepest motivation, their specific orientation and constantly renew themselves in the service of an "*infinitely inventive*" love, schooled by the One who became "*a slave with slaves*" in order to free them from their "*slavery*". It is from here that the decisive importance of contemplation derives, which allows one, as he had once written to M.LeVacher, to be in symbiosis with God. For it is "*the good which God wishes to do, as though directly from himself, without our knowing it*". Thus, face to face with God, one can easily "*weigh up things maturely at the sanctuary before resolving them. Be more frequently receptive than active!*" (CosteIV,12)

Around this core he outlined the first circle; that of a missionary spirituality that is suffused by the spirit of the Gospel; "*keep to the rules of the Company . . . which are those of the Gospel*" and whose criteria for authenticity are those which, according to the mind-set of the seventeenth century, he calls "*The virtues which go to make up the true missionaries, zeal, humility, mortification and holy obedience*". It is a summary of the Beatitudes by which one proclaims Jesus Christ openly to the Christians, non-Christians and Moslems, as they occur, bringing the message to them through the silent witness of a life which is on fire with "*zeal*", which is itself "*the flame of the fire of love*". This is not a spirituality that one lives out alone, rather it is solidarity with one's brothers, in a community of which "*M. Nouelly will be the director*".

This community was to have as its mission to insure that the Incarnation could be seen in time and space. This was the out-line of the geographic circle, the concrete inculturation of the Gospel; Algiers and, at the heart of Algiers, "*a rented house*" with, at its centre, "*the chapel*", the heart of the community, the sign of the sacramental presence. Within this geographic circle was the map of relationships. First place went to those with civil responsibilities, "*the vice-roy, the pasha, the divan (administration), the people*". These relationships would require almost infinite discernment to allow them to "*live, taking all possible care*". St. Vincent knew what he was talking about, since he too had lived among "*the great*" in order to make them aware of the cause of "*the little ones*". The great; how open they are! But what can you say when it is a question of people from another culture and religion and where you yourself are a stranger? Accept to live with this "*strangeness*" in an attitude of profound "*humility*", and "*to willingly suffer the injuries that people will do to (you)*".

At the heart of this circle of relationships there is one privileged group, that of "*the slaves*" and, in the first place, "*the slave-priests and religious; be careful to give them the*

*honour they are due", then, "the merchants; being a peace worker among them, working to keep them in the greatest unity possible".*

The concentric circles end there. St. Vincent was also going to encourage his missionaries not to forget their links with their family back home. They were to "*send news, not about the state of affairs in the country, but about the poor slaves and the work that Our Lord had entrusted to them*", in order to give edification back home where the brothers supported them by their constant and intense prayer.

And, to conclude, he sent two directives. One concerned zeal which was not to allow itself to be limited by the confines of any one town, "*Go visit the poor slaves in the countryside in order to strengthen and console them and to give them alms*". The other required the discernment to "*be subject to the laws of the country*" and to show oneself to be circumspect when in conflict with that which is different and "*other*"; "*Never argue about religion or say anything that would belittle it*". Finally, he suggested an open attitude; in order to adapt successfully "*learn from those who have lived in this country for a long time*".

**Ardent zeal, prudent discretion, patient forbearance, joyful openness to change, active interior life, confident humility, infinite respect for the other person whether Christian or Moslem, openness and circumspection intelligence of mind and heart . . .** so many qualities which go to make of the missionary a person in whom there resides the Spirit of the "*kingdom yet to come*". All this acts as a summary of the Vincentian missionary process in the service both of God and others in the land of Islam.

These directives, however, still had to be submitted to the test of time and of being live out. How would the missionaries apply them in their relations with the Moslems?

**Ardent zeal; this was the key word.**

In the *Memoires de la Mission* one reads that: "*the example of these fervent and devout priests and the radiant love of their charity were able to give the Moslems a clearer idea of what christianity was*" . . .and, elsewhere: "*the scorn of the Turks changed to admiration*" . (II, 144)

**It was, however, a high-risk zeal.**

The task assigned to the missionaries did not go smoothly. The way was strewn with obstacles. "*The priests of St. Vincent were often in a dangerous position. They were there in order to encourage the Christians not to abandon their faith. And that was a very real temptation as renegades often held very brilliant positions*" (II, 289) . They were fatally exposed to the feeling of hatred of certain powerful Moslems, like the Aga Mahomet who once declared, without putting a tooth in it, "*Let us cut down and hack to pieces these Christian dogs who live among us . Let us begin with these papa (priest) dogs who force Moslems to become Christian and stop Christians becoming Moslems*" (II, 283) He was not, however, able to intimidate the missionaries. One could apply to them the words of St. Vincent about Philippe LeVacher: "*This is a man on fire, more in need of a bridle than a spur*".

"M. Guerin worked to buy back the young men and women who were in danger of renouncing their faith or of becoming involved in wicked acts" (II, 26) Philippe LeVacher "bought back an eight-year old child for 1, 000 livres (pounds) and sent him back to his parents in Marseilles...he bought back three young sisters and set free a Corsican mother, girl and little lad". (II, 161, 162) M.Guerin learns that a child of thirteen was beaten 1,000 times with a stick because he would not renounce Jesus Christ, and that one of his arms had been mutilated. Quickly, he intervenes, throws himself on his knees and ends up buying back the child for 200 piastres. (II,26)

### **It is a zeal which leads to exile, to prison and to martyrdom.**

"On two charges, Jean LeVacher was exiled to Bizerte from Tunis for having won back Christians who wanted to become Moors... he was put in prison for having encouraged the consul, M. Husson, to stop a French merchant from agreeing to buy the sail-cloth needed for the corsairs of Islam" . (II, 120) After his bombardment of Algiers, Duquesne said to Jean LeVacher, who reproached him because of the bombardment. "You are more Turk than Christian."

He replied "I am a priest". Duquesne wrote on the 15 July 1691 "LeVacher could no longer stand. He had to be carried everywhere in a litter. Mezzomorto (Hadidj Husayn) had him placed at the mouth of a canon, just as he also did with 22 French Christians."

Others knew prison and torture, like M.Barreau to whom St .Vincent wrote; "I have felt a consolation which surpasses all others in the gentleness of spirit with which you have received this blow and in the holy use which you make of your imprisonment". ( II, 202) The note continues: he was thrown to the ground by the pasha who ordered his henchmen to rain down hundreds of blows on him..he fainted...they forced pointed screws under his nails..."(II, 202). M. Montmasson was also imprisoned. " A Moor tortured him many times with a long needle such as saddlers use...an ear and his nose were cut off. His eye was gouged out. They stuck a knife in his throat. " (II, 464) As for M. Piloni; "he was carried into the street almost dead after his beatings." (III, 15)

### **A zeal which "willingly accepts the injuries done by the people".**

We are told that M. Poissant and his confreres were put in chains; "We were led, with uncovered heads, like common criminals through the main street of the town. We were a spectacle and show for the populace who heaped insults on us. The chains were so heavy and so weighty that we could neither go forward nor backwards without a great deal of pain" . (III, 101)

### **A zeal that is, however, full of kindness.**

We learn that "M.Guerin, by the gentleness of his words, his kind manners...won over all hearts"; certainly those of the slaves but also of the Moslems, since he was able to win agreement from the Dey that they could worship, no longer in secret but openly and that "he would allow the public expression of religion with its hymns and ceremonies . . . to such a



*degree that the prisons became like little churches where the slaves were able to hear holy Mass and celebrate the sacred Mysteries freely and publicly". (II,18) Even better at the end of two years, himself overburdened, "he asked permission of the Dey to seek the help of another missionary. And the Dey answered two or three, if you like. Whenever necessary, I will protect them as I do you and I will never refuse you anything because I know you never do harm to anyone and, on the contrary, do good to everyone".<sup>3</sup>*

### **A zeal which paid no heed to danger and won the admiration of the Moslems.**

The first missionaries almost all died of the plague; M. Noel (22 July 1647) died at the age of 33; M. Guerin (13 May 1648) who *"had only one regret, that he died in his bed, since he had counted on the happiness of being impaled or boiled alive for his Divine Master"* (II, 31); M. LeSage (12 May 1648); M. Dieppe (2 May 1649) who died *"with his eyes fixed on the crucifix which he held in his hands while repeating: there is no greater love than to lay down your life for those you love"*; M. Huguier (April 1663); M. Laurence (1704); M. Faroux (15 July 1740) *"who, although the Superior, went, despite the protestations of his confreres, as a volunteer to care for those stricken with the plague"*; Br. Guesdon (4 August 1740) . . .

### **A discreet zeal bears effective and silent witness.**

It was not a matter of seeking to convert Moslems. Philippe LeVacher was to write: *"It is easier and more important to ensure that several slaves do not defect from the faith than to convert one single renegade."* (II, 163) St.Vincent had been clear on this subject; *"Your concern is not with either the Turks or the renegades"*. Philippe LeVacher was, however, to go beyond this; he wrote: *"God gave me the grace to find two precious stones which were lost, they are of great price and shed an almost heavenly light"*. (II, 166) M. Guerin had gone even further than this; *"He met secretly with Turks, even approaching Mohamed Chebli, the eldest of the sons of the Dey, Ahmed Khodja. This young man was to flee to Sicily in 1646 in order to convert"*<sup>4</sup>. M. Duchesne set out to *"learn Arabic with a marabou...even went so far as to talk with him about Jesus"* (II, 525).

These examples will suffice. They show what form of fidelity the burning zeal of the missionaries inspired and the impact that had on the minds and hearts of both Christians and Moslems. In conclusion, let us summarise all this in a few words; an intrepid courage for the protection and salvation of Christians in distress; a respectful silence, in the face of those who are different; a heroic generosity when faced with the plague, torture and martyrdom.

### **FOOTNOTES**

DODIN, A. De Monsieur Depaul a St. Vincent de Paul, O.E.I.L./Histoire, Paris; pp . 144-155

PIRENNE, H. Mahomet et Charlemagne, P.U.F., Paris, 1970, p. 215

GOYAUX, G. La France Missionnaires, Paris, 1948, p. 17.

VAUMAS, G. L'Eveil de la France au 17eme siecle.

(Translator: Eugene Curran)