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## A Further Look at "Gentleness"

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## A FURTHER LOOK AT "GENTLENESS"

Gentleness, or *douceur*, is the third of the five characteristic virtues of the Congregation of the Mission.<sup>1</sup> It is also one of the virtues stressed most by St. Vincent in his conferences to the Daughters of Charity. "For what is charity," he tells them, "but love and *douceur*."<sup>2</sup>

St. Vincent uses the French word almost 400 times in his letters and conferences, with various shades of meaning. In the Latin text of the Common Rules, to express the same concept, he uses the word *mansuetudo*.<sup>3</sup>

It is very difficult to translate *douceur* into English. The literal translation would, of course, be *sweetness*. But, in contemporary English, that rarely fits.<sup>4</sup> Today sweetness has cloudy connotations in English, especially in describing persons. While it can still be used appropriately in just the right circumstances, its usage becomes more and more limited. Sometimes it has overtones of effeminacy. One might not hesitate to say, in Italian, that a man's character is *dolcissimo*, but one would be slow to say, in English, that he is "very sweet."

"Meekness" too, while usually used to translate *mansuetudo*, does not sufficiently convey the rich overtones of St. Vincent's use of *douceur*. Somehow it often carries with it the connotation of timidity or lack of strength. The latest English translations of the Rules, as well as of the letters, for the most part choose "gentleness," which, it seems to me, is considerably better, because it allows for stronger overtones.

The problem, however, lies not just with the translation of *douceur* as "sweetness" or "meekness." In fact, it is the thesis of this article that *douceur*, as used in the Rules, letters, and conferences of St. Vincent, has a wide range of meanings. As a result, the word that one uses to translate it (for the sake of consistency and readability in this article, I choose "gentleness") must be

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<sup>1</sup>I call this article a *further* look at "gentleness," since I have already treated this subject, in an earlier essay. Cf. R. Maloney, "Five Characteristic Virtues: Yesterday and Today" in *The Way of Vincent de Paul* (New York: New City Press, 1992) 37-69.

<sup>2</sup>SV IX, 267.

<sup>3</sup>CR II, 14.

<sup>4</sup>Actually, however, *sweetness* has a rather noble history in the English language. Shakespeare does not hesitate to use it as a tender accolade: "Goodnight, sweet prince" (*Hamlet*, Act V, Scene 2, line 373). We also find the word generously sprinkled through classical Christian prayers: "O clement, o loving, o sweet Virgin Mary." It is common in hymns: "Sweet Little Jesus Lord," "Goodnight, Sweet Jesus." Popular songs loved the word: "Ain't She Sweet," "Sweet Georgia Brown." Its usage continues, and is accepted, even to the present day in some common phrases: "sweet sixteen," "my sweetheart." My brother-in-law, in fact, still calls my sister "Sweetie"!

supplemented by a variety of other words and phrases. I offer the following exploration of the various meanings of *douceur* as a help to those who want to "put on" this virtue, which St. Vincent regarded as so important.

## I. DOUCEUR AS UNDERSTOOD BY ST. VINCENT

### 1. *It is a missionary virtue.*

It is a mistake to think that, for St. Vincent, the five characteristic virtues were merely a matter of personal Christian asceticism or of individual perfection. He chooses them as characteristic of *missionaries*. This is evident, in regard to *mansuetudo*, when St. Vincent introduces it in the Common Rules. There<sup>5</sup> he states that the missionary, by exercising this virtue, will reconcile the hearts of men and women, so that they are converted to the Lord. Since the reconciliation of those involved in quarrels was precisely one of the goals that St. Vincent proposed for the mission,<sup>6</sup> he wanted the reconciler to be able to remain cool when he mediated disputes that were hot! He states, moreover, that missionaries, beyond all other priests, are to be filled with gentleness since their vocation calls them to serve the most miserable and abandoned in society.

There are many instances where St. Vincent describes *douceur* as a missionary virtue. He tells François Du Coudray<sup>7</sup> that recently he had been involved in the conversion of three people, but he avows that this was possible only through *douceur*, humility, and patience. He assures another priest of the Mission<sup>8</sup> that, while giving missions, one can win over the poor only by *douceur* and personal goodness. He states that this is, in fact, the reason why he has firmly resolved to recommend the practice of this virtue to the Company. When speaking to Philippe Le Vacher about work among the captives and slaves in Algiers,<sup>9</sup> he encourages him to attract them by gentle (*douces*) means. He expresses his fear that the evil which the slaves are already suffering in their captive state, joined with the rigor that Le Vacher would like to exercise, might lead them to despair.

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<sup>5</sup>CR II, 6.

<sup>6</sup>CR XI, 8.

<sup>7</sup>SV I, 66.

<sup>8</sup>SV IV, 52.

<sup>9</sup>SV IV, 120.

In 1852 Etienne Blatiron, the superior in Genoa, asked St. Vincent several times to send Monsieur Ennery to give a mission in Corsica. St. Vincent refused,<sup>10</sup> stating that Ennery is not gentle enough for that region, "where the people are uncouth and used to being rough." He emphasizes the missionary value of gentleness: "They must be won over by *douceur* and cordiality, for evils are cured by the contrary."

St. Vincent likewise tells the Daughters of Charity that nothing conquers the hearts of those who are angry or bitter more than *douceur*.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, in the principal conference that he gave on gentleness, on March 28, 1659, St. Vincent states emphatically that it is the virtue of "a true missionary."<sup>12</sup> In another conference given five months later on the five characteristic virtues, he underlines how essential gentleness is in dealing with poor, often ignorant, country people.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. *It enables the missionary to control anger and to channel it properly.*

This is the principal theme of the conference that St. Vincent gave on March 28, 1659.<sup>14</sup> Here he states that gentleness involves various steps. The first step has two stages. In the first stage a person represses the spontaneous movement that he feels toward anger, trying to remain calm and reasonable. This is difficult, St. Vincent tells his listeners, but it is possible, since, while the movements of nature precede those of grace, grace can conquer them. The second stage consists in directing one's anger appropriately. It may at times be important to correct, to chastise, to reprove, just as Jesus did with his disciples. In such instances the missionary should act not because he has been overcome by anger, but because he has become its master.

St. Vincent states that the gentle are constant and firm. They are able to think straight. On the contrary those who allow themselves to be carried away by

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<sup>10</sup>SV IV, 449.

<sup>11</sup>SV IX, 261.

<sup>12</sup>SV XII, 189.

<sup>13</sup>SV XII, 305.

<sup>14</sup>SV XII, 182ff.

anger and passion are ordinarily inconstant.<sup>15</sup> In addition, he states: "I think that the ability to discern things is granted only to those who have *douceur*."<sup>16</sup>

3. *It is linked with respect for the human person.*

St. Vincent often links gentleness and respect.<sup>17</sup> He tells the Daughters of Charity that there is no such thing as charity without gentleness and respect for the other.<sup>18</sup> He urges Robert de Sergis to treat the domestic help gently, cordially, and with profound respect.<sup>19</sup>

In a conference to the Daughters of Charity, given on August 19, 1646, on "The Practice of Mutual Respect and of *Douceur*," St. Vincent encourages them to give themselves to God by respecting one another. He notes that this will not be easy, and for that reason asks them to join with him in a prayer<sup>20</sup>:

*O my God, I desire from the bottom of my heart to be gentle and respectful toward my sisters in order to please you, and once more I give myself entirely to you to strive to acquire these virtues in a manner quite different from the way I have acted up until now. But, as I am weak and can do nothing that I have resolved to do without your special assistance, I beseech you, O God, by your beloved Son Jesus, who is love and gentleness itself, to grant me those virtues, together with the grace of never doing anything contrary to them.*

4. *Gentleness should be accompanied by firmness, especially in superiors.*

St. Vincent touches on this theme frequently in his letters to Louise de Marillac and to various superiors. He often tells Louise to honor Our Lord in his gentleness and firmness. In a letter written to her on November 1, 1637, he says: "If the gentleness of your spirit needs a dash of vinegar, borrow a little

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<sup>15</sup>SV XI, 65.

<sup>16</sup>SV XII, 190.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. SV I, 88; VII, 590-91; VIII, 227; IX, 260ff.

<sup>18</sup>SV IX, 260.

<sup>19</sup>SV I, 354.

<sup>20</sup>SV IX, 269.

from Our Lord's spirit. O Mademoiselle, how well he knew how to find a bittersweet remark when it was needed!"<sup>21</sup> In putting Monsieur Portail in charge of a mission team, in 1632, he encouraged him to honor *la douceur et l'exactitude* of Our Lord.<sup>22</sup> In writing to the superior at Nancy, François Dufestel, Vincent tells him to be firm and uncompromising in regard to the end, but gentle and humble in regard to the means.<sup>23</sup> He gives the same advice almost verbatim in a letter written four days later to Jean Guérin<sup>24</sup> and repeats it in another letter to Guérin four months later.<sup>25</sup> He returns to the same theme in writing to Etienne Blatiron, the superior at Genoa, on September 9, 1650,<sup>26</sup> as well as to Louis Dupont, superior at Tréguier, on February 16, 1656.<sup>27</sup>

Using a classical axiom in a letter to Denis Laudin, on August 7, 1658, he encourages him to imitate the spirit of Our Lord who is equally *suave et ferme*.<sup>28</sup>

St. Vincent summed all of this up quite carefully in his advice to a seminary director<sup>29</sup>:

*We must be firm but not rough in our guidance and avoid an insipid kind of gentleness (une douceur fade), which is ineffective. We will learn from Our Lord how our gentleness should always be accompanied by humility and grace so as to attract hearts to Him and not cause anyone to turn away from Him.*

Joseph Leonard, in a translation made a number of years ago, rendered this text as follows: "Namby-pamby mildness, that is useless, should be avoided!"<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>SV I, 393.

<sup>22</sup>SV I, 176.

<sup>23</sup>SV II, 298.

<sup>24</sup>SV II, 300.

<sup>25</sup>SV II, 355.

<sup>26</sup>SV IV, 75.

<sup>27</sup>SV V, 552.

<sup>28</sup>SV VII, 226.

<sup>29</sup>SV IV, 597.

<sup>30</sup>Joseph Leonard, *St. Vincent and Mental Prayer* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1925) 177.

5. *Gentleness also means affability, cordiality, warmth, approachability.*

This is the way St. Vincent often describes *douceur* in speaking about relationships with the poor and relationships within the Community.

Cordiality is one of the key words that he uses to describe good relationships.<sup>31</sup> He places it among the means for persevering in one's vocation,<sup>32</sup> stating that a missionary will persevere if he lives in deep charity and cordiality with his brothers.

He links cordiality with affability, saying that it is particularly necessary in working with poor country people.<sup>33</sup> He states that affability is the soul of good conversation and renders it not only useful but also agreeable. In his principal conference on gentleness, he says that the second step in being *douce* (after controlling one's anger and channeling it properly) is affability and cordiality.<sup>34</sup>

St. Vincent is convinced that warmth and approachability are especially necessary in those who hold important positions in the Church:

*You can see by experience that an amiable way wins hearts and attracts them; on the other hand, it has been noted in regard to persons of rank who hold office that, when they are too serious and cold, everyone fears and shuns them. Since we must work with poor country people, candidates for orders, people on retreat, and all sorts of others, it will not be possible for us to produce fruit, if we are like parched land that bears only thistles.*<sup>35</sup>

6. *Gentleness involves joyfulness and peacefulness.*

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<sup>31</sup>SV I, 112; IV, 51, 113, 341, 449; VI, 29; IX, 261.

<sup>32</sup>SV XI, 109.

<sup>33</sup>SV XI, 68.

<sup>34</sup>SV XII, 189.

<sup>35</sup>SV XII, 189.

St. Vincent tells the Daughters of Charity that when someone has joy in her heart she cannot hide it. People will see it on her face. They will be grateful to God for having met her.<sup>36</sup>

Here, the key French word in St. Vincent's writings is *gai*.<sup>37</sup> Since St. Louise was a rather serious type, St. Vincent often urged her to be *gaie*. As she sets out on a journey in 1631, he encourages her: "Honor the tranquility of His soul and that of His Holy Mother and be very *gaie* on your trip, since you have good reason to be so in the work in which Our Lord is employing you."<sup>38</sup> On another occasion, as she was about to travel with the more ebullient Madame Goussault, he writes: "Please be very cheerful with her, even though you should have to lessen a bit that somewhat serious disposition which nature has bestowed on you and which grace is tempering by the mercy of God."<sup>39</sup> He often recommends that she seek the peace of mind and heart that characterized the Blessed Mother and Our Lord.<sup>40</sup>

During the annual retreat of 1632 he exhorted the missionaries to have great respect for one another during the time of recreation and also to be *gai*. He advises a superior to conform his conduct to that of Our Lord, who was always completely humble, completely gentle, completely attentive, and accommodating, with humor, of the infirmities of others.<sup>41</sup>

He constantly counsels the Daughters of Charity to be joyous, smiling in their service of the poor. He once told St. Louise<sup>42</sup>: "The kingdom of God is peace in the Holy Spirit. He will reign in you, if your heart is at peace. So, be at peace, Mademoiselle, and you will honor in a sovereign way the God of peace and love."

## 7. *Gentleness involves forbearance and forgiveness.*

*Support* (forbearance) is the key French word here.

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<sup>36</sup>SV X, 487.

<sup>37</sup>As all English-speaking readers recognize, *gay*, in their own language, has undergone a remarkable transformation in recent decades, so that today it very often means *homosexual*.

<sup>38</sup>SV I, 102.

<sup>39</sup>SV I, 502.

<sup>40</sup>SV I, 111, 114, 571.

<sup>41</sup>SV IV, 581.

<sup>42</sup>SV I, 114.



He encourages Etienne Blatiron to treat a troublesome confrere with gentleness and forbearance (*support*), since this is in conformity with the spirit of Our Lord.<sup>43</sup> He tells Bernard Codoing to show two confreres, with whom he was having difficulty, the gentleness and forbearance recommended by Our Lord.<sup>44</sup> He repeats the same advice to Marc Coglée, superior in Sedan,<sup>45</sup> to Louis Dupont, superior at Tréguier,<sup>46</sup> as well as to Pierre Cabel<sup>47</sup> and Firmin Get.<sup>48</sup>

In the conference on "The Five Characteristic Virtues of the Company," given on August 22, 1659, he states that gentleness and forbearance are necessary both in community life and in the service of the neighbor.<sup>49</sup> It entails enduring offenses with forgiveness and courage. In fact, we should treat gently even those who do injury to us. He encourages the missionaries:

*Gentleness not only makes us excuse the affronts and injustices we receive, but even inclines us to treat with gentleness those from whom we receive them, by means of kind words, and should they go so far as to abuse us and even strike us in the face, it makes us endure all for God. Such are the effects produced by this virtue. Yes, a servant of God who truly possesses it, when violent hands are laid upon him, offers to the divine goodness this rough treatment and remains in peace.*<sup>50</sup>

8. *Gentleness goes hand in hand with humility.*

St. Vincent returns to this theme again and again. The Spirit of Our Lord, he tells Robert de Sergis,<sup>51</sup> is one of gentleness and humility. In the Common

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<sup>43</sup>SV III, 383.

<sup>44</sup>SV III, 469.

<sup>45</sup>SV IV, 51.

<sup>46</sup>SV V, 605.

<sup>47</sup>SV VII, 201.

<sup>48</sup>SV VII, 594.

<sup>49</sup>SV XII, 306.

<sup>50</sup>SV XII, 192.

<sup>51</sup>SV I, 536; cf. I, 528.

Rule he cites the text from Matthew's gospel, "Learn from me that I am gentle and humble of heart"(11:29b).<sup>52</sup>

In writing to Monsieur Portail about how to respond to one of the other original members of the Company, François Du Coudray, he encourages him to treat him always with gentleness and humility.<sup>53</sup> He assures Sr. Françoise Ménage, in a letter written on February 12, 1659, that she will become truly happy if she practices humility, gentleness, and charity toward the poor and toward her sisters.<sup>54</sup>

The Rule of the Daughters of Charity<sup>55</sup> also links the two virtues, calling the members of the Company to honor Our Lord particularly in his poverty, his humility, his gentleness, his simplicity, and his sobriety. In fact, for St. Vincent gentleness and humility are so intertwined that, like prudence and simplicity, they are "twin sisters."<sup>56</sup>

#### 9. *Gentleness involves compassion for others.*

St. Vincent states that the missionary must be filled with compassion,<sup>57</sup> particularly since he is called to serve the most miserable, the most abandoned, and those overwhelmed by spiritual and physical ills. He consistently links compassion with *douceur*.

In the 12th rule for the Daughters of Charity he states: "Their principal concern shall be to serve the sick poor, treating them with compassion, gentleness, cordiality, respect, and devotion."<sup>58</sup> He tells the Daughters that their holiness consists in observing their rules well and in the right spirit by serving the poor with love, gentleness, and compassion.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>CR II, 6.

<sup>53</sup>SV III, 7.

<sup>54</sup>SV VII, 455.

<sup>55</sup>SV XIII, 555.

<sup>56</sup>SV XII, 184.

<sup>57</sup>SV XI, 77.

<sup>58</sup>SV X, 331.

<sup>59</sup>SV X, 353.

During the conference given on July 24, 1660, "On the Virtues of Louise de Marillac," it was precisely this mixture of *douceur* and compassion that one of the sisters noted in Louise.<sup>60</sup>

## II. ST. VINCENT'S PRACTICE OF DOUCEUR

In addition to looking at theory, it is always helpful to examine *praxis*. This is especially important in regard to St. Vincent since, as I pointed out in an earlier article on the vows,<sup>61</sup> he shows a remarkable flexibility in applying principles to concrete situations. Moreover, St. Vincent's *praxis* provided a context within which the members of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity interpreted what he said. When he spoke or wrote about *douceur*, his audience depended not only on his words as an instrument of interpretation, but also on his life.

### 1. *His own self-understanding.*

St. Vincent himself witnesses that when he was young he was strong-willed and easily moved to anger. He also had a tendency to be moody for long, dark periods which, he attests, caused Madame de Gondi some pain at times. But, recognizing these traits within himself, "I turned to God and begged him incessantly to change my dry, contentious manner and to give me a warm, *doux* spirit, and by the grace of Our Lord, and with the little bit of attention that I gave to holding back the movements of nature, I have somewhat changed my dark moods."<sup>62</sup>

St. Vincent speaks with considerable modesty here. Abelly, his first biographer, attests that Vincent had an enormous admiration for Francis de Sales, whom he considered the gentlest person he had ever known. He adds that St. Vincent profited so well from the example of the Bishop of Geneva that he acquired a remarkable *douceur* and affability and had a wonderful way of speaking and relating with all different kinds of persons.<sup>63</sup>

In fact, he learned the lesson of *douceur* so well that he was often compared with St. Francis de Sales in that regard. Collet observes that his

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<sup>60</sup>SV X, 727.

<sup>61</sup>R. Maloney, "The Four Vincentian Vows: Yesterday and Today," *Vincentiana* 3 (Roma: Curia Generalitia, 1990) 230-370.

<sup>62</sup>Abelly, Book III, chapter 12, 177-78.

<sup>63</sup>Abelly, Book III, chapter 12, 180.

gentleness and affability became proverbial and that people said the same things about him that he himself said about Francis.<sup>64</sup>

2. *His respect for persons and his support of those who were difficult.*

The recently published notes of Br. Louis Robineau, which Abelly used in preparing his biography of St. Vincent, give many examples of the enormous respect that St. Vincent showed toward persons of various conditions in life, from the most powerful to the weakest in society.<sup>65</sup> Robineau notes especially the gentleness with which he admonished others and the profound respect with which he treated the poor. He recounts many stories too about St. Vincent's *support*.<sup>66</sup> He comments that Vincent had a remarkable ability to endure difficult situations: the calumnies of others, the trials that he endured as a member of the Council of Conscience, the gossip suggesting that he had witnessed a secret marriage between Anne of Austria and Mazarin,<sup>67</sup> the troubles that several confreres created for him, and his own infirmities.

3. *His warmth and compassion.*

His own letters give vivid witness to his warmth and compassion. He writes to St. Louise de Marillac "que j'ai peine de votre peine!"<sup>68</sup> He often writes with great compassion to confreres and Daughters on the occasion of the deaths of family members or members of the community.<sup>69</sup> Just after the death of Monsieur Portail and immediately before that of Louise de Marillac, he writes to Mathurine Guérin<sup>70</sup>:

*Certainly it is the great secret of the spiritual life to abandon to him all whom we love, while abandoning ourselves to whatever he wishes, with perfect confidence that everything will go better in that way. It is for that reason that it is said that everything works for the good of those who serve God. Let us serve him, therefore, my Sister, but let us serve him according to his*

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<sup>64</sup>Pierre Collet, *La Vie de St. Vincent de Paul* (Nancy: A. Leseure, 1748) Tome I, book 2, 99.

<sup>65</sup>André Dodin, *Monsieur Vincent, raconté par son secrétaire* (Paris: O.E.I.L., 1991) 53-56.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 143-45.

<sup>67</sup>For a discussion of this question cf. Dodin, *Op. Cit.*, 173.

<sup>68</sup>SV I, 142.

<sup>69</sup>SV VI, 444; VIII, 55, 256.

<sup>70</sup>SV VIII, 256.

*pleasure, allowing him to do as he wishes. He will take the role of father and mother for us. He will be your consolation and your strength and finally the reward of your love.*

In a moment of tension between himself and François Du Coudray, he writes to the latter: "I cannot, no, I cannot express to you, my dear little Father, my sorrow at grieving you. I implore you to believe that, were it not for the importance of the matter, I would prefer a thousand times to bear the pain of this myself rather than upset you by it."<sup>71</sup> When Guillaume Delville and his family found themselves in difficulty in 1646, St. Vincent wrote: "I cannot express to you the sorrow my heart felt at this and how I would like to have suffered in your place, myself alone, what you and your family have endured. Monsieur Codoing, the bearer of this letter, will be able to testify to you how deeply this has touched me. I am sending him mainly to assure you that your troubles are my troubles."<sup>72</sup>

#### 4. *His labors for peace.*

To all this must be added something that is quite striking in St. Vincent's practice: peace-making. It appears on two levels particularly.

1) He encouraged the members of the Congregation of the Mission to work at healing broken relationships. One of the goals of "the mission" was reconciliation.<sup>73</sup> Missionaries were to attempt to settle quarrels and disputes during missions. In fact, they frequently report to St. Vincent about their success in doing so.

2) He himself worked actively to bring an end to war. He was deeply concerned over the ravages of war and the grief that it brought to his countrymen, particularly the poor. On two occasions he intervened personally in an attempt to bring peace to his land.

At some time between 1639 and 1642, during the wars in Lorraine, he went to Cardinal Richelieu, knelt before him, described the horrors of war, and

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<sup>71</sup>SV III, 74.

<sup>72</sup>SV II, 619.

<sup>73</sup>CR XI, 8.

pleaded for peace: "Let us have peace. Have pity on us. Give France peace." Richelieu refused, responding that peace did not depend on him alone.<sup>74</sup>

Collet relates an even more striking episode, which he takes from an account written by Brother Ducournau.<sup>75</sup> In 1649, during the civil war, St. Vincent left Paris quietly, crossed battle lines and forded a flooded river (at almost 70 years of age) to see the queen and to beg her to dismiss Mazarin, whom he regarded as responsible for the war. He also spoke directly to Mazarin himself. But again his pleas went unheeded.

### III. SOME HORIZON SHIFTS THAT HAVE TAKEN PLACE BETWEEN THE 17TH AND THE 20TH CENTURIES

Horizon shifts significantly influence our outlook on things. The view of Rome from the pinnacle of St. Peter's Dome is quite different from the view from the surrounding Alban hills. From both places one can pick out the Tiber, many of the same buildings, the parks, and various other sites, but from each perspective they appear quite different. They may seem smaller or larger, depending on the distance. They may seem darker or lighter, depending on the time of day or the season. From St. Peter's, parts of some buildings may be seen that are not visible from the Alban hills, since one is looking at them from different directions.

All of this is evident from a "physical" perspective. One might also say, from a "theological" perspective, that the Church surely appears quite different when perceived from my office in Rome than when seen from a *comunidad de base* in Latin America! One's horizon, whatever it is, always influences one's view, bringing varied insights and different nuances.

A number of horizon shifts have taken place since the 17th century that affect the way one might view *douceur*. Let me try to describe several of these briefly.

1. Contemporary psychology has examined anger very carefully, pointing out the dangers of repressing it.

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<sup>74</sup>Cf. P. Coste. *The Life and Labours of St. Vincent de Paul*, translated by Joseph Leonard (London, 1935) II, 369-370. Cf. also, Abelly, I, XXXV, 169.

<sup>75</sup>P. Collet. *La Vie de St. Vincent de Paul* (Nancy, 1748) I, 468. Cf. SV III, 402. Cf. also, Coste, II, 447.

More than a century ago Charles Darwin in his classic study, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, systematically examined anger responses in the human person as compared with those in animals; he saw anger within the context of the approach-avoidance pattern that characterizes all human affectivity. In 1890 William James noted that all emotional responses have physiological aspects, heightening the person's energy in view of a further response. Since that time research into the emotions has developed considerably.<sup>76</sup>

Today we recognize that stored-up anger often results in considerable psycho-somatic damage and frequently shows itself in unexpected explosions that hurt others. Contemporary literature examines and suggests healthy ways of dealing with anger and directing it creatively.

In recent years, scientific studies have found popular expression in numerous spiritual reading books dealing with the healthy expression of the emotions as part of human growth.<sup>77</sup> Superiors, and those responsible for formation programs, have become quite aware that there are many "angry people" in communities (as in other callings), with potentially explosive results. Through the discussion of the emotions, and particularly anger, during the time of formation, many communities try to deal with these problems ahead of time, in order to avoid catastrophic events later.

Studies also show that emotions, and even basic facial expressions, elicit similar affective responses from others. Happy expressions elicit happy responses; sad expressions, sad responses.<sup>78</sup> Reading these studies, one spontaneously recalls St. Vincent's exhortations to the Daughters of Charity to be joyful and smiling in their service.

2. In modern times there has been a very significant revival of pacifism.

In this regard, Gandhi has had an enormous influence, with his peaceful revolution in India. Likewise, Martin Luther King, in the United States, obtained very significant advances in civil rights by non-violent resistance.

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<sup>76</sup>Robert Plutchik, *Emotion: A Psychoevolutionary Synthesis* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980) 128-151.

<sup>77</sup>Fran Ferder, "Never Let the Sun Set on Your Anger: Anger and Its Expressions" in *Words Made Flesh: Scripture, Psychology, and Human Communication* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1986) 67-84.

<sup>78</sup>G. Simon Harak, *Virtuous Passions* (New York: Paulist, 1993) 18. This author notes (p. 25) that we begin to "pick up" emotions from people about a tenth of a second after coming into contact with them.

James Douglass' book, *The Non-Violent Cross*,<sup>79</sup> which gained immense popularity, capsulized the biblical and philosophical roots of pacifist movements.

In the Catholic tradition, *Gaudium et Spes*<sup>80</sup> took a carefully nuanced, yet positive position in regard to pacifism: "In the same spirit we cannot but express our admiration for all who forgo the use of violence to vindicate their rights and resort to those other means of defense which are available to weaker parties, provided it can be done without harm to the rights and duties of others and of the community." At the same time Paul VI made stirring appeals for world peace, crying out on October 4, 1965, at the United Nations headquarters in New York: "No more war, war never again!"<sup>81</sup> In his book, *Faith and Violence*, Thomas Merton offered a clear presentation of the theory and practice of Christian peace-making.<sup>82</sup> In 1983 the bishops of the United States, in a carefully prepared document, made a very significant contribution to the theory and the practice of working toward the creation of peace.<sup>83</sup>

3. In recent times there has been increased consciousness of the need for peace-making not only on an individual level, but also on a structural level. Here too, Paul VI made an eloquent appeal: "If you want peace, work for justice."<sup>84</sup> John Paul II adds: "Development is the new name for peace."<sup>85</sup>

The groundwork for this emphasis on the need for structural change is already evident in *Pacem in Terris*<sup>86</sup> and in *Gaudium et Spes*.<sup>87</sup> Paul VI takes the theme up eloquently in *Populorum Progressio*,<sup>88</sup> and in an address to the members of Cor Unum, given on January 13, 1972, calls Christians to commit themselves to enter into "the very heart of social and political action and thus

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<sup>79</sup>Douglass, James W., *The Non-Violent Cross* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

<sup>80</sup>*Gaudium et Spes*, 78.

<sup>81</sup>*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 57 (1965) 881.

<sup>82</sup>Merton, Thomas, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

<sup>83</sup>"The Challenge of Peace," *Origins* 13 (no. 1; May 19, 1983) 1-32.

<sup>84</sup>*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 57 (1965) 896.

<sup>85</sup>*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 10; cf. *Populorum Progressio*, 77.

<sup>86</sup>*Pacem in Terris*, 89, 91.

<sup>87</sup>*Gaudium et Spes*, 85.

<sup>88</sup>*Populorum Progressio*, 78.



get at the roots of evil and change hearts, as well as the structures of modern society."<sup>89</sup>

Today we are conscious that sin deeply affects social structures. It becomes embodied in unjust laws, power-based economic relationships, inequitable treaties, artificial boundaries, oppressive governments, and numerous other subtle structural obstacles to harmonious societal relationships. It is only when such structural obstacles are analyzed, understood, and removed that society can establish abiding, peaceful relationships.

Today there is also a heightened sense of the global community and the calamitous implications of the arms build-up. The sale of arms remains one of the major factors in the world economy. Local conflicts (in Algeria, Chechnya, ex-Yugoslavia, and in numerous other places) make the international scene at times quite volatile, with the ever-present danger that these conflicts will escalate into an "all-out war." With the widespread diffusion of arms and the frequency of their use, young people often attest to uncertainty about their future because of the possibility of nuclear annihilation.

Meanwhile, papal documents have consistently condemned the arms race.<sup>90</sup> At the same time, the United States Bishops' Peace Pastoral set off a broad series of discussions on the question of war, peace, and arms among episcopal conferences throughout the world.

#### **IV. DOUCEUR TODAY**

St. Vincent's teaching about this third "smooth stone,"<sup>91</sup> as he liked to put it, is quite translatable into modern usage. His conference of March 28, 1659, as well as several of his letters to Louise de Marillac, contain a practical wisdom that is very relevant today. While one could say much about this virtue, I will focus here only on four points.

##### *1. Gentleness entails the ability to handle anger positively.*

Anger is natural. It is energy that spontaneously arises within us when we perceive something as evil. It helps us to deal with evil. It prepares us to

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<sup>89</sup>*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 64 (1972) 189.

<sup>90</sup>Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 81.

<sup>91</sup>CR II, 6.

"fight," as Darwin might put it. But, like all spontaneous emotions, it can be used well or badly. Concretely, all sorts of people have trouble handling it well. As mentioned above, there are many "angry people" in the world.

Uncontrolled anger, in its most violent forms, erupts into war, assault, rape, murder, and the many crimes that make headlines in daily newspapers. In its less violent forms, unregulated rage shows itself in outbursts of temper, angry diatribes, refusal to talk to others, throwing things, slamming doors, pouting, holding grudges, attempts at "getting even."

As St. Vincent pointed out, handling anger well often involves expressing it appropriately. He himself was outraged at the plight of the sick and the hungry, so he established the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, and the Daughters of Charity. Anger enabled him to react with vigor and creativity when confronted with the needs of the poor in his day. He also expressed anger directly when he perceived evil within his communities, but he learned to combine his anger with gentleness. He knew how to mix the bitter and the sweet, as he told Louise de Marillac.<sup>92</sup> He sought to imitate Jesus who was equally "gentle and firm."<sup>93</sup>

Venting a roused spirit appropriately can be very healthy. It can ease hidden tensions and work toward the resolution of conflict. It can be an appropriate instrument in correction. But if anger is handled badly, it can be terribly destructive. Unleashed, it can result in violence and injustice. Repressed, it can fester into resentment, sarcasm, cynicism, bitterness, depression.

The challenge is to learn the ways of appropriately controlling, moderating (even suppressing anger for a period of time), sublimating, and expressing anger. St. Vincent often appeals to the example of Jesus who knew how to moderate, and yet express, his frustration in regard to the apostles, and who could be very direct in expressing his anger in regard to the pharisees, who were laying unjust burdens upon others.

## 2. *Gentleness entails approachability, affability, warmth.*

These are especially important qualities in ministers. In this regard, St. Vincent encourages us to be confident that we can really change, citing his

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<sup>92</sup>SV I, 292-94.

<sup>93</sup>SV VII, 226.

own personal experience. While he was of choleric temperament and, in his younger days, rather moody for long dark periods, he changed so much in the course of his life that all those who knew him later said that he was one of the most approachable men they had ever met.<sup>94</sup>

He told the community that people are won over much more by gentleness than by argument. This advice is especially relevant when we offer the gift of correction,<sup>95</sup> whether the correction is done by peers or by superiors. Those corrected are much more able to hear words spoken gently than words of stinging accusation.

Moreover, gentleness and warmth in the giver draw out the same gifts in the receiver. Those who find the minister warm and loving will begin to respond in the same way. This is surely why St. Vincent so emphasized *douceur* as a "missionary" virtue.

3. *Gentleness involves the ability to endure offenses with forgiveness and courage.*

St. Vincent based his teaching in this regard on respect for the human person. Even those who commit injustice, he told the double family, deserve respect as persons. The writings of John Paul II reiterate this theme in our day --- the call to have profound reverence for each individual.

Naturally, having respect for the person of the offenders does not prohibit us from channeling our anger with courage against the evils they are committing. But it does prohibit us from practicing injustice in the name of justice. St. Vincent recognized clearly (and he reminded Philip LeVacher about St. Augustine's teaching in this regard<sup>96</sup>) that there are some evils that must be tolerated, since there is no practical possibility of correcting them. The wise person learns to live with them, and the gentle person treats with respect those whose lives are so entwined with evil that it cannot be rooted out.

There is a delicate balance in this regard. At times one must suffer with courage. There are evils that cannot be avoided and that must be endured. But on the other hand, one must avoid a false gentility, as Adrian Van Kaam once

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<sup>94</sup>Cf. Abelly, III, 177-78.

<sup>95</sup>Cf. Mt 18:15-18.

<sup>96</sup>SV IV, 121.

put it<sup>97</sup> (or, to use Joseph Leonard's translation of St. Vincent's phrase, "namby-pamby mildness"! ). At times one must cry out against injustice and channel all one's energies into overcoming it. It takes great prudence to know the difference between these cases.

At this time of rapid change in the history of the Church, the combination of gentleness and firmness is especially necessary. This is particularly so in making decisions. As communities assess their apostolates with a view toward the future, they must have the courage to choose and act. At the same time, they must show gentleness toward those who have great difficulty adapting. Likewise, individuals must have courage in setting growth-goals, but they must be gentle with themselves by recognizing that personal change does not occur overnight, but only gradually.

Ministers too must know that no matter how well they do their jobs, they will have to endure, with both courage and gentleness, their own limitations and the conflicting expectations of others. Religious superiors will experience that some in their communities see all things in black and white, while others love only what is grey. Some will use the past as their dominant norm for decision-making, while others will look only to an uncharted future. Superiors will never fully satisfy all these different personalities. They must make decisions with courage and treat with gentleness those who disagree. They must combine in their lives two New Testament sayings: "With the strength that comes from God, bear your share of the hardships the gospel entails,"<sup>98</sup> and "Learn of me that I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls."<sup>99</sup>

#### 4. *Gentleness involves action on behalf of justice and peace-making.*

Today especially, witness to Jesus' gentleness and his proclamation of a kingdom of peace play a very prominent part in the Church's preaching of the good news. This is intimately linked with the promotion of justice and peace and education toward both. *Centesimus Annus*<sup>100</sup> speaks eloquently on the theme: "I myself, on the occasion of the recent tragic war in the Persian Gulf, repeated the cry: -`Never again war!' No, never again war, which destroys the lives of innocent people, teaches how to kill, throws into upheaval even the

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<sup>97</sup>Van Kaam, Adrian L., *Spirituality and the Gentle Life* (Denville, New Jersey: Dimension Books, 1974).

<sup>98</sup>2 Tim 1:8.

<sup>99</sup>Mt 11:29.

<sup>100</sup>*Centesimus Annus*, 52; cf. also, 14, 54.

lives of those who do the killing and leaves behind a trail of resentment and hatred, thus making it all the more difficult to find a just solution of the very problems which provoked the war. ...For this reason, another name for peace is *development*. Just as there is a collective responsibility for avoiding war, so too there is a collective responsibility for promoting development."

Aquinas reminds us that the passion most immediately associated with justice is anger.<sup>101</sup> Anger recoils in the face of injustice in order to spring back and wipe it out. It moves us to lunge toward justice, to hunger and thirst for it. Anger springs from love and respect for the human person, whose rights we perceive as being violated. It strains to right wrong, to reestablish an order in which persons can grow and flourish. It will always be aroused, therefore, when we perceive that unjust structures are depriving the poor of the political, social, economic, or personal freedom that their human dignity demands.

Gentleness finds the ways of expressing anger in "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world."<sup>102</sup> For those involved in ministry, education for justice and peace will be among the primary means.<sup>103</sup>

Reconciliation too will be one of the basic goals of ministry. I am reminded of the role that the Community of Sant'Egidio played in mediating the peace in Mozambique. After 15 years of civil war, "human wisdom" would surely have doubted the ability of a "powerless" Italian Community to accomplish what other much more "powerful" agencies had failed to do. Yet the negotiations were successfully completed in 1992 and peace continues to reign in that country. Could not other groups have similar courage in offering their services as ministers of reconciliation?

Conversation and dialogue will, in the lives of the gentle, be the primary means for settling conflicts, accompanied by suffering love. These are the tools that Jesus himself used; he himself is "our peace, and breaks down the wall of separation."<sup>104</sup> If the community of his disciples has a genuine

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<sup>101</sup>Cf. *Summa Theologica I-II*. 46.2, 4, 6.

<sup>102</sup>Synod of Bishops, 1971, *Justice in the World*, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 63 (1971) 924.

<sup>103</sup>Cf. John Paul II, "Women: Teachers of Peace," *Origins* 24 (# 28; December 22, 1994) 465-69; Jorge Mejia, "Dimensions of the Bishop's Essential Ministry of Peace," *Origins* 24 (# 39; March 16, 1995) 641-648; Dolores Leckey, "Peacemaking and Creativity: Three Dynamics," *Origins* 24 (# 45; April 27, 1995) 777-780. Leckey focuses on three dynamics that make for peace: listening, beauty, and laughter.

<sup>104</sup>Eph 2:14.

passion for dialogue, justice, and peace, then it is a clear sign that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

"Passionate" gentleness<sup>105</sup> knows how to direct anger to root out injustice, to channel it so that "justice rolls like a river."<sup>106</sup> W. E. B. DuBois sums up this gentle passion in a lovely prayer:

*Give us grace, O God, to dare to do the deed which we well know cries to be done. Let us not hesitate because of ease, or the words of men's mouths, or our own lives. Mighty causes are calling us -- the freeing of women, the training of children, the putting down of hate and murder and poverty -- all these and more. But they call with voices that mean work and sacrifice and death. Mercifully, grant us, O God, the spirit of Esther, that we say: I will go unto the King and if I perish, I perish. Amen.*

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<sup>105</sup>Cf. Walter Burghardt, "A Faith That Does Justice," Warren Series Lectures, in *Catholic Studies* (# 18; November 17, 1991) 9.

<sup>106</sup>Am 5:24.