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## Fr. André Dodin's Contribution to Vincentian Studies

Jean-Pierre Renouard C.M.

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## FR. ANDRÉ DODIN'S CONTRIBUTION TO VINCENTIAN STUDIES

Jean-Pierre Renouard, C.M.

Time is the only sure steward on the matter of judging a person or his works. St. Vincent himself remarked: "time changes everything" (III, 390). I have been asked to give some immediate reactions on the work of Fr. André Dodin who died on 18 December 1996. Imprudence? It is up to the readers to weigh, and probably in a variety of ways, the three remarks that I give by way of a first look.

1. Among the numerous works and magazine articles that Fr. Vansteenkiste, celebrated expert in the field, compiled with patience, I recall three titles that have touched me profoundly:

– The 30 introductory pages which appeared in a little book that is now unobtainable, published by Aubier in 1949 and entitled: *Textes et Etudes, Saint Vincent de Paul*, in the series *les Maîtres de la spiritualité chrétienne*.

These pages offered a still valuable first synthesis on Vincentian spirituality. They gave evidence of the author's declared ambition: "to develop the human journey" and "to develop every action." They helped to enter fully into the Vincentian spirituality which at that time did not exist in a formal manner. They announced in their way the springtime of Vincentian studies by exploiting the foundational mines of Pémartin and Coste. Fr. Dodin wrote me in 1966 with regard to these pages saying that they were the best he had written.

– In 1960 his best seller appeared: *Saint Vincent de Paul et la charité*, published by Seuil, in the series *Microcosme, les maîtres spirituels* NE 21. Published and republished in many languages, this book has made a tour of the Vincentian world presenting a renewed vision of the life ("his earthly service") and spirituality ("the spiritual doctrine") of Monsieur Vincent. It presented some pregnant texts and gave the state of criticism concerning the date of birth, the captivity, and the conversion. It is a book to be read again by those wishing to approach St. Vincent from the inside without risking major errors. It is a paradigm and the best condensed version [on the world of St. Vincent] to put into the hands of those who want to know a good amount. The directors of the internal seminary can treasure here a good "manual" for the formation of our own.

– In 1985, O.E.I.L. published the thesis of Fr. Dodin on Abelly's work (Jean de Pange Prize): *La légende et l'histoire, de Monsieur Depaul à Saint Vincent de Paul*. The author upended the way the first biographer of St. Vincent worked when writing in view of his beatification. Fr. Dodin also demonstrated how it is possible to use this apologetic work to go from legend to history. Certainly the intention here is more pointed and sometimes scathing but it has the enormous merit of recalling that history has its rules and demands. The temptation is always there to invent for oneself a Monsieur Vincent according to one's needs and the expectations of one's time. Objectivity is the path to truth. This is a paradoxical book which leads to humility in the subject of knowing St. Vincent.

Let me add a brief mention of the book, which was also published by O.E.I.L. in 1984, *François de Sales, Vincent de Paul, les deux amis*. This little booklet offers the advantage of reminding Vincentians that the old method of prayer imposed by the two St. Lazare's was resolutely of Salesian inspiration. St. Vincent, we know, proposes more in his oral and written teaching.

2. Fr. Dodin fought the idea that St. Vincent was uniquely a man of action. He affirms loudly and strongly that he was a mystic, a spiritual man. Dodin contributed to the knowledge of the interior man. He caught him in prayer. A session given at the Alliance Française in 1960 concurs with the pages published by Aubier and already cited. Monsieur Vincent invites one to live in Christ and to organize one's interior life from this effort of imitation. The apostolic life finds itself sanctified in this. Fr. Dodin's merit is first of all there; he helped us to move from history to Vincentian spirituality, even if sometimes he organized it to the point of giving an advantage to the spirit of logic over the spirit of philosophy.

3. Parallel to this effort of a change of perspective (roughly, from the Tricentennial), Fr. Dodin made Monsieur Vincent interesting; he brought to his hearers the taste for St. Vincent. He showed a human Monsieur Vincent, a businessman, fond of the temporal... of process, of politics! He also helped to develop an understanding of Vincent's time, with the assistance of Fr. Chalumeau whose reputation as a specialist on the 17th century need not be repeated.

It would be precisely unjust to isolate the brilliant work of Fr. Dodin by forgetting that of his predecessors: Fr. Coste, the supplier; Fr. Guichard, who read the manuscripts and carefully collated them (from which Fr. Dodin borrowed much); Fr. Contassot who classified and left (without any publication) the history of all the seminaries of the Vincentian tradition; Fr. Chalumeau who loved to situate St. Vincent in his context and who opened a royal road to later studies; Fr. Morin who charmed his hearers by his new and personal syntheses. There, jointly, one finds a movement which goes beyond French borders and which led, in 1980, to the writing of the Constitutions in a universal language, not to say to works of renown whose authors are still living.

A final observation: Fr. Dodin succeeded better in articles than in large books. The title which best summarizes his talent would be this: he was a *miniaturist*. In his way, he illuminated the very rich Vincentian hours. And these are far from passed.