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Le Berceau de Saint Vincent de Paul

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If you are someone who has made the pilgrimage to the Berceau in the past you will remember the old topographical characteristics of the birthplace of St. Vincent: a group of 19th century buildings, very much in the style known as Napoleon III, through which runs a regional highway with the reputation of being very busy, and rather dangerous for both the inhabitants and visitors to the Berceau.

Some years back all this changed markedly. There are, so to speak, two Berceaux, the old Berceau and the blatantly modern School, linked by being “islanded” by a divided four-lane highway which cuts the buildings off from the rest of the locality and the parish. So, a new topography means a new Berceau. Let us look at what this involves.

I. The traditional Berceau

This goes back to 24 April 1864 when the first buildings and the neo-Byzantine chapel were blessed. This was due to the combined efforts of Mgr. de Laneluc, Bishop of the Landes, Fr. Etienne, superior general of the Congregation of the Mission, Fr. Truquet CM, who organised a national lottery at the wish of the Emperor. What started as a hospice turned later into a retirement home. Today it houses 80 retired persons, 20 of whom are elderly Daughters of Charity who live in four renovated welcoming wings.

Each one has the comfort and ease of a separate room, which does not, though, prevent the majority of these retired people taking advantage of the benefit of a community lifestyle, made up of sharing, and meeting for games, in pleasant spacious common rooms.

In each area there are a Daughter of Charity, nursing-aides and welcoming personnel who help by being attentive, listening and caring, so that each one finds, or refinds, peace and serenity, and feels loved, as St. Vincent wanted.

Those who want it find great happiness in being able to talk to and pray with the sisters, or the chaplain, a Vincentian who is usually somewhat elderly and experienced. He knows how to listen and to point someone in the right direction, helping them to make “the transition” at the right time.

Some days are brightened by the arrival of groups: people on courses, college students, Daughters of Charity passing through, scouts, Marian Youth members. By their singing and dancing they spread joy.

The Daughters of Charity are very involved with the old people, and the younger ones devote themselves enthusiastically to caring for their older sisters. The particular grace of the Berceau is linked to the praying presence of these women who are consecrated to God and who, by their singing and praying, give a sort of monastic tone to the chapel, in which all the great ordinary and extraordinary Vincentian meetings take place.

The sisters are also involved in the welcoming service for visitors to the Berceau, that is to say for those who come to spend a few days in reflection or spiritual retreat in this little corner of paradise! A lovely newly refurbished building will be finished by the end of December and this will enable visitors of the year 2000 to live their privileged moments in the most up to date surroundings (bedrooms with en suite facilities, a cloister opening out on to a garden and allowing access to the grounds).

The priests carry on their Vincentian ministry in their own way. They ceased work in the Apostolic School in 1970, not without pain and a wrenching of the heart!

It is not without interest to back over the history of this school. From 1867 Fr. Etienne, at his own expense, made arrangements for a new building, to cater for boys and for retreats for the Daughters of Charity. A historian of the Berceau writes:

“In 1868 another building rises from the earth, intended as accommodation for the chaplains. It will welcome the Spanish Vincentians expelled from their country in 1869, and later the Vincentian seminarists from Paris in 1870. At that time an ambulance station to accommodate fifty wounded as set up there.”

For their part, in the same year, the Daughters of Charity took in about twenty sisters who came to do their noviciate, since it was not possible for them to get to Paris. It became necessary to expand the complex.

This meant that the building intended for the chaplains took on a new role. The children entrusted to the care of the sisters could not be left without some preparation for their future. They had to be provided with some trade for their livelihood. On 27 September 1872 a secondary school and a technical school were provided for them. The former began with nine pupils who had shown a desire to be priests. The technical school, which also began with nine, had Vincentian brothers in charge.

The secondary school became a minor seminary, and was to be enlarged in 1879 and again on 24 April 1881. It would change into an Apostolic School on that occasion.

In 1884 Fr. Pémartin, the superior, wrote that “it can cater for one hundred pupils. At present we have eighty-five. We could have a greater number if we wished, but we lack the resources and we must refuse..., something regrettable at the present time when the shortage of priests is so clearly felt.”

And he mentions that at that time the school had provided 22 priests, 11 of them Vincentians; 37 seminarians, 28 of whom were for the Congregation of the Mission, and two lay brothers. There was need once again to expand in 1899. In 1934 Fr. Pierre was to build the seminary chapel and in 1935 the classhalls along the Buglose Road.

Since then this old building, over a period of a hundred years, has provided 475 priests and 32 lay brothers. Three hundred twenty-three joined the Congregation of the Mission, seven became bishops and 189 went to missions outside France. Who could ask for more? And we must not forget the 33 girls from the orphanage who became Daughters of Charity.

As we go down through this honours list we can understand the emotional reactions to the necessity for the Congregation to having to withdraw from such a blessed location. The withdrawal was caused by some points of French law which were too constricting for the professional staff; there was no option but to comply.

At that time the question arose as to what was to be the new situation of the priests. An old house, Le Hillon, was renovated and adapted as a residence for five or six Vincentians. Since then, through good times and bad, they have always been there as chaplains with the mission of passing on the message of St. Vincent, as parochial clergy, as well as animators at the Vincentian Centre.

The year of the fourth centenary of the birth of St. Vincent brought a change in the life of the Berceau. This was the opening of the Vincentian Centre. This is a joint effort of the Berceau, the Company of the Daughters of Charity, and the Congregation of the Mission, who had met together and decided to create a welcoming environment, a place of “animation,” for the crowds of pilgrims and tourists who arrive, especially on feast days. Although nowadays they amount to no more than about 80,000 per year they used to be around 100,000 during the years celebrating that centenary.

Two Daughters and two priests are responsible for the daily “animation” at the Centre. One Daughter, (Sister Maïté, and later and still Sister Thérèse) welcomes those passing through, sees that they are told something about St. Vincent, brings them to the Ranquines house and shows them the permanent exhibition. Originally this was on the theme of “St. Vincent’s glance” (*Le regard de Monsieur Vincent*) and at present it is on the theme of “The fire in St. Vincent” (*Le feu chez Monsieur Vincent*). The Sister is tireless in answering questions from the visitors. This privileged contact gives rise to much dialogue which is serious, complex and profound. During the summer the sister is normally helped by a priest, Fr. Henri, who administers the sacrament of reconciliation, and other welcoming sisters who receive the larger groups, especially groups of children during the months of May and June.

The Ranquines house is a house of memories. Is it on the precise site of the birthplace? Does it actually include pieces of the house which St. Vincent lived in? There are two hypotheses. It would be helpful if *Vincentiana* were to publish both in their entirety. We would not like to make a choice between these two and on the spot we prefer to speak of “the house of memories” of St. Vincent, located, according to the first hypothesis, the officially accepted one, on the site of the outhouse. That is where the real believers gather for recollection and prayer and celebrate the Eucharist, asking God, through the saint of mission and charity, to make them sharers in his spirit.

There is a project in the pipeline to turn the former school, now largely unoccupied, into a conference and retreat centre. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is very interested in this idea and wants to utilise its vibrant Vincentian strength to give a dynamism to such an undertaking. We will, please God, have occasion to speak again about this. A preliminary outline plan for this building would envisage about thirty single bedrooms, five double bedrooms, all with en suite facilities. There would be four offices, a dining area, four meeting rooms, video facilities, an infirmary, a room for relaxation. Because of all this the existing chapel would be retained and renovated. A contract with the Oeuvre du Berceau would spell out the separate responsibilities of the owner and the tenant.

It is worth while remembering that the Congregation of the Mission has opened its intern seminary at the Berceau. Last year six seminarists started their formation year under the direction of Frs. Renouard and Gurtner. They made acquaintance with the Congregation of the Mission, deepened their relationship with Jesus Christ and were imbued with the spirit of St. Vincent, and tried out the experience of community living. They also, obviously, were initiated into the service of the poor and pastoral ministry.

While on this matter we should point out that we are in the area of one of the thirty-six new parishes of the diocese of Dax, the parish of St Vincent-Notre Dame, which includes the villages of Saint Vincent-de-Paul, Buglose, Gourbera, Gousse, Lалуque, Téthieu, Préchacq, Louer and Pontonx. The Parish Priest, Fr. Paul Soussotte, lives in the last named. The Vincentians attend pastoral conferences, but have no other parochial ministry.

II. “LE COMPLEXE SCOLAIRE”

This is the barbarous name which is used for the entire northern half of the new Berceau. A primary school operates with 130 pupils and six teachers, one of whom is headmistress. There is a college with 200 boys, and a technical school with 210 young people; there are in all 38 teachers and a director, M. Jean-Pierre Beïs, and an assistant director Philippe Dupouy.

This block comprises a huge boarding school with 220 occupants, and the technical school offers the following beginners' courses: marketing, various types of accounting, with a *baccalauréat* [completion of secondary schooling] in commercial subjects and a B.E.P. [certificate of completion of professional course] in the electro-technical field.

Recently a central administration unit has been completed. All administrative services will be located there. A hall named "Emmaus" has been made available to the chaplaincy, and a Vincentian chaplain and a Daughter of Charity, assisted by willing volunteers, help the children and young people to maintain contact with God, a thing which is sometimes very difficult to achieve! Three Columbian Vincentians, Rogelio Toro, Ricardo Ramírez and Roberto Ramos, take it in turn to breathe a bit of spirituality into this establishment. It should be mentioned that this block is in the care of the Daughters of Charity, and that the animators are all members of the "Sève" [sap, of plants] network, which is well known in the French Vincentian world.

The educational approach highlights Vincentian values: a feel for the importance of the individual, for the deprived pupil, a sense of responsibility for education in the faith, and the stewardship of freedom.

From an architectural point of view the block is enormous and well built. The different architects who worked on it have succeeded in giving it a modern youthful feel, for which many schools envy us. In the Berceau we have an unbeatable trump card: space. There is no need for a tower or staircases. Everything is on the ground floor. It should be mentioned that examination results match this situation and that the reputation of the place is well founded. So it is a place assured of a fine future under independent management, and which casts a friendly eye towards its older matching Berceau, which is merely thirty years old!

III. What happens at the Berceau

Many things go on at the Berceau. We can mention among recent developments:

- Last 24 April [1999] there was a weekend for sisters engaged in "welcoming ministry" and for young members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, with in-depth discussion of "The love of God and the neighbour in St. Vincent, faith, work – three aspects of reality linked with the person of Christ and experience."
- Many pilgrims on their way to Compostella passed through, because we are on one of the routes to that holy city.
- The bishop of Dax, Mgr. Sarrabère, blessed the new exhibition on the theme of "Fire in St. Vincent."
- A weekend for the 18 to 30 age group on the theme "Vincent de Paul: when love turns into fire."

- An evening of choral singing by the “Marensin Voices,” a choir of children and young people.
- 13 to 23 July, a session with a monk who works in pottery.
- 24 and 26 July, a concert given by Fr. Yves Bouchet CM.
- 27 September, the feast of St. Vincent, the ordination of Fabio Ochoa CM to the diaconate.

But the climax of the summer was the European session, 17 to 30 August. The following is an account by one of the participants, Federico Coda Zabetta CM, from Piacenza, Italy:

The Berceau de Saint Vincent-de-Paul, near Dax, was the starting point and the ideal environment for union among the 23 European Vincentian students attending the ninth formation session.

This birthplace of St. Vincent at present comprises a retirement home, schools, the intern seminary accommodated around a central courtyard in the style of the old eremitical settlements. In itself the Berceau is a centre of enlightenment, an anchorage of Vincentian life, the living memory of a charism united around the region of the Landes and today’s mission territories!

This ninth European formation session aimed at deepening basic matters. We passed through regions of France as pilgrims, and they captured our imagination with the forests and marshes of the Landes stretching out of sight, the sky changing with the behaviour of the ocean, the warm tints of the Basque country. All this contributed to our having the experience of a balanced impression. We saw with our own eyes what the young Vincent had seen; that is the initiation into a meeting with him. The lectures on history and the spiritual meditations became real in the natural environment which was all around us. It was the same for Château-l’Evêque, Folleville and Paris. We made contacts, shared joy, and prayed together in places which have universal appeal.

Then the practicality of the life and work of St. Vincent brought us to see that this loving looking at the land, at people and at ourselves led on to conversion. In this way this practicality struck us by our insight into life in the Landes in the 17th and 18th centuries.

We learnt about the involved social and friendly links between the Depaul and Moras families. The latter was Vincent’s maternal family, linked to the local class of legal and administrative nobility. We learnt how Vincent progressed from a certain compromise with careerism to total dedication of his life to charity and mission.

Everything about St. Vincent’s life, his theology, the context of his life and work, sent us back to God’s providence. This was important for us, as inheritors of the Vincentian tradition and his charism. Through the writings of St. Vincent we learnt how he progressed (and made rich people progress) to the service of “the least.” This

impulse of the heart still has repercussions today and challenges our small number to face the needs of modern man by taking the necessary steps.

Thanks to the organisers, Jérôme Delsinne, J.F. Desclaux, Richard McCullen, Markus Monn, J.P. Renouard, and the animators for such wonderful days!

This has been a short run-down on life and activity at the Berceau. All we have to say to end up is the gospel invitation: “Come and see,” and you will be captivated by the spirit so evident there!

(THOMAS DAVITT C.M., translator)