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# The Central Place of the Eucharist in the Vincentian Vocation

by Erminio Antonello, C.M.

*Province of Turin*

Charity and mission are modalities which express the intimate feeling, living and working of the personality of the Vincentian missionary. His vocation moves between the two fundamental dimensions of charity and mission. Charity refers to *the very principle of his existence* and mission is an *expression of his charity in action*. In other words: what makes the Vincentian missionary act? Charity. What animates him interiorly in the evangelization of the poor? Mission. Charity and mission are not two terms next to each other, which could be examined theoretically, like leaves separated from the branch. They do not express two words of classification of a meritorious institution. They express rather a movement which operates on the level of personal consciousness. There is a vital dynamism between charity and mission, in such a way that in a person charity without mission is incomplete and activity which is not illuminated by charity runs the risk of paralysis. The keeping alive of this supernatural dynamic refers to a source which surpasses the intellect, the will and the feelings of our very humanity. It transcends it without destroying it, but embraces it and takes to letting itself be animated by the event which brings it into movement. This hidden and transcending source is the event of Jesus Christ who becomes active in us thanks to the grace of the Holy Spirit. Here the Vincentian missionary encounters the source from which he draws the Eucharistic mystery, and to which the Constitutions refer:

*Our life should be directed towards the daily celebration of the Lord's Supper as towards its summit, for from the Eucharist, as from a living source, flows the power of our apostolic activity and fraternal communion. Through the Eucharist, the death and resurrection of Christ are made present, we become in Christ a living offering, and the communion of the People of God is signified and brought about (C 45, 1).*

## St. Vincent's thinking about the Eucharist

The references to the Eucharist in the writings of St. Vincent — although they are spread out here and there — are quite rich and vast. But above all we may say that the fundamental climate of his thinking is anchored in the Eucharist, because it is simultaneously strongly Christological and ecclesiological. We find a confirmation of this in the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission, where the Eucharist occupies an absolutely central place in the life of the missionary. The observation becomes clear if one refers to a draft earlier than the definitive Common Rules, i.e. the draft contained in the so-called Codex Sarzana. Here the reference to the Eucharist is functional to introduce in the missionary's believing conscience the certitude of the nearness of Christ in his life, encouraging him to practice certain acts of practical devotion, which keep the consciousness of his Presence alive:

*Because the Most Holy Sacrament of the altar contains in synthesis all the mysteries of our faith and our salvation and in a certain sense the well-being of the Church depends on the veneration of that sacrament, the Congregation reserves for it a respect which never decreases and, with full and continuous attention, occupies itself in order that all turn to this sacrament with faith and reverence, at least with those usual acts of veneration. Among them are: first, making frequent visits to the Most Holy Sacrament; second, wherever we find ourselves, when we hear the sound of the bell ring when the Sacrament is being transferred, we kneel down to adore it and, if possible, we accompany it; third, every time its holy name is being pronounced, we take off our berretta; fourth, when we pass a church we take off our hats and we say: Praised be the Most Holy Sacrament of the altar; finally, we take care that others are instructed about this sacrament, that they believe in such a great mystery and how they must venerate it, in order that, as far as possible, nothing happens with it that is not respectful or out of order.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> *Et quoniam, sanctissimum Altaris sacramentum in se veluti summam omnium mysteriorum nostrae fidei continet, et ex cultu illi debite reddito nostra salus, et totum ecclesiae bonum aliquatenus dependet, eximium, et indeficientem honorem erga illud profitebitur Congregatio, et mente sollicita, et indefessa sataget, ut ab omnibus tanto huic sacramento debitus honor et reuerentia tributur, ijs saltem obsequijs quibus illud colere solita est quae inter caetera sunt haec. – Primo illud frequenter uisitare, – secundo, ubicumque fuerimus dum deferture uel deferri campanulae sono admonemur, flexis genibus adorare, ac si fieri possit, concomitari. – Tertio, quoties eius sacrum nomen pronunciat, caput reuerenter aperire. – Quarto, ecclesias praetereundo haec uerba capite etiam aperto dicere, Laudetur sanctissimum Altaris Sacramentum.*

In the definitive text of the Common Rules, still in Chapter X § 3, the text assumes a major theological citation, in so far as the Eucharist is tied to the complex of the principal mysteries of faith, the Trinity and the Incarnation.

*There can be no better way of paying the best honor possible to these mysteries than proper devotion to, and use of, the Blessed Eucharist, sacrament and sacrifice. It includes, as it were, all the other mysteries of faith and, by itself, leads those who receive Communion respectfully, or celebrate Mass properly, to holiness and, ultimately, to everlasting glory. In this way God, unity and trinity, and the Incarnate Word, are paid the greatest honor. For these reasons, nothing should be more important to us than showing due honor to this sacrament and sacrifice. We are also to make a great effort to get everyone else to pay it similar honor and reverence. We should try, to the best of our ability, to achieve this by preventing, as far as we can, any lack of reverence in word or act, and by carefully teaching others what to believe about so great a mystery, and how they should honor it.*

St. Vincent encourages the missionary as priest to immerse himself into the sacrament he celebrates, in order that this sacramental conformation impress on him the same sentiments of Christ.

*It is not sufficient that we celebrate the Mass, but we must also offer this sacrament with the greatest possible devotion, according to the will of God, conforming ourselves, in as far as this depends on us, with his grace, to Jesus Christ, offering himself, when he was on earth, as a sacrifice to his eternal Father. Let us thus try, Fathers, to offer our sacrifices to God in the same spirit that our Lord offered his and also as perfectly as our poor and miserable nature allows us.<sup>2</sup>*

For the missionary, the relationship to Christ must, therefore, become a daily fact. For this St. Vincent fought against the rigorist tendency of the Jansenists who suggested not approaching the Eucharist frequently. For St. Vincent, abandoning the Eucharist is the cause of decadence in the spiritual life.

*... speaking to his community, he said that they should ask God to give them the desire of receiving communion often;*

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– Quinto, et praecipue alios quod de hoc tanto misterio credere; et quomodo venerari debeant, instruere et ne circa illud aliquid irreverenter et inordinate agatur pro viribus impedire (Codex Sarzana, pp. 24-25, cap X, 3).

<sup>2</sup> COSTE XI, 93.

*that there was reason to groan before God and to be sad in seeing that this devotion was declining among Christians, due in part to the new opinions (i.e., Jansenism).... Nevertheless the Eucharist was the daily bread which Our Lord wanted us to ask for: the first Christians were used to receiving Communion every day, but the innovators made a great number of people stay away.<sup>3</sup>*

As a synthesis, the Eucharist is presented by St. Vincent as a strategy of the infinite love of Jesus to “prevent his absence from making us cool or making us forget” his face; and, moreover, to bring to completion the work of the Incarnation, “serving us as food and drink, claiming, by this means, that the same union and likeness which is made between nature and substance also is made spiritually in every person.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, with passionate language, St. Vincent recommends that the missionary enter into an intimate relation with Jesus Christ, who gives himself in the Eucharist.

With these brief reflections on St. Vincent’s thought, we will try now to deepen the significance of the Eucharist for the Vincentian missionary.

### **The Eucharist introduces a relationship of intimacy with Christ to make the missionary message effective**

“Without me, you can do nothing,” Jesus said to the Apostles; and in that way he posed in all seriousness the problem of each person. But he did not limit himself to exposing the inadequacy, he repaired it by accepting it and accompanying it. “Stay with me,” he repeated, almost at the top of his voice, to the apostles at the Last Supper, not because he needed them, but because they had an absolute need of him. And they did not realize it. Staying with him means life, eternal and true life. And to realize this relationship, *he gave himself in the way of love*, which in the giving does not decrease nor deteriorate. Christ wanted to give himself, totally, repeatedly, in order to meet us daily, so that each person might mature together with Him, in a relationship ever more solid and ever more vital.

The Eucharist therefore leads us to consider the missionary in his relationship with Christ, and thus it brings us to the centre of our vocation. “Vocation” means *relationship with Christ*, or better a *relationship with him*, in such a way that our identity assumes *its form* thanks to this lasting relationship with him in faith. From this

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<sup>3</sup> Excerpt reported by Abelly and not by Coste; cf. DODIN, *Entretiens Spirituels de Saint-Vincent de Paul*, 1960, n. 26, p. 96; taken from ABELLY, Book III, chapter 1, pp. 77-78.

<sup>4</sup> COSTE XI, 146.

point of view the Eucharist is the prolongation of the Incarnation of the Son of God, who continues to be present in history and, thus, becomes accessible at any time. When we enter into a Eucharistic relationship with Christ it is possible at any time to become *co-bodies with Christ* — according to the phrase of Pascasio Radberto — and thus to be contemporaries with him. Avoiding the sentimental aspect which can lie in these words, we can say that in a certain way in the Eucharist it is still possible to hear, to speak with, to listen to Jesus. For St. Vincent, the living relationship with Christ is source of life signified by existence:

*The children of Israel wanted Moses to speak to them and not you [my God]; they feared that the splendor of your majesty would annihilate them; we, on the contrary, we beg you to speak to us, in order that we might live, and that we might live of the life of Jesus Christ.*<sup>5</sup>

If Christ speaks with us, then we live. We always live of the word which illuminates our consciousness and our activity. The word of the Gospel is not only an indicative and exemplary word. It is rather a *revealing word*, in the sense that it discloses the contents of its being. When we hear Jesus tell us: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood, remains in me and I in him. Just as... I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me” (John 6:56-57), he expresses the ultimate meaning of the condition of the disciple, and thus of the missionary, of being totally referred to him. The reference to Christ is not only by way of imitation. In imitation we remain external to the one whom we imitate. The “to follow,” instead, implies entering into a relationship of familiarity or, to use an expression typically Johannine, to stay and  *dwell with him*. And that is exactly where the Eucharist leads us. Indeed, this sacrament, by putting us into contact with Christ sacrificed out of love, makes our humanity assimilated to the manner of Jesus’ being, or rather to a life offered in love for our brothers and sisters. Missionary life can only be a reflection of Christ’s life, otherwise it is not missionary. Mission is the proclamation of another in us, and not speaking of oneself. Without the living relationship with Christ, our life may be a good, just and meritorious life, but being missionary brings as a particular characteristic a prolongation of Christ’s love toward this world’s poor. The poor in fact, in encountering our humanity, are put in the condition of meeting Christ. This may appear presumptuous. But Jesus has chosen this logic of the incarnation, and not another way, for example, mystic or spiritualistic, to have us meet him. “Who hears

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<sup>5</sup> COSTE XII, 201-202.

you,” he said to his disciples, “hears me!” Our humanity is the place where he makes himself present to people. But how can our fragility sustain such a great obligation? From this we understand how essential sacramental life is on the path of grace. In frequenting the Eucharist, the missionary forms his conscience as believer, modeling it and assimilating it to Jesus and, in this way, Jesus’ presence becomes the *beginning* of the activity which he carries out. That is a criterion reaffirmed many times by St. Vincent: to assume the life of Christ in our life in order to be like him in the world. To confirm this, let us read this excerpt of a letter addressed to Claude Dufour, whom St. Vincent had assigned to Madagascar:

*I never had any doubt about your entire submission to God and his orders, nor about the trust with which you honor me and of which I would be unworthy if I did not refer it, as I do, to God, who has given it to you. It is for his greater glory and your own sanctification that I dedicate to him your life and zeal as often as I do my own. I lovingly invoke his Holy Spirit upon you so that, animated by it, you will be able to pour his light and fruits into souls deprived of the assistance priests owe to them. Without this the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ would be ineffectual for them. Therefore, Monsieur, nurture carefully the charity he gives you for them. Be inflamed with zeal for their salvation, and keep alive your determination to go in search of the lost sheep in the Indies. This is a great grace of God, and I thank him for it.<sup>6</sup>*

### **From the sacrifice of the Cross to charity**

The itinerary of Jesus’ life finds its synthesis in his Passion and Cross. The Eucharist is the sacrament which is perennially put at the disposal of our history, in order that we may identify ourselves with that itinerary. God does not teach us to love our brothers and sisters by telling them it, but *by carrying it out* in our own person.

Jesus crucified, of whom the Eucharist is the memory, shows the loving tenderness of the Father for his creature. Indeed, that the Son of God, who became man, should go the way of the cross is not at all taken for granted. On the contrary, to our reasoning it seems rather strange. Everything would lead to thinking that, faced with man’s sin, God would have shown his own divine truth in the form of a punitive power. We keep an ancestral remainder of this in our consciousness when, faced with another’s mistake, we play the judge, saying: “Did you make a mistake? Then you pay now!” The truth of God should manifest itself in the power of justice which keeps order in this

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<sup>6</sup> COSTE IV, 112, Letter 1289; English IV, 118.

world. If God manifests himself in an irresistible and indisputable power, he would totally confirm his truth. In our eyes, fascinated as we are by the flattery of the old snake, God appears always as a power that is able to affirm itself. And it is to this that the Pharisees and Jews at the foot of the cross instigated the humanity of Jesus: "If you are God, come down from the cross and we will believe you!" Jesus did not yield to the blackmail. He remained faithful to his nature of Son, renouncing his own power in order to remain fully devoted to the Father, with whom He constituted a loving reciprocity without limits. It is the fidelity to this communion that saves man: the love of the Son for the Father. This is the theological principle of the redemption which turns all our mental categories upside down.

While man might be led to bow before the power of God, even by sacrificing the other, his brother, if this were necessary, as if God needed a sacrifice from someone to be satisfied, in reality, Revelation brings us to consider things in another way: "If anyone says: 'I love God,' but hates his brother, 'he is a liar'" (1 John 4:20a). The love of God and the love of the neighbor constitute only one thing. If the people urge Jesus to show his power against the other, Jesus avoids it: "Whom do you seek?" — Jesus asks in the Garden of Gethsemane the night of his Passion — "If you are looking for me, let these men go" (cf., John 18:7-8). He did not burden others with his suffering, but he assumes it himself in the first person taking it away from man. In such a way the cross is the sign par excellence of love which sacrifices itself for others and in this it *expresses the truth of God as love*.

The Eucharist, when it is celebrated and lived, initiates a pedagogical way of constant approach toward this love of charity, expressed by the crucified humanity of the Lord Jesus. The Eucharist, being Christ, "bread given for" and "blood poured in favor of," forms the believing conscience by transforming it from its innate egoism to a condition of life in charity. This is a supernatural operation, because nothing would be capable of making us enter into the subtleness of charity if grace did not help us. Because charity is demanding. Because continuous charity is difficult to realize. Because the fear of losing oneself in the gift of oneself is stronger than the desire of giving oneself to one's brother or sister. Nevertheless that is the imperative for the Christian.

*Charity puts in us that which is in the other.... In the measure in which things exist, they act; and acting they make us suffer. Accepting this passion, receiving it actively, means to make exist in us that which is in the other — said M. Blondel in L'Action<sup>7</sup> —.... Only charity has this extraordinary privilege*

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<sup>7</sup> M. BLONDEL, *L'Action*, part IV, chapter III, § II.



*through which, without depriving anyone of that which belongs to him/her and participating with the simple intention of the wellbeing of others, it makes its own all that they have on the level of life and of action. It is necessary to arrive at that love which embraces the characteristics so often irritating in an individual.*

Charity demands a real change in oneself, in the sense of a mutation of one's own personal character, of one's sensitivity, of one's way of listening and speaking; even of one's way of using intellect and liberty. For that it is necessary to follow the same path of Jesus' abasement, of whom the Eucharist is the *representation*, to be able to have one's own person shaped by charity.

Too many times and in an ingenuous manner we reduce charity to works of charity, forgetting that it is first of all a theological virtue. This oversight does not favour the service of the poor, but damages it, because it takes the soul away. The pragmatism of charity may be satisfying and could even receive the world's praise; but the life of charity is hidden and humble. Without doubt, perhaps, if not the most recurring thought in St. Vincent, it is at least among the most recurrent ones. This charity, acquired in the school of the Eucharist, will be the universal language which every poor person understands.

## **Eucharist and mission**

The Eucharist, by its nature, expresses the insuperable level of God's sharing with our humanity. In this Christ's sacrifice, whose strength is in fidelity to the Father's love, is "transubstantiated" — to use a theological term. The Eucharistic mystery makes perpetually present in the fragmentary nature of our history the supreme nearness of Trinitarian love, which made itself a sharer in the humanity of Jesus: "He loved his own in the world and he loved to the end" (John 13:1). The Greek term used to indicate "to the end" is the word *tèlos*, which indicates the terminal point of a dynamism. Now this peak of life is expressed by Jesus at the moment before he gave up his spirit, when he said: "It is finished!" (John 19:30). Here too a word is used in which the noun *tèlos*, end, is implied. Jesus does not hold anything back, he gives everything, "to the end." He gives himself totally to us. He does not keep some space in reserve. One must consider attentively this dynamism of Jesus Christ to keep nothing for himself. He loves "to the end," so that in his giving of himself he also makes each of us, or rather, every person, the one destined for his love. One must enter into it, sense in it the repercussion in the soul, in order to be able, in turn, to allow our humanity to reflect the disconcerting love of Jesus for every person, because missionary activity, that is, the act of being among poor

people to announce the Gospel, lives from the reflection of Jesus' love for humanity. By continuously breathing this supreme love, we too, poorly, joyously, a bit at a time, become persuaded to stand in front of others with the same availability. Mission is done in that way.

This happens, according to the thinking of St. Vincent, through an osmotic process, thanks to which the missionary puts what he has accumulated in relationship with Christ in contact with others. This is the dynamics of the mission expressed in so many thoughts of St. Vincent:

*We must be full reservoirs in order to let our water spill out without becoming empty, and we must possess the spirit with which we want them to be animated, for no one can give what he does not have. So, let us ask this earnestly of Our Lord and give ourselves to him to study how to conform our leadership and actions to his. Then your seminary will diffuse sweetness within the diocese and outside of it, causing it to increase in number and blessings. On the contrary, trying to act as masters with those under our care, or to neglect or disedify them, would be a great hindrance to that good. This would happen if we were too anxious to be sophisticated, well-treated, esteemed, and honored, to amuse and spare ourselves and have too much contact with people outside. We must be firm but not rough in our guidance and avoid an insipid kind of meekness, which is ineffective. We will learn from Our Lord how our meekness should always be accompanied by humility and grace so as to attract hearts to him and not cause anyone to turn away from him.<sup>8</sup>*

And once again: how is it possible to “be reservoirs of (supernatural) water,” if we are not being touched in our humanity by the daily presence of Christ in our believing conscience? The Gospel is proclaimed through life and words which express our life as it is converted by the words which we pronounce as missionaries.

The assimilation with Christ, truth and life, of the Eucharist itself leads every missionary to have a vision of the mission rather diverse from the simple “doing” or “preaching,” even if it is about the religious and evangelical contents. The witnessing force of a word or an action depends on the intimate coherence of the missionary's life with the word he proclaims: but this — said to avoid misunderstanding — is not guaranteed by an irreproachable morality, nor by an unassailable discourse. The pious Pharisee also appealed to those elements, but with little success (cf., Luke 18:8-14). The missionary coherence is not blessed by an irreproachable morality (although

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<sup>8</sup> COSTE IV, 597, Letter 1623; English IV, 570-571.

“the force of coherence” must not be underestimated), nor by a perfect theory, or rather by an intellectual concept expressed in a complete and precise manner (even if the “saying” has its importance). Morality and theory at the most can arouse admiration, but they do not easily constitute a motive for supporting the person; i.e., a reason which attracts to conversion. In our time, the existential motive for adhering to Christianity is given by *a certain type of presence filled with proclamation*, which gives itself in the pleasantness of a person who has let him/herself be formed slowly by a constant and objective reference to Christ.

Therefore, in the experience learned by a lived and loving proximity with the Eucharist, one becomes ever more transparent of Jesus’ very presence. We could say that the centre of the mission is this transparency or reflection. The mission, above all in our times where ideals have fallen, is carried out that way.

### **Eucharist and community**

One last element remains to be highlighted. The missionary’s life is solidly anchored to life in community: first space of charity and fraternity. Here too we find back the essentiality of the Eucharist. Indeed, “the Eucharist builds the Church,” as John Paul II reminded us in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (n. 26). It builds it by attracting to itself persons in the communion and by rescuing them from the temptation of each for him/herself. When we are faithful in living the Eucharist, we are brought into the heart of fraternity. We cannot consciously live the Eucharist and maintain divisions in “the mystical body of Christ.” Or better, one can do it, but maintaining a bad conscience. If we observe the way with which the redemptive force of Christ’s Passover is revealed, of which the Eucharist is the sacrament, we see that it consists in the passage from a disintegration of community toward the resumption of unity among persons. It is symptomatic how the process which accompanies Jesus’ passion, in the soul and in the experience of the disciples, is a disintegrating process. Judas betrays. Peter, James, and John fall asleep. Peter is incapable of acknowledging him in front of a maidservant. All leave. Flee. Christ’s passion is also the break-up of the community. But see that, on Easter morning, the Risen Lord’s task is to return to correct the disciples in order to bring them back to faith in him, even to making of them, in the gift of his Spirit of love, a *united body*, capable of confronting history; capable of giving their life for him. The Easter miracle is that the disciples find unity again. And that is also the result of every Eucharist celebrated and lived in faith. This same miracle happens again. If we do not perceive it, it is only because our conscious is distracted, dissipated, elsewhere.

Allow me a personal memory from the time of my youth. Sometimes small things illuminate the profound truths much more than many words. I was a philosophy student and could not bear a companion because of his arrogant way of acting. A subtle resentment clouded my feelings toward him. I talked about this with my spiritual director, who encouraged me to start a way of conversion. I made superhuman efforts to control myself in a dignified attitude with him, but my irritated sensitivity did not show signs of calming down. After several months, the affair started to preoccupy my spiritual director, who suddenly changed course. He told me: tomorrow see if your companion receives communion. I could not believe it! My spiritual director's request made me self-confident, because I had just been entrusted an authority of supervising one who seemed so insupportable to me. The next morning I observed and immediately I could go to my spiritual director bearing the result of my observation. Well, yes, he too had received communion. To which my spiritual director made a simple remark. Is the Jesus whom you love, to whom you submit your existence, whom you received in the Eucharist, different from the one your companion received this morning? I was dumbfounded. I could only reply truthfully. And in the following days this truth kept coming back to me. I found myself in the position either to deny the impact of Christ in me or to change my attitude toward that companion. In short, everything worked out. And that not by effort but simply by a renewed act of faith toward that Lord from whom my companion and I received food every morning.

So, the Eucharist really builds the community, because it heals from that all that is a source of division in relationships. And we know how St. Vincent insisted on the unity of the company as a condition for the mission. St. Vincent does not allude only to a unity of a moral kind, which is the result of human effort to live in communion. He says that only a *communion generated by the sacrifice of Christ* has the capacity of resisting all forces of division which sin instigates continuously in us.

*Be united, and God will bless you, but this union must be the love of Jesus Christ within you. Any other source of harmony, not being cemented by the blood of Jesus Christ, will not endure. It is in Jesus Christ, by Jesus Christ, and for Jesus Christ that you must be united with one another. The spirit of Jesus Christ is a spirit of union and peace. How could you expect to attract other souls to Jesus Christ if you were not united among yourselves? This cannot happen. Have the same sentiments, therefore, the same will, or else you will be like those horses pulling a plow who pull in opposite directions. They spoil everything. God calls you to work in this vineyard.*

*Go therefore, having but a single heart and a single intention, and in this way you will bear much fruit.*<sup>9</sup>

The presence of Christ in the Eucharist, which as missionaries we celebrate together, cannot remain a formal and ritual act, without the felt participation in the sacrament which is being accomplished. Instead it can represent a vital jolt to our missionary communities. It can awaken in them forced fraternity which at times makes them boring. The condition is that we pay greater attention to his Presence. Because he is really among us. The Eucharist is precisely that staying with us and in us of his beloved person, very near, beyond all expectations. But we must stay near him, because too often our conscious is numbed and needs to be reawakened to a simpler and more sincere faith. The Lord wanted to let himself really be touched, so that our concrete humanity might be enveloped in his redeeming strength.

(VICTOR BIELER, C.M., translator)

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<sup>9</sup> A.DODIN, *Entretiens Spirituels de Saint-Vincent de Paul*, n. 24, p. 93; taken from ABELLY, L., Book II, Chapter I, Section VIII, p. 187 (English edition, p. 126).