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Eucharist, Charity and Social Justice

by Gilson Cezar de Camargo, C.M.

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Introduction

The great French scholar Henri Bremond expressed some indignation in his well-known work, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France*, 1926-1938 (vol. 3, p. 245). He wrote, "St. Vincent de Paul still remains hidden under his cloak." Referring to Pierre Coste, he continued, "Eight thick volumes, rich in doctrine, sparkling with humor, where I have never found any superficial line — this is something unique in a collection of this type. Nevertheless, the public at large does not know these volumes. This is a strange way to honor one's founder." Such indignation has echoed in the hearts of many of the sons and daughters of Vincent de Paul. Today, we have fine works, biographies and documented studies that allow us access to the *Great Saint of the Great Century*.

Nonetheless, the challenge remains to write something about Vincent de Paul that is not a complicated rehash, since we already have at hand a quantity of abundant facts coming from the facile and astute pen of the peasant from Pouy. The major abiding challenge is not to mutilate or simplify him, crediting Vincent de Paul with our own ideas and reasoning drawn from the reality of our own time and contemporary theological environment. If we went on like that, we would be adulterating all the richness and complexity of this man's worldview, a man who lived, thought and acted out of the complexity of 17th-century France.

To explain better, it is worthwhile referring to the truly interesting article "Monsieur Vincent: a heart for our time," from a French periodical, *Messages du Secours Catholique* (n. 366, December 1984). At the beginning of this article, developed like an interview, we read: "St. Vincent de Paul, Monsieur Vincent. His life is in everyone's memory. The poor today are his realization. To whomever wishes to encounter the person who gave a heart to the Great Century, Bossuet will say: 'Whenever we were gathered around him and were listening to him, no one could deny that the expression of the Apostle was fulfilled in him: Whoever speaks, let his words be like the words of God.'" In a note, the periodical adds: "This first-person interview was able to be held thanks to the warm scholarship of Fr. André Dodin, historian of St. Vincent de Paul."

I would like to go to the first question posed in the periodical, done in first person, directed to Vincent de Paul, and answered by him, through the scholarship of Fr. André Dodin. This is how the question was formulated:

Messages: “Many striking images circulate concerning your person. Were you the man whom we know today?”

Vincent de Paul (André Dodin): “Certainly much should be relativized. I am not all of that. But after three centuries and a half each institution and period will not and does not cease leaving in the world the St. Vincent de Paul whom they imagine or whom they need, and who I was not.”

I think that there is some danger here when we write or give conferences about Vincent de Paul. Do we really transmit his thought, or are we projecting what we imagine about him or what we would like him to have affirmed, but which in fact he did not affirm, realizing that he was situated in the 17th century, three and a half centuries removed from us?

1. The opportunity to deepen my knowledge about Vincent de Paul

As a young Vincentian priest, I left my country in pursuit of an academic degree. Since I had some French ancestry on my mother’s side, I opted for the Institut Catholique in Paris and chose the Master’s program in theology, with specialization in liturgy and the theology of the sacraments. For two years, (1982-1984), this program was under the direction of the admired and famous Dominican liturgist, Pierre-Marie Gy, one of the *periti* at the Second Vatican Council.

When the moment arrived to submit my research plan for the master’s degree, I presented to Fr. Gy, the director of the course, my intention of involving liturgical research based on the predominant theological environment of the moment in Brazil, the theology of liberation. Clearly, up to that moment, I did not realize that Fr. Gy had been a great friend of Fr. Annibale Bugnini, and had shared all his joys and anxieties, his sufferings and hopes on the preparatory commission, and then during the Council, resulting in the Apostolic Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

With all the calmness and ease proper to great minds, Fr. Gy argued that, after finishing my academic program and returning to Brazil, I would have all kinds of time available to develop and deepen the question of liturgy in relation to the theology of liberation. But at that time, he assured me, since I was a Vincentian, and to honor the great liturgist Bugnini, it would be better to do my research based on the thought of our founder, Vincent de Paul. He also suggested a

theme: "Vincent de Paul: his teaching and vision of the sacrament of the Eucharist." Besides, since he knew that I was living in the Vincentian Motherhouse in Paris, where Fr. André Dodin, another good friend of his, was living, Fr. Gy suggested that I seek out all Dodin's wisdom and knowledge.

I happily returned to the Motherhouse, realizing that the challenge would be quite large, both as regards the academic demands of the Institut Catholique and the vastness of my proposal. Yet I had one hope: the important collaboration of Fr. Dodin. At the first opportunity, I presented the suggestion to him that Fr. Gy had made, the theme to be developed, and I asked whether he would be disposed to help me in this undertaking.

Fr. Dodin responded affirmatively. He would be ready to help, but under certain conditions: that I would never take the initiative of calling him, but that he himself would call me through the house intercom during his free time and moments of inspiration; that I would never interrupt him with questions when we were talking, but that I would simply take notes. I always tried to comply with the risk involved in these two conditions. On many occasions, Fr. Dodin called me to come to join him. There were many pages crammed with an avalanche of Fr. Dodin's knowledge about the thought and teaching of our holy founder, Vincent de Paul. These allowed me to develop the work of research. Since I was in France, the demand of the Institut Catholique was that the work be written in French. Thus, "Saint Vincent de Paul, doctrine et vision du sacrement de l'Eucharistie" allowed me to receive my degree.

When *Vincentiana* honored me with the invitation to write about the Eucharist, charity and social justice in the light of the teaching of St. Vincent de Paul, I recalled my research, all done in French but never translated into my native language. I then decided to base myself on this to complete the task confided to me, ever aware of my limitations, which I would like to list here. First, I am not a writer. In fact, I am quite limited in this regard. I am a pastor in the outskirts of the city of Curitiba, where I live. I have always been very involved in classes on liturgy in various courses of theology for the formation of the clergy and in numerous formation sessions for laity, which give me great joy as a Vincentian priest. Second, I am a Latin American, Brazilian, and my way of focusing and developing this article, my surrounding culture deeply influence me. And so, I develop this article with a certain sense of envy for others who write about St. Vincent de Paul and who have an infinity of sources at hand. Those of us who live quite far from the Old World, and from France, where our beloved Father lived, are happy to stand with the poor, who were the subject of his attention, and from whom Vincent developed all his teaching and theology: "The poor are our teachers and lords."

2. Situating the issue in the perspective of Vincent de Paul

If we asked Vincent de Paul about his theological thought concerning “Eucharist, Charity and Social Justice,” I think that he would find it quite hard to answer, since the Eucharist in reference to charity and social justice is a concept linked to our time, to our theological reality.

Consequently, to be able to develop our line of thought concerning the theme, we will have to ask permission to use Portuguese to be able to create certain words to help us make our work understandable. The first one that I would like to create is “to temporalize,” *temporalizar*. This involves placing St. Vincent in his time, with his way of thinking and acting, engaged in the theological and ecclesiological issues proper to the Church in France in the 17th century. The other word that we have to create is “to contemporalize,” *contemporizar*. This involves transferring, interpreting, or applying the teaching and theological thought of Vincent de Paul to the time in which we live, that is, the 21st century. We begin with the horizon of our theological thought, enriched by the current teachings of the magisterium of the Church (Second Vatican Council, and, for us in Latin America, the documents of Medellín, Puebla and Santo Domingo), as well as by contemporary theological thought and our ecclesiological environment.

When we “temporalize” Vincent de Paul, we can glimpse the pragmatism of his theological and spiritual thought. He did not leave us any book where we could find his own systematized theological thinking. We should not forget that he was the child of peasants from the south of France. He was a very simple and familiar person. He knew nothing of extraordinary ecstasies and miracles. He affirmed: “Perfection does not consist in ecstasies, but in doing well the will of God.” All his thinking and way of acting grew out of his capacity of opening his eyes to the reality of his time. He did not compose great tomes. What we have at our disposition instead are his letters and conferences, always rooted in the concrete, in the reality of the problems and conflicts of his time, in order to maintain his sons (the Congregation of the Mission) and his daughters (the Daughters of Charity) in faithfulness to his teaching and faithfulness to the Church. “I have always been afraid of becoming involved in the errors of some new teachings. Yes, for my entire life I have been fearful of this” (SV XI, 37).

What Vincent de Paul believed and firmly defended we uncover in his very direct and down-to-earth way of dealing with the events of daily life. This life endowed him with strength and vigor and was expressed very spontaneously through circumstances. The events of his life made real the basis of his conversion and his undertakings. The experience of the dying man at Gannes, followed by the first

sermon of the Mission, 25 January 1617 at Folleville, moved Vincent to look at the reality of his time and to affirm that “the poor country people were abandoned and suffering the evil of ignorance and misery.” In Châtillon-les-Dombes, he looked at reality and acknowledged the overwhelming generosity of his parishioners toward the needy family, but “what about the days and months to come? Their charity is great, but it is badly organized.”

Folleville and Châtillon-les-Dombes, for us today as followers of Vincent de Paul, should not be of interest only as geographical locations, part of that marvelous country called France. Instead, they should be considered as charismatic locations, emblematic of the two great charismatic experiences of our founder: the spiritual and material misery of the country people. His two great works, mission and charity, responded to those needs, but as a single reality. Mission includes charity, and charity includes mission. At bottom, a single experience gave rise to Vincent de Paul’s works: his courage in opening his eyes to the reality of his time. Through this, he discovered people suffering, humiliated, exploited, imprisoned by the greed of the great and powerful, burdened by a society based on privilege, glory, luxury and the intellectual brilliance of the Great Century.

Vincent de Paul began with experience, with the events of life, with reality leading to action. Jesus, after all, began first to do and then to teach. He did not have “ideas” of Christ. Rather, he lived Christ, but this living always grew from the events of daily life. The two episodes of Folleville and Châtillon showed him the two faces of poverty — the lack of God and the lack of bread. These correspond to the two faces of his Christ, both missionary, *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me*, and servant of the poor, *Caritas Christi urget nos*.

In addition to these two events just noted, Vincent searched the Scriptures, especially in his reading of the apostle Paul, and studied St. Francis de Sales, in his *Treatise on the Love of God*, finding inspiration and assurance in their convictions. He was entranced by the discovery of the goodness of God, who lifts up and is never inactive. This discovery of God’s loving kindness was the source of the amazing dynamism present throughout his life and influencing his theological thinking.

Following this, he recommended that his sons and daughters be open to divine providence. We did not love God first; rather, God loved us first. St. Vincent’s wonderful maxim, “to leave God for God,” to do well the will of God, helps us understand that there was more than one way to reach God and grow in his love. “My daughters, you should realize that when you leave prayer or holy Mass for the service of the poor, you are not leaving anything, since the service of the poor is to go to God. You should behold God in their persons”

(SV IX, 5). Prayer is certainly important, no one can dispense with it, but nobody should be satisfied with prayer alone. "My dear daughters, you should always do what you can to make prayer the first thing you do. As a result, your spirit will be full of God for the rest of the day. It is true that you should prefer the service of sick in case of need; but if you organize yourselves, you will find time for both" (SV IX, 33-34).

Clearly, for him, this will of God is always a will for love. Holding to the will of God translates into acts and does not remain fixed just in wishes. "Our Lord is the only model, since he always referred to his Father and always did everything to please him." Vincent beheld the mystery of the Incarnation in following the will of his Father. In contemplating this mystery of the love of God, he became man. Vincent learned to love God and to love God's people in one and the same movement.

Jesus Christ is the savior. This affirmation was essential for Vincent. In fulfilling the command received from his Father, Jesus gave himself freely up to death on the cross. He, who brought with him the freedom and joy of the kingdom of God, chose to be the victim of the evil existing in the world. For love of us, Jesus completed, in reverse, the way of sin. His passion would be the supreme witness of the love of Christ for the Father and for humankind. As a result, for Vincent the goal of life is to honor our Lord in his earthly life. Joined to Christ, the source of our salvation, we have in him the model of our salvation. Vincent considered the imitation of our Lord as fundamental for all spiritual development. "Remember, Monsieur, we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and that our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ" (SV I, letter 197, p. 276).

In his time, the Church was arguing about a difficult crisis: the reform of western Christianity. The Council of Trent had been attempting to remedy excesses and errors, and thus Vincent was a post-conciliar man, one of those who did the most to make the council real for the Church in France, by moving from a worldly Church to a Church of the poor, and by reestablishing the true meaning of a Christian life accessible to the humblest. In this sense, we situate his statement: "... alas! the Church has enough solitaries... too many useless ones and even more who tear it apart. Her great need is evangelical men who work to purge, enlighten, and unite her to her Divine Spouse" (SV III, letter 960, p. 204).

Vincent struggled incessantly to promote the renewal of a truly apostolic priesthood and episcopacy. "Clearly, all evil comes from bad priests. The sad state of the clergy is the main reason for the ruin

of the Church. The Church has no more dangerous enemies than its priests. Even though they are not heretics, they are still responsible for this sad state, for which they should shed tears of blood. Out of their neglect and unruly lives there flow three rivers: heresy, vice and ignorance; these will unmake the Church.” But, on the other hand, Vincent affirmed: “Oh, gentlemen, how great a good priest is. How much good can a good priest not accomplish! How many conversions could he not bring about! The happiness of Christianity depends on the clergy since, when good parishioners behold a good priest, a charitable pastor, they respect and follow his voice, and they try to imitate him” (SV XI, 7).

In this spirit of renewal, he developed a new form of religious life, receiving simple country girls who were ready to undertake multiple tasks for the abandoned, at that time as numerous in the cities as they were in the country. He proposed to his daughters: “They will have no other monastery than the house of the sick where the superioress is; as a cell, a rented room; as a chapel, the parish church; as a cloister, the streets of the city; for their enclosure, obedience; for a grille, the fear of God; for a veil, holy modesty; for profession, a continuous confidence in providence, an offering of all that they are” (cf. SV X, 661).

His horizon of understanding was of a Church that continues the mystery of Christ, which should reveal and prolong the faithful and merciful love of Jesus Christ. She should be poor and of the poor. Certainly, this Church should not despise anyone, but its predilection should go toward the poor. For Vincent, Jesus is present in the poor, for him a certainty. The mystery of the neighbor in Christ comes about through his gesture of devotion and aid granted to the poor. Charity is a sharing, a participation in the very love of God. “Oh! Sister, how consoled you will be at the hour of death for having consumed your life for the same reason for which Jesus Christ gave His — for charity, for God, for the poor!” (SV VII, letter 2734, p. 397).

For Vincent, Christian charity was effective. It did the will of the Lord, and this supposes a faith that culminates in obedience to this will. For this, he said: “It is said of religious that they are in a state of perfection. We are not religious, but we can say of ourselves that we are in a state of charity, since we constantly strive to practice love or to be disposed to do so” (SV XII, 275). The proof of love is its manifestation in action. God loved us when he gave us his Son. We cannot love him unless we respond to the gift of his love through the acceptance of his will, in the obedience of a living love. Showing love for God and love for the neighbor is, at the same time, a communion in the love of God, since its source is the very gift of God.

Salvation comes to us through faith in the Word and through participation in the sacraments. Vincent highlighted the sacramental life of the Daughters of Charity, especially the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. According to him, our faith is established through contact with the glorified Christ, and the sacraments bring about a real encounter, under the veil of a sign. To meet Jesus, we have to make an act of living faith in him, prolonged into an act of adoration, love and oblation.

But, if we want to understand well the thinking of Monsieur Vincent about the sacraments, especially about the Eucharist, we cannot forget that in his intellectual horizon, the poor appeared primarily as a form of the “sacrament” of the encounter with God. For Vincent, the Lord appears to us also under the sign of the poor, under the sign of the ignorant neighbor. For this reason, he said: “I should never consider a poor peasant or a poor woman according to their exterior, nor the way their intellect presents itself. The reason is that they almost do not appear to have the spirit of rational beings, since they are so base and earthy. But turn the medal around, and you will see through the light of faith only the Son of God, who wished to become poor for us, represented in these poor folk” (SV XI, 32).

In this broad horizon of theological understanding, we can locate his appreciation of the Eucharist. Vincent considered the Eucharist as a sacrament in the light of the Word made flesh, who came to give life to mankind. This Word made flesh remains among us in the Eucharist as the food that nourishes charity. In this way, he recommended it to the laity, to the Daughters of Charity, and to youth, “to help them live like Christians.” Once we see him in a broad understanding of the mystery of faith, well rooted in real events, we will appreciate that he did not let himself fall victim to the evil influence of Jansenism.

3. Vincent de Paul and the struggle about “frequent communion”

The central year in the whole polemic that involved our founder Vincent de Paul was 1642. In that year, a small group seemed little disposed to join those favoring frequent communion (motivated especially by the Jesuits). This group, formed of Cistercian nuns and some nobles, had retired to the solitary monastery of Port-Royal-des-Champs, the better to give themselves to God. They were in a special way the disciples of Jean du Vergier de Hauranne, Abbé of Saint Cyran.

Next, Antoine Arnauld appeared on the scene in September 1642, a few days after his priestly ordination, when he left for the solitary monastery. He had planned to make his ordination retreat at Bons-Enfants, but he was not completely satisfied and finally took

refuge at Port-Royal-des-Champs to share the existence of the solitaries. It was in this atmosphere that he would draw up his famous Jansenist thesis and the famous treatise *On Frequent Communion*.

This treatise by Arnauld grew out of his opposition to a small booklet by Fr. Pierre de Sesmaisons, a Jesuit. Together with Frs. Bauri and Ravardeau he demonstrated through the tradition of the Church the legitimacy of weekly communion that demanded only regular devotion and the absence of mortal sin. We read in this little work: "As often as one is deprived of grace, the more should one courageously approach Jesus Christ in the Eucharist." Such an affirmation agreed in no way with the theology of Saint-Cyran. As a result, Arnauld drew up in a few months his treatise on frequent communion to defend what he considered the truth. His thesis can be formulated as follows: Holy Communion is more a reward for virtue than nourishment for virtue. Only a sinless life, sanctified by virtue and penitential exercises can prepare for communion. His thesis had been approved by 20 doctors of the Sorbonne and by 16 bishops (DODIN, *Autour du problème de la Fréquente Communion*, p. 378).

We are now in 1644, at Saint Lazare-lès-Paris. Clearly, Fr. Vincent must have been well informed about all these events concerning the Eucharist, since he had just joined the Council of Conscience. He was consequently in contact with the powerful at court, with the Jesuits, and with a large number of bishops. He was well informed about Port-Royal, since he was a friend of Saint-Cyran. Besides, and beyond their friendship, Vincent always had a fear of falling into heresy, a life-long worry for him.

Thus we know that, from 1645 on, Vincent would have a hostile attitude toward Port-Royal. This is clear in a letter to Bishop Abra de Raconis, in which he counseled him not to name Fr. Joby (a declared disciple of the new doctrine) as his vicar general (cf. SV III, letter 1205, p. 618). In this same year, one of the theologians of Notre-Dame, Isaac Habert, who violently opposed Arnauld's teaching and Jansenism, was named bishop of Vabres. This indication comes from the Council of Conscience, where Vincent was all powerful.

Up till then, this entire quarrel had not gained the heart of Vincent de Paul. These were concerns external to the Little Company or, we might say, concerns *ad extra*. In 1648 this quarrel would reach the *ad intra* of the Little Company. Vincent received a letter from Fr. Jean Dehorgny, who sought to defend the Jansenists. As an old adage says: Some evil looks good. One of our confreres, a man who rightly enjoyed Vincent's total confidence, allowed himself to be influenced by the new doctrine. In this way we can today gain access to the ideas and positions of Vincent de Paul in relation to

Jansenism, as well as to his doctrinal vision of the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Dehorgny, one of the pioneers, was one of the most brilliant members of the Company. At the beginning, he was superior at the Bons-Enfants, a post demanding Vincent's confidence. Next, he was sent to Rome to be superior there. While in Rome he fell under the influence of the new teaching. In response to Dehorgny, who was too complacent with the new doctrine, Vincent presented decisive arguments.

He admitted that there were abuses in the overly prodigal administration of the Eucharist but, in his opinion, this did not justify falling into the contrary abuse. He showed that the title of Arnauld's book was just a trap, since its intended goal and the results it obtained were deplorable. The frequency of reception of the sacraments was less than before, even at Easter. Several pastors in Paris were lamenting the fact that there were fewer communicants than in previous years; that they no longer saw anyone approach the communion rail on the first Sundays of the month or on feasts, or very few, or hardly any religious, even when encouraged by Jesuits. Working with great ease and rapidity, Vincent marshaled texts from the Council of Trent. He concluded his letter to Dehorgny with an exhortation to peace and moderation: he should respect the practice at St. Lazare and in no way trouble himself about the new opinions.

On 17 August of the same year, however, Vincent received a letter from Dehorgny, who reproved him for not having understood Arnauld's book.

Immediately, Vincent set out to answer Dehorgny. This time, he used a more precise and solid argumentation, along with irrefutable texts and data. Vincent did not deny his concern about the liberality of frequent communion, celebrated without criteria, and consequently agreed that Arnauld's book could do much good. However, Vincent could not be mistaken since, although some people might profit from the book, it still confused some tens of thousands of others and held them back from communion. In no way either did Vincent accept Arnauld's interpretation of St. Charles Borromeo to justify the new doctrine.

It is untrue that St. Charles ordered public penance or abstention from communion. His orientation was to prohibit communion for scandalous sinners, something that St. Vincent agreed with entirely, following the Council of Trent. But St. Charles, far from being opposed to frequent communion, never ceased to promote it. Vincent knew his thought thoroughly, as he did that of the Jansenists. He regretted that the directress of Port-Royal was following the rules of St. Ignatius. He permitted great sinners to receive communion only every eight or ten days. This led Arnauld to have a good

religious abstain from communion for five or six months so as to live a great purity.

That Arnauld was completely opposed to communion is evident from his praise of those who abstained even until death. He believed that frequent communions were an insult and shame to Our Lord Jesus Christ, and he imposed such terrifying conditions on approaching the Eucharist that it was morally impossible to receive communion. Vincent affirmed: "As for myself, I admit frankly that, if I paid as much attention to M. Arnauld's book as you do, not only would I renounce Mass and Holy Communion forever in a spirit of humility, but I would even have a horror of the Sacrament. For it is true that for those who receive Communion with the ordinary dispositions approved by the Church, he represents it as a snare of Satan and a venom that poisons souls. He also treats all those who approach it in this state as nothing less than dogs, pigs, and Antichrists" (SV III, letter 1064, p. 364).

We may affirm that, thanks to the Jansenist tendencies clearly expressed by Dehorgny, we have these wonderful letters that present the sentiment, the intimate thought of St. Vincent about the issue of his time. They allow us to grasp the broader background to his understanding of the Eucharist. Thanks to these letters we appreciate his thinking better. We can sense his independence in relation to his milieu and to the struggles raging around him. His constant steadiness and lucidity of thought let us affirm that Vincent clearly possessed an excellent doctrinal vision of the Eucharist.

4. Vincent de Paul's doctrine of the Eucharist

Evidently, we cannot project our current thought about the Eucharist on Vincent, bringing him to affirm things that really did not figure in his thinking. Vincent was influenced by the theological thought of his time, especially by Bérulle and the reformers. They brought him to adopt a less-than-noble concept of human nature. Nonetheless, to counterbalance his pessimism about human nature, the positive factor was his relationship to divine providence, a stance filled with awe and joyful abandonment, joined to serene confidence. His vision of God came to him from St. Paul, and it is a thought full of greatness, which he sought to hand on to his sons and daughters.

In this way he affirmed that "this knowledge which we have, that God is infinitely above all knowledge and all human understanding, ought to suffice to make us esteem him infinitely, to annihilate ourselves in his presence, and make us speak of his supreme majesty with great reverence and submission" (SV XI, 48; ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul*, English trans., bk. 3, chap. 8, p. 72). We should not forget that, at the beginning of his

mission, Vincent had only one sermon that he turned in a thousand ways, on the fear of God (cf. SV XII, 8).

Clearly Vincent had this pessimistic sense of a benighted human nature. This concept would influence his teaching on the Eucharist but obviously it would not bring him to the radical position of the Jansenists. A rapid survey of the dispositions that he lists as requirements for communion will readily convince us of this. Despite the strict rules imposed on the Daughters of Charity, he forced himself to moderate their desire for communion. "Frequent communions badly made are useless. We can be saints without approaching communion" (SV X, 631).

For this reason, a person should not work much at or bother the director about obtaining his permission for more frequent communion. According to Vincent, this insistence would surely come from a hidden pride that would ruin our actions. If one hesitates about communicating, Vincent says, it is better to abstain. His worry was the frequency of unworthy and sacrilegious communions. This is constantly evident in his conferences. He conceived of this under the figure of Judas. He became a hypocrite by following his Master but, instead of conforming to the words of Our Lord, as the other apostles were doing, he was carrying out actions inspired by Satan. According to Dodin, this worry was almost an obsession in Vincent de Paul.

For frequent communion, the state of grace is rigorously demanded, but Vincent also demanded a good confession. Recall that his sermon on the importance of general confession marked the beginning, 25 January 1617, of the Congregation of the Mission. He looked on this preliminary purification as an excellent means of communicating well. "My daughters, you should see that for frequent communion it not sufficient to have no affection for mortal sin, but you must free yourself from all unruly and vicious affection. So, to have great affection for one sister and to cling to her is an unruly affection; to delight in being in this place and not in some other is an unruly affection, and you must leave all this aside to become worthy of communicating frequently" (SV X, 340-341). In summary, being a clear glass allows us to reflect God and to conform ourselves to Jesus and to identify with him.

Above all else, conformity to the Eucharistic Christ is, for Vincent, what he accomplished in instituting the mysterious sacrament, since he desired intensely to be united to creatures. To correspond to this desire of Jesus, the best reply is to be nourished in our souls with the same desire for union, approaching the intentions of Christ himself. To conform ourselves to Christ, in our thoughts and prayers, we place ourselves in the best possible dispositions to understand him and to unite ourselves to him. In this we take the first step, so to speak, in his direction.

These preliminary dispositions for union with God will demand a constant asceticism of mortification, self-denial and flight from unruly affections. Eucharist will not be for the Daughters of Charity a sacrament of union with God unless they are ready to give themselves completely to Christ at the moment of communion. And so, when Christ penetrates their soul, he consecrates, so to say, this state. He unites himself intimately to the creature and imparts his peace.

“After communion, we should be one with God. We share in the spirit of God so that he will take over all our being in such a way that, if we communicate well, all will be well. Whoever communicates well does everything well. Without our realizing it, life is transfigured, since Christ does not remain inactive. He moves us to change, he helps us to do nothing apart from him, in such a way that the actions we do reach perfection.”

He continued: “If Elijah, with his double spirit, was performing so many marvels, what then will a person not accomplish who has God within, who is full of God! She will not be doing her own actions but those of Jesus Christ. She will serve the sick with the charity of Jesus Christ. She will have the meekness of Jesus Christ in her speech. In her afflictions she will have the patience of Jesus Christ. She will have the obedience of Jesus Christ. My daughters, may all these actions not be the actions of a mere creature, but the actions of Jesus Christ.”

He concludes: “The Daughters of Charity were chosen to give spiritual manna, the spirit of God, to the poor. Where do they receive him in order later to communicate him? In Holy Communion, my daughters. Pay attention, please, and consider the greatness of God’s plan in your regard. He wants you, poor young women without ability or studies, to cooperate with him in communicating his spirit. Oh! my daughters, please never neglect this grace. But come close to this fire to be enkindled with it and then, through your charity and good example, to attract the others. You should realize, my daughters, that the principal strength of the Daughters of Charity is to communicate well” (SV IX, 332-333).

5. Conclusion

Eucharist, charity and social justice in the light of the thought of St. Vincent de Paul is a possible theme, if these terms are set in the complexity of his thought and feeling in relation to the human person, to Jesus Christ, and to the Church. Vincent de Paul exhibits the profound unity of the love of neighbor and the love of God. He invites us through words and actions not to regard persons and events just as they seem or just as the light of reason presents them to us. Rather, we should see things as they are in God; otherwise we

would deceive ourselves and act in a way that he would not want. We first have to listen to God, to give ourselves to God, for him to use us in the adventure of the salvation of the world.

Vincent de Paul paid attention to concrete realities, to the order of things as God wishes. In the ordinary way, God wants to save us through persons like ourselves. Our Lord became a man to save all men. And we act through others and with them to gain them to God, to bring about his kingdom to unite ourselves to God through Jesus Christ. The condition is that we be empty of ourselves for God to fill us. "Three can do more than ten when Our Lord puts his hand to things" (SV IV, letter 1293, p. 122). And so, "Affective love must pass over into effective love, to do the works of charity, the service of the poor undertaken with joy, courage, constancy and love" (SV IX, 592).

His Christological thought is associated with the Christ of the Trinity, but a Christ as gift from his Father and an eternal offering to mankind, a Christ in the state of mission, meek and humble, a Christ who became an oblation for humanity in the mystery of the Incarnation. The Christ of Vincent is a model to which we should conform ourselves, to love and serve, and a Christ, finally, concretized in the poor.

This is what he affirms in a conference of 13 December 1658. "We must clothe ourselves with the Spirit of Jesus Christ. O Savior! O Gentlemen! what an undertaking! to put on the Spirit of Jesus Christ! This means that if we are to be perfect and help the people fruitfully, if we are to serve ecclesiastics well, we must labor to imitate the perfection of Jesus Christ and strive to attain it. It also means that of ourselves we can do nothing. We must be filled and animated with this Spirit of Jesus Christ. To understand this clearly, it is essential to know that his Spirit is poured forth into all Christians who live according to the rules of the Christian religion; their actions and their works are bedewed with the Spirit of God and God has raised up the Company, as you will see, to act in the same manner" (SV XII, 107-108; English, pp. 626-627).

His thinking about the Church is clear: the poor are the true and beloved children of the Church. As a Latin American, I can state that, in the conception of Vincent de Paul, he anticipated the teaching of the document of Puebla on the preferential option for the poor. We have to go to meet those who are the beloved of the King of the poor. The purpose of the mission of the Son of God is *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me* (Lk 4:18). Jesus Christ saw himself as poor and the savior of the poor.

In St. Vincent's thinking, the vocation of a missionary is more beautiful. In his vision, the missionary is happy when he is seen as the minister of the poor. This obliges him not only to help the poor when they present themselves, but also to reach out to them as a servant

who should anticipate the wishes of his master. "There is no act of charity that is not accompanied by justice..." (SV II, letter 452, p. 68).

We can "contemporarize" this thought of Vincent's and apply it perfectly to the teaching of the Church's present magisterium on the Eucharist. The Pastoral Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, at the beginning of chapter two on "The Most Sacred Mystery of the Eucharist," number 47 states: "At the Last Supper, on the night when He was betrayed, our Savior instituted the eucharistic sacrifice of His Body and Blood. He did this in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries until He should come again, and so to entrust to His beloved spouse, the Church, a memorial of His death and resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is eaten, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us."

The expression, "a bond of charity" used by Vatican II, presents us with the Eucharist as the sacrament which supports the essence of Christian life, namely, love. This love is total self-giving, the very essence of God, since *Deus caritas est*. This love or charity is what the apostle Paul lists as the highest of the gifts (1 Cor 13). This Christian love bears two indivisible realities: *a*) it is the source and origin of fraternal communion among those who partake of the same bread, creating *koinonia*, the sharing of goods, the solidarity of "one heart and one soul"; *b*) this *koinonia* love awakes in a Christian the commitment to Christian living, especially through service, but a preferential service of the poor, care for victims of injustice and of unjust and perverted political systems. This struggle is what we call social justice.

Let us look at the words of His Holiness John Paul II in his last encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*: "Many problems darken the horizon of our time. We need but think of the urgent need to work for peace, to base relationships between peoples on solid premises of justice and solidarity, and to defend human life from conception to its natural end. And what should we say of the thousand inconsistencies of a 'globalized' world where the weakest, the most powerless and the poorest appear to have so little hope! It is in this world that Christian hope must shine forth! For this reason too, the Lord wished to remain with us in the Eucharist, making his presence in meal and sacrifice the promise of a humanity renewed by his love" (Chapter I, paragraph 20).

The magisterium and contemporary theology present charity and social justice as flowing from the sacrament of the Eucharist. In the light of this, and while safeguarding the distance that the centuries place between ourselves and Vincent de Paul, we cannot have doubts about affirming that, in the environment of doctrinal understanding,

the Eucharist was, in the heart of our Father and Founder, the ever-flowing source of true charity and social justice. “A Daughter of Charity who communicates well does everything else well. Her heart is the tabernacle of God, yes, the tabernacle of God. A Daughter of Charity should always be this. She should always be in God and God in her, and in this way she will do nothing else but good” (SV IX, 33).

Translator’s note:

Citations from St. Vincent de Paul are taken from the English translations of volumes one to eight of Pierre Coste. Those from volumes nine to twelve are the work of the translator. The volume and page numbers are from the French edition of Coste.

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