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1992

The way of Vincent de Paul: rule for servants of the poor

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PART II

Christ is the Rule of the Mission. It is he who speaks, and it is up to us to be attentive to his words.

SV XII, 130
There is no better way to assure our eternal happiness than to live and die in the service of the poor within the arms of providence and in a real renunciation of ourselves by following Jesus Christ.

SV III, 392
I offer this small work primarily to those who are preparing for life-long commitment in the Congregation of the Mission. But I hope that it will also be of service to many others—especially to the Daughters of Charity and to the hundreds of thousands of lay men and women who have already dedicated their lives in varying ways to following Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor.

I intend this work as a word of encouragement and of direction, accompanied by the sense of awe that you feel as you stand before the gift of God calling you to be a servant of the poor. I address it directly in the second person singular to each of the candidates whom I have so often spoken to as he came forward for admission into St. Vincent’s Company. I trust that the women who read this Rule, envisioning their own contexts, will freely substitute the word “sister” for “brother.”

To paraphrase St. Vincent—there is nothing new in this work. It simply describes a way of following Christ. But I assure you that if you walk in this way, if you breathe deeply of St. Vincent’s spirit, you will find profound joy, because you will be embodying, like him, the spirit of Jesus whom the Father sent to preach the good news to the poor.
My brother, you come to community freely. If you wish to commit yourself to it for life, seek to understand the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul. Try to live by it.

The call you are responding to is a great one. It is a gift from God. Be very happy then, my brother, and very grateful, that God has led you to a company that shares in the mission of his Son. Listen to St. Vincent’s words:

*To make God known to the poor; to announce Jesus Christ to them; to tell them that the kingdom of heaven is at hand! But that we should be called to be associated with, and to share in, the works of the Son of God surpasses our understanding. What! to render ourselves—I do not dare say it—so great, so sublime is it to preach the gospel to the poor, for it is above all else the office of the Son of God, and we are applied to it as instruments by which the Son of God continues to do from heaven what he once did on earth. Great reason have we, my brothers, to praise God and to thank him unceasingly for this grace!*

Know that, before you commit yourself to the community, you are always free to depart. God offers many ways to men and women. St. Vincent’s is not the only one. Unless you are firmly resolved to live in it and have a deep trust that God can make you holy through it, do not enter St. Vincent’s Company. The decision to enter is a grave one. Stand before it with great honesty, humility and courage. Decide to enter only if you can do so with great freedom and with trust that God who begins a good work in you can bring it to completion.

But if you should commit yourself to St. Vincent’s Company, know that you are committing your whole life. When at some future time—as inevitably happens—you are tempted to go back on that commitment, picture to yourself, as St. Vincent said, countless people with outstretched arms calling you.² It is to God, to the poor, and to us your brothers, servants of the poor, that you give your life. If you make that commitment, be faithful to it.

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1. SV XII, 80.
2. SV I, 252.
CHAPTER I - THE PURPOSE OF THE CONGREGATION

My brother, as you enter St. Vincent’s Company, seek to understand its purpose well and to make it your own—to follow Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor. Ponder its meaning. Notice that the purpose of the Congregation does not lie merely in works, like preaching missions or teaching in seminaries, important as these may be. Rather, it is a way of following Christ, a specific way. St. Vincent calls you to focus on Jesus as the Evangelizer of the Poor. This is how he saw him:

*In the eyes of the gentiles he passed for a fool. To the Jews he was a stumbling block. But with all that, he described himself as the Evangelizer of the Poor.*

Strive, with your brothers, to realize the purpose of the Congregation in the three ways that flow from our heritage.

1) As St. Vincent’s follower, make every effort to put on the spirit of Christ himself, the Evangelizer of the Poor, in order that you may grow in genuine holiness.

2) Then preach the gospel to the poor. This is your pre-eminent work. Listen well, my brother, to the eloquent words of St. Vincent:

*Our inheritance, gentlemen and my brothers, is the poor, the poor; pauperibus evangelizare misit me. What happiness, gentlemen, what happiness! To do what our Lord came from heaven to earth to do, and by means of which we too shall go from earth to heaven, to continue the work of God...*  

3) And assist others, both clergy and lay, in their formation as bearers of good news to the poor. Struck by the need for priests and longing for the reform of the clergy, St. Vincent called his Company to labor for the formation of the clergy. He thought so highly of this work that he could cry out:

*To make good priests is the greatest achievement in the world: it is impossible to conceive anything greater or more important. To devote oneself to making good priests and to cooperate to this end—is to fulfill the very task of Jesus Christ. Our Divine Lord, during his life on earth, seems to have taken it as his very special work to train twelve good priests, his apostles; with this end in view, he designed to stay with them some years to instruct and train them for this sacred ministry.*

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1. SV X, 32.
2. CR I, 3.
3. SV XII, 4.
4. St. Vincent frequently returns to the importance of the work for the clergy. Cf. CR XI, 12; SV XII, 84-85.
Contemplate the Christ of St. Vincent, who comes to preach good news to the poor and to form followers to continue this ministry. Learn to know this Christ and to love him deeply. Share his sensitivity toward the poor. Join with him in his labor to form priests and other ministers. Feel the compassion that throbbed in his heart as he reached out to those who were wandering and aimless like sheep without a shepherd.

Come forward to be a priest or brother in the Congregation of the Mission only if you are firmly committed to walk in his footsteps.
CHAPTER II - THE PLACE OF THE GOSPELS

Listen carefully, my brother, to St. Vincent’s striking belief in the power of the gospels:

Each one must strive, above all else, to ground himself in this truth: the teaching of Christ can never deceive, while that of the world is always false, since Christ himself declares that the latter is like a house built upon sand, whereas he compares his own to a building founded upon solid rock. For this reason the Congregation shall always make claim to act according to the maxims of Christ, never according to those of the world.¹

With these words St. Vincent opens the Common Rules. He was most conscious that the members of his Company should be men of the gospels. To preach the gospel to the poor is to be your mission, my brother. In order to grow in knowledge and love of the gospels, you shall read prayerfully each day, as St. Vincent asked his Company, a portion of the New Testament.

But your preaching is to be in “word and work,” St. Vincent says. Your love must be both “affective and effective.” So, with the contemporary Church, be very conscious that “action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world are integral elements in the preaching of the gospel.”² The words of good news that you proclaim will be credible only to the extent that they are accompanied by works of justice, of love, and of peace.³

As a preacher of the good news, the first service that you owe God and your brothers and sisters is to listen. Love of God begins with hearing his word and believing in his love for us: “The marvelous thing is not so much that we love God, but that God first loved us” (1 Jn 4:10). So also your love for the neighbor will begin with listening to him.

Learn, then, to be a good listener. Allow yourself to be evangelized by others—by your brothers in community, by those you work with, and especially by the poor. You must first hear the good news before you can preach it.

If you listen well, the word of God will enter your life in strikingly diverse ways, always with a view toward your conversion and growth. Sometimes it will come as food (Ps 19:11) to strengthen you and build you up. Sometimes it will be refreshing water (Is 55:10) to quench your thirst on the journey. But at other times God’s word may jolt you like a hammer that shatters a rock

¹. CR II, 1.
³. Cf. SV VII, 98; VII, 620. In these texts he speaks of the importance of the works of justice.
(Jer 23:29), breaking in on your too-settled ways or your hardness of heart. It may also strike you like a sword (Heb 4:12) to pierce your resistance. Listen to it attentively.

*Each morning he awakes me to hear*  
*to listen like a disciple.*  
*The Lord Yahweh has opened my ear.*

Is 50:4-5
CHAPTER III - SERVICE OF THE POOR

My brother, listen to these memorable words:

*Let us love God, my brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brow. For it often happens that the various affective acts of the love of God and the interior motions of a humble heart—even if they are good and desirable—are nonetheless suspect if they do not result in effective love. Our Lord himself says: "In this is my Father glorified: that you bring forth very much fruit."*

You are a servant of the poor. That is your vocation. Remember both terms of your title: you are a *servant*, and a servant of the *poor*.

Jesus loved the poor deeply. He came to serve them, not to be served. "Let him who would be first among you," Jesus told his followers, "be the least of all and the servant of all." As one who walks in Jesus' footsteps, be content to be a *servant*. Have no proud ambitions. Seek little for yourself. Let your needs be few. Be grateful to God for the little you have and ask for little beyond his service. Know, my brother, that as a servant you will have to work hard. That is the lot of servants and that is what God calls you to commit yourself to. Be generous with your time. Regard yourself as being at the beck and call of "your lords and masters." It is to this that you commit yourself by your first vow.

You are the servant of the *poor*, so love the poor dearly, my brother. Pour out that love day after day. Realize beforehand, however, that your love will often be disappointed. You will meet frustrations in preaching or teaching or laboring for the poor. They will sometimes, as St. Vincent warned his followers, despise you the bread that you give them. But persevere, my brother, with a love that manifests joy and enthusiasm and generosity. If you can do this, you will be sharing fully in Jesus' ministry. Faithful to your vow, you will be dedicating your whole life to the poor in his Company.

But in your ministry, as St. Vincent says, first do and then teach. As a follower of Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor, your proclamation of the good news will resound in the hearts of your people especially when you give vibrant witness:

1) through the language of works: performing the works of justice and mercy which are a sign that the kingdom of God is really alive among us: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, helping to find the causes of their hunger and thirst and the ways of alleviating it;

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1. SV X1, 40.
2. Cf. SV IX, 119; X, 332.
2) through the language of words: announcing with deep conviction the Lord’s presence, his love, his offer of forgiveness and acceptance to all;

3) through the language of relationships: being with the poor, working with them, forming a community that shows the Lord’s love for all.
CHAPTER IV - CELIBACY

Read carefully, my brother, the following statements from the Constitutions in regard to celibacy:

*Imitating Christ in his limitless love for all, we embrace, by vow, perfect chastity in the form of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. We accept it as a gift given us by the personal and infinite goodness of God.*¹

In this way we open our hearts more widely to God and neighbor, and our whole way of acting becomes a joyous expression of the love between Christ and the Church which will be fully manifested in the age to come.²

*Intimate union with Christ, true fraternal communion, zeal in the apostolate, and asceticism supported by the experience of the Church will enable our chastity to grow strong. Through a continual and mature response to the Lord’s call, it is a living source of spiritual fecundity in the world and it also contributes greatly to the attainment of human maturity.*³

If you choose to enter St. Vincent’s Company, my brother, freely choose to live as a celibate. Christ chose a celibate life-style for carrying out his mission and made it clear that, in his footsteps, others are called to be celibate “for the sake of the kingdom” (Mt 19:12), “for my sake and for the gospel” (Mk 10:29), to care for “the affairs of the Lord” (1 Cor 7:32). Celibacy stands as a sign of your faith in values which transcend sexual union. It is a sign of your dedication to a full-time project of prayer, apostolic labor, and missionary mobility in the service of the kingdom of God. As a celibate, you show your love for God and your brothers and sisters by making yourself available to serve them single-mindedly. You show your enthusiasm for the gospel and for the kingdom of God by making them the explicit focus of your life, even to the extent of renouncing the positive value of marriage.

But for celibacy to be a vital sign to others, your life, like Christ’s, must be filled with prayer⁴ and with joyful, generous service (cf. Mk 10:43-45; Jn 13:4-15; Pt 4:7-8). Strengthened by the community, you must lose your life in the service of others, and in losing it truly gain it. You must not be self-conscious about your own fulfillment, but other-conscious in complete dedication to God and your brothers and sisters.

¹ C 29 §1.
² C 29 §2.
³ C 30.
⁴ Cf., to cite just a few instances, Lk 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 9:28; 11:1; 22:39.
Yet like all God's gifts, celibacy entails your own responsibility too. Experience teaches this: you will live joyfully as a celibate only if certain values enrich your life and nourish your love; especially

1) daily prayer
2) generous apostolic service
3) deep human relationships both within and outside the community
4) prudence in these relationships
5) balance and discipline in your life-style
6) honest self-presentation in spiritual direction.

The challenge of celibate living is not easy. But the responsibility, while yours, is not yours alone. The Lord who calls you is faithful.
CHAPTER V - POVERTY

As a member of St. Vincent's Company, my brother, you will vow to live simply. Your vow is a profession to be poor both in spirit and in fact, both individually and communally. While your work, St. Vincent says, will not permit you to practice absolute poverty, you must as far as possible strive to imitate Jesus' poverty.¹

Poverty must be conspicuous in your life in the community. St. Vincent warned his Company that it would cease to exist when it ceased to be poor. He was deeply convinced that we need to be poor if we are to serve the poor.² He told the community that poverty would be its defense and support,³ that it was of the highest importance that we profess it all times and in all places,⁴ that without it we would not be credible as servants of the poor.

These thoughts of St. Vincent are echoed strikingly in the contemporary Church:⁵ the Church must be poor with the poor by sharing with them in their need.

To be practical in your efforts to be at one with the poor, my brother, take to heart the simple directives that follow. They will be very demanding if you apply them concretely. But Jesus assures you that the poor will be happy.

1. Strive to be poor in spirit and in fact, both individually and communally.
2. Often examine conscientiously how you live and work, whether you use the Company's own goods mostly on yourself or whether you share them generously with others, especially the poor.
3. Make your life of poverty more than simply the obtaining of permission to own things; rather, be sparing in the things you acquire.
4. Be willing to labor hard, both in the daily chores of community life and in the labors of the apostolate.
5. Accept some of the privations that poor people experience, especially as regards food and material comforts.
6. Give generously to the poor from your personal belongings; encourage the Company to do likewise from its corporate holdings.
7. Hand over your earnings to the community so that a true community of goods may be established.

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¹ CR III, 2.
² CR III, 1.
³ Cf. SV XI, 232f.
⁴ Cf. SV XII, 403f.
⁵ Cf. PC 12-13.
CHAPTER VI - OBEDIENCE

"I am a child of obedience," St. Vincent says. He proposes the following of Christ as the basis for our living this virtue:

The first reason we have for giving ourselves to God that he may grant us this virtue of obedience is ... the example which the Son of God gave us, and which he lived out during his whole life, which was nothing but a web of obedience.

Community demands common judgments and common action. It inevitably involves decisions with which some will not agree. As you come to community, know, and weigh carefully, that you are committing yourself to carry out at least some directives with which you will not agree. This is a difficult human undertaking. Do not accept this burden unless you are firmly committed to living under obedience for the sake of the community. Ponder well the words of our new Constitutions:

To participate in this mystery of the obedient Christ requires us all to seek, as a community, the will of the Father. We do this through mutual sharing of experience, open and responsible dialogue in which differences of age and outlook interact, so that common directions may surface and develop, and lead to making decisions.

Mindful of the words of St. Vincent, and in a spirit of co-responsibility, members should strive to obey superiors as promptly, joyfully and perseveringly as they can. They should try by the light of faith to obey decisions of superiors even when they consider their own views better.

As you commit yourself to obedience, strive to make your own the dispositions and even many of the practices that St. Vincent proposed in the Common Rules:

In order that the Congregation may advance more easily and rapidly in this virtue, it shall do all in its power to see that the pious custom of neither asking for nor refusing anything shall always be practiced among us. Nevertheless, when anyone discovers that something is either harmful to him or necessary for him, he shall examine the matter before the Lord, and decide whether he ought to manifest it to the superior or not.

No one, having received a refusal from one superior, shall approach

1. SV I, 511.
2. SV XII, 426.
3. C 37.
4. CR V, 4.
another superior regarding the same matter without making known
to him the previous refusal and the reason for it.¹
Our own sick shall be persuaded that they are confined to bed in
the infirmary not only to be cared for and cured by medical help,
but also to teach, as from a pulpit, at least by their example, the
Christian virtues, especially patience and conformity to the will of
God. . . . Since, among the other virtues demanded of the sick,
obedience is very necessary, all shall show it with exactitude not
only to their spiritual but also to their medical physicians, to the
infirmarian and others assigned to take care of them.²
Faithful to St. Vincent’s spirit, my brother, seek to respond faithfully to
the modern-day demands that obedience may make of you:
1. Study our Constitutions well. Seek too to understand the spirit of the
   Rules that St. Vincent left the Company. Meditate on both these
   sources, so that they shape your life and vision.
2. Give generously of your time by taking part in our contemporary
decision-making processes (e.g., meetings, questionnaires, letters of
consultation).
3. Carry out the decisions of superiors, joyfully if possible, even at times
   when you might disagree with them.
4. Be ready to respond to the needs of the community and God’s people,
   particularly in accepting assignments.
5. Be faithful to the order of day that has been worked out, after consult-
ation, in your house; in particular, be faithful to the times established
for daily prayer and the eucharist.

¹. CR V, 7.
². CR VI, 3.
CHAPTER VII - COMMUNITY

My brother, St. Vincent did not set out alone in the service of the poor. He formed a Company with common ideals. Reflect for a moment on St. Vincent’s vision of the community.

He saw it as a Company whose whole life would revolve around the good news: it was to preach the gospel to the poor that he knew God had sent it. He saw the Company as outward-oriented, as embarking on a mission. He saw it as a group of men who would be deeply convinced that Jesus had become one of us, that he had formed warm human bonds with his followers, that he had died abandoned, but lives on, reunited with us as Risen Lord. He saw the community as living by Jesus’ spirit, as walking now in the footsteps of Christ. He envisioned it as poor, as celibate for Jesus’ sake, as obedient, and as a servant of the poor.

Meditate, my brother, on the simple New Testament axioms which St. Vincent proposed for our up-building as a community:

Acts of charity toward the neighbor ought to be practiced constantly by us, such as: 1) to do to others that which we would justly wish them to do to us; 2) to agree with others and to approve of everything of which the Lord would approve; 3) to bear with one another without complaint; 4) to weep with those who weep; 5) to rejoice with those who rejoice; 6) to show respect for one another; 7) to be sincerely kind and obliging to others; 8) finally, to become all things to all men that we may gain all for Christ.

Seek to avoid those things which are the enemies of community. Avoid the jealousies which St. Paul so often speaks of. Avoid the griping that can be so often divisive. Avoid especially speaking of others’ faults. You will very much hurt others individually, and the Company as a whole, if you allow yourself to fall into these failings. Speak words that build up the community rather than tear it down. When criticism is necessary, speak simply, but in such a way that your love for your brothers shines through.

If you cannot find peace with the community as it is or with the people who make it up, then do not enter it; otherwise you would be entering on a way that would lead to great unhappiness. But if you can find basic peace even with this very imperfect Company and its very imperfect members, then enter freely, knowing that though life together will make many demands, it will also bring many joys and the communal support of living with those who sincerely pursue the gospels.

As St. Vincent recognized, fidelity to some basic evangelical imperatives

1. CR II, 12.
will help you enormously in living happily in an apostolic community. Note well the list of axioms he offers you above. Meditate on them often and put them into practice.
CHAPTER VIII - SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Listen, my brother, to what St. Vincent says about spiritual exercises:

Christ our Lord and his disciples had their spiritual exercises, such as to go up to the temple on appointed days, to withdraw at times into solitude, to give themselves to prayer, and so forth. Hence, it is reasonable that this little Congregation should also have its spiritual exercises, which it shall perform most diligently and which it shall prefer, unless necessity or obedience disposes otherwise, to every other occupation, since these exercises lead more effectively to the genuine observance of other rules and constitutions, and to the attainment of our perfection.¹

St. Vincent asks you to make the incarnation and the Trinity the center of your life. Remember that he continually proposed Jesus, the Word made flesh, as the exemplar for all that the members of his Company were to do. He asks you to come to know God our Father in prayer and to call upon God’s spirit to fill the Company, so that the life of the Risen Lord might be conspicuous among us.

St. Vincent sets out concrete means to which, in adapted form, our new Constitutions ask you to commit yourself:

1. take part in the eucharist daily;
2. join your brothers each morning and evening in praising God in common;
3. in imitation of Jesus who spent even whole nights in prayer, support your brothers by giving an hour daily to personal prayer; seek to spend some of that time in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament;
4. receive the sacrament of penance frequently, as the Church in each age shall recommend;
5. read a portion of the New Testament daily, and in addition spend some time reading from a book that pertains to spiritual matters;
6. have some daily devotion to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, such as the rosary; in particular, imitate her attentiveness in listening to the word of God, her humility, her gratitude, her purity; whenever occasion offers, encourage others to know her and love her.
7. make it your practice to examine your conscience daily in order that you might grow in Christ’s life;
8. engage in spiritual direction regularly throughout your life;
9. each year join your brothers in an annual retreat.

In committing yourself to St. Vincent’s Company, my brother, know that

¹. CR X, 1.
he asks you to commit yourself to means like these. If you enter into them wholeheartedly and give yourself generously to them, you will certainly grow.
CHAPTER IX - SIMPLICITY

This is the virtue St. Vincent loved most. "It is my gospel," he says. Listen, my brother, to how St. Vincent describes simplicity:

Jesus, the Lord, expects us to have the simplicity of a dove. This means giving a straightforward opinion about things in the way we honestly see them, without needless reservations. It also means doing things without any double-dealing or manipulation, our intention being focused solely on God. Each of us, then, should take care to behave always in this spirit of simplicity, remembering that God likes to deal with the simple, and that he conceals the secrets of heaven from the wise and prudent of this world and reveals them to little ones.

But while Christ recommends the simplicity of a dove he tells us to have the prudence of a serpent as well. What he means is that we should speak and behave with discretion. We ought, therefore, to keep quiet about matters which should not be made known, especially if they are unsuitable or unlawful. In actual practice this virtue is about choosing the right way to do things. We should make it a sacred principle, then, admitting of no exceptions, that since we are working for God we will always choose God-related ways for carrying out our work, and see and judge things from Christ's point of view and not from a worldly-wise one; and not according to the feeble reasoning of our own mind either. That is how we can be prudent as serpents and simple as doves.

St. Vincent proposed simplicity to his sons as their first characteristic. He loved to speak on the subject:

God is simple. Wherever you discover Christian simplicity, walk with confidence, whereas they that use craftiness and duplicity are in constant fear lest their cunning be detected, and lest in consequence other people cease to have confidence in them.

For my part—as I can affirm—long experience has demonstrated to my satisfaction, that a strong and practical faith, and a true spirit of religion, are more commonly found among poor and simple people. God is pleased to enrich them with fervent faith. They believe and relish the words of everlasting life that Christ has left us in his gospel. As a general rule, they bear illness patiently,

1. SV I, 284.
2. SV IX, 606.
3. CR II, 4-5.
privations, too, and other afflictions. Such things they endure without murmuring or complaining, except a little and rarely. Moreover, everyone feels an attraction for persons who are simple and candid, persons who refuse to employ cunning or deceit. They are popular because they act ingenuously, and speak sincerely; their lips are ever in accord with their hearts. They are esteemed and loved everywhere . . . .

In St. Vincent’s spirit then, my brother, speak truthfully, even at times when the truth may be inconvenient or embarrassing to you. That is not an easy discipline. Seek to do only what God wants. Strive to have less and less preoccupation with yourself. Do not be anxious for the esteem of others. God communicates with the simple. He reveals himself to the little.

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1. These themes recur frequently when St. Vincent speaks of simplicity. Cf. SV XI, 50; XII, 171.
CHAPTER X - HUMILITY

Take St. Vincent’s words very much to heart, my brother:

"Each one shall also show great diligence in learning this lesson taught by Christ. "Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart." By it we are reminded, as he himself affirms, that the earth is possessed through meekness, because by the exercise of this virtue men's hearts are well disposed to be turned back to the Lord, something which is not accomplished by those who deal harshly and roughly with the neighbor. Moreover, heaven is acquired by humility, for the love of self-abasement is wont to raise us up, leading us step by step from virtue to virtue, until we arrive at our goal."1

Humility is basic to gospel spirituality. The kingdom of God belongs to the poor in spirit. God resists the proud; he raises up the humble. St. Vincent knew these things well. In fact, he was convinced that humility is “the foundation of evangelical perfection and the core of the spiritual life.”2 Consequently, there is no virtue that he spoke of more eloquently. Sense in his words, my brother, the great conviction with which he spoke on the subject:

"How does it happen then that so few try to practice it and still fewer possess it? It is because it is ravishing to speculate on, but its practice is disagreeable to nature; its very appearance is disagreeable to nature. To practice it means that we should always choose the lowest place, put ourselves below others, even the least, bear with calumnies, seek after contempt, love abjection; and to all these things we are naturally adverse. Yet it is essential for us to overcome this repugnance; it is essential for each of us to make strong efforts to arrive at the actual exercise of this virtue. Otherwise, we shall never acquire it."3

Stand before God humbly in your daily prayer, my brother. Have the attitude of a servant. Let there be no task too menial for you to take on cheerfully. Stand before God and your brothers with a grateful heart, as one who has received many gifts. He who is mighty has done great things. Never tire of responding by daily common-place labor.

St. Vincent also asks us to be humble corporately. He urges us to see ourselves as a little Company, existing by God’s love and kindness—able to

1. CR II, 6.
2. CR II, 7.
3. SV XI, 54.
do nothing on your own, but able to do all things by God's power. It is with great urgency that he writes:

Understand this well, gentlemen and my brothers: we shall never be fit to do the work of God if we have not profound humility and self-contempt. No, if the Company of the Mission is not humble, if it has not the belief and conviction that it can do no good, that it is more apt to spoil everything than otherwise, it will never accomplish anything great; but where it possesses and lives in the spirit of which I have just spoken, then, rest assured, gentlemen, it will be fit to do the work of God, because God makes use of such subjects for his great works.¹

¹ St. Vincent emphasizes the need for corporate humility again and again. Cf. SV IX, 57; IX, 303; X, 200; XI, 60; XI, 114-115; XI, 434; XII, 438.
CHAPTER XI - MEEKNESS

My brother, St. Vincent tells us that he was choleric by temperament. Confronted with the gospel call to be meek and humble of heart, he asked God to change his heart:

*I turned to God and earnestly begged him to change this irritable and forbidding disposition of mine, and to grant me a kindly and benign spirit. And with the grace of our Lord, by giving a little attention to suppressing the impetuous impulses of my nature, I have been partially cured of my gloomy disposition.*

God worked healing in this holy man, my brother. His contemporaries tell us that he was affable and easy to approach. He was mild even when administering correction. By his compassion and the kindness of his words, even when reprimanding, he often won the hearts of the stubborn.

St. Vincent warned the members of his Company not to think that those who are meek are weak:

*There are no persons more constant nor firm in well-doing than those who are meek and gracious. While on the contrary those who allow themselves to yield to anger and the passions of the irascible appetite are mostly inconstant, because they only act by fits and starts. They are like torrents, which are strong and impetuous only when in full flood but which dry up immediately afterwards, while rivers, which represent the gentle and gracious, flow on noiselessly, tranquilly and unfailingly.*

Learn, my brother, to be meek. Anger can be a force for good or for evil in your life. To control it and find creative ways of expressing it is a great challenge.

When directed against injustice, as Jesus’ example shows us, anger strengthens a person to struggle courageously, to confront the Pharisee, to “cast out the money-changers from God’s house.” But, as our own experience teaches us, anger can also be destructive. It can drive us to lash out at the weak or the innocent.

Learn to understand your anger and to harness it for good, for truth, for justice. You may fail many times in your attempts, but know that the power of God is much greater than the weakness that you experience. Jesus says that the meek shall be happy. St. Vincent believed this word of the Lord and won the hearts of the poor because his meekness developed as warmth, approachability, openness, deep respect for the person of others. His contem-

2. SV XI, 65.
poraries found him gentle and welcoming. But he also knew, as he sometimes expressed it to St. Louise de Marillac, “how to mix the bitter with the sweet.” Seek, my brother, to develop this remarkable combination of gentleness and firmness.

1. SV I, 393-94.
2. SV VII, 226.
CHAPTER XII - MORTIFICATION

My brother, Jesus calls you to follow him even unto death. He asks you to die to sin daily. St. Vincent knew these gospel imperatives very well. Listen to his words:

Since Christ has said: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily"; and since St. Paul in the same spirit has added: "If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the flesh, you will live," everyone shall devote himself to a continual denial of his own will and judgement, also the mortification of all his senses.¹

Take on no exaggerated mortifications, my brother, but still let mortification be a real part of your daily life. It is an indispensable means for reaching the goals you seek. It will set you free, even to die for Christ.

St. Vincent offers you many means, which can be adapted to present-day circumstances:

1. be faithful to the duties of your state in life; prefer them when they conflict with other more pleasurable things;
2. work hard as servants do;
3. be sparing in your obtaining or accepting material possessions, like clothing or money, or items for your room;
4. rise promptly in the morning that you might praise God and strengthen your brothers by joining them in prayer;
5. be slow to ask for privileges, or to be the exception from what is the norm in the Company;
6. withhold critical or divisive words;
7. seek equally to be with those who are less pleasing to you as with those to whom you are attracted;
8. be disciplined in eating and drinking, and avoid all anxiety or complaint about what you shall eat or what you shall drink;
9. employ moderation and a critical sense in using television, radio, movies, and other media.

¹ CR II, 8.
"If love of God is a fire," St. Vincent tells us, "then zeal is its flame." He loved, my brother, with a burning love. From the bottom of his heart he cried out to the members of his Company:

_Behold the beautiful field which God is opening up to us in Madagascar, the Hebrides and elsewhere! Let us beg him to enkindle in our hearts a desire to serve him. Let us give ourselves to him to do whatever he pleases with us. St. Vincent Ferrer encouraged himself by the thought that one day priests would come who by the fervor of their zeal, would set the whole world on fire. If we do not deserve that God should give us the grace to be those priests, let us at least beg him to make us their exemplars and forerunners. But, however that may be, let us hold it as certain that we shall not be true Christians until we are ready to lose all and to give even our life for the love and glory of Jesus Christ, resolving, with the holy Apostle, to desire tortures and even death itself rather than be separated from the charity of the divine Savior._

St. Vincent labored doggedly even to the end. Listen to his simple statement as an old man:

_As for myself, my age notwithstanding, I do not consider that I am excused from the obligation of laboring in the service of the poor; what is there to prevent me from so doing? If I am unable to preach every day, I will preach twice a week; and if I lack sufficient strength to make myself heard in large churches, I will speak in small ones; and if even that should prove impracticable, what will hinder me from gathering those good people around me, and speaking to them simply and familiarly just as I am now talking to you?_

The ways of serving are many, my brother. Take St. Vincent’s words to heart. When you are a young man, use the resources of youth, its vigor and enthusiasm, in the service of the poor. When you have grown old, bring the resources of age, experience and understanding, to bear on your labors. Labor long as a servant of the poor. In all things be faithful, even to the end.

But there is a subtle enemy, St. Vincent warns us, that lurks at the far edge of zeal. He called it "indiscreet zeal." Today we might describe it as

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1. SV XII, 307-308.
2. SV XI, 75.
3. SV XI, 136.
4. CR XII, 11.
over-working. It often leads to discouragement, anger with those who work less, resentment, and finally apathy. It can be a deadly enemy.

So know your limitations. Live a balanced life, so that you might have the energy that nourishes zeal. While the Lord asks you to cooperate in his work, it still remains his work. When the time comes to rest, place the work in his hands. “The Lord gives to his beloved in sleep” (Ps 127:2).
CHAPTER XIV - TRUST IN PROVIDENCE

Listen, my brother, to these striking words of St. Vincent:

*If divine providence ever allows a house or member of the Congregation, or the Congregation itself, to be subjected to, and tested by, slander or persecution, we are to be extra careful to avoid any retaliation, verbal abuse, or complaint against the persecutors or slanderers. We should even praise and bless God, and joyfully thank him for it as an opportunity for great good, coming down from the Father of lights. We should even pray sincerely to him for those who harm us and, if the opportunity and possibility present themselves, should willingly help them, remembering that Christ commanded us, and all the faithful to do this: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and pray for persecutors and slanderers.” And to get us to do this more willingly and more easily he said that we would be blessed in doing so and that we should be joyful and glad about it since our reward is great in heaven. And, more importantly, he was gracious enough to be the first to act in this way towards others so as to be a model for us. Afterwards the apostles, disciples, and numberless Christians followed his example.*

Christ said: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all those things which you need will be given to you as well.” That is the basis for each of us having the following set of priorities: matters involving our relationship with God are more important than temporal affairs; spiritual health is more important than physical; God’s glory is more important than human approval. Each one should, moreover, be determined to prefer, like St. Paul to do without necessities, to be slandered or tortured, or even killed, rather than lose Christ’s love. In practice, then, we should not worry too much about temporal affairs. We ought to have confidence in God that he will look after us since we know for certain that as long as we are grounded in that sort of love and trust we will be always under the protection of God in heaven, we will remain unaffected by evil and never lack what we need even when everything we possess seems headed for disaster.

Vincent knew great peace. He trusted in God as his own Father, who watched over and cared for him. He believed deeply that God was the author of the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, the

2. CR II, 2.
Daughters of Charity and all the good that he had done in the service of the poor. He was confident that his Father, who had begun these good works would bring them to completion. He had utter trust in God’s unseen plans, which work through human history to reveal his love. On the one hand, he urged his followers to be patient in discerning and following God’s designs. He knew that grace has its moments and he praised those who had learned the rhythm of God’s movements. But on the other hand, he knew that this same loving, provident Father acts in and through human instruments, as he had in Jesus his Son. So he also praised those who had learned to foresee and prepare the way for the works of providence.

Learn from this holy man, my brother, to place yourself in God’s hands daily. Your life will know many joys and many sorrows. Accept them as gifts or as challenges from the hand of God. Seek little for yourself. Do not be anxious about what you shall eat or what you shall drink or what you shall put on. Seek first the kingdom of God. Then all other things will be given you besides.

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1. SV II, 453.
2. SV VII, 310.
My brother, learn from St. Vincent. He knew Jesus well. He loved him deeply as the Evangelizer of the Poor. He penetrated the meaning of the good news and burned with an intense desire to share it with the poor. He lived simply. Yet he did great things.

The wisdom of the world will often hold out power or fame or comfort as more sensible than St. Vincent’s style of life. It will suggest to you that other means are more effective than chastity, poverty, obedience and service of the poor. But you have not chosen to follow the wisdom of the world, my brother. You have chosen to live the gospels. Learn from this holy man the ways in which his Company should embody them.

If you become conscious that you are growing in St. Vincent’s way, rejoice in the gift God is giving you. Pray too that God might strengthen all of us, your brothers, in the same way. But always, as a humble man, recall what St. Vincent told his Company:

... we must get it firmly into our heads
that when we have carried out all we have been asked to do, we should,
following Christ’s advice, say to ourselves that we are useless servants,
that we have done what we were supposed to do,
and that, in fact,
we could not have done anything without him.¹

¹. CR XII, 14.
We are weak, O God,
and capable of giving in at the first assault.

By your pure loving kindness
you have called us;
may your infinite goodness, please,
now help us persevere.

For our part, with your holy grace,
we will try with all our strength
to summon up
all the service and all the faithfulness that you ask of us.
So give us, O God, give us the grace to persevere until death.

This is what I ask of you
through the merits of Our Lord Jesus Christ
with confidence that you will remember me.

SV IX, 360