The Heart of Jesus in the Spirituality of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac

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There was something in the air in early seventeenth-century France. Decades before the visions of Margaret Mary Alacoque, which began on 27 December 1673, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac were already focusing on the heart of Jesus. It became a powerful force in their spirituality, moving them on related, but different, roads toward “mission” and “charity.” The names of the congregations they founded reflect these two thrusts: the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.¹

At a gathering of the members of the Congregation of the Mission on 22 August 1655, Vincent de Paul cried out, “[let’s] ask God to give the Company this spirit, this heart, this heart that causes us to go everywhere, this heart of the Son of God, the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord… He sent the Apostles to do that; he sends us, like them, to bring fire everywhere. *Ignem veni mittere in terram, et quid volo nisi ut accendatur;* to bring this divine fire, this fire of love and of fear of God everywhere…”²

Vincent spoke eloquently of the fire that he hoped would burn in the heart of missionaries, like those who went to Madagascar. He envisioned it as a flame, an all-consuming zeal that would drive the members of his Congregation toward those in need. His dream was that this flame would energize not just those engaged in foreign missions, but also those preaching missions at home or laboring in works among the abandoned anywhere in the world.

Louise referred to the heart of Jesus even more. Not only do we read of it in her writings, we see it in the paintings which, she told the sisters, were her devotion and amusement.³ She painted both small and large images of Jesus’ heart, and her letters inform us that she sent the “Lord of Charity” to houses of the Daughters of Charity. A large painting depicting the “Lord of Charity” hangs above a landing on a staircase near the Superior General’s room at the Motherhouse of the Daughters in Paris. The heart of Jesus is exposed as he looks out at the viewer.

For Vincent, the heart of Jesus was the source of missionary zeal. For Louise, it was the font of a burning charity that was both affective and effective. Hence, “Mission et Charité” have had a central role in the lives of their followers, with different accents, in the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.

I. Early traces of devotion to the heart of Jesus

Explicit devotion to the heart of Jesus developed slowly in the Church. In some ways

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this is surprising, since love is so central in the New Testament and since the heart is a universal symbol of love. The New Testament tells the Good News of God’s love for us as revealed in Jesus. This is especially evident in John’s gospel and letters. John sums it up in statements that are familiar to all readers: “God so loved the world that he gave us his only-begotten Son”⁴; “God is love”⁵; “In this is love: that he laid down his life for us.”⁶ Paul makes similar forceful assertions.⁷

But neither John nor Paul speaks of the heart of Jesus. One Johannine text has had a significant influence on devotion to Jesus’ heart, but while it is often cited as referring to his heart, it actually speaks of his side: “…one soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out.”⁸ From early times, Christians meditated on Christ’s open side and the mystery of blood and water that flowed from it. Some saw these as symbols of baptism and the Eucharist. Others saw the Church issuing from the side of Jesus, as Eve came forth from the side of Adam. But it is only by extension that John’s reference to Jesus’ side came to be understood as alluding to his heart.

One New Testament text, however, does speak explicitly of Jesus’ heart. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus himself tells his followers (it was a text that Vincent and Louise loved to quote), “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart.”⁹ This text has had an enormous influence on Christian spirituality. It appears in the rules of numerous religious communities. Jesus’ gentleness of heart has stood as a challenge for all Christians: they were to be in control of their anger, peace-makers, warm, receptive, aware of their limitations, grateful for God’s gifts. As will be recounted later in this article, Vincent and Louise placed strong emphasis on gentleness as well as humility.

Yet, as is evident, the New Testament and early Christian texts are not speaking of devotion to the Sacred Heart. In fact, there is nothing to indicate that, during the first ten centuries, any explicit devotion focused on the wounded heart of Jesus. It is only in the eleventh and twelfth centuries that we find the first clear indications of devotion to the heart of Jesus. The wound in Jesus’ side began to be seen as symbolizing a wound of love in his heart. In Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries, and through the writings of Anselm and Bernard, the devotion gradually grew. Among the early devotees were Saint Mechtilde (d. 1298) and Saint Gertrude (d. 1302). On the feast of Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Gertrude had a vision that plays an important role in the history of the devotion. Resting her head near the wound in Christ’s side, she heard the beating of his heart and questioned the apostle John: “If, on the night of the Last Supper, you too felt Jesus’ heartbeat, why did you never mention it?” John replied that this revelation was reserved for subsequent ages

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⁴ John 3:16.
⁵ 1 John 4:16.
⁶ Ibid., 3:16.
⁷ See Romans 8:31-35; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Ephesians 3:14-19, etc.
⁸ John 19:34.
⁹ Matt. 11:29.
when the world, having grown cold, would need to rekindle its love.10

The *Vitis mystica*, ascribed to Saint Bonaventure (d. 1274),11 contains a beautiful passage about the relationship of Jesus’ heart to the sacraments. It was later used by the Church for one of the lessons for the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart:

> It was a divine decree that permitted one of the soldiers to open his sacred side with a lance. This was done so that the Church might be formed from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death on the cross, and so that the Scripture might be fulfilled: *They shall look on him whom they pierced.* The blood and water which poured out at that moment were the price of our salvation. Flowing from the secret abyss of our Lord’s heart as from a fountain, this stream gave the sacraments of the Church the power to confer the life of grace, while for those already living in Christ it became a spring of living water welling up to life everlasting.

From the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, the devotion spread slowly, particularly among members of religious congregations, especially Franciscans, Dominicans, and Carthusians. Still, it remained an individualized devotion, often of a mystical nature. No widespread movement gained momentum, other than devotion to the Five Wounds of Jesus, in which the wound in his side figured prominently.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, devotion to the heart of Jesus took a leap forward and entered into the domain of popular piety. By the end of the seventeenth century, it had become a widespread devotion called “Devotion to the Sacred Heart,” with clearly formulated prayers and special exercises whose practice was recommended.12

*Francis de Sales*

In this context, from the perspective of the Vincentian Family, the writings of Francis de Sales in the early seventeenth century are most significant. His *Treatise on the Love of God* speaks often of the heart of Jesus. This work, along with his *Introduction to a Devout Life*, had an enormous influence on Catholic spirituality. Both Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac read it and referred to it frequently, as did Jane Frances de Chantal, an intimate friend of Francis de Sales and, with him, the co-founder of the Order of the Visitation. At his death in 1622, Francis entrusted the direction of the Visitation nuns to Vincent de Paul. Margaret Mary Alacoque, whose visions sparked what came to be called “Devotion to the Sacred Heart,” with its particular prayers and practices, was a member of that congregation.

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12 For example, communion on the first Friday of the month, assisting at Mass on nine first Fridays, the observance of the Holy Hour, the saying of certain prayers, etc. See [http://sacredheartdevotion.com/](http://sacredheartdevotion.com/) (accessed 15 July 2013).
At the very start of his *Treatise on the Love of God*, in the Dedicatory Prayer, Francis addresses himself to Mary and Joseph, praying, “I conjure you by the heart of your sweet Jesus, King of hearts... animate my heart and all hearts that shall read this writing, by your all-powerful favour with the Holy Ghost.” And Francis returns to the subject of Jesus’ heart in a variety of ways. Of someone impervious to the divine touch: “We call that a heart of iron, or wood, or stone.... On the contrary, a gentle, pliable and tractable heart is termed a melting and liquefied heart. *My heart*, said David, speaking in the person of our Saviour upon the cross, *is become like wax melting in the midst of my bowels!*” Speaking of the union of the soul with God, he writes, “O sweet Jesus! ...draw me still more deeply into thy heart, that thy love may devour me, and that I may be swallowed up in its sweetness.”

Francis uses the image of the heart in many different contexts. He speaks of the heart of God, the heart of Christ, and the heart of the individual person, and he describes a dynamic movement of love between the three. To Francis, the heart of Christ is what makes our ascent to the heart of the Father possible. On earth, a ladder is planted in the pierced side of Jesus, in his Sacred Heart. His wounded heart is where we start climbing.

Francis writes, “[He] beholds by the cleft of his pierced side all the hearts of the sons of men: for this Heart being the King of hearts keeps his eyes ever fixed upon hearts. But as those that look through a lattice see others clearly, and are but half-seen themselves, so the divine love of this Heart, or rather this Heart of divine love, continually sees out hearts clearly and regards them with the eyes of his love...”

*John Eudes*

For most of the seventeenth century, devotion to Jesus’ heart remained private. It was ultimately John Eudes (1602-1680) who made it public and succeeded in having a feast established for it. Eudes, whom Vincent knew, was an apostle of the heart of Mary especially; but his devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary overlapped with devotion to the heart of Jesus. Gradually, he saw devotion to the Sacred Heart as separate, and, through his efforts, on 31 August 1670, the first feast of the Sacred Heart was celebrated with great solemnity at the major seminary in Rennes. The feast soon spread to other dioceses and was adopted in various religious communities. Two centuries later, Leo XIII pronounced Eudes as “the author of the liturgical devotion of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary.”

*Margaret Mary*

In 1673, Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690), a Visitation sister living in Paray-le-Monial, began to have visions of the Sacred Heart. From there, the devotion took off.

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14 Ibid., Book 6, chapter 12, 240.

15 Ibid., Book 7, chapter 1, 252.

16 Ibid., Book 5, chapter 11, p. 214.

There is no indication that Margaret Mary had known the devotion prior to the apparitions. Her visions were many. In them, Jesus permitted her, as he had formerly allowed Saint Gertrude, to rest her head upon his heart and revealed to her the wonders of his love, telling her that he desired to make the treasures of his heart known throughout the world. He told her that he had chosen her for this work. He wanted to be honored under the figure of his heart of flesh and asked for a devotion of expiatory love — frequent Communion, Communion on the First Friday of the month, and the observance of a Holy Hour. In what came to be called the “great apparition,” which took place during the octave of Corpus Christi in 1675, he said, “Behold the Heart that has so loved men… instead of gratitude I receive from the greater part [of men and women] only ingratitude…”, and asked her for a feast on the Friday after the octave of Corpus Christi, telling her to consult Father Claude de la Colombière, then superior of the small Jesuit house at Paray-le-Monial. A few days after the “great apparition,” Margaret Mary made everything known to Father de la Colombière. He promptly consecrated himself to the Sacred Heart and directed Margaret Mary to write an account of the apparition, which was soon circulating through France and England. The Jesuits played an enormous role in spreading the devotion.18

In 1765 Clement XIII approved the Office and Mass of the Sacred Heart for use in Poland, and the nuns of the Visitation were allowed to celebrate the feast throughout their Order. In 1856 Pius IX made the feast obligatory throughout the Church. In 1899 Leo XIII consecrated the human race to the Sacred Heart.

II. The heart of Jesus in the spirituality of Vincent de Paul19

Vincent uses the word heart often. In his conferences and letters, one finds numerous common uses of the word, such as “take to heart,” “learn by heart,” “heart to heart,” and “with all my heart.” He also speaks of his own heart and that of Saint Louise. Frequently, he urges Louise to keep her “heart at peace.”20 He felt that she was too serious, and was also concerned about her health (as she was about his), so he encouraged her to honor the

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18 An extended treatment of this topic might address at length the Jesuit contribution to devotion to the Sacred Heart. It might also include a treatment of the writings of Louis de Montfort, in which devotion to the heart of Jesus, like that of John Eudes, is united with devotion to the heart of Mary. For a discussion of the role of Jesuits and others in fostering individual devotion and communal practice of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, see “Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus” in The Catholic Encyclopedia at http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07163a.htm (accessed 18 July 2013). See also, Raymond Jonas, France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Hereinafter cited as Jonas, Cult.

19 As the reader has probably already noted, in order to avoid confusion I am using the word “focus” rather than “devotion” when I speak of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise and the heart of Jesus. Clearly, they were “devoted” to the heart of Jesus, but the phrase “Devotion to the Sacred Heart” has a technical meaning, involving concrete practices. This meaning flowed from the visions of Saint Margaret Mary, which began thirteen years after the deaths of Vincent and Louise.

20 See Letter 309, “To Saint Louise,” [1638, around February], CCD, 1:446.
joy of Jesus’ heart: “I shall say nothing to you about the rest [of the things you asked me about]. Our Lord will advise you as to what you must do. Please take care of your health and honor Our Lord’s cheerfulness of heart.”

At times his language of the heart is quite affectionate. He writes to Louise, “Rest assured, Mademoiselle, of the heart of one who is, in the heart of Our Lord and in His love, your most humble servant… Courage! May Our Lord be in our hearts and our hearts in His, so that they may be three in one and one in three and that we may wish only what He wills.” On another occasion, he tells her, “Offer this action to God, I beg of you, as with all my affection, I ask God to be the heart of your heart. I am, in His love, your servant.”

Perhaps most affectionate of all are his greetings on New Year’s Day in 1638: “I wish you a young heart and a love in its first bloom for Him Who loves us unceasingly and as tenderly as if He were just beginning to love us. For all God’s pleasures are ever new and full of variety, although He never changes. I am, in His love, with an affection such as His Goodness desires and which I owe Him out of love for Him, Mademoiselle, your most humble servant.”

He uses similarly affectionate language when writing to Jeanne Frances de Chantal and Madame Goussault. To the latter he says, “God knows to what extent He has filled my heart with this fondness for you and how much I feel it now as I speak to you, I who am, in the love of Our Lord, Madame, your most humble servant.”

He sometimes describes the fire of love that he feels in his own heart. During a conference to the priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Mission he prays aloud:

O God of my heart, Your infinite goodness doesn’t allow me to share my affections or to give them to anyone else if that’s prejudicial to You! Take possession, for yourself alone, of my heart and my liberty! And how could I wish for anything good from anyone else but you? Would it be, perhaps, from myself? Alas! You love me infinitely more than I love myself; You are infinitely more desirous of my welfare and have the power to see to it better than I myself, who have nothing and hope for nothing except from you. O my only Good! O Infinite Good! Would that I had as much love for you than all the Seraphim put together! Alas! It’s too late to be able to imitate them! O antiqua bonitas, sero te amavi! [O goodness so

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ancient, late have I loved you! But, at least I offer you, with all the extent of my affections, the love of the Most Holy Queen of Angels and of all the blessed in general. O my God, before heaven and earth I give You my heart, such as it is. I adore, for love of you, the decrees of Your paternal Providence regarding Your poor servant; in the presence of the whole heavenly court, I despise anything that could separate me from You. O Sovereign Goodness, You who want to be loved by sinners, give me love for You, and then command what You will: *da quod jubes et jube quod vis* [Give what you command, and command what you will].

He tells his confrères that what God wants is the heart, “God asks primarily for our heart — our heart — and that’s what counts. How is it that a man who has no wealth will have greater merit than someone who has great possessions that he gives up? Because the one who has nothing does it with greater love; and that’s what God especially wants....”

Vincent often expresses his admiration for martyrs and for the love that burned in their hearts. Speaking to the Daughters of Charity, he cites the Canticle of Canticles 4:9:

Dying like that seems the most beautiful way to go; it’s to die of love, to be a martyr — a martyr of love. It seems that those blessed souls can apply to themselves the words of the Spouse and say with her: *Vulnerasti cor meum* [you have wounded my heart]; it’s You, my loving God, who have wounded me; You’re the one who has broken and pierced my heart with Your burning arrows; You’re the one who put this sacred fire in my inmost being, causing me to die of love. Oh, may You be forever blessed! O Savior, *vulnerasti cor meum*!!

For Vincent, fire in the heart expresses itself as missionary zeal. There are few occasions when he was so clearly moved as when he spoke with the members of the Congregation of the Mission on 22 August 1655. He urges them to pray: “Let’s ask God to give the Company this spirit, this heart, this heart that causes us to go everywhere, this heart of the Son of God, the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord... He sends us, like them... to bring this divine fire... everywhere, throughout the world.” He asks them to be willing to go anywhere in the world as missionaries and to be willing to die there, citing the famous saying of Tertullian, “The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians.”

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Vincent mentions various things that presumably delighted Jesus’ heart: the practice of poverty, doing the Father’s will, humility, and love of the neighbor. Vincent also focuses on Jesus’ heart in another context, one which has played a very important role in the spirituality of his Family. He uses the words of Jesus himself about his heart, and cites them frequently, “Learn from me that I am gentle and humble of heart.” He returns to those words again and again in his talks to the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. Perhaps the clearest, most succinct expression of his thought in this regard appears in the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission, published in 1658:

We should make a great effort to learn the following lesson, also taught by Christ: Learn from me because I am gentle and humble of heart. We should remember that he himself said that by gentleness we inherit the earth. If we act on this we will win people over so that they will turn to the Lord. That will not happen if we treat people harshly or sharply. And we should also remember that humility is the route to heaven. A loving acceptance of it when we are humiliated usually raises us up, guiding us, as it were, step by step from one virtue to the next until we reach heaven.

Speaking to the Congregation of the Mission, Vincent states that gentleness and humility are like “two sisters” who are inseparable. They are missionary virtues which are indispensable for winning the hearts of poor country people. He describes them as two of the five smooth stones with which a missionary can slay any enemy, as David slew...
Goliath. Speaking to the Daughters of Charity, he tells them that humility “is the origin of all the good that we do.” He equates gentleness with charity, “For what is charity if not love and gentleness?”

When he mentions the heart of Jesus to the Daughters, the context is usually their prayer or their service. What a blessing it will be, he tells them, if a sister “does her utmost to put her heart in the state of being united with the heart of Our Lord.” He encourages them to speak with the Lord “heart to heart.” He says that ejaculatory prayers are “like darts that are shot and [that] wound the heart of Our Lord.” In their service of the poor, he urges them to “find in the heart of Our Lord a word of consolation for the sick poor person.”

III. The heart of Jesus in the spirituality of Louise de Marillac

Her writings

Louise uses heart with great frequency. She urges the Company to be of “one heart” and one mind or will, and encourages sisters to have “a loving heart for works of charity.” She is aware of her own “hardness of heart”; she desires things “with all my heart”; and advises that “God wants only our hearts.” Her language too, like Vincent’s, is often quite affectionate.

As early as 1622, when writing about her desire to give herself to God, she focuses explicitly on the heart of Jesus:

As I meditated on the Gospel of the Sower, I realized that there was no good soil in me. Therefore I desired to sow, in the heart of Jesus, all the actions of my heart.

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43 Conference 89, “Mortification, Correspondence, Meals, and Journeys (Common Rules, Arts. 24-27),” 9 December 1657, Ibid., 10:327.
46 Ibid., 151-231, in which there appear 25 instances of such a closing statement.
50 See, for example, L.11, “To Sisters Barbe Angiboust and Louise Ganset,” 26 October 1639, Ibid., 20.
51 See L.40, “To Madame...,” [undated], Ibid., 679.
52 This was the practice of Louise de Marillac as evidenced by letters written between the Years 1639 and 1660. See Ibid., 151-231, in which there appear 25 instances of such a closing statement.
and soul in order that they may grow by sharing in His merits. Henceforth, I shall exist only through Him and in Him since He has willed to lower Himself to assume human nature.54

Louise had frequent contact with the Capuchin religious, a community she tried to join but to which she was refused entrance for reasons of health. They had a strong devotion to the Five Wounds of Our Lord. At that stage in her life, she may well have also come in contact with the works of contemporary writers like Père Joseph, the original Éminence grise, the counselor of Richelieu, who in 1623 urged devout people to find in the Open Heart of Jesus, “the living fountain of pure love and the center of all their works.” In 1636, he introduced religious in Paris to the “Exercise of the Devotion to the Five Wounds of Our Lord.”55

However, her contact with the writings of Francis de Sales and with the Visitation nuns would surely have influenced her most strongly. She was a friend of Jane Frances de Chantal, to whom Francis had written on 10 June 1611, “I thought we ought to take as our arms a heart pierced by two arrows, enclosed in a crown of thorns, this heart serving as a setting to a cross which will rise from there, and will be inscribed with the Sacred names of Jesus and Mary… Truly our little Congregation is a work of the hearts of Jesus and Mary. The dying Savior gave birth to us through the wound of His Sacred Heart.”56

In speaking to the sisters about the heart of Jesus, Louise’s emphasis, like Vincent’s, is on the affective and effective love they are to bring to the poor: “During this time of recreation, reflect on the eternal joy that you will have in heaven if, on earth, you love God and your neighbor as He has commanded you. To help you practice the love you owe your neighbor, remember when you are together that the bond of union among you is the Blood shed by the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ.”57

Her paintings

It is surprising that so little has been written about Louise as a painter, surely a very interesting facet of her personality. Vincent refers to her paintings as early as 1630.58 We still have a number of them and know that there were many more. Louise called them, “the little occasions for amusement that I find in holy cards and other devotions.”59

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54 A.15B, “On the Desire to Give Oneself to God,” [c. 1622], Ibid., 693.
59 A.11, “Notes during a Retreat,” SW, 783.
Here I will comment briefly only about those paintings which are related to her devotion to the heart of Jesus.

1. The Good Shepherd

We possess three miniature watercolors painted by Saint Louise. One of these, shown above, depicts the Good Shepherd surrounded by his sheep. In the background, which is quite detailed, Louise has placed towers, a home, a fence, a river, a wall, trees, birds, and plants. In the foreground, she portrays Jesus seated, four sheep with him. One has climbed onto Jesus’ lap and is quenching his thirst at the wound in Jesus’ side. Two others appear to be doing the same at Jesus’ feet. A fourth seems about to kiss Jesus. One can see the wound on Jesus’ left hand.

Here, then, we see the influence of devotion to the five wounds of Jesus, popular at that time. Devotion to the wound in Jesus’ side, as discussed previously, developed into devotion to his heart.

2. A medallion of Christ

A small medallion, painted by Louise, is in the archives of the Daughters of Charity at rue du Bac, and was formerly in the apartment of the Mother General.

Close photographic analysis of the painting reveals a heart which the naked eye can barely see, and was unnoticed for years. On the right-hand banner, near the head of Christ, are the words, “Learn from me that I am gentle...”, and on the left-hand banner, “Come, blessed of my Father...” This is the Lord of Charity, and it was images like this that Saint Louise referred to when she wrote, “I am enclosing pictures for you. One is a Lord of Charity to put in the room where you receive the poor. The other is for your room.”60

As can be seen below, an attestation on the reverse side of the medallion states: “Cet image a été peinte de la propre main de la vénérable Louise de Marillac, veuve de M. le Gras, secrétaire de la reine Marie de Medicis, et 1ère Supérieure de la Compagnie. Morte le 15 mars 1660

60 L.3, “To a Sister,” [Between 1640 and 1646], Ibid., 335.
[This image was painted by the very hand of the venerable Louise de Marillac, widow of Monsieur le Gras, secretary of the queen Marie de Medicis and first Superioress of the Company. Died, 15 March 1660].

3. A large “Lord of Charity”

Over the years, Vincent sent Louise various images of the Lord of Charity, painted by unknown artists. Louise passed a number of them on to houses of the Daughters, and painted some herself. Around 1637, she sent two to Barbe Angiboust, one for the room where the sisters received the poor, and one for her own room. In 1647, Louise asked Vincent for more images of the Lord of Charity. Vincent must have liked these images; in 1656, he told Jean Martin in Turin that he would send him several copies of the Lord of Charity.

The large painting below is currently housed on the staircase near the office of the Superior General in the Maison-Mère of the Daughters of Charity, rue du Bac. At the bottom of the painting someone has written in capital letters: “Ce tableau a été peint par Mlle. Le Gras notre mère et institutrice [This tableau was done by Mademoiselle Le Gras, our mother and founder].”

In 1891 this painting was noticed in a chapel annexed to the cathedral of Cahors, where a house of the Daughters of Charity had been established in the time of Vincent and Louise. It is likely that this house, like many others, received a “Lord of Charity” from Louise. Such paintings were probably also placed in the room or chapel where the Confraternities of the Ladies of Charity met, so that the members might have an image of

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61 It is interesting to note that in the French edition of Écrits Spirituels the letter listed as L.3 appears twice. The first time, as cited in the footnote immediately above; the second time as L.3, “à Sœur Barbe Angiboust,” [vers 1637], ES, 680. In the English translation, however, the second appearance of L.3 is eliminated. The Translator’s Note to the English translation states: “Entries which could not be verified have been eliminated.” See SW, xxxv.

62 L.190, “To Monsieur Vincent,” [August 1647], SW, 224; This same letter appears with a different date ascribed; see Letter 999, “Saint Louise to Saint Vincent,” October 1647, CCD, 3:255.

the Lord, their patron. It appears that, for some reason, the sisters in Cahors had a local artist add 25 centimeters of canvas around the painting, harmonizing the new canvas with the original painting and adding the inscription. The painting was probably sent to the chapel during the French Revolution, when the sisters were expelled from the orphanage they ran in Cahors. In 1891, a member of the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul drew it to the attention of a confre, M. Méout, who was the superior of the major seminary there. The bishop of Cahors gave it to the Daughters at the Maison-Mère.

The work pictures Jesus, almost life-size, with open arms, his head inclined and his eyes lowered as if he were speaking to someone who is imploring him. He is standing on a globe to signify that he is both its creator and its savior. His feet and hands reveal his wounds. His heart radiates light.

It is a remarkable image, particularly if one considers that it was created decades before Saint Margaret Mary’s visions of the Sacred Heart. The heart painted by Louise is simpler than the one that Margaret Mary later popularized, without a flame, and with no crown of thorns. It is one of the first such representations of the heart of Jesus that we know of. Some feel the figure of Christ was painted by someone else (since the paintings of Louise that we possess are so small), and that Louise added the heart.

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64 This is another related topic which cannot be treated here, but merits further research. In setting up the Confraternity of Charity at Châtillon-les-Dombes in November 1617, Vincent gave them the Lord of Charity as their patron: “Since, in all confraternities, the holy custom of the Church is to propose a patron, and since the works gain their value and dignity from the purpose for which they are performed, the Servants of the Poor will take for patron Our Lord Jesus and for its aim the accomplishment of His very ardent desire that Christians should practice among themselves the works of charity and mercy. This desire He makes clear to us in His own words: ‘Be merciful as my Father is merciful,’ and in these words: ‘Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me to eat… I was sick and you visited me… for what you have done to the least of those, you did to me.’” See Document 126, “Charity of Women (Châtillon-les-Dombes),” November-December 1617, *Ibid.*, 13b:9.
Similar images of the “Lord of Charity” can still be found today in Boulages, Chavagnes, Paris, l’Huître, St. Ouen, St. Germain en Laye, Toulouse and, most likely, in other places. All are similar to the medallion above and to the painting of the Lord of Charity on the staircase at the Motherhouse of the Daughters, except that a heart is not visible in the other images.

IV. The emblems of the two Companies

The emblems of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity both appear to derive from the Lord of Charity. Did Louise influence Vincent in the choice of this emblem for the Congregation?

The image in Boulages is interesting. Fernand Portal, in an article that appeared in Petites Annales de St. Vincent de Paul, 1ère Année (Juin 1900), N°6, pp. 173-174, describes it as follows: “Tableau conservé à l’église de Boulages, diocèse de Troyes. Notre-Seigneur porte sur la poitrine un cœur couronné d’épines et surmonté d’un jet de flammes. En haut, des anges déploient des banderolles sur lesquelles on lit, à droite: ‘Venez, les bien aimés de mon Père, posséder le royaume qui vous a esté préparé dès le commencement du monde'; à gauche: ‘Pour ce que j’ay eu faim vous m’avez donné à manger, j’ay eu soif et vous m’avez donné à boire, j’ay été malade et vous m’avez visité.’ Au bas, à droite, un prêtre donne la communion à un mourant et plusieurs personnes sont à genoux auprès du lit; à gauche, deux groupes de Dames de la Charité servent des malades. Tout à fait au bas, bien en évidence: ‘La Charité de Jésus-Christ nous presse,’ et au-dessous: ‘Dieu est charité et qui demeure en charité demeure en Dieu et Dieu en lui.’ Ce tableau, peint par Duviert, est de 1666.” But contemporary photos of the image show no heart. Historian John E. Rybolt, C.M., who saw the image and photographed it, attests that no heart of Jesus was visible.

Actually, Vincent and Louise, over the course of the years, gave many different types of images to the Daughters so that they might distribute them to the poor. They regarded this as an effective way of catechizing.

While the Congregation had no official emblem in Vincent’s time, various emblems appeared, many featuring the Lord of Charity. The words on those emblems varied. Today, the image of the Lord of Charity on the Congregation’s emblem is surrounded by, “Evangelizare pauperibus misit me.” The first known instance of an emblem in which the Lord of Charity and the now universal motto are combined dates from 1655, when Firmin Get, superior in Marseilles, wrote to Saint Vincent asking his approval for its use.68 But Get’s emblem was notably different from the modern version. He placed “Evangelizare pauperibus misit me” on a ribbon below the Lord of Charity. In any event, there was not much follow-up to Get’s lead. The modern version of the emblem, in which the motto surrounds the image, dates from the nineteenth century.

In the Daughters’ emblem, seen above, a burning heart is surmounted by the crucified Lord, and surrounded by “Charitas christi urget nos.” It is clear that this emblem aims to signify that the heart of the crucified Lord is the font of the Company’s works of love.

Below, the reader can see an emblem of the Congregation of the Mission, in color, based on the Lord of Charity,69 and the emblem of the Daughters of Charity with the heart of Jesus Crucified.70

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69 There are many other interesting topics that one might write about in relationship to the heart of Jesus and the Vincentian tradition; e.g., the image on the reverse side of the Miraculous Medal, images of Saint Vincent with a burning heart, etc. In order to keep this article within reasonable length, however, I must leave those to another day (and perhaps another author!).
70 Much more could be said about Louise’s devotion to the Crucified Lord, which, as is evident on the emblem, is related to her devotion to his heart. I have touched on this topic briefly in “The Cross in Vincentian Spirituality,” which appears in my work He Hears the Cry of the Poor (New York: New City Press, 1995) 30-51, available also at http://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentian_ebooks/2/#. In her will, Louise asked that a cross be placed at her burial place and that it would bear the inscription “Spes Unica,” an allusion to a line from a famous sixth-century hymn, “Vexilla Regis Prodeunt” (The Banners of the King Unfurl), whose ninth stanza begins: “O Crux ave, spes unica” (Hail, O Cross, our only hope). See http://www.preces-latiniae.org/thesaurus/Hymni/Vexilla.html (accessed 29 July 2013).
V. Vincent’s and Louise’s focus on the heart of Jesus — some implications for the spirituality of the Vincentian Family today

1. Focus on the heart of Jesus heightens our awareness of the limitless love of God

Some words are more than words. They are universal symbols that evoke feelings and transmit levels of meaning that go far beyond any definition found in a dictionary. German philosophers and theologians sometimes refer to them as Urworte. Life, light, spirit, and a number of other words have a significance that runs much deeper than their literal sense; they come inextricably bundled together with a series of emotions.

Heart is one of these symbolic words. It means more than a muscle which pumps blood and which doctors can now transplant. We use heart in all sorts of ways: “He’s all heart”; “Have a heart”; “The heart of the matter.” But in its deepest sense, heart signifies the core of the human person. It refers to the inner wellspring of love. When we speak of the heart of Jesus, we are referring to the center of his person, where God himself is revealed as boundless love. In the heart of Jesus we experience the height and depth, the length and breadth of God. In the pierced heart of Jesus, from which, on the cross, blood and water flow out, we experience death and life, sorrow and joy, weeping and laughing, darkness and light.

Even here, our words fail. When I refer to “God’s limitless love,” it is not just that God has a love that knows no bounds. Rather, God is limitless love. The experience of that love

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71 See Goethe’s poem “Urworte. Orphisch,” which lists five such words: Demon, Chance, Love, Necessity, and Hope. Karl Rahner, the great twentieth-century theologian, speaks of Urworte as “creative words,” “living words in which the soft music of infinity plays,” “primordial words in which a door is mysteriously opened to us into the unfathomable depths of true reality.” Paroles maternelles or paroles-de-l’origine (urworte) is an essential term used by Rahner in “Prêtre et poète” (“Priest and Poet”) in his, Éléments de théologie spirituelle (Paris: Desclee De Brouwer, 1964).
is central to all Christian spirituality. In the New Testament, love is everything. Saint John puts it quite simply, “God is love.”

The response which the God of love calls for is simple too. When asked what the greatest command is, Jesus responds without hesitation, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength; and, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The Johannine tradition states, “This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” In a summary statement, Paul says, “Owe no one anything except to love one another.” Martin Luther King, Jr., expressed the matter succinctly: “Christianity affirms that at the heart of reality is a Heart.”

Devotion to the heart of Jesus helps us to plumb the mystery of God’s love for us. “The marvelous thing is not so much that we love God, but that God first loved us.” God’s love saves us from our sin. It is liberating. It makes us whole. It drives us out to spread the same love with joy. This love has characteristics that the scriptures emphasize again and again. It is:

- freely bestowed; that is, it is pure gift, grace,
- suffering,
- forgiving, and
- constant.

2. Focus on the heart of Jesus summons us to learn to be gentle and humble

Jesus’ statement in Matthew 11:29 is clear and direct: “Learn from me that I am gentle and humble of heart.” In our wounded human condition, being gentle and humble does not come easily. It is a learning process.

Vincent himself tells us that, when he was young, he was strong-willed and easily moved to anger. He also had a tendency to be moody for long, dark periods which, he admits, caused Madame de Gondi some pain at times. But, recognizing these traits

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73 1 John 4:16.


75 John 13:35.

76 Romans 13:8.


78 John 13:35.

79 Classical theology has consistently found it difficult to reconcile the revelation of God in Jesus as “suffering love” with its conviction that God, being perfect, cannot suffer.

within himself, “I addressed myself to God… to beg him earnestly to change this curt and forbidding disposition of mine for a meek and benign one. By the grace of Our Lord and with some effort on my part to repress the outbursts of passion, I was able to get rid of my black disposition.”

Saint Vincent speaks with considerable modesty here.

Abelly, his first biographer, attests that Vincent had an enormous admiration for Francis de Sales, whom he considered the gentlest person he had ever known; and that Vincent profited so well from the example of the Bishop of Geneva that he acquired a remarkable gentleness and affability, and had a wonderful way of speaking and relating with all different kinds of persons. In fact, he learned the lesson of gentleness so well that he was often compared with Saint Francis de Sales. Collet observes that his gentleness and affability became proverbial, and that people said the same things about him that he himself said about Francis.

Humility stands near the top, and sometimes at the very top, of the list of virtues Vincent recommends to his followers. It is “…the basis of all holiness in the Gospels,” he wrote, “and a bond of the entire spiritual life. If a person has this humility everything good will come along with it. If he does not have it, he will lose any good he may have and will always be anxious and worried.”

Few New Testament imperatives are as clear as Jesus’ call to, “Learn from me that I am gentle and humble of heart.” Vincent saw gentleness and humility as indispensable missionary virtues, as inseparable as twin sisters.

3. Focus on the heart of Jesus draws us to be vulnerable

The Latin word vulnus means wound. The humble know their woundedness. In fact, it is precisely the vulnerable who are capable of letting God’s saving love, and the love of others, enter in. Consciousness of our own sinfulness and limitations, a fundamental aspect of humility, is basic to salvation. It is only when we recognize our woundedness, and humbly come to the Lord, that we can be healed. In “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” Oscar Wilde, the Irish playwright and poet writes:

How else but through a broken heart
May Lord Christ enter in?

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82 Ibid., 3:165.


84 Constitutions and Statutes, “Common Rules, II, 7,” 111.


Wilde, who at this stage in his life was a broken man writing from exile in France, saw that wounded hearts have an opening through which Christ can enter. He perceived, from experience, that a sense of our own weakness opens us to our fellow men and women so that we respond to them with compassion.

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac emphasized throughout their lives how indispensable recognition of our dependence on God, and on others, is for those called to serve the poor. Without a vulnerable heart, we remain untouched by the poor. Our love is neither affective nor effective. In his book The Wounded Healer, written more than three decades ago and which remains popular to this day, Henri Nouwen emphasized that it is only when we are vulnerable that we can be effective healers of others. A Daily Meditation offered by the Henri Nouwen Society recounted these words of his:

Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not “How can we hide our wounds?” so we don’t have to be embarrassed, but “How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?” When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.

Jesus is God’s wounded healer: through his wounds we are healed. Jesus’ suffering and death brought joy and life. His humiliation brought glory; his rejection brought a community of love. As followers of Jesus we can also allow our wounds to bring healing to others.87

In the end, when we recognize our woundedness and weakness, Vincent urges us to run to the Lord with “exuberant trust.”88

4. Focus on the heart of Jesus offers us an often unused road toward wisdom and discernment

There is a wisdom which goes beyond human knowledge and that flows from the heart. In the Christian tradition, truth and love are inseparable,89 though philosophers and theologians have continually wrestled with the relationship between the mind and heart. Growing in love involves penetrating to the truth of the beloved. We come to understand those we love, not just on the surface but in their depth. Likewise, growing in truth involves moving toward deeper communion, overcoming differences, “looking for the larger truth that embraces my little truth and that of the other.”90


90 Timothy Radcliffe, I Call You Friends (New York: Continuum, 2001), 80.
There is a delicate interplay between mind and heart in the search for truth. For those with a highly intellectual formation, Pascal’s corrective can be very helpful: “The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know. We feel it in a thousand things.” Antoine de Saint-Exupéry expresses the same conviction: “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.

Some, by penetrating to the heart of God, as revealed in Jesus, and by penetrating to the heart of the poor through personal contact, acquire a wisdom that the learned often lack. They do not merely know about God; rather, they know God because, as Vincent and Louise both said, God speaks “heart to heart” with them. They also know the poor, because their love reaches into the heart of the marginalized and abandoned and evokes a resonant response.

In a moving conference, Vincent assures the Daughters of Charity that if they come humbly before the Lord, he will speak with them “heart to heart.” He tells them, “Once a person has reached this point, God takes pleasure in that soul, especially since He sees in her the features of His divine perfections, His love, His goodness, and His wisdom, which He has implanted in her by His grace.” He assures them, “Here’s what will happen, Sisters: all your actions, all your words, and everything else you do will be pleasing in the eyes of God, and people will see the Daughters of Charity growing in virtue from day to day.”

We have all known learned people who are not at all wise. From time-to-time we also meet people who have a wisdom that clearly flows from their union with God as revealed in Christ. They have penetrated God’s heart, and absorbed “wisdom from above.” To use a phrase from the prayer to the Holy Spirit that many in the Vincentian Family say daily, wisdom is recta sapere, rendered in English rather aptly as “a sense of the true and a taste for the good.”

Thomas Merton sums this up in his brief poem, “Wisdom”:

I studied it and it taught me nothing.
I learned it and soon forgot everything else:
Having forgotten, I was burdened with knowledge--
The insupportable knowledge of nothing.

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How sweet my life would be, if I were wise!
Wisdom is well known
When it is no longer seen or thought of.
Only then is understanding bearable.97

5. Focus on the heart of Jesus moves us to have a love that is expansive (mission) and that is both affective and effective (charité)

Love is a fire. It is a flame, Saint Vincent said. The expansive love of Jesus’ heart, his zeal, mirrored in our hearts, is a love that burns with compassion for those around us and drives us out to serve them. It is warm, but also concrete and effective, as the Vincentian tradition reminds us again and again. When it burns within us, people see in us the reflection of the heart of Jesus.

It is a mistake to think this love is always serene and peaceful. Dorothy Day, quoting Dostoevsky, reminds us: “Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.”98 It can mean dying in countless everyday ways. It can mean pouring out one’s blood, as did the pierced heart of Jesus on the cross. But it is the only thing worthwhile. It lasts, as Paul attests.99

Devotion to the heart of Jesus has its historical roots in a profound experience of God’s love as revealed in Christ. It is a way in which people have attempted to express God’s self-revelation to them. They experience that, in the person of Jesus, they have met God, who is love, and that, in going to the very depths of Jesus’ person, to his heart, they have found forgiving, healing, saving love.

What we call “Devotion to the Sacred Heart” is a popular devotion, with its own recommended set of prayers and practices.100 It began with John Eudes and Margaret Mary Alacoque, and is a specific instance of how focus on Jesus’ heart came to be concretized over a long period in history. But a simple focus on the heart of Jesus, like that found in the beliefs of Vincent and Louise, has roots that are basic to Christian spirituality. It draws us to meditate often on God’s deep personal love for us. Here, there is no question of a piety that today we call “intimism,” a type of spirituality that is overly focused on oneself without any social dimension. Vincent and Louise wanted to avoid that type of piety completely.

99 1 Cor. 13:13.
100 At the time of the French Revolution, particularly in the Vendée, and again in the 1870s, devotion to the Sacred Heart gathered strong political overtones and became an emblem of the counter-revolutionary fervor of some Catholics. It is one of the reasons why the Basilica of Sacré-Cœur in Paris was initially poorly received by a number of Parisians. See Jonas, Cult, 122-197. Interestingly, the Basilica has a chapel dedicated to Saint Vincent in which there is a mosaic which highlights Saint Louise’s devotion to the heart of Jesus. It depicts the Lord of Charity that now hangs at the Maison-Mère of the Daughters. There are various references in the Annales to the devotion that Fr. Étienne, Fr. Fiat, and Fr. Villette had to the Sacred Heart. See, for several examples, Annales 81 (1916), 600; Annales 98 (1933), 685. See also the text of the “Acte d’amende honorable de la consécration au Sacré-Cœur de Jésus, à réciter, tous les ans, le jour de sa fête, par les membres de la Congrégation de la Mission,” in the circular letter of Fr. Fiat on 2 February 1881.
Rather, the accent here is on what is central to the Good News: God, who reveals himself in Jesus, loves us deeply. The Scriptures are filled with images to express this. God holds us in the palm of his hand. He walks with us on the journey. He reveals himself to us face-to-face. He forgives us our sins. He lives with us. He dies for us.

*Mission et Charité* characterize the family to which Vincent and Louise gave birth. The two founders’ focus on the heart of Jesus, and the extraordinary impact of Jesus’ heart on their own hearts, moved them toward missionary zeal and toward affective and effective charity.
The miniature painted by Louise de Marillac depicting the Good Shepherd surrounded by his sheep. Original is housed at the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, Paris.

Courtesy of the author
The front and back sides of the small medallion painted by Louise de Marillac.

*Courtesy of the author*
The “Lord of Charity” painted by Louise de Marillac; discovered in Cahors, France, in 1891.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute
The “modern” emblem of the Congregation of the Mission.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute
The emblem of the Daughters of Charity.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute
Further examples of the emblems for both the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute