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Vincent de Paul and the Galleys of France

JOHN E. RYBOLT, C.M., PH.D.
In 1619, six years before the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission, Louis XIII appointed Vincent de Paul “Royal Chaplain of the Galleys of France.”¹ He continued in this responsibility until the last years of his life. This study reviews this work, often neglected in the popular recounting of his accomplishments.

Galley, definitions

In Vincent’s time, the term “galley” [galère] was applied to a long and narrow ship, about three feet above the water line, propelled primarily by oars but also having masts for sails (mainly triangular, or lateen, sails). Ships with multiple rowers date from remote antiquity, from the time of the Egyptians, as carvings and written descriptions attest. In ancient Greece and Rome, these ships, originally used for commercial transportation, became war vessels. Biremes and triremes were propelled by two or three oarsmen respectively sitting in rows above or below each other, each with a single oar. In the sixteenth century maritime powers still used very large galleys, and the final great sea battle, the battle of Lepanto, occurred in 1571. It was the last of a long series of engagements between Muslims and Christians, and it was fought in shallow waters. As a result, the Mediterranean was left divided between the Ottoman east and the Christian west.

The Ottoman galleys then expanded to Barbary, the traditional name for the North African coast, now comprising Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. They served mainly for piracy: attacking Christian vessels, seizing their goods and passengers, and often using the Christian galleys to swell their fleets. They also regularly attacked coastal settlements to loot and acquire slaves either for work or for ransom.²

The Christian-rowed vessels (from Spain, France, Genoa, Venice, the Papal States, and others) continued to develop. The Italians had the galleass [galeazzo], a larger and heavier craft, or the galliot, a smaller and lighter version. The galleon, by contrast, was a sailing ship propelled by wind and sails, and not by oars. The Spanish developed these for both war and commerce, using them to cross the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in service of the Spanish Empire. All the ships were armed with cannons and staffed by sailors.

A new system of rowing began in Venice, the great sea power of the period. In the sixteenth century, the Venetians gave up the one-man/one-oar system passed down from antiquity in favor of a more efficient style of several-men/one-oar. This relieved the problem of the possible clash of multiple oars for various reasons, such as broken oars or errors by an oarsman in following the highly complex system of synchronized rowing.


France lagged far behind its neighbors in the use of galleys, inasmuch as they were utilized principally for commercial interests such as transporting goods, the long-haul trucks of their day. Henry IV had only one galley, and Louis XIII only twelve at his death. His son, Louis XIV, began with only nine in 1661. As a result, in an effort to build a fleet, he then either appropriated others from commercial owners or constructed new ones to his specifications.

A primary reason for this growth was that France sought to safeguard its coasts from other powers. Consequently, it also had to find a source of suitable rowers. Since France had only a few galleys by the beginning of the seventeenth century, it could rely either on paid volunteers (the *bonnevoglies*), or on slaves purchased in the numerous slave markets found in Genoa, Livorno, Malta, Mallorca, and even Constantinople. Many of these were prisoners of war, and a percentage of them, perhaps one quarter, were Muslims.\(^3\) The majority, then, were Christians, often Orthodox from Eastern Europe.

It is unclear who first had the idea of using French criminals for service on the galleys—they were not slaves—but it developed during the sixteenth century in the time of Francis I as a kind of punishment, along with banishment from one’s home territory.\(^4\) The first law concerning using convicts for galleys dates from 1561, and in 1564, another extended the time of punishment to no less than ten years. This system powerfully affected Vincent’s ministry. As Henri de Maupas du Tour relates in his funeral oration: Vincent could not recount their suffering without becoming “bathed in tears,” describing the prisoners as, “being covered with vermin and maggots.”\(^5\)


"Until the coming of the concentration camp, the galley held an undisputed pre-eminence as the darkest blot on Western civilization; a galley, shuddered a poetic observer, would cast a shadow in the blackest midnight."6 Although no French galley has survived, the words galère or galérien (a galley convict) continue in the French language as synonyms for any sort of brutal and rough conditions. It was in this system that the kindly Vincent de Paul, often portrayed simply as caring lovingly for abandoned children, began a new ministry. In his work, he dealt with human fuel, men who were used principally to power the ships, working until they could no longer do so because of illness or death, the most common reason.

As a member of the Gondi household, he would have had occasions to observe the convicts in Paris being held before their transfer to the galleys in Marseilles. They were under the authority of Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi, general of the galleys. Vincent recalled later in a conference to the Daughters of Charity, “I’ve seen those poor men treated like animals; that caused God to be moved with compassion.”7 This must have happened shortly after he returned from Châtillon in 1617, since he had more time to engage in pastoral work. One of his first cares was to remove prisoners from such inhuman confinement as the dungeon in the Châtelet of Paris. It was known as “the Dyke of Hypocras where a prisoner could not sit or lie down; he had to stand in or trample wearily the filthy water swishing about him, his body chained and bent over his swollen, rotting feet.”8 No one survived more than a month there.

Vincent located a building for rent in the city, and the convicts were transferred there. He often spent time with them and recalled in an undated letter: “I kissed their chains, showed compassion for their distress, and expressed sorrow for their misfortune.”9 After about ten years, he acquired a much larger property, located on the left bank of the River Seine. It had been designed as a fort, La Tournelle, upriver from Notre Dame. Originally planned to protect the city, it had long outlived its usefulness. In 1632, therefore, the prisoners were transferred here.10

This property was situated in the parish of St. Nicholas du Chardonnet, an easy walk from the Bons-Enfants, the Congregation’s first house. With the aid of the pastor, Vincent secured regular help from some of his many assistant priests to care sacramentally for the prisoners, especially when the time approached for their departure to the galleys

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8 Mary Purcell, The World of Monsieur Vincent (New York, 1963), 82; the “Dyke” translates chausse, an underground space in the shape of a deep inverted funnel, likely named from the shape of a bottle containing a liqueur named Hippocras. The prisoner was let down by ropes through the narrow opening and escape was impossible.
themselves. He encouraged the members of the parish Confraternity of Charity to help as well, primarily mature women who could provide kindness and the small necessities of life. In this case, too, the Daughters of Charity, who lived nearby, worked with the Confraternity.\footnote{See Letter 2044, “Saint Louise to Saint Vincent,” 8 April 1656, CCD, 5:589, where she suggests that Vincent should visit the prisoners at the time that the Ladies bring them their meal.}

Vincent drew up rules to guide them in their service.\footnote{Document 149b, “Particular Rules for the Sisters who Minister to the Galley Convicts,” \textit{Ibid.}, 13b:221-25.} Article one is the most important, inasmuch as it prefaces the rules that follow. It is clear that the founder had thought long and hard about the Sisters’ service.

(1) Just as the ministry of the Sisters of the Charity with the galley convicts is one of the most difficult and dangerous they can have, because of the management of money involved as well as the kind of persons to be visited there, it is also one of the most meritorious and pleasing to God when carried out properly, because of what is practiced there to a high degree: the corporal and spiritual works of mercy for persons who are so wretched in body and soul that it is almost beyond imagining. That is why those who are called by God to this holy ministry must, on the one hand, endeavor to make themselves worthy of it by the practice of the requisite virtues and by an exact observance of their Rules, and, on the other, encourage one another and have great confidence in Our Lord Jesus Christ, keeping in mind that, by assisting those poor persons, they will render Him a service as pleasing or more pleasing to Him, than if it were done to His own person. He will not fail to give them as a reward the graces needed to overcome all the difficulties they might encounter there, in addition to the rich crown He reserves for them in heaven.
Vincent also clearly understood the implication of mixing devoted women with sex-starved men, as seen below, as well as how this concerned the confrères in similar service.

(4) They will make it a point to bring them a change of linen every Saturday and have the soiled linen washed. At that time they will remember to renew interiorly the spirit of purity and modesty in order to protect themselves against the usual insolence of such persons in these circumstances.

(10) When they go to serve the men, they will be extremely careful that no persons suspected of being disreputable or of giving bad advice go in with them. To avoid that, they will never allow anyone to enter except persons who they are sure are there to be of service to them rather than to do them harm.

This service lasted for decades, as seen from a report by Jean Marteilhe, a Huguenot leader condemned to the galleys. Despite his anti-Catholic bias and numerous falsehoods, he reported as follows in 1687: “As regards the food, they [the convicts] have it quite well. A kind of beguines, called the Grey Sisters, daily at midday bring soup, meat, and good bread in sufficient quantity.”

Not everything went well, and an astonishing scandal developed involving one of the convicts and a Sister. While serving at La Tournelle, she became captivated by one of the men and they planned to be married. They discussed their hopes with one of the priest chaplains, but he did not realize that the bride was a Daughter of Charity. When he discovered her identity, he wisely turned to another Daughter of Charity working in his parish, and she forwarded the information to Louise de Marillac. Her description, although interesting, does not resolve the story. Vincent was, as superior general, informed and he assembled several advisers (Fathers Antoine Portail, René Alméras, and Louis Abelly). He then interviewed the young Sister who described the history of their relationship. She refused to alter their plans. The couple drew up a marriage contract, and it seems that it went ahead. How the convict was released is unclear, but perhaps he offered suitable bribes. In any case, the Sister disappeared from the records.

Sister Barbe Angiboust was perhaps a better model than her infatuated Sister in religion. At a conference after Sister Barbe’s death in 1659, the assembled Daughters of Charity spoke admiringly of her charity:

She was very patient in putting up with the troubles to be met there because of the bad temper of those men. For, although they were sometimes so angry with her as to throw the soup and meat on the ground, saying to her whatever

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13 Jean Marteilhe, Mémoires d’un galérien du Roi-Soleil, ed. by André Zysberg (Paris, 2001), 238.
their impatience suggested, she bore it all without saying a word and gently picked up the food, looking just as pleasant as if they hadn’t said or done anything to her.¹⁵

Another Sister came to Louise de Marillac with the tearful news that she was often unable to buy bread for the convicts. Louise’s comments to Vincent portray some of the difficulties of the Sisters’ service: bribery, quarrels, accusations, and lies. “You know, Most Honored Father, what those men are capable of saying and doing.”¹⁶

The Chain

“The Chain” was the technical term given to the groups of convicts moved from prison to the galleys, mainly from Paris to Marseilles.¹⁷ To identify the convicts, their heads were shaved except for a small tuft at the crown, and, after 1660, they were branded with GAL on the shoulder. The government then had to provide special and easily identifiable clothing for them. Many had grown weak in prison, despite the care offered by charitable organizations. The provision of food, clothing, and lodging, no matter how rudimentary, was a large expense for the state.

The Chain itself was a chain gang composed of future oarsmen chained two by two, front and back, who were forced to walk while carrying a heavy chain between them. Accompanying them were guards (“archers”), and drivers of horses and carts carrying supplies, the sick, and others who could pay for a ride. Occasionally, family members walked along with them, sharing their sufferings but providing them some respite. Since the so-called conductors (independent contractors) were hired to bring the convicts to the galleys, it was in their interest to keep them alive with food and water, but it was also in their interest to do so as cheaply as possible.

Sometimes numbering up to one hundred men, the Chain traveled in all weathers, but the best times were April and September. At night, they bedded down in barns or stables. Their food was principally bread, beans, and wine. They followed several routes, the most utilized from Troyes, Dijon, and finally to Châlons sur Saône. There, because of the mountainous areas bordering the river, they boarded barges on the Saône to Avignon. Once in Avignon, they walked again. On average, they made only about five miles a day (or three at the end of their exhausting trek). As the Chain passed by farms and villages, the men’s blood flowing from their shackled feet formed a gruesome trail. Some guards or unchained convicts would often steal from them and terrify the inhabitants.¹⁸ Indeed, the blood, the noise, and the looting warned the populace of a similar punishment awaiting them in case of wrongdoing.

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¹⁵ Conference 109, “The Virtues of Sister Barbe Angiboust,” 27 April 1659, CCD, 10:517.
The trip of about 350 miles took nearly a month. The few surviving accounts, mainly from after 1660 (following Vincent’s death and Louis XIV’s accession), agree that the experience of the Chain was the worst of their sufferings, exceeding even rowing the ships.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Marseilles}

Once in Marseilles, the convicts were taken to receiving ships, then examined and divided into groups according to their physical condition. The sick and physically unfit constituted the lowest class; they were consigned to on-shore work. The others then had to confront their masters on-board, the commander (called the \textit{comite}), officers, sailors, guards, and others responsible for the good order of the galley. A fully staffed ship included between 350 and 500 oarsmen, with the larger number assigned to the flagship, or \textit{réale}. In the summer, with good weather and calm seas, the new arrivals began to learn the art of rowing and military maneuvers. Generally, they were placed alongside other convicts who had spent at least a year in training.

The oarsmen were, as mentioned previously, chained to their benches. Called “The Oar,” they numbered five to a bench, with the place nearest the water being the preferred one since the energy required to row was the least. The convict at the end of the oar, in the center of the ship, had the most demanding position, since the oar had to be pulled from the level of his feet to above his head. Convicts with funds could often bribe their way to easier positions. Since the oars were too thick to grasp, handles were attached for each of the rowers.

A crewmember beat out the cadence on a drum or used a whistle, and it was imperative that the rowers follow it exactly. If not, they would become hopelessly out-of-sync and disrupt progress. The exact depth of the stroke was guided by the lashings on the oar. In a perfectly calm sea the ship would move placidly, but that was rarely the case. As a result, since the ship was low in the water, the waves would splash over the rowers, and the salt water would add to their distress.

The basic motor for the rowers, therefore, was not their arms but their back, legs, and feet. They had to keep their arms unbent at the elbows and push with their legs, alternately standing and sitting, while raising the oar even above their head. Each rower was issued a large piece of cork attached by a cord around his neck. This plug (the *tap en bouche* or *bâillon*) kept them quiet when silence was important, so as to better hear commands or be unheard as the galley moved.\(^\text{20}\)

John Evelyn, a young Englishman on tour, left an important eyewitness account of rowers in his diary dated 1644. He must have witnessed a training session.

The spectacle [of rowing] was to me new and strange, to see so many hundreds of miserably naked persons, their heads being shaven close and having only high red bonnets, a pair of coarse canvass drawers, their whole backs and legs naked, doubly chained about their middle and legs, in couples, and made fast to their seats.... The rising-forward and falling-back at their oar, is a miserable spectacle, and the noise of their chains, with the roaring of the beaten waters, has something of strange and fearful in it to one unaccustomed to it. They are ruled and chastised by strokes on their backs and soles of their feet, on the least disorder, and without the least humanity.\(^\text{21}\)

His account introduces the punishments meted out regularly. Junior officers moved along a central walkway, employing a bullwhip (*nerf de boeuf*) to keep the oarsmen attentive. For serious offences, they would beat a rower’s elevated soles with wooden rods (the bastinado). This punishment could leave the man crippled for some time and consequently unable to row during his recovery.

**Life ashore**

Surprisingly, the galleys spent three quarters of the year ashore. The ships, as mentioned previously, were too low in the water to move in rough seas. They were designed principally as a coast guard patrol, since they could not cross the Mediterranean directly.\(^\text{22}\) The problem, then, was what to do with the growing number of convicts?

The solution for the able-bodied was work. Those with some education could serve as office personnel, such as secretaries, bookkeepers, or purchasing agents. Others with less education served in construction, either for naval purposes or for official works: digging, hauling, stoncutting, etc. Many learned skills as carpenters or shipwrights, building or repairing vessels of all sorts, especially galleys. Others made or repaired sails, and those unable to do much else were set to work cleaning ships or knitting stockings. These workers received a pittance, but at least it allowed them to provide some extras for themselves, or

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\(^\text{22}\) Appendix 4, “Louis XIV to the Consuls of Marseilles,” 5 July 1657, CCD, 6:649.
the wherewithal to bribe their guards for extra rations or wine. Naturally, this increasing workforce disrupted the Marseilles labor market, since citizens sometimes found it difficult to find a job.

The convicts normally returned after work to eat and sleep aboard the galleys. They were confined to narrow spaces on and underneath their benches. To protect them from the frequent rains and cold weather, a sail was spread over the ship like a tent; it was better than nothing.

In leisure time, the convicts could go ashore on occasion to buy supplies or sell their handiwork. Those with greater resources could buy alcohol from the crew or purchase sexual services, as Vincent noted obliquely in the rules for his confrères who cared for the convicts: “(10) [They should be informed] if women and young boys are permitted to board, and whether they allow some of these boys to sleep on the galleys.”23 Homosexual relations among the convicts themselves were a part of this reality as well.24

Although malingerers could sometimes bribe their way into the hospital, it was set up for those who truly needed care. Gondi had planned this institution, but he never finished it. This was perhaps because in 1635 the last member of the family to hold his position had to sell it to the duke de Richelieu, nephew of the duchess of Aiguillon.25 Bishop Jean-Baptiste Gault of Marseilles, in office only briefly (1642-43), worked on it, and with the duchess’ financial support, the three-hundred-bed hospital was completed with royal approval in 1646. Vincentians assigned to Marseilles supervised its management, made more complex by rampant diseases. As Paul Bamford notes:

The compounded effects of fatigue in the march to Marseilles, the inadequacy of the rations received, the labor in working the oars, the tainted food and water that was sometimes consumed, the incidence of communicable disease among the

crowded oarsmen, and countless other circumstances [rats, fleas, lice; probably venereal diseases] help to explain why there were few really long-lived oarsmen on French galleys.\textsuperscript{26}

André Zysberg, who has devoted his career to the study of the galleys, analyzed the cases of some 60,000 convicts from 1680 to 1715, the height of the galley period. His data on the outcomes of the convicts (including life expectancy, liberation, and length of term) may be taken as approximations of the earlier period under Vincent (1619-60). Out of the total deaths known from 1680 (17,614), 6.1\% died on the chain, and 86.4\% died in the hospital. Out of those whose length of term is known (16,278), 32.5\% died in less than one year, 16.3\% died in their second year, and 10.9\% in their third year.\textsuperscript{27}

Thus, the Marseilles Vincentians had to care for large numbers of the sick and dying. They also had to be certain that prayers were held. “(1) They should be informed whether morning and evening prayers are held on the galleys, and whether during them each one remains in a decent posture to hear them.”\textsuperscript{28} Besides these daily duties, they were required to give missions to the convicts at least once every five years for each galley. The two or three priests posted to each ship for about three weeks led daily prayers, taught catechism, held spiritual reading in small groups, and prepared the oarsmen and others for receiving the sacraments. With the exception of founding a Confraternity of Charity at the end of a mission, the order of the galley missions resembled closely that followed by Vincentians in rural parishes. Not all the convicts were Catholics, but they were required to attend and to maintain a respectful bearing during the exercises of the mission. In the time of Louis XIV, when numerous Huguenots were condemned to the galleys because of their religion, maintaining order became much more difficult. A nineteenth-century schoolbook, written in an anticlerical period, repeated Marteilhe’s many lies and misstatements:

Almost all the chaplains were very severe Lazarists. They were the very cruel persecutors of the Protestant convicts, spying on them, intercepting their mail, keeping them from receiving charity from their brethren, which was so necessary that without it, they would die of hunger. Anyone found distributing money [the charity] would die of a beating…. The Lazarists treated in almost the same fashion, the Protestants who did not kneel at Mass.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{26} Bamford, Fighting Ships, 224.
\textsuperscript{27} Zysberg, Les Galériens, 349-50.
\textsuperscript{28} In “Regulation for the priests of the Mission of Marseilles.”
As the work developed, the Missioners labored to form diocesan chaplains of good quality. This was particularly difficult since galley work was not an especially attractive assignment. As a result, those candidates often arrived with a deficient formation. To remedy this, the Vincentians held regular conferences every two weeks, on the model of the Tuesday Conferences for clergy in Paris.

Another undertaking was a kind of Red Cross service, providing access between families and their loved ones condemned to the galleys. This was later extended to those being held captive in the Barbary States. A special ministry was the evangelization of “Turks,” the typical term for Muslims. Some became Christians, and the confreres in Marseilles continued their formation by teaching the catechism in Italian, utilizing a rough vernacular spoken in North Africa. Similarly, Christian slaves “turned Turk” and thus became “renegades.” In both cases, conversion was seen as a route out of slavery.

Life at sea

When summer weather permitted, the galleys began to move from Marseilles into their accustomed duties. As a coast guard service, they surveyed the bays and inlets on the Mediterranean. Rowing managed about five knots an hour under the best conditions. When it became necessary to chase down a prowling ship from Barbary, the oarsmen had to row at a lethal pace. On occasion, they all rowed together, but normally the two front quarters rowed for about an hour, followed by the back quarters. These skirmishes became more common under Louis XIV.

A few other galleys rounded the Iberian Peninsula to guard France’s Atlantic coastline. It was in Bordeaux in 1623 or 1624 that Vincent and some of his friends conducted missions

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for the galleys. At their conclusion, his companions urged him to visit his family in Pouy near Dax, and Vincent recorded his poignant reflections on his emotions when he left them.32 The galleys moored at Bordeaux were available during the conflict with the English over the port of La Rochelle. The French blockaded the port with them in 1627-28, and because of a combination of circumstances, the government of Louis XIII emerged victorious. The galleys, however, did not directly engage in battle with the English.

From Marseilles, the galleys could carry out another of their functions: the projection of French power. This was accomplished with a fanfare of trumpets and drums, cannon shots, and flags and banners flying. By showing off French military might along the Italian and Spanish coasts and the Balearics, it was hoped that threats to France would diminish. As this appealed especially to Louis XIV, he greatly enlarged the fleet.

Since battles fought with galleys had become outdated, the galley service was of little use in the larger picture. Besides, providing the human fuel for them was enormously expensive and inefficient. This ultimately doomed the galleys, but it would take several decades to complete their use.

Substituting for a prisoner?

Even during Vincent’s lifetime, a story circulated that he substituted himself for a prisoner. In the nineteenth century, a large painting by Léon Bonnat in the Paris church of St. Nicholas des Champs perpetuated this fantasy. Abelly told the story and added that one day when a confrere asked the founder about it, he merely smiled. For Abelly, this proved that it was true.33 Coste and most other biographers have rejected it because it was inherently not possible, especially since substituting for a prisoner was a capital offense. Those who accepted its veracity, such as witnesses for the beatification and canonization proceedings, disagreed on how it happened. Biographers embroidered the narrative with fanciful details,34 and thus it entered further into the realm of fiction.35 If there is a kernel of truth to it, the depiction of the event in the film Monsieur Vincent comes closest. It was likely based on the analysis of Henri Lavedan: “a brusque action, a sudden impulse, done on the spur of the moment, and short lived.”36 The film depicts a shocked Vincent aboard a galley during a race. A sailor savagely whips a rower who then collapses, and the saint leaps to his aid, moving him aside, and taking his place at the oar.37

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34 See, for example, Arthur Loth, Saint Vincent de Paul et sa Mission Sociale (Paris, 1880), 122-23.
36 Lavedan, Monsieur Vincent, 194.
37 Some have linked this story to an account of St. Paulinus of Nola as related by Gregory the Great (Dialogues, bk. 3, ch. 1), in which the saint sold himself to the Vandals to redeem the son of a poor widow. See: http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/gregory_03_dialogues_book3.htm#C1
Later years

What began as a personal ministry for Vincent de Paul developed into a major commitment by the Congregation of the Mission. Since Vincent visited Marseilles only two or three times, he had to delegate his responsibilities to the superiors of the house located there. Vincent continued his support of the work in Marseilles, which eventually linked the ministry on the French galleys with relief of French captives held in North Africa.

Vincent’s own convictions about the system of using the galleys for punishment are unknown or at least unclear. We never hear of him calling for a change to it, only for more humane care for those condemned. However, he called the prisoners “the scum and malice of the kingdom,” whose life of penance was clearly deserved. Jean Le Vacher, the consul in Tunis, reported to Vincent regularly on his ministry among the prisoners, and shared Vincent’s ideas. Le Vacher sympathized with the French prisoners held in North Africa: “how many blows those wicked renegades in charge rained upon their poor bodies!” Yet, he made an important distinction between the French in France and those in Barbary:

I am well aware that convicts on the French galleys are treated no better, but the difference is that convicts in France are condemned for their crimes there, whereas the slaves in Barbary undergo all their punishment and suffering only because they are good Christians, faithful to God.

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38 The Marquise of Vins left a sizeable gift in her will for Marseilles; Conference 198, “Seeking the Kingdom of God,” 21 February 1659, CCD, 12:125.


Of course, thinking about systemic change is more a contemporary concern whose roots come from the Enlightenment. It is wrong, therefore, to expect the founder or his confreres to have protested against the system he faced.

The same must be said about his confreres in Marseilles. Jean Marteilhe, mentioned above as a Huguenot writing after 1685, had no love for the Lazarists. Still, even his malicious comments reveal the continuity of the Congregation’s style inherited from the founder.

As the leaders of this congregation had had the secret of obtaining the king’s confidence, through a certain manner of simplicity and of disinterest, people in Marseilles greatly feared the power of each of its members in particular…. Finally, these fathers knew so well how to insinuate themselves into the court that the ministers looked on them as oracles, and the Jesuits, just like the people that they had tricked, looked on them only with eyes full of envy and jealousy.⁴²

As Louis XIV pushed the development of French glory through his galley fleet, it became clear that the entire system was crashing. The authorities imported slaves from sub-Saharan Africa to become rowers, but they were unequipped to survive the cold, new diseases, and general ill treatment. A few Iroquois were also brought from Canada for punishment, but, like the Africans, they could not become oarsmen.⁴³ Ultimately, it was only under Louis XV that the system was dismantled, thereby removing what Warren Hamilton Lewis called “the darkest blot on Western civilization.”

⁴² Marteilhe, Mémoires d’un galérien, 207.
⁴³ Bamford, Fighting Ships, 165; Zysberg, Les Galériens, 60-62.
Vincent de Paul distributes Communion to galley prisoners. Illustration by Jean-Loup Chamet.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/
Vincent de Paul, kneeling, kisses the feet of a galley prisoner at La Tournelle.

One of the earliest engravings of Vincent de Paul, reproduced in The Heroic Life of Saint Vincent de Paul by Henri Lavedan. Lavedan likely erred in identifying the priest with Vincent de Paul. He is more likely Claude Bernard, a contemporary of the saint known as "the poor priest."

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/
A réale galley ship belonging to the Mediterranean fleet of Louis XIV.

Oil on canvas, c. 1694. Artist unknown.

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Vincent de Paul, chaplain of the galleys at Marseilles, holds the chain of a galley prisoner.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/
Vincent de Paul and galley prisoners in Marseilles.
Illustration from the 1841 biography *Saint Vincent de Paul* by Augustin Challamel.

*Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online*
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/
Vincent de Paul pleads for a galley prisoner.

Artist AG Laisne; engraved by De Rudder.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/