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**AT THE BEGINNING OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION**

**SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES’ CONTRIBUTION IN SHAPING**

**SAINT VINCENT’S CHARISMATIC IDENTITY**

To rediscover the meaning of our Vincentian vocation, it is necessary to go back to one’s origins, which are made up of a large number of circumstances. All of them are important. However, of these I would like to isolate a fragment—the meeting/friendship of Saint Vincent with Francis de Sales—and submit it for analysis in order to be able to draw from it elements that help us grasp the meaning of our missionary-charitable vocation today.

1. The experience of the poor and the awareness of one’s own poverty: confused material for the discovery of Saint Vincent’s vocational identity

The experiences of Gannes, Folleville, and Châtillon were the events that generated the profound and radical intuition of Saint Vincent’s vocation. It might have been aborted, however, if there had been no ground for it to mature. It is characteristic of all human planning ideas: they ignite like a fire, but then most of them go out. Vincent’s vocational intuition to put himself at the service of the poor was able to grow through a long gestation from 1617 to 1625. What was the soil that guarded the seed and brought to fruition this original intuition of giving himself to the poor by serving them “spiritually and corporally”?

In retrospect, we can say that Vincent worked out the basic orientation of his vocation by penetrating the human space of poverty and weakness, his own first, and then that of the misery around him. The encounter with the condition of human frailty was a shock to Vincent’s sensitive soul. The unjust accusation of a judge friend because of a thieving boy, the despair of the Sorbonne doctor who had relied on him, the Saint-Léonard de Chaumes, Gannes, and Châtillon events were the gateways to a deeper understanding of himself. Then the experience with the hellish conditions of the convicts, of whom he said, “I’ve seen those poor men treated like animals” (CCD X, 103); the first missions among the peasants in the lands of the Gondi, which made him exclaim, “it seemed to me that, when I reached Paris, the gates of the city were going to fall upon and crush me” (CCD XI, 391): all these and other experiences were “combustive material” that caught fire with the spark of the painful consciousness of his own personal poverty. This consciousness would lead him to say of the poor, “‘Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice,’ but the world laughs at that” (CCD XII, 103). Here, Vincent would learn to understand his own vocation and put himself at the service of the poor by “suffering” the wound of his own weakness and helplessness through the lens of the misery that surrounded him. A wound that formed in him an affinity with those miseries. Before being his reason for living, the poor were his obsession, or as he himself would say “my worry and my sorrow” (Abelly, bk. III, chap. 11, sec. 2, p. 117). They penetrated his soul and transformed it.

For Vincent, perhaps the extent to which the torment of the soul with poverty, his own and that of others, was the condition that opened to him the horizon of his vocation has not been explored sufficiently. He suffered uncertainty of meaning about life as a drama of the soul for a long time, certainly for a decade or so between 1610 and 1620, and probably still after that, at least until 1625. This spiritual torment was valuable to him, for it brought him into contact with his own disappointed desires and inconsistencies, with ideal impulses and the inability to realize them. If all this, on the one hand, stripped him of himself, dragging him into his own history like “a bee banging against glass,” according to the image he would use for Louise de Marillac; on the other hand, this torment of the spirit was the source of a strong desire for redemption for himself and for others, because desire is a transcendent force that stirs and mobilizes life.

Through this torment of the soul, Vincent came to perceive himself emptied of all forms of ideal planning and pride, feeling himself as a “beggar” of God, poor, perhaps even more “a nothingness.” He left this written about the beginning of the Mission’s foundation:

“For we’re only insignificant workers and poor ignorant men; and few or none among us are noble, powerful, learned persons or men capable of anything. So, it’s God who has done all that and has brought it about through whatever persons He has seen fit, so that all the glory may revert to Him.”

Descending into the depths of humility would be a constant attitude of his life. Such perception for Saint Vincent was not simply at the level of thought, but touched the fibers of his sensibility: it was an experience that marked him in the depths of consciousness.

That is why it became a principle of fruitfulness, for his emptied inner being was ready to receive God’s action. The humility he would later teach and require of his missionaries would not be a facade: it would rather be—as he teaches—the “empty space” that God fills with his grace:

The humble … are like valleys that draw down on themselves sap from the mountains. As soon as we empty ourselves of self, God will fill us with himself; for He can’t stand a vacuum.”

It was at this germinal moment, when Vincent’s charitable and missionary vocation was in gestation, that his encounter with Francis de Sales occurred.

2. The grace of an encounter with a living model of kindness

The year 1617, with the two experiences of Gannes/Folleville and Châtillon, had recently ended. Vincent had begun, in the early months of 1618, to attend the Conciergerie to meet the convicts and to travel as a missionary through Madame de Gondi’s countryside. These events, still in the confused state, were to mark the two directions of his vocation; namely, that the poor needed to be helped in their vital needs and to be introduced to the experience of faith. In these events, he later would recognize the origin of his major works. But at the time, they did not yet have a decisive force on the personality of the young Vincent, who was then 37 years old.

Something original in his conscience already had arisen a few years earlier, when—according to Abelly—on the famous dark night when he had decided to take the place of the theologian in a crisis of faith, he proposed to consecrate his life to the service of the poor. But this did not yet have the force of a charism. What was needed was a turning point, in which there was not only a decision of his will on behalf of the poor, but also a unifying factor that would impress on his will a decisive lure and have the energy of a charism. This event happened with the coming of Francis de Sales to Paris in 1618. It is precisely from this meeting that—in my opinion—the originality of the Vincentian charism was born; that is, that spiritual sensitivity with which Saint Vincent lived and delivered to the Church a new style of charity and evangelization toward the poor.

In early December 1618, Vincent was returning from the Montmirail mission. He learned that the Bishop of Geneva was at court. Everyone was talking about him. His address to the court on the feast of Saint Martin had scandalized the courtiers because they had expected a lofty panegyric, whereas he had chosen to speak informally and simply.

The fact struck Vincent because that manner of speaking informally matched well with the effort he was making in preaching to the poor peasants and was probably the spark that stimulated the desire to get in touch with him.

The meeting had a striking impact on Vincent. The latter did not discover in Saint Francis only an affinity of thought. More profoundly, a “living style” of faith—to use Romano Guardini’s language—had presented itself before him that summed up in an instant all he was seeking. In the person of Francis de Sales he saw a missionary of the Gospel who spoke directly, with gentleness, and with a captivating appeal. That is, his way of thinking was not just a coincidence, but to Vincent’s consciousness—made sensitive by an interior torment he had suffered that was open still—Francis de Sales appeared a figure who magnetized all the fragments of the search for self and one’s vocation that until then had not yet found their unifying center:

“Having reached the 37th anniversary of his earthly existence,”—A. Dodin rightly wrote—“Monsieur Vincent was endowed with the grace to see, love, and contemplate a living example. Francis de Sales was the being who most recalled the life and loving journey of Christ living on earth.”

Vincent himself was fully aware of this and testified to it:

“He was the gentlest and kindest person I have ever known. The first time I saw him, I immediately glimpsed in the serenity of his face, in his manner of conversation and speech, a well-marked reflection of the gentleness of Our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“This caused me to experience a certain devotion and tender affection; indeed I felt that the Servant of God was divinely enlightened ... I will add, furthermore, that, because of that same friendship … he opened his heart ....”

Francis’ presence thus represented a witness to what Vincent felt he was not, but to what he aspired or, at least, in his familiarity with him, appeared to his native sensibility as an incentive to imitation. Saint Vincent again says of him:

“… his abundant, gentle goodness overflowed on those who enjoyed his conversation because of the example of his devotion. I myself shared in those delights.”

Vincent’s encounter with Francis de Sales was thus the key that opened his religious sensibility, still bridled in the meshes of doctrine, and made charity flash in his soul as a charismatic vibration or motion of the Spirit: not through a rational path, but through contact with the affective accord that the presence of Saint Francis gifted him. That is, it disclosed to him a world: that of God’s grace passing through existence’s poor conditions. This did not happen through new or better rational knowledge, but through the witnessing contact of a man who had made the love of God the pivot around which existence revolved. There are some people who have a provocative and enthralling energy, observed H. Bergson:

“Why is it, then, that saints have their imitators and why do the great moral leaders draw the masses after them? They ask nothing, and yet they receive. They have no need to exhort; their mere existence suffices.”

Until then, for Vincent, the Church was an institution that taught charity toward one’s neighbor; and charity was a doctrine or, in its practical translation, almsgiving. Or perhaps, even more, it was a moral commitment, which every disciple of the Lord had to obey. But at this level there is nothing originally provocative for the human. The way is indicated, but there is no attraction to travel it. It was the encounter with Saint Francis de Sales that aroused the attraction. It is true that, in his letters, Saint Vincent traces the beginning of his charitable works to the events of Gannes and Châtillon, but these events—when he spoke of them—he had by then assimilated and transfigured them into his own history. But, in the beginning, in order to ignite his charism of “missionary charity,” a human catalyst was needed who, selecting the energies of the spirit and warming them with fervor, impregnated the soul with them. Now this came about thanks to the sweetness breathed in the meeting with the charism of affability, characteristic of Francis de Sales, who was his true master, who stole his heart and spirit. For thanks to

“this encounter”—observes A. Dodin—“a profound change took place. It affects doctrine and sensitivity. It is a renewal of the heart. Progressively, a new rhythm is imposed on the religious experience of Monsieur Vincent de Paul ... an unexpected transfiguration.”

This interpretation is well suited to the grace of a charism, which is never separated from human persons, for the mystery of the Incarnation prohibits this. Grace passes through the human being who is illuminated by supernatural love; and this is mediated by the sensitivity of “someone” whom God places alongside so that this happens and then, slowly, in the path of life, develops and flourishes. Vincent, upon meeting Saint Francis, experienced a form of spiritual magnetism that conquered him.

3. The retreat of Soissons (1621) and the amiability of missionary charity

The encounter with Saint Francis de Sales reverberated—as Vincent himself testified—shortly afterwards in the spiritual retreat he made in Soissons in 1621. But far more, in this retreat, he mirrored himself in the amiability of Saint Francis and saw the need to change his own uncouth and forbidding character. Abelly reports:

“I addressed myself to God to beg him earnestly to change this curt and forbidding disposition of mine for a meek and benign one.”

We find here a virtue that would become for Vincent the spiritual undercurrent that he taught to those who would come into his orbit of missionary charity: after simplicity in speaking to proclaim the Kingdom, and humility as the foundation of the life of the spirit; now also gentleness or amiability in dealing with others and, first and foremost, with the poor, was to be the climate that nurtured the practice of charity.

This way that which Saint Vincent recommends to his missionaries is characteristic:

“Missioners, above all other priests, must be filled with this spirit of compassion, since they are obliged by their state and vocation to serve the most wretched, the most abandoned, and those most weighed down by corporal and spiritual sufferings. First of all, they must be touched to the quick and afflicted in their own hearts by the sufferings of their neighbor. Second, this suffering and compassion must be apparent in their exterior and in their expression, after the example of Our Lord, who wept over the city of Jerusalem because of the disasters with which it was threatened. Third, they must use compassionate words, which make the neighbor see how they share his feelings, interests, and sufferings. Lastly, they must do their utmost to rescue and assist him in his needs and sufferings, and try to free him from them in whole or in part because, as far as possible, the hand must conform to the heart.”

Without this particular gentle look of amiability toward the poor, made up of kindness, tenderness, simplicity, and humility, which constitute the typical sensibility of his charism, Saint Vincent’s commitment to the poor would not have attained the form of Christian charity according to that charismatic light proper to him.

In his friendship with Francis de Sales, Vincent himself recognized a sort of spiritual sonship. In his conferences to the missionaries and the Daughters of Charity, he always kept a grateful memory of him, repeatedly calling him “our blessed father,” as if to say that the community had a generational bond from Saint Francis. In order to get all those who revolved around him in the exercise of charity to be regenerated continually in the spirit of supernatural love that he himself had breathed in his association, Saint Vincent assiduously recommended reading the writings of Saint Francis, beginning as early as the first regulation of Châtillon.

Vincent received much from Francis. From this, which also can be documented through the parallelism of so many spiritual themes that recur in the writings of both of them, (e.g.: spirit of indifference, affective and effective love, the spirit of condescension, etc.), I pause to emphasize the crucial point that unites them. That is that—as J. Calvet summarized of Francis de Sales—“faith in the God of Christians is nothing other than love.” Saint Vincent made himself an instrument of this love to make it reach the dispossessed and the poor. With J. Calvet again it can be said

“His whole spirituality is summed up in the word charity.... But he did not invent charity; it does not belong to him. What belongs to him, what is his, what is only his, is a certain accent of the mind and heart in charity.”

Here is the point of origin, and thus sonship from Saint Francis de Sales. In other words, from him he learned that “the manner” in which charity is exercised determines its content. At the time of his encounter with Saint Francis, Vincent, who already had been dedicated to the service of the poor for some years, lacked, or perhaps it was not yet clear to him that “the affable way of charity” is the light of the spirit that transfigures the concrete gestures of charity and without which acts of charity fail to express fully God’s love.

Therefore, Saint Francis’ greatest contribution was to export to Saint Vincent his amiable outlook in the world of charity and mission; namely, that, to be authentic, charity and mission must feed on an affable style. This element we can define synthetically as an “affable missionary charity,” which to be such must be enlightened and inflamed by a humble, docile, merciful, and gentle conscience, eager to communicate the Gospel.

Saint Vincent transfused this gentle and affable form of charity toward the poor into the regulations of the Confraternities of Charity. He wrote characteristically already in the first regulation of the servants of the poor of Montmirail in the years 1618-1620:

“… to be good Servants of the Poor, they must help them spiritually and corporally, with tender compassion regarding their misfortune, and that it was with this in mind that they had the happiness of being admitted into the association. ... On the morning of the day they are to serve the sick poor, they will ask God to grant them the grace to conduct themselves during this action with gentleness, humility, and true charity. ... When they enter the patient’s room, they will greet him in a friendly way; then, drawing near to the bed with a cheerful expression, they will encourage him to eat ... saying some little light-hearted, consoling word in an effort to cheer him up ... when he has finished eating ... they will … leave him right away in order to go serve someone else.”

Similar ways of acting suggested by this regulation and repeated in so many others, show the permeation between gesture of charity and amiability, which properly signal the birth of the charismatic style of Saint Vincent. This will be the refrain that will echo continually and in so many ways in his writings and which we can translate as follows: everyone can serve the poor, but the way of serving them according to the tenderhearted charism that the Spirit has aroused in the Company, thanks to the mediation of Saint Francis de Sales, has an entirely new mode of expression, that of an amiable and charitable service of the poor.

This is an attitude that even today can restore to our vocation the beauty of its origins.

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