



Spiritual reading

THE 400TH BIRTHDAY OF THE VINCENTIAN CHARISM

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St. Vincent always regarded 1617 as the birthday of his Family. Even though his three principal foundations had distinct juridical birth dates – the Confraternities of Charity in 1617, the Congregation of the Mission in 1625, and the Daughters of Charity in 1633 – Vincent consistently looked back at 1617 as the year when everything began. He had two experiences that year which transformed his life.

The first took place in January in Gannes-Folleville, north of Paris. While accompanying Madame de Gondi as she visited workers on her family's land, he was called to the bedside of a dying peasant who had a reputation for being holy. Vincent encouraged him to make a general confession. The peasant poured out his heart, confessing shocking sins that he had held back for years. When he received absolution, he felt liberated and filled with joy. He called his family, neighbors, and Madame de Gondi herself into his home and told them his story.

Three days later, he died. With Madame de Gondi's help, Vincent quickly organized a popular mission for those living in the area, emphasizing the importance of general confession. People flocked to it. On January 25, 1617, he preached a sermon in Folleville that was powerful and easy to grasp. Afterwards, confessions were so numerous that he had to search for more priests to hear them. Looking back more than 40 years later on his "first sermon of the Mission," he regarded this as the beginning of the Congregation of the Mission.

Later that year, Vincent became the pastor in Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne in southwest France. There, around August 1617, he had a second life-changing experience. Having heard that the members of a family in his parish were quite sick, he appealed to his parishioners in his Sunday sermon to help them. Later that day, he met numerous women returning from the sick family's home. He realized that charity needed to be better organized. He asked himself, "Couldn't these good women be brought together and encouraged to give themselves to God to serve the sick poor?" Looking back decades later, he regarded that question as God's call to found the Confraternities of Charities, whose first Rule he wrote a few months afterwards, and the Daughters of Charity, who came into existence juridically 16 years later.

Mission (Folleville) and Charity (Châtillon) were the core of Vincent's outreach toward the poor. He urged his followers to serve the poor "spiritually and corporally," through "word and work," and he brought great organizational skills to the task.



Since 1617, more than 300 branches have sprouted on the Vincentian Family tree. Some branches are tiny shoots. Others, like the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, with 800,000 members in 150 countries, are robust limbs. Each has its own accents in spirituality. This diversity is healthy and enriching. But, in the midst of diversity, the branches of the Family also share a rich spirituality in common. Five elements stand out. It is a spirituality:

1) that blends prayer and action

Writing to a priest of the Congregation of the Mission in 1657, St. Vincent held up as central *“two virtues of Jesus, his filial relationship with the Father and his charity toward the neighbor.”* He regarded a combination of prayer *and* action as indispensable.

“Give me someone who prays,” Vincent exclaimed, *“and he or she will be capable of everything!”* At the same time, he stated, *“Let us love God, my brothers and sisters, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows!”*

How might we better integrate prayer and action as we serve the poor?

2) that is wholly Christocentric

Repeatedly, Vincent emphasized the centrality of Christ. In writing rules for the groups he founded, he urged all of them to see the face of Christ in the face of the poor. He encouraged them to meditate on the “mysteries” of Jesus: the events of his life, death, and resurrection. He told his longtime friend, Fr. Portail: *“Remember, we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ. Our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ. In order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ.”*

How might we enter more fully into the faith-vision that enabled Vincent to see the face of Christ in the face of the poor?

3) that makes simplicity central

Vincent stated explicitly that simplicity is *“my gospel”*. He called it *“the virtue I love most.”* He emphasized two aspects of simplicity especially: simplicity in speech and simplicity in life-style. He urged all his initial foundations – the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, and the Daughters of Charity – to make simplicity a central value in their lives.

How might we learn to speak and live more simply ourselves, as we serve the poor?

4) that is grounded in humility

There is no virtue about which Vincent spoke so eloquently as he did about humility. He stated that it is *“the foundation of all evangelical perfection, the core of the spiritual life.”* He wanted us to regard the impoverished as *“our Lords and Masters”*. He emphasized listening *“to the least of my brothers and sisters”* and urged us to collaborate with one another.



How might we listen better to the poor, as we discern their needs?

5) that expresses itself in creative charity

One of the most cited sayings of Vincent is *“Love is creative, even to infinity.”* The context for this statement is different from what we usually imagine. When Vincent used this phrase, he was speaking of Jesus’ creativity in instituting the Eucharist. Still, the phrase is readily applicable to Vincent himself and to his followers. In response to events, Vincent showed a remarkable freedom. He devised new solutions and created new institutions to deal with the ongoing problems of the marginalized and abandoned.

In what ways might we be more inventive as we serve the poor?

Vincent identified all five elements above as essential to a healthy spirituality. He was deeply convinced of their importance. In fact, he stated that, without each of them, we would cease to exist as a Family.

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