



Studies on the Spirituality of Saint Vincent - A Brief History

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Abstract:

Exploring the spirituality of Saint Vincent de Paul reveals a complex and evolving tradition. Father Giuseppe Toscani's work, *The Mystique of the Poor*, delves into Vincentian spirituality, building on studies and reflections over many years. Early biographers like Abelly and Collet highlighted different aspects of Vincent's life, while Henri Bremond and Pierre Defrennes provided the first critical studies of his spirituality. Bremond focused on Vincent's mystical experience, while Defrennes emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit and Vincent's dual vocation to Christ and the poor. Later scholars like André Dodin and José Maria Ibañez Burgos further explored Vincent's Christocentric faith and action-oriented mysticism. Vincentian spirituality is characterized by fidelity to action, unity of love for God and neighbor, and a profound connection to the poor as a manifestation of Christ. This tradition continues to inspire contemporary Vincentian studies and practices, emphasizing practical love and humility.

L'exploration de la spiritualité de Saint Vincent de Paul révèle une tradition complexe et évolutive. L'ouvrage du Père Giuseppe Toscani, *La mystique des pauvres*, approfondit la spiritualité viciencienne en s'appuyant sur des études et des réflexions menées pendant de nombreuses années. Les premiers biographes comme Abelly et Collet ont mis en lumière différents aspects de la vie de Vincent, tandis qu'Henri Bremond et Pierre Defrennes ont fourni les premières études critiques de sa spiritualité. Bremond s'est concentré sur l'expérience mystique de Vincent, tandis que Defrennes a mis l'accent sur le rôle de l'Esprit Saint et sur la double vocation de Vincent pour le Christ et les pauvres. Des chercheurs ultérieurs comme André Dodin et José Maria Ibañez Burgos ont exploré plus avant la foi christocentrique de Vincent et son mysticisme orienté vers l'action. La spiritualité viciencienne se caractérise par la fidélité à l'action, l'unité de l'amour pour Dieu et le prochain, et un lien profond avec les pauvres en tant que manifestation du Christ. Cette tradition continue d'inspirer les études et les pratiques vicienciennes contemporaines, en mettant l'accent sur l'amour pratique et l'humilité.

Explorar la espiritualidad de San Vicente de Paúl revela una tradición compleja y en evolución. La obra del padre Giuseppe Toscani, *La mística de los pobres*, profundiza en la espiritualidad vicienciana, a partir de estudios y reflexiones de muchos años. Los primeros biógrafos, como Abelly y Collet, destacaron distintos aspectos de la vida de Vicente, mientras que Henri Bremond y Pierre Defrennes aportaron los primeros estudios críticos sobre su espiritualidad. Bremond se centró en la experiencia mística de Vicente, mientras que Defrennes subrayó el papel del Espíritu Santo y la doble vocación de Vicente a Cristo y a los pobres. Estudiosos posteriores como André Dodin y José María Ibañez Burgos profundizaron en la fe cristocéntrica de Vicente y en su misticismo orientado a la acción. La espiritualidad vicienciana se caracteriza por la fidelidad a la acción, la unidad del amor a Dios y al prójimo, y una profunda conexión con los pobres como manifestación de Cristo. Esta tradición sigue inspirando los estudios y las prácticas viciencianas contemporáneas, haciendo hincapié en el amor práctico y la humildad.



Keywords: Spirituality of Saint Vincent, Mystique of the Poor, Christ-Church-Poor, André Dodin

Introduction

Writing on the spirituality of Saint Vincent de Paul is an adventure. It means delving into an unfamiliar world long past and investigating ideas and themes that turn out to have a meaning different from what we anticipated. It can overturn long held certitudes, common assumptions and convictions that we thought were unassailable.

Father Giuseppe Toscani, the author of the present work, *The Mystique of the Poor*,¹ previously authored *The Theology of the Church According to Saint Ambrose* (Milan, 1975), a fundamental and substantive study which gave a definitive direction to THE future OF Ambrosian and Patristic studies on the Church.

The present work was born of years of reflection. It did not pop up overnight. Father Toscani earlier had studied with a great teacher, Father Giovanni Moioli, who died prematurely, leaving Toscani to bring to fruition his insights and teachings over the years.

Like everything else, Father Toscani's work was not a creation *ex nihilo*. It is original, but not without antecedents. There were a number of articles and publications that paved the way. His is the most recent link in a chain of studies on Vincentian spirituality.

I

The tradition of studying the spirituality of Saint Vincent is actually rather recent. For the first two centuries after Vincent's death, the custom was to add a supplementary

¹ This article is originally the introduction for the Toscani's book, *The Mystique of the Poor*; it is republished in *Vincentiana* with the permission of the author to highlight the studies of Saint Vincent's spirituality. The idea to publish Father Giuseppe Toscani's book in English version, *The Mystique of the Poor*, comes providentially from Father Hugh O'Donnell's share with us in an occasion of spiritual retreat. He was wondering whether the CCC (the Commission of Vincentian Charism and Culture in Asia Pacific) is interested in publication the English translation of *La Mystique des Pauvres*. Soon after that, as chairman of the CCC, Armada Riyanto CM presented the plan of publication to APVC (Asian Pacific Visitors Conference) in Manila 2011. The visitors granted immediately a "yes" to publish the English translation of the book for the benefit of the Vincentians in Asia Pacific region. Translation was made by the late dear confrere, Myles Rearden CM from Irish Province; some corrections were suggested by Fr. Greg Cooney CM; Fr. Hugh O'Donnell CM translated Fr. Luigi Mezzadri's introduction of "Studies on Spirituality of Saint Vincent". This is the re-publication of the Introduction of *The Mystique of the Poor* with the permission of the author, Fr. Luigi Mezzadri, CM. Writing a book on the Charity of St Vincent does not mean learning how to 'love' as he has taught us. This is something the reader needs to keep in mind, so as not to expect to find in the book an exhaustive account of the teaching of the Saint, or still less, of the mystery of Charity. Overall the book should follow the expository principle so dear to St Vincent, of selecting between two thoughts the one that is more simple, more humble, clearer and more charged with affection, because that is the more convincing. Anyone who would prefer another approach should pardon the writer, put the book aside and return to St Vincent himself. But in fact no harm is likely to be done by the author's efforts, and they will surely contribute something to understanding St Vincent and his spirituality. While the work of historians is not overlooked, this undertaking has been carried out almost exclusively by reference to the works of St Vincent, so as to present his thought in its most original form. It is for this reason that bibliographical references are comparatively few. It is for those who are qualified to decide whether the outcome corresponds to these intentions or is too ambitious. The passages quoted in the text or referred to in the notes are, as much as possible, taken from the French edition of St Vincent's works, produced by Pierre Coste.

section on Vincent's virtues to his biography. Abelly² and Collet³ each had a central theme that guided their writing. The former focused on Vincent as "founder" and model priest, and the latter, writing during the Enlightenment, centered his research on Vincent as an organizer of charity, the one who took care of others and gave birth to one of the most responsive institutions of his times, namely, social service. Their different approaches reflect two different historiographic eras and cultures.⁴ The biographers who came after them likewise examined Saint Vincent's life more or less from a specific thematic point of view.

The first explicit study of the spirituality of Saint Vincent—by which I understand a critical study organized around definite criteria—appeared with Henri Bremond (1865-1933). It is easy to understand the reason for such a long period of silence. There were no complete critical editions of the writings of Saint Vincent before Pierre Coste published his work in 1920-1925.⁵ The work by Father Jean-Baptiste Pémartin⁶ was reserved only for members of the Congregation of the Mission and it could not be "communicated" to outsiders.

Things changed with Bremond. Today, of course, we can criticize, if we want, this great historian of spirituality for his method, or for various statements or for some of his quick and even mistaken conclusions, but his *L'histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux* still bears the mark of genius. Bremond put Vincent in Bérulle's camp. He studied Vincent on both his psychological and spiritual dimensions. To do this, he set aside the conventional image of Vincent as the dispenser of assistance to people in need, in order to cast light on the mystical experience at the core of his being: "...it is his mysticism which gave us the greatest of *the men of action*."⁷

In 1932 an extremely important essay was published which has received very little attention, particularly in the Vincentian world. I'm speaking of the study of Pierre Defrennes, S.J. on "The Vocation of Saint Vincent."⁸

Before tackling the spirituality of Saint Vincent, Defrennes chided Bremond for placing Vincent in the "gallery" of Bérulle's disciples. He then began by studying the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. He writes that the seventeenth century often used the word

² L. Abelly, *La vie du véritable serviteur de Dieu, Vincent de Paul, instituteur et premier supérieur général de la congrégation de la Mission* (Paris, 1664).

³ P. Collet, *La vie de saint Vincent de Paul, instituteur de la congrégation de la Mission et des Filles de la Charité*, 2 vols (Nancy, 1748). About Collet see : M. Bernos, "La pastorale des laïcs dans l'œuvre de Pierre Collet lazarusse," in the collection of articles *Vincent de Paul* (Rome, 1983) 289-309. About Abelly see : A. Dodin, "Louis Abelly" in *Vincentiana* 28 (1984) 280-291 (Dodin wrote his thesis on Abelly).

⁴ L. Mezzadri, "L'historiographie vincentienne, selon les époques culturelles" in *Vincentiana* 28 (1984) 292f. About historiography also see : A. Dodin, "Etat des études vincentiennes au moment du quadricentenaire de la naissance de M. Vincent de Paul" in the collection of articles *Vincent de Paul* 115-128.

⁵ Saint Vincent de Paul, *Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, edited by Pierre Coste, 14v (Paris, 1920-1925) a fifteenth volume was published by *Mission et charité* in 1970. Abbreviation : *CED*.

⁶ *Lettres de saint Vincent de Paul*, 4v. (Paris, 1880) ; supplement in 1888 ; *Conférences de saint Vincent de Paul aux Filles de la Charité*, 2v. (Paris, 19881) ; *Avis et conférences de saint Vincent de Paul aux membres de la Congrégation* (Paris, 1881).

⁷ H. Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours*, 3/1, *La conquête mystique, l'École Française* (the new edition : Paris, 1967) 199-228. ⁸ P. Defrennes, "La vocation de saint Vincent de Paul, Étude de psychologie surnaturelle", *Revue d'Ascétique et Mystique* 13 (1932) 60-86, 160-183, 294-321, 389-411.

⁸ P. Defrennes, "La vocation de saint Vincent de Paul, Étude de psychologie surnaturelle", *Revue d'Ascétique et Mystique* 13 (1932) 60-86, 160-183, 294-321, 389-411.

‘spirit’.⁹ He examined the different usages of this word. The Spirit, he found, inspires service. The vocation of Vincent is based on the fact that the Spirit dwells in him in the act of prolonging the Incarnation.

Defrennes had extended the doctrine of the spirit of God “into a kind of psychology (dynamic principle) of the Mystical Body and of Christian life.”¹⁰ He adds, “Thanks to this (psychology of the Mystical Body) Vincent’s activity, which was entirely concrete, *a posteriori*, and experiential, found a home with the classic doctrine of the continuation of the historic event of the gospels into the present and future.”

Defrennes also identified the two poles of Vincent’s vocation, namely, the call of Christ and the call of the poor: “The example and the living rule of Christ called him on one side and the poor (with whom he was able to show himself as an apostle among his own kind) called out to him on the other.”

Then Defrennes examined the way in which the Spirit of God led Vincent to confidence in Providence. This is the source of Vincent’s apprenticeship in following the will of God that, according to Vincent himself, involved a state of indifference and also an education of the will through action.¹¹ Vincent’s diverged from Bérulle at this point. Even if Vincent used Berullian vocabulary, like “honor,” “adherences,” and “oblations” Vincent was not in the line of Berullian theocentrism. Vincent says, “All activities of the spirit risk being illusions, if they do not lead to effective, perfect and constant imitation, which contains *the intention, the ends and the circumstances of God’s action.*”¹²

Vincent refrained from encouraging his disciples to venture on paths “too subtle”, such as Benedict of Canfield’s “super-eminent will of God.” He had, however, no reservations about contemplative prayer. “The other type of prayer is called contemplation. In this the soul, in the presence of God, does nothing but receive what He gives. It doesn't act and, with no effort on the part of the soul, God himself inspires it with everything it may be seeking, and much more. Haven't you ever experienced this sort of prayer, dear Sisters?” (CCD, IX, 330)

During the war years (1940-1945), Father André Dodin, one of the most prestigious interpreters of Saint Vincent, began his productive work on Saint Vincent. His studies on the influence of Francis de Sales on Vincent date from the forties.¹³ Three important works appeared in the sixties: the biography,¹⁴ the critical edition of the conferences to the Missionaries,¹⁵ and the study of the spirituality of Saint Vincent.¹⁶ Father Dodin came back to some of these themes in later years.¹⁷

⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹² *Ibid.*, 168.

¹³ A. Dodin, “Lectures de M. Vincent: l’introduction à la vie dévote,” in *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission* 106-107 (1941-42) pp. 239-248 ; 110-111 (1943-46) pp. 447-464; 112-113 (1947-48) pp. 479-497.

¹⁴ A. Dodin, *Vincent de Paul et la Charité* (Paris, 1960). ET: *Vincent de Paul and Charity : A Contemporary Portrait of His Life and Apostolic Spirit* (New City Press, 1993).

¹⁵ Saint Vincent de Paul, *Entretiens spirituels aux missionnaires* par les soins de A. Dodin (Paris, 1960). Father Dodin significantly redesigned the approach of Father Coste, which had its own special value.

¹⁶ A. Dodin, “Spiritualité de Vincent de Paul”, *Mission et Charité* 1 (1961) 54-75 ; also, “Vincent de Paul mystique de l’action religieuse”, *Mission et Charité* 8 (1968) 26-47.

¹⁷ A. Dodin, “Théologie de la charité selon saint Vincent de Paul”, *Humanisme et foi chrétienne* (Paris, 1976) 633-647; *L’esprit vincentien : le secret de saint Vincent de Paul* (Paris, 1981) ; *En prière avec Monsieur Vincent* (Paris, 1982) ; *François de Sales, Vincent de Paul les deux amis* (Paris, 1984).

His first work mentioned above is very little known, but extremely important. It is a very well documented article that was ahead of its time in reaching several conclusions that only in later years were clearly formulated.

While Bremond tried to make Vincent a Berullian, Dodin made him a Salesian with arguments that are indeed convincing. The publication of Francis de Sales' two major works coincided with the major changes of direction in Vincent's life. *The Introduction to the Devout Life* (1609) corresponded to Vincent's "conversion"; *The Treatise on the Love of God* (1616) came out just before Vincent's commitment to Charity in 1617.

Beyond the influence of the books, Vincent was deeply affected by de Sales' goal of re-integrating into the world the religious spirit and the role of religious women. In addition, at the time of his foundations (1617, 1625, 1633) Vincent took inspiration from the Bishop of Geneva and infused the doctrine of Love into them, which was a corrective to his own fears and his "sadness." His teaching on love and prayer was steeped in the spirit of Francis de Sales, which complemented the distinctively new life he found in discovering the poor.

In a 1961 article, Dodin brought to light what he learned about the faith of Vincent. The dogmatic foundations were Christocentric. "All the truths of his faith are centered on a gentle and humble missionary Christ."¹⁸ The mystery of Christ constituted a "formative and enlightening" rule of his faith. Dodin underlined the manner in which the principle of imitation was inscribed at the heart even of the Incarnation, that is, in the living flesh of Christ. The image he sketched was that of a peasant Christ, gentle, simple and amiable, whose first word as well as his last was about humility, but humility full of tenderness seeking hearts that were lost. Love was the identifying characteristic of the Son of God, love for the Father that became love for human persons. Thus, Vincent recognized Christ "in all his states," and this became the source of his apostolic dynamism.

This dynamic is studied in the 1968 essay "A Mystic of Religious Action." Dodin identified two principles which guide and direct religious existence:

1. Fidelity is to present action with attention to universal needs;
2. Charitable activity is inseparable from the totality of the spiritual life.

From these principles arise four rules:

1. Rely on God and not on oneself;
2. Establish the reign of God first in oneself then in others;
3. Unite the love of God and the love of neighbor;
4. Restore the unity between affective love and effective love.

Dodin concluded that Vincent was a "mystic of action." "Vincent was a mystic who didn't know he was one." He was not a visionary. Nor was he an activist. He simply pushed people to "see." And the only way in practice to "see" people as they are is to represent them as they are *in reality*, "that is to say *in God*."¹⁹

1972 is an important date for Vincentian studies, because that was the year the annual Vincentian Studies Week began in Salamanca. Up until then most studies came from France, which also set the pattern for Vincentian studies. Beyond the borders of

¹⁸ A. Dodin, *Spiritualité*, 56.

¹⁹ A. Dodin, *Vincent de Paul, mystique de l'action religieuse*, 46.

France people were generally content to repeat and assimilate the work done in France. The Spaniards were the first to go beyond this way of doing things. They published the Spanish translation of Coste, adding some unpublished documents to the thirteenth volume. This gave new impetus to the distribution of Coste's classic work. The study weeks and other sessions attracted the interest of the grassroots. A good number of the most interesting studies in recent years have come from Spain.

José Maria Ibañez Burgos was one of the most productive and innovative writers;²⁰ he was familiar with a great number of documents and sources, which he put to good use. He was thus able to explain to us the attitudes of Vincent toward the poor in relation to his charitable initiatives and material assistance. The cries of the poor are the voice of God. It was faith that opened the eyes of the saint and led him to continue the mission of Christ and to clothe himself with his Spirit. The axes of his thought were **Christ-Church-Poor**. The poor were perceived in their double poverty: material and moral.

Christ. Christ above all. "The Vincentian Christ," Ibañez wrote, "is the Son of God incarnated in history, descended from heaven to earth to do the will of the Father and to save humanity. The Love of the Father and the misery (destitution) of the human race led him to the emptying of the Incarnation, to the ignominious punishment of the cross. For Vincent, if Christianity is not inserted in this dynamic of the Incarnation it is impossible for it to continue the mission of Christ.²¹ At the center of the logic of the Incarnation is the role of the *kenosis* of the Son of God, to which we are assimilated by humility "...which changed apostolic persons into instruments of God while creating in them a disposition of openness." However, it is not only about efficacy: "Theologically speaking, humility, according to Vincent, signifies a relationship to transcendence and to the divine perfections, to the dynamic of the incarnation and the redemption of Christ, to the littleness of creatures and to human persons as sinners."²²

The union of the human will and the divine will is indispensable if God is going to work through our human actions in some way. When the human person is united to God *in willing and not willing the same things*, human activity "...is no longer the unfolding of instinct, an unruly and dominating instinct of self-preservation and power, but it is the deployment of vital energy which enriches others while making human existence concrete and real."²³ It is at this point that the value of work, which is never an end in itself, is revealed: "The value and meaning of work is guided and supported by the contemplation of the divine life and of the earthly existence of Jesus Christ. For Vincent, the Father and the Son have the identity of workers: they are involved in an eternal work..."²⁴

Church. The Church is the second axis that draws him. Certainly it was not Vincent who "invented" charity, as Anouilh suggested through the mouth of Chancellor Séguier in the film *Monsieur Vincent*. It is in the nature of things that as the Church opens up to mission she opens up to charity. Initiatives in favor of the poor were many, but often they were tainted with severity and pessimism; the severity practiced against the poor

²⁰ José Maria Ibañez Burgos, *Vicente de Paül y los pobres de su tiempo* (Salamanca, 1982); id., *Vicente de Paül, realismo y encarnación* (Salamanca, 1982); id., *Le volontarisme chez Vincent de Paul* in the collection *Vincent de Paul* (Rome, 1983) 155-184. Other contributions can be found in the Salamanca Vincentian Week annual Publications and in Vincentian periodicals.

²¹ *Id.*, *Vicente de Paül y los pobres*, 326.

²² *Ibid.*, 251.

²³ *Ibid.*, 225.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 262ff.

reflected the pessimism which had invaded French Catholic culture in the seventeenth century.”²⁵ “The poor were transformed into victims of a process of social purification. The dominant mindset of the Church at the time, under the influence of abstract theologies, was absolutist and non-incarnational. The society of the time did not realize that in opening prisons for the poor, it was also imprisoning itself in its own obsessions and was creating an obstacle for anyone who wished to discover the true face of the poor, of Jesus Christ, pleading for help and calling us from our egoistic preoccupations.”²⁶ It was a century committed to helping, but their error was to choose structures without content, in contra-distinction to Vincent who “out of an experience of poorly organized charity” took the occasion to lance “a charitable movement of mercy, tenderness and feminine love.”²⁷

The Poor. The third axis is found in the meaning of evangelization of poor people, who are, for Vincent, sign, presence, and call. Encountering poor people was for him the moment for discovering the Gospel of Jesus Christ addressed to the poor. He worked for a radical change of attitude in the church, which was tempted to be a “center of power.” “The poor—he concluded—established the rhythms of his life, emptied him of himself and helped him be filled with God.”²⁸ Poor people led him to initiate a movement of compassion, of action, of life and of faith. The saint was thus pushed to love the poor as God loves them, “...who does not love them for their merits but because they are poor and God is the one who liberates from all oppression.”²⁹ What Father Ibañez calls the “Vincentian Revolution of Charity,” was not brought about by words, but by the union of thought and action aimed at uniting people together in order to lead them to God.

In 1982 Ibañez carried his line of thought further and condensed his thinking in a work of great originality.³⁰ He investigated the origins, dynamism and orientation of the prodigious activity of Saint Vincent, who, though he had the temperament and flair of a man of state, was essentially a *mystic of action*. It was his profound faith—alive, dynamic, and strong—which at the same time was open to life and its events that opened him to “reality.” In prayer he encountered not only God but also God’s love. But this love, he understood, was open to humanity, and from there he discovered that the will of God is “a will of service to human persons.”

Ibañez classified Vincent’s spirituality, focused as it is on the will of God, as “voluntarism,” a term which has provoked a lot of discussion, even disagreement. Better still: he calls it anthropocentric-theocentric voluntarism to distinguish Vincent from the anthropocentrism of Francis de Sales, from the theocentric voluntarism of Benedict of Canfield (and other mystics), and finally from the theo-Christocentric voluntarism of Bérulle. Examining anew the heart of Vincentian spirituality, he takes up the theme *mystic of action*. Francis de Sales has a well known text, “Ecstasies are of three kinds: intellectual, affective and operative. The first bespeaks light, the second fervor, and the third action. The first consists of admiration, the second of devotion, and the third of works.”³¹ Then, following the work of Bergson, Maritain and Bremond, for whom mysticism is not only ecstasies and visions, Ibañez concludes that the secret of Vincent’s action is found in mystical experience. Words like “indifference,” “passivity,” “non-

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 126ff.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 134ff.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 280.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 285.

³⁰ *Id.*, *Vicente de Paúl, realismo y encarnación* (Salamanca, 1982).

³¹ Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, 7, 4; *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

action,” reveal a great mystical depth “lived and experienced in action.” “The originality of Vincent’s spirit—of Vincentian spirituality or the Vincentian mystique—has its roots in Jesus Christ incarnate and emptied in history to carry out the will of the Father which is a will of service to people.”³² Only in entering into the dynamic of the Incarnation do human persons “empty” themselves, save themselves, and penetrate into the process of salvation that saves because it makes us saviors.

On the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the birth of Saint Vincent (1981), the *Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos* published two volumes on Vincent: a biography by José María Román³³ and an anthology of Vincentian spirituality by Antonino Orcajo and Miguel Perez-Flores.³⁴ Antonino Orcajo began with Vincent in his own historical context, and then presented the progressive evolution of Vincentian spirituality. Faith and experience are its sources; Christ and poor people its guides; the gospel and life its roots. Jesus Christ is at the center of the Vincentian experience from three angles: glorifying, creating and saving. The *glorifying* mission consists of adoring the Father and following the divine will through docile obedience to Providence. The *creative* mission plunges Vincent into the midst of the world, where he is hyper-sensitive to the action of God and to human efforts. He loves the world created by God as well as its inhabitants; he loves especially the faces covered with sweat of those who work the earth, of those who maintain charity on the earth through their own sufferings and illness.³⁵ Orcajo develops two themes with deep understanding: work and prayer. He doesn’t intend to make Vincent Benedictine, but to point out, in my opinion, the contemplative character of work and the active character of contemplation. The *saving* mission of Christ is based on his *kenosis* that creates space that is filled with zeal for souls. Following in the footsteps of Christ who at Nazareth announced his mission to evangelize the poor, the Vincentian mission is a single mission of evangelization and charity.

In Italy evidence of interest in Vincentian studies appeared in the middle of the 70s. Actually there were some confreres studying Vincent before that time. For example, the *Annales de la Mission* appeared at regular intervals. Still, there was no expression of personal opinion and articles were rare.

However, after the creation of an international organization for Vincentian studies,³⁶ there was some movement. Each year there was a meeting of the Congress for Vincentian Animation.³⁷ Original work began to see the light of day.³⁸

Giuseppe Luigi Coluccia entitled his thesis, *Vincentian Spirituality: A Spirituality of Action*, defining it as “The organization of individual Christian existence constantly verified by the spirit of Christ and thus ready to take on specific human situations in which the experience of God and his service are realized in the experience and service of people

³² Ibañez, *Vicente de Paúl, realismo y encarnación*, 216.

³³ J. M. Román, *San Vicente de Paúl: Biografía* (Madrid, 1981).

³⁴ A. Orcajo and M. Perez-Flores, *San Vicente de Paúl: Espiritualidad y selección de escritos* (Madrid, 1981).

³⁵ *Op.cit.*, 114.

³⁶ G.I.E.V. (Groupe International d’Études Vincentiennes = International Group for Vincentian Studies): 1975-1980. It gave way to S.I.E.V. (Secretariat International d’ Etudes Vincentiennes = International Secretariat for Vincentian Studies) which continues to the present.

³⁷ In Italian it had the initials G.A.V. and included CMs, Daughters of Charity, the Sisters of Charity of Saint Jeanne Antide Thouret and some lay groups working under the banner of Saint Vincent. Nine meetings were held between 1977 and 1985 each year in a different city in Italy. The acts of these meetings have been published and constitute a significant resource for study.

³⁸ G. L. Coluccia, *Spiritualità vincenziana, spiritualità dell’azione* (Rome, 1978) p. 235. It has been translated into Spanish.

through action.”³⁹ Coluccia placed Vincent between Augustinianism and humanism with pagan leanings. Vincent was revealed as capable of liberating people through action, something Augustinianism (Luther and Jansenius) didn’t succeed in doing; neither did humanism nor “the mystical invasion.” These conclusions were open to debate.

I myself tried twice to delineate the dimensions of Vincentian spirituality.

In my book on Jansenism I devoted part of a chapter to Vincent’s spirituality.⁴⁰ It was a study of the sources, but also an attempt to situate Vincent in an intelligible context. The seventeenth century was marked by Saint Augustine’s teachings, and Vincent naturally breathed in the air of his times. But, when he saw some of the disciples of Augustine establish themselves as an opposition party, eventually harming the Church and becoming disobedient by carrying some of Augustine’s ideas to the extreme, he placed himself on the side of the anti-Jansenists. There also was the anti-Jansenism of politicians (Richelieu, Mazarin and later Louis XIV), of theologians (Petau) and finally of the spirituals (Olier, Condren, and Vincent himself).

In my second work I reflected on the Jesus of Saint Vincent. His experience of Christ propelled Vincent far away from abstract spirituality. Vincentian Christocentrism is closer to Franciscan than to Bérullian views, particularly since Vincent lived both religion toward the Father and love for people. Humility, the will of God and prayer are the foci of part one; poor people, love, evangelization and human promotion are the elements in part two.

In 1981, an International Colloquium on Vincentian studies organized by G.I.E.V. was held and proceedings were published, including a section on Vincentian spirituality.⁴¹ Ibañez reiterated his conviction about voluntarism. Manfred Tietz explained that the unsophisticated quality (poverty) of Vincent’s writings was a deliberate effort to avoid any semblance of human respect. Volker Kapp spoke on how the Little Method was inserted into efforts to reform preaching. Cesar de Bus with Saint Charles Borromeo and Saint Phillip Neri insisted strongly on simple rhetoric in order to enable the Word to prevail over literary artifice.

Jean Séguéy showed that Vincent indeed was aware of Saint Vincent Ferrier’s preaching on the subject of a “company of men of the gospel” called to convert and to transform the world. For the great Dominican preacher, the arrival of these preachers who were poor, docile and simple revealed the Church’s lack of confidence in its own capacity for self-reform. Vincent himself also used to fear that God would “transfer” the Church to distant and non-believing regions. Nevertheless, the differences are profound: Vincent did not speak of the anti-Christ, nor did he protest against the hierarchy and the institution. After the Council of Trent protests against the hierarchy were actually reduced. Vincent thought the bishops of an earlier time were responsible for the lack of “men of the gospel.” The church presently did have “men of the gospel,” namely, the missionaries called to

³⁹ L. Mezzadri, *Fra glansentisti e anti giansenisti: Vincent de Paul e la congregazione della Missione 1624-1737* (Florence, 1977).

⁴⁰ *Id.*, “San Vincenzo de Paoli: Il primato della carità” in the collection *Le grandi scuole della spiritualità* edited by E. Ancilli (Rome, 1984) 553-576.

⁴¹ *Vincent de Paul: Actes du colloque international d’études vincentiennes, Paris, 25-26 septembre 1981* (Rome, 1983).

preach missions and form the clergy under the guidance of a renewed and purified hierarchy.

Massimo Marcocchi made a very solid contribution on the origins of the Daughters of Charity with his study on the experiences of the consecrated lives of women. The sixteenth century witnessed the emergence of various experiments in non-cloistered religious life for women. The Tridentine spirit corralled them back into the tried and true monastic structures and prevented women from exercising an active role in the apostolate or in the Church.

Sister Blandine Delort studied, in the same volume, the evolution of the Daughters of Charity. Like several other Catholic reform initiatives the Daughters of Charity began as a pious and charitable work, which, with the passage of time, took an autonomous form and structure.

The existence of GIEV was brief, because it was replaced by a new structure, organized this time not as a spontaneous group, but as the International Secretariat for Vincentian Studies (SIEV). The new Secretariat began a “Vincentian Month,” that is, a study session with published proceedings.⁴²

Some of these articles showed a special interest in the history of spirituality. I would like first of all to point to a charismatic figure, Jean Morin, who, already some years ago, set forth a very important body of reflections. Through his conferences and articles he was able to present a very strong and convincing portrait of Vincent. The reflections of Jean-Pierre Renouard on the Christ of Vincent and the fundamental virtues of the Congregation also deserve attention. The Christ of Vincent is a peasant Christ, who is missionary and servant, a Christ to be imitated by putting on his spirit. This “spirit” brings with it a new way of being, the acquisition of new “faculties” which are the virtues of the Congregation: animated with “zeal,” the missionary acts with “simplicity” in relation to God, with “humility” in relation to himself and with “meekness” in relation to his neighbor. “Mortification” accompanies and regulates all these virtues. Jean-Francois Gaziello underlined the necessity of “communion” or as Father Toscani says, “of the congregation.” This reflection corrects the notion inherited from the past of a community made up of a collection of rules, not as a source of charity. Finally, Christian Sens traced out a very subtle image of the prayer of missionaries, which was a great help in leaving behind approaches now out of date.

II

We now come to the present work of Father Giuseppe Toscani, beginning with the title. A writer is like a sculptor standing before a block of marble. His masterpiece is in his head; he knows that it will be his masterpiece. He feels he is able to make it a reality. But it has not yet taken form. He guides the chisel blow by blow toward the heart of the marble in order to extract the work of art.

The title of Father Toscani’s book dramatically expressed an intuition that cannot be proved rationally. It’s easier to grasp his meaning by excluding a few things. Vincent certainly did not get his inspiration from wishful bourgeois theories or from ideologies; rather he was grounded in “the incarnation of the Word of God and sacramental reality, in order to reach the lives of the people. It is also not possible to explain the genius of Vincent through sociological concepts, nor can someone say that his journey to the poor had a value equal to contemplation. To speak only in anthropocentric categories is to miss

⁴² S.I.E.V., “Mensis vincentianus”, *Vincentiana* 28 (1984) 257-840.

the point. Father Toscani also refused to use a “Jesusology” to interpret Vincent, that is, a Christology exclusively from below. Perhaps an example will help grasp his intuition. If we think of climbing a mountain, there will be one path from the base to the summit that is the most direct, but also the most difficult. Vincent was a mystic, and, among the paths available, he chose the steepest and most direct, the way of love passing through love of the neighbour. He showed that the poor are the path to the experience of love. He did not find it necessary to belong to a great school (of spirituality) or to have God only knows what qualities and knowledge.

The book has a prologue that gives the hermeneutic criteria that guided Toscani. First, though, he expresses his disappointment in the lack of interest and protests against interpretations which have accepted Vincent’s thought uncritically: “...one of the most disconcerting surprises is to discover how deeply rooted, even today, is the habit of passively accepting any interpretation of the Holy Founder’s writings.” In order not to repeat the same mistake, the author uses the following six criteria:

1. Respect the unity of the whole;
2. Pay attention to the exact meaning of the words;
3. Be exact, above all, concerning the human context, namely, pay attention to the people to whom he was writing or with whom he was speaking, Louise de Marillac being his greatest interpreter;
4. Acknowledge the role of the “Company”-- “the mentality of Saint Vincent was revealed, developed and came to maturity in communion with the people who shared his life;”
5. Be aware of Vincent’s constant reference to poor people: “By participating (in the condition of poor people) he lived the mystical experience most profoundly....He thus experienced the great silence of the real mystics and their crucified waiting for glory”;
6. Recognize in Vincent “a genuine and sincere mystical dimension, which grounded him in the Love of God and consumed him through authentic charity.”

The heart of Vincentian spirituality is the contemplation of the mystery of Love of the Son of God incarnate and present in every person. Vincent’s vision is not derived from concepts. In his middle years, when the veil separating him from the Light was rent in two, “he saw and he believed” (St. John). That is to say he was a mystic not “possessed by an unreal image of Christ,” but as someone for whom the poor were his “burden and his sorrow”-- he *saw* them. This led to a revolution in his life, as he followed the dynamics of the Incarnation “coming close to the least human person, as God does in Christ.” In the presence of poor people, he experienced “his dark night of the spirit;” yes, he had his mystical ecstasies, but, like Christ on the cross, he did not escape suffering, on the contrary, he remained anchored in the suffering of the least poor person. Poor people became, like Christ, his “lords and masters.” The theology of Saint Vincent is mystical, not speculative, and is not organized according to conceptual logic but according to the logic of Love. His point of reference is the Incarnation; Arianism and Docetism are absent from his frame of reference. The mystery of the Man-God is seen in its unity as the Word within the Mystery of the Trinity.

John of the Cross spoke of the participation of human persons in the operations of the Trinity. “One should not think it impossible that the soul be capable of so sublime an activity as breathing in God, through participation, as God breathes in her. For, granted

that God favors her by union with the Most Blessed Trinity, in which she becomes deiform and God through participation, how could it be incredible that she also understand, know and love—or better that this be done in her—in the Trinity, together with it, as does the Trinity itself!” (*Canticle of Canticles*, 39, 4; translation from *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD, Washington, DC, 1979). Without indeed speculatively analyzing the inter-Trinitarian life, Vincent contemplated “the work of God” as a Love realized in creation and all of life. “Filled with love for creatures” Christ abandoned the throne of the Father to manifest the tenderness of God: “...this tenderness made him descend from Heaven, he saw human persons deprived of glory, he was moved by their misfortune.” (*CCD*, XII, 271)

The path of Vincentian spirituality takes its energy from the contemplation of the Trinity and follows the way of the Divine Economy (of salvation). The Incarnation manifests the extreme poverty and humility of the Son of God. Seeing how love assumed our human condition set the heart of Vincent on fire. His Christocentric theology is less metaphysical than that of Berulle who used to reflect on the ontological nature of “self-emptying.” Saint Vincent’s is more dynamic, more attentive to Christ’s saving action, quicker to seize upon the abiding presence of the Spirit. There is a striking passage on this point: “It is said that Vincent discovered the poor, in spite of the fact that he already knew them. More often it is said that he discovered Christ in the poor; but this is not true, because it was Christ who showed him the poor. On the contrary, it should be said that he understood that Christ is still present and acting on the earth, and he had the grace to unite himself with Christ (to adhere to him), in order to incarnate his divine mercy in the midst of the chaos and divisions provoked by hate.”

Love is our model. “Adherence” is the manner of our conformity. “Through love Christ was profoundly moved by human misery, renounced his glory and put himself in the extreme situation of immolation with attentive and ardent charity.” To adhere to Christ became in us a “transfusion” of his very being. To love Christ means to love as Christ. “Adherence to Christ sealed a definitive union with God, a true proximity to all human persons.” A new way of interpreting religion was born: God is not “a refuge” but “one who calls.”

The service of poor people constitutes the third part of this work. Love is its foundation; service is its fruit. Vincent was not an operator or an organizer: he was a mystic who, having experienced ecstasy “became a prisoner of the mystery that was revealed to him.” He “truly” saw God when he affirmed the presence of Christ in poor people. He was, henceforth, a prisoner of this discovery and knew that the Trinitarian processions are realized through service, and in that way he was engaged to “the point of holocaust.” It was contagious. Love seeks “companionship.” And therein is the secret of his foundations: “Love delights in the world, sets out on the journey, perseveres, is totally absorbing, works at welcoming, protects, preserves and personalizes.” The recipients of this love, the poor people, become in their turn “the most important signs of Love.” Whoever loves them and welcomes them is saved, “the poor bring down the divine favor on those who encounter them.”

The reality of this way of thinking (finally verified when the author speaks of vows and of Mary), leads him to put forward a hypothesis on the eclipse of the mystics. Generally speaking, the Quietist controversy and the primacy of ascetical spirituality are blamed for this eclipse. Toscani, on the contrary, writes that the cause was different. Abstraction would have relegated Love to a secondary place as the center and “heart” of *devotion*. At the core, it is the same discovery that Saint Therese of Lisieux made in

Carmel. She chose all. “My Love, I have finally discovered my vocation, it is love!” The little saint was aware of realizing in this way the synthesis of all vocations. If the saints are the rays that converge toward the center, according to the image of Dorothy of Gaza, the closer they come to the point of arrival, the closer they come to one another.

In this presentation, carried along by passionate reasoning, supported by remarkably new and unfamiliar texts, I would like to say more, but I would not want to deny the reader the privilege of reading this work. Also, so you will not be led astray...

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