



The Virtue of the Perfect: Patience in the Life, Writings, and Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul

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Abstract:

In his article, "The Virtue of the Perfect: Patience in the Life, Writings, and Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul," Robert Maloney, C.M., explores St. Vincent's personal struggle with patience, which he termed the "virtue of the perfect." Maloney examines Vincent's teachings on patience, highlighting his frequent self-admitted shortcomings and his emphasis on Christ's patience as a model. The article delves into Vincent's application of patience across various contexts, including self-reflection, community living, service to the poor, and enduring suffering. Maloney also discusses Vincent's balance between trusting in Divine Providence and taking prompt action when necessary. The study concludes by underscoring the enduring relevance of patience in contemporary times, drawing connections to modern spiritual practices and the teachings of Pope Francis.

Dans son article intitulé « La vertu de la perfection », Robert Maloney, C.M., explore la lutte personnelle de saint Vincent avec la patience : Patience in the Life, Writings, and Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul, Robert Maloney, C.M., explore la lutte personnelle de saint Vincent avec la patience, qu'il appelle la « vertu du parfait ». Maloney examine les enseignements de Vincent sur la patience, en soulignant les fréquentes lacunes qu'il admet lui-même et l'accent qu'il met sur la patience du Christ en tant que modèle. L'article se penche sur l'application de la patience par Vincent dans divers contextes, y compris l'autoréflexion, la vie en communauté, le service aux pauvres et l'endurance à la souffrance. Maloney discute également de l'équilibre trouvé par Vincent entre la confiance en la Providence divine et l'action rapide en cas de besoin. L'étude se termine en soulignant la pertinence durable de la patience à l'époque contemporaine, en établissant des liens avec les pratiques spirituelles modernes et les enseignements du pape François.

En su artículo «La virtud de lo perfecto: La paciencia en la vida, los escritos y las conferencias de San Vicente de Paúl», Robert Maloney, C.M., explora la lucha personal de San Vicente con la paciencia, a la que denomina "virtud de lo perfecto". Maloney examina las enseñanzas de Vicente sobre la paciencia, destacando sus frecuentes defectos autoadmitidos y su énfasis en la paciencia de Cristo como modelo. El artículo profundiza en la aplicación que Vicente hace de la paciencia en diversos contextos, como la autorreflexión, la vida en comunidad, el servicio a los pobres y la resistencia al sufrimiento. Maloney también analiza el equilibrio de Vicente entre la confianza en la Divina Providencia y la adopción de medidas inmediatas cuando era necesario. El estudio concluye subrayando la relevancia duradera de la paciencia en los tiempos contemporáneos, estableciendo conexiones con las prácticas espirituales modernas y las enseñanzas del Papa Francisco.

Keywords: Virtue of the perfect, Vincent de Paul, Patience, Service of the Poor



St. Vincent struggled with patience. He called it the “virtue of the perfect.”¹ Using those words in a conference with the Daughters of Charity on July 23, 1656, he encouraged them to persevere in times of physical and moral suffering. I sense that, on that and on many other occasions, he was yearning to grow in patience himself and was aware of the distance he still had to go. He spoke frequently of his own failures in patience, employing language that today we might think exaggerated.² When Barbara Angiboust died, her patience in serving the galley slaves was the virtue that he most extolled in this sister whom he and Louise de Marillac love so much.³ When Louise de Marillac died, impatience was the only fault he mention her having (and he added that it was minimal!).⁴ Vincent was convinced that patience is utterly necessary for growing in genuine virtue.⁵

Writing to Jacques Tholard on August 26, 1640,⁶ he told this charming story to encourage his confrere to have patience as he struggled with sexual temptations: “In the early days of the Church, a holy bishop suffered these trials when he was baptizing women by immersion. Having entreated God a number of times to deliver him from these temptations and not having been heard, he finally lost patience and withdrew to the desert. There, God let him see three crowns, one richer than the other, which He had prepared for him, had he persevered. He would have only the least, because he had not believed that God would keep him from succumbing to the temptation since He was permitting him to be tried in the duties of his vocation. This example, cited for me one day by a Carthusian monk under whom I was making my retreat at Valprofonde, eradicated an almost similar temptation I was undergoing in the exercise of my vocation. I hope from the goodness of God, Father, that it will have the same effect on you, and that, if you persevere, you will receive a special crown before God on that account.”⁷

This article will examine Vincent’s attitude toward patience, both in theory and in practice. It will proceed in three steps: 1) some background, 2) Vincent’s teaching and its application to a variety of situations, 3) the quest for and the ongoing importance of patience today.

I. Some Background⁸

Vincent was quite well educated. He had two degrees, a bachelor’s in theology from the University of Toulouse and a licentiate in canon law from the University of Paris.⁹ The library at Saint-Lazare, the motherhouse, contained numerous books,¹⁰ some

¹ CCD:X:147.

² CCCD:III:599.

³ CCD:X:517.

⁴ CCD:X:574.

⁵ CCD:IV:350.

⁶ Jacques Tholard suffered from scrupulosity. Vincent often wrote to him with compassionate advice and the assurance of prayers for his liberation. It seems that Tholard was eventually healed of his painful anxieties. Cf. CCD:II:19; CCD:II:21-22. Vincent’s letters to Tholard are filled with wisdom. Pierre Coste edited them heavily because of a concern about the sexual matters that they treat. They are now available in their entirety in many of the recent translations of the works of St. Vincent.

⁷ CCD:II:123-24.

⁸ For these background thoughts I am deeply indebted to my deceased Vincentian confrere Bernard Koch, whose prolific writings remain unpublished for the most part. Fr. Koch’s articles have been given to me in digital form by Fr. Claude Lautissier, C.M., whose work in Vincentian studies and in the archives on Paris has deeply enriched us all.

⁹ Brother Pierre Chollier testified to this explicitly during the beatification process of St. Vincent.

¹⁰ Some interesting studies are available on this topic. More could be done. Cf.

of which he clearly used in preparation for his regular conferences with the members of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. This is evident when he spoke about patience.

He had very definite ideas about teaching. He did not want professors in his community to compose notes and distribute them. Rather, he preferred that they use a good author and explain his text to the students. He mentioned five texts by name: Peter Lombard¹¹ for theology, Martin Becanus¹² for controversy, Francis Toletus,¹³ Peter Binsfeld,¹⁴ and Martin Bonacina¹⁵ for cases of conscience.

He was also well acquainted with the scriptures, often quoting them by heart in Latin or French, sometimes verbatim and sometimes approximately.¹⁶ He knew and used the principal New Testament texts that referred to patient endurance, such as:¹⁷

- Romans 5:4
- Galatians 5:22-23
- Colossians 3:12-13
- Ephesians 4:2
- James 1:1-4; 5:7-8.

He also knew many of the early Christian writers and was aware of Tertullian's (160-240) work *De Patientia*.¹⁸ Since he sometimes quoted the following authors when treating other matters, might he have known their works on patience too?

- Cyprian of Carthage¹⁹ (210-258), *De bono patientiae*
- Augustine²⁰ (354-430), *De patientia*
- Thomas Aquinas²¹ (1225-1274), *Summa theologiae*, II-II, 136, 4
- Catherine of Siena²² (1347-1380), who wrote on patience to Raymond of Capua²³ and in her *Dialogue*, where she often spoke of "perfect patience" and linked it with humility.²⁴

• Fr. Bernard Koch, C.M., "La Bibliothèque de Saint Vincent," *Bulletin des Lazaristes de France*, 172 (February 2000) 26-36.

• Fr. Edward Udovic, C.M., "St. Vincent's Reading List," a series of 87 titles, which can be found at: <https://news.library.depaul.press/full-text/category/st-vincent's-reading-list/>

¹¹ CCD:I:289.

¹² CCD:I:57.

¹³ CCD:II:608.

¹⁴ CCD:II:266.

¹⁵ CCD:II:263.

¹⁶ Cf. Robert Maloney, C.M., *Mystic of Charity* (St. Louis, MO, 2019), chapter 2, "As a Baby Sucks Milk from its Mothers Breast: the Scriptures in the Spirituality of Vincent de Paul," p. 33-49.

¹⁷ Vincent sometimes referred to these texts explicitly. Cf. CCD:I:405; VIII:317, 325; XI:134; XII:50, 232.

¹⁸ Cf. footnote in CCD:I:516.

¹⁹ CCD:XII:300.

²⁰ Vincent cites Augustine very often. Cf. CCD:III:301; IX: 166, 199, 247, 357, 359, 444, 473; X:79, 206, 271; X:79.206, 271; XI:44, 118, 130, 363, 390

²¹ He cites Aquinas frequently. Cf. CCD:IX:28; XI:172, 343; X:271; XI:271-72; XIIIb:357.

²² CCD:III:370; VI:69; IX:184, 188, 215.

²³ Cf. Letter 272 in Louis Ferretti, O.P., *Lettere di S. Caterina Siena*, (Siena: 1927), vol. iv.

²⁴ The full text can be found, and easily searched, at: [Dialog of Catherine of Siena \(ccel.org\)](https://www.ccel.org/siena/dialogue/).

He read, and frequently recommended to others, Francis de Sales' *Introduction to a Devout Life* and *Treatise on the Love of God*. Both books treated patience extensively. The *Introduction* dedicated its third chapter to the theme.

II. Vincent's teaching about patience and its application to a variety of situations

Vincent was aware of how difficult patience is. He highlighted the example of Christ's patience, using one of his favorite images to describe it: "Patience is the left arm of the cross of Christ."²⁵ In this metaphor, charity was at the head of the cross, humility was at its foot, obedience was its right arm, and patience was its left.²⁶

He often encouraged others to imitate Christ's patience. He wrote to his confrere Jean Barreau, who was the French consul in Algiers and who had just been thrown into prison there: "Our Lord, who descended from heaven to earth to redeem men, was captured and imprisoned by them. What a happiness, dear Brother, to be treated in almost the same way! You left here, going, as it were, from a place of joy and rest, to assist the slaves in Algiers and, lo and behold, you have become like them, although in a different way. The more our actions resemble those our noble Savior did and suffered in this life, the more pleasing they are to Him. Since your imprisonment so closely honors His, He also honors you with His patience. I pray He will confirm you in it."²⁷

In speaking with the confreres, he frequently cited the example of Jesus' patience in sharing our sufferings with us: "The state of pain and affliction is not a bad state. God puts us in it to make us practice the virtue of patience and to teach us compassion toward others. He himself willed to experience this state in order that we might have a high priest who could share our sufferings and encourage us by His example to practice this virtue."²⁸

As in the letter to Jacques Tholard cited above, he often associated patience with winning a "crown in heaven"²⁹ and stated that patience characterized "those who aspire to paradise."³⁰

His words to the Daughters of Charity about the need for patience were sometimes eloquent. He compared God to a sculptor and the sisters to blocks of marble. God worked steadily in their lives, chiseling away to make them beautiful statues: "Take a poor Daughter of Charity or a poor Missionary. Before God withdraws them from the world, they're living in a coarse, rough sort of way. They're like big blocks of stone. But God wants to make beautiful statues of them, and to do this He sets to work and strikes them with great hammer blows. And how does He do this? Sometimes by making them suffer from heat, sometimes from cold, or by having to go to visit the sick in the country where the wind lashes them in winter. When the weather is bad, they still have to go out in it. Well! These are the heavy hammer blows with which God strikes a poor Daughter of Charity. If we were to judge by appearances, we'd say that this Sister is unfortunate, but if we take a look at God's plan for her, we'll see that all these blows are intended only to form a beautiful statue. And when, in the beginning, God sends great sufferings, both of

²⁵ CCD:X:428 and XIIIb:161. In the imagery that Vincent was using, charity was at the summit of the cross, humility was at its foot, obedience was its right arm, and patience was its left. Cf. CCD:XII:160.

²⁶ Cf. CCD:XII:160.

²⁷ CCD:IV:87.

²⁸ CCD:XI:56.

²⁹ CCD:X:154.

³⁰ CCD:X:415.

mind and body, and sees that all the rougher elements of this soul have been removed by means of the patience she has practiced, then He takes His chisels to perfect her ...”³¹

On July 14, 1658, in a conference with the Daughters, he told them: “Sisters, if anyone wants to know who are the true Daughters of Charity among those who wear the dress and bear the name, it's the ones who practice these four virtues: humility, charity, obedience, and patience.”³² Again employing the metaphor mentioned above, he described patience as the fourth arm of the “spiritual Cross of Our Lord.”³³ He immediately added: “There's scarcely a moment when we don't need patience.”³⁴ He then described the many occasions in life when we need to be patient with others and with ourselves. He concluded lyrically: “What a beautiful building is a Sister who is humble, patient, obedient, and charitable! There's nothing more beautiful, Sisters. The angels all over heaven look with pleasure at the lovely harmony of those virtues.” But he concluded by stating strongly that impatience is the ruin of a sister: “Take that (patience) away from a Daughter of Charity and what do you find? Ah! Sisters, you find nothing but the trunk of pride. O poor child, whom we've seen being so obedient for all those years, must we say that this is no longer the case? What a pity to see now impatience instead of patience; to see now only outbursts of anger where once there was such forbearance! What can we say except that it's a beautiful city of Carthage in ruins.³⁵ There's nothing left but the poor, grey dress and the name of Daughter of Charity. What grounds for sadness!”³⁶

He encouraged the sisters to examine their conscience every day about patience, evoking rather surprisingly the example of the philosopher Seneca in that regard.³⁷ Vincent cited Seneca on only one other occasion in his extant works.³⁸

In a conference with the priests and brothers in 1658, he openly confessed his own impatience: “O wretched man that I am! What poor use have I not made of the sickness and of the minor inconveniences God has been pleased to send me! How many acts of impatience have I committed, wretch that I am, and what scandal have I not given to those who have seen me acting like that! Help me, brothers, to ask God's forgiveness for having made such poor use of my little discomforts as I've done in the past, and for the grace to make good use in the future of those it may please His Divine Majesty to send me in my old age and in the little time I have left to live on earth.”³⁹

Vincent applied his teaching about patience to a variety of situations:

Patience with ourselves

Writing to Jean Martin, the superior in Turin, he recognized how hard it is to be patient with oneself: “Remember that patience is as necessary to bear with ourselves as charity is to bear with the neighbor. May God be pleased to give us both!”⁴⁰

³¹ CCD:X:148-49.

³² CCD:X:422.

³³ CCD:X:426.

³⁴ CCD:X:428.

³⁵ Carthage was one of the largest and most beautiful cities in the ancient world. It was destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC after the Third Punic War. A famous phrase “Carthago delenda est” (Carthage must be destroyed) is attributed to Cato the Elder, who is said to have used it at the conclusion of many of his speeches in the Roman senate.

³⁶ CCD:X:429.

³⁷ CCD:X:486.

³⁸ CCD:IV:55.

³⁹ CCD:XII:29.

⁴⁰ CCD:VII:291.

This was one of Vincent's favorite themes. He was convinced that "we must abandon ourselves to the Spirit of Our Lord in order to bear with ourselves."⁴¹ He told the Daughters that, if we don't learn to bear with ourselves in our changing moods, we will never enjoy peace and tranquility.⁴² He stated even more strongly to his confreres that "we are constituted in such a way that most often we have to bear with ourselves, so true it is that this virtue ... is necessary for everyone, even in order to practice it toward ourselves, whom we sometimes find hard to bear."⁴³

Patience and Service of the Poor

Early in their ministry to the poor, Vincent told François du Coudray, one of the original members of the Congregation of the Mission, that meekness, humility, and patience were the "essence of this good work."⁴⁴

He often mentioned that during missions there were "some little occasions for practicing patience."⁴⁵ During a mission in Saint-Germain, he noted somewhat wryly that "the firm stand taken against low-necked dresses" caused a reaction. As a result, the missionaries needed formidable patience in the face of criticism, but their patience won out. He added: "The ladies who had the hardest time in the beginning are now so fervent that they have become members of the Charity and serve the poor on their day. They also went out in four groups to collect money in the town. They are the Queen's maids of honor."⁴⁶

Of the Daughters of Charity, he wrote: "Since their work is, for the most part, very arduous, and the poor persons whom they serve are a little difficult, to the point that they are sometimes reproached even when they have done their best in their regard, they will strive to do their utmost to have a good store of patience, asking Our Lord every day to give it to them in abundance and to grant them a share of the patience He practiced toward those who calumniated, slapped, whipped, and crucified Him."⁴⁷ In a draft of the Daughters' Common Rules, under Patience, he wrote: "They will endeavor to endure willingly and for the love of God inconveniences, contradictions, ridicule, calumnies, and other mortifications that may befall them, even for the good they have done, bearing in mind that all this is only a part of the Cross Our Lord wants them to carry after Him on earth so that one day they may merit to go to heaven with Him who, though innocent, suffered so much for us and even prayed for those who crucified Him."⁴⁸

He emphasized how importance patience was for priests who were assigned to be army chaplains,⁴⁹ as well as for those who were trying to help priests and religious that were being held as slaves in North Africa.⁵⁰

When he wrote to Bernard Codoing, whom he regarded as often rash and impatient, he succumbed to using stereotypes: "I have always heard that the Italians are the most cautious people in the world and the most distrustful of individuals who act too

⁴¹ CCD:VIII:348.

⁴² CCD:IX:99.

⁴³ CCD:XII:30.

⁴⁴ CCD:I:58.

⁴⁵ CCD:I:440.

⁴⁶ CCD:I:442.

⁴⁷ CCD:XIIIb:127.

⁴⁸ CCD:XIIIb:149.

⁴⁹ CCD:XIIIa:307.

⁵⁰ CCD:XIIIa:345.

quickly. Caution, patience, and gentleness resolve everything with them, in time. Because they know that we French act too quickly, they leave us out in the cold for a long time without making friends with us.”⁵¹ He underlined the point in another letter, written a short time later: “It is fitting that your principal plans, which deal with Rome, be carried out with patience and forbearance in Rome. The people there are patient and observant of the conduct of men. Because they are stable, it is hard for them to entrust matters of importance to persons who pursue and become attached to secondary ideas, and this sometimes to the detriment of their primary goals. Oh! How patient and forbearing they are, and how they delight in patience and perseverance in the original plans!”⁵²

Patience in Community Living

With a considerable dose of realism, Vincent wrote to a confrere who was having difficulty in confiding in his superior and wanted to change houses: “This comes from being hot-blooded and quick-tempered, and these are moderated with age and not by any change of residence. We take our temperament with us wherever we go, and this impetuosity and hastiness are sources of boredom and unrest. There are some persons who are content with everything and others who are scarcely content with anything. The latter need patience to bear with themselves.”⁵³

He was also very aware of how patient superiors often needed to be. In 1659, he told Antoine Durand: “O Father, how great is human misery and how necessary is patience for Superiors!”⁵⁴ Shortly after that, he told him that “our life is ... strewn with crosses.”⁵⁵

Patience in Working with Others

Continually, he urged Louise de Marillac to be patient in enduring the wanderings of her son, in dealing with the Ladies of Charity, and in forming the young women who came in from the countryside to join the Daughters of Charity. He urged her to “honor the patience of the Blessed Virgin.”⁵⁶

On the feast of the Assumption in 1636, he urged Monsieur Portail, who was experiencing some opposition, to “honor the meekness, patience, and humility of Our Lord with regard to those who disliked His person and teaching and act the same way He did.”⁵⁷

In a letter of apology to Mother de la Trinité for the Congregation’s delays in fulfilling its commitment to her, he wrote charmingly: “But then, charity is patient. O dear Mother, what reason you have to expect a beautiful jewel in your crown for the patience you are practicing towards us in this matter! That is also the prayer, dear Mother, that I offer to Our Lord; and of you, I ask that you not grow weary of bearing with us in the suffering you are experiencing on our account.”⁵⁸

⁵¹ CCD:II:262.

⁵² CCD:II:350.

⁵³ CCD:III:616.

⁵⁴ CCD:VII:610.

⁵⁵ CCD:VIII:113.

⁵⁶ CCD:I:123.

⁵⁷ CCD:I:332.

⁵⁸ CCD:I:577.

He wrote to Louis Rivet: “I thank Our Lord for this; you honor His patience by the patience you exercise with regard to the failings of others, putting up with them as He put up with the boorishness of His disciples and He puts up daily with the greatest sinners like me.”⁵⁹

*Patience in Sickness*⁶⁰

A common theme in Vincent’s talks and writings was the witness of the infirm. He spoke of those whose endurance of sickness and suffering was like a “theater of patience, in which they showed forth all the virtues in their brilliance.”⁶¹ He stated that the sick were in a bed or in a hospital, “as if in a pulpit, to witness publicly to Christian virtues, especially patience and acceptance of the Divine Will, at least by their example.”⁶²

He observed how essential patience, gentleness, and cheerfulness of mind” were for those who were infirm.⁶³ He reproached himself for not having similar patience: “Ah, when I think about some members of the Company who, for one, two, six, eight, or ten years have been suffering, one from severe pain, another from a lingering illness, and are accepting this with perfect patience and in conformity with God’s good pleasure, and that as soon as I have a slight pain in my feet or my knees, I cry out, I complain. You can well imagine, I say, that those examples make me ashamed to see myself so weak as not to be able to suffer the slightest pain!”⁶⁴

He wrote eloquently of the virtues of Jean Pillé, who entered the Congregation of the Mission late in life and soon afterwards chronically ill: “It pleased the Divine Wisdom, who wished him to preach to us by his patience, to impede the course and impetuosity of his zeal by his infirmity, which was always with him, preventing him from carrying out the functions of the Mission as he would have liked.”⁶⁵ He described Pillé’s patience as heroic.⁶⁶

Patience in Being Misjudged

Vincent often reminded the confreres and the sisters that trials were part of God’s Plan: “In our situation, calumnies and persecutions, in so far as they are trials and exercises in patience and forbearance, are the very work of God, who wills, by these vexations, to detach His servants from anything that can hinder them from going to Him.”⁶⁷ He added: “God’s Spirit is a spirit of peace, a gentle inspiration that slips in without any commotion ... Everything He does is always followed by calmness and gentleness; and, because He’s the God of peace and union, God can’t tolerate any disturbance or division. If, by the ministry of angels, He sometimes communicates a favor

⁵⁹ CCD:III:599.

⁶⁰ Cf. CCD:XII:402.

⁶¹ CCD:XI:61.

⁶² CCD:XIIIa:447.

⁶³ CCD:I:523.

⁶⁴ CCD:XI:347.

⁶⁵ CCD:II:368.

⁶⁶ CCD:II:375.

⁶⁷ CCD:XII:227.

to us, it will be easy to recognize that this insight comes from Him if it slips sweetly into our soul, prompting us to seek the greater glory of God.”⁶⁸

When complaints were being made about the Visitation nuns, he wrote to Jane Frances de Chantal (just six months before her death), “I can assure you, dear Mother, that it was no fault of theirs. Well, Our Lord is permitting your good daughters to be tried in this way. Blessed be God that there are no grounds for it! Charity is patient, says Saint Paul. Does not the great work of charity they are doing require that they suffer to try their patience? Never is a work of God done for God where one is not paid back in this coin.”⁶⁹

Patience as a companion of Humility and Gentleness

Vincent continually linked patience with humility⁷⁰ and gentleness⁷¹ and was convinced that this combination of virtues would win others over.

He saw patience and humility as the flip side of trust in God’s mercy and regarded them as crucial in life. He wrote to Louis Lebreton: “The Company is increasing in number and in virtue, by the mercy of God, which everyone recognizes and which was apparent to me during the visitations. I am the only wretch who keeps on heaping new iniquities and abominations on myself. O Father, how merciful God is to put up with me with so much patience and forbearance, and how weak and miserable I am to abuse his mercies so greatly! I entreat you, Father, to offer me frequently to His Divine Majesty.”⁷²

Patience and Trusting in Providence

Here, Vincent’s teaching moved in two contrasting directions. The first focused on slowing down; the other, on acting promptly. Vincent tied the two together when he exclaimed to Louise de Marillac: “Who can hurry or delay the order of adorable Providence!”⁷³

1) Slowing down and accepting the pace that Providence dictates

Vincent insisted that God’s plan will be revealed to those who wait patiently and peacefully. This theme came through very strongly in his letters to the impetuous Bernard Codoing, the superior in Rome, who often aroused the founder’s ire by moving too quickly or too brusquely. After rebuking Codoing rather sharply in a letter written on December 7, 1641, and after telling him to act with greater deliberation, Vincent added⁷⁴: “Reflecting on all the principal events that have taken place in this Company, it seems to me, and this is quite evident, that, if they had taken place before they did, they would not have been successful. I say that of all of them, without excepting a single one. That is why I have a particular devotion to following the adorable Providence of God step by step. And my only consolation is that I think Our Lord alone has carried on and is constantly carrying on the business of the Little Company.” On March 16, 1644, Vincent reprimanded Codoing for interfering in matters that were not his concern, urged him to

⁶⁸ CCD:XII:285.

⁶⁹ CCD:II:202.

⁷⁰ CCD:III:154, 339, 390.

⁷¹ CCD:III:154; IV:182; V:63; VII:241; VIII:169; IX:402; X:585; XII:364.

⁷² CCD:II:173.

⁷³ CCD:I:557.

⁷⁴ CCD:II:237.

attend to his own affairs, and reminded him that Providence will take care of the rest. "Grace has its moments," he told him.⁷⁵

There is a clear tension in St. Vincent's writings between activity and passivity. His attitude depended greatly on the circumstances. For instance, in trying to moderate the indiscreet zeal of Philippe le Vacher, he urged passivity: "The good that God wishes to be done comes about almost by itself, without our thinking about it. That is the way the Congregation was born, that the missions and the retreats to ordinands began, that the Company of the Daughters of Charity came into being.... My God! Father, how I desire that you would moderate your ardor and weigh things maturely on the scale of the sanctuary before resolving them! Be passive rather than active. In that way God will do through you alone what the whole world together could not do without him."⁷⁶ He often emphasized this theme to Louise de Marillac,⁷⁷ encouraging her to be patient in awaiting the action of God.⁷⁸

In all this, it is quite evident that St. Vincent abhorred rushing. He told others that "God's spirit is neither violent nor hasty,"⁷⁹ "his works have their moment,"⁸⁰ they are done "almost by themselves,"⁸¹ they are accomplished "little by little."⁸² "In the name of God, Father," he told Codoing, "if necessity urges us to make haste, then let it be slowly, as the wise proverb says."⁸³

2) Acting promptly as the agent of God's Providence

But, as is suggested in the citation above, there is another side to this truth in Vincent's teaching; namely, that since we are God's co-workers, we must sometimes make haste, even if slowly. Vincent took the other side of the passivity/activity theme with Étienne Blatiron, the superior in Rome in 1655, when he made it clear that he was eager for some action: "Do not stop pursuing our business, with confidence that it is God's good pleasure ... Let us wait patiently, but let us act, and, so to speak, let us make haste slowly in negotiating one of the most important affairs that the Congregation will ever have."⁸⁴

The tension between activity and passivity is evident in another letter that Vincent wrote to Blatiron on November 12, 1655. In it, he commented favorably on a practice that Blatiron had begun of asking, through the intercession of St. Joseph, for the spread of the Company. Vincent added reflectively: "For twenty years I have not dared to ask that of God, thinking that, since the Congregation is His work, we should leave to His providence alone the responsibility for its conservation and its growth. But, struck by the recommendation made to us in the gospel to ask Him to send laborers into the harvest, I have become convinced of the importance and usefulness of this devotion."⁸⁵

When he wanted action, Vincent emphasized collaboration with providence. He wrote to Edme Jolly: "You are one of the few men who honor the Providence of God very

⁷⁵ CCD:II:499.

⁷⁶ CCD:IV:128.

⁷⁷ CCD:I:234.

⁷⁸ In a similar vein, but in very different circumstances, in 1659 he told Jacques Pesnelle, who was initiating one-day retreats for the local community (CCD:VIII:81): "Since God does not depend on time, he sometimes works more graces in one day than in eight...."

⁷⁹ CCD:II:257.

⁸⁰ CCD:V:400.

⁸¹ CCD:II:521.

⁸² CCD:VII:454.

⁸³ CCD:II:310.

⁸⁴ CCD:V:400

⁸⁵ CCD:V:468-69.

much by the preparation of remedies against foreseen evils. I thank you very humbly for this and pray that Our Lord will continue to enlighten you more and more so that such enlightenment may spread through the Company.”⁸⁶

The balance in Vincent’s writings is delicate. Trust in providence involves patient waiting, not immobile passivity. It demands constant alertness, so that we might know the right moment to act. Sometimes the right moment arrives slowly; at other times it comes quickly. Sometimes it reveals itself only after considerable prodding; at other times, an opportunity arrives unexpectedly, with almost no preparation.

Vincent believed that we are active sharers in God’s providence. God acts not only upon us, but in and through, us. God’s freedom does not diminish, but enhances, ours. Providence works not only through the events of nature and history that unfold around us, but also through us personally. Not only is God responsible for the world, but we are too.

In fact, for Vincent, a servant of the poor personified God’s providence in the lives of the poor. he felt that another name for the Daughters of Charity might be the Daughters of Providence.⁸⁷ Giuseppina Nicoli, a Daughter of Charity beatified in 2008, captured this aspect of Vincent’s thought as she was instructing the seminary sisters: “This is what being a Daughter of Charity means. She is the personification of Divine Providence. She is the tangible proof of God’s love for the poor.”⁸⁸

III. The quest for and ongoing importance of patience today

Recently, when asked what message he would like to send to the Catholics of China, especially to young Catholics, Pope Francis said: “Always a message of hope. But it seems tautological to send a message of hope to a people who are masters of waiting. The Chinese are masters of patience. You have ‘the virus of hope.’ It’s a very beautiful thing.” He added: “Don’t waste this heritage. Pass it on with patience.”⁸⁹

The patient refuse to be robbed of their serenity. They recognize that, on the list of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, love, joy, and peace accompany patience.⁹⁰ As Hildegard of Bingen stated, patience is “the pillar that is weakened by nothing.”⁹¹

Etymologically, patience is related to suffering. The Latin verb *patior* means *to suffer* or *to endure*. The Latin noun *passio* means *suffering*.

At a time of increasingly rapid change and in a world of widespread violence, patience is essential in sharing the suffering of those in need and in bringing joyful news to those who are in pain.

Just as patience was difficult for Vincent de Paul, so too the hopeful patience of which Pope Francis speaks is a lifelong quest for most of us rather than an achieved goal.

⁸⁶ CCD:VII:326.

⁸⁷ CCD:IX:62.

⁸⁸ *Positio* II, 1912, Instructions to the Seminary Sisters, document 130a, p. 1161.

⁸⁹ Interview with Pedro Chia, S.J., the director of the Jesuit Communication Office of the Chinese Province, released on Aug. 9, 2024.

⁹⁰ Galatians 5:22-23.

⁹¹ Josef Pieper, *Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart* (Ignatius Press, 1991).

Let me conclude these reflections by suggesting three means for growing in patience. All three of them lie tucked away in the teaching of Vincent de Paul, though below I will express them in more contemporary language.

1. *Examining and Reframing*

Most of us run into people and situations that repeatedly rouse our ire! In their presence or in those circumstances, anger surges up within us spontaneously. Recently, when I was celebrating a Sunday Mass in a parish, the homilist spoke about drivers who become furious in congested traffic. A young woman directly in front of me elbowed her husband and laughed. He bowed his head humbly and, red-faced, shook it back and forth with embarrassment. Similarly, I have known people who always react with a sharp edge when confronted with trying situations or when a particular person is speaking, acting, or neglecting to act.

Since impatience is such a problem, it is important for each of us to recognize what triggers it: what are the circumstances and who are the people who quickly make me impatient? Like many other saints, Vincent de Paul recommended a daily examination of conscience as a means for rooting out impatience.⁹² If we track our emotional states during the day, looking for patterns, we will grow in self-awareness and will better define the situations and behaviors that trigger our impatience.

At that point, it is helpful if we can “reframe” the situations that irk us. Are there other ways of looking at the situation? Is the traffic jam really delaying me for a long time? Are there things that I can do to use this time profitably, like listening to music or the news or an audiobook, or praying? What are the good points that I have observed in the person who ticks me off? What positive things do others see in that person?

Reframing can help shift our emotions in difficult situations or with people we find problematic.⁹³

On a macro-scale, history teaches us that some nations offend other nations repeatedly and hostilities quickly emerge. Situations like that are much harder to deal with than individual impatience, but analogously, diplomats and negotiators are continually trying to reframe situations, pointing out alternative advantages and disadvantages, as they attempt to bring about or maintain peace.

2. *Waiting and taking one's time*

A few deep breaths always help! Vincent knew how to take his time. He also knew how to act. It is ironic that, though his confreres sometimes accused him of being too slow, his accomplishments were enormous!

Regarding patience, Gabriel Marcel wrote in *Homo Viator*: “A simple expression borrowed from everyday language is a help here: *to take one's time* ... What exactly do these words, so foreign to the vocabulary of technical philosophy, mean? “Take your time,” an examiner would say, for example, to a flurried candidate. That means, do not force your personal rhythm, the proper cadence of your reflection, or even of your

⁹² CCD:I:255; IX:28, 36; X:401; XII:55.

⁹³ CCD:XII:120.

memory, for if you do, you will spoil your chances, you will be likely to say at random the first words which come into your head ... Further back I spoke of patience with oneself; perhaps it is even more instructive now to consider patience with others. This most certainly consists in never hustling or being rough with another person, more exactly, in never trying to substitute our own rhythm for his or hers ... If we look no further than its etymological meaning, patience appears to be just a simple letting things alone, or allowing them to take their course, but if we take the analysis a little further we find that such non-interference is of a higher order than indifference and implies a subtle respect for the other person's need for time to preserve his vital rhythm, so that it tends to exercise a transforming influence upon him which is comparable to that which sometimes rewards love."⁹⁴

An objection to Marcel's words is that action is often required rather than inaction. "Patience" can easily slip into sedentary complacency. St. Vincent knew how to wait, but he also knew how to make haste slowly.

3. *Engaging in repeated acts*

Vincent believed in what today we might call behavioral modification. He urged others to grow in virtue by performing repeated acts. He wrote to Pierre du Beaumont on October 3, 1655, "I will say to you, Father, that that cannot be done all at once, but little by little with meekness and patience. Like the other virtues, mortification is acquired only by repeated acts, so you have to be content to lead your people there step by step without intending to arrive there in a short time."⁹⁵

In describing Jesus' love, Vincent spoke of the repeated acts of His love: "His humiliations were nothing but love, His work only love, His sufferings only love, His meditations only love, and all His interior and exterior actions were nothing but repeated acts of His love. His love gave Him great contempt for the world, for the spirit of the world, for wealth, for pleasures, and for honors. That is a description of the Spirit of Our Lord, with which we must be clothed, namely, in a word, to always have great esteem and love for God. He was so filled with these that He did nothing of himself or to satisfy himself, 'I always do the Will of my Father. I always do the actions and works that are pleasing to Him.'"⁹⁶

If, as Vincent believed, patience is the virtue of the perfect, then it is surely worth striving for repeatedly, even while, like Vincent, we recognize that the road toward it is long and elusive.

Shakespeare, Vincent's contemporary, recognized the challenge: "How poor are they that have not patience! What wound did ever heal but by degrees?"⁹⁷

In the end, patience is the flowering of final freedom.

⁹⁴ Marcel, Gabriel. *Homo Viator: Introduction to the Metaphysic of Hope* (Harper Torch Book, 1965) 39-40.

⁹⁵ CCD:V:443.

⁹⁶ CCD:XII:94.

⁹⁷ [*Othello*, II, iii, 376-379.](#)

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