



Prayer as the Source of Dynamism and Missionary Fruitfulness

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Abstract

This article explores prayer as the vital source of dynamism and missionary fruitfulness in the spirituality of Vincent de Paul. Drawing on his life and teachings, the study highlights prayer not merely as a devotional practice but as the heart of discernment, conversion, and apostolic effectiveness. Vincent presents prayer as a continual “lifting of the soul to God,” essential for aligning human action with divine will. Through rich images—such as nourishment, light, and refreshing dew—he describes prayer as sustaining and renewing the missionary spirit. The article further examines the intrinsic relationship between contemplation and action, showing that authentic service to the poor flows from deep union with God. Prayer becomes both a school of self-knowledge and a path to ongoing conversion. Ultimately, this reflection affirms that, within the Congregation of the Mission, fidelity to prayer remains indispensable for fruitful evangelization and enduring missionary vitality.

Cet article explore la prière en tant que source vitale de dynamisme et de fécondité missionnaire dans la spiritualité de Vincent de Paul. S'appuyant sur sa vie et ses enseignements, cette étude met en lumière la prière non seulement comme une pratique dévotionnelle, mais aussi comme le cœur du discernement, de la conversion et de l'efficacité apostolique. Vincent présente la prière comme un « élévation continue de l'âme vers Dieu », indispensable pour aligner l'action humaine sur la volonté divine. À travers des images riches – telles que la nourriture, la lumière et la rosée rafraîchissante –, il décrit la prière comme ce qui soutient et renouvelle l'esprit missionnaire. L'article examine en outre la relation intrinsèque entre la contemplation et l'action, montrant que le service authentique aux pauvres découle d'une union profonde avec Dieu. La prière devient à la fois une école de connaissance de soi et un chemin vers une conversion permanente. En fin de compte, cette réflexion affirme que, au sein de la Congrégation de la Mission, la fidélité à la prière reste indispensable à une évangélisation fructueuse et à une vitalité missionnaire durable.

Este artículo analiza la oración como fuente vital de dinamismo y fecundidad misionera en la espiritualidad de Vicente de Paúl. Basándose en su vida y sus enseñanzas, el estudio destaca la oración no solo como una práctica devocional, sino como el núcleo del discernimiento, la conversión y la eficacia apostólica. Vicente presenta la oración como una continua «elevación del alma hacia Dios», esencial para armonizar la acción humana con la voluntad divina. A través de imágenes ricas —como el alimento, la luz y el rocío refrescante— describe la oración como lo que sostiene y renueva el espíritu misionero. El artículo examina además la relación intrínseca entre la contemplación y la acción, mostrando que el auténtico servicio a los pobres brota de una profunda unión con Dios. La oración se convierte tanto en una escuela de autoconocimiento como



en un camino hacia la conversión continua. En última instancia, esta reflexión afirma que, dentro de la Congregación de la Misión, la fidelidad a la oración sigue siendo indispensable para una evangelización fecunda y una vitalidad misionera duradera.

Keywords : Man of Prayer, Missionary, Vincent de Paul, Apostolic Activity

Introduction

Through this reflection, we would like to present the importance of prayer in Vincentian spirituality as the source of dynamism and missionary fruitfulness. Referring to the life of Saint Vincent de Paul and his spiritual doctrine, particularly considering the evocative expressions and images he uses about prayer, we felt challenged and edified by the relevance and depth of his experience and teaching on prayer. This is why, through this reflection, we would like to highlight the relevance and depth of Saint Vincent de Paul's experience and thought on prayer as the source of dynamism and missionary (apostolic) fruitfulness, and also as the rule of utmost importance in daily life. In the following lines, we will divide our reflection into four points; namely: Saint Vincent de Paul as a man of prayer, prayer as the path to discernment and conversion, the complementarity between prayer and apostolic action, and finally, we will address the question of the method for praying well.

1. Saint Vincent de Paul, a man of prayer

Saint Vincent de Paul defined prayer as a *“lifting of the soul to God to show Him how much we love Him, or to make known to Him our needs.”*¹ According to the testimony of Abelly, his first biographer and friend, Saint Vincent de Paul was a man of prayer, his spirit was always attentive to the presence of God, and he regularly turned to God in prayer to implore His light and grace.² He could not make a decision or undertake a work or initiative without resorting to prayer. Because he was convinced that nothing good could be done in human life without prayer,³ as he himself clearly stated: *“one cannot hope for much from someone who does not continually converse with God.”*⁴

In fact, prayer was at the heart of Saint Vincent de Paul's life and all his activities; it was the source of the dynamism and fruitfulness of his entire spiritual and missionary experience. This is why, during a talk with the missionaries, he confessed to them his unshakeable conviction that prayer was the source of missionary fruitfulness and a shield against the attacks of the enemy, declaring:

Give me a man of prayer, and he'll be able to do anything; he can say with the holy Apostle, 'I can do all things in Him who sustains and comforts me' (Philippians 4:13). The Congregation of the Mission will survive as long as it's faithful to the practice of meditation because meditation is like an impregnable rampart, which will protect the Missioners against all sorts of attacks; it's a mystical arsenal, or is like the Tower of David, which will supply them with all

¹ CCD X, 471.

² L. Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul. Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*, New City Press, New Rochelle, New York 1993, Book III, p. 56.

³ CCD XI, 361.

⁴ L. Abelly, *op. cit.*

*sorts of weapons, not only to defend themselves but also to attack and rout all the enemies of God's glory and the salvation of souls.*⁵

Convinced of the irreplaceable role of prayer, Saint Vincent de Paul had insisted much through his teachings to help his Vincentian missionaries to place prayer at the center of their lives and activities. He used several comparisons and beautiful expressions and evocative images to explain and instill in the Daughters of Charity, the Priests and Brothers of the Mission, as well as all Vincentian laity the value of prayer as a rule of the utmost importance in their daily lives.⁶ Here we can cite a few expressions or images he used to explain the irreplaceable role of prayer: *the nursery of devotion, the soul, the threshing floor, food, the pantry, the source of rejuvenation, the sun, bread, salutary freshness, watering, sweet dew....* As an example, we can quote an extract from the conference of 1 May 1648, in which Saint Vincent de Paul explains to the Daughters of Charity the importance of prayer through the image of watering and sweet dew, saying to them:

... if you find no benefit in prayer, you won't profit much from the conferences. You see, dear Sisters, gardeners take the time twice a day to water the plants in their gardens because without this assistance they would wither away during very hot weather. On the contrary, thanks to this watering, they draw their nourishment from the soil because a certain humor coming from this watering rises from the roots, flows through the stem, and gives life to the branches and leaves and savor to the fruit.

*In the same way, dear Sisters, we are like those poor gardens in which drought causes all the plants to die, unless the gardener's care and hard work make provision for this. That's why you have the holy custom of mental prayer which, like a gentle dew, moistens your soul every morning by the grace it draws from God. When you're worn out by encounters and difficulties, you have again, in the afternoon, this salutary refreshment, which continuously invigorates all your actions. How beneficial this will be for a Daughter of Charity in a short space of time, if she is careful to refresh herself with this sacred dew! You'll see her growing day by day in holiness, just as the gardener sees his plants growing day by day, and in a short time she'll advance like the beautiful dawn that rises in the morning and goes on increasing until noon.*⁷

2. Prayer: a path to discernment and conversion

For Saint Vincent de Paul, prayer was an opportune moment to discern God's will. He offered himself to God during prayer to seek how to align or conform his will, his conduct, his life plan, and his works with God's good will.⁸ Likewise, prayer was for him the ideal place to learn to convert and do penance in order to live according to God's will. This is why Saint Vincent de Paul compares prayer to a form of preaching to oneself in order to convince oneself of the need to convert with the help of divine grace. So, for him, prayer is, in a way, like a school where one learns to know oneself better through the

⁵ CCD XI, 76.

⁶ Jean-Pierre Renouard, *15 Days of Prayer with Saint Vincent de Paul*, Translated and edited by John E. Rybolt, CM, New City Press, Hyde Park, New York, 2010, 85-86.

⁷ CCD IX, 316-317.

⁸ A. DODIN, *En prière avec Monsieur Vincent [In prayer with Monsieur Vincent]*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1982, 18.

reflection of divine grace, in order to renounce one's vices and passions and ask for the grace to lead a virtuous life in accordance with God's good will.⁹

3. The complementarity between prayer and apostolic activity

In accordance with the tradition he had received from Saint Francis de Sales, Saint Vincent de Paul taught all his disciples to observe the intrinsic union that exists between action and contemplation; every Vincentian missionary is invited to be “*a contemplative in action and an apostle in prayer.*”¹⁰ Because apostolic activity and prayer are inseparable, they nourish each other. Prayer intensifies apostolic activity; just as apostolic activity nourishes the practice of prayer.¹¹ That is why Saint Vincent de Paul advised the Daughters of Charity to interrupt their prayer in case of a legitimate emergency for the service of the poor. Here, for example, is what he said to the Daughters of Charity about the harmony between prayer and apostolic activity:

*Sisters, for the consolation of those in difficult ministries, let me say that there must be no delay in what concerns the service of the poor. If, at the time of your morning prayer, you have to take medicine to someone, then go there with your mind at rest; after an act of resignation to the holy Will of God, offer Him what you're going to do, unite your intention with the prayer being made at the Motherhouse or elsewhere, and go about your business with no anxiety. If, on your return, you're free to spend a little time in meditation or spiritual reading, very well! But, if you can't do it, don't become upset, nor think you've failed, for it's not lost when you leave it for a legitimate reason. And if there is ever a legitimate reason, dear Sisters, it's the service of the neighbor. To leave God for God is not leaving God at all, that is, to leave one work of God to do another, either of greater obligation or of greater merit. You leave prayer or spiritual reading or you break the Rule of silence in order to help a poor person. Keep in mind, Sisters, that doing all this is to serve Him. What a consolation for a good Daughter of Charity to think, 'I'm going to help my sick poor, but God will accept this in place of the prayer I should be making just now,' and let her go off cheerfully to wherever God is calling her!*¹²

4. The method of prayer

Regarding the method of prayer, Saint Vincent de Paul was keen to pass on to his followers the method he had received from his master, Saint Francis de Sales. In summary, this method divides the practice of prayer into three stages. The first stage is the distant preparation of the subject of prayer on the previous evening. The second stage is the moment of prayer itself at the appointed time, usually in the morning after Lauds. The moment of prayer begins with placing oneself in the presence of God to “*converse properly with His Divine Majesty,*”¹³ followed by asking for the grace to pray better and recalling the subject of prayer chosen the previous evening. Finally, the third and last step

⁹ CCD XI, 84.

¹⁰ Constitution 42.

¹¹ Jean-Pierre Renouard, *Saint Vincent de Paul maître de la sagesse. Initiation à l'esprit Vincentien* [Saint Vincent de Paul, Master of Wisdom. Introduction to the Vincentian Spirit], Nouvelle Cité, France 2010, 30.

¹² CCD IX, 251-252.

¹³ CCD XI, 359.

is to make a concrete resolution that will guide and determine the person's thinking and behavior throughout the day in order to conform to God's will.¹⁴

Saint Vincent de Paul strongly emphasized the importance of the resolution because, according to him, prayer remains fruitless if it does not lead to a firm resolution that allows one to practice virtue and act out of love in daily life through a program of evangelical living in the service of the poor. According to Saint Vincent de Paul, the purpose of prayer is in keeping with the resolution we make at the end; once the resolution is made, we must redouble our vigilance throughout the day to remain faithful to it, overcoming all kinds of obstacles that could potentially prevent us from carrying out this resolution.¹⁵ Thus, speaking about the importance of resolution, Saint Vincent de Paul maintains:

... it doesn't suffice to have good affections, we must go further and be motivated to take resolutions to work seriously in future for the acquisition of the virtue, proposing to ourselves how to put it into practice and doing acts of it. This is the crux of the matter and the benefit to be drawn from meditation. That's why we mustn't take our resolutions lightly, but repeat them and really plant them firmly in our heart. It's even a good idea to foresee the obstacles that may arise and the means that can help us to adopt this practice....¹⁶

Conclusion

Finally, prayer occupies a place of great importance in Vincentian spirituality. According to Saint Vincent de Paul, prayer is the source of dynamism and fruitfulness in spiritual and missionary life. It is a shield that enables us to fight against the attacks of the enemy and to defeat him by divine grace. Likewise, prayer is the place par excellence for discerning the will of God and the path that leads to penance. Thus, through his teachings, Saint Vincent de Paul uses beautiful expressions and evocative images to explain and instill the irreplaceable value of prayer as a rule of the utmost importance. He insisted greatly on the observance of the harmony that must exist between prayer and apostolic activity, because the two feed off each other. That is why, in case of necessity, one could leave prayer for urgent service to others; according to Saint Vincent de Paul, interrupting prayer to serve others is like *leaving God for God*.

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¹⁴ Renouard, *op. cit.*, *Saint Vincent de Paul maître de la sagesse*, 71-74.

¹⁵ Pierre Coste, *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, translated by Joseph Leonard, CM, New City Press, Brooklyn, New York, 1987, Volume 3, pages 357-358.

¹⁶ CCD XI, 360-361.

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