



A Brief History of Canonization of St Vincent de Paul

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Abstract

While many members of the Vincentian family are familiar with aspects of the life and spirituality of St Vincent de Paul, they may not know what happened in the years following his death. This article aims to briefly describe the process that led to Vincent's canonization on June 13th 1737. It focuses on the funeral oration of bishop Maupas du Tour, the three-volume biography of Bishop Louis Abelly and the role of Bishop Prospero Lambertini author of *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione*. He was involved, before his elevation as Pope Benedict XIV in processing the cause of St Vincent de Paul, and had interesting things to say about it in his monumental treatise.

Si de nombreux membres de la famille vincentienne connaissent certains aspects de la vie et de la spiritualité de saint Vincent de Paul, ils ignorent peut-être ce qui s'est passé dans les années qui ont suivi sa mort. Cet article a pour but de décrire brièvement le processus qui a conduit à la canonisation de Vincent le 13 juin 1737. Il se concentre sur l'oraison funèbre de l'évêque Maupas du Tour, la biographie en trois volumes de l'évêque Louis Abelly et le rôle de l'évêque Prospero Lambertini, auteur de *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione*. Avant son élévation au rang de pape Benoît XIV, il avait participé au traitement de la cause de saint Vincent de Paul et avait des choses intéressantes à dire à ce sujet dans son traité monumental.

Aunque muchos miembros de la familia vicenciana conocen aspectos de la vida y la espiritualidad de San Vicente de Paúl, es posible que no sepan lo que ocurrió en los años posteriores a su muerte. El presente artículo pretende describir brevemente el proceso que condujo a la canonización de Vicente el 13 de junio de 1737. Se centra en la oración fúnebre del obispo Maupas du Tour, la biografía en tres volúmenes del obispo Louis Abelly y el papel del obispo Prospero Lambertini, autor de *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione*. Antes de su elección como papa Benedicto XIV, participó en la tramitación de la causa de San Vicente de Paúl y dejó interesantes comentarios al respecto en su monumental tratado.

Keywords: Vincent de Paul, Canonization, Devil's advocate, Miracle.

Introduction

The Second Vatican Council stated that there were two universal callings which were shared by all the baptised, namely, the calls to holiness and evangelisation. One cannot be truly holy without evangelising and evangelisation will only be fruitful to the extent that a person is holy. St John Paul II stated in par. 90 of *The Mission of the*



Redeemer, “The universal call to holiness is closely linked to the universal call to mission. Every member of the faithful is called to holiness and to mission. This was the earnest desire of the Council. The Church's missionary spirituality is a journey toward holiness.” St Vincent de Paul was the living epitome of what the Council and St John Paul had in mind.

He was born in 1580 when France was afflicted by many problems. There was hardly a year during his lifetime when France was at peace. His native country was troubled by wars, death, destruction, dislocated lives, destitution, disease etc. Furthermore, from a religious point of view Vincent was living in the era of the Counter Reformation which followed the conclusion of the Council of Trent in 1563.

Life

Vincent was a member of a conventionally Catholic family and was ordained, illegally, at the age of 19. There was little or no sign that he was either particularly holy or committed to evangelisation in his early adulthood. Indeed the evidence points to the fact that he tended to be worldly, unscrupulous, and ambitious to advance his career. It was only a number of years later, when he had endured a spiritual crisis, that he really began to take his priestly duties seriously, initially on the vast estates of the de Gondi family, where he was the tutor to the family's children. It was during that time that Vincent began to grow both in holiness and in commitment to the evangelisation of the poor country people in the locality. From the beginning he augmented his preaching with practical deeds of mercy, e.g., firstly with the aid of the Ladies of Charity, and later the Daughters of Charity who he had founded with the aid of St Louise de Marillac.

In the final decades of his long public life, Vincent de Paul achieved national prominence for his role in the post-Tridentine reformation of the Catholic Church in France. He was often called “Father of the Poor” and revered as a spiritual father to the nation due to his immense charitable work and influence on French society

Death

In the early hours of the 27th of September 1660, after a long and painful period of failing health, Vincent de Paul died at the age of seventy-nine while sitting fully clothed in a chair. The very next day, on the morning of the 28th of September the chapel of Saint-Lazare was filled beyond capacity by a crowd that included the papal nuncio, six bishops, many ecclesiastical dignitaries, members of the nobility, as well as Ladies of Charity, Daughters of Charity, and Vincent's own missionaries. There was also a large number of lay people in attendance. Following the requiem mass, the coffin was placed in a stone vault in the choir of the church.

On the 23rd of November 1660 a commemorative funeral mass was followed by a eulogy which was given by bishop Henri de Maupas du Tour, the bishop of Le Puy. He was chosen for this task because he had known Vincent ever since the time he was a chaplain to the de Gondi family. Apparently, du Tour was related to the Gondi family through his mother, Anne de Gondi. Not only that, he admired Vincent greatly.

When one reads the published version of the bishop's talk, which took more than two hours to deliver, it is evident that he thought that because of his many virtues, Vincent was a saint. He made three main points about his former mentor. Firstly, he stressed the fact that Vincent was extraordinarily humble. Secondly, he drew attention to Vincent's

remarkable charity.¹ Thirdly, he highlighted the fact that Vincent was a wonderful peace maker and prayed continually that France would be peaceful.²

Soon after the delivery of the eulogy, another bishop, Louis Abelly, who knew Vincent ever since 1633, wrote a three-volume biography about him. It was published in 1664. It was not only influenced by what bishop Maupas du Tour had said, but greatly expanded the points he had made with quotations and recollections about the founder of the Congregation of the Mission. Fr. Edward Udovic CM, an American Vincentian scholar, has stated that it is clear that both bishops intended to inaugurate a process of reflection that could come to fruition with the canonization of Vincent.³

Initiation of the canonization process

At the time Church rules stipulated that fifty years had to elapse before a person's cause for beatification and canonization could be introduced. However, in 1697 the General Assembly of the Vincentians decided to initiate remote preparation for a formal submission in 1710. This was prudent in view of the fact that there was a tremendous amount of preparatory work to be done, such as collecting documents, interviewing people who knew Vincent while they were still alive and collecting supportive letters from seventy-two prominent members of church, and state, e.g., Louis XIV of France⁴ and bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet. On 1 January 1713, the Lazarist superior general, Jean Bonnet, wrote in his New Year's circular letter that he estimated Vincent's cause might only take five or six more years to complete. His optimism proved unfounded. Vincent's cause was formally opened in Rome on 4 October 1709. Sometime later his body was exhumed in 1712, i.e., 53 years after his death. The written account of an eyewitness stated that "the eyes and nose alone showed some decay". However, when the body was exhumed again in 1737, it was found to have decomposed due to an underground flood.

The devil's advocate

Cardinal Prospero Lambertini, who would be elected as Pope Benedict XIV in 1740, dealt with the canonization and acted as the devil's advocate. He was one of the most learned popes in Church history, renowned for his vast erudition in theology, canon law, history, and the arts. He was the author of a massive work entitled, *A Treatise on the*

¹Speaking about Vincent's response during a time when there was a food shortage, Bishop Maupas du Tour said, "For three months he distributed armfuls of bread daily at the doors of saint-Lazare to feed two thousand poor people, and sometimes as many as three thousand or three thousand five hundred."

²Maupas du Tour described how Vincent mobilized his missionaries at Saint Lazare to undertake unceasing prayers for peace by means of an extraordinary novena. Every day for nine years the community of Saint-Lazare prayed for peace. Two or three confreres would receive communion for this special intention. Each day a priest from the community said Mass for the same intention, and a brother took communion at this Mass that could appropriately be called a Mass for peace. The priest and the brother then spent the rest of the day fasting. Monsieur Vincent took his turn at this novena for peace. At the end of nine years, a general peace was concluded.

³Edward R. Udovic, CM, *Henri de Maupas Du Tour: The Funeral Oration for Vincent de Paul 23rd Nov. 1660* (Chicago: De Paul University, Vincentian Studies Institute, 2015).

⁴King Louis XV, issued a decree in 1738 ordering the publication of the papal bull of canonization, despite resistance from Jansenist factions in the Parlement of Paris.

Beatification and Canonization of the Servants of God (1734–1738).⁵ In 1717 he presented his three main reasons why Vincent should not be canonized.

- Firstly, he questioned Vincent’s orthodoxy in virtue of the fact that he was a friend of a well-known Jansenist called *Jean du Vergier de Hauranne*, the Abbot of Saint-Cyran, (1581 – 1643). He was a French Catholic priest who introduced the heresy of Jansenism into France. While Vincent didn’t accept the Abbot’s views, his relationship with him, was generally close and amicable until 1644. After Saint Cyran’s arrest, Vincent did not give formal legal testimony. His opposition was theological and pastoral, not judicial.⁶
- Secondly, in his earlier years as a priest, Vincent had abandoned several of his parish appointments. This could suggest instability, lack of pastoral commitment, or ambition—traits inconsistent with heroic virtue.
- Thirdly, as a result of claiming to have been the slave of an alchemist in North Africa, Lambertini maintained that Vincent’s knowledge about mixing medicines was considered to be a flirtation with the occult and therefore indirectly with the devil.⁷

Apparently, the postulator of Vincent’s cause had no difficulty in nullifying Lambertini’s objections.

Vincent and the fruits/charisms of the Spirit

Although the main sign of holiness was and continues to be the exercise of virtue and the fruits of the Spirit mentioned in Gal 5:22-23, i.e., “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control,” all the evidence pointed to the fact that Vincent was richly endowed with these Christ-like characteristics. It is interesting to note, that in spite of being Vincent’s devil’s advocate years earlier, Cardinal Lambertini referred to his cause for canonization in his huge treatise. The main problem he addressed was this. Besides giving evidence of practicing heroic virtue, did Vincent exercise any of the charismatic gifts in his life? In his book, Lambertini responded by saying,

⁵ In the 19th century sections of it were translated into English by the Oratorians and published in Britain and America in three volumes entitled, *Heroic Virtue*.

⁶ It is worth mentioning in passing that in 1713, 53 years after Vincent’s death, a papal bull entitled *Unigenitus* was published. Although it was designed to put an end, once and for all to the Jansenist controversies it actually led to deep divisions not only in the French Church but also in the Congregation of the Mission. On the eve of the Congregation’s ninth General Assembly, held in Paris in August 1724, Jean Bonnet, the superior general, announced the expulsion from the community of two leading French Lazarists, Pierre Himbert, the superior general’s first assistant, and Antoine Philopald Delahaye, because they were influenced by Gallicanism and for the criticism of *Unigenitus*. The delegates supposedly “amidst perfect order, peace, and tranquility” unanimously affirmed, “without trouble and without hesitation” the Congregation’s full adherence to *Unigenitus*. At the eleventh session of the Assembly held on 11 August, the delegates voted to require all priests, seminarians, and novices in the Congregation to indicate their acceptance of the papal bull. It is possible that this controversy delayed Vincent’s canonization.

⁷ Speaking about Vincent’s familiarity with Alchemy Pope Clement XII said at his canonization, “he made better use of it than those who try to change the nature of metals; for he has converted evil into good, the sinner into a just man, slavery into freedom, hell into paradise through the many works undertaken by his Company and by the ingenuity of which a zealous man is capable.”

“The fathers of Salamanca. . . after showing that graces *gratis datae*⁸ are to be taken into account after the virtues, add; “But because they are not necessary for the attainment of blessedness, so the absence of them does not show the absence of sanctity.” Matthaeucci also says that besides heroic virtues, the promoters of the faith are accustomed to requiring, for the sake of greater precaution, some grace *gratis data*. I confess that when I was a promoter of the faith, I did not omit to make that observation. I did so in the cause of St Vincent de Paul, and the prudent postulators replied, that graces *gratis datae* were not necessary in order to form a safe judgment on his virtues, some, however, of them were not wanting in the servant of God. These are their words. ‘Although graces *gratis datae* are not necessary to prove heroic virtues, and therefore it is not necessary that St Vincent de Paul should have been endowed with them in order to perceive that he had attained to heroic virtue; but, we will bring forward many matters of moment, from which it may be inferred that the servant of God was possessed of those gifts which are now the subject of discussion.’⁹

Unfortunately, Lambertini did not offer examples of Vincent’s charismatic powers. One could hazard a guess that he thought that Vincent had the gifts of the utterance of wisdom and knowledge, as well as the gifts of the discernment of spirits (cf. 1 Cor 12:8-10) and seeing visions, e.g., when he had a prophetic type of image at the time of Jane de Chantal’s death. However, Vincent is not known to have performed any public or documented miracles or healings during his lifetime in the way that saints like Vincent Ferrer, Francis of Assisi or Francis of Paola did. Pierre Collet said in a biography that was published in 1747 that during his lifetime Vincent was instrumental in the spiritual healing of a Visitandine nun at the monastery in Troyes in 1637.

Confirmatory miracles

Normally, the Church only canonizes a person if two confirmatory miracles take place as a result of prayers which are offered through the intercession of the saintly person. Testimonies of twenty-one such miracles were collected after Vincent’s death. He was beatified on August 13th 1729 in St Peter’s Basilica, Rome. On 24 June 1736 Pope Clement XII accepted two miracles as being supernatural. Apparently, a nun was cured of ulcers, and a laywoman was cured of paralysis, and so the canonization could go ahead. The superior general of the time, Jean Couty, was very conscious of the enormous expense involved in a canonization ceremony. He resolved, therefore, to wait until a number of other causes came to completion. Then he would propose a single ceremony with shared expenses. On 13th of June 1737 Vincent de Paul was finally canonized together with St. John Francis Regis, SJ (1597-1640). I presume that the Jesuits and Vincentians shared the expenses.

Canonization and ongoing influence

The canonization procession in St John Lateran, began at six a.m., and lasted more than three hours due to the enormous gathering of people. Twenty-six cardinals, bishops, patriarchs, and other clergy participated. During the ceremony, the pope was presented

⁸ Gratuitous, freely given graces of a charismatic kind.

⁹ Benedict XIV, *Heroic Virtue* Vol III, (London: Thomass Richardson & Son, 1852), 97.

with two decorated and painted candles weighing sixty pounds each two turtledoves, two golden loaves, two pigeons, and two barrels of wine, all donated by noblemen, cardinals, and friends of the Congregation.

A century later, in 1835, the French scholar Blessed Frederic Ozanam called a lay Catholic organization he had founded to help the poor, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. In 1883, about fifty years later the Church designated St Vincent as the special patron of all charitable associations. In the contemporary era, all the members of the Vincentian Family, who are influenced by the spirituality of St Vincent de Paul, can clearly see in his life the close connection between holiness and evangelization.

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