



“Italian Interpretations of St. Vincent de Paul” Three Authors for a New Understanding of the Vincentian Spirit: Mezzadri – Toscani – Antonello

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Abstract

This introductory study presents the original contributions of three Italian Vincentian scholars—Luigi Mezzadri, Giuseppe Toscani, and Erminio Antonello—to a renewed understanding of the spirit and spirituality of Saint Vincent de Paul. Written within the context of the post-Vatican II renewal of the Congregation of the Mission, their works seek not merely to recount the life of Saint Vincent but to offer comprehensive syntheses that illuminate the theological, spiritual, and historical foundations of the Vincentian charism. Mezzadri emphasizes the primacy of charity through a historically grounded interpretation of Vincent's life; Toscani develops a theology of the “mysticism of the poor,” centered on Christ's love as the heart of Christian existence; and Antonello proposes an “aesthetics of the gaze,” highlighting charity as a spiritual perception shaped by faith. Together, these complementary perspectives continue to enrich Vincentian formation, theological reflection, missionary identity, and the ongoing renewal of the Congregation today.

Cette étude introductive présente les contributions originales de trois chercheurs vinciens italiens — Luigi Mezzadri, Giuseppe Toscani et Erminio Antonello — à une compréhension renouvelée de l'esprit et de la spiritualité de saint Vincent de Paul. Rédigés dans le contexte du renouveau de la Congrégation de la Mission après le Concile Vatican II, leurs travaux ne cherchent pas seulement à retracer la vie de saint Vincent, mais à offrir des synthèses globales qui mettent en lumière les fondements théologiques, spirituels et historiques du charisme vinciens. Mezzadri souligne la primauté de la charité à travers une interprétation historiquement fondée de la vie de saint Vincent ; Toscani développe une théologie de la « mystique des pauvres », centrée sur l'amour du Christ comme cœur de l'existence chrétienne ; et Antonello propose une « esthétique du regard », mettant en valeur la charité comme une perception spirituelle façonnée par la foi. Ensemble, ces perspectives complémentaires continuent d'enrichir la formation vinciennne, la réflexion théologique, l'identité missionnaire et le renouveau permanent de la Congrégation.

Este estudio introductorio presenta las aportaciones originales de tres estudiosos vicencianos italianos —Luigi Mezzadri, Giuseppe Toscani y Erminio Antonello— para una comprensión renovada del espíritu y de la espiritualidad de san Vicente de Paúl. Escritas en el contexto de la renovación de la Congregación de la Misión después del Concilio Vaticano II, sus obras no buscan simplemente narrar la vida de san Vicente, sino ofrecer síntesis integrales que iluminan los fundamentos teológicos, espirituales e históricos del carisma vicenciano. Mezzadri destaca la primacía de la caridad mediante una interpretación históricamente fundamentada de la vida de san Vicente; Toscani desarrolla una teología de la «mística de los pobres», centrada en el amor de Cristo como núcleo de la existencia cristiana; y Antonello propone una «estética de la mirada», destacando la caridad como una percepción espiritual modelada por la fe. En conjunto, estas



perspectivas complementarias siguen enriqueciendo la formación vicenciana, la reflexión teológica, la identidad misionera y la renovación permanente de la Congregación de la Misión.

Keywords: Mezzadri, Toscani, Antonello, Bibliography of Vincentian Interpretation.

INTRODUCTORY PRESENTATION

This text aims to present the original contributions of three Italian authors toward a *new understanding of the Vincentian spirit*.¹ The works of Luigi Mezzadri, Giuseppe Toscani, and Erminio Antonello will be presented, as they are committed to conveying not a complete image of St. Vincent, but a “comprehensive” one. Without detracting from other authors who have studied individual aspects of Vincentian spirituality (the list would be long), these “three,” starting from a synthetic vision, draw out from St. Vincent’s life those elements that, in a certain way, are capable of “explaining” him.

These are three confreres who have studied St. Vincent with passion. And they did so during a very particular period in the history of the Congregation of the Mission, when, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, the identity and mission of the “Little Company” needed to be redefined. It was therefore necessary to undertake new historical, theological, and spiritual research on the charism of the origins. Mezzadri, Toscani, and Antonello did so, each according to his own expertise, and in service to the movement of communal renewal that the Congregation experienced in the post-conciliar years.

From the very beginning, these works have had an ecclesial-charismatic origin and purpose. The life of the Congregation in Italy, with its choices and pastoral conversions, was the environment that inspired this research and, at the same time, the primary beneficiary of it. In this sense, they are “Italian readings,” yet they offer a new understanding of the Vincentian “spirit” that extends far beyond linguistic boundaries.

These three confreres are also united by the fact that they taught, in the post-conciliar years and at different times, at the Collegio Alberoni in Piacenza, and that they worked for many years in the formation of the clergy, the Daughters of Charity, and Vincentian laypeople. For this reason, their writings have a very strong formative purpose.

Today, they are brought to the attention of our confreres, not because they are unknown to the international community, but because their works constitute a “point of no return” on certain themes. I borrow the words of J. L. Marion to justify this choice: “One cannot take a single step forward without being supported by tradition [by the masters] ... And so if we have moved forward, we owe it first and foremost to those who made us think” (cf. *The Idol and the Distance*, Milan 1979, 7). This means that, if we wish to progress in our understanding of St. Vincent, we must necessarily take their insights into account so as not to run the risk of finding ourselves inexorably left behind.

OVERVIEW OF THE SYNTHESSES

¹ The original text is in Italian. Therefore, the titles of books and articles that appear in this translation have been rendered in English and may differ from their original Italian titles (*Editor’s note*).

1. “*The Primacy of Charity*” (Luigi Mezzadri)

Mezzadri’s body of work is the most extensive in terms of the number of publications and the variety of interests. He has written on many aspects of St. Vincent’s life and spirituality. His vision is truly modern. He presents St. Vincent as a precursor, as a man who was ahead of his time, and for this reason, still capable of speaking to our contemporary world. It would take too long here to list all the studies he has published. However, his two major biographies contain all the original aspects of his research, which he has scattered throughout his various studies.

- *Vincent de Paul (1581-1660)*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1985, (Italian edition: *San Vincenzo de Paul. Una carità senza frontiere*, Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo 1986 (2nd ed. 1989)

- , *Vincenzo de’ Paoli il santo della carità*, Città Nuova, Rome 2009, (2nd ed.: *Vincenzo de’ Paoli. Vita, carisma e carità*, Tau, Todi 2019)

The first biography aims to situate St. Vincent within the context of his time. It presents the starting points of his childhood and early youth, the development of his awareness of being a priest as a man-for-others, the turning point of 1617, and the progressive expansion of his work during the era of great achievements and great works. The aim is to help readers appreciate St. Vincent’s work in its modern context. To this end, the author draws on studies in politics, social history, and religious history that explain the meaning behind St. Vincent’s choices and his extraordinary fruitfulness.

In his latest work, the author synthesizes years of research to present his definitive biography of St. Vincent. His historical insight into the various aspects of St. Vincent’s life and spirituality shines through. The aim is to make the figure of St. Vincent increasingly known, so that he may be loved. The author has also precisely situated St. Vincent within the social problems of his time (famine, care for the sick, care for foundlings), within the relationship between charity and politics, and within the doctrinal disputes within the Church (the problem of Jansenism and Gallicanism). With a sure hand, Mezzadri guides the reader to understand the development of St. Vincent’s life, fully embedded in the evolution of the Church and the society in which he lived.

The author’s historiographical contribution over the years has been to offer a *historical framework* for the story of St. Vincent. Until a few decades ago, “histories of spirituality” and “dictionaries” ignored him. Today, thanks in part to Mezzadri, St. Vincent has taken his rightful place among the great masters of the spiritual life.

2. “*The Mysticism of the Poor*” (Giuseppe Toscani)

Toscani’s thought is fully expressed in two works. These are unique, original studies, written in a language intended for specialists. He eschews the superficiality of popularization in favor of a language that prioritizes conciseness in the search for meaning.

- *The Mysticism of the Poor*, Alzani, Pinerolo 1986;

- *Love, Contemplation, Theology. Jesus Christ as Seen by St. Vincent*, Alzani, Pinerolo, 1987 (revised edition of Id., *The Christ of St. Vincent*, “Colloquium Vincentianum” Paris 1986, in *Vincentiana* XXX (1986) 357–405)

The *Mysticism of the Poor* is undoubtedly Toscani’s most successful essay because it offers the finest synthesis of St. Vincent’s mystical experience, a true gem for

its original perspective and compelling language. At the same time, it is a veritable manifesto of the noble vocation of charitable service, an expression of God's personal love in Christ.

Toscani's second study arose from his participation as a speaker at a study conference (June 12–14, 1986) on "The Christ of St. Vincent" in relation to the historical-religious context of 17th-century France, organized by the SIEV (S cretariat International d'Etudes Vincentiennes). It places the study of St. Vincent's mysticism within the framework of theological anthropology studies on religious symbolism. His paper, *The Christ of St. Vincent*, introduced his perspective to the international community of the Congregation of the Mission. The study was subsequently revised for publication as a book with critical apparatus: *Love, Contemplation, Theology. Jesus Christ as Seen by St. Vincent*. It is his final contribution on his research methodology for reconstructing St. Vincent's contemplation of the mystery of Christ.

Toscani was convinced that Charity is everything. And that theology should, in some way, address this certainty. He therefore sought to construct a "theology of the mysticism of Christ's Love," in light of the mystical experience of St. Vincent. The inspiring motif, point of convergence, architectural principle, and interpretive criterion is the observation that to the great mystics, *God reveals Himself as Love in Charity*, conforming their existence to that of Christ. In this dynamic, a life consecrated to *heroic charity* toward the poor, like that of St. Vincent, becomes the most authentic form of Christian experience. The result is a *Theologia Cordis Christi* which, even before being a teaching, re-proposes the ideal of Christian life in the most radical form of following Christ: the total oblation of one's life for the least of these.

3. "The Aesthetics of the Gaze" (Erminio Antonello)

Antonello's original contribution to Vincentian studies is his aesthetic interpretation of St. Vincent's *work* and *vision*. The author has always had to divide his time between theological teaching, animating the charism of the Vincentian Family groups, and governing the two communities, the Missionaries and the Daughters of Charity. After much work, the author offers us a synthesis of how he has interpreted and understood the figure of St. Vincent and his spirituality, within the project of the new Italian edition of his *Works*, on which he has worked continuously for a full 25 years. Two contributions are considered:

- *The Poor and Poverty in the Charitable Experience of St. Vincent*, in *Works* 11, Rome 2019, pp. IX–LIV
- *Through the Eyes of Monsieur Vincent. The Aesthetic Key to the Interpretation of St. Vincent*, in *Works* 6, Rome 2022, pp. XIX–XLIII

At the foundation of his reflection, Antonello places *the charitable experience*, which, when lived *in personal encounter* with the poor, tends in and of itself to engage one's own "sensibility." His is an attempt to interpret the sensibility of St. Vincent and, at the same time, that of those who have been inspired by his way of living the Gospel and of looking upon the poor. The aim is to explore *the order of affections* and its restructuring through charity, the source of closeness and the principle of action. Since charitable activity involves encountering people in need, their condition challenges, *moves* (evokes pity), and *stirs* (sets in motion). These emotional reactions then transform into sensations, moods, and *feelings*, varying in strength depending on the degree of personal involvement.

And yet the movement of human affections does not stop there, for it is intertwined with the experience of Christological faith. In fact, what unites all the inner faculties in the act of faith is the sensitivity of the spirit, which is not merely or primarily the sensory aspect of emotions, but rather the sensitive perception that arises from faith in Christ, infused with grace. The human person touched by faith in Jesus in their entirety goes beyond feelings, emotions, and affections understood in a sentimental sense. In the Christian experience, there is no will at the beginning; at the beginning there is the grace of the Spirit that affectively permeates the soul with the serenity of love and impels one to act in accordance with it, and in the end there is still grace and love. It is only within this that Christian charity shines in its enchantment. The foundation of this vision lies in the fact that Christological Revelation shows us that agapic love is rooted in the very place of its origin, for “God is love (agape)” (1 Jn 4:8, 15).

This gives rise to a true *theology of the affectus fidei*, in the broadest sense of the term, which seeks to place human “spiritual sensibility” back at the center of attention. Charity has to do “first” with *affectio* and only “afterward” with *intellect*.

For Antonello, a theology of charity must necessarily connect with the discourse on *Christian aesthetics*, understood as *aisthesis*, “the doctrine of perception” (H. U. von Balthasar). The ancient patristic tradition had taught us to consider this perception as both a physical and spiritual act, through the doctrine of *the spiritual senses*. The exercise of charity, within this framework, was essentially a spiritual act. With the advent of medieval Scholasticism, charity came to be regarded primarily as a moral act, and aesthetics was reduced to a theory of *ornamentation*. In the modern era, action became increasingly separated from contemplation, and charitable action was reduced to mere “doing”—typical of a solidarity that, while generous and good, was insufficient to express the energy of Christian charity.

To recover the necessary spiritual dimension, for Antonello, the exercise of charity must therefore take the form of an “aesthetic act,” not because it is outwardly clothed in a beautiful form to attract people’s attention, but because the “gaze” and the “gesture” that accompany and sustain it are aesthetic. Thus, aesthetics once again becomes the art of *educating* people’s *sensibilities* and *leading them* toward a personal relationship with Christ, who is truly present in the poor. It is precisely a matter of *accompanying* people to experience Christ through closeness to the poor, and of making them increasingly sensitive to *the appeal* of charity.

Bibliographic Note

This text is a revised version of a brief presentation I gave at the international conference organized by the CIF in Paris from November 9 to 19, 2025. I had previously introduced the three authors in the following written contributions:

[Mezzadri] *Making History and Writing It. A Study on Vincentian Christocentrism in Dialogue with Luigi Mezzadri*, in Various Authors, *Mission and Charity. Writings in Honor of Fr. Luigi Mezzadri, CM*, edited by F. Lovison and L. Nuovo, Edizioni CLV, Rome 2008, 31–73.

[Toscani] Fr. Giuseppe Toscani, CM. *Bio-bibliographical note*, in G. Toscani, *You Did It to Me. Theological Meditations on the Works of Mercy*, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 2015, 211–219; *St. Vincent the Mystic. Rereading The Mysticism of the Poor by Father Giuseppe Toscani, CM*, in “Charity and Mission.” Annual Monograph of Vincentian Studies, Memoirs, and Formation, New Series, 1 (2020), 35–66; *Father*

Giuseppe Toscani CM's "Mysticism of the Poor," in G. Toscani, *Becoming Charity. Reflections on the Mysticism of Charity*, CLV, Rome 2023, 95–119.

[Antonello] Review: Saint Vincent de Paul, *Works*, Volume 11 – Documents, Introduction, translation, and notes edited by Erminio Antonello, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 2019, in "Carità e Missione." Annual Monograph of Vincentian Studies, Memoirs, and Formation, New Series, 1 (2020) 155–159; Review: Saint Vincent de Paul, *Works*, Volume 6 – edited by Erminio Antonello, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 2022, in "Carità e Missione." Annual monograph of Vincentian studies, memoirs, and formation, New Series, 3 (2022) 151–157.

I

"The Primacy of Charity"

(Luigi Mezzadri)

1. Making History and Writing It

Michel de Certeau's well-known distinction between "making history" and "writing history"—which constitutes the "work of historiography"—is useful for consciously introducing the idea of considering a historian's work in relation to his "narrative." Far from viewing this as a separation or rupture between two elements that arise independently, it is, on the contrary, an articulation of two interdependent moments that are structured in relation to one another.

In our common way of thinking, on the one hand there is "history," made by the protagonists of events, and on the other, the "writing of history," the work of the historian who attempts to interpret them and decides to narrate them in a certain way. In reality, "history" proper arises together with the language that recounts it. And the "writing of history" stems from well-defined "interests," whether institutional, political, pedagogical, or simply ideological. The study of the past and its narration cannot in any way be separated, because a relationship of "mutual alteration" exists between "making history" and "writing it."²

Even St. Vincent, as a historical "figure," is not exempt from this dynamic. The various portraits drawn of him throughout different cultural eras have been influenced by the diverse interests that have driven the historical reconstruction of his life story, the study of documents, and the interpretation of his spirituality.³

² The study of this "mutual alteration" is what defines Michel de Certeau's reflection on history and historiography (See M. de Certeau, **La scrittura dell'altro**, ed. S. Borutti, Cortina, Milan 1985; ID., **La scrittura della storia**, ed. S. Facioni, Jaka Book, Milan 2006).

³ Dodin was the first to investigate this dynamic: A. Dodin, "State of Vincentian Studies on the Occasion of the Four-Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of St. Vincent de Paul," in VARIOUS AUTHORS, *Vincent de Paul – Colloqui de Paris 1981*, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 1983, 115–128 (republished in ID., *Initiation à Saint Vincent de Paul*, Cerf, Paris 1993, 357–375). Mezzadri completed this perspective: L. Mezzadri, "L'historiographie vinctienne selon les époques culturelles," in "Vincentina" 28 (1984) 292–313 (revised and expanded in the "Preface" to J.M. Roman, *St. Vincent de Paul, Biography*, Jaka Book, Milan, 1986, pp. 1–8, and in the "Introduction" to G. Toscani, *The Mysticism of the Poor*, Alzani, Pinerolo, 1986, pp. 7–26).

For all those who have engaged with St. Vincent from the 1970s onward, the name Luigi Mezzadri is well known. He is undoubtedly one of his most famous and popular biographers.⁴

The debt we owe to Mezzadri is enormous. One need only glance, even briefly, at the list of publications on St. Vincent bearing his name, and the many other publications he supported, sponsored, or inspired, to realize not only the sheer volume of his writings, but above all the breadth of interests that drove his research and the care he devoted to the passionate reading of the writings of St. Vincent de Paul, his founder, to the historical and spiritual understanding of his charism, and to the vivid and effective presentation of his legacy to make it an ever-greater shared heritage, not only for the members of the Vincentian Family, but also for the entire Church and civil society.

This presentation aims to be an attempt to understand the underlying interest that drove and animated his research. It is not a reconstruction of his historiographical work (in terms of the methods and results of his research), nor a critical evaluation of the various studies he conducted in the field of Vincentian studies, nor even a summary of his immense body of work, but rather an effort to bring to light the intention that guided his studies. The pages that follow are intended to be nothing more than an attempt to shed light on the way in which Mezzadri understood St. Vincent and his charism and, building on this and in dialogue with him, to attempt to continue along the same path he charted and indicated for those who, like me, have become passionate about and attached to St. Vincent and his cause.

2. Telling the story from which one is told

St. Vincent de Paul belongs to that select circle of men who “made” history during the time in which they lived. Yet he was not a man of power, nor of culture, nor even a fashionable spiritual master. The “Great Century” could easily have overlooked him had he not received a special touch of Grace, which made him unique in the fruitfulness of his insights. His great achievements still defy the wear and tear of time. His prophetic choices, his brilliant insights, as well as some of his passions and priorities, have today become the common heritage of those who work with the poor. If today we speak of generosity, solidarity, sharing, volunteerism, and charitable action (which is not limited to mere assistance, but also and above all involves prevention, addressing root causes, cultural enrichment, social action, and the integral promotion of the human person), we owe it to him. If today we see more clearly in the field of charity, we owe it to the one who opened our eyes to the reality of the poor and showed us the way forward. Few after him have been able to add anything to the vocabulary of charity, which consists, for the most part, of his own lexicon.

Yet, knowing who this man really was is not so simple, nor is explaining why he exerted such a great influence on subsequent generations. We can never fully account for the rich and important work of Vincent de Paul, nor for his exceptionally intense yet entirely ordinary life; one might say that a mystery lies hidden within it. We must be aware of this to understand the reason for the fascination that his work has retained to this day.

⁴ For published biographies, see the bibliography at the end of the volume.

2.1 Making St. Vincent de Paul Known and Loved

As early as 1977, in the introduction to his essay on *Jansenism*, Mezzadri stated that “The history of the Congregation of the Mission—where history is not merely a collection of data and scholarly references concerning foundations and biographies—has yet to be written. Likewise, a biography of Vincent de Paul remains to be written in which the “ ” story of the man and the spiritual master is presented within a more compelling framework and situated in a context richer in references, common traits, and influences.”⁵

In the 1978 editorial that marked the beginning of a new direction for the Journal of Vincentian Studies in Italy, the *Annali della Missione*, Mezzadri noted that the state of scholarship was rather disappointing and that it was necessary to strengthen the journal and make it “a driving force for the study and dissemination of the thought of St. Vincent as it relates to today’s situation.” This was the program of the GIEV (Group International d’Etudes Vincentiennes), founded first as a spontaneous research group in 1975 and later as the official body of the Congregation for the revitalization of Vincentianism, of which Mezzadri was the secretary.⁶ To transform a journal of information and historical documentation of the CM into a “forum for reflection, debate, and planning for all components of Italian Vincentianism” was the intention that was to guide the new editorial approach. The path indicated was that of a more serious and less occasional study of St. Vincent and his spirituality with a view to charismatic renewal.⁷

Thus, in those years, the studies emerged that would later form the basis for the “biographies” Mezzadri would write—one in the 1980s, one in the 1990s, and one at the beginning of the new millennium.⁸

In these early studies, the research was not driven by strictly historiographical interests, but was conducted with a view to the present, which was to be, in a certain sense, reshaped according to the original experience. To achieve this, it was necessary to “re-narrate” the original charism in an effort to understand it and put it into practice under changed circumstances. This led to the founding of the GAV (Vincentian Animation Group) in 1976, of which Mezzadri was the initiator, along with other confreres, and the principal animator.⁹

⁵ L. Mezzadri, *Between Jansenists and Anti-Jansenists. Vincent de Paul and the Congregation of the Mission (1624–1737)*, La Nuova Italia, Florence 1977, 1.

⁶ The GIEV would later become the SIEV (Sécretariat International d’Etudes Vincentiennes), the official body for study and formation of the Congregation of the Mission, beginning in 1982. It would promote the “Vincentian Months” of formation and the “Colloquiums” of study. Mezzadri’s influence is evident in the two Colloquia (1981 – published in the volume *Vincent de Paul*, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 1983; 1986 – On the Christology of St. Vincent de Paul – published in “Vincentiana” XXX (1986) 3–4) and in the four Vincentian Months (1984 – “Vincentiana” XXVIII (1984) 4–5–6; 1987 – “Vincentiana” XXXI (1987) 4–5–6; 1990 – “Vincentiana” XXXIV (1990) 4–5–6; 1993 – “Vincentiana” XXXVII (1993) 4–5).

⁷ L. Mezzadri, The Annals of the Mission, *Annals of the Mission* 85 (1978), 3–6, 5.

⁸ L. Mezzadri, *Vincent de Paul (1581–1660)*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1985, 205 pp., Italian edition, *San Vincenzo de Paul. Una carità senza frontiere*, Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo 1986 (2nd Italian ed. 1989); Id., *Petite vie de Vincent de Paul*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1989, 123 pp., Italian ed.: *St. Vincent de Paul. A Life Spent for Others*, Borla, Rome 1989, (2nd ed.: *St. Vincent de Paul*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo, 1998; Id., *St. Vincent de Paul and the Charism of Charity*, Rome 2002, (2nd ed.: *Vincent de Paul. Life, Charism, and Charity*, Tau, Todi 2019).

⁹ For the various GAV conferences from 1976 to 2007, see the bibliography at the end of the volume.

Methodologically, this moved beyond the objectivist view of history and the myth of documentary reconstruction characteristic of the positivist school. Historical reconstruction cannot be neutral and detached, because history is part of humanity, says in reference to a coherent web of relationships in which human beings are fully entwined. Historical knowledge, therefore, cannot be “objective” because every time one asserts something about history, one simultaneously asserts something about oneself.¹⁰

“At a retreat in 1976, Father Jean Morin said that we read St. Vincent to better understand our missionary vocation in the Church and in today’s world. Thus, according to this teacher who passed away far too soon, the saint’s thought is not static, immobile, or incapable of inspiring the present. St. Vincent is still alive. His writings still speak. What is important is knowing how to read them.”¹¹

Reading is an art. We read to enter into dialogue. Entering into dialogue means questioning history, driven by current interests, concerns, and questions. To read history and perceive oneself as dependent on it, however, requires mastery of scientific tools and a vital impulse. “Thanks to a scientifically sound method, we avoid superficial apologetics. We do not attribute arbitrary ideas to the saint, nor do we fall into unfounded assertions. It is philology that examines the texts; it is historical science that places them in a chronological perspective, explains them, interprets them, and explores them in depth. But all this is not enough if a vital impulse is lacking—that need to know, that subtle connection that binds a son to a portrait of his father and leads him to recapture the emotions of the time and rediscover the sense of a calling to a mission.”¹²

The goal Mezzadri sets for himself in his work as a biographer is to lead the reader into a dialogue with what is being told. In other words, his aim is not simply to write a biography of St. Vincent, but first and foremost to communicate his own attempt to understand him, to let him speak, to make him known, and above all, to be loved. This explains the need to continually retell the life of St. Vincent, which has characterized Mezzadri in his work as a formator, teacher, and animator of the charism.¹³

And precisely as an animator of the charism, his historical research was always accompanied by a spiritual dimension. Culture and spirituality can be considered the two focal points of the same ellipse of thought, which animated his reflection on the Vincentian charism.¹⁴ This activity naturally became part of the journey that the entire

¹⁰ It is to the “Annales” school that Mezzadri looks for inspiration in his historiographical approach, which emphasizes a global perspective and the revolution in documentary techniques introduced by the “Nouvelle histoire.” Regarding “Nouvelle Histoire,” Mezzadri values the epistemological approach that seeks to align the historian’s subject matter with that of the anthropologist, analyzing various elements of an era or a nation: economy, culture, climate, diet, mentality, customs, social imagination, territorial organization, festivals, and collective representations. This influence is particularly evident in his first major biography of St. Vincent, published in 1985, and in his studies on the history of the popular missions and the Congregation of the Mission, all of which were compiled in the volume **Le Missioni popolari della Congregazione della Missione nei secoli XVII-XVIII**, Rome, CLV Edizioni Vincenziane, 2002.

¹¹ L. Mezzadri, *Thirst and the Spring II: In Search of Origins*, CLV, Rome 1993, 5.

¹² L. Mezzadri, *Thirst and the Spring II*, op. cit., 9.

¹³ See the bibliography at the end of the volume.

¹⁴ Among the initiatives promoted by the GAV: the publication of the “Schede Vincenziane” (1978–1982) and the establishment of a “Scuola Vincenziana” (1988–2008). See the bibliography at the end of the volume.

Church undertook in the post-conciliar period, in the effort toward “updating—renewal—revitalization.”¹⁵

“Reading” the present time, “searching” for what is original, attempting to “live it” creatively in order to propose it meaningfully today: these are the stages that Mezzadri identified for a possible path of research to be undertaken together and which he was the first to attempt to follow. For this reason, at the beginning of the new millennium, he promoted the founding of a new journal of Vincentian studies and formation, an expression of the entire Vincentian Family in Italy, **Carità e Missione**, in service to this process.¹⁶

2.2 Seeking Paths

The legacy that Mezzadri leaves to future generations is undoubtedly that of “seeking new paths.” Our journeys—both personal and collective—are always at risk of falling apart. Sometimes we sink day by day with a clear conscience; other times, we find ourselves breathless before the abyss that suddenly appears before us. We are always given the chance to change course. To do this, Mezzadri emphasized the need to reflect, dialogue, and discuss how we have been taught to seek paths of spirituality that “do not sink.” His writings, particularly his later ones, contain food for thought on the life of the Congregation, questions about the mission, and working hypotheses on ecclesial spaces to be occupied in new ways compared to the past. It is a way to treasure the lessons learned and to convey glimpses of a heritage that can help give a soul to the present day.

“Seek the words” is Hosea’s invitation! (Hos 14:3) This is what Mezzadri always sought to do: to nurture a love for living together, to support the search for absolute values, and to try to lift our gaze and open new horizons. Ultimately, in his work as a historian and formator, he was driven by the desire to work toward finding a new embodiment of the charism, in the search for new languages.

II

“The Mysticism of the Poor” (Giuseppe Toscani)

1. A Happy Rediscovery

¹⁵ Immediately after the Council, the watchword was “aggiornamento.” It was thought that updating the structures of the various religious orders would be sufficient to overcome the crisis. And so many efforts were made to revise the various “Rules” in light of the innovations brought by the Council and in adaptation to the new times. It soon became clear that this was evidently not enough; so the watchword became “renewal.” It was believed that renewal necessarily involved and consisted in the rediscovery of the “original charism.” This, too, was not enough. For charism is always a gift from God, given to a person or a group of people for a specific mission, which is, however, always tied to a precise time and place. Charism is never outside of time and space. But when the context changes, when the socio-cultural reality evolves, continuing to think and act according to established patterns can lead to the suffocation of the charism: it then no longer evangelizes, no longer transmits the good news, no longer creates space for life, loses its meaning, and is no longer a bearer of meaning either for those who have made it their own or for the surrounding environment. Today, it is more appropriate to speak of “revitalization.” The new watchword is therefore “revitalizing the charism for a creative fidelity to the original.”

¹⁶ L. Mezzadri, “Presentation,” in “Charity and Mission” I (2001) 1-2, 3-6

Traditionally, St. Vincent de Paul has been presented as a “man of action.” Pierre Collet’s interpretation played a major role in shaping this image; he wrote the second major biography of the “saint of charity,” by far the most widely printed.¹⁷ For him, St. Vincent was the greatest organizer of charitable works of his time. His basic thesis is to highlight the saint’s extensive activity, the fruit of his generosity combined with a keen practical sense. After all, Collet was writing during the era of Enlightenment historiography. He had no trouble classifying St. Vincent’s actions under the label of “social utility.” And Voltaire’s exclamation, “St. Vincent de Paul is my saint...,” clearly attests to the esteem in which he was held even among the revolutionaries.¹⁸ A long tradition of panegyric then helped to consolidate this image throughout the 19th century—that of the soup-distributor, the almsgiver, the man of pure action.¹⁹ From this perspective, it is no surprise that Leo XIII chose to proclaim him, on May 12, 1885, the universal patron of Christian works of charity.

But, as Brémond effectively stated, “the greatest of men of action is the mystic who gave him to us!”²⁰ In his monumental **Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu’à nos jours**, in 11 volumes, he wrote a chapter on *Bérulle and Vincent de Paul*.²¹ And from that moment on, St. Vincent emerged from the ranks of lesser spiritual figures to be placed among the mystics. Few authors after him were able to follow in his footsteps. It was by no means a foregone conclusion to do so. And this for two fundamental reasons.

The first reason lies in the restricted use to which the category “mysticism” is very often put in theological-spiritual literature, reserving it *for the pinnacle of Christian experience*, accompanied by certain “extraordinary phenomena” (visions, ecstasies, raptures...). By definition, the mystical experience is situated outside ordinary experience

¹⁷ P. Collet (1693–1770), a theologian rather than a historian, was the biographer at the time of St. Vincent’s canonization. The title of his biography is: *La vie de St. Vincent de Paul, instituteur de la Congrégation de la Mission et des Filles de la Charité*, 2 vols., Nancy 1748. This work was published in 69 French editions, 4 Italian editions, 2 Spanish editions, and one English edition.

¹⁸ Voltaire’s words are taken from a letter sent to the Marquis de Villette on January 4, 1776, in Voltaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. XII, *Correspondance générale*, published by Furne, Paris 1837, pp. 621–622. Here is the full text: “My saint is Saint Vincent de Paul [...] he deserves to be deified both as a philosopher and as a Christian. He left behind more useful monuments than his sovereign Louis XIII. He alone would have been capable of preventing the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre [...] He was so humble of heart that he refused to celebrate solemnities with the luxurious ornaments the Medici had given him.”

¹⁹ Emblematic is the celebratory volume by A. Loth, **Saint Vincent de Paul et sa mission sociale**, Dumoulin, Paris 1881 (an illustrated volume of no fewer than 527 pp).

²⁰ H. Brémond, “*Was Saint Vincent a Berullian?*”, in “La sete e la sorgente II. Alla ricerca delle origini”, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 1993, 57, [Chapter IV, Volume III, *La Conquête mystique. L’école française I*, Paris 1920, 228 of *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France ...*, Bloud et Gay, Paris 1916–1933]. The great scholar notes, in support of his assertion: “Here are some interesting details about Vincent de Paul that have, it seems to me, escaped the notice of most of his biographers. I found them in one of Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin’s *Réponses* to the Jansenists: ‘Those who run the House of St. Lazarus know that Monsieur Vincent was my good spiritual father, whom I often consulted [...] He often gave me good advice, and I noticed that he never gave me counsel until after he had gathered himself a little in God, consulting Him rather than his own intelligence and knowledge’» (*Fourth Part of the Response to the Insolent Apologies of Port-Royal*, by Monsieur de Saint-Sorlin Des Marets, 1668, 262–263).

²¹ The study on St. Vincent is Chapter IV of Volume III of *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France ...*, Paris 1920, 199–228—in the facsimile edition republished in 1967 by Armand Colin, Paris 1967, III/1, 199–228, (Italian translation in “La sete e la sorgente II,” Rome 1993, 19–57).

and reserved for the few, for those whom God has graced with certain special “gifts.” In fact, St. Vincent does not appear, from the testimonies we possess, to have enjoyed special “gifts” from God, except for the episode of the vision of the globes on the occasion of Chantal’s death.²²

The second reason lies in the common usage of the term “mystic,” which has become synonymous with “disembodied spiritualist,” detached from the world, a sort of seer lacking practical sense and totally uninterested in worldly affairs. In this case, a pejorative sense of the term prevails, indicating a dreamer, a visionary, an unforgivable idealist. This is the exact opposite of St. Vincent, whose talents as a great organizer have always been emphasized: a down-to-earth, concrete, realistic, and pragmatic man. In this sense, “mystic” is the opposite of a man of action.

To tell the truth, in the 1950s, Vincentian spirituality had been defined as “the spirituality of action.”²³ This expression was intended to describe the Christian’s commitment “in the world.” The formula, which remained in vogue until the 1980s, lent itself, however, to ambiguous interpretations, so much so that Dodin preferred to speak of “mysticism of religious action,” Ibanez of “mysticism in action,” Toscani of “mysticism of the poor,” and Maloney of “mysticism of charity.”²⁴ These “ ” corrections were intended to combat the danger of falling into “anthropological reductionism,” of failing to respect the “primacy of God.” On the positive side, however, the aim was to propose a vision of “spirituality lived in action,” a sort of reinterpretation of St. Ignatius of Loyola’s motto: *contemplativus in actione*. It is the model, not of a spirituality that arises “from action,” but one that is nourished, verified, and realized “in action.” St. Vincent did not “discover” the Face of Christ in the faces of the poor. He merely “recognized” the face of Christ in the faces of the poor. This is not a subtle distinction. The difference is enormous; it is substantial.

Thus, Rahner’s famous aphorism, “The Christian of the future will either be a mystic or will not be at all!”—which has inspired so much theological and spiritual

²² It is well known that St. Vincent himself, who speaks in the third person in his account of the vision of the globes, interprets himself and judges the authenticity of that experience in these terms: “What might lead one to doubt the reality of this vision is the fact that this person [St. Vincent] holds the holiness of that blessed soul in high esteem ... And consequently, this vision could be a product of his imagination. But what suggests that it is a true vision is the fact that he is not prone to them and has never had one.” The event occurred in 1641 on the very day of the death of Jeanne-Françoise de Chantal (SV XIII, 125–127; *SVit* XI, 135–137) and was revealed only to Father Codoing, superior of Annecy (SV II, 212–213; *SVit* II, 180–181).

²³ *Spirituality of Action: In the School of St. Vincent de Paul*, edited by R.J. Hesbert and E. Bertaud, Editions Alsatia, Paris 1960 (Italian translation: *Spiritualità dell’azione, secondo la scuola di S. Vincenzo de’ Paoli*, Edizioni Paoline, Milan 1962). It is an anthology of studies spanning from 1932 to 1960 by J. Calvet, D. Gorge, G. Truc, P. Coste, A. D’Agnel, G. Goyau, A. Dodin, V. Lenoir, and E. Favier. This successful collection subsequently inspired and influenced many later studies (see in particular the synthesis by G. L. Coluccia, *Vincentian Spirituality, Spirituality of Action*, Spada, Rome 1978, also translated into Spanish).

²⁴ Direct references for these authors: A. Dodin, *Vincent de Paul, mystique de l’action religieuse*, in “Mission et Charité” 8 (1968) 26–47; J.M. Ibanez, *Vicente de Paul y el juicio de los pobres*, in “Vincentiana” 3 (1978) 90–127; Id. (1982): *Vicente de Paul. Realismo y encarnación*, Ediciones Sigueme, Salamanca 1982; G. Toscani (1986): *The Mysticism of the Poor*, Alzani, Pinerolo, 1986; Id. (1986): *The Christ of St. Vincent*, “Colloquium Vincentianum” Paris 1986, in *Vincentiana* XXX (1986) 357–405; R. Maloney (2017), *Saint Vincent, a Mystic of Charity*, in “Vincentiana” 61 (2017), 112–143; Id. (2019): *Mystic of Charity. The Fire in the Heart of St. Vincent de Paul*, Saint Louis, Missouri 2019.

literature—has guided the few studies on the mysticism of St. Vincent by situating it within the realm of *Christian experience*.²⁵

I would therefore like, within the brief scope of this contribution, to outline the fruitfulness of applying the category of “mysticism” to St. Vincent and the way Father Giuseppe Toscani uses it.²⁶

2. The Application of the Category “Mysticism” to the Life of St. Vincent

Following Brémond’s study, there have been few but significant studies on the mysticism of St. Vincent. For reasons of space, I will refrain from providing even a brief overview, limiting myself to noting the bibliographical references in a footnote.²⁷

²⁵ References: K. Rahner, *Sollecitudine per la Chiesa*, Nuovi Saggi VIII, Paoline, Rome 1982, 449: “If by *mysticism* we do not mean strange parapsychological phenomena, but an *authentic experience of God* that springs from the center of existence, then this statement is very true and will become even clearer in its truth and relevance.” As is well known, this is a phrase already written by A. Malraux: “The man of the 21st century will either be religious or will not be” (ibid.); Id., “Piety in the Past and Today,” in *New Essays II. Essays on Spirituality*, Paoline, Rome 1968, 24: “The pious person of tomorrow will either be a *mystic*—that is, one who has *experienced* something—or will cease to be pious, because the piety of tomorrow will no longer be sustained by conviction born of experience and a unanimous, natural, and public personal decision, nor by the religious customs of all.”

²⁶ The reference is to the essay *La mistica dei poveri*, Alzani, Pinerolo, 1986, 1987² (French trans., *La mystique des Pauvres. Le charisme de la Charité*, Saint-Paul, Versailles 1998, English trans., *The Mystique of the Poor*, Malang 2012), read in conjunction with the subsequent study published in two different forms: Id., *Il Cristo di S. Vincenzo*, “Colloquium Vincentianum” Paris 1986, in *Vincentiana* XXX (1986) 357–405; Id., *Love, Contemplation, Theology. Jesus Christ as Seen by St. Vincent*, Alzani, Pinerolo, 1987.

²⁷ ARTICLES IN JOURNALS AND EDITED VOLUMES: H. Brémond (1920): “Was St. Vincent a Berullian?”, in *La sete e la sorgente* II, Rome 1993, 19–57, [Chapter IV, Volume III of *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France ...*, Paris 1920, 199–228]; P. Deffrennes (1932): *The Vocation of St. Vincent de Paul. A Study in Supernatural Psychology*, in “La sete e la sorgente” II, Rome 1993, 97–241, [original edition published in “Revue d’Ascétique et Mystique” 13 (1932), 60–86, 160–183, 294–321, 389–411]; J. Calvet (1938): *In the Footsteps of St. Francis de Sales*, in “La sete e la sorgente” II, Rome 1993, 66–82; [Chapter III: *Religious Literature from François de Sales to Fénelon*, from Volume V of *Histoire de la littérature française*, Paris 1938, 113–127]; E. M. Rossetti (1960): *St. Vincent de Paul, Mystic of Mercy*, in “Divus Thomas,” LXIII (1960), 442–455; A. Dodin (1968): *Vincent de Paul, Mystic of Religious Action*, in “Mission et Charité” 8 (1968) 26–47; J.M. Ibañez (1978): *Vincent de Paul and the Judgment of the Poor*, in “Vincentiana” 3 (1978) 90–127; L. Mezzadri (1984): *St. Vincent de Paul. The Primacy of Charity*, in *The Great Schools of Christian Spirituality*, edited by E. Ancilli, Edizioni OR, Rome 1984, 553–576; G. Toscani (1986): *The Christ of St. Vincent*, “Colloquium Vincentianum” Paris 1986, in *Vincentiana* XXX (1986) 357–405; J. Morin (1991): *The Mysticism of the Poor According to Saint Vincent*, in “Carnets Vincentiens” 4 (1991); H. O’Donnell (1995): *Vincent de Paul: His Life and Way*, in *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: The Classics of Western Spirituality*, John E. Rybolt and Frances Ryan eds., Paulist Press, New York 1995, 13–38; T. McKenna (2015): *Vincent de Paul: What Moved Him? And What Moved Him Toward Those Who Are Poor?*, in “Vincentian Heritage,” 32 #2 (2015); R. Maloney (2017), *Saint Vincent, a Mystic of Charity*, in “Vincentiana” 61 (2017), 112–143. MONOGRAPHS: J.M. Ibañez (1982): *Vicente de Paul. Realism and Incarnation*, Ediciones Sigueme, Salamanca 1982; G. Toscani (1986): *The Mysticism of the Poor*, Alzani, Pinerolo, 1986, 1987²; C. Riccardi (1998): *Vincentian Spirituality. A Contribution to the Study of Vincentianism*, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 1998, 2000²; R. Maloney (2019): *Mystic of Charity. The Fire in the Heart of St. Vincent de Paul*, Saint Louis, Missouri 2019; L. Mezzadri (2024): *St. Vincent de Paul. Mysticism and Charity*, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 2024.

Among the various perspectives, that of Father Giuseppe Toscani is by far the most comprehensive and profound on the subject.²⁸

Toscani does not provide a definition of the term “mysticism” and then proceed to apply it to the life of St. Vincent. Rather, he evokes it, seeking to describe those fundamental elements that define it.²⁹

He is not interested in *the “mystical phenomenon,”* understood as a particular “grace” that God bestows on certain individuals, which is virtually absent in St. Vincent. Instead, he is concerned with freeing St. Vincent from distorting, misleading, and partial interpretations. Now, for Toscani, among all the reductive readings of St. Vincent, the worst would be one that ignores the mystical dimension of his thought and action. Beyond all definitions, St. Vincent is a believer who lived an exhilarating experience of the mystery of Christ. And by virtue of this experience, he was able to be a true teacher of life. Reading his writings, one clearly perceives that what he says is the fruit of a knowledge that does not derive from a cultural tradition. Only a mystic, who has lived a transforming experience of Christ, is capable of speaking of God, of the world of the Spirit, of his own inner experience, with such surprising linguistic singularity. “When he [St. Vincent] says ‘Jesus Christ,’ he utters a proper name; he evokes a living being; he performs an act of faith in the mystery of a transfiguring divine presence; he signifies a relationship of personal communion with God in the closest unity; he affirms what is most singular, intimate, exclusive, mysteriously un , exalting, and extraordinary that can be found in a person’s experience.”³⁰

Toscani has no doubt that St. Vincent lived an authentic mystical experience within the ordinary journey of faith he undertook. An ever deeper and more intense experience of God, of His personal attributes, and of His ways of acting. Unexpectedly, he found himself totally immersed in a new relationship with God, so that every dimension of his life underwent a transformation: his thinking, his feeling, and his acting.³¹ “His (St. Vincent’s) mystical experience possesses highly significant characteristics. First of all, regarding the subjective conditions, it reveals the immediacy of surprise. For him, conversion was an event of “revelation.” Suddenly, Christ revealed himself to him in a form of presence that was unexpected and so overwhelming as to be scandalous. His encounter with God was not secondhand, nor did it take place through an intermediary. It erupted from the depths of his being as in a new “Erlebnis.” It tore away, in the midst of his life, the veil that separated him from the light. The surprise brought about totality, which definitively transfigured his life at every level... Vitality established concreteness... Concreteness led him to participation... In participation he lived the

²⁸ In recent years, Father Toscani’s perspective has been taken up by the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, Fr. Tomaz Mavric, C.M., and presented to the entire Congregation from the day of his election on July 5, 2016, in his first public address. (cf. N. Albanesi, *St. Vincent, Mystic of Charity*, in “*Vincentiana*” 60 (2016) 4, monographic issue in English, 517–524 – Spanish, 508–514 – French, 545–552; Id., *St. Vincent, Mystic. Rereading The Mysticism of the Poor by Father Giuseppe Toscani, CM*, in “Charity and Mission.” Annual Monograph of Vincentian Studies, Memoirs, and Formation, New Series, 1 (2020) 35–66; Id., *The Contemplative Dimension of Our Spirituality*, in “*Studia Vincentiana*” 1 (2023), 41–47; Id., *The “Mysticism of the Poor” by Father Giuseppe Toscani*, in G. Toscani, *Becoming Charity. Reflections on the Mysticism of Charity*, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 2023, 95–119.

²⁹ *The Mysticism of the Poor*, 44–51.

³⁰ G. Toscani, *Love, Contemplation, Theology*, 17

³¹ Toward a Phenomenology of Mystical Experience: G. Toscani, *Love, Contemplation, Theology*, 57–84

deepest experience... Man was for him truly the direct and sure way to Christ. Thus he experienced the great silence of the authentic mystics and their crucified waiting for glory. St. Vincent, in the presence of the poor, knows how to be silent rather than speak... In the presence of the poor, he feels himself in the presence of Christ: he stands in adoration, he kneels to serve them better, just like a mother beside her child, even if he were the most wayward. In this attitude he summed up his “worship” and lived through his “dark night,” dying completely to the attractions of the world, to reach the transforming union with the Love of Christ. He certainly experienced mystical ecstasies, but in the manner of Jesus on the cross, without ostentation, abstraction, or dissociation from the suffering of his neighbor: as a true poor in spirit like the Master.”³²

By *mysticism*, therefore, Toscani means an “immediate awareness” of God’s presence and action, whose *foundation* is faith, whose *sphere of expression* is human experience, and whose *place of manifestation* is language.³³ From this perspective—the same one highlighted by Agaësse—“every believer has their *own* ‘mystical life,’ to the extent that they fulfill *their* personal vocation, *their* way of following Christ and adhering to him in order to become, in turn, a child of God, under the guidance of the Spirit. Such a life begins with baptism and develops through virtue and asceticism, ecclesial life, and love of neighbor, cooperating with the divine gifts communicated through the sacraments and the charisms of the Holy Spirit. It is the mysticism of St. John and St. Paul.”³⁴

3. The Success of a Formula

At this point, we can better grasp the meaning that Toscani gave to his definition of the “mysticism of the poor.”

First of all, “mysticism,” in the broad sense of the term, is in no way intended to be a misrecognition of extraordinary gifts of grace or of the highest contemplative states. It is meant solely to designate the experience of having been “touched,” “sensitized,” or “moved.” The mystic is one who realizes that he has been “pre-empted,” “pre-moved,” that he has “under gone” God’s initiative. To use a felicitous expression of Jousse, the mystic (in the same way as the man who expresses himself) is “an agent who acts while being moved”!³⁵

An experience can therefore be defined as “mystical” when, in relation to a person, God takes the initiative, graces them with a special manifestation of Himself and an extraordinary communication of His Love, transforms them according to His own nature, enriches them with special gifts, and entrusts them with a mission.³⁶

The mystic’s entire experience is then completely transfigured by divine Love. His intellect receives a form of intuitive, “super-conceptual” perception, leading to a

³² *The Mysticism of the Poor*, 44–46

³³ This is also the definition given by Elmar Salmann in several of his essays, in particular: Id., *Presence and Critique. On the Elective Affinities between Philosophy and Mysticism*, in Various Authors, *Philosophy and Mysticism. Research Pathways*, Rome 1997, 29–60; Id., *Mysticism: Experience and Theory—Stories and Figures*, in Id., *Presence of Spirit. Christianity as Gesture and Thought*, Padua 2000, 193–208.

³⁴ P. Agaësse, *Mysticism*, DS 10, (*Dictionary of Spirituality*, 1980), 1953

³⁵ M. Jousse, *The Anthropology of Gesture*, Paoline, Rome 1978, 43

³⁶ G. Toscani, *Love, Contemplation, Theology*, 89–212. In the third part of the volume, *The Epiphany of Christ in the Contemplation of St. Vincent*, he describes in detail the mystical experience of St. Vincent, focusing on its characteristic elements.

higher knowledge of the mystery of Christ that culminates in contemplation. The mystic enjoys an intoxicating intuition of the divine mysteries, which the Church Fathers compare to intoxication because it provokes rapture and leads to ecstasy. In it, the mystic experiences the joyful and wondrous surprise of feeling infinitely loved by an “other” Love. Affectivity is thus totally polarized by the irresistible attraction to divine beauty. The mystic savors the taste of God. His freedom, enriched by extraordinary energies, acts governed exclusively by the Father’s will and the demands of Love. The mystic has no other aspiration than “to please God.”

The mystical experience generates a new linguistic capacity. The ecstatic is called to enlighten others in a prophetic role. Therefore, he receives the “gift of tongues”: that is, he is given the grace to express, in a new, bewildering, and at the same time highly meaningful language, the divine Reality he perceives in contemplation.

The life of one who has been thus seized and assimilated to Christ in the possession of the attributes of Love inspires sympathy, wins people over, and draws them in, because it reflects the arcane beauty that adorns it. Mystics “attract” others and reveal to them the “way to God.” They are lovable. And since love is infinitely generative and inventive, in their lovability they exercise true fatherhood and motherhood toward all, beginning with the poor.³⁷

Note that in this context, we always speak of “the poor” and never of “the poor person.” The poor person is an abstract category. The poor, on the other hand, refer to concrete people. Thus, we better understand why Toscani speaks of the spiritual experience of St. Vincent as a “mysticism of the poor.” It is a mysticism “of the poor” in a twofold sense:

1) a mysticism lived “by the poor,” in a condition of poverty of natural and spiritual gifts, without great cultural resources at their disposal and without an adequate religious education (this is the reason for *the* “enlightened *illiterate*,” which demonstrates that the Kingdom of God is not a human work). “Devoid of cultural artifice, it is rich in love. It is expressed not so much in the words of St. Vincent as in his ‘works,’ in harmony with the invitation to ‘act first and teach later.’”³⁸

2) A mysticism that lives through the relationship “with the poor,” loved in God and as God. “He [St. Vincent] made himself a neighbor even to the least of men as God in Christ, and in this closeness he attained union... His Charity unites God and every man, without confusing them, yet without ever separating them.”³⁹

Father Toscani borrows the expression “mysticism of the poor” from Pourrat.⁴⁰ In his famous 1953 study for the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, he describes the mystical life as a “state of infused contemplation,” drawing on the doctrine of the Spanish masters, St.

³⁷ See the entries “God” (111–116), “Incarnation” (209–216), “Mysticism” (294–300), written by Father Toscani in *Dizionario storico spirituale vincenziano*, edited by Luigi Mezzadri, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 2003.

³⁸ *The Mysticism of the Poor*, 76

³⁹ *The Mysticism of the Poor*, 45–46

⁴⁰ The dependence is formal, not substantive. The same category, “mysticism of the poor,” is also found in J. M. Ibañez, but understood differently from Father Toscani (cf. Id., *Vincenzo de’ Paoli e il giudizio dei poveri*, “Annali della Missione” 85 (1978), 53–88; the expression appears on p. 67). J. Morin also uses it differently in his studies: *La mystique du pauvre selon Saint Vincent*, in “Carnets Vincentiens” 4 (1991)—which draws on a series of lectures given in 1981 at the Berceau, to both the Missionaries and the Daughters of Charity.

Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. Infused contemplation brings about the transformation of the soul into an ever-growing desire for conformity to Christ. It produces lasting effects: a complete self-forgetfulness, a burning desire to consume oneself for Christ, a thirst for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, an absolute detachment from all things, a consuming zeal! Now, to use the words of the distinguished scholar, “It does not seem that St. Vincent habitually attained infused contemplation proper. But who was more charitable, more humble, more zealous than he?”⁴¹

And, in the same vein, Gentili asks: “Does Vincent de Paul not deserve to be held up as a distinguished model of the ‘mysticism of the poor,’ precisely because he dedicated his entire life to the poor, having emerged from the severe trial? (The author says this in reference to the ‘night’ of the severe trial of faith that lasted four years during his early period in Paris). He had what Teresa and John only desired. And he ascended in a glorious “winter direct route.” It is not certain that he ascended any less high. Nor that he climbed a peak different from that of the “mystical marriage.” After all, if one prefers, one may call it “transforming union.” Without such a union, there is no heroic holiness. And it can exist without that conscious perception of special favors... Even in the absence of the contemplative graces that sometimes accompany the high union, one can experience God’s embrace, being loved by Him, and loving Him in return, in a love that silently transforms by divinizing, through graces that are not infrequently crucifying. One must literally climb with bare hands up the walls of a precipice. One must welcome the Lord in what is most mysterious and incomprehensible about Him, if one wishes to share in Him, and thus in intimacy.”⁴²

Moreover, if it is true, as Pascal says, that there is no other relationship between God and man than love (*Pensées* 582), a life spent in love is indicative of being in God. And since there is only one love (there is no love for God qualitatively different from love for one’s brothers and sisters), whoever experiences love experiences God: “Whoever loves has known God, for God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, 16). “From the mysticism of the Incarnation, the disciples of St. Vincent can still be led to experience that God is Love, that He is accessed through Love, that through Love He dwells in man, that He works by loving, and that we unite ourselves to God by working as He does.”⁴³

Even the “poor,” then, can reach the heights of heroic charity. These are the “little ones” of the Gospel, those who have made themselves small for the Kingdom of Heaven. And because they are so poor (destitute, weak, and fragile), they can better understand the “poor” and place themselves at their service in every way. “This was, in fact, the great revelation of his life. When we recall his conversion, it is said that he discovered the poor, even though he already knew them. More often it is stated that he discovered Christ in the poor; this is not true either, for it was Christ who showed him the poor. Instead, it must be said that the “state of Christ” was revealed to him—as it is present and still at work on earth—and, therefore, he was given the grace to adhere to it, to embody divine mercy amid the chaos of all the wounds caused by hatred. In the words of the Apostle, he finds confirmation that God, in Christ, “became all things to all people,” because showing

⁴¹ P. Pourrat, *Contemplation*, DS 2, (*Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, 1953), 2157

⁴² E. M. Gentili, *Our Only Love. Union with God Yesterday and Today*, LDC, Leumann (Turin) 1982, 169–170

⁴³ *The Mysticism of the Poor*, 78

mercy is a characteristic of God. Feeling chosen for this ministry, he finds no rest and becomes all things to all people.”⁴⁴

4. The “Mysticism of the Poor”

Toscani’s thesis possesses the power of “brilliant intuitions,” which, however, cannot be proven rationally. The logic underpinning the reflection is not argumentative. That is to say, one should not expect any conclusion to the discourse. Or rather, the conclusion is not reached through argumentative reflection, but through a meditative reflection. The logic is explanatory; therefore, the conclusion is entirely contained within the premises.

Toscani thus begins with an intuition—*St. Vincent is a mystic, transformed by the revelation of God as Love, whose privileged place of manifestation is the poor*—which then becomes the central idea governing the entire text. This insight, which for him is an inner conviction, born and strengthened by his assiduous reading of St. Vincent’s writings and the familiarity that comes from them, he seeks to amplify, make explicit, and share, but not strictly to prove.

When reflecting on themes such as love, charity, and mercy, Toscani liked to say that love cannot be proven. It can only be sensed, perceived. If it exists, it is given; one feels it and experiences it in the sharing of life, but it cannot be proven.

Now, that “God is love” we know by grace. The statement “God is love” is not the result of a logical reflection to which the Christian community arrived after following a rational path. “God is love” is a revelation. It is the intuition commensurate with the gift received. God is “that love” which in Christ was revealed in a splendid form and which reached its highest expression in the total and definitive gift of his life. A love that draws us in and, in drawing us in, transforms us. If the object is of this kind, it is clear that reflection can only amplify the initial intuition.

In **The Mysticism of the Poor**, the reflections of a lifetime find their peace and definitive form. There is not a single superfluous word, not a single flaw, no misplaced self-satisfaction, or sterile polemic. Reading its pages, one gets the impression of an exceptional richness, rarely found in occasional religious literature.

Toscani had been persistently urged to put into writing the ideas he had long communicated through his intense activity in preaching, formation, and teaching. Those who knew him personally know that he gave himself entirely to discussions, conversations, and dialogues. Yet when his essay comes to light, almost suddenly, it appears in all its novelty. One does not get the impression of the already known, the already said. St. Vincent emerges from the past but not as a figure of the past. Toscani makes him speak in the present, also providing the tools to do so.

From the overall picture that emerges, it is not the individual positions on specific issues that are convincing. Toscani’s hermeneutical choices were already known, as were his ideas on mysticism and charity. It is the reconstruction of St. Vincent’s contemplation as a whole that is effective and imposes itself with the force of a very long preparation and profound meditation.

Let us not forget that Toscani always intends to present what has become a conviction for him. This is why he keeps the reader on the edge of their seat. But he does

⁴⁴ *The Mysticism of the Poor*, 66–67

not present himself as a writer who wants to convince at all costs and is literally consumed by the unprovable thesis he upholds. On the contrary, he proposes a hermeneutical path in reading St. Vincent that only at the end is able to establish itself as appropriate.⁴⁵

One of the most frequent criticisms leveled at Toscani's works is the following: are we really so sure that St. Vincent said everything that Father Toscani has him saying? As if to say that in *The Mysticism of the Poor* there is more of Toscani's theology than of St. Vincent's thought. Or, at best, that St. Vincent's thought has been expressed in the categories of the theology that nourished Toscani's reflection. But this is a false problem, because it is clear that each of us reads with our own eyes. It cannot be otherwise. But it is equally clear that everything Toscani has set forth, he found or rediscovered in St. Vincent. The proof is all in his writings, which, however, one must have the patience to read in their entirety. (note on the writings of St. Vincent)

Toscani approaches the illustration of St. Vincent's mystical experience and our own in a three-part discourse. He proceeds by presenting *the Vincentian experience* in three major parts:

1 – *Incarnation* – St. Vincent's experience – A reconstruction of the features of his mystical experience and his "personal charism";

2 – *adherence* – St. Vincent's program of life and our own – The presentation of the "Christian way of life" that St. Vincent transmitted to his communities: the "original charism";

3 – the *mission* – the place of the Company of Charity in the Church – An illustration of the "original charism," with particular attention to the significance of lived experience.

In the theological-spiritual language in vogue today, a distinction is made between the *founder's* charism, the charism *of foundation*, and the charism *of the foundation*, referring respectively to the founder's personal experience, the founder's particular inspiration in bringing about the foundation, and the life of the foundation. The founder's charism and the charism of the foundation are no longer accessible: they die with the founder and with the end of the initial group. The charism of the foundation is transmitted from one generation to the next by living it and embodying it in the changing circumstances of life.

It is surprising that Toscani never used the term "charism" to refer to the "gift" that St. Vincent was for his contemporaries and for the entire Church in subsequent generations. Nor does he use it to indicate the "spiritual heritage" of his communities or the "style" of life of those inspired by him. Toscani speaks rather of the "spirit" of St. Vincent (in harmony with the language of the seventeenth century), or of "grace" as it pertains to the Society.

The essay concludes with the presentation of a vision: that of St. Vincent, which is destined to become ours as well.⁴⁶ The themes are revisited and placed within a concise,

⁴⁵ See *The Mysticism of the Poor*, 36: "Reading ... must become pre-comprehensive within a familiarity fostered by that same affectivity. A fruit of the Spirit, it is a rare grace, promised to lovers more than to hurried readers."

⁴⁶ By "vision" here I mean the ability to read reality not so much in terms of a doctrine as in terms of a believer's experience. "Vision is the combination of lived experience and knowledge; it is a believer's knowing and a loving belief" (F. G. Brambilla, *Theological Anthropology*, Queriniana, Brescia 2009, 15). It is the consciousness of faith that emerges from a spiritual experience and is reflected in the way of seeing

vision. The initial insight, as I mentioned, is also the conclusion: the mystery of the revelation of Love.

But here—Father Toscani warns—we are dealing with the revelation of Trinitarian Love. Love belongs to God. It is God’s exclusive property. Man can only receive it. So much so that it is God who shares his love in Christ and gives it through his Holy Spirit, so that we may be infected by his very way of loving. If God’s Love is the impulse that gives rise to every form of activity—indeed, to every form of life—and if Love is that original impulse, which belongs to God, it is clear that we can only receive it once God shares it with us.

And as often happened when he taught, his reflection becomes an occasion for contemplation. With lyrical tones he writes:

“Charity is everything. It is everything in everything: in God, in Christ, in the Church, in religion, in life, on earth and in heaven.

Charity is God, in himself, in Jesus Christ, and in his Spirit: infinite Love that makes itself loved. Adorable loveliness!

Charity is the Trinity that loves and communicates itself as infinite loveliness. Charity becomes the Church and, in the Church, the kingdom of God: grace, life, law, practice, salvation, paradise. Everything else is meaningless and worthless.

Charity bestows upon every person, as upon Jesus, the face of God’s Love. In the least of men, in the poorest, in all those in whom the need for goodness is greatest, Love presents itself most actively, because it is committed to making itself loved in a more intense and demanding way.

This vision explains why Charity always maintains primacy and preeminence, initiative and authority over everything else, to embrace every aspect of human existence in the epiphany of God’s Love and to transfigure man into an icon of the Trinity.

As for its constitutive nature, it can be said that St. Vincent’s contemplation intuits that Charity consists in making oneself loved, rather than in loving. He identifies it with the very essence of God, supreme goodness that exerts infinite attraction, and assigns it personal properties within the Trinity.

The Father, the original Good, makes himself loved by giving birth to the Son, infinite gratitude. In communion, the Holy Spirit expresses the divine lovability of the Father and the Son. God’s lovability is revealed in the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit: infinite gentleness, tenderness, and sweetness.

Life of the Trinity and soul of the history of salvation, Charity is grace for humanity’s deification. It gives rise to faith and sustains hope. It forms the Church and brings about the Kingdom of God. It bestows a truly fatherly heart and imparts a filial spirit to every person, establishing a new kind of

things, people, and events. St. Vincent did not have his own doctrine. He did, however, have a “vision” and the rare ability to “point the way.” Hence all his prophecy.

brotherhood, founded on the care to anticipate one another in love. It is the happiness of God and our own.”⁴⁷

5. A Timely Correction

At the end of this journey, one might ask: what fundamental insights does Father Toscani’s study offer regarding our understanding of St. Vincent and the mystery of Charity?

One of the most important insights is the fusion between the man of action and the man of contemplation. In the past, there was undoubtedly an overemphasis on presenting St. Vincent the “organizer” as entirely separate from St. Vincent the “mystic,” as if they were two distinct persons. There was an exaggeration in presenting his undeniable “practical aptitudes” as detached from his “vision of faith.”

St. Vincent is not just any priest of the seventeenth century who can be confined to rigid cultural frameworks. What is evident in his life and achievements is *originality*. The question is whether this originality can be attributed solely to a human evolution that shaped his life, or whether it reveals something else. After all, among the spiritual figures of his time (some of whom were certainly his superiors in doctrine), he is the one who has had the greatest spiritual legacy. What was the source of his generativity?

When seeking the principle that drives the entire life journey of St. Vincent and of the people who were drawn to his way of living the Gospel, one cannot help but find it in God. And access to the mystery of God can never be a “conquest,” but exclusively a “gift,” a “grace” received, to be desired, to be asked for, to be inherited.

St. Vincent unites within himself the “qualities” of the organizer and the “graces” of the spiritual. In him, the realistic man of action coincides with the mystical man of faith. In the authentic Christian experience, there is no rupture between the life of faith and real life. Woe if that were the case. It would be the cause of serious distortions in the Christian experience. A good administrator can be a charismatic figure, and an authentic mystic is always a practical man. Proust said that “despite” is always a hidden “because”! Applying this maxim to St. Vincent, one must not think that, “despite” being a mystic, he was “also” a great organizer. On the contrary: St. Vincent was a brilliant organizer “because” he was an authentic mystic. The spiritual legacy of St. Vincent was not mistaken when it recognized, behind the father of organized charity, the man of God guided by the Spirit, the passionate follower of Christ, and the friend of the poor.

6. A Spirituality of “Interiority in Action”

Until the 17th century, the ideal of Christian spirituality was entirely centered on the theme of the “presence of God.” With the *French School*, a language of “ ” began to prevail, according to which the summit of the Christian life is not living in the presence of God, but adhering to the “will of God.” And doing the will of God means practicing love of God and neighbor.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *The Mysticism of the Poor*, 162–163

⁴⁸ In recent decades, research on French spirituality has seen new momentum and developments: B. Papasogli, *The Letter and the Spirit. Themes and Figures of the French Seventeenth Century*, Goliardica, Pisa 1986; Id., *The Depths of the Heart. Figures of Inner Space in the French Seventeenth Century*, Goliardica, Pisa 1991; VARIOUS AUTHORS, *The Hidden God. The Great French Masters of the Seventeenth*

In St. Vincent there is a radical critique—though not entirely conscious—of the *intellectualism* and disembodied *spiritualism* of a certain Christian spirituality. Only the practice of charity shields us from intellectualist and spiritualist distortions. St. Vincent was deeply convinced that Charity is the center, the foundation, and the criterion of Christian life. He had been captivated by it; it had transformed him. This is why his “words” and his “deeds” remain persuasive even today.

Charity has an *external* dimension, which manifests itself in concrete actions, in service. But, as we know, authentic charity also possesses an *internal* dimension, which manifests itself in the “heart,” in feelings, in affections, in the measure of love poured into the concrete things one does. In the “Augustinian age”⁴⁹ St. Vincent, like all his contemporaries, was captivated by the return to interiority. Rather than speaking of *the spirituality of action*, I believe it is preferable to speak of *the spirituality of interiority in action*.

“One cannot help but be struck,” states Mino Bergamo, “when one turns one’s mind to consider religious publications in seventeenth-century France, by the frequency with which the word *intérieur* recurs in their titles. [...] These recurring appearances are indicative of the fascination exerted on seventeenth-century religious thought by the world of interiority. [...] Now, I feel I can say that interest in interiority—the inquiry into the movements and states of the inner life—reached one of its highest points of development in seventeenth-century French culture. And the extraordinary success of the word *intérieur*—which, used both as an adjective and as a noun, became one of the key words of the religious language of the era—already allows us to grasp the breadth and historical significance of this phenomenon.”⁵⁰

In the spiritual language of seventeenth-century France, the inner man is not a man closed in on himself and his private life, passive, confined to his own innermost self. In this context, *the internal* is not opposed to *the external*, *interiority* to *exteriority*, *passivity* to *activity*. This is how it is in our common language, but not in that spiritual language known to St. Vincent. To speak of *interiority* does not mean to fall *into introspection*. On the contrary, the return to the interior is like a catapult that propels one outward; the “r curvature” toward oneself and one’s inner movements paradoxically projects one beyond oneself.

Inhabiting one’s inner space is the condition of possibility for *ex-stasis*, that is, the place where the “ecstatic movement” takes place, which sets the subject in motion. One returns “within oneself” in order to go “outside oneself.” The interior and the exterior, in a certain sense, come to coincide. The interior “is” the *place* where one’s self is dislocated outward. One returns to oneself to encounter God and then to find Him outside of oneself, in the faces of the poor. In other words: only those who have returned to themselves can go out of themselves; only those who have already found God can “leave God for God.”

Century and the Image of God, De Luca, Rome 2001; M. de Certeau, *The Place of the Other. Religious and Mystical History*, Gallimard-Le Seuil, Paris 2005; R. Deville, *The French School of Spirituality*, Desclée, Paris 2008 [This is a new, revised, and expanded edition. This time, the author dedicates a separate chapter to St. Vincent, Chapter 7, titled: “*Vincent de Paul, a Gascon Who Left His Mark on His Century (1581–1660)*”, pp. 141–156].

⁴⁹ H. De Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*, Opera Omnia vol. 12, Jaka Book, Milan 1978; D. Bosco, *Augustine in Modernity. The Grand Siècle (and Beyond)*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2011.

⁵⁰ M. Bergamo, *The Anatomy of the Soul. From François de Sales to Fénelon*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1991, 13.

For this reason, St. Vincent places great emphasis on cultivating the interior life, on inner attitudes, on the need to purify one's intentions, and on the virtues to be lived.

From this perspective, we can better understand Brémond's famous statement: "It was not the poor who gave it to God, but God who gave it to the poor."⁵¹ And at the same time, as Dodin pointed out, once God was discovered in the poor, "God made use of them." For St. Vincent, the poor were "discreet, unconscious, and mysterious evangelists."⁵² Toscani even compares them to "ministers" of the worship of charity.⁵³ In a sacramental sense, the poor are brought *into our lives* by God's love, and at the same time, it is *they* who bring us to God's love.⁵⁴

St. Vincent was *entrusted* by God to the poor. And the poor *led him back* to God. By working for them, he *consumed himself* for God. By loving God, he also *loved* the poor as God does. In this sense, Riccardi's note can better clarify in what sense we can speak of mysticism regarding the life of St. Vincent. "Vincent is a mystic, an authentic mystic, even more authentic than those who lived the mystical life as a search for loving union with the divine, content to contemplate, love, and rejoice in intimacy with God. The union that Vincent sought with the divine was the search for union with His divine will, not merely to be contemplated but to be carried out. And since this divine will was manifested in Christ, who dedicated himself to serving the poor above all, this is what Vincent sought to do throughout his life. [...] St. Vincent is called to 'consume himself for God' and not to 'lose himself in God' according to the conception of classical and abstract mysticism."⁵⁵

Bérulle loved "God in God." St. Vincent loved "God in the poor." Herein lies the full diversity, the full novelty, and the full modernity of St. Vincent de Paul. In this legacy—entire generations of Missionaries, Daughters of Charity, and members of various charitable associations have found inspiration to embody the Vincentian charism in the changing circumstances in which they have found themselves living it. And even today, defying the wear and tear of time, it can serve as a sure point of reference, not only for the Vincentian Family, but also for those who are too easily swayed by current theologies (or rather ideologies) of charity that are overly anthropocentric and narrowly focused on the social sphere.

"In the witness of St. Vincent, Charity remains for us his sole legacy. Spirit and life, it finds its faithful guardian and its inexhaustible source in the very grace that nourished the Saint's contemplation, and not in the form of a doctrine, or in the crystallizations of legal institutions, or in the patterns of a practice modeled on imitation. His experience is affirmed in the humility of the "poor in spirit," who cannot explain the mysterious event with which he has been graced, but who can attest to having been

⁵¹ H. Brémond, *A Literary History of Religious Sentiment in France ...*, vol. III, Paris 1920, 219. The full quote: "It was not the love of men that led him to holiness, but rather holiness that made him truly and effectively charitable; it was not the poor who gave him to God, but, on the contrary, God who gave him to the poor. Those who see in him more the philanthropist than the mystic, those who do not see him first and foremost as a mystic, imagine a Vincent de Paul who never existed" (in "La sete e la sorgente" II, 45).

⁵² A. Dodin, *Vincent de Paul and the Sick*, in VI Week of Vincentian Studies, Salamanca 1977, CEME, Salamanca 1978, 33–34.

⁵³ *The Mysticism of the Poor*, 138

⁵⁴ *The Mysticism of the Poor*, 128

⁵⁵ *Evangelical Perfection*. The Complete Thought of St. Vincent de Paul in His Own Words, edited by C. Riccardi, 3rd ed., CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 1983, note, XVII-XVIII.

governed exclusively by God, and point to Jesus Christ and his Love as the source of all. His life remains a simple witness to this marvelous event, and his words a humble confession; yet they evoke highly significant reflections that point to the essential aspects of a transformation that only Love can bring about in everyone through the program of Christ's life. In the celebration, his Charity becomes for us a "memorial" for a rebirth in the Spirit of Christ, a "baptism of fire" for purification from all selfishness, a "promise" of bliss in the gift of self, a "prophecy" of creativity for a new world."⁵⁶

III

"The Aesthetics of the Gaze"

(Erminio Antonello)

1. The Project to Reissue the Works of St. Vincent

The largest editorial project Antonello worked on is undoubtedly the new Italian edition of *the Works* of St. Vincent. He deserves great credit for having been able to work firsthand and to coordinate a number of collaborators at various stages of the project. Not only did he oversee the entire edition together with Mezzadri, but he also took on the responsibility of checking the translation, composing the critical notes for the text, and directing the graphic design. He tirelessly maintained contact between the translators and collaborators, with the members of the Joint Commission (Missionaries, Daughters of Charity, Vincentian laypersons), with the publisher, the Vincentian Liturgical Center, and the printing house, overseeing every stage of the work. It is worth briefly retracing the stages of this undertaking, which has absorbed much of his time and energy over the past thirty years.

1.1 *The Slow Maturation of the Project*

The idea of reprinting the *Works* of St. Vincent originated with the CLV, which had edited the previous edition; however, that edition was missing Volume XIII of Coste's work (Documents). This was back in 1989. The project was part of a broader program to revive Vincentian publications. In the following years, the *Vincentian Missal* (1991), the *Vincentian Breviary* (1992), and the *Vincentian Liturgy of the Hours* (1993) would be published. The decision to reprint the *Opera omnia* was prompted by the poor quality of the previous edition and the need to supplement and correct, in certain places, Coste's work based on later contributions, particularly those of Dodin and Koch.

As for the previous edition, it had been published in 16 small volumes between 1952 and 1982, varying in size, with a highly fragmented chronological arrangement, and printed on poor-quality paper that had yellowed. The translation had been undertaken as early as the 1930s by Prof. Fornaciari, a Dame of Charity, at the initiative of Bishop Marina. In the printed version, the translation was revised, for the first volumes by Fr. Franci, who had introduced some Tuscanisms (very elegant but considered by others a limitation), and later by Fr. Fei, who used very different criteria, prioritizing fidelity to

⁵⁶ The last three paragraphs of *The Mysticism of the Poor*, 168–169.

the original over the elegance of the Italian language.⁵⁷ It was therefore decided to update the translation to contemporary Italian to facilitate wider dissemination of the work even beyond the boundaries of Vincentian communities.

As for Pierre Coste's French edition, the discovery of Vincentian texts in subsequent years—published by Dodin in 1970—required an update. Furthermore, the review of the text and historical notes by Combaluzier and Chalumeau, who had highlighted inevitable inaccuracies, made a comprehensive revision necessary. We know that Coste worked hard, but in a hurry and with the help of collaborators who were not always experts. Thus, Fr. Baldacchino completed a re-reading of the texts against the originals in the Archives of St. Lazre, drafting a rather lengthy series of corrections to Coste's reading. Furthermore, Fr. Koch undertook the task of reviewing all of Coste's published texts and subsequent additions. Finally, Fr. Lautissier converted the texts into digital format, making the entire Opera Omnia available on CD for wider distribution.

In the initial phase of the work, between 1989 and 1995, it was decided that the time had come to tackle Volume XIII of Coste's work on the documents, as this was the text where the additions and corrections to Coste's work had been most numerous. Fr. Braga began working on the composition of the texts for this volume, and Fr. Fei on its translation. At the same time, Fr. Mezzadri planned the revision of the Epistolario with the assistance of a translation expert. Also during those years, the CLV undertook the computer transcription of the entire Opera Omnia. The revision process proceeded slowly due to a lack of continuity in the work and the small number of people involved.

In a second phase of the work, from 1996 to 2000, leadership of the project passed from the CLV to the *Joint Commission* (composed of the three male visitors and five female visitatrices, along with their provincial superiors from the Italian provinces). During those years, the initiative was launched to create a single popular magazine for the three Provinces of the Missionaries, replacing the three historical magazines—a project to which the five Provinces of the Daughters of Charity would also adhere. It was finally a new editorial project, shared even from an economic standpoint. The aim was to effectively revitalize Vincentian publications in Italy to support the formation of all branches of the Vincentian Family. Gradually, the idea took shape to move beyond a simple revision of the previous Italian edition and instead prepare a new one, based on new criteria. This brings us to 1999, when the Joint Commission decided to formulate a new project for the publication of the Works of St. Vincent. A scientific committee was formed, and two editors, Fathers Antonello and Mezzadri, were chosen to direct the work.

The third phase, from 2001 to 2025, is marked by the publication of the new Italian edition: St. Vincent de Paul, *Works*, (to date, 10 volumes of the 11 planned have been published), edited by Antonello E. – Mezzadri L., CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 2001 – 2025. The following volumes have appeared in order of publication:

Works 1, Correspondence (1607–1639), 2001 [translation: F. Onnis]

Works 2, Correspondence (1640–July 1646), 2002 [trans. M. De Michele]

⁵⁷ Coste's work had been translated into Italian as follows: vols. IX–XII, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Collegio Alberoni, Piacenza 1931–33 (in 4 volumes), in a new edition in single volumes, *Conferences to the Priests of the Mission*, Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 1959, and *Spiritual Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, edited by L. Mezzadri, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 1980; vols. I–VIII, *The Complete Works of St. Vincent de Paul. Correspondence*, Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 1952–1982 (in 16 volumes, the first 7 of which were co-published with Cantagalli of Siena).

Works 3, Correspondence (August 1646 – March 1650), 2003 [trans. R. Gustapane]
 Works 4, Correspondence (April 1650 – July 1653), 2005 [trans. E. Onnis]
 Works 10, Conferences to the Missionary Priests, 2008 [ed. E. Antonello]
 Works 9, Conferences to the Daughters of Charity, 2012 [t: E. Onnis, E. Antonello]
 Works 5, Correspondence (August 1653 – June 1656), 2016 [translated by E. Antonello, R. Gustapane]
 Works 11, Documents, 2019 [translation: E. Antonello]
 Works 6, Correspondence (July 1656 – November 1657), 2022 [translated by E. Antonello, E. Fossati, M. Mistrorigo]
 Works 7, Correspondence (December 1657 – June 1659), 2025 [translated by E. Antonello, E. Fossati, M. Mistrorigo]
 Works 8, Correspondence – in preparation ... (already translated and annotated), 2026?
 [Volume 8 will feature the first publication of Brother Robineau's *Notebooks*, which were published in a critical edition by Dodin in 1991. In addition, plans are underway to publish a Volume 12 of *Indices* (not originally planned) that translates and supplements Volume XIV of the Coste edition.]

1.2 Editorial Criteria

The new edition translates Coste's French critical edition into modern Italian, with subsequent corrections and additions up to the present day. The original numbering of the edition has been retained, with the corresponding French page number indicated alongside the Italian text to facilitate cross-referencing and allow for the immediate retrieval of citations from the Coste edition.

When new texts had to be added, they were numbered sequentially with letter designations (a, b, c ...) while maintaining the original numbering. When, on the other hand, certain texts had to be moved due to a dating error, the Coste numbering was retained but the relocation was noted elsewhere.

The notes have been translated from Coste's, but corrected, supplemented, and new ones added as needed. In particular, theological-spiritual notes—which were rather lacking in the Coste edition—have been added to provide greater clarity and contextualization of St. Vincent's text. New cross-references between texts have also been included where connections or references regarding content were found, which were completely absent in the Coste edition. The result is a completely new critical apparatus.

The fundamental criterion used for the Italian translation of the texts is the reproduction of St. Vincent's thought in contemporary language. Greater readability in Italian was prioritized over literal fidelity in the translation. "Consequently, when the sentences of the original text are long and overloaded with subordinate clauses, the translation has sought to unpack the thought with greater clarity and, as far as possible, using short sentences. However, the expressions characteristic of his spirituality and of the era have been preserved and explained in editorial notes."⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Works 1, Correspondence (1607–1639), 2001, LV

The edition is enriched by a series of introductory studies, generally one of a historical nature and one of a theological-spiritual nature, which constitute original monographic studies on various aspects of the life and spirituality of St. Vincent.⁵⁹

2. The Original Interpretation of St. Vincent

Antonello's original contribution to Vincentian studies lies in the development of two categories: *missionary charity* and *the aesthetics of St. Vincent's gaze*. After years of teaching, fostering the charism, and governing the two Communities—the Missionaries and the Daughters of Charity—the author offers us a synthesis of how he has interpreted and understood the figure of St. Vincent and his spirituality.

Among the many studies available, the ones I consider directly are the following: - *The Poor and Poverty in the Charitable Experience of St. Vincent*, in Works 11, Rome 2019, pp. IX–LIV; - *Through the Eyes of Monsieur Vincent. The Aesthetic Key to the Interpretation of St. Vincent*, in Works 6, Rome 2022, pp. XIX–XLIII.

2.1 Missionary Charity

In the first study considered, the author guides the reader to better understand St. Vincent's comprehensive work on behalf of the poor within the economic, social, and religious context of 17th-century France, and to provide interpretive criteria for better understanding his organizational genius and his vision of the poor and the Church.

Charity requires concrete and affable people, strong and lovable, hardworking and cordial. From this perspective, St. Vincent's *realism* met *the amiability* of St. Francis de Sales; his *practical spirit* was joined with *spiritual sensitivity*. Antonello emphasizes the influence that St. Francis de Sales exerted on St. Vincent.⁶⁰ Following Calvet's lead, he attributes St. Vincent's charitable style and the refinement of his sensibility to this encounter. "This interpenetration of affectivity and the concrete practice of service generated in St. Vincent a form of gentle and affable charity toward the poor, which he then infused into the regulations of the Confraternities of Charity."⁶¹

This, in turn, made it possible to forge an extraordinary synthesis between mission and charity, missionary proclamation and social assistance, preaching and charitable work.⁶² And from this sprang a "vision": of the poor as the "sacramental image of Christ," of charity as "theological and evangelical love," of service as an "experience of faith."⁶³ Thus emerges the characteristic of Vincentian charity that Antonello points out: love for the poor.⁶⁴ It is only love for the poor that allows the manifestation of *Charity-that-saves*.

St. Vincent has rightly been placed in the period of early modernity,⁶⁵ specifically in that phase of the modern era when Europe witnessed the phenomenon of the "removal of poverty" (15th–18th centuries). And precisely when this process was underway, St.

⁵⁹ See the references to these studies in the final bibliography.

⁶⁰ *The Poor and Poverty...*, in Works 11, Rome 2019, pp. XVII–XXV

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. XXIV

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. XXXI–XXXII

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. XLV–XLIX

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. XLII–XLIX

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. XXV–XVI, XXXVIII–XLII

Vincent had the courage to go against the tide and place the poor at the center, not only of his work, but of his life! He established a new way of viewing the poor. From this perspective, he raised awareness among people, engaged institutions, and shaped consciences.⁶⁶

And in the society of his time, which offered women only the path of marriage or the convent, St. Vincent had the courage to empower them and value them in the service of the poor. In charity, he recognized them as more sensitive and far-sighted than men because of their capacity to become “mothers,” which is not merely a biological capacity but a spiritual disposition consisting in knowing how to “cultivate” life in all its aspects! It is women’s capacity to generate, safeguard, protect, nurture, and promote life around them. It is therefore a “special motherhood” that manifests itself, in service, through the thoughtfulness, solicitude, diligence, dedication, and care of the actions it requires, which in turn demand delicacy, patience, kindness, subtlety, and creativity. It is the ability to place the person at the center of attention, with their needs, desires, and aspirations.⁶⁷

This volume will help those who have been inspired by his charisma and moved by his charity to love St. Vincent even more. But we believe it will also be useful to scholars, for a history of European civilization cannot overlook the contribution of St. Vincent de Paul.

2.2 *The Aesthetics of the Gaze*

In the second study, Antonello then explores St. Vincent’s “spiritual sensibility,” drawing inspiration from Sequeri’s theological language and employing the aesthetic categories of Guardini and von Balthasar.

St. Vincent possesses “a refined sensitivity of the gaze,”⁶⁸ a natural ability inherited from being a man of the fields, but refined by an intense spiritual experience. His way of seeing forms a “vision.” The eyes—Father Antonello notes—are the gateway to a person’s inner life.⁶⁹ A profound kindness shines through St. Vincent’s eyes, “whose ultimate root lies in the faith in God that he meditated upon assiduously,”⁷⁰ the God who entered human history “in the flesh,” taking upon himself all human frailty to fill it and transform it with his divinity. A kindness was discovered through his relationship with St. Francis de Sales, the man St. Vincent most admired, and refined under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the life he shared with Louise de Marillac and her Daughters of Charity. His writings contain profound traces of this kindness, imbued with meekness, delicacy, and the tenderness of his gestures and words. In St. Vincent, however, these are traits acquired through the experience of Grace and not provided by Nature. The rough man, who describes himself as “subject to the impulses of nature,” like “a raging torrent ready to overflow,” gives way to the sensitive man, docile to the calls of the Spirit, thoughtful, meek, and humble.

“Healed of his impetuousness by a voluntary self-abasement pushed beyond measure—almost ferocious in his attempt to consider himself the lowest of all and even

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. XLV–XLIX

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. XLV–XLVIII

⁶⁸ *Through the Eyes of Monsieur Vincent...*, in Works 6, Rome 2022, pp. XX

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. XXI

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. XXII

worthy of contempt—he found himself free in the gift of self. In the image of Jesus—or rather, in the continuation of the missionary path begun by Christ of being among the crowd—Vincent perceived himself as a man on the side of the poor and humiliated, drawn toward them in an embrace filled with compassion and tenderness. For this reason, his language toward the poor was rich in kindness.”⁷¹

Antonello’s concern is to describe, as far as possible, the “evangelical way of charity.”⁷² He does so by examining the writings of St. Vincent, from which he brings out his “spiritual sensibility.” And it is precisely here, in this spiritual sensibility, that the source of the achievements and the fruitfulness of St. Vincent’s evangelical proposal must be sought. He does not proceed by referring to a doctrine or starting from a spiritual synthesis. On the contrary, he proceeds from his own experience of having been “touched,” “struck,” “involved”—in a word—“sensitized”—by God’s action within him.⁷³ His way of feeling was refined by Christ’s charity toward the poor. This is the foundation, according to Fr. Antonello, of the love that St. Vincent nurtured toward the poor.

Thus a “new perspective” was born, ignited by his spiritual sensitivity, through which he saw God, the Church, and the world of the poor. Gradually, St. Vincent assimilated God’s way of seeing the poor. He saw, in faith, the way Jesus acted toward them. He realized that God “made human poverty the very space in which the Son became incarnate.”⁷⁴ “Here is the point,” says Fr. Antonello, “God drew the marginalized and lost human being out of darkness, involving Himself with them, almost calling His own divinity into question. And so he showed how precious the poor are in his eyes... because in every poor person the Father sees the Son who stripped himself and became poor. This is the central Christological revelation: by encountering, serving, and touching a poor person, one comes into contact with God.”⁷⁵

From this perspective, it is easy to see at work in St. Vincent an “aesthetics of the gaze.” For Antonello, only an aesthetics of the gaze can free charity from the self-righteousness of benefactors, from detached bourgeois piety, from the rhetoric of pious words, and from moralism in the commitment to serving the poor. “The crux of the problem to be resolved in the practice of charity lies precisely here: in the way one looks at a poor person and stands before them.”⁷⁶ Only Christological faith can sustain the effort of serving the poor in a lasting way and give it that “quality” that makes it worthy in God’s eyes. Then the poor become, not so much strangers to be assisted, but friends to be helped, family members to be supported.

But to arrive at this “vision”—Father Antonello points out—one must come to terms with one’s own inner world. Only those who have a disillusioned and sincere view of their own poverty (fragility, weaknesses, wounds) are able to stand close to the poor and see them in God, and to regard them as God does. The Gospel impels us in this direction.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. XXXIII

⁷² Ibid., p. XXIII

⁷³ Ibid., p. XXXIV

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. XLI

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. XLI

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. XLII

2.3 St. Vincent's "Theology of the *Affectus Fidei*"

Antonello has offered us a new interpretation of St. Vincent and his "vision." He draws extensively on the language of the *affectus fidei*, which Pierangelo Sequeri has patiently developed over the years.⁷⁷ At first glance, this might seem like a stretch. In reality, through aesthetic categories, we can reinterpret an entire period in the history of the Church and European culture, marked by the transition from an intellectualist approach to the rediscovery of the theme of the affections. The French 17th century represents a turning point. Sequeri has extensively documented this in his studies, and through his research, he has stimulated further inquiry in this direction.⁷⁸

St. Vincent lived in the "Augustinian Age," as the "Grand Siècle" has been defined, and breathed the atmosphere of opposition to the intellectualism of the Scholasticism of the time. In 17th-century theology, the "will" returns forcefully to the forefront. But here we speak of "affection" because the category is broader than that of the will, considered in its intellectualist reduction as presented by the Thomist school. As in Augustine, *affection* is considered not only a principle of action but also a source of subjective knowledge. Desire tends to overlap with, and in some cases, replace the intellect. Hence the emergence of a true *theology of the affectus fidei*. Ibáñez refers to this theology with the questionable term "voluntarism," still indebted to the intellectualist framework. In his book **Vicente de Paul. Realismo y * n encarnación** (Sigueme, Salamanca 1982), he defines the voluntarism of St. Francis de Sales as "anthropocentric-theocentric," that of Benedict of Canfeld as "mystical-theocentric," that of Bérulle as "theocentric-Christocentric," and that of St. Vincent as "anthropocentric-Christocentric."

Antonello, on the other hand, rightly places the theme of the will within the dynamics of desire and reinterprets everything in an aesthetic-affective key. *The affectus* is a will, a fundamental desire that gives strength and impetus to reorganize one's life and inner world around an *affective center*. In the case of the Christian faith, the center is represented by the mystery of Christ. The *theology of the affectus fidei* is not simply a "theology of the heart" (Pascal) or a "theology of the will" (Ignatius), but rather a "theology of affectivity," in the broadest sense of the term, which seeks to place human "spiritual sensibility" back at the center of attention. This is a fruitful point of arrival that can usher in an entirely new season of studies on St. Vincent.

⁷⁷ P. Sequeri, *The Trustworthy God: An Essay in Fundamental Theology*, Queriniana, Brescia 1996; Id., *Sensitive to the Spirit: Religious Humanism and the Order of the Affections*, Glossa, Milan 2001; Id., *The Idea of Faith: A Treatise in Fundamental Theology*, Glossa, Milan 2002; Id., *The Justice of Agape. The Religious Needle of the Balance*, Servitium, Milan 2010; Id., *Against Postmodern Idols*, Lindau, Turin 2011; Id., *The Love of Reason. Symphonic Variations on a Theme by Benedict XVI*, EDB, Bologna 2012; Id., *The Sensible and the Unexpected. Lectures on Theological Aesthetics*, Queriniana, Brescia 2016; Id., *The Eye of the Needle of the Ego. Moving Beyond the Monotheism of the Self*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 2018; Id., *Faith and the Justice of the Affections. Fundamental Theology of the Christian Form*, Cantagalli, Siena 2019.

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FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

At the end of this journey, we may ask ourselves once again: why have these three interpreters been brought to light? So that readers may truly read, or return to read and revisit, St. Vincent through them.

These three authors, each with their own style, propose reading in St. Vincent something that has helped them live the Vincentian spirit in the context of their own lives. They have written to convey a vivid image of St. Vincent that has inspired them and given their writing the character of “discovery.” They have truly discovered “the primacy of charity” that animated and unified the life of St. Vincent (Mezzadri), “the mysticism of the poor” that defined St. Vincent’s Christian experience (Toscani), and “the aesthetics of the gaze” that characterized the emotional engagement in St. Vincent’s charitable and missionary work.

The writing styles of these three authors, very different from one another—narrative/figurative in Mezzadri, explanatory and concise in Toscani, expository in Antonello—are united by the fact that everything is alive, that St. Vincent is not a man of the past but a contemporary of the reader, and serves to restore to us a precise image of him, along with an atmosphere. And so, in addition to the pleasure they offer—which makes the effort required to read them worthwhile—their writings also contain a *lesson in interpretive rigor*, a *need for deeper understanding* that leads us to read St. Vincent in a different way. I believe this is the legacy they bequeath to us as a gift.

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4. Publications of the Spiritual Exercises courses (1990–1995): L. Mezzadri, *Pilgrims in Prayer, Pilgrims in Charity. In the Footsteps of St. Vincent*, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 1994; J.F. Gaziello – L. Mezzadri, *Come and Follow Me. On Retreat with St. Vincent*, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 1995; L. Mezzadri, *With St. Vincent at the Foot of the Holy Mountain. The Beatitudes*, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 1995.

Vincentian bibliography of the three authors

1. Luigi Mezzadri [biographies – texts – studies]

Born in Piacenza on May 16, 1937, he entered the Collegio Alberoni in 1954, where he began his high school, philosophy, and theology studies, continuing through the subdiaconate. In 1961, he entered the Congregation of the Mission in Siena. After his novitiate, he was ordained a priest on June 30, 1963, in Piacenza. That same year, he began his studies in History at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, where, under the guidance of Prof. Pierre Blet, he earned his doctorate in 1969 with the thesis **Il Collegio Alberoni di Piacenza (1732–1815). Contributo alla storia della formazione sacerdotale** (The Alberoni College of Piacenza (1732–1815). A Contribution to the

History of Priestly Formation), published in 1971. Between 1966 and 1993, he taught Church History and Spirituality at the Collegio Alberoni in Piacenza. He was among the pioneers of the revival of Vincentian studies from 1976 onward, participating in the work of the GIEV, presiding over the activities of the SIEV, and founding the GAV in Italy. In 1994, he began teaching at the Gregorian University in the Chair of Modern History, a position he held until 2008.

His research focused on the history of priestly formation after the Council of Trent, studies on Jansenism and Gallicanism, and studies on the early Enlightenment and the history of the French Revolution.

His major publications: **The Alberoni College of Piacenza (1732–1815). A Contribution to the History of Priestly Formation**, Rome 1971 (republished in Piacenza in 2006); *Between Jansenists and Anti-Jansenists. Vincent de Paul and the Congregation of the Mission (1624–1737)*, La Nuova Italia, Florence 1977; *The Church and the French Revolution*, Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo 1989.

Biographies. [French translation]; Id., *Vincent de Paul (1581–1660)*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1985, 205 pp. [Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Croatian translations]; Id., *Petite vie de Vincent de Paul*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1989, 123 pp. [Italian, Portuguese, English, Spanish, Korean, Slovenian, and Malagasy translations]; Id., *Prière et charité. Pèlerins à la suite de Vincent de Paul*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1995, 135 pp. [Italian translation]; Id., *Vincenzo e Luisa* (Scrittori di Dio – Moderni, 56), Edizioni San Paolo, 96 pp., Cinisello Balsamo 2001; Id., *St. Vincent de Paul and the Charism of Charity*, Rome 2002 [Portuguese, Hungarian translations].

Text editions. He edited the edition of the Spiritual Conferences to the Daughters of Charity: St. Vincent de Paul, *Spiritual Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*, edited by L. Mezzadri, CLV, Rome 1980, LIV-1600 pp., with an introduction and extensive historical-spiritual notes; Together with M. Perez Flores, he published for the first time the earliest Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity: L. Mezzadri-M. Perez Flores, *The Rule of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul*, Jaca Book, Milan 1989, 147 pp. She is currently collaborating on the new edition of the Opera omnia with extensive introductions to the published volumes: St. Vincent de Paul, *Works* (publication in progress), edited by Antonello E. – Mezzadri L., CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 2001–2025.

Major studies on the Vincentian charism. The author's historiographical contribution has been to provide a *historical overview* of the life and work of St. Vincent de Paul. SV's work and thought have been situated within the context of Church reform; his charitable initiatives were not isolated (e.g., the issue of the presence of the Daughters of Charity in hospitals was broadened by studying the presence of a movement of hospital sisters dating back to the Middle Ages: "Given to God for the Service of the Poor." *Founders and Foundresses of Women's Congregations in the 17th Century*, in AMI 98 (1991) 47–58). The same applies to the vision of the priesthood: *Jesus Christ, Figure of the Missionary Priest, in the Work of Monsieur Vincent*, in "Vincentiana" 30 (1986) 323–356; *In Praise of Glory. The Priesthood in the French School. 17th–20th Centuries*, Jaca Book, Milan 1989, 185 pp.; *Adoration, Sacrifice, and Mission. The Dimensions of the Priesthood in the French School of the 17th Century*, in "Communio" 150 (1996) 32–46. He situated the spirituality of St. Vincent de Paul within French spirituality. Until now, works on spirituality had overlooked him. Today he has taken his rightful place among the great masters of the spiritual life: *St. Vincent de Paul. The Primacy of Charity*, in Various Authors, *The Great Schools of Christian Spirituality*, edited by E. Ancilli, Teresianum,

Rome 1984, 555–576; C. Brovetto-L. Mezzadri-F. Ferrario-P. Ricca, *Christian Spirituality in the Modern Age*, (History of Spirituality 5), Borla, Rome 1987. He has written entries on the figure and spirituality of St. Vincent de Paul for various dictionaries: Dictionary of Youth Ministry, 1989; Dictionary of Pastoral Theology in Healthcare, 1997; Dictionary of Mysticism, 1998; Dictionary of Homiletics, 1998; Dictionary of Institutes of Perfection, 2003. He has better contextualized the figure of St. Vincent de Paul within the social issues of his time: on hunger, care for the sick, foundlings, and the relationship between charity and politics: *Charity and Politics. St. Vincent de Paul and the Fronde*, in AMI 85 (1978) 20–38; “*Sentire Ecclesiam.*” *The Church in the Reform of France*, in AMI 86 (1979) 5–41; *Social Commitment According to St. Vincent*, in VIII Semana de Estudios Vicencianos, Salamanca 1979, 3–15; “*The Cry of the Poor*”: *St. Vincent and Hunger in the Seventeenth Century*, in AMI 92 (1985) 17–40. His contribution to the study of popular religion is significant: *St. Vincent de Paul and Popular Religiosity*, in AMI 89 (1982) 77–102; *St. Vincent de Paul and the Feast*, in “*Communio*” 62–63 (1982) 113–119. The major volume on Vincentian popular missions is not to be overlooked: L. Mezzadri (ed.), *The Popular Missions of the Congregation of the Mission in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, Rome, CLV Edizioni Vincenziane, 2002. An important study on Jansenism: *Between Jansenists and Anti-Jansenists. Vincent de Paul and the Congregation of the Mission (1624–1737)*, La Nuova Italia, Florence 1977, X–197 pp. Together with Fr. Roman, he began a major history of the Congregation of the Mission: *History of the Congregation of the Mission*, edited by L. Mezzadri and J.M. Roman: Vol. I: L. Mezzadri and J.M. Roman, *From the Foundation to the End of the 17th Century (1625–1697)*, Rome 1992; [translated into French, Polish, and Spanish]; II/1: L. Mezzadri-F. Onnis, *The Congregation of the Mission in the 18th Century: France, Italy, and the Missions (1697–1788)*, Rome, CLV-Edizioni Vincenziane, 2000 [French and Polish translations]. He has been invited to give lectures and conferences on Vincentian topics in many places: Spain, Portugal, Brazil, Kenya, Indonesia, Albania, Poland, France, and Eritrea. A summary of his entire work is the *Dizionario storico spirituale vincenziano*, edited by L. Mezzadri, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 2003.

Studies (1977–1984): L. Mezzadri, “*The Conversion of St. Vincent de Paul: Historical Reality and Contemporary Implications*,” AMI 84 (1977), 176–189; ID., *The Figure of St. Vincent de Paul in the History of Historiography*, AMI 84 (1977), 163–175; ID., *Charity and Politics. St. Vincent de Paul and the Fronde*, AMI 85 (1978), 20–38; ID., *The “Apostolica vivendi forma” in the Congregation of the Mission*, AMI 85 (1978) 267–29; ID., *Prayer in 17th-Century France between Mystical Invasion and Apostolic Conquest*, AMI 85 (1978) 173–208; ID., *The Degrees of Humility in David of Augusta*, AMI 86 (1979) 32–41; ID., *Humility in the Apostolic Dynamism of St. Vincent de Paul*, AMI 86 (1979) 11–31; ID., “*Sentire Ecclesiam.*” *The Church in the Reformation of France*, AMI 86 (1979), 3–41; ID., *The Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul*, AMI 87 (1980) 304–340; ID., *The Spirituality of the Seventeenth-Century Clergyman in Some Literary Sources*, AMI 88 (1981), 89–130; ID., *St. Vincent de Paul and Popular Piety*, AMI 89 (1982), 77–102; ID., *A Biography of St. Vincent for the 1980s*, AMI 89 (1982), 297–304; ID., *St. Vincent de Paul and the Feast*, in “*Communio*” 62–63 (1982), 113–119; ID., *Toward a Vincentian Spiritual Retreat*, AMI 91 (1984), 6–38.

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Ideas" 9 (1988) 479–488; ID., *The Following of Christ According to St. Vincent de Paul*, AMI 97 (1990) 229–241; ID., *Humility and Mission*, in AMI 98 (1991) 3–17; ID., *Adoration, Sacrifice, and Mission. The Dimensions of the Priesthood in the French School of the 17th-Century*, in "Communio" 150 (1996) 32–46; ID., *St. Vincent de Paul and the Seminaries*, in "Annals of the History of Education and Educational Institutions" 1 (2000) 89–111; ID., *The Sources of Vincentian Prayer*, "Carità e Missione" II (2002) 1, 9–28; ID., *An Unpublished Letter by St. Vincent*, "Carità e Missione" I (2001) 1–2, 7–9; ID., *The Image of St. Vincent Between Charism and Institution*, "Charity and Mission" II (2002) 2, 101–110; ID., *The Presence of Christ in the Poor in St. Vincent*, "Charity and Mission" III (2003) 2, 76–86; ID., *Adoration, Sacrifice, and Mission. The Dimensions of the Priesthood in the French School of the 17th Century*, "Carità e Missione" V (2005) 2, 139–150; ID., *When Religions Fight: The Wars of Religion in France (1562–1598)*, "Carità e Missione" V (2005) 1, 27–35; ID., *At the Sources of Vincentian Spirituality. St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153)*, "Carità e Missione" VI (2006) 2, 133–154; ID., *Religion and Politics*, "Carità e Missione" VI (2006) 1, 3–12; ID., *St. Ignatius, St. Vincent, the French School, and Love for the Church*, "Carità e Missione" VI (2006) 1, 53–90; ID., *At the Sources of Vincentian Spirituality. A Comparison of Dominican and Vincentian Spirituality*, "Carità e Missione" VII (2007) 1, 65.

2. Giuseppe Toscani (1929–2018)

Born in Ferriere (Piacenza) on April 17, 1929, for about thirty years (from the 1970s to the 1990s) he taught theology at the Catholic University of Milan's Piacenza campus, at the Collegio Alberoni in Piacenza, and at the FIST in Turin. Ordained a priest in 1955, he pursued the missionary ideal that had led him to join the Congregation, preparing to be sent to China. In the meantime, he preached popular missions, especially in Sardinia. Circumstances, however, prevented him from leaving for the mission. His superiors therefore assigned him to formation and teaching in the Congregation's internal schools. He dedicated himself to the study and teaching of theology as his mission.

After earning his degree from the Pontifical Theological University of Venegono in 1971 with a thesis on St. Ambrose under the guidance of Fr. Giovanni Moioli, he revised the text for publication with Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, then professor of the History of Christian Origins at the Catholic University of Milan. Thus, in 1974, **Theology of the Church in St. Ambrose** was published in the prestigious series **Studia Patristica Mediolanensia**, an important research text for studies on Latin theology of the late antique period.

In the 1970s, he taught primarily *Christian Anthropology*. His field of research, however, remained the Church, viewed as the privileged space for the encounter between humanity and God—the place where the entire theology, beginning with the Trinity, becomes spiritual life, doxology, and the proclamation of salvation. In the 1980s, he devoted himself particularly to teaching *Fundamental Theology*, *Christology*, and *Trinitarian Theology*, taking care never to separate theology from spirituality, the cultural expression of faith from the forms of spiritual experience. He was particularly interested in the phenomenology of language and, in this light, studied the mystical experience of St. Vincent de Paul and his Christology. His aim was to reposition St. Vincent within the mystical tradition of the Church and to trace, through lived charity, the path to the experience of God.

His major work: *Theology of the Church in St. Ambrose*, Studia Patristica Mediolanensia 3, (Series edited by G. Lazzati and R. Cantalamessa), Vita e Pensiero, Publications of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan 1974.

Works: Ibid., *St. Vincent Yesterday and Today* (excerpt from **Missione Vincenziana**, May–August 1973), Turin 1973; Ibid., *Renewing Ourselves to Recreate Charity*, Turin 1981; Ibid., *Contemplating with an Unveiled Face. Vincent de Paul and the Daughters of Charity*, Turin 1982; Id., *The Incarnation: Heart of Vincentian Spirituality* (outline) – *Adherence: Shaped by Love* (outline) – *The Mission: Service of the Church for the Poor* (outline), Annali della Missione 91 (1984), 134–144; Ibid., *The Mysticism of the Poor*, Alzani, Pinerolo 1986; Ibid., *The Christ of St. Vincent*, “Colloquium Vincentianum” Paris 1986, in *Vincenziana XXX* (1986) 357–405; Ibid., *Love, Contemplation, Theology. Jesus Christ as Seen by St. Vincent*, Alzani, Pinerolo, 1987; Id., *Mme. Guillemin. Prophecy and the Mysticism of Charity* (special issue), Turin 1989; Id., *Prophecy Must Not Die* (special issue), Turin 1989; Entry: “Dios” in *Dictionary of Vincentian Spirituality*, edited by M. P. Flores – B. Martinez – A. Orcajo – A. Lopez, CEME, Santa Marta de Tormes – Salamanca 1995, 119–141; Id., *The Place of God. Jesus Christ, Incarnation and t of Divine Love in the Contemplation of St. Vincent*, (manuscript), Nikodemo, Nichelino (Turin) 1999; Entries: “God” (111–116), “Justice” (199–203), “Incarnation” (209–216), “Mysticism” (294–300), “Peace” (317–321), in *Dizionario storico spirituale vincenziano*, edited by Luigi Mezzadri, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 2003. Id., *Mercy Is Our God. Meditations on the Works of Mercy*, Traditions and Perspectives, “E. Manfredini” Cultural Center, Piacenza 1997; Id., *The Place of God. Jesus Christ, Incarnation of Divine Love in the Contemplation of St. Vincent*, (manuscript), Nikodemo, Nichelino (Turin) 1999; Id., *You Did It to Me. Theological Meditations on the Works of Mercy*, (edited by N. Albanesi) CLV – Vincenziane Editions, Rome 2015 [posthumous]; Id., *Becoming Charity. Reflections on the Mysticism of Charity*, (edited by N. Albanesi and A. Corona), CLV – Vincenziane Editions, Rome 2023 [posthumous].

3. Erminio Antonello

Born in Arluno (Milan) on September 23, 1944, he entered the Congregation of the Mission on September 17, 1960, in Chieri. He pursued his studies from 1955 to 1969 in Verona, Scarnafigi, Chieri, and Turin at various seminaries. He was ordained a priest on March 19, 1969, in Turin. After his ordination, he was assigned to the formation of students in Scarnafigi until 1974, when he was assigned to the Congregation’s parish in Milan, where he remained until 1991. From 1975 to 1980, he attended the Theological Faculty of Northern Italy in Milan, earning a Licentiate in Theology with a thesis on Pouget under the guidance of the dean of the faculty, Giuseppe Colombo. In 1991, he returned to the formation center in Chieri, where he remained until 1997, when he was appointed Director of the Daughters of Charity of Sardinia, a position he held until 2003. Also during the years 1991–97, he taught Professional Ethics at the I.P. School of the Molinette Hospital in Turin, a position he had previously held at the Sacco Hospital in Milan from 1982 to 1991, and served as a professor of Theology of Consecrated Life at the USMI Intercongregational School in Turin. In 1996, he earned a postgraduate degree in Bioethics from the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Rome. From 2003 to 2012, he served as Visitor of the Province of Turin. In the same year, he was appointed superior of the Alberoni College in Piacenza, a position he held until 2019. There he began teaching fundamental and systematic theology, a role he continues to this day. In 2019, he was elected Visitor of the Italian Province of the Vincentian Missionaries, a position he holds until 2024.

Over time, he has cultivated his studies in theological aesthetics, following the insights of the Milanese theologian Pierangelo Sequeri. From this perspective, he reinterprets the entire spirituality of St. Vincent.

His major work is the publication of his licentiate thesis in fundamental theology at the Theological Faculty of Northern Italy in Milan: *Guillaume Pouget: Witness to Theological Renewal at the Beginning of the 20th Century. A Biography of His Thought*, Glossa, Milan 1994.

Studies: Id., *The Vincentian Missionary and the Poor*, SIEV – Mensis Vincentianus 1984, in *Vincentiana* XXVIII (1984) 4-5-6, 785-796; Id., *The Missionary and Community Life*, in SIEV – Mensis Vincentianus 1984, in *Vincentiana* XXVIII (1984) 4-5-6, 812-824; Id., *The Social Action of St. Vincent*, SIEV – Mensis Vincentianus 1987, XXXI (1987) 4-5-6, 798-817; Id., *The Animation of the Laity*, SIEV – Mensis Vincentianus 1987, XXXI (1987) 4-5-6, 818-838; Id., *Outlines of Vincentian Experience*, CLV-Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 1992; Id., *The Human and Divine Reality of Jesus*, Chieri 1994; Id., *Spiritual Writings* of Sister Giuseppina Nicoli, CLV-Ed. Vincenziane, Rome 2001; Id., *A History of Charity: The Daughters of Charity in Sardinia (1856–2006)*, CLV-Ed. Vincenziane, Rome 2006; Id., *Monsieur Pouget face à Loisy*, in Various Authors, *Alfred Loisy: A Hundred Years Later Around a Small Book, Proceedings of the International Colloquium held in Paris, May 23–24, 2003*, edited by François Laplanche, Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Religieuses, ed. Brepols, Tournhout, 2007, pp. 185–194; Id., *The Thought of Guillaume Pouget in the Modernist Era: Contacts and Links with Joseph Malègue*, in J. Fontaine, B. Gendrel, *Joseph Malègue: The (Re)discovery of a Work*, ed. du Cerf, Paris 2023, pp. 167–177; Id., *The Missionary Priests in Turin, 350 Years of History (1655–2005)*, CLV – Ed. Vincenziane, Rome 2005; Id., *A Mystic of Charity, Blessed Giuseppina Nicoli, A Biographical and Spiritual Journey*, CLV-Ed. Vincenziane, Rome 2008; Id., *Luisa de Marillac, The Nobility of Charity*, CLV-Ed. Vincenziane, Rome 2011; Editor of the correspondence of the Servant of God Father Giovanni Battista Manzella: *Charity in Action, Correspondence of, Father Giovanni Battista Manzella (1855–1937)*, Ed. CLV-Edizioni Vincenziane 2014; Id. *Francis de Sales, an Authentic Believer. At the Sources of the Vincentian Vocation*, Supplement to *Carità e Missione* 2022/2; St. Vincent de Paul, *Works*, [Correspondence, Documents, and Writings], editor and translator of the French *Opera omnia* (Vol. I-XIV) into Italian for CLV-Ed. Vincenziane, Rome 2001-2025. In this work, his studies: *Theological-Spiritual Framework in the Letters of the Founding Period*, in *Works* 1, pp. XXXV–LIV; *At the Heart of the Vincentian Spirit*, in *Works* 10, pp. XXI–LVII; *The Poor and Poverty in the Charitable Experience of St. Vincent*, in *Works* 11, pp. IX–LIV; *Through the Eyes of Monsieur Vincent. The Aesthetic Key to the Interpretation of St. Vincent*, in *Works* 6, pp. XIX–XLIII; *St. Vincent and the World of Women*, in *Works* 7, pp. XIII–LIII.

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[Toscani] Fr. Giuseppe Toscani, CM. *Bio-bibliographical note*, in G. Toscani, *You Did It to Me*. Theological Meditations on the Works of Mercy, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 2015, 211–219; *St. Vincent the Mystic. Rereading The Mysticism of the Poor by Father Giuseppe Toscani, CM*, in “Charity and Mission.” Annual Monograph of Vincentian Studies, Memoirs, and Formation, New Series, 1 (2020), 35–66; *Father Giuseppe Toscani CM’s “Mysticism of the Poor,”* in G. Toscani, *Becoming Charity*. Reflections on the Mysticism of Charity, CLV, Rome 2023, 95–119.

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(The complete bibliography is integrated into the text).