



The Varied Perceptions of Saint Vincent de Paul

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Abstract

This article examines the diverse perceptions of **Saint Vincent de Paul**, distinguishing between historical reality and later interpretations of his life and personality. It explores questions surrounding his humble origins, family background, education, intellectual abilities, and other aspects that have generated differing opinions among historians and biographers. Drawing upon the works of Pierre Coste, Henry Bremond, Eamon Devlin, Louis Abelly, and other Vincentian scholars, the study demonstrates that Vincent's greatness did not arise from privilege or exceptional social status, but from his openness to God's grace and his lifelong dedication to the poor. While emphasizing Vincent's simplicity and humble self-understanding, the article also highlights his remarkable intelligence, practical wisdom, and capacity for leadership. It concludes that an authentic understanding of Saint Vincent requires careful attention to historical sources, recent scholarship, and Vincent's own words and actions.

Cet article analyse les diverses perceptions de **saint Vincent de Paul**, en distinguant la réalité historique des interprétations qui se sont développées au fil du temps concernant sa vie et sa personnalité. Il examine les débats portant sur ses humbles origines, sa famille, sa formation, ses capacités intellectuelles et d'autres aspects qui ont suscité des opinions divergentes parmi les historiens et les biographes. En s'appuyant sur les travaux de Pierre Coste, Henry Bremond, Eamon Devlin, Louis Abelly et d'autres chercheurs vinctiens, l'étude montre que la grandeur de saint Vincent ne provient ni de son statut social ni de privilèges particuliers, mais de son ouverture à la grâce de Dieu et de son engagement constant au service des pauvres. Elle met également en lumière son intelligence, sa sagesse pratique et ses qualités de leadership. L'article conclut qu'une compréhension authentique de saint Vincent exige une lecture attentive des sources historiques, des recherches récentes et de ses propres paroles et actions.

Este artículo analiza las diversas percepciones sobre **san Vicente de Paúl**, distinguiendo entre la realidad histórica y las interpretaciones posteriores de su vida y personalidad. Examina los debates relacionados con sus humildes orígenes, su familia, su educación, sus capacidades intelectuales y otros aspectos que han suscitado opiniones diferentes entre historiadores y biógrafos. Basándose en las investigaciones de Pierre Coste, Henry Bremond, Eamon Devlin, Luis Abelly y otros estudiosos vicencianos, el estudio demuestra que la grandeza de san Vicente no nació de privilegios ni de una elevada condición social, sino de su apertura a la gracia de Dios y de su dedicación constante al servicio de los pobres. Asimismo, pone de relieve su notable inteligencia, su sabiduría práctica y su capacidad de liderazgo. El artículo concluye que una comprensión auténtica de san Vicente exige una lectura atenta de las fuentes históricas, de los estudios recientes y de sus propias palabras y acciones.



Keywords: Vincent de Paul, Perception, Parentage, Vincentian Interpretation.

This topic embraces and presupposes the authentic and misconstrued conceptualisations of Saint Vincent De Paul starting from his birth, his education, his intelligence, his slavery experience and many other things pertaining to his person. Saint Vincent De Paul had so many sides to his life. This led to multiple interpretations and reinterpretations of facts and thoughts. Some defended vehemently the positions they held as long as they thought that that was the correct one while presuming other positions to be erroneous.

In all these situations, the Saint of the Landes stands out conspicuously among equals as an oak tree towering over many other trees. In order to arrive at the true understanding of St. Vincent De Paul, one needs to be attentive to the signs of the times, the recent studies and discoveries and what Vincent himself said and did. To contextualise this properly, this write-up will examine his origin in conjunction with other pertinent points. The first point to be looked at will be the person of Vincent as such.

1) The person of Vincent

All the volumes of the conferences revolve around the person of Saint Vincent de Paul. Pierre Coste CM,¹ the editor of the first set of conferences, likewise one of his biographers, rendered the title of the three volumes of his biography on Vincent as *Le grand Saint du grand siècle*.² Literally, this means *the great saint of the great century*. With this lovely title, he gives an indication of how he perceived Vincent. From the backdrop of a hidden village life and “swine-herd,”³ Vincent emerged under the bright sunlight of the sixteenth-century France on Easter Tuesday, March 28, 1581,⁴ being his birthday, as the third of six children of his parents. His was a family of four males and

¹ Coste P., 1987, “Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul”, translated by Joseph Leonard, New York, New City Press from the 1931, *Le Grand Saint du grand siècle*, Monsieur Vincent, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer et CIE, Éditeurs, 3 vols.

² *Le grand saint du grand siècle*, the great saint of the great century is translated by Joseph Leonard as “Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul.”

³ CCD, 2004, vol. IX, 14.

⁴ ABELLY, L., 1993, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul*, Book One, chapter 2, Ed. by John E. Rybolt, C.M. Trans. by William Quinn, F.S.C. New York, New City Press, 35. From here onward, it will be cited in English as: ABELLY L., followed by the year, then “Venerable Servant”, volume, chapter and or section and page. Abelly L., *La Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu Vincent De Paul*, Instituteur et Premier Supérieur Général de la Congrégation de la Mission, Paris, Florentine Lambert, 1664, Bk. I, Chapter II, 6. The English version of this book is titled *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul*. The subtitle: *The Founder and the First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission* is not included in the official translation. Abelly gives the year of Vincent’s birth as Easter Tuesday, April 24, 1576, which to P. Coste and many other Vincentian writers do not correspond to what Vincent himself said. For more discussion on this point vide P. Coste, 1987, *Life and Works of St. Vincent*, 1, I, 2. (*Le Grand Saint du grand siècle*. Monsieur Vincent I, 6.), Román J. M., 1999, *Saint Vincent De Paul, A Biography*, trans. Joyce Howard, London, Meliende; The original title was *San Vicente de paul*, Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos de la Editorial Catolica, 1981, it is translated into Italian as *San Vincenzo de Paoli*, 1986, trans. Bruno Pistocchi, Milan, Jaca Book, p. 21. On the other hand, estimates about 1580 following Vincent’s involvement in the beatification process of Francis de Sales in 1628 when Vincent said he was forty-eight years old. Calvet J., 1948, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, Paris, Editions Albin Michel, p. 10.

two females. The birth of Vincent came eighteen years after the Council of Trent had brought its final sessions⁵ to an end.

Vincent de Paul, who later became Saint Vincent de Paul, was born in a little village of Pouy,⁶ now called Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, near Dax at the Landes region in the Gascon Province bordering Bordeaux in the southwestern France. Like many young men in his village, he was a shepherd. He often referred to himself as “a swine shepherd.”⁷ Henry Bremond, referring to the ironic manner Vincent often referred to himself either as a swine herd or as a peasant, said:

Vincent de Paul does not seem to have been a much simpler character than Fénelon. On the contrary he was many-sided, subtle, rich in fine shades, unusual and most attractive. Hence *a priori* contrast should not be set up between his “bluff-common sense”⁸ and the mystic reveries of a Bérulle. After we have attempted to form a portrait of him, in all his complex truth, we shall feel less surprised that this simpleton can take his place amongst the subtle masters of the French School. He said often enough, perhaps too often, that he was only a peasant. In the same way, when Rollin sent knives to his friends, as a gift, he did so to remind them that ‘he had first begun to direct his steps towards Parnassus’ in the “cyclops’ cave,” or in other words, that he had been a cutler before he became a Rector of a University.⁹

It is obvious that Henry Bremond in this citation has succinctly brought out the *finesse*, the *sagesse*, the refined, and the reverential manner of Vincent not only in attitude but even so in his use of terms. Thus, “Even the word chastity was too expressive for him; he rarely pronounced it, so that its opposite might not be recalled to mind; he made use of the word purity, which is a word of wider signification.”¹⁰

It is the perception of Vincent’s worth that induced Eamon Devlin to go out of his way to defend Vincent’s eloquence, intelligence, knowledge, and learning culture. He says that it is not right to see Vincent as an ignorant man who discouraged learning. Vincent was rather a man who put all his talents at the disposal of his main aim, “his haunting obsession with saving the poor.”¹¹

Vincent is sometimes presented as one who distrusted learning and the intellect. If this were true, how could he have encouraged the proper instruction of the daughters or Young Women of the Lower Class¹² or to study even at their leisure times so that they

⁵ COSTE P., 1987, “Life And Works of Saint Vincent de Paul”, translated by Joseph Leonard, vol. 1, 1. (Le Grand Saint du grand siècle, Monsieur Vincent, Vol. 1, 18).

⁶ ABELLY, L., 1993, “Venerable Servant”, Book 1, II, 35. Its location in the French version is different. Abelly L., (La Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu Vincent De Paul, I, II, 6). From here onward, Abelly would be cited with the roman numerals, indicating the book, the chapter, and the page.

⁷ CCD, 2004, vol. IX, 14. SV VIII, 138; - A JEAN DEHORGNY De Paris, ce 28 Septembre 1659, 2992. - TO JEAN DEBORGNY, IN RICBELEU Paris~ September 28, 1659, IX, 81. Also Cf. Abelly L., 1993, Venerable Servant, 1, II, 36 in the English version. (La Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu Vincent De Paul, I, II, 7).

⁸ BREMOND H., 1937, Introduction to Letters of St. Vincent de Paul trans. by LEONARD J., England, Burns & Oates, p. 1.

⁹ BREMOND H., 1937, pp. 1–2.

¹⁰ BREMOND H., 1937, pp. 3–4.

¹¹ DEVLIN E., Spring 1984, The Eloquence of Vincent de Paul in Colloque no. 9, pp. 195 ff.

¹² CCD, 2004, vol. IX. 82. (SV X, 101).

would be able to work effectively with the poor,¹³ or why did he have to praise the virtue of Marguerite Naseau, who taught herself how to read?¹⁴ He did not distrust learning or the intellect. He rather distrusted those who pretended to rely totally on the intellect¹⁵ as their god to the neglect of the heart. He equally distrusted the false mystics who relied on sentiments rather than on simple attitude on prayer. This is why he said that prayer does not depend on having visions and ecstasies. This is the saint of the Landes that Vincent specifies as “in that part of the country where I come from”¹⁶ in his profoundest perception of reality from the eyes and person of Christ¹⁷ and the poor.

Like many of his compatriots from the Landes, he knew how to use gestures and expressions to better convey what he used few words to express. What Bremond says of Vincent here is similar to a proverb Chinua Achebe is often identified with: “When a child washes his hands well, he can eat with the elders.”¹⁸ The humble origin and the constant confession of being from the countryside¹⁹ should not let anyone to underrate Vincent in any way.

Vincent not only washed his hands well, but he also washed them so well that like a precious metal at the frontier, he became the source of dispute as to who owns it. There are some who are born great, and there are some who are made great, and there are some who become great. Vincent de Paul, who became Monsieur Vincent and later Saint Vincent, is surely among the third group. He became great. He was not born or made great. This is very much in line with what Saint Paul the Apostle says in his letter to the Corinthians:

Rather God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong. And God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something. So that no human being might boast before God (1Cor. 1:27-29).

The above quotation is from *The New American Bible Revised Edition*. The rendering of *The Jerusalem Bible* version is different. It says: ‘No, it was to shame the wise that God chose what is foolish by human reckoning, and to shame what is strong that he chose what is weak by human reckoning; those whom the world thinks common and contemptible are the ones that God has chosen, those who are nothing at all to show up those who are everything (1Cor. 1:27-29).’ The next sentence that comes from this

¹³. CCD, 2004, vol. X, 502. (SV X, 625). On The Order of The Day

¹⁴. CCD, 2004, vol. IX, 65, (SV IX, 77). Conference 12 “THE VIRTUES OF MARGUERITE NASEAU”, [July 1642].

¹⁵. The medieval discussion between “scientific and spiritual” and the enthronement of the intellect and the subjugation of what was considered spiritual went through very heated discussions. The problem still persisted during the time of Vincent. It was very profound in Thomas A Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*. In the seventeenth century, the attempt was to enthrone mysticism whether true or false; and Vincent, as a true churchman, had to stand aloof to evaluate the situation. This is why he suspected ecstasies and visions. For more details on what was scientific and what was spiritual Cf. MOIOLI G., “Spiritual Theology”, (Teologia spirituale in DS, pp. 1,597–1,609); vide also, CHENU M. D., “Theology as Science in the 13th Century”, (Teologia come scienza nel XIII secolo, Milano, Jaca Book, 19852).

¹⁶. CCD, 2004, vol. IX, 70. (SV IX, 81).

¹⁷. IBÁÑEZ J. M., 1977, “Rural Society in the vocation of Saint Vincent de Paul in Saint Vincent and Rural Evangelization”, (La sociedad rural en la vocación de san Vicente de Paúl in Vicente de Paúl y la evangelización rural), Salamanca, Editorial CEME, p. 38.

¹⁸. Cf. A. Chinua is a Nigerian author and novelist. He wrote, among many other works of his, *Things Fall Apart* (Ibadan, Nigeria, African Writers Series, 1962). This book was first published by Heinemann Educational Books 1958. It is in this novel that he uses the proverb that is put in the mouth of the elders.

¹⁹. CCD, 2004, vol. IX, 67, (SV IX, 81).

translation is that ‘the human race has nothing to boast about to God...(V.30) That is why Vincent in his characteristic simplicity and openness always referred to his humble beginnings thereby seeing everything as gift.

Coste notes that up till 1887, there was no dispute as to where Vincent was born until a Spaniard Feliu y Perez very strongly emphasized that Vincent was born in the same place with Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Xavier, Teresa of Ávila, and other illustrious saints.²⁰ One of the reasons given for such a position is that if Vincent had been a Frenchman,²¹ he would not have gone to study in Saragossa (or Zaragoza). Even if Vincent went to study at Saragossa University, that would not have deprived him of being a true Frenchman²² and a true Gascon²³ as he often mentioned his background.

2) Parentage

His parents were Jean de Paul²⁴ and Bertrande de Moras. There was no confusion at all about the mother’s name, Bertrande, but the father’s name, Jean, was surely mistaken to be Guillaume by Collet²⁵. What happened to the date of birth of Vincent with Abelly also happened to the father’s name with Collet. After him came Maynard,²⁶ who gave the same rendition. Later writers discovered the mistake and soon corrected it and went back to the original one.

Vincent was born into a fairly large family of six children. He was the third child and had three brothers and two sisters. Although Vincent was from a poor peasant family who lived frugally like all peasants,²⁷ he soon grew up to easily mix with the great people of his days. From his experience of a country life, he spoke to the Daughters of Charity about the “virtues of village [country] girls.”²⁸ His parents lived from the proceeds of their own work²⁹ and ate the bread of the poor made from millet³⁰ as distinct from the white bread eaten by the rich. Wine was reserved for feast days; the *buvande* and water were used by poor people³¹ while the rich drank wine normally at table during meals.

The little farmhouse, the Ranquine, in which Vincent was born was preserved for many years for “pious veneration.”³² The house has since been reconstructed and has been shifted a little from its original position. The original site has been renamed Le

²⁰. Coste P., 1987, *Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, vol. 1, 3; (*Le Grand Saint du grand siècle, Monsieur Vincent*, I, 19).

²¹. Coste P., 1987, *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, vol. I, 3; (*Le Grand Saint du grand siècle, Monsieur Vincent*, I, 19).

²². CCD, 1989, vol. II, 267, (January 1640 - July 1646; (SV II, 235).

²³. CCD, 1989, vol. II, 113, (SV II, 68).

²⁴. For the intricacies of “de” or “DePaul” Vide Coste P., 1987, “Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul”, translated by Joseph Leonard, vol. I, 5. (*Le Grand Saint du grand siècle, Monsieur Vincent*, I, 5).

²⁵. Collet P., 1764, “Brief History of Saint Vincent De Paul”, (*Histoire Abregée de Saint Vincent de Paul, Nouvelle Edition*, Paris, p. 2).

²⁶. Maynard, 1861, “The Life of Saint Vincent de Paul”, (*Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul*, Paris, Ambroise Bray, Libraire Editeur). On page 11, he gives the name of the father of Vincent as Guillaume de Paul. What is interesting is that no one confounded the surname de Paul or DePaul. Luigi Mezzadri, in the introduction to José María Román’s book *San Vincenzo de Paoli* (p. 14), said that the “errors found in the work of Abelly. we’re not wilful but arose out of imprecision of documentation.” It is likely that the same thing applied to other authors who wrote after Abelly.

²⁷. CCD, 2004, vol. IX, 70. ((SV IX, 84). Conference 11 On OBEDIENCE, June 20th 1642.

²⁸. CCD, 2004, vol. IX, 62. (SV IX, 74).

²⁹. Abelly L. 1993, *Venerable Servant*, vol. 1, II, 35.

³⁰. Cf. CCD, 2004, vol. IX, 70. (SV IX, 84).

³¹. Mezzadri L., 1998, “Saint Vincent De Paul”, (*San Vincenzo de Paoli*, Torino, Edizioni Paoline, p. 10).

³². Coste P., 1987, “Life and works of Saint Vincent de Paul”, vol. 1, I, 4; (*Le Grand Saint du grand siècle, Monsieur Vincent*, I, 20).

Berceau, or the Cradle.³³ Vincent soon joined the rest of his brothers in pasturing the animals.

3) His education, seminary training, and ordination

The education of Vincent took place not with great ease but with major setbacks of provision of funds. Coming from a poor background made the prospect of education very slim for him. His father decided to overcome that problem by getting him into school by sacrificing a great deal. Abelly describes well what happened:

The vivacity of spirit with which God had endowed the young Vincent began to appear and was so noticeable in such surroundings. His father soon realised that this child was destined for other things than pasturing animals. He planned therefore to send him to school, encouraged by his acquaintance with a prior in the neighbourhood.³⁴ This man was from a humble family himself, but it was known that he supported members of his family from the revenues of a benefice he enjoyed. In his simplicity the father imagined that with a little schooling Vincent too might receive a benefice and while serving the church might help to support his family.³⁵

With such thoughts, the father decided to sell the only pair of oxen owned and used by the family in farming to pay Vincent's school fees. The gesture was a very big sacrifice for the family. Renaudin questions whether it was out of modesty³⁶ that Vincent was frightened of the great sacrifice since he put up some resistance. All the same, about 1591 or 1592, he was sent to the Franciscan college at Dax.³⁷ He was a boarder in the college for two years. It could be, in some way, Vincent was very happy to be out of the village setting and shed of the old clothing of poverty as he refused to go and see his father while still at the college at Dax. One day, his father came from the village to see him but was badly dressed. The father, Jean de Paul, was a little lame³⁸ and limped while walking. Vincent was ashamed to identify with his father because of the defect.³⁹ Vincent regretted the action later on in life and tried to make up for it when he was visited by his nephew. To undo what he had done badly, he introduced his nephew to the members of the community.

He was later entrusted to Monsieur De Comet⁴⁰ from Pouy who resided at Dax and was a barrister there and a judge of Pouy. The section connected with Justice is still there, but the Franciscan school has been turned into a police station. The original name of Dax, which dates even before Vincent, is rendered as *D'acq*, which is somehow connected with *water*. The inscription is found in one of the old buildings near the courthouse in Dax. Another interesting inscription is the one on a wall perpendicular to the court: "Here lived Vincent de Paul." M. de Comet was happy to admit Vincent to his

³³. Purcell M., 1989, *The World of Monsieur Vincent*, Dublin-Ireland, Veritas Publication, p. 17.

³⁴. Abelly L., 1993, "Venerable Servant", 1, I, 36. The French version is found in (ABELLY L., 1664, *La Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu Vincent De Paul*, I, II, 7).

³⁵. Abelly L., 1993, "Venerable Servant", 1, II, 36. (*La Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu Vincent De Paul*, I, II, 7).

³⁶. Renaudin P. 1927, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, Marseilles, Editions Publiroc, p. 8.

³⁷. Collet P., 1764, vol. I, renders Dax as d'Acqs. Perhaps this was the old usage, 5.

³⁸. CCD, 2009, vol. XII, 365. (SV XII, 432); Conference 222. – OBEDIENCE (Common Rules, Chap. V, Art. 1–3), [December 19, 1659].

³⁹. Coste P., 1987, "Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul", vol. I, 14 (*Le Grand Saint du grand siècle, Monsieur Vincent*, I, 30).

⁴⁰. Monsieur de Comet can also be rendered as Commet. Abelly often indicated it either way.

home because of Vincent's quick progress⁴¹ and developed a special affection for him. While living with M. de Comet, he became a private tutor to his two children. He studied in the Franciscan school for four years.⁴² Encouraged by M. de Comet, he left for the University of Toulouse about 1595 or 1596.

Even with the big step forward, he refused the money his father remitted to him;⁴³ he rather preferred to take care of himself by teaching in a small academy offered to him at Buzet,⁴⁴ where the Roman soldiers pitched their tent near the river. This small town was a control post for the Roman garrison that stationed there. At the time of Vincent, Buzet had only one bridge that linked the other side of the river. The present rendering is Buzet-sur-Tarn. The lone solid bridge provided control and security.

Presently, the bridge is not used by vehicles although it can be accessed by pedestrians. The church called Notre-Dame De Grace is close by. It was a miniature fortress, which is still standing solidly till this day. It is very likely that Vincent taught the children of the soldiers since there was no school there. Vincent's arrival must have been welcome news. Owing to Vincent's excellent method of teaching, the academy soon grew, and many people patronized it. Vincent had to transfer that academy to Toulouse in order to teach and at the same time continue with his theological studies.⁴⁵ The break from his studies took place about September 1598.

He had to take the break to teach and get some money for his university expenses. Vincent was a man of many sides. At Toulouse, he lived at the third floor of the College de Foix named after the cardinal that owned the building. He used to come down to the ground floor to render some help in the refectory while receiving some payment that helped with his schooling expenses. Today, College de Foix (literally, the College of Faith or The Faith College) is the mother house of the Sisters of Compassion. They are always eager to welcome the Vincentians and to take them on a tour of the place. What used to be partly the refectory and library is now the chapel for the Sisters of Compassion.

It was in the Faculty of Theology that Vincent registered for his studies on the way to priesthood. Abelly conjectures, that he also spent some time in Spain to complete his studies at Saragossa (University of Zaragoza)⁴⁶ before returning to Toulouse. However, Mary Purcell adduces reasons why Vincent left for Saragossa. He left probably because of constant unrests and strikes coupled with violence and insecurity due to the presence of gangs and their troubles in the university or poor quality of education.⁴⁷ It is not likely that he would have taken the risk of traveling at a time when he was financially unbalanced coupled with the fact that he rejected the aid willed by his father before his

⁴¹. Abelly L., 1993, "Venerable Servant", I, III, 38; (*La Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu, Vincent De Paul*, I, III, 10).

⁴². The data of the early life of Vincent are very scanty as it always occurs when records are not kept. The number of years that Vincent spent in Dax is disputed by many who wrote after Abelly, his first biographer.

⁴³. RENAUDIN P., 1927, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, p. 8.

⁴⁴. Coste P., 1987, "Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul", vol. I, 20; (*Le Grand Saint du grand siècle, Monsieur Vincent*, I, 37).

⁴⁵. Coste P., 1987, "Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul", vol I, 16; (*Le Grand Saint du grand siècle, Monsieur Vincent*, I, 41).

⁴⁶. Abelly L., 1993, "Venerable Servant", I, III, 39, (*La Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu Vincent De Paul*, I, III, 10). If he went to Saragossa (Zaragoza), it means Vincent had some knowledge of Spanish unless the lectures were given in French, which might be very doubtful. It is very likely they were given in Latin.

⁴⁷. PURCELL M., 1960, *The World of Monsieur Vincent*, Dublin, Veritas Publication. It is the reprint that is used here, 1989, pp. 29–33.

death. There is a possibility that he must have continued in Toulouse from where he received tonsure and the minor orders in September 1596.⁴⁸

It is interesting to note that at the University of Saragossa, a painting of Vincent is clearly depicted at the entrance. This could have been caused by the fact that the Spaniards were trying to claim

Vincent for themselves because of having many great saints, although of recent, the Spaniards are digging out some documents to prove that Vincent was a student there. With the reception of the tonsure, he automatically became an ecclesiastic—that is, a cleric, according to the old dispensation.

There are two opinions concerning the ordination of Vincent at Château-l'Évêque. One is in his favour, and the other indicts him seriously. The first one goes thus: Two years later, he secured the dimissorial letters from Guillaume de Massiot, the Vicar General of Dax, who issued them on behalf of Jean-Jacques de Sault, named during the Vacant See.⁴⁹ The Tridentine Reform had not yet taken off in France. It was prevented by the French parliament even though individual dioceses had made some efforts to initiate the reforms about 1615 in their various dioceses. The reception and permission took place about 1628. That was a very long time after the ordination of Vincent. Vincent received the subdiaconate and the diaconate orders respectively at the Cathedral Church of Tarbes at the hands of Salvat Diharse, the Bishop of Tarbes, on September 19, 1598.

Three months later in December 1598, he was ordained a deacon;⁵⁰ he was seventeen years and a few months old when he became a deacon. He offered or rather made himself to be ordained a priest on September 23, 1600, at the little countryside chapel of Château-l'Évêque near Périgueux by the old bishop François de Bourdeilles, who was said to be virtually blind.⁵¹ In other words, Vincent was ordained by the bishop of Périgueux at the age of nineteen years and four months. For courtesy's sake, many writers have been approximating his age of ordination as twenty. Whatever the case is, Vincent was underage when he was ordained a Catholic priest.

One would wonder why Vincent had to sidetrack his proper bishop and diocese of origin and make a dangerous journey to Périgueux, aware of the fact that the road was filled with brigands and robbers although he wisely preferred the sea voyage to traveling by road.⁵² There are two opinions concerning the priestly ordination of Vincent at Périgueux. The first opinion holds that it is probable that Vincent skipped his proper

⁴⁸ Abelly and Collet agree on the month but not on the date. Abelly gives the date of the reception of tonsure as September 19, 1596, at the age of twenty while Collet gives September 20, 1596, without indicating the age. Abelly L., "Venerable Servant", I, III, 39, (*La Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu Vincent De Paul*, I, III, 10); Collet P., "Brief History of Saint Vincent de Paul", (*Histoire Abrecée de Saint Vincent de Paul*, p., 5). The date indicated by Abelly must have been computed from the date of birth given as 1576. This could have been because of the unavailable data or an attempt to justify the fact that Vincent was canonically worthy of the tonsure and the minor orders.

⁴⁹ BOUGAUD L., 1922, "History of Saint Vincent de Paul" (*Histoire de Saint Vincent de Paul*, I, Paris, J. de Gigord, Editeur, 13).

⁵⁰ Cf. CCD, 2004, vol. XIII a, 5, 6. (SV XIII, 4–7); DIMISSORIAL LETTERS FOR DIACONATE, (December 11, 1598), • LETIERS FOR DIACONATE, (December 19, 1598), 5–6; COSTE P., "Life And Works of Saint Vincent de Paul", I, 21, (*Le Grand Saint du grand siècle, Monsieur Vincent*, I, 36); On the other hand, Abelly gives the subdiaconate and diaconate dates as February 27 and December 29, 1598, while Collet differs by giving September 19, 1598, and three months later the diaconate (cf. pp. 7–8 and p. 13) of Bougaud. This time Collet is right looking at the dimissorial letter of priestly ordination of September 1599.

⁵¹ CCD, 2003, vol. XIII a, 7, (SV XIII, 7). LETTERS FOR PRIESTHOOD (September 23, 1600).

⁵² Purcell M., 1989, *The World of Monsieur Vincent*, p. 34.

bishop whom he perceived was about to begin or had already begun the implementation of the Tridentine Reform. He, therefore, armed himself with his certificates indicating the period of his theological studies, his bachelor's degree, and authority to expound or lecture on the Sentences of Peter Lombard in the University⁵³ and left for ordination. Whether the Sentences were expounded or taught is another matter.

Immediately, one would sense a serious danger here, and Vincent was no fool to let himself be caught by the web and trap of Tridentine Reform, which was to be brought in by the newly appointed bishop of Dax. Vincent made use of the Lord's saying very effectively: "Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Matt. 10:16). He did not want any trouble. He had to avoid it at all costs. The astuteness of Vincent even at that age is very transparent. The trait of astuteness continued to manifest itself almost constantly in various situations. Vincent's action does not collaborate the attempt of some to portray Vincent was a saint from the beginning.

At the same time, he did not forget the side motive that made him to go into the priesthood: the advancement of his family and comfortable retirement even though he felt himself called. Vincent wanted to get his retirement and benefice quickly; he offered himself for ordination⁵⁴ while still a student,⁵⁵ and soon after his ordination, he was involved in a lawsuit.

Deep down, he was very religious following his background, but the gold was coated with mud. Coste observes:

At the suggestion of M. de Comet, the Bishop of Dax appointed the newly ordained priest to the Parish of Tilh, one of the best in the diocese. Scarcely had this appointment been made than it was appealed against in the court of Rome by an ecclesiastic named Saint Soubé. Rather than engage in lawsuit which might go against him, Vincent preferred to abandon his claim.⁵⁶ Coste adds:

It was perhaps, on this occasion that he paid his first visit to the Capital of the Christian world, to which he tells us himself he went during the pontificate of Pope Clement VIII,⁵⁷ who died in 1605.

The saint-to-be had many victories and failures in his life, but this was his major failure.

On the other hand, there is an alternate position Vincent did not run away from his proper bishop as Coste indicates. He did everything normally. He could not go to Périgueux for his ordination because there was a serious war between the Romans and

⁵³. Leonard J., 1925, *St. Vincent de Paul and Mental Prayer*, London, Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., p. 9 affirms that this was done. Possibly, his conclusion is based on Abelly, 1993, "Venerable Servant", I, III, 12.

⁵⁴. Mezzadri L., 1989, "Saint Vincent de Paul", (San Vincenzo di Paoli, Milano, Edizioni Paoline, p. 8). The book was originally published *San Vincenzo di Paoli: una vita spesa per gli altri*, "Saint Vincent de Paul, 1989, *A Life spent for others*" Roma, Edizione Borla.

⁵⁵. Vide section 4 on The Poor and Poverty of the Time below.

⁵⁶. Coste P., 1987, "Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul", vol. I, 24; (*Le Grand Saint du grand siècle*, Monsieur Vincent, I. 40). RomÁN J. M., San Vincenzo de' Paoli, in his footnote on page 49 notes that Coste is not sure of the fact that there was a vacancy. It seems there is a little confusion between Bougaud, *Histoire de Saint Vincent de Paul*, I, 13 and the point of Coste here.

⁵⁷. Coste P. 1987, "Life and works of Saint Vincent DE Paul", vol. I, V, 48. In the English version, the information is found in the footnote 1 in that page; (*Le Grand Saint du grand siècle*, Monsieur Vincent, I. 40).

the Barbarians who invaded the stronghold of the Roman army. They even succeeded to destroy their watchtower and expelled the Romans from there and took control of the tower. To leave their mark, they decided to reconstruct it with their own style and not with the style of the conquered, which was originally there. Even the cathedral was under siege, and some part of it was destroyed, and signs of the ruins are still there. He did not want to go to a ruined, abandoned cathedral for his ordination. He rather preferred to go to Château-l'Évêque, where he could easily have a comfortably decent place for his ordination.

He was probably introduced to the bishop by some of the influential Roman soldiers, whose children he taught, at Buzet. The idea could have come from some of his friends to approach those soldiers, or some others could have approached them on his behalf. Whatever way, Vincent went with his documents to the bishop, who was not virtually blind as Coste indicates, because of security and decency for his ordination. Owing to the recommendation of the mentors, Vincent was ordained a priest at Château-l'Évêque, which is held in a very high esteem as one of the Vincentian sacred places.

The presentation of Coste placed a very thick cloud around Vincent, but with the present historical researches and discoveries⁵⁸ about the epoch of Vincent, his ordination cannot be seen as the one who tried to escape the wrath of the law by going to a quasi-blind bishop for ordination. At that time, things were still very fluid and had not yet been systematized. It was even Vincent himself, with others, who contributed in straightening things about the priesthood. That is why Vincent said many years after that if he had known what the priesthood was about, he would not have allowed himself to be ordained.⁵⁹

Intent on succeeding, Vincent put all his energy into his studies until he successfully finished his bachelor of theology in the University of Toulouse in 1604. He even had a foolhardy idea he might become a bishop who spoke about his advancement.⁶⁰ Luigi Mezzadri interprets the advancement as aspiration for bishopric, but it could also have been material advancement through having a lucrative parish or a place he would not have to suffer very much and yet have plenty money and wealth and comfortable life. Vincent's attitude and ambition can easily be perceived. His desire to have a comfortable benefice was uppermost in his mind. The motivating factor distorted his vision of the priesthood and caused him to see only the flamboyant aspect of the priesthood and blocked the aspect of service, which God eventually led him into, through his many contacts, circumstances, and friends.

Vincent later criticized this attitude very seriously when a lawyer at an advanced age in March 1659 wanted to become a priest.

This occurred one and a half years before Vincent's death. He wrote:

For the same reason, I would consider it a matter of conscience to do anything to have you take Holy Orders, especially priesthood, because it is a misfortune for those who enter it by the window of their own choice

⁵⁸. CARROLL G., 2004, "An Image of Priest: The 10 days retreat for the Ordinands", (Un portrait du prêtre: Les retraites de 10 jours pour les ordinands, Paris, Pierre Tequi, Editeur, pp. 43–44).

⁵⁹. CCD, 1997, vol. VII, 479, (SV, VII, 463), Conference 1792. - TO MONSIEUR DUPONT-FOUINIEN, LAWYER, in LAVAL, March 5, 1659.

⁶⁰. CCD, 1987, vol. I, 12; (SV I, 13); Vincent's second letter to Monsieur De Comet after slavery experience in Turkey. Abelly L., 1993, "Venerable Servant", I, III, 39; (La Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu Vincent De Paul, I, IV, 14); MEZZADRI L., 1998, "Saint Vincent de Paul", (San Vincenzo di Paoli, p. 8).

and not by the door of a legitimate vocation. Yet, the number of the former is high because they consider the ecclesiastical state a soft way of life, in which they seek rest rather than work. This has been the source of the scandalous havoc we see in the Church; for the ignorance, sin, and heresies that devastate it are attributed to priests. That is why Saint John Chrysostom has said that few priests will be saved. Why? Because God gives the graces needed to fulfil the obligations of this sacred state only to those whom His Goodness has called to it, and He never calls anyone in whom He does not see the requisite qualities or to whom He does not intend to give them. For everyone else, He lets them act and, as a punishment for their temerity, permits them to do more evil than good, and ultimately, they are lost.⁶¹

Vincent, who was looking for his own advancement, would never have conceived such a thing in the heat of the pursuit when he was blinded by his quest. It was solely at the moment of illumination that he was able to say this with conviction; otherwise, his eyes and his face would only have been covered as Moses's face was in the desert (Exod. 34:35; 2Cor. 3:7-18) until Moses went back to God. Vincent arrived at that point of unveiling of his face and the eyes of the spirit through his encounter with the God who is and dwells in unapproachable light (1John 1:5; 1 Tm. 6:16) that he discovered and served in the poor. He wrote from that standpoint and was extremely profound.

4) The future fortune and the debtor

No sooner had Vincent finished his first-degree studies than news of a great future fortune came his way from a woman who willed 400 to 500 ecus to him. Fired by the hope of such future fortune, Vincent immediately decided to pursue the man who was a debtor to the testator as far as Marseilles. There, he sold the horse he rented⁶² and got the man arrested and made him to pay his debt immediately. Vincent was happy and contented with himself after collecting the debt. He got ready to set off when another great misfortune struck⁶³ at his door. Recounting his experiences to M. de Comet after his slavery⁶⁴ in his letter dated July 24, 1607, written at Avignon, he wrote to his mentor, telling him of the turn of events in his life which he expected a favourable progress of his affairs, which, on the contrary, featured vicissitudes and inconstancy, changing of

⁶¹. CCD, 1997, vol. VII, 479; (SV VII, 63).

⁶². Bougaud., 1922, "History of St. Vincent de Paul", (Histoire de Saint Vincent de Paul, p. 20). The point of selling the horse is not mentioned by many except by Mary Purcell (p. 40) who follows Bougaud directly, but it is explicitly mentioned in the saint's first letter to M. de Comet. Cf. SV I, 6 ff.

⁶³. COLLET P., "Abridged History of St. Vincent de Paul", (Histoire Abrecée de Saint Vincent de Paul, p. 9).

⁶⁴. CCD, 2004, vol. I, 8, (SV I, 6 ff). TO MONSIEUR DE COMET, IN DAX, ABELLY L., 1993, Venerable Servant, I, III, 39; (La Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu Vincent De Paul I, IV, 14 ff). The account of the slavery of Saint Vincent is one of the most contended discourses about the early years of the saint. Experts such as P. Coste, on a very private level, Raymond Chalumeau, and Jean Morin were quite convinced that Vincent was never in North Africa. MEZZADRI L., San Vincenzo de Paul, p. 17 takes a moderate stand by saying that the fact of it is true but not the circumstances. One of those doubting the authenticity of the account is Poole S., *Tunisian Captivity: A Survey of the Controversy*, California, St. John's Seminary, p. 71 quoted in Collins P., Spring 1984, Saint Vincent de Paul-A Psycho-Spiritual Study, in *Colloque*, No. 9, pp. 165–171. ROMAN J. M. is one of those who discussed the slavery of the saint very passionately during the Vincentian Month - SIEV held in Paris between July and August, 1987. In any case, the handwritten letters of the saint to M. de Comet found in possession of the De Comet's family seems to give some weight to their authenticity and dispel the cloud that covered those two years (1605–1607) of Vincent's life. It seems the fact of its historicity is true rather than the account.

favour into disfavour and good luck into misfortune.⁶⁵ Knowing that Monsieur is well acquainted with his affairs, Vincent wondered whether M. de Comet heard of a will drawn up in his favour by a good old woman from Toulouse when he returned from Bourdeaux.⁶⁶ Vincent indicates what was in the will and what he did afterward:

Her property consisted of some furniture and some land that the bipartite court of Castres had awarded to her in place of three hundred ecus owed to her by a wicked rogue. In order to obtain part of it, I set out for the place to sell the goods, as was recommend by my best friends and by my needs of money to meet the debts I had contracted and the great expense I foresaw as proper for me to make in the pursuit of the affair that my temerity does not allow me to mention.⁶⁷

On his arrival at Marseilles, he was advised to pursue the debtor immediately. He did and got him arrested and received his 300 ecus and arranged to travel back when Turkish brigantines attacked so violently, captured him along with the passengers and the members of the crew, and put them up for sale.

5) The slavery experience

The slavery experience of Saint Vincent de Paul did not deprive him of his faith in any way. Although the body was greatly experiencing pain and torment, the spirit was unaffected in any manner. This is similar to what Jesus said during the agony in the garden: 'The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak (Matt. 26:41)'. The inner strength sustained the outer weakness as Pope Gregory the Great taught *Moralia*. His faith was strong. It confirms the idea that suffering purifies a person for holiness. That accounts for many of the experiences that will be seen in this section and many of his utterances and reactions. Vincent did not experience the torment of God's distance as a form of purgation or expiation as in the case of his loss of faith arising from his decision to suffer for the loss of faith of the theologian⁶⁸. The positive aspects of the slavery experience did not in any way minimize the excruciating pain of going through the difficult and different experiences.

The procedure for selling⁶⁹ the slaves was awful. They were ignominiously exposed at Tunis and sold as slaves. Vincent was first sold to a fisherman and was later resold⁷⁰ to an alchemist; and when he (the alchemist) was taken to the general sultan, who wanted him to perform his wonders of changing any metal to gold, the alchemist died of grief. Vincent was transferred to a relative of the alchemist, and out of fear, he was resold to a renegade from Nice in Savoy.⁷¹ The renegade, who finally bought Vincent

⁶⁵. CCD, 1987, vol. I, 2–3. (SV I, 1–2). Letter 1, TO MONSIEUR DE COMET, IN DAX.

⁶⁶. CCD, 1987, vol. I, 2. The journey referred to is no other than the abortive one mentioned in footnote 47 above.

⁶⁷. CCD, 1987, vol. I, 2, CCD, 2008, vol. XI, 27; (SV I, 2–3).

⁶⁸. Cf. ABELLY L., 1993, "Venerable Servant", vol. I, III, 14; (The French Version, I, III, 116–119).

⁶⁹. The story of Vincent's slavery never came to light until 1658 when the letter was discovered in the archives of the family of M. de Comet. Calvet mentions that Vincent never mentioned it to anyone whether in public or in private. The strange reaction of Vincent when he was told by the canon of Saint Martin about the letter made people to wonder why Vincent reacted in that way. Vide: CALVET J., Saint Vincent de Paul, Paris, Editions Albin Michel, 1948, p. 35. On p. 36. He says that the story could have been invented or concocted by the two of them as Gascons in the bid to evade the debtors. This is the reason why Vincent was infuriated that his plot as a young man had been discovered. The postulate is a good one, but it does not solve the whole problem.

⁷⁰. CCD, 1987, vol. I, 5.

⁷¹. CCD, 1987, vol. I, 7; (SV I, 9).

and took him to his *temat*,⁷² was hostile by nature. One of the wives of the renegade who was fond of Vincent used to come to where he was working and ordered him to sing praises to God, and he used to remember,

*Quomodo cantabimus in terra aliena*⁷³ of the children of Israel, captives in Babylon, made me begin, with tears in my eyes, the Psalm *Super flumina Babylonis*, and then the *Salve Regina* and other hymns. The pleasure she received from these was as great as her admiration of them.

Those were painful experiences for the saint-to-be. Being in bondage, he had no alternative than to submit himself to the request of his master and or mistresses. He sang for the mistress even if he had no desire of doing so. The plan of escape was a welcome news. He embraced it wholeheartedly at the opportune time.

6) Escape to freedom and journeys

It did not take too long before the master and the servant arranged an escape. Vincent arranged for them to meet the vice legate, who received back the apostate, the renegade who had bought Vincent and became his master. The vice-legate promised to take them to Rome following the secrets of alchemy that Vincent revealed to him. Vincent said, “He values this more, than if *io li avesse dato un monte di oro* [I had given him a mountain of gold].”⁷⁴ While in Rome, he sent for his bachelor of theology⁷⁵ certificate. At the end of the whole letter, he signed in his usual manner: Depaul.⁷⁶

Father Vincent de Paul gives the itinerary of his journeys and experiences⁷⁷ to his countryman and benefactor M. de Comet as he, Vincent, tried to link up with his roots that were becoming blurred because of the slavery experience. The link was not only with M. de Comet but also with his natural family. To that effect, he decided to write to his family as mentioned in the above letter. It seems that the referred letter to the mother is one of those that could not be found. The certificate he requested for had been sent, but the bishop’s signature was not there to authenticate it.

He had to write another letter to M. de Comet asking for his letters of ordination to be signed and sealed by the bishop of Dax so that he could get the long-awaited benefice. His next letter to M. de Comet was written in Rome on February 28, 1608, asking for his papers that were sent without the official seal to indicate authenticity. He was at pains to get his papers and smoothen up things for himself.

⁷² It is one of the Arabic words that Vincent learned during his period of slavery in Tunis. Cf. ROMÁN J. M., 1999, *Saint Vicente de Paul, A Biography*, trans. Joyce Howard, London, Melisende, p. 64. José Román treats the term *temat* in its original context and gives the various shades of meanings showing that it is really an Arabic term, one of the words that Vincent learned during his slavery in Tunis.

⁷³ Meaning: How can we sing in a foreign land?

⁷⁴ [If] “I had given him a mountain of gold.”

⁷⁵ This was one of the documents that Vincent armed himself with while traveling to Bordeaux for the business, which Vincent did not even dare to mention: the bishopric referred to earlier in the above letter.

⁷⁶ The signature of Vincent here, Depaul, was his common way of signing his letters. Sometimes he signed Vincens Depaul or just VP or VDP. In volume 1 of the English version of the *Correspondence, Conferences, and Documents*, p. 11, a note is added: “Never in the Saint’s words do we find de Paul in two words, although his contemporaries separated the two syllables of his name in that way.”

⁷⁷ Some of the experiences accentuated in the letter will be referred to often. Vide CCD, 1985, vol. I, 6 ff.

Conclusions

The above exposition shows that Vincent de Paul was born into a poor family. He grew up to be a shepherd like many of his contemporaries. He was very zealous and conscientious in carrying out his work. He experienced poverty and lived in a situation of poverty. The decision of his father to send him to the Franciscan school at Dax revealed the hidden hatred of poverty in Vincent's life when he secretly refused to go and meet his father who came to visit him. He did not want to identify with his limping leg and village outlook, a situation that Vincent remained ever repentant of afterward. It could be that early experience left a deep impression on him and caused him to emphasize humility and simplicity very much in his later life. His later attitude indicates how bold and courageous he was to face the fact and overcame his weakness and forge ahead with the opposite action and attitude especially when his nephew visited. He showed him to the community.

The attempt to escape poverty in his life and to provide for his family's welfare pushed him to do everything possible to snick into the priestly circle at a very tender age. It could be that part of the process was to avoid the newly appointed bishop who was to usher in the Tridentine Reforms which might not have been true. The war-torn situation caused Vincent to go to Château-l'Évêque, for Ordination being helped by his acquaintances to get in touch with the Bishop there. The astuteness of Vincent manifested itself even in those early days. The motive of a comfortable life made him to look for benefices at all cost. When he met with a very strong resistance in one of those occasions, he backpedalled, but that did not deter him from continuing his search.

He was very happy when a legacy in the form of debt to be recovered was bequeathed to him. He sold a rented horse and hurried to Marseilles to get the debtor imprisoned and have his money back. He made plans to return home by road but was persuaded by his friend to go by sea. There, the disaster struck. The consequence of his continuous search for wealth landed him in the disputed slavery experience that made him to write two letters to his benefactor M. De Comet and one to the family.

The authenticity of those letters is disputed, but from the contents and later findings, they are probably authentic. He found his freedom by escaping with his master. They arranged to meet the legate who later took them to Rome after reconciling the apostate master. After emerging from the clouds, he never went back to it. His freedom opened the door once again for him to continue his search until everything worked out for him. He made good use of every opportunity that he had and stood out as one among equals.

The two letters of Vincent are very revealing in their content, and they equally reveal the long and rigorous road to conversion,⁷⁸ which the Saint in the making at the time had to undergo in his life in order to arrive at sainthood.

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⁷⁸. The stage of life that Vincent went through at the time is what the spiritual writers call the second conversion. It is very significant in the life of Vincent as he progressed step by step trying to follow Christ the poor and the poor in Christ through the hard and narrow way.

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