



Two Unique Experiences of Asceticism in the Life of Saint Vincent de Paul

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Abstract

This article examines the ascetical dimension of the spiritual life of **Saint Vincent de Paul**, situating it within the broader development of Christian spiritual theology. Drawing upon classical authors such as Tanqueray and Charles André Bernard, it distinguishes between asceticism as the human response to God's initiative and mysticism as God's gracious action toward humanity. Against this theological background, the study explores two significant episodes in Vincent's early life—his silent acceptance of an unjust accusation of theft and another decisive experience of voluntary self-denial—as concrete expressions of evangelical asceticism. Rather than extraordinary practices, these events reveal an interior freedom shaped by humility, trust in Divine Providence, and conformity to Christ. The article argues that asceticism occupies a central place in Vincentian spirituality, not as an end in itself, but as a path through which the missionary is transformed interiorly and prepared to serve the poor with authentic charity and perseverance.

Cet article étudie la dimension ascétique de la vie spirituelle de **saint Vincent de Paul**, en la situant dans le développement plus large de la théologie spirituelle chrétienne. En s'appuyant sur des auteurs classiques tels qu'Adolphe Tanqueray et Charles André Bernard, il distingue l'ascèse comme réponse libre de l'être humain à l'initiative de Dieu et la mystique comme l'action gratuite de Dieu envers l'homme. À partir de ce cadre théologique, l'étude analyse deux épisodes marquants de la jeunesse de saint Vincent — son acceptation silencieuse d'une accusation injuste de vol et une autre expérience décisive d'ascèse volontaire — comme expressions concrètes de l'ascèse évangélique. Loin d'être de simples pratiques extraordinaires, ces événements révèlent une liberté intérieure façonnée par l'humilité, la confiance en la Providence et la conformité au Christ. L'article montre ainsi que l'ascèse constitue un élément essentiel de la spiritualité vincentienne au service de la charité missionnaire.

Este artículo estudia la dimensión ascética de la vida espiritual de **san Vicente de Paúl**, situándola en el marco más amplio de la teología espiritual cristiana. Apoyándose en autores clásicos como Adolphe Tanqueray y Charles André Bernard, distingue la ascética como la respuesta libre del ser humano a la iniciativa de Dios y la mística como la acción gratuita de Dios en favor de la humanidad. Desde esta perspectiva teológica, el estudio analiza dos episodios significativos de la vida de san Vicente —su aceptación silenciosa de una injusta acusación de robo y otra experiencia decisiva de ascética voluntaria— como expresiones concretas de la ascética evangélica. Más que prácticas extraordinarias, estos acontecimientos manifiestan una libertad interior modelada por la humildad, la confianza en la Providencia divina y la configuración con Cristo. El artículo



concluye que la ascética ocupa un lugar central en la espiritualidad vicenciana, preparando al misionero para servir a los pobres con auténtica caridad y perseverancia.

Keywords: Ascetism, Saint Vincent de Paul, Mysticism, Temptation against faith.

Introduction

This article aims to focus on two specific instances of asceticism that appear to have occurred in the life of St. Vincent de Paul.

In Vincent's century, as in most of the preceding and subsequent centuries, asceticism was highly valued in the lives of believers. Asceticism and mortification of the flesh—through fasting, abstinence, deprivation, wearing hair shirts, and sometimes self-flagellation—were widespread in the 17th century; and we know that Vincent was no exception. But these were daily or recurring practices. Furthermore, we recall that after his self-understanding, his realization of his place in life, and after the founding of the Congregation of the Mission, Vincent included mortification among the five Vincentian virtues—alongside simplicity, humility, meekness, and zeal—understood as the renunciation of oneself and one's desires in order to conform to Christ; but the latter was meant, in Vincent's intention, to be a constant attitude to which the confrere must always be ready on every occasion.

Instead, prior to the two famous events that marked the turning point in our saint's life—those at Folleville and Châtillon-les-Dombes—we find two instances¹ of which Vincent speaks little, but which he would not later deny: when, accused of theft, he decided not to defend himself against the charge; and when he chose to bear the burden of a theologian's temptation against the faith.² In this article, I intend to focus on the manner, the motivations, and some possible consequences for Vincent's spiritual life in these two instances in which he apparently freely chose to take upon himself such sufferings.

In the Catholic tradition up until the 19th century, the human experience in relation to the spiritual and supernatural dimension was described—and to some extent studied—primarily through practical treatises that structured and described in various ways the unfolding of the individual's journey toward ever greater closeness to God (toward union with God) during earthly life.

In fact, treatises or writings—including monastic rules—on the path to perfection in the Christian life (Christ-centered) have existed since the time of the Apostolic Fathers; indeed, it is a common view among those who study Christian spirituality that, up until Scholastic theology, theology and spirituality were often not clearly distinguished, but rather intertwined. From the Scholastic period onward and for five centuries, theology took on an increasingly sophisticated, substantial, and articulated theoretical character, while spirituality remained confined to treatises or works of a predominantly³ concrete nature, serving as a support for spiritual growth according to the three way,⁴ the practice of the virtues, the struggle against sin, prayer, meditation, and contemplation.

¹In the course of this study, we will examine as precisely as possible when, how, and why Vincent took on these two spiritual "tasks."

²As we will see below, this decision by St. Vincent is not confirmed in his writings, but is posited by Abelly in the third volume of his biography of Vincent, in Chapter XI.

³Although not exclusively.

⁴Often referred to as the purgative, illuminative, and perfect ways.

Between the 19th and 20th centuries, partly as a result of the anthropological shift⁵ that swept through theology, there was a sort of convergence between dogmatic and moral theology (another fundamental area of theological research) and spirituality (understood as humanity's journey toward union with God). If the 'study of God' is recognized as necessarily dependent on how humanity has lived and described its experience of faith throughout history—beginning with the biblical era and thus with the composition of Sacred Scripture—then humanity is effectively placed back at the center of the life of faith. But with humanity at the center, even its concrete relationship with God—which had been described for centuries in spirituality—cannot be excluded from theological research. Consequently, the theme of the spiritual life is imbued with a need for greater theological and systematic significance. And an attempt is made to establish a systematic study of the spiritual life that has its source, in addition to Sacred Scripture,⁶ in dogmatic theology, and from which it can draw inspiration for a method.

The interrelationships between dogmatics, moral theology, and what would come to be called spiritual theology in the second half of the 20th century were already addressed as early as 1927–1928 by Tanquerey, for example in *his Compendium of Theology and Mysticism*,⁷ and later, in addition to other authors, by Charles André Bernard, as seen in the following text: CHARLES ANDRÉ BERNARD, *Spiritual Theology*, Edizioni San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2002.

Setting aside these historical digressions, I found the older of the two texts cited—the *Compendium of Ascetic and Mystical Theology*—particularly interesting as an introduction to the topic I intend to address. This is because, even though it uses an expression (i.e., “Ascetic and Mystical Theology”) that would later in the 20th century—and, as we mentioned with Bernard—be abandoned in favor of the term “Spiritual Theology,” it helps distinguish asceticism from mysticism as essential factors in the spiritual life of man. Tanquerey explains the two terms as follows:

1) The term “*asceticism*” comes from the Greek ἄσκησις (exercise, effort) and refers to any strenuous exercise related to the physical or moral education of man. Now, Christian perfection requires efforts that St. Paul readily compares to the training exercises athletes underwent to achieve victory. It was therefore natural to use the term “*asceticism*” to describe the efforts of the Christian soul striving to attain perfection. [...] It is therefore no wonder that the name “*asceticism*” was given to the science dealing with the efforts necessary to attain Christian perfection.

2) However, for many centuries, the name “*Mystical Theology*” (μύστης, mysterious, secret, and particularly religious secret) prevailed to designate this science because it expounded the secrets of perfection. Later, these two terms were used interchangeably; but soon the practice prevailed of reserving the term “*asceticism*” for that part of spiritual science dealing with the initial stages of perfection up to the threshold of contemplation, and the term “*mysticism*” for that which deals with contemplation and the unitive way.⁸

⁵We can add: biblical renewal, patristic renewal, and liturgical renewal.

⁶And we can certainly say in Tradition and in the liturgy.

⁷The text I consulted, specifically the 1948 Italian edition, is ADOLFO TANQUEREY, *Compendium of Ascetic and Mystical Theology*, Society of St. John the Evangelist, Rome 1948.

⁸ADOLFO TANQUEREY, *Compendium of Ascetic and Mystical Theology*, Society of St. John the Evangelist, Rome 1948, p. 3.

Tanqueray discusses the *status quaestionis* in his time, but I would say that it is very easy and simple, without compromising lexical and logical rigor, to keep asceticism and mysticism separate⁹ in the following way:

1) *Asceticism* is a predominantly human ‘occupation’; simplifying as much as possible, we can say that it refers to a purely voluntary and human activity, oriented, however—since we are in the realm of the spiritual life—toward God. Asceticism is possible because human freedom exists, one might also add.

2) *Mysticism* is a typically divine “task”; again, simplifying as much as possible, we can say that it refers to a voluntary yet divine activity that is, in turn, directed toward humanity.

The Greek root in both cases is very revealing. Asceticism refers to the effort—similar to that of athletes—made by human beings to draw as close as possible to God. Mysticism, on the other hand, with its root in ‘mystery,’ is easily attributable to the divine, which, by its very nature, always transcends human knowledge and therefore, by necessity, has a mysterious component, as well as being easily seen as God’s bending down toward human beings. In a nutshell:

asceticism, **human beings** → **God**

mysticism, **God** → **human beings**.

It is clear that a clear-cut or even unbridgeable separation between asceticism and mysticism must be categorically ruled out. This is also because the relationship between God and humanity—the mystical dimension—precedes the ascetic one, because:

1) First, this relationship invariably begins with God... we could even say that the very fact of the creation of human beings is a mystical event; God alone creates them and gives them life and spirit. It is evident that the path is: God → human beings.

2) Second, the very call to life and salvation of the individual human being who is born and lives in every time and place is also the work of God (who, in addition to creating, ensures the existence of all things, including, of course, his favorite creature), at least according to the Christian faith.

3) Furthermore, the call to faith in revelation is willed by God through all the means we know (family, friends inspired by the proclamation, cultural and social heritage, circumstances, experiences, etc.), and certainly through others unknown to us as well. This too is a way in which God acts, bending down toward humanity to make himself known, or at least to be sought (God → human being).

The ascetic dimension, therefore, always and in every case takes shape as a response to the mystical one. Human beings seek to draw near to God through exercises and efforts only after God has made Himself present to them in one of the infinite ways we can even begin to imagine. The energy, motivations, and strength of asceticism are in some way also given and strengthened by God; however, in Christianity we speak of the gift of free will, which must be exercised directly by human beings, so it is necessary that the voluntary journey of the human being toward God also take place. The encounter with God, at least from an anthropological perspective, ordinarily takes place at a sort of point situated between God and humanity; the clear preponderance lies in God’s journey toward humanity (the mystical dimension), but there must be a minimum of collaboration on the

⁹As we will see shortly: in the sense of different polarities, not of clearly divided realities.

part of the human being who seeks to draw near to God - or to bring God near - (the ascetic dimension); otherwise, we would end up denying human freedom.

From this perspective, asceticism cannot be merely mentioned. It must, we might say, be phenomenologically situated and described in its forms and modalities.

We have already mentioned the ordinary forms of asceticism that were widespread in Vincent's time. In that era, fasting, abstinence, and even wearing hair shirts or self-flagellation were common practices, regularly observed. Vincent himself, for example, wore a hair shirt: visitors to the small museum at the Mother House of the Congregation of the Mission in Paris will find what is identified as Vincent's hair shirt. The same common rules outline various forms of asceticism that the confreres must observe, in addition to the aforementioned virtue of mortification. But, as mentioned, these are ordinary or recurring practices.

Life, on the other hand, can present the faithful Christian with circumstances, events, and situations that are out of the ordinary and must necessarily be faced (episodic forms of asceticism that are difficult to avoid). Avoiding them might be possible, but it usually amounts to shirking responsibility.

Even more distinctive are the cases in which one decides to seek out opportunities for asceticism that one would not be required to undertake. These are, then, instances of occasional asceticism that one could in fact avoid without hesitation, without, justifiably, feeling any sense of obligation.

Of the two instances in Vincent's life that I intend to discuss, the first can be definitively classified as the last type of asceticism (occasional and freely undertaken asceticism, even though it was not necessary to do so), the second must at the very least be assigned to the penultimate form of asceticism (occasional asceticism that must be undertaken, lest one shirk one's responsibilities), but based on the historical data in our possession, it could also be a form of the second type (occasional asceticism freely undertaken even though it was not necessary to practice it).

The Two Occasions of Voluntary Asceticism: The Forms

Every sufficiently comprehensive biography of St. Vincent recounts two events narrated by him in his own letters. First, I will describe the events as they appear in the biography and in texts attributed to Vincent himself. Then, I will attempt to frame them within the perspective of the ascetic dimension introduced above.

The Unjust Accusation of Theft

Let us begin with the first event: the theft of which Vincent was accused and for which he decided not to defend himself. I will limit myself to quoting a long but useful passage from Román's biography:

Contrary to his expectations, Vincent did not return from Rome to Toulouse or to Dax, his native region. Toward the end of 1608, he arrived in Paris, coming from the Eternal City [...]

Vincent went to Paris, not only because he felt drawn to the capital, but because, after his latest failure in Rome, only in Paris could he hope to obtain the coveted benefice, indispensable for the financial security of his life. [...]

Vincent's affairs had become complicated and would become even more so, to the point that his brief stay would end up turning into a lifelong residence.

One of the complications arose through no fault of Vincent's whatsoever. Upon his arrival in Paris, he had settled in a modest neighborhood on the left bank of the Seine [...] because [...] it was the Gascons' neighborhood. He rented a room, sharing it with a fellow townsman, a modest conciliatory judge from the town of Sore. One day he felt unwell and had to stay in bed. The judge left early to run his errands in the city. Vincent had the necessary medicines brought from a nearby pharmacy. The pharmacy clerk arrived, looked for a bottle in a cabinet, and found the judge's wallet containing 400 scudi. It was too great a temptation, and the young man could not resist. Without letting on, while he pretended to be fumbling for the bottle, he made off with that fortune. Once he had tended to the sick man, he vanished, never to be seen again. Shortly afterward, the judge arrived and immediately realized his money was missing. Who could have stolen it? There was no doubt: it had undoubtedly been the fake patient, who was still in bed as if nothing had happened and who claimed he had never taken it nor seen anyone take it. The judge [...] Without a second thought, he accused Vincent of theft, threw him out of the house, and slandered him in front of friends and acquaintances. He also arranged for the ecclesiastical authorities to issue a warning against him. Poor Vincent found himself once again the victim of relentless misfortune [...] He had recently met Pierre de Bérulle, the future cardinal, a man who would have a decisive influence on his life. Not even in his presence did the indignant judge's anger subside: in his presence, he accused Vincent of theft. Vincent's reaction was exemplary. We now find ourselves before a premonitory glimpse of the future character of his holiness. It did not even cross his mind to shift the suspicion onto the unfortunate apprentice. He simply said calmly: "God knows the truth." [...] If there were no explicit testimony of all this in Vincent's own words, Coste would have cast doubt on the entire incident. In reality, six years later¹⁰, the culprit was arrested in Bordeaux for another crime. Driven by remorse, he summoned the judge of Sore to his cell and confessed his guilt. The judge was as effusive in his apologies as he had been in his accusations. He wrote to Vincent, asking for forgiveness, stating that if he had not sent it in writing, he would have gone personally to Paris to ask for it on his knees, in public, and with a rope around his neck. It was not necessary; Vincent generously granted him his forgiveness.¹¹

Román cites another biographer of Vincent who suggests that the theft was a key event in Vincent's conversion, but he responds that "the accusation of theft is merely the

¹⁰Ed. It would therefore be an event of 1615; but St. Vincent himself also speaks of six months, as noted in the much more recent biography written by Marie-Joëlle Guillaume cited in the footnote; and this shorter timeframe is found in the Conference to the Fathers of the Mission of June 9, 1656, cited below. In the Italian translation of the Conferences, in note 4 on p. 271, also from the Conferences, it is noted, however, that "Elsewhere St. Vincent says: 'six years later'".

¹¹JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *Saint Vincent de Paul – Biography*, Jaca Book, Albairate (MI) 1996, pp. 76–78. See also, for example: MARIE-JOËLLE GUILLAUME, *Vincent de Paul – A Saint of the Great Century*, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 2023, pp. 72–73.

first link in the chain”¹². He also quotes Vincent: “in February 1610, Vincent still seems anchored to his previous way of life, which consisted of planning his life by relying on luck and human resources: he continues to hope for ‘an opportunity for advancement.’”¹³ Roman, in these pages¹⁴, nevertheless sees positive signs within Vincent, years before the famous events at Folleville and Châtillon-les-Dombes (1617).

The exact text taken from the *Conferences to the Fathers of the Mission* in which Vincent recalls the incident is as follows:

There is one in the Society who, having been accused of robbing his companion and having been publicly branded as such in the house, even though it was not true, never wanted to defend himself and, seeing himself falsely accused, thought to himself: “Do you want to defend yourself? You are accused of something that is not true. Oh! No,” he exclaimed, lifting his eyes to God. “I must bear it patiently!” And so he did. What happened then? Brothers, here is what happened six months later: the one who had actually stolen, finding himself a hundred leagues away, having acknowledged his guilt, wrote to him and asked for forgiveness. You see! Sometimes God wants to test people, and therefore allows such things to happen.¹⁵

A probable reference, moreover, to these events narrated in the third person—as was the custom of the time—is found, this time in the first person, in the lecture of October 24, 1659:

“All right, but there are details that do not correspond to the truth.” It is enough that the matter be true in substance. Let the one who is admonished rejoice at being accused, even though he is innocent. And even if he were entirely so, what a consolation! O God! I have experienced it.¹⁶

The acceptance of the temptation against faith

In the chronology at the end of his Biography of St. Vincent, Román places these events in 1611: “St. Vincent’s stay at Berulle’s house. Visits to the hospital of charity. He meets a theologian tempted against the faith”¹⁷.

Description and Conjectures

Vincent gives a rather lengthy account of this event in a Conference of unknown date, which, in *the Works* (Volume X of the 2008 Italian edition), is described as a

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴See *Id.*, p. 79

¹⁵S Vit X, pp. 270–271. The Conference is dated June 9, 1656. It concerns the “practice of giving warnings” and how to behave when receiving a warning; even in the case of a false warning, he says: it is best not to defend oneself as he had done regarding the theft erroneously attributed to him 43 years earlier.

¹⁶See Vit X, p. 620, commentary on the common rules in which Vincent explains the need to confide everything to the Superior, including the faults of fellow members when they are well-founded and serious. The example he gives of himself concerns precisely the case in which the person accused before the Superior is in fact innocent.

¹⁷JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *Saint Vincent de Paul – Biography*, in “Chronological Tables,” p. 580.

“conference excerpt.” I believe it is appropriate, once again, to reproduce the relevant page in its entirety to facilitate the analysis that will follow the quotation.

I knew a famous doctor who had long defended the Catholic faith against heretics as a canon theologian of a diocese. Having been summoned by the late Queen Margherita to her side for his learning and piety, he was compelled to abandon his usual occupations; but, no longer preaching or teaching catechism, in his leisure he was assailed by a violent temptation against the faith. This teaches us, incidentally, how dangerous idleness is for both body and spirit; for just as land, however good it may be, if left uncultivated for some time, immediately produces thistles and thorns, so our soul cannot remain long at rest and in idleness without being affected by some passion or temptation that leads it to evil. That doctor, therefore, finding himself in such a deplorable state, turned to me to confide that he was agitated by the most violent temptations against the faith: horrible blasphemies against Jesus Christ passed through his mind, and he had bouts of despair, to the point of feeling driven to throw himself out the window.

He was reduced to such a state that it was necessary to exempt him from saying the Office, from celebrating Holy Mass, and even from saying any prayers; so much so that, as soon as he began to recite the *Our Father*, a thousand fantasies would pass through his mind, greatly disturbing him. His imagination had become so barren and his spirit so exhausted, from constantly performing acts to ward off temptations, that he could no longer produce any more. Being reduced to this wretched state, he was advised to follow this practice: whenever he turned his hand or a finger toward the city of Rome, or toward some church, he was to understand that, by that gesture or action, he was making his own everything that the Roman Church believed. What happened next? God finally took pity on that poor doctor, who, having fallen ill, was instantly freed from all his temptations. The dark veil suddenly fell from the eyes of his spirit; he began to see all the truths of the faith, but with such light that it seemed to him he could feel them and touch them with his own hands*. Finally, he died, filled with gratitude and love for God, for having allowed him to fall into those temptations and then raise him up again, giving him such great and admirable feelings regarding the mysteries of our religion.¹⁸

The quoted text from the lecture does not mention Vincent’s decision to take the temptation upon himself, but it is noted: “Abelly attributes this outcome to Vincent’s prayers and to the generous act of charity with which he offered himself to God to be tempted in the doctor’s place. Vincent suffered a severe temptation of faith for about three or four years, from which he emerged stronger.”¹⁹ This connection between the theologian’s temptation and a period of spiritual darkness beginning in 1611 and lasting for about four years cannot be said to be beyond doubt: yet it is made by Abelly, the first biographer of St. Vincent. And the hypothesis that this was indeed the case has a sound

¹⁸*S Vit X*, pp. 26–27. This passage from the conference was reproduced in full in Coste, from (see subsequent citation): LOUIS ABELLY, *La vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul*, Paris 1664, Book III, Chapter XI, Section I, pp. 136–137, translated into Italian in LOUIS ABELLY, *Della vita di s. Vincenzo de’ Paoli*, Book Three, Tipografia Arcivescovile, Florence 1913.

¹⁹*S Vit X*, p. 27, note 3.

basis if one applies to Abelly's biography a fairly reliable criterion used in history and the history of spirituality: when the biography of one who will become a saint in the future is written shortly after his death—and thus deals with a figure who may well be significant but has not yet even been declared blessed—it is likely to contain more realistic details about his person.²⁰ The historical-critical problems of hagiographies (particularly those written several centuries ago) from a historical perspective: these problems generally increase as the time between their writing and the death of the subject they deal with grows, and as the subject's beatification or canonization draws nearer.

In the lengthy passage where Abelly makes this connection, he cites the aforementioned conference excerpt (of which he is the source) and a subsequent account (of which the source is unknown) in which Vincent speaks of his own personal temptation against the faith, following that of the theologian.

Here is a notable example that occurred during the time when St. Vincent was almoner to Queen Margaret. We will draw the account partly from a speech he gave one day to his community, and partly from what became known after his death through the testimony of people of the highest credibility.²¹

[...] This is what was recorded from a talk that Vincent gave one day to his followers on the subject of faith, in which he says nothing about the means he used to free that doctor from the storm of temptations [*Ed. note: this sentence immediately follows the quotation from St. Vincent's lecture*]; but after his death it became known that this had come about through his prayers and the offering he made to God of himself for the deliverance of the poor afflicted man. I will recount how events unfolded, according to the written testimony left by a most trustworthy person, who was entirely unaware of the speech by Vincent quoted above.²²

“Mr. Vincent, having resolved to console the person who had confided her spiritual sufferings to him, advised her to reject them and to perform some good work to merit the grace of being freed from them. It subsequently happened that the said person fell ill, and during her illness the evil spirit redoubled its efforts to lead her astray. Mr. Vincent, therefore, seeing her reduced to such a pitiable state, and rightly fearing that she might ultimately succumb to the violence of temptations of infidelity and blasphemy and die poisoned by the implacable hatred that the devil harbors against the Son of God, devoted himself to prayer, imploring Divine Goodness to deign to save the sick man from such danger, offering himself to the Most High in a spirit of penance to bear, if not the same sufferings, at least those effects of His justice that He would have been pleased to make him suffer, imitating in this the charity of the Only-Begotten, who wished to take upon Himself our infirmities to heal us and satisfied the punishments we deserved. It pleased

²⁰It may always be the case that, if the subject is in the odor of sanctity, one seeks to favor the most favorable interpretations; however, as we shall see in a few lines, the attention Abelly gives to the fact that he was able to access a written account from a trustworthy person allows us to downplay the significance of this observation.

²¹LOUIS ABELLY, *On the Life of St. Vincent de Paul*, Book Three, Archiepiscopal Press, Florence 1913, pp. 135–136 (translation of LOUIS ABELLY, *La vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul*, Paris 1664, Book III, Chapter XI, Section I, pp. 117–119). This passage in Abelly's biography precedes the text of the lecture cited in Coste.

²²*Id.*, p. 137; this passage, however, follows the account of the lecture found in Coste.

God, by a secret of His Providence, to take the charitable man at his word, and by granting his prayer, He entirely freed the sick man from his temptation, restored calm to his spirit, and enlightened his faith, which had fallen into darkness and turmoil, giving him feelings of gratitude toward Our Lord Jesus Christ, so full of tenderness and devotion, never before experienced. But at the same time, oh admirable conduct of divine Wisdom! God allowed the same temptation to enter the spirit of Vincent, who from that moment on was fiercely assailed by it. He resorted to prayers and mortifications to drive it away, but they had no other effect than to make him endure those hellish torments with patience and resignation, without, however, losing hope that God would finally have mercy on him. Nevertheless, as soon as he realized that God wished to test him by allowing the devil to attack him with such ferocity, he did two things [...]"²³

Abelly seems convinced that he is dealing with something that truly happened to Vincent; in fact, he speaks of: "the offering he made to God of himself for the liberation of the poor afflicted man."

He does not present this merely as a possibility based on his own intuitions or reasoning. In fact, he is careful to specify: "I will recount how things unfolded, according to the written testimony left by a person of the utmost trustworthiness, who was completely unaware of the passage from Vincent cited above."

He speaks of a reliable witness, of his "written testimony," and specifically notes that this reliable witness was unaware of the content of Vincent's lecture on the doctor tempted in the faith.

All of this would seem to validate the fact that Vincent, in addition to praying for the unfortunate theologian, actually offered to take those temptations upon himself. No text currently available that can be directly traced to what Vincent said or wrote supports Abelly's idea; however, we know that a large portion of Vincent's correspondence and archival material was lost during the French Revolution, while Abelly almost certainly had access to a much broader range of material, including possible oral testimonies from those who had known Vincent, having written the biography four years after Vincent's death.

Staying with the older biographies predating the French Revolution, Collet, in his 1748 biography of St. Vincent, also confirms the idea that this temptation had befallen our saint, in fact at his own request:

The turmoil of the soul caused the body to be disturbed. The Theologian fell ill. The more his strength waned on one side, the more the temptation intensified on the other. The evil spirit weakened him with greater fury than he had shown until then, and he spared no effort to instill in him that implacable hatred he bears toward the Son of God. *Vincent was moved to see his friend in such a pitiable state; he feared that he might finally succumb under the repeated blows, that his lips might open to blasphemy, and his heart to irreligion. To implore the mercy of God, who was punishing with such severity the idleness to which this Doctor had given himself over a little too much, he began to pray; he earnestly implored Him who calms,*

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 137–138.

when He pleases, the most raging waves, to restore peace to a man who had long served Him; and in a sense imitating the charity of Jesus Christ, who took upon Himself our weaknesses to heal us, he offered himself to God in the spirit of a victim; and he undertook, to satisfy divine justice, to bear upon himself either the same kind of trial or any other punishment with which God might wish to afflict him.

Such a fervent prayer—which closely resembled St. Paul’s desire to be accursed for his brothers—was answered, and answered in its entirety. The sick man was completely delivered from his temptation. A deep peace followed the storm. The difficulties that had clouded his faith dissipated. He began to see the Mysteries of the Religion so clearly and fully that it seemed to him as though he could touch them with his finger. His feelings of respect and tenderness for Jesus Christ were more vivid than ever; and until his death he blessed God for having granted him consolation for the bitterness of his past conduct—or rather, for having allowed him to experience a calm whose sweetness outweighed the violence of the agitations that had preceded it.

But just as Naaman’s leprosy passed to Gehazi, so the temptation of the theologian passed to Vincent de Paul; with this difference, that Elisha’s servant was punished because he was a criminal, whereas Vincent was afflicted precisely because his charity had led him to ask to be one. The first pangs of an affliction, which one never feels more keenly than when personally afflicted, astonished him; yet they did not crush him. To free himself from them, he turned to prayer and mortification. To be sure, these helped him bear it with great patience and resignation; yet they did not stop it. The new Job seemed abandoned to the full fury of the devil; yet he did not lose heart, and he always hoped that God would have mercy on him.²⁴

My Italian translation²⁵ of the parts highlighted in italics in the previous passage, in which Collet says more or less the same things as his predecessor, the biographer:

Vincent was moved to see his friend in such a wretched state; he feared that he might ultimately succumb to so many blows that his lips would open to blasphemy and his heart to irreligion.

To appease the mercy of God, who was punishing with such severity the idleness in which this Doctor had become a little too immersed, he turned to prayer; he earnestly invoked the One who, at His discretion, calms the highest waves, to restore peace to a man who had served Him for a long time; and, imitating in some way the charity of Jesus Christ, who took upon himself our follies to heal us, he offered himself to God as a victim; and he made himself available, to appease his justice, to bear upon himself either the same kind of trial or whatever other punishment God might wish to inflict upon him

²⁴PIERRE COLLET, **The Life of Saint Vincent de Paul—Founder of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity**, published by A. Leseure, Nancy 1748, Book I, pp. 32–33.

²⁵I should clarify: I did this with the help of online translation tools and decided to do so because the Italian in the available translations was too archaic.

Such a fervent prayer, which closely resembled St. Paul's desire to be accursed for his brothers, was answered, but it was answered in its entirety. The sick man was completely freed from temptation.

[...] But just as Naaman's leprosy passed to Gehazi, the theologian's temptation passed to Vincent de Paul; with this difference: that Elisha's servant was punished because he was guilty, while Vincent was afflicted precisely because his charity had led him to ask to be so.²⁶

Thus, these two sources, which are more distant in time and predate the French Revolution, from the years 1664 and 1748, presuppose that there is a direct connection between the theologian's temptation and that of Vincent. Whereas in the original texts currently available that record what our saint said and wrote, we have neither confirmation nor denial of this.

Also noteworthy is the final quotation, where Collet, in a certain sense, distinguishes the two forms of asceticism I mentioned in the introduction.²⁷ The difference Collet refers to is between an asceticism one is compelled to undertake if one does not wish to shirk one's responsibilities, and an asceticism to which one would not be compelled by circumstances, but which one nevertheless freely chooses to undertake. This second case would be Vincent's regarding the theologian's temptation.

Ascetic or mystical experience?

One might object that these two possibilities—a connection or independence between the two temptations against the faith—are irrelevant: Vincent's work of accompanying the theologian is one of his many praiseworthy and effective actions, and the temptation against the faith that Vincent himself had to face roughly from 1611 to 1616 is an example of a sort of dark night permitted by God (mystical experience) to which (as we shall see) Vincent responded with certain 'ascetic' strategies, of which there are not a few in the history of Christian spirituality, and which can be considered the very 'night of faith' of the aforementioned theologian.²⁸

If, however, we accept what I have proposed regarding the differences, the polarity, between asceticism and mysticism, the issue is of some significance. As noted, there is a factor that helps to distinguish asceticism from mysticism conceptually, but also spiritually, without denying that they are two sides of the same coin, or, better yet, two spiritual polarities with various intermediate positions: human freedom.

God's action, pertaining to the 'mystical polarity,' is by definition absolutely free from our creaturely constraints, and can be directed toward any human being, at any moment, without God having the slightest need to perform it (or not perform it) depending on what man wants (or does not want), or deserves (or does not deserve). The human

²⁶An Italian translation of the text does exist, but it is written in 19th-century Italian, so I preferred to translate it myself.

²⁷I quote this to help anyone who might wish to find them: "Life, however, can present the faithful Christian with circumstances, events, and situations that are out of the ordinary and must necessarily be faced (episodic ascetic practices that are difficult to avoid). Avoiding them might be possible, but it usually amounts to shirking responsibility.

Even more peculiar are the cases in which one decides to seek out opportunities for asceticism that one would not be obliged to undertake. These are, then, occasional acts of asceticism that one could in fact avoid without hesitation, without, justifiably, feeling any sense of responsibility."

²⁸The case of the theologian, however, will also require some attention regarding ascetic and mystical experiences. I will address this separately later.

being has only the faculty to decide how to react to this divine action, but only after God has undertaken it as and when He Himself willed it.

Human actions themselves, however, must have moral significance; and, to have it, they must be performed with a minimal margin of free will; and certainly, as we have observed in quoting Tanqueray, this human freedom plays a key role in asceticism, the action undertaken by human beings to draw themselves closer to God, while at the same time seeking to keep themselves adequately distant from vices and worldly temptations.

If Vincent underwent the dark condition of temptation against the faith because he found himself in it without having asked for it, that experience has a predominantly mystical character (although it subsequently had to, by necessity, elicit in him an ascetic response of the first kind—asceticism as a response to specific difficult circumstances). If, on the other hand, along with prayers and some form of intercessory request on behalf of the tempted theologian, he showed himself willing to undergo the same kind of temptation himself, or even explicitly asked the Lord to take it upon himself in order to relieve the theologian of it, we are faced with an experience of a predominantly ascetic nature of the second type (a decision to take on a ‘spiritual’ burden, even though there would be no necessity, duty, or obligation to do so).

Whether the ‘ascetic’ or the ‘mystical’ hypothesis holds true, we can nevertheless find an interesting sequence of specific experiences²⁹ in Vincent’s life between 1609 and 1617, which mark his journey toward a sort of spiritual maturity (always dynamic, we can assume), which will become evident starting in 1617 and will lead Vincent on the path to full sanctity, which the Church itself later recognized in him.

The motivations

The details of these two experiences of Vincent’s were discussed in the first chapter, where I presented the facts as they are recounted by some of Vincent’s biographers and by Vincent himself in the collection of *Conferences to the Mission Priests*. However, along with the details, the motivations that led Vincent to have these experiences also emerge.

The decision not to defend himself against the accusation of theft

The nature of the experience involving the accusation of theft undoubtedly has a strong and recognizable ascetic motivation; the free decision not to defend himself—when one might have thought it was the duty of an innocent person to do so—is stated by Vincent himself. It is described as patient endurance in imitation of Christ, and as a situation we must accept because it was permitted by God to test us. Taking place in 1609³⁰, this act of asceticism predates the famous experiences of 1617 by a significant margin and was decided upon when Vincent still harbored the aspirations that had initially driven him to pursue an “ecclesiastical career,” even though he had, so to speak, begun a path of “spiritual formation” following his encounter with Berulle.

²⁹Which do not exclude, of course, the assiduous work of grace—and of one’s will, we might add—even, and perhaps above all, in the ordinary events of life and in the more ‘routine’ forms of asceticism.

³⁰According to Roman’s chronology.

Vincent's temptation against the faith

Regarding the temptation against the faith of the theologian (1610, when he was appointed chaplain to Marguerite de Valois), followed by that of Vincent, there may be various reasons why it arose and was faced and overcome.

1) Both may have been due to a decision made exclusively by the Lord—experiences that were therefore essentially mystical and independent of one another—which then paved the way for a long and arduous ascetic journey to overcome them.

2) The first (but also the second, if one wishes) could also be due to a human element in the theologian (and in Vincent, though he does not speak of it), who allowed himself to be overcome by some kind of vice or sin; and, entangled in the 'sirens of the world,' he wondered what sense there was in a life of faith that keeps one away from selfish but materially pleasurable instincts. Some form of *reckoning* followed the prolonged temptation, as Vincent himself testifies regarding the theologian; and one might think that this occurred thanks to a voluntary and deliberate reaction based on faith in the revelation of the tempted.³¹

3) Leaving aside the details of the first experience and its positive conclusion (that of the theologian), there remains, regarding Vincent, the hypothesis of Abelly (and Collet) of a decision with a significant voluntary component, namely that, alongside the prayers and spiritual suggestions Vincent offered to the theologian, Vincent himself made a sort of vow-proposal to the Lord to take upon himself the theologian's temptation. This last option is also supported in the recent biography of Vincent written by Marie-Joëlle Guillaume:

On the other hand, Abelly, relying on the trustworthy testimony that he was unaware of this account, established a direct connection between the temptations of the famous doctor and Vincent's personal temptation. Collet and Coste did the same, because the parallelism between the two experiences is so strong as to lend credence to the idea that they are linked. It would have happened this way: faced with the intimate trust with which the theologian entrusted himself to him, Vincent was not content to simply give his friend good advice, but became so involved that he took it upon himself.³²

As we have said, all three options must be considered possible, and they may even overlap to some extent. In any case, there must be an ascetic component, at least as a response to the difficulty of the temptations against the faith, against which those who suffered them decided to fight using specific means.

Consequences and Outcomes

The reaction to the accusation of theft, immediate and subsequent outcomes

Of the two cases in question, we know the first one precisely thanks to Vincent, who made it a topic of meditation for one of his conferences 43 years later, modestly presenting it as a way to deal with the admonitions received following accusations by third parties.

³¹The struggle against sin and temptation was certainly waged with divine help, as well as through the active combat of the one being tempted.

³²MARIE-JOËLLE GUILLAUME, *Vincenzo de' Paoli – A Saint of the Great Century*, CLV – Edizioni Vincenziane, Rome 2023, p. 80.

Vincent also firmly regards this kind of asceticism as an act of entrusting oneself to Providence, through which, God willing, a human being can experience divine justice, goodness, and mercy toward those who, being innocent, genuinely imitate Christ. The fact that, in retrospect, he considered it suitable as a topic for a conference to the Priests of the Mission makes it, on the one hand, a useful example for the context of 1656 and for the priests of the Congregation, and on the other, a significant step taken voluntarily (ascetically) by Vincent toward his change of perspective in life, marked in 1617 by the two circumstances attributable to the mysticism of charity.

The temptation against faith

We can divide the outcomes of this circumstance of the temptation against faith into three parts: (i) the theologian's reaction after contact with Vincent, (ii) Vincent's reaction to the theologian's temptation, (iii) and Vincent's reaction to his own temptation.

The theologian's reaction to the temptation in the conference

The theologian's reaction is only briefly mentioned. I take it from the new Italian edition of Coste, previously cited³³ :

Having been reduced to this wretched state, he was advised to adopt this practice: whenever he turned his hand or a finger toward the city of Rome, or toward some church, he would intend, by that gesture or action, to make his own everything that the Roman Church believed.³⁴

This sort of asceticism on the part of the theologian is the only information Vincent provided in the surviving passage of the lecture, likely suggested to the theologian by Vincent himself. The theologian was then freed from temptation; let us recall the passage in question:

What happened next? God finally took pity on that poor doctor, who, having fallen ill, was instantly freed from all his temptations. The dark veil suddenly fell from the eyes of his spirit; he began to see all the truths of the faith, but with such clarity that it seemed to him he could feel them and touch them with his own hands.

The outcome for the theologian is thus complete liberation and happiness through his regained faith.

Vincent's actions to help the theologian

Vincent, if we rely on the quotation that Abelly, following the one from the conference passage³⁵ , provided, took further steps to help the theologian: "having resolved to console the person who had confided his spiritual sufferings to him, he advised him to reject them and perform some good work to merit the grace of being freed from them"; "he set himself to prayer to beseech Divine Goodness to deign to save the afflicted man from such danger, offering himself to the Most High in a spirit of penance to bear

³³This is a passage from a conference, cited in Coste by Abelly himself as a source.

³⁴*S Vit X*, p. 27, in Coste, but always taken from Abelly: LOUIS ABELLY, *On the Life of St. Vincent de Paul*, Book Three, Archiepiscopal Press, Florence 1913, p. 136.

³⁵We recall the quotation: "according to the written testimony left by a person of the highest credibility, who was completely unfamiliar with the speech by Vincent reported above."

upon himself, if not the very same sufferings, at least those effects of His justice which He would have been pleased to make him suffer”³⁶.

These, then, are Vincent’s actions on behalf of the tempted theologian: advising him to reject spiritual sufferings and to perform some good work; praying for him; offering to take upon himself the theologian’s sufferings or some similar punishment.

Vincent’s final act, in particular, is the one that is called into question, since there is no longer any trace of the document Abelly refers to. If, as already mentioned, this account is reliable, we have Vincent’s now-famous “asceticism” of taking upon himself the burden of temptation—something that could have been avoided, but which Vincent is said to have voluntarily accepted.

Vincent’s asceticism as a reaction to his own temptation

Vincent’s asceticism as a response to temptation—whether it was placed upon him as ‘vicarious suffering’ in place of the theologian’s suffering, or whether it was independent of the theologian’s temptation but a trial of a dark night willed solely by God (and thus a ‘mystical’ experience)—is nonetheless noteworthy. The passage cited by Abelly (not in the lecture, but in the subsequent citation from the ‘reliable’ source) offers, in any case, a spectrum of Vincent’s reactions to his own temptation against the faith. We have already quoted the following:

He resorted to prayers and mortifications to drive it away, but they had no other effect than to make him endure those vapors of hell with patience and resignation, without, however, losing hope that God would finally have mercy on him. Nevertheless, as soon as he realized that God wished to test him by allowing the devil to attack him with such ferocity, he did two things [...]³⁷

The quotation in Abelly continues:

first, he wrote his profession of faith on a sheet of paper which he placed over his heart, as a specific remedy for the evil he was experiencing, and, making a general rejection of all thoughts contrary to the faith, he made a pact with Our Lord that every time he placed his hand on the paper and on his heart, as he often did, he intended by this act and this gesture to renounce the temptation, even though his mouth uttered no words, while at the same time lifting his heart to God, gently raising his spirit from the distressing pain, and thus confounding the devil by remaining silent and despising him.

The second remedy used by Vincent was to always do the opposite of what temptation suggested to him, striving to act by faith and to honor and serve Jesus Christ; which he practiced particularly by visiting and consoling some poor sick people at the Hospital of Charity in the suburb of St. Germain, where he lived at the time. The pious practice of assisting the sick, being one of the most meritorious, was also the most suitable for testifying to Jesus Christ with what faith he believed in His words and examples, and with what love he wished to serve Him, since He said that the services rendered to the lowliest among His brothers would be as if rendered to His own person.

³⁶LOUIS ABELLY, *On the Life of St. Vincent de Paul*, Book Three, Archiepiscopal Press, Florence 1913, p. 137 (cited previously).

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 138.

Through this means, God granted Brother Vincent the grace to derive such benefit from the temptation that afflicted him that not only did he never have cause to confess any fault committed in this matter, but moreover, the remedies applied to him were almost a source of infinite blessings that subsequently spread throughout his spirit.

After three or four years of this painful trial (ed. Thus, we may presume around 1613–1614), the holy man [...] one day resolved to make a firm and unbreakable decision to honor Jesus Christ more fully and to imitate him with ever greater perfection than he had done until then, and he dedicated the remainder of his life, out of love for him, to the service of the poor. As soon as he had formulated such a beautiful resolution, through a marvelous effect of grace, all the suggestions of the evil spirit dissipated and vanished; his heart, so long oppressed, joyfully returned to its sweet freedom, and his soul was filled with such light that he confessed on several occasions that it seemed to him he was seeing the truth of the faith with a wholly special light.³⁸

Abelly, having completed the quotation from his source, concludes:

Such was the end of this temptation, and the fruit of Vincent's resolution, from which it may be said that God subsequently drew, through His great grace, all the great things He later accomplished through him—namely, the assistance and salvation of an infinite number of the poor, and the greater good of the Church.

In addition to the person who gave this testimony, there were many others of merit and virtue who, having outlived Vincent, confirmed the same thing as having been shared with them by Vincent himself, who had confided in them what had happened to him on that occasion, to persuade them to use the same remedies and obtain relief and healing from similar spiritual sufferings from which they were afflicted.

The final part of the quotation also shows Abelly's insistence on maintaining that Vincent had taken on the temptation; in fact, he adds that there were many other testimonies confirming the fact.

Collet does not deviate significantly from what Abelly reports. Summarizing Abelly's account, Vincent's "ascetic" reactions in the face of his temptation against the faith were:

- Prayers and mortifications (unspecified), apparently insufficient;
- A profession of faith written on a piece of paper and held close to his heart, to which he would bring his hand on certain occasions with a "general rejection of all thoughts contrary to the faith" ("act and gesture" with the hand, without words);
- Always doing the opposite of what the temptation suggested, accompanying these actions with visits and assistance to the poor and sick "at the Hospital of Charity in the suburb of St. Germain where he then lived," which seems to have been the most meritorious and effective way to combat the temptation and help him remain free from sin;

³⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 138–139.

- Transforming assistance to the poor into a lifelong commitment to be maintained for the rest of his life; this final ascetic “move” seems to have been the one through which the temptation, which had lasted three or four years, was definitively defeated.

Some biographers and historians tell us that we cannot state with certainty that Vincent had expressly set out to take on the theologian’s temptation because there are no documents to confirm it. However, they agree that Vincent took various countermeasures against his own temptation against the faith. The fact is that Vincent’s own temptation and his countermeasures -- the specific ascetic practices he employed to combat the temptation -- are apparently described in the very same text that states Vincent expressly asked the Lord to take upon himself the theologian’s temptation. Collet, too, links the assumption of the theologian’s temptation with Vincent’s own countermeasures to combat it. I would therefore venture to suppose that: either the assumption of the temptation and Vincent’s countermeasures are both trustworthy, or neither is historically reliable.

In any case, assuming that Vincent experienced the temptation against the faith and took the listed countermeasures, we can conclude that these countermeasures are also part of a specific ascetic practice of Vincent’s, which continued for several years prior to *the annus mirabilis* of 1617. And, in that case, these practices were certainly significant steps that contributed to Vincent’s journey of conversion, which then opened him up to the spiritual and charitable “feats” that marked his life³⁹.

If, furthermore, we include among Vincent’s ascetic practices that of a specific willingness to take upon himself the temptation of the theologian likely preceding those described,⁴⁰ we can conclude that, taken as a whole, these practices play a significant role in Vincent’s spiritual evolution.

Conclusions

Starting from the distinction between mysticism and asceticism—recognized as valid and useful for understanding the spiritual life—two experiences of Vincent that occurred between 1609 and 1616 were presented; these can be considered instances of specific asceticism and of particular significance for his spiritual journey.

The first, dated 1609, can clearly be attributed to a circumstance that, due to its extraordinary nature and the courage with which it was lived, stands out from the daily or periodic ascetic practices that were very common in Vincent’s time. In the passage from a 1656 conference where he speaks of it and in a 1659 conference where he seems to allude to it, he states that, in imitation of Christ, he did not wish to defend himself against the false accusation of theft of which he was the subject. Based on this experience of his (we might call it: free and unmerited, even if prompted by a case of theft unrelated to Vincent), he observes that it may happen that the Lord tests us when we are victims of injustice; in such a case, we must accept it, since we will receive consolation from it

³⁹This case would be of the type I have already discussed in the opening pages: “Life, however, can present the faithful Christian with circumstances, events, and situations that are out of the ordinary and must necessarily be faced (episodic asceticism that is difficult to avoid). Avoiding them might be possible, but as a rule it amounts to a flight from responsibility.”

⁴⁰In the opening pages, I also described this form of asceticism as follows: “More peculiar are the cases in which one decides to seek out opportunities for asceticism that one would not be obliged to undertake. These are, then, occasional forms of asceticism that one could in fact avoid, without, justifiably, feeling a sense of responsibility.”

anyway. Such an ascetic act during those years of Vincent's life, when he had not yet abandoned the idea of securing a financially secure position for himself and his family, can be seen as a milestone on his spiritual journey toward his human and priestly growth.

The second, dating from 1611, concerns a theologian he knew who was severely tempted against the faith, and what Vincent did to help him overcome it. Abelly, Vincent's first biographer, claims to possess a document written by a trustworthy person stating that among the ways in which Vincent helped the theologian overcome the temptation was an explicit request to the Lord to take that temptation upon Himself. Among Vincent's current biographers, there is no consensus on whether that document actually existed. After explaining the reasons why it is likely that this document actually existed, I also noted that, after the theologian was freed from his temptation, Vincent himself suffered a temptation against the faith that lasted at least four years (strangely, this latter fact is not questioned by historians, even though it comes from the same source as Abelly's account). The episode, however, has an ascetic and/or connotation at the very least, as it contains Vincent's responses to his own temptation: unspecified prayers and mortifications, a profession of faith written on a sheet of paper and kept close to his heart, striving always to do the opposite of what the temptation suggested, and devoting himself fervently to the poor. It is simply a matter of adding, if Abelly's account is to be believed, to this "plan of action"—or rather, prior to this plan of action—the most demanding form of voluntary asceticism: expressly taking upon himself the theologian's temptation in order to facilitate his liberation. We are, as mentioned, in the years from 1611 to 1615–16. Vincent, therefore, up to one or two years before 1617—the time of the episodes at Folleville and Châtillon-les-Dombes—spent this period of torment, during which he had already, with remarkable commitment, embarked on the path of assisting the poor and the sick, a path that would later become the guiding principle of his thoughts, words, and actions.

I believe that the descriptions of these two episodes in Vincent's life can offer us some insights, both into his spiritual evolution and into the value we should still place on asceticism today.

As already mentioned, Vincent's era was characterized, especially in religious circles, by a widespread practice of ordinary, daily asceticism, such as fasting, the wearing of a hair shirt, and other voluntary privations of some sort (more or less) on a regular basis. But the two cases described here are extraordinary in nature and imply a determined will to make heroic efforts (in their own way) to walk the path of the imitation of Christ, despite the human and spiritual limitations of Vincent in those years. And the fact that they precede the most important moments of his spiritual journey in 1617 lends credence to his early biographers, who believed they had observed this continuity in his growth.

Today, asceticism as a practice of spiritual "perfection" among believers is far less widespread and understood than in Vincent's time; ordinary forms of asceticism, in particular, seem to have almost disappeared. Yet opportunities for extraordinary asceticism in response to life's circumstances will never be lacking. However, as noted regarding the two instances of Vincent's asceticism in question, there are at least two ways of responding to life's trials that are comparable to mystical experiences:

a) Responding ascetically to them so as not to culpably shirk personal responsibility. This is the case with the theologian's temptation, had Vincent's asceticism been limited to praying for him and helping him as a friend, offering advice and speaking with him. In the Gospels, this might correspond to a 'moderate' call to love one's friends.

b) Accepting the trials and practicing asceticism even if one had every right to refuse to face them. And this is the case of the accusation of theft from which Vincent did

not wish to clear himself even though he was innocent; or it is the case of the theologian's temptation if Vincent had expressly asked the Lord to place that temptation upon himself. No one forced him to do so, and it would not have been an evasion of responsibility, since Vincent, in both cases, was not even required to bear any, at least according to the less radical Gospel criteria. In the Gospels, this could be likened, in some way, to loving even one's enemies or doing good to those who persecute us.

These two forms of asceticism, so to speak contingent, in response to certain events, we can still compare today with what may happen to us in life, especially in cases where it seems we have in no way provoked what we must face; those situations in life that, due to unforeseeable sequences of circumstances beyond our control, we can attribute to trials that God has decided to have us face. If we consider ourselves consistent Christians and members of the communities that St. Vincent founded, we should at the very least feel a responsibility to strive and/or suffer in order to face them; or, more courageously and "heroically"—even while feeling sincerely free from the duty to sacrifice ourselves—we might decide to do so anyway for the good of our neighbor, whoever they may be.

In conclusion, I believe that these two ascetic experiences of Vincent, beyond their value as significant milestones on his spiritual journey, can also be placed alongside the Gospel teachings to help us assess how much the power of God's love is influencing our thoughts, our words, our free decisions, and our actions in the face of certain trials of life.

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