



VINCENTIAN CHARISM AND THE THIRD SECTOR IN DIALOGUE “From Charism to Planning: Providence and Foresight in Vincentian Thought”

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Abstract

This article explores the dynamic relationship between the Vincentian charism and the contemporary Third Sector through the complementary concepts of **Providence** and **Foresight**. It argues that authentic Vincentian charity is rooted in trust in God's providence while requiring responsible planning, institutional sustainability, and concrete social action. Drawing on the thought of Saint Vincent de Paul, together with reflections from Romano Guardini, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Stefano Zamagni, and Pope Benedict XVI, the study demonstrates that faith never replaces human responsibility but calls for intelligent discernment and organized charity. Vincent's establishment of charitable institutions illustrates how spiritual inspiration becomes enduring structures of service. The article concludes that the Third Sector offers a contemporary expression of the Vincentian charism, where organization and planning do not diminish evangelical charity but enable it to remain effective, sustainable, and faithful to the dignity of the poor.

Cet article explore la relation dynamique entre le charisme vincentien et le Tiers Secteur contemporain à travers les notions complémentaires de **Providence** et de **Prévoyance**. Il soutient que la véritable charité vincentienne est fondée sur la confiance en la Providence de Dieu tout en exigeant une planification responsable, une durabilité institutionnelle et une action sociale concrète. En s'appuyant sur la pensée de saint Vincent de Paul ainsi que sur les réflexions de Romano Guardini, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Stefano Zamagni et du pape Benoît XVI, l'étude montre que la foi ne remplace jamais la responsabilité humaine, mais appelle au discernement, à l'organisation et à l'engagement. Les œuvres fondées par saint Vincent illustrent comment l'inspiration spirituelle devient des structures durables de service. L'article conclut que le Tiers Secteur constitue aujourd'hui une expression contemporaine du charisme vincentien, où l'organisation renforce la charité évangélique au service de la dignité des pauvres.

Este artículo explora la relación dinámica entre el carisma vicenciano y el Tercer Sector contemporáneo a través de los conceptos complementarios de **Providencia** y **Previsión**. Sostiene que la auténtica caridad vicenciana se fundamenta en la confianza en la providencia de Dios, al tiempo que exige planificación responsable, sostenibilidad institucional y una acción social concreta. Basándose en el pensamiento de san Vicente de Paúl y en las aportaciones de Romano Guardini, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Stefano Zamagni y el papa Benedicto XVI, el estudio demuestra que la fe nunca sustituye la responsabilidad humana, sino que impulsa el discernimiento, la



organización y el compromiso. Las instituciones creadas por san Vicente muestran cómo la inspiración espiritual se traduce en estructuras estables de servicio. El artículo concluye que el Tercer Sector representa hoy una expresión contemporánea del carisma vicenciano, donde la organización fortalece la caridad evangélica y garantiza un servicio eficaz y duradero a los pobres.

Keywords: Vincentian charism, Providence, Responsibility, Foresight.

“Faith is realistic. It is not a spiritual refuge, but a judgment on reality that generates works.” -- Giorgio La Pira

Introduction

“From charism to planning”: this expression does not intend to suggest an evolutionary transition that moves beyond charism in favor of a more modern organizational efficiency. On the contrary, it aims to indicate a vital intertwining between spiritual origin and historical form, between inspiration and responsibility, between gift and task. Charisma is not a relic of the past, but a source that demands to be translated into planning, so that it may inhabit history without dissolving.

From this perspective, the dynamic between Providence and Foresight stands as a decisive interpretive category of Vincentian thought. Charism constitutes the generative principle; planning represents its historical configuration. One cannot exist without the other: a charism devoid of structure is consumed in the moment; planning without charism is reduced to mere technique.

When speaking of charity and service, especially in the context of the Vincentian charism, a theological and anthropological question of great importance emerges: how can we reconcile trust in God with the concrete responsibility of human action? How can we prevent Providence from becoming a spiritual alibi and Foresight from degenerating into technocracy?

Romano Guardini forcefully reminds us: “Trust in God does not exempt man from thinking, deciding, and acting; on the contrary, it obliges him to do so to the very end”¹. Guardini reminds us that faith is never an escape from reality. Entrusting oneself to God does not mean passively waiting for things to happen, but courageously and responsibly assuming one’s part, knowing that our actions are sustained by Providence.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer takes a similar line, emphasizing that Christian faith arises from concrete responsibility: “Responsibility arises from the fact that man is placed by God in a concrete situation and must respond to it through his actions”².

For Bonhoeffer, God does not replace human action, but makes it necessary and meaningful. Faith does not eliminate the weight of decisions, but makes it inevitable; it does not offer shortcuts, but calls for real responses before God and others. Providence does not enable man to act recklessly, but rather in a mature manner, with the awareness that we are not alone, but accompanied.

This insight finds a surprising resonance in contemporary economic thought attentive to the centrality of the person. Stefano Zamagni reminds us that: “A civil

¹ R. GUARDINI, *The Meaning of the Church*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1964

² D. BONHOEFFER, *Resistance and Surrender: Letters and Writings from Prison*, Queriniana, Brescia 2001

economy is not one that maximizes efficiency, but one that makes it possible for people to flourish in reciprocity.”³

Vincent de Paul himself lived out this responsibility in the concreteness of charity; for him, charity was not a devotional act, or worse still, an action detached from the real possibilities of bringing it to fruition; on the contrary, his action was so concrete and feasible as to reveal the action of God himself. He believed deeply in Providence, but he knew that it passes through intelligence, organization, and the ability to foresee. The Vincentian tradition, though rooted in the 17th century, surprisingly anticipates this vision: charity is authentic only when it promotes the dignity and responsibility of the poor, and not when it is limited to an isolated gesture

It is interesting to understand the etymology of the two words: Providence and Foresight (pro, forward – videre, to see: to see ahead, to see first). The person moved by providence is one who can see feasibility before others; they do not have a closed or surreal outlook, but rather a prophetic ability to see beyond and to declare in full honesty that such action is of God. It is interesting to note that the two words share the same root and meaning, both pointing to the ability to see; thus, the provident person is one who is skilled at seeing through God’s gaze upon reality.

In the Vincentian charism, foresight—the ability to plan, administer, and organize—is not contrary to faith, but is a mature expression of it. Planning means making charity sustainable, responsible, and respectful of the dignity of the poor. Planning does not mean making charity dry, but rather making that experience solid.

It is precisely in this intertwining of Providence and Foresight that the connection with the Third Sector emerges today. Organized forms of service and social planning are not foreign to the Vincentian charism, but represent a possible contemporary embodiment of it. Where charity is structured, equipped with tools, works in networks, and looks to the future, the charism continues to act. It is not a matter of bureaucratizing charity, but of making it real, feasible, and enduring over time. The Third Sector, therefore, can be seen as a space where Providence and Foresight meet: trust in God becomes shared responsibility, and planning becomes a concrete way of living the Vincentian charism in our time. This is where our reflection today begins.

1) The Charism: Source of Trust and Responsibility

The Vincentian charism arises from a personal encounter with the poor and suffering Christ and translates into a concrete commitment to the poor. In this sense, Providence is the spiritual matrix that inspires and sustains, but it cannot remain an emotional or personal impulse: it must become a structure of service, a way of life, and a community project.

Vincent did not stop at a vague sense of charity: he organized confraternities, lay groups, and charitable institutions to give continuity and substance to his service. The founding of the Ladies of Charity as early as 16174 was an example of this

³ S. Zamagni, *The Civil Economy*, Il Mulino, 2013

⁴ *SVit*, XI, pp. 442–443, *Regulations of Charity, Châtillon-les-Dombes, August 23, 1617*: Today, August 23, 1617, the undersigned ladies have charitably gathered to assist the poor sick of this city of Châtillon, each according to her own turn, having decided among themselves, by mutual agreement, that one of them will care for, for a single full day, all those whom they, gathered together, have recognized as needing their help. In doing so, they have two aims: to help the body and the soul. The body by

transformation: the charism was embodied in associative and operational forms capable of enduring over time and of involving many people in direct service to the poor. This interplay between emotional commitment and the practical reality of service fostered in Vincent a gentle and affable form of charity toward the poor, which he then incorporated into the regulations of the Confraternities of Charity. In the Vincentian vision, missionary preaching was always complemented by the establishment of “Confraternities of Charity” in rural villages, and thus it became evident that charity and solidarity toward the vulnerable were the highest point of the proclamation of the faith. In this way, the Gospel preached was not a refuge in spiritualism; on the contrary, it reawakened in rural society an image of faith capable of caring for the poorest members of humanity, offering them also regulations that explained in detail how to carry out, in all its forms, that specific service.

This leads us to recall that Providence and Foresight are not antithetical, but complementary dimensions: Providence invites us to entrust our mission to God, while Foresight calls us to take seriously the sustainability, planning, and responsibility of our works.

The historian André Dodin, in his biography **Monsieur Vincent**, observes that Vincent does not limit himself to aiding the poor, but devises stable forms of social protection, describing him as a true “organizer of charity”⁵. This does not stem from a managerial mindset, but from a profound evangelical fidelity: loving the poor means not leaving them exposed to constant precariousness. And it is precisely here that providence and foresight prove inseparable.

In the Vincentian charism, Providence gives the ultimate meaning to action: everything stems from trust in God; everything is oriented toward his love for the poor. Social welfare, on the other hand, is the concrete way in which this trust takes shape in history. Without Providence, social welfare risks becoming technocracy; without social welfare, Providence risks being misunderstood as fatalism.

Social works are increasingly called upon to grapple with complex regulations, economic sustainability, planning, and impact assessment. All of this can generate a certain spiritual fatigue, as if organization were taking away space from charity. The Vincentian charism helps us overcome this false dichotomy and to remain in reality with the gaze of faith and with the “sweat of our brow.”

Pope Benedict XVI also stated: “Charity needs organization as a prerequisite for an orderly and effective community service.” This statement could be read as a perfect synthesis of Vincentian thought. Organizing does not mean cooling love, but protecting it from improvisation and ineffectiveness. If there is a solid structure, the risk that the service will depend solely on the qualities of a single person is eliminated; instead, it becomes accessible to all who wish to share in this project of charity.

Applying Providence and foresight to the Third Sector today means, first and foremost, accepting complexity without losing one’s soul. It means planning with competence, while continually allowing oneself to be challenged by the concrete faces of the poor. St. Vincent never made important decisions without asking himself what was best for them. In a conference to the Daughters of Charity, he says: “When it comes to

feeding it and providing medical care; and the soul by preparing those who are near death to die well and helping those who will recover to live well.

⁵ See A. DODIN, *Monsieur Vincent*, Paris, 1960

⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 7

the poor, one must never act without reflection”⁷. This remains a decisive criterion today: planning, budgets, and strategies make sense only if they remain anchored in the reality of people and embedded in a logic of authentic discernment. Vincentian Providence is never disembodied: it arises from listening and allows itself to be corrected by experience.

2) Providence: A Call to Reality

To address the theme of Providence and Social Welfare in the experience of Saint Vincent is to enter into the heart of a spirituality that is deeply evangelical and, at the same time, surprisingly modern. Vincent is not an abstract theorist, but a man who thinks starting from reality and, above all, from the history of the least among us. Precisely for this reason, his theology is never situated outside of history, but always within its contradictions, its urgent needs, and its concrete limitations. Even within the realm of theological reflection, one can speak of a practical theology in Vincent—that is, a theology that begins from the bottom up, from a concrete vision of humanity, and is then reinterpreted in the light of the mystery of the Incarnation⁸.

From the very beginning of his journey, Vincent understood that the Christian faith cannot be reduced to a generic trust in God, detached from human responsibilities. Providence, for him, is not a consolatory principle, but a demanding category that compels one to question how God works in history. We can affirm that trusting in God does not mean shirking the duty to act with intelligence and responsibility. This nuance is particularly important for us, not only to remember, but above all to translate into our actions.

The decisive experience that marks Vincent’s journey is his encounter with the poor as the place of God’s revelation. It is no coincidence that he comes to define the poor as “lords and masters”; we read in one of his talks: “God loves the poor and consequently loves those who love the poor; for when one loves a person deeply, one also feels affection for their friends and for those who serve them. Now, since we of the Little Company of the Mission strive to devote ourselves with affection to the service of the poor, who are God’s favorites, we have reason to hope that, for their sake, God will love us. Take courage, then, brothers; let us devote ourselves with renewed love to the service of the poor; indeed, let us seek out the most wretched and the most abandoned. Let us acknowledge before God that they are our lords and masters, and that we are unworthy to render them our humble services”⁹.

This exhortation must be understood in its profound theological meaning: the poor are not simply the recipients of an act of charity, but subjects who guide the action of charity and determine its authentic meaning. In them, Vincent recognizes the suffering Christ, according to a careful reading of Matthew 25. It is not a matter of physical sight, but of perceiving another presence, which points to something greater: the experience of Love.

Here providence comes into play, for it allows us to see beyond human struggles and appearances and gives us an additional reason to continue the work. It is precisely this centrality of the poor that prompts Vincent to rethink the relationship between providence and organization. It is an interplay that brings to light true respect for the poor

⁷ COSTE, *SV*, IX, p. 124

⁸ See G. MARTINELLI, *Theological and Spiritual Implications of the Missionary Charity Lived by St. Vincent de Paul*, CLV, Rome 2025

⁹ *SVit*, X, p. 331

and for every work or person. If the poor are truly “lords,” then charity toward them cannot be haphazard, sporadic, ineffective, or simply dependent on the person who initiated it. From this arises the conviction that charity must be not only fervent but also structured. In a letter to Louise de Marillac, Vincent writes: “Charity cannot exist unless it is well-ordered”¹⁰. This is a statement of immense significance, for it affirms that order is not the enemy of the Spirit, but a condition for its fruitfulness and endurance. Prudence is not synonymous with the bureaucratization of charity, but rather means giving charitable action a long-term perspective, preventing it from succumbing to the logic of momentary and unresolved welfare dependency.

Foresight has at heart the promotion of the person in all their dimensions and also requires an intellectual honesty that translates into discerning whether and how we can carry out a specific project or act of charity. We must not foster false hopes, nor should we undertake projects that do not correspond to our actual strengths and capabilities. Providence is not recklessness, but always involves at least two elements: faith and feasibility.

In a letter addressed to Luisa, Vincent encouraged her not to stop, especially in the face of difficulties, but to verify whether the poor had received at least some relief. He wrote: “Mademoiselle, my God, how well you have done everything you told me about! Take heart; we must not stop now, just when the journey is at its best. If the difficulties opposing you should prevent a successful outcome, let it be as it must be. There is no need to worry about sin, neither mortal nor venial. The poor will have received, nonetheless, some relief, and the people who assisted them will have the merit. I dearly wish that we may belong to this blessed company, and I thank you for the people you have provided us for this purpose.”¹¹

Luisa, in full harmony with Vincent, further develops this insight. In her writings, she insists that service to the poor requires attention, competence, and perseverance. In one of her letters to the Daughters of Charity, she states: “We must take great care of temporal things, because they belong to the poor, who are the members of Jesus Christ”¹².

Here a “*theology of stewardship*” clearly emerges as a spiritual act: managing resources is not a distraction from the mission, but a concrete way of honoring Christ present in the poor. And this must be done with the awareness that nothing is ours, but everything is administered to improve our service.

Vincent urges us to trust in God, but at the same time warns against any form of irresponsible spiritualism. In a talk to the Daughters of Charity, he states: “Prudence, therefore, dear sisters, is a virtue that inclines one to act in the proper way. Prudence, sisters, prudence in *everything*”¹³. The virtue of prudence can be understood as foresight: the ability to foresee, to plan, and to ensure continuity and sustainability in our works.

3) Foresight: Community and Organization

¹⁰ COSTE, *Correspondence*, II

¹¹ *SVit*, I, p. 234

¹² See LUISA DE MARILLAC, *Spiritual Writings*

¹³ *SVit*, IX, p. 1020

Foresight is often seen as a sterile aspect, almost out of step with the Vincentian charism. Yet both Vincent and Louise, in their experience, sought to combine Providence with foresight in charity.

One need only consider Vincent's early experience with the sick family: many people responded to the call to help them, but the danger was that the aid would remain sporadic. It was then that Vincent had the insight to organize the charitable effort.

Or consider the numerous visits Luisa made to the Charities, recalling how important it was not only to follow the regulations but to organize the service as effectively as possible. It was a new way of conceiving and living charity: driven by a truly inventive creativity, yet with both feet firmly on the ground. St. Vincent, in a talk to the Daughters of Charity, speaks precisely of foresight, linking it to the responsible dimension of work—not as an act of the individual, but as the work of the community. “The ant, dear sisters, is a little creature to whom God has given such foresight that everything it can gather for the winter during the summer and harvest season, it brings to the community. Note well, dear sisters, that it does not appropriate it for its own use, but brings it for the others to the community's small storehouse. Bees behave in the same way: in summer they gather honey from the flowers to sustain themselves in winter and bring it, like the ants, to the community. They are merely small creatures, among the smallest on earth, yet God has given them the instinct for work, making them an example to us of provident labor”¹⁴. The image is extremely eloquent: Providence is not individual accumulation, but shared responsibility; it is not selfish calculation, but organization in service of the common good.

Benedict XVI, in the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, takes up this line of thought by affirming that Christian love needs structures so as not to be reduced to an occasional gesture. He writes: “Love—caritas—will always be necessary, even in the most just society... but it needs organization”¹⁵. This statement sheds light, in retrospect, on the work of St. Vincent, who had intuited centuries in advance that charity, without social security, risks becoming ineffective and even unjust.

Pope Francis, for his part, insists on the primacy of reality and the need for active charity. In **Evangelii Gaudium** he states: “Charity is not a sterile sentiment, but an operational criterion”¹⁶.

For Vincent and Louise, charity is never merely an emotion, but a structured, verifiable practice oriented toward the genuine good of people. In the Vincentian vision, the affective and the effective go hand in hand. Within this framework, we can also understand Vincent's perhaps most famous expression: “Moreover, since love is infinitely inventive, after being nailed to the wicked wood of the cross, to win over the souls and hearts from which it wishes to be loved, not to mention other stratagems and a whole series of innumerable works of which, during his earthly life, he made use for this purpose, foreseeing that his absence might be a cause of forgetfulness and cooling of our hearts, he wished to remove this inconvenience by instituting the most august Sacrament, where He is truly and substantially present as in *heaven*”¹⁷.

This inventiveness is not disordered creativity, but the ability to find new answers to new needs, while remaining faithful to the spirit of the Gospel. It is what we might call

¹⁴ *SVit*, IX, pp. 360–361

¹⁵ BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 28

¹⁶ POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 199

¹⁷ *SVit*, X, p. 128

today “planning”: the ability to translate a charism into appropriate historical forms, without betraying its original inspiration.

Providence frees us from the fear of failure and the illusion of total control; foresight frees us from improvisation and the risk of ineffective charity. Together, they safeguard an evangelical charity capable of enduring over time.

4) Contributions the Vincentian charism can offer to the third sector

In the current context of the Third Sector, marked by growing professionalization, increasingly complex regulatory constraints, and a strong demand for effectiveness and measurability, the Vincentian charism can offer a valuable and, in some cases, decisive contribution. It is not simply a matter of adding a “spiritual note” to already established practices, but of offering a criterion of discernment capable of deeply guiding social action.

At least five contributions that the Vincentian charism can offer the third sector today:

1. **Placing the person at the center as a subject and not merely as a recipient.** The first specific contribution of the Vincentian charism to the Third Sector is to put the person back at the center as a subject and not merely as a recipient. In a context where there is a risk of reducing people to users, beneficiaries, or project numbers, this vision is strongly countercultural. The Vincentian charism reminds us that every form of social welfare, every structure, and every service must be continually evaluated based on its real impact on the dignity of the most vulnerable.
2. **Combining compassion and competence.** A second fundamental contribution is the ability to combine compassion and competence. Vincent never pits the heart against reason; on the contrary, he invites us to serve the poor with affection, but also with intelligence. The Vincentian charism legitimizes and indeed encourages formation, planning, evaluation, and economic sustainability. All of this is not foreign to spirituality, but constitutes a concrete expression of it.
3. **Providence as a criterion for discernment.** A third contribution concerns the way of understanding Providence as a criterion for discernment and not as an easy solution. For the Third Sector, this means having the ability to look ahead, beyond the immediate, not stopping at mere calculation, but having the ability to go deeper.
4. **The preventive dimension of social action.** A fourth contribution is the focus on the preventive dimension of social action. St. Vincent understands that charity must also address the causes of poverty. His works are not created merely to respond to immediate needs, but to accompany, educate, and reintegrate. In this sense, the Vincentian charism offers the Third Sector a holistic vision of the person, which intelligently combines assistance and promotion.
5. **The relational and communal style.** A fifth contribution, particularly important today, is the relational and communal style. Vincentian works always arise from a “doing together”: priests, consecrated persons, laypeople, benefactors, and the poor themselves. There is never any individual protagonism. This style is extremely relevant in a Third Sector that often struggles to network and overcome competitive mindsets, forgetting that everything is at the service of humanity and its ultimate good.

Conclusion

Vincent and Louise offer us a shining example of how trust in God (Providence) and responsibility in the management of charitable works (Prudence) are two sides of the same Christian mission. Providence opens us to trust and to listening to God in the poor; Prudence asks us to translate this trust into sustainable structures and initiatives capable of bearing fruit over time. Holding Providence and foresight together ultimately means cultivating a style: a sober, transparent, participatory style, in which resources are administered as entrusted goods and not as possessions.

We can affirm that the Vincentian charism offers us a precious key for the present: believing in Providence does not mean renouncing foresight, but giving it a soul; building foresight does not mean extinguishing faith, but making it credible. It is this alliance that makes service to the poor not only effective, but authentically evangelical.

To conclude this reflection, let us allow two voices—different yet deeply convergent—to summarize the heart of our journey.

In the Gospel according to Luke we read: “To whom much has been given, much will be required” (Lk 12:48). It is a demanding call: every gift received becomes a responsibility, every grace translates into a task.

In a strikingly similar vein, Stefano Zamagni reminds us: “The economy needs ethics not to be good, but to function¹⁸.” Even the management of our works, therefore, cannot stand without a moral and relational foundation.

This is where the strength of the Vincentian charism lies: in holding together faith and responsibility, gift and organization, Providence and foresight. Only in this unity does service to the poor become credible, fruitful, and capable of a future.

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