Readings by Vincent de Paul
Introduction to Devout Life

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(The green numbers in brackets refer to the pages of the Annals)

For those who wish to explore the originality of Vincentian spirituality, Brother Ducourneau, who knew Saint Vincent well, provides an excellent clue: he acknowledges that, strictly speaking, all of the "Lecturer's" words could be found in books: *"He only says common things. However, on* certain subjects, he excels both in practice and in expression."[1] Moreover, he adds, *he gives them according to our needs and* obligations, which *differ in many ways from those of other Companies."*[2] It is therefore not *doctrinal* originality, but *psychological* originality, that we must try to characterize. To achieve this goal, the least questionable, if not the most penetrating, approach will be to show, based on the sources, the variations, the *specific way of choosing and using.*

The fate he reserves for *the Introduction to the Devout Life*—chronologically one of his first printed sources, since Cardinal de Bérulle's *"The Greatness of Jesus"* would not appear until 1623—can help us to rediscover, in a special light, a face already known, a character already loved.

Popularity.

It was in 1609, when Mr. Vincent returned from Rome and entered Paris for the first time, that *the Introduction to the Devout Life* appeared on the shelves of the Lyon bookseller Pierre Rigaud. In the same year, the little book was published in a second edition, and the following year in a third. Its popularity grew with each passing day. In Douai, Balthazar Bellere, without the author's consent, produced three editions (1610, 1611, 1616). Millanges in Bordeaux and Thomas de la Ruelle in Paris did the same. The work was therefore a resounding success, which time, far from disproving, would confirm and justify. It was probably during this period of widespread distribution that Saint Vincent, either in Paris or in Clichy, read and meditated on this little masterpiece. We are certain that he appreciated it when he founded the Charity of Châtillon in 1617, for he asked the members of the Brotherhood to read it.[3]

Adoption.

At that time, the good-natured Bishop and Prince of Geneva had just published a new edition that could be considered definitive[4] . The book became familiar to Saint Vincent, [240] and its adoption

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[1] XII, 448,
[2] XII, 448,
[3] XIII, 435,
[4] 1616 edition.

proved to be in the following years, without repentance and without restrictions[5] . Throughout Saint Vincent's life and works, we find praise for Philothea's manual. In 1628, when he testified for the beatification process of the Bishop of Geneva[6] , and in 1630, when he asked Louise de Marillac to make her retreat following the instructions in *the Introduction*[7] . A few years later, he adopted the method of prayer for the Daughters of Charity[8] , then advised them to read it daily as an exercise in spirituality[9] . In 1653, he again made explicit mention of the familiar book[10] .

Similar guidelines were given to missionaries, and thus we learn from a letter from Vincent de Paul to Mother de Chantal that missionaries and ordinands followed the method of prayer in *the Introduction to the Devout Life*[11] . When leaving for Madagascar, Mr. Nacquart took several copies with him and made them the subject of spiritual reading for all the passengers on the ship[12] . Quotations from St. Francis de Sales recur in the *"Entretiens"* of 1657[13] , and especially in those of 1658. Mr. Vincent complacently reports the words of a good servant of God—who could well be the Commander of Sillery— "Do you see *that whoever observes everything contained in this book will attain great perfection, even though it seems that all the Practices are familiar and accommodating to human infirmity?"* [14] . That same year, the book was read or reread in the refectory of Saint-Lazare[15] . [241]

In 1640, Mr. Alméras, reworking the French edition of Busée's *Meditations*, placed the method of prayer following *the Introduction to the Devout Life* at the beginning[16] .

There is little doubt about it. We are looking at the book which, after the Gospel and the Epistles of St. Paul, was the most frequently consulted and most widely used manual by St. Vincent de Paul and the first workers of the Mission. The catalog of the old library of Saint-Lazare shows the presence of numerous copies of this breviary of Christian life for people of the world[17] .

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5 Although he noted in 1641 that the method of prayer described *in the Introduction to the Devout Life* was not suitable for all the Daughters of Charity, he still followed in the footsteps of the Bishop of Geneva. (See *Introduction,* II p. ch. VIII, p. 85, Annecy edition, 1893).

6 XIII, 81.

7 I, 155: similarly in 1636, cf. I, 384,

8 IX, 13 (1634)

9 IX, 43,

10 IX, 585.

11 I, 562.

12 III, 551,

13 XI, 424,

14 XII, 2-3 (May 17, 1658).

15 VII, 363. To Mr. Jean Martin, November 15, 1658. "Today in the refectory, we were told that virtues that are meditated upon but not practiced are more harmful than beneficial to us. See *Introduction to the Devout Life,* L. II, ch. VIII, p. 83: "Virtues that are meditated upon but not practiced sometimes inflate the mind and courage... but they are not such, but rather vain and dangerous, if they are not practiced."

16 Solid reasons put forward by Mr. Coste *(Monsieur Vincent*, vol. III, p. 13; contrary to what was stated in the publication of Saint Vincent's correspondence, vol. I, p. 197, in 1920) argue in favor of attributing this heavily revised edition of J. Busée's *Méditations* to Mr. Almeras. The first edition appeared in 1644. It is not in the National Library; Mr. Joseph Guichard had the good fortune to discover and purchase a copy of the 1647 edition, which he kindly made available to me.

17 The first catalog, which was begun before 1670 (as evidenced by the writing and classification of prohibited books), is kept at the *Bibliothèque Mazarine,* under the reference number 4169 in the *Manuscripts section.*
On page 695, it mentions an Italian, Spanish, and English edition; on page 641, a French edition from 1657; on page 663, other editions that cannot be identified; and on page 623, the complete works edition, Paris, in-f., 1652.

This preference continued even after St. Vincent's death. We find references to *the Introduction* both in the book inventories of the Daughters of Charity in the 18th century and in the list of books from which he asked the Director of the Internal Seminary to draw the principles for the formation of the Lazarists[18] .

This persistence in the use, even in the "cult" of the Writings of St. Francis de Sales, as well as St. Vincent's insistence on calling the Bishop of Geneva "*Our Blessed Father*," invite us to take a closer look at Philothea's Directory, to reread it in a Vincentian way, *"slowly and calmly, for, he tells us, there is a difference between reading slowly and calmly, reflecting deeply so that the mind not only understands and satisfies its curiosity, but also absorbs the truths presented to it, to help it live better; "Our mind is like a small vessel with a very narrow opening; if we pour water into it little by little, in small streams, it enters without loss* [242] *and the vessel fills up, but if we pour it in quickly and abundantly, very little of it penetrates, or rather, nothing penetrates*"[19] .

The place of devotion

When we usually define devotion *as being attached to religious practices,* "we no longer agree with St. Francis de Sales, who understood devotion not as a part of piety, but as the whole of religious life, *the active love of God, which "makes us act carefully, frequently, and promptly"* [20] . And in teaching about this devotion, he aimed to *extend it to everyone, to* show that it "should be—for this reason—practiced *differently* by the gentleman, the craftsman, the servant, the prince, the widow, the daughter, the bride"... "And not only that," he added, "the practice of devotion *must* be *adapted* to the strengths, affairs, and duties of each individual... wherever we are, we must aspire to the perfect life." [21]

Vincentian Adaptation. -

These two principles, *the definition of love of God* in terms *of action* and the need *to adapt religious life* to the concrete demands of worldly situations, were particularly dear to St. Vincent. We remember his axioms, so clear and so sharply engraved, through which his conviction was expressed in an indisputable way. "Let us love *God, my brothers, let us love God, but let it be at the expense of our arms, let it be with the sweat of our brow. Totum opus nostrum in operatione consistit*[22] *... If the love of God is a fire, zeal is its flame; if love is a sun, zeal is its ray. Zeal is the purest form of love for God."* In doing so, was he not echoing *the Introduction to the Devout Life? "In the end, charity and devotion are no more different from each other than flame is from fire, especially since charity is a spiritual fire, and when it is strongly inflamed, it is called devotion: so that devotion adds nothing to the fire of charity except the flame that makes charity prompt, active, and diligent, not only in observing God's commandments, but also in exercising heavenly counsel and inspiration"*[23] .

He also insists on the autonomous, original perfection that must characterize the Institute of the Daughters of Charity. They [243] are not religious, this is understood[24] , but they must possess

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18 The *Directoire,* dating from the 18th century, is kept at the *Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal,* Ms 1229.

19 XI, 152,

20 *Introduction,* L, I, ch. I, pp. 14-15.

21 *Introduction,* L. I, ch. III, 19, 20, 21.

22 XI, 40-41; XII, 307-308; *(See Dictionnaire de Spiritualité,* vol. II, article *"Charité." L'École Française,* P. Pourrat, col. 616-617.

23 *Introduction,* L. I, ch. I, p. 16. (La Pleide, p. 33)

24 V, 406; VII, 49, VIII, 237; IX, 533, 662. X, 651, 658, 661; XIII, 603.

religious virtues to a higher degree[25] . Moreover, they must exercise these virtues in a particular "spirit" that is unique to them, in a spirit different from that of the Carmelites and the Daughters of Saint Mary[26] . And it is St. Francis de Sales himself who speaks in favor of St. Vincent's convictions: *"Our Blessed Father, the Bishop of Geneva, says it so well in his* Introduction: *If a bishop wanted to follow the spirit of the Carthusians and live like them, he would* not *be living according to the spirit that God has given him, and he would not be fulfilling his* duty"[27] . Whether it be about priests, the Mission[28] , or the Servants of the Poor, it is from his own spirit that he defines autonomy and builds his spirituality (the duty of state.

The path of Mr. Vincent. -

A matter of common sense, one might say, an affirmation of common law... Undoubtedly, but one that did not come without some practical difficulties in the time of St. Francis de Sales and St. Vincent. Theoretically, in fact, the principle laid down by the Bishop of Geneva had *two* main *consequences*.

The first was the reintegration of the religious spirit into the world, the sanctification of what was deliberately considered profane. This first consequence took shape in a true Christian renewal, to which the little book *Introduction* was no stranger[29] .

The second consequence could be seen in the reintegration of nuns into the world through the founding of a secularized order, which, thanks to this secularization, was able to work with the "damned" masses. By abolishing the cloister and mingling with the people, the current of Christian life coming from the summit of religious life would join the efforts of the worldly who climbed the hillsides, *Introduction to the Devout Life* in hand. Since any state could legitimately nourish the desire for the perfect life and could also defend it outside the cloister, nuns could in principle mingle with the world. We know how this attempt at secularization of the nuns, in this case the nuns of the Visitation, failed in the face of the uncompromising objections [244] of the Archbishop of Lyon, Denis de Marquernont. For this reason, the Visitation nuns, originally intended to *visit* the poor, did not visit. [30]

At the same time, Vincent de Paul was on the path that would lead him, in his desire to sanctify the world, to found the Company of the Daughters of Charity. In 1617, he was in the process of establishing the Confraternities that would call for the creation of a religious community dedicated to the service of the poor. Following a different approach and spirit, this *compromise* would be a realization of Salesian thought. The new group called for by circumstances, guided by the hand of God, would be a *religious* community in spirit and virtues, but lay, or rather secular, parish-based, in terms of its canonical status. Since it was impossible to open the doors of the cloister, Vincent de Paul did not bring religious souls into it, but he constituted them into a "religion" whose cloister was the whole world. We know with what finesse and mischievous good humor he found for his Daughters all the elements of the old religious life: "Their *monasteries* will be the houses of the sick

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[25] X, 143-1,45; 661.

[26] IX, 459, 581-582; X, 123, 124; XII, 262,

[27] IX, 385, cf. Introduction, L. I, Ch. III, p. 20,

[28] See XII, 95; 298-311, etc.

[29] A. Dufourcq: "The Future of Christianity. Saint Vincent de Paul, Pascal, the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes," Paris (Plon), 1936, clearly outlined the Catholic effort and the reasons for its failure.

[30] Saint Francis de Sales did not achieve what he wanted. See Coste, *Monsieur Vincent,* volume I, pp. 108-109, N. I. And Saint Vincent*: "My Sisters, it has been deemed appropriate that the name of society or confraternity remain with you, and His Grace the Archbishop himself has so ordered, lest, if the name of congregation were given to you, there might be those who would wish in the future to change the house into a cloister and become nuns, as the daughters of Saint Mary did. God has allowed poor girls to take the place of these ladies."*

and the house where the superior resides; their *cells* will be rented rooms. Their *chapel will be* the parish church; their cloister, the streets of the city; their *enclosure,* obedience, since they must go only to the sick or to places necessary for their service; for *a grille,* the fear of God; for a *veil*, holy modesty, and making no other *professions* to ensure their vocation... than this continual trust they have in divine Providence... and the offering they make to Him in all that they are and... their service in the person of the poor. [31]

It has been noted that, in the original manuscripts of *the Introduction,* "the idea that Philothea should practice, albeit to a lesser degree, the virtues required of persons consecrated to God" was expressed twice[32] . It was therefore by another route that St. Vincent realized the idea of the Bishop of Geneva. [245]

Conditions of devotion.

After this position of principle, which opens the door to devotion, St. Francis de Sales specifies the character of religious life in the world and shows the need for a guide on the path to perfection. This preeminence of *spiritual direction* and the director will not be retained in this form by St. Vincent. Drawing instead on ancient forms of religious life, he thought above all of providing the Daughters of Charity with Superiors or Sister Servants to whom they could open themselves in complete confidence. Nothing therefore leads us to see any kind of dependence here, but the following chapters dealing with the purging of the soul were used by the founder of the Mission as a framework for retreats. As for *general confession,* the primary goal of the missions, we know that the confession of sacrilegious confessions and the ignorance of priests in matters of the sacraments sufficiently explain it. This sacramental practice was a condition of salvation for souls; for Philothea, who was a little more advanced, it was the first step on the path to perfection. A different perspective. Nevertheless, the widespread practice of general confession could rightly draw inspiration from and claim the general patronage of the author of *the Introduction to the Devout Life.*

The protest

The protest that follows the general confession, on the other hand, is adopted in its entirety. "At *the end of the prayer rehearsal*," says Mr. Alméras, "*a document similar to the one in the Introduction to the Devout Life was read aloud*"[33] . This practice, customary at the Mother House since 1644-1645, spread to a few other houses, then in 1662 it was imposed on all the houses of the Company. In the copy that Mr. Alméras had sent, a few stylistic changes had been made. Subsequently, further revisions, made by an unknown hand, produced the text that is still read every year at dawn on New Year's Day[34] .

The general purpose of the Introduction.

Once this clarification regarding God had been made, it was then necessary to keep Philothea in a state of grace and begin the real work of enlightening the soul. Three *positive* means were given : prayer, the sacraments, and the practice of virtues. The last two parts dealt with the struggle against temptations and spiritual retreat. [246]

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[31] X. 661.

[32] *Preface* to the 1893 edition. *Dom Mackey,* p. XLI.

[33] *Circulars of the Superiors General,* I, pp. 58-59.

[34] The changes made when Mr. Alméras' circular was sent were grammatical or literary in nature. Cf. *Annales,* 1920, vol. 85, pp. 37-38

There is no need to laboriously retrace this path, counting each stone along the way. By fixating on the material borrowings, we would lose sight of the overall picture that allows us to situate Vincentian teaching in relation to Salesian doctrine. Let us simply establish a few points of reference.

Prayer

In matters of prayer, St. Vincent is a direct disciple of St. Francis de Sales. He borrows from him the framework and the method[35] . If he departs from it—very rarely—it is still to follow the instructions of the Bishop of Geneva, who allows great freedom in the practice of mental prayer[36] . It should be noted in this regard that the Library of Saint Lazarus kept several copies of the books that Francis de Sales recommended to Philothea for effective prayer: *Saint Bonaventure,[37] Bellintani,[38] Bruno,[39] Capiglia,[40] Grenade,[41] Dupont,[42] Arias,[43]* .

Communion.

Of the second positive means of approaching God, the sacraments, Saint Vincent retained, among other things, the instruction regarding weekly communion. However, the soul must not remain attached to venial sin[44] . Later, he would firmly maintain this position against the objections of Mr. Dehorgny, who was directly inspired by the rigorist attacks of the Grand Arnauld[45] . It is also worth noting the instructions given by Saint Vincent to Louise de Marillac on how to attend Mass according to the method of introduction. All these straws point us in the direction of the wind, or rather, of the Spirit.

Borrowing and originality

But ultimately, what matters to us [247] is not that he adopted this or that way of understanding virtue—gentleness, for example*,* from the author of *the Introduction*, or that he appropriated this or that remark on how to combat temptations. Our intention is not so much to add up these elements—which can sometimes be useful—as to try to bring out Monsieur Vincent's own originality.

In 1620, said Henri Bremond, French devotion awoke to Salesianism. While many nuances could be added to this statement, on the whole it remains true. Saint Vincent him , liked to remark *that* "in Paris*, people are filled with the spirit of Bishop de* Genève"[46] .

Was Saint Vincent a *pure* Salesian? Certainly not. Other teachings that the devout humanism of Saint Francis de Sales ignored or deliberately left in the shadows provided essential elements for the doctrine and "spirit" of the founder of the Mission. The difference in their works, enriched by

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35 See appendix*: "Prayer according to St. Francis de Sales and St. Vincent."*

36 *Introduction,* L. II, ch. VIII, p. 85,

37 Bonaventure, Ms. 4169. Sect. "*Sancti Patres."*

38 Bellintani, *Pratica dell'Oration Mentale* (sic), Venice, 1592, cf. *Biblioth. Mazarine,* Ms. 4169, p. 681.

39 Bruno. *Meditations on the Life and Passion of Jesus Christ.* Douai, 1596, Lyon, 1615. (Cf. Ms, 4169, p. 709)

40 Capiglia, *Introduction,* L. II, ch. I, p. 71, ch. VI, p. 81. *Meditations on the Gospels,* Paris, 1601; Ms. 4169 indicates 3 copies, p. 655, 683

41 Grenada. *Guide for Sinners,* Ms. 4169, pp. 638, 639, 661, 701. Prayer, pp. 638, 639, (bis)

42 Dupont, *Meditations,* Douai, 1611, Ms. 4169, p. 655, 635 (Ed. 1628, 1638, 1630-1631.

43 Arias. *Meditations,* Rouen, 1606, Ms, Ms, 4169, p. 681.

44 IX, 340-341,

45 III, 321, 362-367.

46 III, 76.

experience gained during a different historical period and in response to different needs, led Monsieur Vincent to modify, if not religious "customs," at least the image of this Philothea whom he had truly adopted.

From then on, Philothea was no longer of the city, but of the fields. She was no longer bourgeois and could not go to the ball: she lived poorly and tested her love of God every day in the crucible of her hard work. She sacrificed everything to God and remained on this path through prayer and obedience. An intimate consolation soothes her heart: she knows that she is continuing the work of Christ and she inwardly protests in each of her actions her desire to honor him in a spirit of humility and charity. This emphasis on Christ and humility, which is not found in the same light in St. Francis de Sales, gives the Philothea presented to us by St. Vincent a luminous, gentle, and serious appearance. It is unique to her in this family of God's children, where all are different yet similar.

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I. — Remote preparation.

Subject matter. -

- Read carefully the day before (SV., IX, 219-426).

- Observe the end and anticipate the resolutions. (SV., IX, 7, XI, 356, 404).

- Organize your thoughts. (SV., X, 590)

Subject.

- Purity of soul through contrition or confession. (SV, IX, 43).

- Peace of mind and contemplation. [248] (SV, IX, 7, 219, 116).

- Do not anticipate God's will. (SV, X, 129-130)

II. — Immediate Preparation.

1. Presence of God

In general. Introduction L. II ch. I, p. 71 - SV. XI, 404;

Omnipresence. Introduction, L. II ch. 2, p. 74 - SV. IX, 4, X, 587, XI, 404)

Presence through grace (Introd., L. II, ch. 2, p. 74 - SV. X, 588; XI, 405).

Vision of Our Lord in Heaven. (Intro., L. II, Ch. 2, p. 75 - SV, X, 587; XI, 404);

Representing Our Lord in the imagination. (Introduction, L. II, ch. 2, p. 76 - SV. X, 587).

2. Invocation.

Adoration. (Intro., L. II, Ch. 3; p. 77 - SV, X, 589.

Humiliation: Introduction, Book II, Chapter 3; p. 77.

Invocation: Introduction, Book II, Chapter 3; p. 77 - SV. X, 590.

3. Presentation.

Composition of the place. - Intro., L. II, Ch. IV, p. 78 - SV, X, 590

III. — Body of the prayer.

Either *Considerations, reflection. - Introduction,* Book II, Chapter V, p. 279. - SV, X, 591, XI, 405,

or definitions - Introduction, L., II, ch. V, p. 80 - SV. XI, 405,

IV. Effusion.

1. Various affections. - Introduction, Book II, Chapter VI, pp. 80-81 - SV, XI, 406.

2. Resolutions. - *Intro.,* L. II. ch. VIII, p. 83 - SV. IX, 13, 33, 35; XI, 255, 406, 87.

V. Conclusion.

1. Thanksgiving. - *Introduction,* Book V, Book X, pp. 572-573, Book XI, p. 407.

2. Offering of the heart. - *Introduction,* L. II, ch. VII, p. 82 - SV, X, 572-573, XI, 407,

3. The request. - *Introduction,* L. II, ch. VII, p. 82 - SV, X, 572-573, XI, 407.

VI. Spiritual bouquet. - *Introduction,* Book II, Chapter VII, pp. 82-83.

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