Readings by Monsieur Vincent

The Treatise on the Love of God

André DODIN, C.M.

Annals of the Congregation of the Mission, 1948: Volumes 112-113, pp. 479-497.
(The green numbers in brackets refer to the pages of the Annals)
(See Annals, vol. 106-107, pp. 239-248; vol. 110-111, pp. 447-464)

THE TREATISE ON THE LOVE OF GOD

b) *Life of Charity and Life of Prayer*

It was not enough for Francis de Sales to provide us with the identity of divine charity in the first five books of *the Treatise on the Love of God*; he also needed to complete his exposition and show us the movement of this charity. Such is the purpose of the seven other books of this monumental work, which condenses the ideas and experiences of a pastoral approach to mysticism.

Vincent de Paul carefully leafed through this second part of *the Treatise on the Love of God.* As he read, his soul blossomed and was reassured. This doctrinally rich book would be widely used.

Need we remind ourselves that the content of a work is not the same for everyone? The same book "offers an infinite number of possible perspectives that vary according to the direction of our attention, our interests and tastes, and the depth and delicacy of our soul"[1] . The reader's temperament and culture determine exactly what the author can convey to him. More than just contact with others, reading is the invention of oneself in others; and in the pure mirror of the Salesian soul, it is an image of himself that Mr. Vincent discovers, an image set in a different horizon, thus restoring his original fluidity and helping him to become aware of his unsuspected potential. This providential friend, through his protective loyalty, reveals him to himself, assuring his faith in his grace and vocation. Do these pages not seem to have been written especially for him? In any case, they allow him, as he reads them, to rediscover and even recover almost everything he himself has thought about the mystical life. Concentrated in a few formulas, is this not everything , what he himself has written in his own existence, without skipping a single page or making any deletions?

---

[1] L. LAVELLE, *La Parole et l'écriture (The Word and Writing),* Paris, 1942, p. 199.

To properly appreciate the spiritual legacy that Mr. Vincent left in the *Treatise on the Love of God,* it is not enough to juxtapose or compare Salesian phrases and Vincentian statements piece by piece. More than textual quotations, it is the general direction of thought, the moral context, that must hold our attention. They give new meaning to the borrowings made, and it is in order to bring this out clearly that we will consider for each of the teachings proposed, not only *the doctrine* but also *the moral experience* of the reader. This method will allow us to assess more accurately all the riches acquired. [480]

I. — THE TWO EXPRESSIONS OF LOVE

1° *Salesian Doctrine*

"Love," writes Francis de Sales, "is the movement and flow of the heart that comes about through the complacency we have in it... so that complacency is the great motive of love, just as love is the great movement of complacency." [2]

This complacency allows us to unite ourselves as much as humanly possible with the perfections of the divinity; through it, "we eat them spiritually because we make them our own and draw them into our hearts"[3] . "We therefore draw God's heart into our own, and he pours out his precious balm there"[4] .

But if complacency draws God into us, it *also draws* us *into him,* for "since divine perfections are stronger than our spirit, entering into it, they possess it" so that "not only is God ours, but we are His." [5]

In this movement of love, the heart remains at peace, even at rest, for its rest does not consist in "remaining motionless, but in no longer needing anything... in having no need to move... love seeks what it has found, not to enjoy it, but to rejoice in it"[6] .

However, the dialectic of human love is different from that of divine love. In man, love must normally begin with complacency and end with benevolence, that is, with the desire to exalt, magnify, and praise God; this benevolence will even strive to make all creatures praise God and will provoke the desire for heaven. In God, love is first of all creative benevolence and then, so to speak, complacency in the work accomplished.

2°The affective experience of Mr. Vincent

This doctrine of affective charity was very accessible to Vincent, who did not underestimate the power of feeling. Accustomed to reading mainly his letters of government, particularly those addressed to Saint Louise de Marillac, Messrs. Martin,

---

2 *Treatise on the Love of God* (Annecy edition), vol. IV, p. 255.

3 *Treatise on the Love of God,* vol. IV, p. 257.

4 *Treatise on the Love of God,* vol. IV, p. 260.

5 *Treatise on the Love of God,* vol. IV, p. 264.

6 *Treatise on the Love of God,* vol. IV, p. 267.

Jolly, and F. Get, we are tempted to leave the sensitive aspect of his character in the shadows[7] . Without undertaking an exhaustive investigation here, let us nevertheless attempt to outline some lines of research that will enable us to better understand Vincent's attitude toward piety and even affective religion.

Emotion played a role in Vincent de Paul's life. At fifteen or sixteen, his sense of self-esteem seemed quite profound. Not only was he ashamed to go with his father because he was poorly dressed and slightly lame, but he even refused to talk to him[8] . He was prone to tears and emotions: the letter from captivity bears witness to his capabilities[9] . After leaving his family nineteen years earlier, he made a trip to his native country. When he left home, he was literally overwhelmed. "I was in so much pain," he tells us, "that I could only *cry* all the way, and *cry almost incessantly...* my tender heart shared with them what I had and what I did not have... For *three months* I was consumed by this unrelenting desire to help my brothers and sisters; it was a constant burden on my poor mind." In the end, "God took away my tenderness for my parents"[10] .

The retreat at Soissons (1621), which established his vocation, did not yet give him all the "prudence" he needed, nor did it indicate the appropriate regime for his sensitivity. For about ten years (between the ages of forty and fifty), he imitated St. Francis de Sales and made extensive use of the resources of sensitivity. The letters or notes he sent at that time to Louise de Marillac, Mlle du Fay, or Mother de Chantal are rich in affectionate expressions.

He calls Mlle Legras his "dear Mademoiselle"[11] ; he takes extreme care to explain his comings and goings to her[12] ; he does not forget to mention "the one her heart cherishes"[13] ; he takes great care to maintain "the union of hearts in Our Lord"[14] . We also find this Salesian and somewhat devout language in the letters to Mlle Isabelle du Fay.

Suddenly, a few years later, between 1630 and 1632, Vincent de Paul banished all such expressions of sensitivity. Only a letter to Louise de Marillac still shows some

---

7 Let us recall that we currently have four hundred letters to Louise de Marillac, one hundred and seventy to F. Get, one hundred and thirty to Jean Martin, one hundred and twenty to Edme Jolly, one hundred to C. Ozenne, and eighty to E. Blatiron.

8 S.V. XII, 432: Testimony for the cause of beatification, "Processus ne pereant probationes," f° 916, v°.

9 He begins with tears in his eyes, the psalm "Super flumina Babylonis." S.V. 1,10.

10 He made this visit after June 23, 1623 (ABELLY, vol. I, p. 60), and before the Mission of Chartres; July 1623 (COLLET, vol. I, p. 111). He stays eight to ten days, XII, 219.

11 At this time, Vincent de Paul readily called L. de Marillac "my dear daughter" (S-V, I, 39, February 9, 1628: I,.62. 1628-1629), or "my dear young lady" (S.V. I, 51, 63, 69). In 1629-1630, the tone becomes more objective (I, 74). The year 1632 seems to mark the extreme limit of Salesian expressions (I, 169, 171).

12 S.V. I, 30, 109.

13 S.V. I, 170. "My heart is not my heart, but yours in that of Our Lord." Cf. S.V. I, 169.

14 S.V. I, 63, 71.

tenderness[15] . Undoubtedly, the difference in living conditions and the influx of works can partially explain the conciseness of style and sentiment. The rapidity of the change helps us to identify the stages of an evolution in sensitivity.

Since the retreat at Soissons (1621), Mr. Vincent's path has become increasingly clear. At first, out of caution, he followed the same path as the Bishop of Geneva, but his temperament, his grace, and his special vocation gradually asserted themselves and took him in another direction. [482]

INCIDENTS.

Between 1625 and 1630, circumstances, behind which Vincent increasingly clearly perceived the hand of God, invited him to reflect on the shortcomings of sentiment: under innocent appearances, he subtly thwarted the avarice of the Spirit of God. It is therefore not enough to affirm that flesh and blood do not enter the Kingdom of Christ; we must also call these tendencies by their familiar names and denounce all their concrete manifestations. Vincent de Paul does not fail to do so.

- *The excessive maternal tenderness of Louise de Marillac.*

In that same year, 1630—when he had been entrusted with the care of the "Illuminati of Picardy," who were venially guilty of religious sentimentality—Mr. Vincent undertook to deliver Saint Louise de Marillac from her excessive attachment to little Michel[16] . This legitimate affection threatened to become all-consuming. It polarized her entire inner life and distorted her path to God. Our Lord demands a tranquility that comes from "the stripping away of everything that is not God"[17] . The tone of the direction rises. Vincent, who had already attacked this imperfection in Saint Chantal, intends to train Mademoiselle de Marillac in "a dependent and gentle affection"[18] .

- *Affection for parents.*

A similar evolution, oriented toward the same ideal of detachment, also took place at the same time in his personal life.

After worrying about helping his parents, he asked for and obtained a grace of appeasement[19] . He had understood before 1623 that God was asking him for greater detachment[20] . He now felt compelled to honor the poor kinship of Our Lord. That is why he quickly adopted an uncompromising attitude toward his family that may seem brutal to us. The breakups manifested themselves in decisive acts. In August 1630,

---

15 S.V. I, 185. An exception must be made for the letters to St. Chantal and to the Mother of the Trinity. It is very difficult in these writings to distinguish between what comes from the "spirit" and what comes from convention.

16 "I have never seen a mother so strongly a mother as you: you are not a woman in anything else." S.V. I, 584.

17 S.V. I, 76.

18 S.V. I, 37, 76.

19 "I prayed to God that He would deliver me from this temptation, and I prayed so much that He finally took pity on me." S.V. XII, 219-220.

20 He spends eight or ten days telling them... that they should expect "nothing from me" (S.V. XII, 219).

one of his nephews arrived in Paris and went to see him at the Collège des Bons-Enfants[21] He hoped to receive some help. Overcoming his repugnance, Mr. Vincent came down from his room, and, as the Canon of Saint-Martin, who was visiting the college, tells us, "he went himself to the street where, having found his nephew, he embraced him, kissed him, and took him by the hand, and having led him into the courtyard, called down all the gentlemen of his company, to whom he said that this was the most honest man in his family, and made them all greet him."[22] However, "he gave him only enough to return on foot, as he had come, sending him away with only ten écus to travel about 180 leagues; he even asked for these ten écus as alms from Madame la Marquise de Maignelay."[23] .

A few days later, Vincent de Paul settled his family affairs once and for all and drew up his will (September 7, 1630)[24] . When the missionaries questioned him, he was able to clearly define his position: "Do you think I don't love my parents?" I have for them all the tenderness and affection that anyone else might have for their own family, and this natural love compels me to help them; but I must act according to the movements of grace and the gift of nature and think of the most abandoned poor, without dwelling on the bonds of friendship or kinship." [25]

Gradually, Vincent acquired this religious wisdom, which is balanced by an austere asceticism, but whose evangelical resonances allow us to recognize its perfect supernatural authenticity.

- *A call to action.*

This putting aside of emotional love was accelerated, according to ABELLY, who based his statements on the Memoirs of the Priests of the Mission, by a slogan received from an eminent figure. "Totum opus nostrum in operatione consistit": he often repeated these words and said he had learned them from a great servant of God who, lying on his deathbed, when asked for some words of edification, replied that he could see clearly at that hour that what some people took for contemplation, raptures, ecstasy, and what they called anagogical movements, divine unions, were nothing but smoke, and that this proceeded either from a deceptive curiosity or from the natural springs of a mind that had some inclination and facility for good ; whereas good and perfect action is the true character of the love of God." [26]

---

[21] ABELLY, vol. III, 208, 292; Cf. COLLET, vol. I, 168-169.

[22] ABELLY, vol. III, 208.

[23] ABELLY, vol. III, 292. In 1632, he made remarkable progress in his indifference towards all material possessions. He wrote about the dispute over Saint-Lazare: "Our Lord has made me as indifferent on this occasion as in any other matter *I have ever had " (S.V.* I,152). With what serenity he wrote to Saint Louise on the execution of the Keeper of the Seals, Louis de Marillac (May 10, 1632): "It matters to us how our parents go to God, provided they go there" (S.V. I, 154).

[24] *Annales,* vol. CI (1936), pp. 704-707. He had already made some donations to his brothers on September 4, 1626 (S.V. XIII, 61-62).

[25] ABELLY, III, 293.

[26] ABELLY, I, 82.

The same reflection was made in similar circumstances by Father Pierre GIRARDEL, who died in Rome on February 8, 1633. He had been in Toulouse at the time when Vincent de Paul was studying at the University, and after his religious profession in 1600, he remained in that city until 1615. He had even been rector there from 1612 to 1613. After a brief stay in Paris (1620-1623) and Bordeaux, he was sent to Rome. As he was about to die, the Master of the Order came to visit him and asked him for a few words of edification for the brothers present. He whispered with difficulty: "Totum negotium salutis nostrum pendet ab executione"[27] . Perhaps Fr. GIRARDEL is the [484] great servant of God mentioned by Mr. Vincent, who may have been advised of this singular reflection made on his deathbed. But even supposing that the sentence was not inherited, even indirectly, from the Dominican religious, the fact remains that a very clear and valuable directive was given to Mr. Vincent at an early stage. Between 1630 and 1635, we see a particular emphasis in his thinking on effective charity. In the sum of mystical theology presented to him by the Bishop of Geneva, he will freely make his choice according to his particular concerns.

3° *Vincent's teaching on the love of God*

Whenever Vincent spoke to the missionaries or the Daughters of Charity about the nature or effects of the love of God, he referred to the division of love into effective and affective love, which the Bishop of Geneva had borrowed from St. Bernard[28] . He also used this comparison between the Father and the Son to link all his explanations of love to a concrete image accessible to all[29] .

But he does not dwell on magnifying affective love. He simply mentions it and hastens to point out the actions that best express effective love.

Prayer itself is oriented toward action. Resolutions are the culmination of this[30] . They should not focus on a distant future that could slip away , but on the day that is beginning[31] . When Vincent de Paul sent the resolutions of a retreatant back to Saint Louise de Marillac one day, he revealed his entire thinking on good intentions that remain generalities. "I am sending you the resolutions of Mrs. N..., which are good,

---

27 On Father Pierre Girardel, see François GIRARDEL, *Vie de Pierre Girardel,* Langres, 1682 (National Library, 8° Ld27 8.755).
- PERCIN (Jean-Jacques), O.P., *Manumenta Conventus Tolosani,* Tolosa, 1693, pp. 150-152 (Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense).
- *Dominican Year,* February 8, 1644.
- FLORAND (Fr.), O.P. Introduction *to "The Cross of Jesus"* by Fr. Chardon, Paris, 1937, pp. XXIV-XXV.

28 *Treatise on the Love of God,* vol. IV, p. 301. Cf. St. Bernard, *Sermo* 50 *in Cantica* (§ 2), Latin Patrology (Migne), vol. 183, col. 1021. "Est caritas in actu, est et in affectu. Et de illa quidem. quae operis est, pute daturn esse legem. hominibus, mandatumque formatura: nom in affectu quis ita habeat, ut mandatur? Ergo illa mandatur ad meritum, ista in proemiurn datur."
This same distinction is used by Fr. Saint-Jure in his book, *De la connaissance et de l'amour du Fils de Dieu (On the Knowledge and Love of* the Son of God*)*, Paris, 1631 (books II and III). This book was common among the Daughters of Charity (cf. National Archives, H. 3.726).

29 S.V. IX, 475; 478; 592; XI, 43.

30 S.V. XI, 30, 87.

31 S.V. IX, 30.

but they would seem even better to me if she went into a little more detail. It would be good to encourage those who are doing the retreat exercises at your place to do this; the rest is merely a product of the mind, which, having found some ease and even some sweetness in the consideration of a virtue, flatters itself with the thought of being very virtuous; nevertheless, in order to become so in a solid way, it is expedient to make good resolutions for practice in particular acts and then [485] be faithful in carrying them out. Without this, one is often virtuous only in one's imagination. [32]

He distrusts emotional love that does not lead to action, for, according to the Bishop of Geneva, virtues that are meditated upon but not practiced are more harmful than useful[33] . "Let us love God," he declares in a passage that has become classic, "let us love God, my brothers: but let it be at the expense of our arms, let it be with the sweat of our brow. For very often, so many acts of love for God, of complacency, of benevolence and other similar affections and interior practices of a tender heart, although very good and very desirable, are nevertheless very suspect when they do not lead to the practice of effective love." [34]

This lack of concrete exercise explains the inability of certain souls to escape from the mediocrity that overwhelms them. "Having failed to receive grace, they lack grace." "We see many who, however good their intentions and however beautiful their resolutions, nevertheless fall short when it comes to putting them into effect or overcoming difficulties, because, having failed to receive grace, they lack grace, and then scruples gnaw at them, their self-love forms a conscience that accommodates sensuality and nature: it regains the upper hand: I am not exaggerating: experience shows this daily." [35]

TRANSPOSITION.

Let us remember this repeated call to action, a sign of true love. Along with the care taken to consider Our Lord in all things, this was one of the most visible moral characteristics of Vincent de Paul's holiness[36] . Let us not believe, however, that sensitivity is entirely rejected in spiritual life. Very economical with human strength, Vincent uses it in another area: that of fraternal charity. Here he transposes what Francis de Sales had said about the love of complaisance and precisely characterizes the spirit of mercy and compassion that must be the mission , as it is God's own. The tone here is more masculine, the impact immediately active. "Missionaries must be deeply moved and afflicted in their hearts by the miseries of their neighbors. This misery and compassion must be visible on their faces, following the example of Our Lord who wept over the city of Jerusalem because of the calamities that threatened it.

---

[32] S.V. II,190.

[33] Cf. Introduction to the Devout Life (Annecy edition), 1. III, p. 83. S.V. VII, 363.

[34] ABELLY, L. I, p. 81.

[35] S.V. III, 163.

[36] ABELLY, L. I, 81-82.

Compassionate words must be used. They must be helped and assisted... everything in a charitable person breathes and preaches charity." [37]

By creating an atmosphere of respect and gentleness that facilitates the mutual giving of hearts and the communion of souls, charity thus brings about, in a very concrete way, union with God. "Charity is the cement that binds communities to God and people to one another, so that whoever contributes to the union of hearts in a community binds it indissolubly to God."[38] .

II. - THE PROBLEM OF PRAYER

This emphasis on effective results is particularly noticeable in an exercise that should normally ensure the connection between thoughts or affections and daily life: *prayer.* Vincent de Paul, who was not very speculative by temperament and missionary vocation, focuses all his teaching on mental prayer on resolutions. "The main fruit of prayer consists in making good resolutions."[39] One does not pray unless one delves into the details of one's faults and resolutions[40] . Prayer cannot be separated from life, for it is a concentrated exercise of Christian life.

Let us try to see how the experience of God and the world led Mr. Vincent to this conclusion.

1° *Mr. Vincent's Prayer*

Here we should try to analyze the intimacy of his prayer, uncover the driving forces of his religious life, and characterize his relationship with God. The paucity of our information does not allow us to carry out a study that would satisfy our desire to know his soul. At the very least, let us try to recognize certain aspects of his prayer and discern the rhythm of his inner life.

ABELLY, the only witness who speaks with any authority on the private life of Vincent de Paul, shows an embarrassed discretion. "It has not been possible to discover," he confides, "whether Mr. Vincent's prayer was ordinary or extraordinary, his humility having always made him hide the gifts he received from God, as much as possible."[41] It is true that the founder of the Mission did not indulge in confidences when he could not thereby humble himself or inform others. For us, no matter how fervently we observe him, three centuries of distance allow him to easily keep his secret. Let us try, however, to shed some indirect light by listening to him talk about

---

[37] S.V. XI, 76-77.

[38] S.V. II, 374.
"Gentle people seem to offer you their hearts and ask for yours in return." (S.V. XII,189).
"It is the nature of love to show respect and kindness toward the beloved." SV. XII, 265).

[39] S.V. XI, 87.

[40] Cf. S.V. XI, 301; II, 190.

[41] ABELLY, L. III, 53-54.

the religious life of others; let us even try to see everything that his improvised prayers reveal about his profound life.

a) *Indirect evidence*

Testifying at the beatification trial of Bishop de Genève, Vincent de Paul reveals one of his ejaculatory prayers. Six years earlier, he writes, around 1622, broken by illness, he recalled in his mind the shame of Francis de Sales and often said to himself: "O my God, how good you are, how good you are, since your creature, Bishop François de Sales, is so good."[42] "I had the good fortune to communicate with the late Bishop de Genève," he wrote twenty years later, "several [487] times during his lifetime. He had such great goodness that God's goodness was clearly visible through his." [43]

A simple, naive, affectionate elevation, which takes its starting point in the beauty or goodness of beings. "When he saw flowers or anything else beautiful or pleasant, he took the opportunity to think of the infinite perfection and beauty of God and to say in his heart these words, which were found written in his own hand: "What can compare with the beauty of God, who is the source of all beauty and perfection in creatures? Is it not from him that flowers, birds, stars, the moon, and the sun borrow their luster and beauty?" [44]

Even more evident is God's transparency in human activities, when the disproportion between the works and the human forces involved prompts God to intervene. "Three do more than ten when Our Lord lends a hand," declared Vincent de Paul, "and He always lends a hand when He takes away our human means and commits us to the necessity of doing something that exceeds our strength."[45] A discreet miracle then takes place. "O Sir," wrote St. Vincent to Étienne Blatiron, who was overloaded with work, "may the Good Lord appear in your little company and in your work." [46]

b) *Elevations and prayers.*

We find the same characteristics in the prayers that spring from St. Vincent's lips during his various conversations.

After exploring his subject, recognizing the nature of virtues, appreciating the motives, and measuring the means that will enable action, Vincent strives to further realize his purpose. The expression, which until now has been objective and very lively, transcends the listeners and enters into dialogue with the invisible. The flight of this soul is simple, imperceptible, and steady.

---

[42] S.V. XIII, 78-79.

[43] S.V. III, 493 (October 3, 1649).
From Bishop Jean-François Bagni. "His wisdom, his kindness, and the affection with which he honored our little company here were a reflection of God's wisdom, His kindness, and the favor with which His divine Majesty honors our little company." (S.V. I, 548, May 10, 1639.)

[44] ABELLY, L. III, 51.

[45] ABELLY, L. II, 11 (Cf. SV, IV,115-116, December 4, 1650)

[46] S.V. II, 573 (March 23, 1646).

From a fact or a feature of the Savior's life, an act of admiration full of love and respect emerges: "Let us look at the Son of God: oh, what a heart of charity, what a flame of love!" Quickly, this admiration turns into an imploration, an ardent conversation: "My Jesus, tell us, please, who drew you from heaven to come and suffer the curse of the earth, so many persecutions and torments that you have received there?" The example of the Savior then concretizes this prayer into an immediate resolution: "Gentlemen, if we had a little of this love, would we stand idly by? Would we let those we could help perish?"[47] Beauty, tender love, says Christ, understanding compassion for the poor, obscure work ennobled by the humble worker of Nazareth—these are the [488] sentiments that sustain his prayer, the harmonics that prolong its repercussions.

These few clues, incapable of revealing his inner religion to us in its entirety, nevertheless allow us to guess at some of its aspects. Although the usual structure of his prayer escapes us, we can at least identify a few topics for reflection: Scripture[48] , especially the Synoptics and, in Saint Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount[49] , the grace with which he was concerned for several months[50] , the day as he foresees it, desires it, and transposes it into God[51] , the solution to certain very temporal problems, such as the acquisition of housing[52] . Anything can be an occasion for sin, but any incident can also be a point of support for prayer or elevation[53] .

This variety and flexibility in adaptation reveal a religious sense of singular depth, a spiritualized and delicate emotionality, and finally a concern for the efficiency of grace that cannot fail to surprise. Rich and complex in a way that transcends all overly academic classifications, Vincent was able to be the evangelist of a common, affective, and very practical form of prayer, that was as accessible to different minds as it was adapted to all circumstances of life.

2° *Salesian doctrine*

When reading the Treatise on the Love of God, it is only natural that he dwells on certain passages that affirm the preeminence of the poor and the simple.

"The great Saint Thomas assures us that often 'the simplest and women abound in devotion' and are usually more capable of divine love than skilled scholars." [54]

---

47 S.V. XII, 264-265.

48 S.V. XII, 135; XII,823, "One verse and no more is capable of sanctifying a soul, when it is tasted and savored with the devotion that God demands."

49 S.V. XII, 127, 128.

50 S.V. III, 331; ABELLY, III, 6: Fourth witness testimony, A. DURAND.

51 S.V. VIII, 388.

52 S.V. II, 18; V, 459.

53 S.V. XI,128.

54 Treatise on the Love of God, vol. IV, p. 314. Cf. S.V. IX, 3, 32, 220, 421; X, 568, 577.

Blessed Brother Gilles, one of the first companions of St. Francis, once said to St. Bonaventure: "O how happy you learned men are, for you know many things by which you praise God; but what shall we idiots do?" And St. Bonaventure replied: "The grace to love God is enough." But, Father, replied Brother Gilles, can an ignorant person love God as much as a learned person? He can, said St. Bonaventure, but I tell you that a poor, simple woman can love God as much as a doctor of theology. Then Brother Gilles, becoming fervent, exclaimed, "O poor and simple woman, love your Savior and you can be as much as Brother Bonaventure!" And on that note, he remained in rapture for three hours.[55] [489]

"How true it is, as St. Augustine exclaimed, 'that fools delight in heaven,' while many scholars are lost in hell."[56]

"It often happens that, through our misery, knowledge prevents the birth of devotion, inasmuch as knowledge inflates and makes us proud, and pride, which is contrary to all virtue, is the total ruin of devotion." [57]

3° *The teaching of Saint Vincent*

The definition of prayer that Vincent de Paul gave to the Daughters of Charity on May 31, 1648, is more complete than that given in *the Introduction to the Devout Life* and seems to be inspired quite closely by *the Treatise on the Love of God*[58] .

Prayer "is an elevation of the spirit to God, but this union can only be achieved by separating oneself from all creation." "The soul detaches itself as if by itself to go and seek God in himself."[59] "One must leave oneself and let go of all earthly thoughts in order to rise up to God." [60]

This presence in God's presence is completed and strengthened, culminating in a conversation, a dialogue. "It is a conversation between the soul and God, a mutual communication in which God tells the soul inwardly what he wants it to know and do, and in which the soul tells its God what he himself has made known to it that it must ask for." [61]

This is a concrete variation—in a minor key, one might say—and one that is not lacking in elegance, on the prayer of the Holy Spirit within us, of which St. Paul

---

55 Treatise on the Love of God, vol. IV, 315. Cf. S.V. XII, 101, IX,32.

56 *Treatise on the Love of God,* vol. IV, 281, 316. Cf. S.V. I, 304. "Now then, blessed be God, for it can be said that 'Idiotae rapiunt coelum' (August 10, 1635). Cf. Confessions, L. VIII, c. 8 (P.L. 32, 757).

57 *Treatise on the Love of God,* vol. IV, 318.

58 "If prayer is a colloquy, a conversation or a dialogue between the soul and God through it, then we speak to God and God speaks to us in return, we aspire to him and breathe in him, and he mutually inspires us and breathes on us. (Treatise, vol. IV, 305.)

59 S.V. IX, 419.

60 S.V. X, 586; IX, 422.

61 S.V. IX, 419.

speaks[62] The initiative is therefore left to God, who opens the way and guides the prayer of petition.

Delving deeper into his subject, Vincent de Paul distinguishes between two ways of praying: through understanding (meditation) and through will (contemplation).

— *Prayer accessible to all.*

Ordinary prayer cannot be done without God's help, but neither is it reserved for an elite few. Saint Vincent de Paul never misses an opportunity to affirm that it can be the privilege of all souls.

"No, do not fear that poor village girls, ignorant as you think they are, should not aspire to this holy exercise. God is so good and has already been so good to you that he has called you to the exercise of charity: why should you think that he would deny you the grace you need to pray? Let this not enter your mind. I was so edified today, talking to a good village girl [490] who is now one of the greatest souls I know." [63]

Even people who cannot read or write can devote themselves to meditation and be favored with the gift of prayer. "There are examples that teach us that people who cannot read or write, poor peasants who know nothing, have received from God the gift of prayer and, to a greater degree, have believed much more than many other learned people."[64] The reason for this is that God comes to the aid of our infirmity and usually communicates his graces to the humble of heart[65] .

But in affirming the simplicity of prayer and the possibility of everyone accessing it, especially through a humble and religious attitude, Vincent de Paul found himself having to define his position with regard to more perfect forms of prayer and the graces of contemplation.

The subject was not without its dangers and required extremely precise nuances. Spain had just enacted severe measures, but these were considered sufficient to avert any further danger of Illuminism[66] . In France, some spiritual leaders viewed the success of the mystics of the North and the popularity of Benedict of CANFIELD with suspicion. These latent difficulties made people cautious and even distrustful. This was therefore an opportunity for Mr. Vincent, if ever there was one, to speak clearly and exercise all his prudence. Let us hope that he will not disappoint us.

---

62 Epistle to the Romans, VIII, 26-27.

63 S.V. IX, 3.

64 S.V. X, 568.

65 At the end of his experiment, Vincent de Paul came to this conclusion. In law, learned people, if they are humble, are not excluded from the ways of prayer; in fact, the ignorant seem to have an advantage, because they are simpler and fulfill the evangelical conditions of revelation to the little ones (Matt. XI, 25).

66 1623 edition, published in the *Mercure de France,* 1624, vol. IX.357).

III. - THE GRACE OF CONTEMPLATION

1° *Mr. Vincent's experience*

a) *Personal experience.*

The prevailing opinion does not place Saint Vincent de Paul among the mystics. This word evokes the image of a man somewhat lost in prayer, distracted from earthly realities, which he neglects a little. This description does not apply to someone who, without denying the afterlife, spent his life inspiring charity and organizing it on earth.

However, the meaning of the word "mystic" is a source of concern for good minds. Since Péguy, there has been no reluctance to apply it to entirely secular movements of thought or action[67] . With the help of fashion, the expression has lost all the scientific precision that dogmatic theology had given it through a long tradition of work and experience. By restoring its original meaning, we will dispel [491] certain ambiguities that leave ideas vague and prevent thought from understanding and analyzing itself.

- *Meaning of the word* "MYSTIC."

Commonly, and in a broad sense, the word "mystic" refers to "the aspect of passivity found in all inner life"... it implies a certain taste for the things of God "and... something experiential in the knowledge of the supernatural world"[68] .

More strictly, the adjective characterizes in souls more advanced in the spiritual life "a more passive state or, better, a greater *docility* to *the Holy Spirit,* which manifests itself not only in a *simplification* of the life of prayer, but also in a transformation of the apostolic and charitable life." [69]

Finally, the term mystical also refers to "the higher form of prayer known as *transformative union,* plenary union, ecstatic union, or 'prayer of quiet'."[70] .

These clarifications, imposed by the facts, avoid categorizing such different states as ritual intoxication, artificial ecstasy, transforming union, and spiritual marriage under the same heading. They allow us, with St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa, and St. Francis de Sales, not to make ecstasy the essential phenomenon of the mystical life. They compel us to recognize in Vincent de Paul one of those mystics "in whom the

---

67 "Mysticism," says a recent critic of Péguy, "is that spontaneous force contained in the youthfulness of a doctrine, a religion, a movement; a freshness, a dynamism, a potential that tends toward upheaval and expansion; it is akin to Bergson's élan vital and is associated with Christian grace." Jean Delaporte, *Connaissance de Péguy*, vol. I, Paris, 1944, p. 280.

68 J. DE GUIBERT, *Etudes de théologie mystique,* Toulouse, 1930, p. 20.

69 J. DE GUIBERT, *Etudes de théologie mystique,* p. 21.

70 J. DE GUIBERT, *Etudes de théologie mystique,* p. 21.

gifts of the Holy Spirit, even the gifts, are exercised in a practical form, ordered to action." [71]

- *Mystical phenomena.*

Let us remember, moreover, that his interior life was not devoid of "mystical" phenomena.

Certain witnesses, called to the Beatification Process, recounted either his almost miraculous sense of discernment of spirits or the mysterious influence he exerted in the realm of prayer[72] . He himself paints a portrait of a man submitted to the will of God, which discreetly informs us about the climate of his own interior life[73] .

But not only did he have the intimate consolation of doing only God's will at certain moments, God himself made himself felt. "Do you not feel, my brothers," he said, "do you not feel this divine fire burning in your hearts when you have received the adorable body of Jesus Christ in communion?"[74] The ease with which he attributes contemplative prayer to the Daughters of Charity [492] shows us that he did not consider contemplation and quietude to be extraordinary phenomena[75] .

At least once, we know for certain, God favored him in a special way. "This person," he writes—and we know from other sources that it was himself[76] —"told me that, having received news of the extreme seriousness of our deceased sister's illness, she knelt down to pray to God for her, and that the first thought that came to her mindmind was to make an act of contrition for the sins she had committed and usually commits, and that immediately afterwards, a small globe of fire appeared to her, rising from the ground and joining another larger and brighter globe in the upper region of the air, and that the two, reduced to one, rose higher, entered and shone in another sphere infinitely larger and brighter than the others, and she was told inwardly that the first sphere was the soul of our worthy Mother and the second that of our Blessed Father, and the other the divine essence; that the soul of our worthy Mother had been united with that of our Blessed Father, and both with God, their sovereign principle."[77] ,

"He further said that, celebrating Holy Mass for our worthy Mother, immediately after learning of her happy passing, and being at *the* second *Memento* where we pray for

---

71 Reg. GARRICOU-LACRANGE, *Les trois âges de la vie intérieure,* vol. II, Paris, n.d. (1939), p. 427.

72 In February 1658, the perils overcome by the missionaries on their journey to Metz were attributed to the proieelion of M. Vincent, thirty-third witness, Jean de la Ferrière.
He recalls to J.-B. Parmentier all the acts that accompany prayer in such a manner and with such fervent expressions "that the witness to each of his words felt within himself a kind of inner impulse" (ninety-first witness, Jean-Baptiste Parmentier).

73 S.V. XI, 46-47.

74 ABELLY, L. III, p. 77.

75 S.V. IX, 420-421.

76 S.V. II, 212; XIII,126.

77 Note 77 is missing from the text.

the dead, he thought he was doing well to pray for her, that perhaps she was in Purgatory because of certain words she had spoken some time ago, which seemed to be venial sins, and at the same time he saw the same vision again, the same globes and their union, and he was left with an inner feeling that this soul was blessed and did not need prayers. This remained so firmly in this man's mind that he sees her in this state when he thinks of her...

"What makes us think that this is a true vision is that he is not prone to any other and has never had any other than this one." [78]

This direct intervention by God and the care that Mr. Vincent took in consulting successively with Father Morice, Barnabite, and the Archbishop of Paris, give us a glimpse of the style of his inner life, his serene lucidity. No exaltation, no sorting. The mind—his best mind—is always master of his heart[79] .

Finally, let us note a particular clairvoyance regarding the future of those who consult him[80] . On certain occasions, he even possesses the power to heal mental anguish by the simple laying on of hands[81] .

b) *Mediate experience.*

This experience of the supernatural, which gave Mr. Vincent a more intimate knowledge of God, does not seem to have occurred much before 1630. From its first appearance, it was immediately doubled and reinforced by *the objective observation of the* many and very different *mystics* for whom the founder of the Mission was spiritually responsible.

Entrusted in 1622 with the spiritual direction of the Visitation, and even with guiding Mother de Chantal, he was able, at a pinch, to learn about the various forms of passive supernatural prayer by proxy. There was no shortage of elevated souls in the first monastery of the Visitation in Paris, nor of diverse supernatural states ranging from blissful tranquility to the arid and crucifying tranquility experienced by Saint Chantal.

---

78 S.V. XIII, 127, according to the original in the Archives of the Visitation of Annecy.

79 On this vision, see Bibliothèque Nationale, New Acquisitions, French Collection, no. 22.338, F° 27-28.
COLLET t. I, 340-34l. Fearing an illusion, Monsieur Vincent consulted the Archbishop of Paris, "to whom he recounted the event as it had happened. He also conferred with a Barnabite religious who was knowledgeable about the workings of God—the Reverend Father Morice. Both replied that this vision bore the marks of being inspired by the Holy Spirit."

80 Testimony of Sister Marie Masseré (twelfth witness), reporting Monsieur Vincent's prediction concerning the Daughters of the Cross.
J.-B. Parmentier, the ninety-first witness, recounts the predictions of which he himself was the subject.
P. COLLET, in his *Histoire abrégée de saint Vincent de Paul (A Brief History of Saint Vincent de Paul)*, new edition, Paris, 1764, pp. XI-XII, gives an excerpt from a letter from Dom Emmanuel de Large d'Eaubonne, which reports the predictions of Vincent de Paul to Dom Charles Le Bret Chartreux of Paris, successively Visitor of the Province of Picardy, Prior of Paris, Visitor of the Province of France).

81 S.V. XIII, 195.

In 1628-1630, Mr. Vincent was called upon to rule on the case of the Guérinets who, without indulging in illuminism, showed a very inappropriate and imprudent admiration for the supreme prayer of the Mystics of the North, so highly praised by Dom Beaucousin and the Carthusians of Paris[82] . His attitude was both reserved and very magnanimous. He supported the persecuted, firmly guiding them along the path of suffering that brings conformity to Christ crucified and saves from all compromise. We can imagine him, at that time, in the midst of a lower evolution. He escaped the somewhat subtle harassment of the authorities and, with a wholly Salesian gentleness, his psychological insight freed these poor souls from extreme danger[83] .

At this time, André Duval's spiritual direction replaced that of Fr. de Bérulle. However, the new spiritual guide had a greater sense of practicality and human psychology than the founder of the Oratory. His "conduct" seems to have had the immediate result of preserving Vincent de Paul from all the cloudy mysticism that then enveloped certain minds. On the advice of his Director, he accepted the Priory of Saint-Lazare and strengthened his apostolic decisions. More aware of his [494] inner path, he also judged the things of God more serenely. [84]

These indications and various observations make up the spiritual context, an expansion of Mr. Vincent's intimate experience. They allow us to read the pages of *the Treatise on the Love of God* relating to prayer with a particularly informed mind. Specific questions are thus asked of Francis de Sales: the answers will be clearer and more nuanced.

2° *Salesian Doctrine*

— Definition of contemplation.

The simple and precise definition of contemplation given by the Bishop of Geneva is particularly apt. "Contemplation is nothing other than a loving, simple, and permanent attention of the mind to divine things... meditation is the mother of love, but contemplation is its daughter."[85] "It takes a simple and focused view of the object it loves, and the consideration thus united also makes for a more lively and stronger movement." [86]

It comes about without effort. When God enters the soul, he brings about a supernatural recollection, for "it is not done by the command of love, but by love

---

82 Dom Richard Beaucousin (1561-1610), known as "the eye of the contemplatives," helped publish Benoit de Canfeild's *Rule of Perfection* (Paris, 1609). He most likely translated into French the *Perle Evangélique* (Paris, 1602) and the *Spiritual Marriage* of Ruysbroek (Toulouse, 1606).

83 On September 15, 1630, Louis XIII asked Cardinal de La Rochefoucauld to entrust the Guérinets "to the man named Vincent, head of the Collège des Bons Enfants" (Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Manuscripts 366, fol. 389). I owe my knowledge of this document to the kind assistance of Mr. J. Guichard.

84 Vincent de Paul no longer seems to have been under the tutelage of P. de Bérulle during the years 1624-1625.

85 *Treatise on the Love of God,* vol. IV, p. 313.

86 *Treatise on the Love of God,* vol. IV, p. 318.

itself."[87] . Francis de Sales then uses and capitalizes on everything St. Teresa writes on this subject in The *Castle of the Soul*[88] .

— *Stages.*

This description naturally introduces a map of mystical states. By following God's guidance, the soul will be able to experience, in succession, loving recollection and rest in recollection. It will also be able to experience the outpouring of self into God, the wound of love, and the loving languor of the heart wounded by love.

In Book VII, the Bishop of Geneva explains ecstasy, describing its different types. At its peak, ecstasy causes the death of the divine lovers. But Francis de Sales does not admit that all ecstasy is supernatural, for "even philosophers have recognized certain kinds of natural ecstasy caused by the vehement application of the mind to the consideration of higher things"[89] . Ecstasy is not even necessary for sainthood. "There are many saints in heaven who were never in ecstasy or rapture of contemplation."[90] . The mark of good ecstasy is "the ecstasy of work or life."

3° *Mr. Vincent's borrowings*

Such a clear doctrine based on such meticulous psychological observation was not displeasing to Vincent de Paul. We see him drawing faithfully on 's *Treatise on the Love of God* whenever he addresses questions of mysticism.

— *Contemplation.*

Speaking about prayer to the Daughters of Charity, he distinguishes, like Francis de Sales, between two ways of praying: meditation and contemplation.

"Prayer of the will is called contemplation. It is when the soul, present to God, does nothing but receive what He gives it. It is without action, and God Himself inspires it, without any effort on its part, with everything it could seek and much more. Have you never, my dear daughters, experienced this kind of prayer?

"I am sure you have, many times, during your retreats, when you were amazed that, without having contributed anything of your own, God Himself filled your mind and imprinted on it knowledge that you had never had before." [91]

Let us note the distinctly mystical characteristics of this prayer, which Bossuet would later call "prayer of faith and simple presence of God":

1. It is frequent during retreats.

---

87 *Treatise on the Love of God,* vol. IV, p. 326.
88 *Fourth Abode,* ch. 3.
89 *Treatise on the Love of God,* vol. V, p. 31.
90 *Treatise on the Love of God,* vol. V, p. 31.
91 S.V. IX, 420-421.

2. The soul is passive, without action.

3. It is full of sweetness for the soul.

4. The mind is filled and receives new knowledge.

— *Supremely Eminent Prayer.*

Vincent de Paul maintains a cautious attitude toward supreme prayer, bordering on mistrust. Was he not told that "raptures, ecstasies," and what are called "anagogical movements and divine unions" are nothing but smoke? ABELLY tells us that he greatly respected the views of "modern authors" and was familiar with their opinions "regarding the excellence of this extraordinary form of prayer that they discuss in their books." However, he recommended a more down-to-earth but much safer approach. "His long experience in guiding souls led him to say sometimes to people he trusted that there were ways of praying that seemed very lofty and very perfect but nevertheless led astray. That is why he recommended the more humble and lower path as the surest one until God himself made us change course... He believed that it was God who had to make this change, considering it to be very reckless and somewhat presumptuous, even illusory, to want to turn away from the ordinary path and venture onto an unknown path, under the pretext of achieving a greater degree of perfection, because perfection does not consist in the manner of prayer one may follow, but in charity.[92]

— *Ecstasies.*

[93]If Francis de Sales preferred the ecstasy of life to any other, if he mistrusted extraordinary movements that may be "nothing but illusions and diabolical amusements," Vincent de Paul was even more mistrustful. "Ecstasies are more [496] harmful than useful," he bluntly told the Daughters of Charity.

Let us note, however, that his outlook is much less closed than that of Rodriguez. He clearly encourages seminarians to ask God for the grace of quiet prayer and the consolation of supernatural contemplation. "Let us therefore ask him often for this gift of prayer, and with great confidence. God, for his part, seeks nothing better; let us pray to him, but with great confidence, and be assured that in the end he will grant it to us, through his great mercy. He never refuses when we pray to him with humility and confidence. If he does not grant it at first, he will grant it some time later. We must persevere and not be discouraged; and if we do not have this spirit of God now,

---

[92] ABELLY, vol. III, p. 55.

[93] S.V. IX, 30 (August 2, 1640).
"In our age," wrote François de Sa'es in the *Treatise on the Love of God* (L V, p. 215), "we have seen many people who believed themselves, and everyone with them, to be frequently enraptured in divine ecstasy, but in the end it was discovered that it was only illusion and diabolical amusement."
Saint Vincent takes the same view as Saint John of the Cross and differs from Saint Teresa, who shared Father Banez's opinion and "severely criticized the advice given by some to reject any vision of this nature with a gesture of contempt... If you are given such advice, my daughters, I urge you not to follow it." *Castle of the Soul,* Sixth Mansion, ch. IX.

through his mercy he will give it to us if we hold fast, perhaps in three or four months, or in a year or two. Whatever happens, let us be resigned to Providence, let us hope for everything from his generosity, let him do as he will, and let us always be of good courage. [94]

In short, he asks those he leads to adopt the attitude and general principle given by Bishop de Genève. "I remember, on this subject," he says to the overly hasty seminarians, "a remark by Mr. de Genève, words that are entirely divine and worthy of such a great man: 'Oh! I would not want to go to God if God did not come to me.' Admirable words. He would not want to go to God if God did not come to him first. Oh! How these words come from a heart perfectly enlightened in this science of love! That being so, a heart truly touched by charity, which understands what it means to love God, would not want to go to God if God did not precede it and draw it to Himself by His grace. This is far removed from wanting to prevail and draw God to oneself by force of arms and machines. No, no, nothing is gained by force in such cases."

CONCLUSION

It remains for us to examine how Vincent de Paul read and interpreted the masterful pages in which Francis de Sales invites us to union with God through conformity to the divine will . But since [497] this study would require us to trace the origins and characterize the expression of Vincentian thought by synthesizing the spiritual "sources," we will study it—if the opportunity arises—in a work focused on Vincentian mysticism of Providence.

For now, we can draw some conclusions from our investigation of the second part of the Treatise.

Vincent de Paul took a lot, but he also "chose" a lot from the "mystical arsenal" of the Prince of Geneva.

By dwelling complacently on the love of benevolence, he gave the Treatise another focus of interest and singularly changed the Salesian horizon. Personal experience, as well as the demands of pastoral ministry, are sufficient reasons for this shift in the focus of charity.

Undoubtedly, Vincent owes to Francis de Sales, to the Direction of the Visitation Sisters, and to the Treatise, which condenses the spirituality of the pure love of the Visitation of Holy Mary, the opportunity to become more familiar with the riches of mystical life and literature. He lived in this world and penetrated the hermeticism of some of its disconcerting formulas. Without François de Sales, Vincent de Paul would not have been as firm in his leadership. We can also imagine him as more awkward and self-conscious in his relations with the mystics of his time.

---

94 S.V. XI, 221-222.

Let us add, and this is what, in our view, is of greatest interest, that the community of ideas and attitudes observed between Francis de Sales and Mr. Vincent has discreetly led us to recognize in the soul of Vincent de Paul what his somewhat wild humility would have forever hidden from us: the very tip of his soul God and eternity were not concepts for him, hardened like pieces of thought. He tasted and savored the supernatural. Eternal grace transformed him entirely. Already the mystical promise of the hereafter was whitening his soul. All the tired features of his face relaxed and lit up with the flame of ineffable goodness that burned silently in his eyes.

Angoulême, March 13, 1948.

André DODIN.

Scanned by Cl. LAUTISSIER *November 1998*