SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES AND SAINT VINCENT: A FRUITFUL FRIENDSHIP

Jean Calvet observes that the religious sentiment of the 17th century until 1660 was under the spiritual atmosphere generated by Francis de Sales; only after 1660 did the climate change by coming under the influence of Port-Royal and Bossuet. And the proper characteristic of this spiritual context was that it took the relationship with God and the spiritual life out of the abstraction of elitist intellectualism and brought them to the everyday dimension of love of delight, usable in all conditions of life.

St. Francis in the face of an intellectualistic theological thinking that had been spreading with the rise of Second Scholasticism, so laden with metaphysics, and with the incipient rationalism tinged with anthropological skepticism, brought to light the necessary minimum that characterizes the Gospel, namely, that "faith in the God of Christians is nothing other than love; and that to believe God who speaks to us means nothing other than to love Him. "[1]

St. Vincent," Calvet always observes, "allowed himself to be enriched by this climate, which enabled him to learn a positive and loving outlook in the service of the poor. Such teaching consisted in understanding that "the manner" in which one expresses charity determines its content. Whether one graciously and sweetly offers soup to a hungry person or rudely puts it in front of him, from a nutritional and social aid point of view it makes no difference, but the anthropological reality that takes shape is totally different. In the first case, the person feels welcomed and loved; in the second case, he sees himself scorned and humiliated. In the first case, the person feels revived; in the second, he feels dead. Francis wrote this in his *Treatise on the Love of God*: " ... that saint who gives a glass of water for the love of God to the poor thirsty pilgrim does little, at least it seems so, but the intention, the gentleness, the love with which his action is animated is so excellent that it changes that simple water into water of life and eternal life. "[2]

At the time of his encounter with St. Francis, St. Vincent, who had also already begun to serve the poor and feel their pain, lacked o

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[1] J. Calvet, *La littérature religeuse de François de Sales à Fénélon*, Paris 1938, pp. 113-114. J. Calvet is the biographer most careful to recognize the central role of St. Francis de Sales in the development of St. Vincent's vocation, calling him "his true teacher, who stole his heart and spirit": *cf*. J. Calvet, *o.c.*, pp. 113-127. We find the same perspective in A. Dodin, *François de Sales et Vincent de Paul, les deux amis*, O.E.I.L., Paris 1984; although the latter, adopting a mainly literary criterion, eventually ends up describing the doctrinal similarities and differences between the two, recognizing only weakly the affective bond of spiritual creativity that brought them together (*cf*. ibid., pp. 53-61).

[2] F. di Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, Città Nuova, Rome 2011, Book XII, Chapter 6, pp. 668-669 (abbreviation used henceforth TAD, followed by Roman numeral for the book, Arabic numeral for the chapter).

perhaps it was simply not clear to him this piece: that of the amiable mode of charity, which is the affective light of the spirit that goes beyond the concrete gestures of charity; and without which acts of charity fail to fully express love. This formality of affective love toward the poor St. Vincent discovered it, or at least was able to deepen it and bring it to evidence in his consciousness, in his encounter with St. Francis de Sales.

The bond with Francis de Sales

This encounter was not of a brief moment, but was a light that accompanied St. Vincent throughout his life's journey. He recalled with pleasure that he had had "the honor and joy of knowing and frequenting him before the foundation of the Congregation. "[3] He recognized in him "such a great goodness through which one could see the very goodness of God."[4] He considered him "a great teacher" and thought of himself "as one of those who had most esteemed him· "[5] Precisely with these words he sent in 1659 a petition to Pope Alexander VII to support his canonization, openly expressing "the special veneration he had for so great a saint, whose virtues he had witnessed on a variety of occasions. "[6] And he alone "treasured very dearly the portrait of him. "[7]

But especially before the Daughters of Charity and the missionaries, he designated him by the name "our blessed Father. "[8] And this was not a rhetorical or circumstantial expression; rather, it said the bond o f spiritual sonship by which he felt generated. He expressed this in one of his first letters to St. Louise: "I have proposed to let myself be done in the manner in which it seems to me that our blessed Father would do. "[9] "Letting oneself be done" ("se laisser faire") is the pregnant metaphor of generation, where one is not active, but receptive of the mystery of life that flourishes beyond any "giving of oneself." And again he insists in the same way with St. Louise: "In the name of God, act lovingly in the same way that you can imagine our blessed Father would have done. "[10]

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[3] *SVit* X, 662.

[4] *SVit* III, 418.

[5] Coste VII, 584.

[6] Coste VII, 584; VII, 591-592.

[7] *SVit* 472-473.

[8] In the writings of St. Vincent one finds applied to St. Francis de Sales the title "Notre bienheureux Père" 18 times ; and that of "bienheureux évêque de Genève" 47 times.

[9] It was the feeling in which another soul, Frances Frémiot de Chantal, guided by Francis de Sales, at that very same time, lived and communicated to St. Vincent: "As for my state, I seem to be in the simple expectation of what God will want to do with me. I have no desires, no intentions. The only thing that presses upon me is to *want to leave it to God*. I still do not see his will, but it seems to me that it is already in the depths of my soul. I have no plans or feelings for the future, but I do, moment by moment, what seems necessary to me, without thinking too far ahead": *SVit* I, 31.

[10] *SVit* I, 218-219.

These sketchy testimonies suggest that St. Vincent's relationship with St. Francis was not simply imitative and exterior. That is, Vincent did not simply model his qualities or follow his example to become similar to him. Rather, it was a generative relationship, capable of bringing forth new life and new openings. For the motion of life is not to reduplicate itself, but to proceed by creating other forms and new scenarios. Life is not repetitive; and yet it transmits itself by using the material it already finds to create other life. It generates. Such was the case with Saint Vincent. He found in St. Francis that spiritual affinity that fertilized his purpose of wanting to put himself at the service of the poor, which had then just dawned on his experience. And from this affinity he was able to delve into the events that had happened to him in those same years and that had perturbed him: the failures of the search for an honorable living arrangement, the serene joy of the people of Clichy, the encounter with the de Gondi family, the experience of the peasant of Gannes and the pain of a family with no hope of survival in Châtillon, the fruitful preaching in the countryside of Madame de Gondi and the first organizations of *Charities*.

All these experiences were certainly decisive for St. Vincent, but insufficient to shape his personal charisma. What was needed was a catalyst that would amalgamate them, make them vibrate together and interpret their meaning. This glue Vincent found in his encounter with a man whose charity was embodied in his humanity and in whose relationship he felt arising within himself the spiritual mode that could g i v e all past experiences their own, personal coloring. What changed in the encounter with St. Francis was the rhythm, not the music. It changed the perspective and nuance in looking at the poor, not the commitment to succor them. What happened in Vincent was the transformation of self-consciousness and the way of living charity that was still tied to his purpose, but not sufficiently tuned with grace.

Francis de Sales' mediation was the instrument God used to leaven service to the poor with the Spirit's affection, transforming it into the charism of God's agape among poor people. They are the prophets who rekindle the mystical element, rescuing religious institutions from the hardening of patterns. Until then, for Vincent, the Church was an institution that preached religious teaching and exhorted people to give alms to their neighbors. The encounter with St. Francis set fire to Vincent's soul, which was in its infancy on the path of proclamation and charity.

Vincenzo had a pragmatic, active character, tending to the concrete. And therefore inclined to the immediate and effective. Sometimes even rough, tending toward impulsiveness that resulted in a kind of black humor, rusticity and rudeness in his m a n n e r i s m s . Of himself

he said he was "as rough as a bramble bush, "[11] and likened characters like his to "torrents in flood that have no force and impetuosity except in their overflows and, after the great flow, immediately dry up. "[12]

Francis de Sales' amiability contrasted with this natural disposition and was for Vincent a shock that subdued his sensibility. Evidence of this is that, shortly after meeting St. Francis, during the exercises he lived in Soissons in 1621, he recognized precisely at this point - of having to transform himself from surly to benevolent - the most urgent need for his life: "I turned to Our Lord and asked him to change my harsh and unfriendly disposition and to grant me a meek and benign soul."[13]

And more generally, that retreat was all marked by the influence of St. Francis, as a few years later he would recount and recommend to St. Louise: "The spirit of God acts suavely and always with humility. Remember that you and I are subject to a thousand impetuses of nature. I have already told you that, at the beginning of the Mission's foundation, I felt a continuous tension of the spirit, which made me doubt whether the project came from nature or from the evil spirit. For this reason I made a retreat in Soissons, so that it pleased God to free my spirit from t h e complacency and ardor I felt about that initiative. It pleased God to hear me, so that, by his mercy, he freed me from the one and the other, causing me to enter into the opposite disposition. I think that if the Lord gives any blessing to the Mission and grants that I am not of scandal, the reason lies, after God, in this experience. I therefore continue to remain faithful to the practice of concluding and undertaking nothing, as long as I am in the grip of the ardor of enthusiasm that dilates the expectation of great good. "[14]

The magnetism of an encounter

St. Vincent came into the orbit of familiarity with St. Francis de Sales during the year of the latter's stay at the court of Paris beginning in November 1618-a few months after Folleville and Châtillon-when he had accompanied the cardinal of Savoy, who was in charge of negotiating the marriage of the prince of Piedmont to Christina of France, sister of Louis XIII.

When St. Francis de Sales arrived in Paris in November 1618, St. Vincent was on a mission in the countryside of Montmirail,[15] but upon his return he could not escape the charms of St. Francis. Everyone at the court was talking about him. He had made a speech on the feast of St. Martin that had scandalized the courtiers because they expected a

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[11] *SVit* X, 55.

[12] *SVit* X, 55.

[13] L. Collet, *La vie de saint Vincent de Paul*, Nancy 1748, I, p. 99.

[14] *SVit* II, 208.

[15] *SVit* XI, 474.

lofty panegyrics, whereas he had chosen to speak in a good-natured manner and with simplicity.[16] The court chatter also reached his ears, since his appointment he had in February 1619 as chaplain general of the royal galleys brought him into contact with that plethora of noble courtiers. The fact struck Vincent because that manner of speaking in the good way matched well with the effort he was making in preaching to the poor peasants and was the spark that stimulated his desire to come into contact with St. Francis. The encounter had a dazzling impact on St. Vincent. The latter did not discover in St. Francis only an affinity of thought. More profoundly, a "living form" of faith - to use R. Guardini's language - had presented itself before him that summed up in an instant his entire search for God. It was not, however, just a matter of a coincidence of thoughts mediated by reasoning, but the presentation to Vincent's consciousness - made sensitive by a still open inner travail - of a figure that magnetized all the fragments of the search for self in a desire for life that had as its horizon the sanctity of loving-kindness.

The meeting generated a friendship at first sight. "Having reached the threshold of the thirty-seventh year of his life," wrote A. Dodin - Vincent had the grace of seeing, loving and contemplating a living model, who represented to him live the figure of Jesus. "[17] "The fervor of this servant of God," Vincenzo deposed at the process of beatification, "shone out in an extraordinary way in his public speeches because they kindled in the hearers a living flame of spiritual devotion. I considered him a "talking Gospel." Not only that, [this fervor] also shone through in his private and family conversations, by which those who attended were attracted and enchanted: in fact, esteeming himself a debtor to all, he adapted himself to the capacity of each one in such a way that whoever consulted him, whether on a serious matter, or on scruples or other things, he would not allow them to leave unless satisfied and full of consolation. In me, too, his words, when I recalled them to mind, provoked such great admiration that I was moved to believe that no one had meditated on the Son of God better than he had in his earthly life. And what increased my admiration was that although he was thought to be a great personality devoted to affairs of the highest importance, he indulged in meeting with any person, however lowly, without shirking any effort, until that person felt fully content."[18]

It was precisely this amiability that most impressed St. Vincent: "The suavity of his amiability was so superabundant that the example of his piety expanded sweetly with immense joy in those who enjoyed his familiarity. I, too, enjoyed

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[16] *SVit* III, 367.

[17] A. Dodin, *François de Sales, Vincent de Paul, o.c.*, p.12.

[18] *SVit* XI, 75-76.

of these delights, and I remember that, now about six years ago, lying in bed in the grip of an illness, I often meditated on the goodness of God and continually repeated this thought to myself, "How good you are, God, my God, how good you are, since there is so much gentleness in Monsignor Francis de Sales, who is a creature of yours."[19]In all these testimonies the subterranean metamorphosis produced in Vincent, whose development is evidently difficult to document, but whose genesis appears clear. The figure of St. Francis left a deep trace in St. Vincent's religious consciousness, which would emerge from time to time in his vocational journey and charismatically characterize the operation of charity toward the poor.

The encounter with the spirituality of St. Francis was solidified with the arrival in Paris in April 1619 of St. Frances Frémiot de Chantal. Called by St. Francis, she brought with her some Visitation nuns to start a new foundation. They were months of great poverty that strengthened the vocation and piety of these young women supported by the presence among them of St. Francis. And when the latter left in September of that same year, Mother Frances found it natural to place her trust in Francis' friend for the formation of her young novices. A spiritual harmony of profound quality had been created between the three. One would not understand otherwise why it had taken only a few months of frequentation to create a reciprocity of feelings and intentions, such that Francis and Chantal were persuaded to choose Vincent, among all the Parisian clergymen then far more highly regarded than he, to entrust him with the spiritual care of their daughters. This bond of leadership was so solid that, although St. Vincent on several occasions tried to get rid of it,[20] it endured for the other nearly forty years of his life. This circumstance also converges to show how much the two souls, Francis' and Vincent's, influenced each other.

In any case, this contact was providential and valuable for the charism that was taking shape in St. Vincent's personality precisely in those years. St. Francis' greatest contribution was to export his view of amiability to the world of charity and mission, namely, that charity to be authentic and missionary proclamation to be effective, must feed on an amiable style. It is this amiable style that shapes charity and missionary witness, indeed it is its very content. It takes nothing to treat an insolent poor person badly. Perhaps he even deserves it. But amiability forbids it. The gaze of amiable charity knows how to pierce

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[19] *SVit* XI, 80-81.

[20] *SVit* X, 662. St. Vincent would remain until the end of his life superior and director of the Visitation. However, around 1646 (*cf. SVit* III, 56 note 5: LL 866 and 873) he tried to remove himself from this office, but could not hold out for more than a year and a half, a s Madame de Maignelay's intervention with the archbishop of Paris forced him to resume the office: *cf.* P. Coste, *Le grand saint du grand siècle*, Desclée. Paris 1931, III, 218-220; J.M. Roman, *Saint Vincent de Paul*. *Biography*, Jaca Book, Milan 1996, p. 137.

the rind of the indisposed trait and show a mystery in the one who stands before with his need: the mystery of the Son of God, who went through the world in the guise of the poor and misunderstood. To see this requires a special light, which is not rational in nature. Indeed, it is not enough to know it and give oneself a reason for it, even a religious one. It would not hold up over time. Rather, it takes an affective atmosphere, which is not even a mere moody feeling, but is the penetrating gaze of supernatural love, which a person experiences and breathes in contact with the mystery of God.

It was this *imprinting* that St. Francis transmitted in the charitable generosity of St. Vincent and his works; and it thus contributed to characterizing the *esprit* of his vocation - to put it in a word of the time that is dense with meaning - or his charism - as we are used to say today.

"Introduction to the Devout Life": a shared spiritual orientation.

If the encounter with St. Francis was decisive, it was no less important that Vincent had practiced a frequentation of his teaching before having met him personally.

In the early decades of the 1600s, various currents of spiritual thought had gathered in the Paris frequented by St. Vincent. Vincent, then between the ages of thirty and forty, approached them cautiously without fully deciding for any of them. Cardinal de Bérulle had taught him to set his eyes on God, to have righteous intention and to act and suffer for the honor of God. But this was "very subtle"-Vincenzo would later say.[21] It was a theoretical God-centering, indispensable certainly, but insufficient. Especially since this theocentrism was also accompanied by an exaggerated pessimism about man of the Augustinian brand, as appears from a sermon of Vincent's when he was under the influence of Bérulle. Indeed, in sermon 16 he used these terms: "Man is but a worm of the earth, a puff, a sack full of garbage and a cavern filled with a thousand evil thoughts. "[22] After that time Vincent would have a milder and more understanding anthropological view of human nature: weak, inconsistent and changeable, certainly, but also a space of God's benevolence.

At the same time, "good Monsieur Duval," toward whom St. Vincent felt greater sympathy, had introduced him to the *Rule of Perfection reduced to the single point of the will of God* by the Capuchin Benedict of Canfield, which was first published in 1609. And St. Vincent, although he assimilated the doctrine of adhering to God's will as the backbone of his spirituality, nevertheless subtracted from it that moralistic inclination that the

[21] *SVit* X, 464.

[22] *SVit* XI, 36.

made for a rigorous and ultimately fatiguing doctrine. "This unassailable synthesis of Benedict of Canfield," writes A. Dodin - overshadowed the life-giving humanity of Jesus, his ineffable, attractive, very mild goodness. The Capuchin fathers themselves had rebuked this Scottish convert, who had forgotten St. Francis of Assisi and St. Bonaventure, and in 1614 they inserted into the *Rule of Perfection* a correction sheet to this effect. "[23]

At that same time a little volume by Francis de Sales that was widely circulated between 1609 and 1619, *The Introduction to the Devout Life,* began to make its way into Vincent's soul. And it is likely that from the beginning Vincent was also won over by it, since he already appreciated it when he founded *Charity* in Châtillon in 1617. On that occasion he recommended its reading to the adherents of that first confraternity.[24] In any case, it is certain that the book became familiar to him and that he adopted it without ever abandoning it for the rest of his life.

In 1628, when he deposed for the beatification of St. Francis, he testified, "The book *Introduction to the Devout Life*, as soon as it was published, everyone found it so attractive, useful and necessary that wherever the servant of God passed, even in distant regions, they pointed to it publicly, saying, "Here is the great Francis of Geneva, who wrote *Introduction to the Devout Life*!"[(25)] "After the Gospel and the letters of St. Paul," A. Dodin - it was the manual most leafed through and used by St. Vincent and the first missionaries":[26]he recommended its reading and meditation to Luisa de Marillac, the Daughters of Charity [27] and her confreres.[28]

What is the life-giving center of this booklet, which St. Vincent appreciated and felt was suitable for women who were doing charitable work, for his daughters who had to enter the hovels of poor people, and for missionaries who were not to spare themselves in proclaiming the Kingdom? I think we can gather this idea in a nutshell: Francis spoke to the hearts of men, to their expectations and limitations, showing a way that could make them serene and ready to expand the joy of the Gospel. He did not clamber into abstract theories, but read the everyday with Gospel simplicity. And he recounted how, in the most usual and simple gestures of life, when traversed by God's love, one would give one's person and the world the shape that pleases God and makes people more authentic. He was expressing the thesis that gestures of justice, nor of charity, nor of any other virtue, are not enough to make a person just, charitable, virtuous. All these gestures must be irradiated by the

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[23] A. Dodin, *François de Sales, Vincent de Paul, o.c.*, p.12.

[24] *SVit* XI, 455.

[25] *SVit* XI, 82-83.

[26] A. Dodin, *François de Sales, Vincent de Paul* ... o.c., p. 17.

[27] *SVit* I, 300; III, 465; IX, 16; 42.

[28] *SVit* I, 446; X, 355.

devotion, that is, from the love of God, which "is called grace when it beautifies the soul; it is called charity when it gives the strength to act well; devotion when it impels one to work with care, with perseverance and with readiness. "[29]

Or put another way, St. Francis urged again: "People see that the devout fast, pray, endure insults, serve the sick, assist the poor, make vigils, control wrath, dominate the passions, dispense with the pleasures of the senses, and perform many other actions similar to these, in themselves and by their nature harsh and rigorous; but he cannot see the inward and hearty devotion that turns all these actions into pleasant, sweet and easy ones, like the bee on thyme which, though sucking a very bitter juice, turns it into honey. ... Devotion is the true spiritual sugar that takes the bitterness out of mortifications; ... anger out of the poor and worry out of the rich; desolation out of the downtrodden and insolence out of the favored of fortune; sadness out of the lonely and dissipation out of the company; ... finds honor and contempt equally useful, receives pleasure and pain with almost equal hearts and is filled with wonderful suavity. "[30]

In these few introductory lines of St. Francis one can already hear resounding the colorful and simple eloquence of St. Vincent when he spoke and invited to live in holy indifference of spirit, to transform one's existence into an unresisting surrender to the God who speaks through the circumstances of history, to fill oneself with the virtues of meekness, simplicity and humility of the Son of God.

Not only that, but the fact that Francis intended to release the power of the Gospel by bringing it inside the seething mystery of creation and the world, with no one excluded,[31] corresponded to Vincent's most acute desire to bring the warmth of Christ's charity to everyone and everywhere.[32] In this way, the *Introduction to the Devout Life* constituted the manual that most

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[29] Francis de Sales, *Philothea. Introduction to the Devout Life*, Complete Works 3, Città Nuova, Rome 2009, p. 32. Henceforth cited as IVD, followed by part number in Roman numerals, and chapter number in Arabic numerals.

[30] IVD I, 1, p. 34-35.

[31] "To pretend to eliminate the pious life from the soldier's barracks, the artisan's workshop, the prince's court, the intimacy of spouses is an error, indeed a heresy.
... Devotion must be lived differently by the gentleman, the artisan, the servant, the prince, the widow, the maiden, the bride; not only that, but devotion must be proportionate to the strengths, occupations and duties of individuals ... Christians become more cordial and sympathetic in their vocation if they place devotion alongside it: the care of the family becomes more serene, the love between husband and wife more sincere, the service of the prince more faithful, and all occupations sweeter and more pleasant. ... It matters little where we are: wherever we can and should aspire to devotion.": *Introduction to the Devotional Life*, o.c. 36-37.

[32] "If it is true, brethren, that we are called to carry God's love far and near, if we are to set the nations ablaze, if our vocation is to go and spread t h i s divine fire throughout the world, if so, I say, if so, brethren, how much I myself must burn with this divine fire! How much must I be inflamed to love those with whom I live, how much must I edify my brethren by the exercise of love, and how much must I strive to persuade them to practice the acts of charity!": *SVit* X, 548.

helped shape the interiority of St. Vincent and those who followed in his footsteps.

The "Treatise on the Love of God": consonance and diversification

Then when St. Vincent found himself in charge of the Visitation sisters in 1622, the *Treatise on the Love of God* became the main reference text for his instructions. This was normal, since the *Treatise* had just been given to print (1620) and had been composed for the daughters of Chantal. With its composition, St. Francis intended to go beyond what he had explained in the *Introduction* and offer a writing-as he says in the first pages-"for souls advanced in devotion. "[33] In it was expressed the theological heart of St. Francis: the fruitful womb of God is love, since in its Trinitarian intimacy there is the eternal generation of the Son in the breath of the Spirit. And of this spiritual fabric must also be woven the life of the believer.

St. Vincent, for his part, considered *the Treatise* "an immortal work." He said this when, in 1628, he was called to testify about the virtues of St. Francis: "I intuited the most ardent charity toward God of this servant by observing his calm tranquility, which flowed from his recollection in the Lord and from his ardent desire for intimate conversation with Him. From this familiarity he derived the sweetness of his words, attested in the suavity of his writings. ... Driven by the superabundant joy of divine love, he published an immortal work of absolute nobility, *Of the Love of God*, a faithful testimony of his ardent affection for God: a marvelous book, whose readers can testify how great was the sweetness of mind of its author. For my part, I have done everything in my power to ensure that in our Community this book would be read as a universal remedy for the lukewarm, a mirror for the neglectful, an incentive to love and an ascetic impetus for those who strive for perfection."[34]

Without going into details, the design of the *Treatise* goes through some spiritual thought hubs that can be succinctly reduced to two themes.

1. The first is that at the center, beginning and end, of every spiritual journey is the love of God, generated in us by the Holy Spirit, which works in the soul by attraction and makes it yearn for ever greater good that leads it to God. Of this love, "God has planted in the heart of man a particular natural inclination not only to love good in general, but also to love in particular and above all things his divine Goodness. "[35] However, "the poor will, upset by the continual attacks of concupiscence, is no longer able to make a progress in divine love as great as the natural inclination and reason suggest to it that

[33] TAD pp. 92. 97-98.

[34] *SVit* XI, 74.

[35] TAD I, 16 p. 144-145.

should do. "[36] If this is the case in human history, God-Love's plan is expansive beyond the measure of the human dynamism of lovingkindness, for "Our Lord's redemption, touching our miseries, makes them more useful and lovable than their original innocence would have been."[37] And this takes place through the grace of the Spirit poured into our hearts, which empowers them for charity, "so that the charity that dwells in our hearts, does not derive from them, but is poured into them like a heavenly liquor by the supernatural providence of His divine Majesty and resides in the summit (*pointe*) of the spirit like a queen. "[38]

The thrust of St. Vincent's teaching went in the same direction when he qualified charity as a supernatural gift by which the Holy Spirit Himself worked in a soul and enabled it to perform a divine activity in doing the most ordinary human acts, as when he wrote to Father Durand, "It is necessary that Jesus Christ Himself act with us and we with Him; that we work in Him and He in us; that we speak as He did and in His Spirit, just as He was in His Father and proclaimed the doctrine learned from the Father. "[39]

The supernatural realism of the action of the Spirit's grace is continually reiterated in Vincentian writings, "Filled and moved by the spirit of Jesus Christ, diffused in all Christians living Christianly, their actions and works are permeated with the spirit of God. But what is this spirit diffused in souls? When it is said that the spirit of Our Lord is in such a person, in such an action, what is meant? Does it mean that the Holy Spirit Himself is diffused in them? Yes, the Holy Spirit, in person, is diffused in the righteous and dwells in them through a personal relationship. When it is said that the Holy Spirit works in someone, it means that the Spirit, dwelling in this person, gives him the same inclinations and dispositions that Jesus Christ had on earth, so that he works in the same way, I do not say with equal perfection, but according to the measure of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. But what is the spirit of our Lord? It is a spirit of perfect charity, filled with an admiring devotion to God and a boundless desire to honor Him worthily. He had a knowledge of the greatness of His Father, whom He continually admired and exalted."[40]

In recognizing the primacy of grace in the spiritual life St. Vincent refers directly to St. Francis as in this text: "I remember an expression of Monsignor de Genève, words all divine and worthy of such a great man: 'I would not want to go to God, if God would not come to me.' Wonderful words! He would not have wanted to go to God, if God had not bowed down to him first. These words

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[36] TAD I, 17 p. 147.

[37] TAD II, 5, p. 168.

[38] TAD II, 22, p. 219.

[39] *SVit* X, 276.

[40] *SVit* X, 431-432.

flow from a heart perfectly enlightened on the science of love! That's how it is, a heart truly enlightened with charity, which knows what it is to love God, would not want to go to God, if God did not prevent it and draw it with His grace. It is a very different thing from expecting it at any cost, and drawing God to himself by force of arms and mechanisms. No, no, by force nothing is achieved in such cases. God, when He wants to communicate Himself, does so effortlessly, in a sensitive, gentle, loving way. "[41]

As with St. Francis, the most heartfelt and decisive perspective of Vincentian thought is at the opposite ends of the spectrum from a moralistic voluntarism. Instead, it is a position in which *gratia Christi*, perpetually made available by his Spirit, hierarchically holds primacy in relation to the human will and it is precisely it that directs and sustains it through supernatural desires and inspirations. It is the very *habitat* where charity takes its energy and human action becomes effective in world history.

2. A second central theme for St. Francis is the way in which this love, generated by the Spirit, acts in man. It is a love that attracts and generates a desire to please the beloved: "Whoever truly pleases himself in God," writes St. Francis, "faithfully desires to please him and, in order to please him, desires to be conformed to him. ... The righteous man is righteous because he possesses holy love; and if he possesses love, he no longer needs to be impelled by the rigors of the law, since love is the most demanding teacher and counselor to convince the heart that possesses obedience to the wills and intentions of the beloved. Love is a magistrate who exercises his power without noise, without officers or messengers, by means of that mutual complacency whereby, as we please ourselves in God, at the same time we also desire to please him. Love is the synthesis of all theology. ... By dint of pleasing ourselves in God we become conformed to Him, and our will is transformed into that of the divine Majesty by the complacency we experience there ... Sacred complacency transforms us into the God we love, and the greater its dimension, the more perfect the transformation, whereby the saints who strongly loved were transformed very quickly and perfectly, because love transfers and transmits manners and moods from one heart to another. "[42]

It is the love of benevolence, or affective, that binds a soul to bind itself to God in "loving obedience, "[43] as the Spirit revives, uplifts, transports and brings into the intimacy of a vital relationship. This adherence to God's love is not dry and rational, but

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[41] *SVit* X, 191.

[42] TAD VIII, 1 pp. 440-441.

[43] TAD VIII, 2 p. 443.

affective and charged with the complacency toward the good that God is. And it is in such reciprocal spiritual pleasure of being in contact with the root of all roots that the soul is regenerated and filled with desire, making it "become like a child who, attached to the bosom of our Lord, sucks up his charity. "[44]

All this is not an end in itself, but triggers the desire for charity toward one's neighbor, communicating God's love, made up of patience, humility, gentleness: "Divine love not only commands the love of neighbor, but generates it and infuses it into the human heart ... since man's love for man is sacred insofar as it is the true image of heavenly love for God. "[45]

Life in service to one's neighbor: the "Treatise on the Love of God" in the elaboration of St. Vincent

St. Francis' thought stops here, for he had in mind to write a separate treatise on the love of neighbor to which he also gave the name "Philadelphus," or "Love of Brother." He would not write it, as he would die only two years after finishing the *Treatise on the Love of God*.

It will be his friend St. Vincent himself who will probe this terrain of love of neighbor as a reflection of God's love. And he will do so with his more pragmatic temperament and more guardedness toward the world of feelings, for he feared that under the complacency of love toward God one could hide complacency toward oneself. And this would hold the soul in a form of narcissistic enjoyment, which is the negation of love.

Therefore, without denying affective love, Vincent teaches that it is necessary to keep this love in constant verification through "actual love": "Let us love God, brethren, let us love God, but at the expense of our arms and with the sweat of our brow. Very often, so many acts of loving God, complacency, benevolence, and other similar inward affections or acts of a sensitive heart, though very good and even to be desired, are not the less very suspicious, when they do not lead to the practice of actual love. ... We must beware of them, for many ... stop at that; and when it comes to action and the occasion arises that they must act they fail. They flatter themselves with their inflamed imaginations; they are content with the suave conversations they have with God in prayer, they talk about it, indeed, like angels; but, having gone out of there, if it comes to working for God, to suffer, to mortify themselves, to instruct the poor, to go and look for the lost sheep, to be glad if they lack something, to accept sickness or some other misfortune, alas, everything vanishes, they lack courage. No, no, let us not be deceived: *Totum opus nostrum in operatione consistit*." [46]

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[44] TAD V, 2, p. 306.

[45] TAD X, 11, p. 562.

[46] *SVit* X, 32-33.

It is therefore in an operational orientation that Vincent pushes the love of God and urges its ardor in the dual direction of loving service to the poor and in the proclamation of the Gospel message. It is the doctrine of the two loves, affective and effective, which had already been sketched out by St. Bernard, when he wrote, "There is a charity in action, there is one in affection";[47] and which was fine-tuned by St. Francis in his *Treatise*: "Two are the principal exercises of our love for God: one affective and the other effective ... By the first we become attached to God and to what he loves; by the second we serve him and do what he commands; that one unites us to God's goodness, this one makes us do his will. The one fills us with complacency, benevolence, impulses, desires, sighs and spiritual ardors, impelling us to the practice of the sacred communications of our souls with God's; the other arouses in us the firm resolution, the firmness of courage and the inviolable obedience required to carry out the orders of the divine will and to suffer, accept, approve and embrace everything that comes from his will. The one makes us please God, the other makes us please God; by means of the one we conceive [thoughts of love], by means of the other we produce [actions of love]; by means of the one we place God in our hearts as a banner of love around which all our affections are centered, by means of the other we place him in our arms (*cf.* St. 8:6) as a sword of delight with which we accomplish all virtuous undertakings. "[48]

For St. Vincent, the two loves cannot be separated, but there is a dialectic between them in which the practical aspect is what gives substance to sensitive love. St. Vincent's page, quoted in full, is instructive on the consonance and at the same time the diversification of the exposition of the same theme with respect to St. Francis: "What is it to love God? How is it possible? - asks St. Vincent speaking to his daughters - To this I answer, my daughters, that to love is to want good for someone; to desire that all know his merits, esteem him; to procure him honor and joy as far as we can; to desire that all do likewise and that the person we love be affected by no misfortune. The more perfect love is, the more sublime and high is the good we want for the beloved. Now since there is nothing higher than God, it follows that love toward Him is a sincere love that tends to seek His greater glory and all that can give Him honor. To understand this well, sisters, it is necessary to know that there are two kinds of love: one is called affective, the other actual. Affective love comes from the heart. The person who loves is full of relish and tenderness, sees God present continuously, finds his satisfaction in pleasing Him and tirelessly spends his life in this contemplation. By virtue of this same love, he accomplishes without

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[47] St. Bernard, *Sermo 50* in *Canticle 2, Works V/2*, ed. Città Nuova 2008, p. 187 ff.

[48] TAD, VI, 1, pp. 339-340.

effort and indeed with pleasure the most difficult things and is thoughtful and vigilant in everything that can make her pleasing to God; in short, she immerses herself in this divine love and feels no sweetness in other thoughts. Actual love, on the other hand, occurs when we work for God without feeling His sweetnesses. This love is not perceptible to the soul; it does not feel it, but that does not mean that it does not produce its effect in her or perform its act. This difference, says the holy bishop of Geneva,[49] can be understood by observing a father who has two sons. The one is still small: the father caresses him, enjoys making him play, takes pleasure in hearing him babble, thinks of him when he does not see him, suffers in himself his little sufferings. ... The other son is a man of twenty-five or thirty, already master of his will, who goes where he sees fit, returns when he pleases, does the business of the house; it seems that his father has no tenderness for him and does not love him. If there is any toil to be borne, this son takes it upon himself ... Now some of you love God fervently, feel much gentleness in prayer, much suavity in all practices, much consolation in partaking of the sacraments, do not feel inwardly displeased because of their love for God, which makes them take with joy and submission everything that comes from his hands. But there are others who do not feel God. They have never felt him, they do not know what it is to have a taste for prayer, they have no devotion, at least that is how it seems to them, but they do not neglect to do prayer, to practice the rules and virtues, to work hard, although they feel repugnance. Do they therefore not love God? Yes, they certainly love him, for they do everything like the others and with love the stronger the less they feel it. It is actual love that is at work even though it does not make itself felt."[50]

Here, then, is exemplified in this page from the Lectures to the Daughters of Charity the diversification, or rather the extension with its own pragmatic vein, of Vincentian thought with respect to Salesian thought, making the two a synthesis of the ascetic and spiritual way of going to God.

Francis and Vincent: a fruitful complementarity

In conclusion, it can be said that St. Vincent treasured the teachings of St. Francis. He did not simply repeat, but elaborated on the lines of his own temperament, Salesian thought. He benefited from Francis' fine sensitivity in reading the human soul, and somehow he was equally adept at probing its folds. He absorbed its warm temperature of the spirit and transferred it to the concrete acts of charity. In other words, he gave "flesh" to the affective impulses toward God by orienting them to tenderness toward the suffering man, the image of the

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[49] Francis de Sales, *Spiritual Retreats*, Complete Works, V, Città Nuova, Rome 2008, *Retreat XV*, pp. 313-314.

[50] *SVit* IX, 351-353.

Son of God who took human flesh. And he strengthened its momentum with the exercise of effective relief to the poor, the suffering members of the flesh of the Son of God.

In this respect St. Vincent took a different course from the metaphysical and philosophical framework of St. Francis' thought. This had as its source the Augustinian intuition of the human "heart" structurally oriented toward the ever greater good that is God. And he recognized in man's desire the faithful echo of God that resonates in the depths of the soul and urges to generate a communion and draw him into a beatifying embrace.[51] On this point Vincent is more guarded: he feels the weight of the weakness of human feeling and the humoral oscillations of the heart. He sees its misdirections of passion. He knows from experience how fascinating the things of the world are and how they can lead away from God.

Therefore, Vincenzo to Francis' anthropological approach, which he does not disdain and on which he also thrives, prefers a Pauline brand itinerary that has as its starting point the *memoria Jesu* and, centering on Jesus Christ, reads human reality: "Let us behold the Son of God. What a heart of charity! What a flame of love! O my Jesus, tell me a little, I pray thee, who snatched thee from heaven to come and suffer the curses of earth, so many persecutions and torments that thou hast suffered there? O Savior! O source of love humbled to the point of lowering yourself to us and enduring infamous torment, who loved your neighbor more than you? You came to expose yourself to all our miseries, taking on the form of a sinner and leading a life of affliction to the point of suffering an ignominious death for us. Is there such a love? Who could love in such a sublime way? There is none but Our Lord who was so rapt with love for creatures that He left His Father's throne to come and take a body subjected to infirmity. And why? To establish among us, through his word and example, charity toward our neighbor. This is the love that crucified him and accomplished the wondrous work of our redemption. O brothers, if we had a little of this love, would we remain with our arms folded? Would we let those whom we could assist perish? Oh! no, charity cannot remain idle; it impels us to procure the salvation and relief of others."[52]

In fact, the Christological principle is emblematically posited by Vincent as the hermeneutical criterion of the Rules he gives to his missionaries: "Let each one strive to base himself well on this truth: that the doctrine of Jesus Christ cannot deceive and, on the contrary, that of the world is always fallacious, affirming Jesus Christ himself that this is like a house founded on sand, and his like a building founded on firm rock. "[53] And he exhorted them, "Let us walk with

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[51] *cf* G. Gioia, *Freedom as Love. The Christocentric supra-humanism of St. Francis de Sales*, in TAD, *o.c. Introduction, pp. 13-14.*

[52] *SVit* X, 549.

[53] *SVit* X, 437.

safety in the royal way, in which Jesus Christ is our guide and our teacher ... let us judge, speak, and act as the eternal wisdom of God, clothed in our weak flesh, has judged, spoken, and acted. "[54]

Thus the slant of Vincentian thought is more based on the centrality of Christ reflected in the human and open to the charity of poor brothers and sisters by virtue of the Incarnation of the Son, while the Salesian approach has a more pronounced anthropological perspective built on the desire that leads into the interiority of the heart to find there its divine root, and from there to pour out in an effective love for the brothers and sisters.

Simplifying and exaggerating in order to grasp the subtle difference between the two we can say: for St. Francis, the virtues are oriented toward bringing human self-realization to fruition according to the logic of God's love; for St. Vincent, on the other hand, they are expressions of a missionary charity toward one's neighbor, so that one's neighbor may receive a few drops of the Lord's love through one's own charity. And this thought of St. Vincent is well expressed in the maxim, "It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love him. "[55]

On the basis of the recognition of the complementarity and differences of these basic lines are then grafted all the concordances and similarities from the ascetical point of view of the Christian soul's journey, which we can summarily list in the doctrines of holy indifference, humility and meekness, condescension in relationship with others and zeal for God and souls.

The doctrine of indifference

To have an indifferent soul - St. Francis will say - is to have "a heart without its own choice, equally disposed to everything ... bends and conforms to the good will of God, as if we were made of wax, wasting no time in desiring and wanting things, but leaving it to God to will and do them in our stead, casting all our solicitude on him in so far as he has care for us, ... that is, the solicitude of accepting all events, and that of willing and unwilling: for he will take care of the good outcome of our affairs and will for us the best."[56]

To his daughters he recommended, "I have an immense desire to impress on your hearts a maxim that is of incomparable usefulness: ask nothing and refuse nothing; accept what is given to you, and do not ask for what you will not be granted. By acting in this way you will find peace for your souls. ... I tell you in a

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[54] *SVit* X, 44.

[55] SVit X, 547.

[56] TAD IX, 14, p. 521.

word: desire nothing, rather leave yourselves and all your cares to the care of divine Providence. "[57]

Equally St. Vincent, with a more pronounced Christological nuance, believes that to have holy indifference is to be in the "primary class" in the school of Jesus Christ.[58] The theme of adhering to God's "will and will not," underpinned by "holy indifference" (not to be confused with the apatheia-imperturbability of the Stoic philosophers), does not mean annulling one's own will as such, but having it move in unison with God's, in imitation of the human will of Jesus, which was all intent on fulfilling the Father's plan. It is therefore not a restriction, but an enlargement of the human will, which is placed in the condition of maximum freedom, because the human will is freed from its own limitation and enters into a loving relationship with the very source of love.

Adhering with indifference of spirit to the circumstances of life and to the demands of the Company is then the way of being of love, because only in love does one give oneself to another without fear: "What indifference," said St. Vincent, "in Abraham [in the act of sacrificing his son]! How master of natural feelings and how free in his actions and emotions, being ready to submit them to God's commands so strange and unexpected! Admire, however, also the obedience of the son, as great as that of the father. Observe his virtue. He does not inquire what is being planned about him; he lets himself be led, he lets himself be bound, he gets down on his knees and offers his life. It is enough for him to know that his father wants him. O my God! Brothers, what reason do we not have to fear that our thoughts are far from such abandonment! Are the insights, knowledge and science we have, or presume to have, subdued? Are you ready, brethren, to sacrifice them to God? ... What would you do, you, brethren, if you were asked for your Isaac? ... The child of your mind keeps you bound, this unruly affection enslaves you; go, learn and make yourself free and indifferent."[59]

Meekness and humility

Next to indifference of spirit there are two other virtues, closely related to each other, that Vincent absorbed from St. Francis. The latter was the saint of prudence and human balance, who taught to avoid extremes, for "if one abandons the good in order to seek the better, it happens that in leaving one one does not find the other: it is better to possess a small treasure already found than to hope for a greater one to be sought. "[60] In this St. Vincent was a faithful disciple: "Virtue lies in the right middle, the two extremes are

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[57] *Restraint* XVI, p. 335.

[58] *SVit* X, 72.

[59] *SVit* X, 529.

[60] TAD VIII, 11, p. 471.

flawed."[61] And from this attitude of prudence also arose the virtue of meekness or the dominion of passionality, which is to be put under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who "is truly violent, but of a gentle, suave and quiet violence. It comes like a rushing wind and like a thunderbolt from heaven, but it does not overwhelm, it does not shock, and it immediately generates a sweet security vice versa the evil spirit is
turbulent, harsh, subversive."[62]

In St. Vincent the theme of meekness, which knows how to master the extremes toward which human passionality drives, is read in a missionary key. It is the virtue that wins men's hearts to the Kingdom. And precisely because he considers this virtue essential to the proclamation of the Gospel, he insists on it pedagogically more extensively than Francis. He identifies its exercise in three particular forms. The first consists in mastering the wrathful and fiery movements of feeling, subtracting it from instinctive reactivity, helping it to bear false judgments and even insults without becoming irritated, indeed facilitating forgiveness toward those who hurt us by reserving for them, in spite of everything, esteem and benevolence. The second form is a consequence of the first: to those who are meek, the features of the face are transfigured, allowing a capacity for sympathy and understanding to shine through in the eyes and in the smile that attracts. The third consists in passing over everything that hurts, without letting slip the displeasure that another's action has caused in the soul.[63]

But all this asceticism in the acquisition of meekness - for St. Vincent - is not functional for self-perfection. For him, the purpose of meekness has a Christological root and is functional to mission: "All will put great diligence in assimilating the teaching transmitted to us by Christ: 'Learn from me, who am meek and humble of heart,' persuaded, as He Himself affirms, that by meekness one possesses the earth, inasmuch as by the practice of this virtue one wins the hearts of men in order to convert them to God; a purpose which those who treat their neighbor too harshly and harshly do not obtain."[64] The missionary is called to practice it in order to make available to men, and first the poor, the good and loving face of Christ. For the Lord to be encountered throughout history needs the face of his disciples. Now meekness is the attitude that shortens the estrangement between people, realizing an immediate attunement with all.

Alongside meekness, indeed as the psychological substratum that sustains and directs it, there is the virtue of humility. "To peace and gentleness of heart," Francis taught, "is inseparably joined the most holy humility. "[65] And again, "Humility reaches perfection

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[61] *SVit* X, 97. 190. 541.

[62] TAD VIII, 12, p. 474-475.

[63] *SVit* X, 489-491.

[64] *SVit* X, 488-489

[65] TAD VIII, 13, p. 475.

when it is not only patient but also gentle and affable. "[66] In Philothea Francis recommended love to abjection: "Abjection is the meanness, lowliness and pettiness that dwells in us, without our thinking about it. The virtue of humility, on the other hand, is the truthful knowledge and admission of our abjection. The pinnacle of humility consists not only in acknowledging our abjection, but in loving it and being content with it; not for lack of courage or generosity, but in order to exalt the divine Majesty more and to give our neighbor a higher esteem than ourselves. "[67] And in the *Treatises* he shows how humility can be lived at different levels of depth, from the most basic to the most heroic forms. He lists according to the ascetic tradition five degrees, of which the first degree is to know one's own misery and the last is "not only to love being despised, but to desire it, seek it and be pleased with it for God's sake. "[68]

St. Vincent moves in the same direction by giving it a Christological underpinning, since it is the humility of Christ that must be assimilated by the missionary: "Humility, which Jesus Christ recommends to us so often by word and example and which the Society must try with all its strength to acquire, requires three requirements. The first is to esteem ourselves with all sincerity worthy of abjection. The second is to be very glad that others know our faults and have disdain for us. The third requirement, considering our misery, is to conceal the little good that God works in us and through us and, if it is not possible to conceal it, to attribute it solely to God's mercy and the merits of others. This is the foundation of all evangelical perfection and the cornerstone of all spiritual life. Those who will have this virtue will easily obtain all the others. He who lacks it will have even those he thought he had taken away and will be tormented by continual disturbances."[69]

Spirit of condescension

A particular method taught by St. Francis for exercising meekness combined with humility is the spirit of condescension, by which "we allow ourselves to be bent by the will of others." And he justified this attitude by the fact that one cannot know God's will in the abstract, but only through listening to the voice of one's neighbor. He said, "God recommends to me charity toward my neighbor: it is a great charity to preserve the union o f one with another, and I find no better means than to be very sweet and condescending. Sweet and humble condescension should dominate all our actions. But the main consideration is to believe that God manifests his will to me through that of the

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[66] IVD III, 8 p. 145.

[67] IVD III, 6 p.138.

68 Restraint VIII, p. 189.

[69] *SVit* X, 496.

my brothers; therefore I obey God whenever I comply with them in anything. ... Do not be surprised, therefore, if I am docile and easy to comply like a child, for in this I do nothing but what is commanded me by my Savior. "[70]

And elsewhere he pointedly described ways and forms of condescension: "Condescension to the moods of others, forbearance of the rustic and uncivilized actions and manners of our neighbors, victories over our own moods and passions, renunciation of our petty inclinations, continual effort against our aversions and repugnances, sincere and sweet admission of our imperfections the continual suffering we go through to keep our souls in an equal state, the love of our abjection, the gracious and benevolent reception given to the scorn and censure of our condition, our life, our conversation, our actions: all this is more fruitful for our souls than we would know how to think, provided it is regulated by heavenly delight."[71]

This practice was also particularly esteemed by St. Vincent, as he considered it a very fitting tool with charity toward one's neighbor. Condescension is "a certain flexibility of spirit," he told the nuns, "which makes one yield to the opinions of others in everything that is not sinful ... For people who condescend in everything ... and easily submit themselves to the will of God manifested to them through others, soon arrive at holiness."[72]

He recommended it to his daughters precisely based on the teaching of St. Francis: "How good it is to love God and to do the will of one's companion rather than one's own! The blessed bishop of Geneva asked God for the grace to fulfill this virtue well and insistently recommended it to his daughters. He said to them, speaking of condescension, "You see, sisters, I prefer to do my will in that of others, than to do theirs in my own, and I do sooner to condescend to a hundred people than to make one condescend to me." What was the [ascetic] exercise of this great saint? It was condescension. ... To do so is to have no will but that of the companion; it is to live in the will of God and in the will of the companion, because it pleases God. "[73]

Apostolic zeal and fervor

The spiritual environment of all these virtues for our two saints was not the dry voluntarist stance of commitment and effort on the basis of religious reasoning, but the warm temperature of a

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[70] *Retreat* XI, pp. 229-230.

[71] TAD, XII, 6 p. 669.

[72] *SVit* IX, 858-859.

[73] *SVit* IX, 860-861.

spirit filled with the desire for God. Desire is a force that attracts, flows through and transcends the human soul, imbues it with tension and leads it to overcome bending toward comfortable positions by propelling it forward. Action, prayer, feelings and all that man expresses are either moved by desire or are dead gestures. After all, desire is the echo of God's voice being heard by the human heart. When the human heart feels its attraction, fervor of spirit and zeal are born.

"Zeal," said Francis de Sales, "is nothing but ardent love or rather the ardor found in love. Therefore what love is such is the zeal that is the ardor of it. "[74] And he inflamed his visitands to hear Jesus' invitation, "I have brought fire to the earth. What do I ask but that it burn unceasingly on my altar and, because of that, never be extinguished? And thus show with what ardor he desires that the fire of his love be always kindled on the altar of our hearts. "[75]

St. Vincent took up this teaching, but with his own missionary sensitivity to poor people gave it a coloring in order to evangelization: "Zeal consists in the pure desire to make oneself pleasing to God and useful to one's neighbor: zeal to extend the kingdom of God on earth and zeal to procure the health of one's neighbor. If the love of God is a fire, zeal is its flame; if love is a sun, zeal is its ray. Zeal is what is purest in the love of God. Now, brothers, how will we have the spirit of simplicity, humility and meekness, if we do not have the mortification that makes us find everything good? And how will we have mortification without the zeal, which makes us pass over every difficulty, not only by virtue of reasoning, but by the power of grace, which makes us even take pleasure in suffering, yes pleasure? "[76]

Spiritual fervor therefore for St. Vincent was the horizon that could attract and sustain missionary activity on behalf of the poor. He realized the disconnect between the ideal and the real. And in the exercise of a love for the poor it was easy to slip into a repetitiveness that in the long run extinguished the affection of charity. And so he fought the insensitivity of spirit that could easily creep into charitable and missionary activity: "Insensitivity," said St. Vincent, "makes us incapable of emotion before the material and spiritual miseries of our neighbor. Then one has no charity, no zeal, no feeling of God's offenses. Eh! May we not happen to become missionaries without zeal! If you send them on a mission, they go; if they have to take care of ordinands, they do; and equally of exercisers: but how do they do it? Where is the zeal? Zeal is dulled by insensitivity. So let us be animated with fervor in carrying out the tasks of our Institute. Let us do them with zeal, with

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[74] TAD X, 12 p. 563.

[75] *Restraint* XVI, p. 334.

[76] *SVit* X, 580-581.

courage, with fervor. We have compassion on so many souls who are lost and we do not allow our laziness and insensitivity to be the cause of their loss." [77]

Four hundred years later

In beginnings also always lies the energy of a revival of the vitality of a reality. To have studied the interweaving of the experience of St. Francis and St. Vincent at the time when the Congregation of the Mission was being born is not an end in itself, to embalm a fragment of life in written history. Rather, its purpose was to bring to light and resent the spiritual climate that fostered the birth of the Vincentian charism. For it will be the same climate that, traversing the history of this "little Company," will make it significant in the Church four hundred years after its origin.

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[77] *SVit* X, 590.