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The Vincentian Tradition

Evangelizare Pauperibus Misit Mei

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Introduction

Vincentian spirituality begins and ends with the evangelization and service of the poor. Ours is a mission-based spirituality, rooted in action, undertaken in partnership with a God who has a particular concern and love for those on the margins of human society. This love of God moves those who call themselves "Vincentians" to action on the poor's behalf.

Higher education, in this tradition, does not grow out of a particular intellectual framework or heritage. Certainly, there have been notable scholars among the Vincentian membership throughout the centuries, but the present work of higher education emerges from a social and ministerial mission. Higher education is seen as a powerful method of breaking the social evils of poverty and advancing the progress of poor people economically, socially, and spiritually.

Because this spirituality is so mission-based, it is best learned in the lives and activities of Vincent DePaul, his contemporaries, and present-day followers.

Vincent DePaul

Not unlike many others of his era, Vincent DePaul pursued and accepted ordination as a step out of the humble means into which he had been born. His farming family had been able to educate him at a local college of Dax for his preparatory studies and also for the first two years of his bachelors studies at the University of Toulouse, but difficult times at home soon forced him to seek employment privately tutoring and running a boarding house in order to meet his own expenses. After seven years formal study, Vincent was ordained to the priesthood in 1600 at nineteen years of age, six years under the minimum prescribed age. The French Church did not always enforce the minimum age but, to be safe, Vincent sought out an ordaining bishop who was both elderly and blind for the ceremony.

Vincent's earliest years of priesthood are somewhat unclear, although two stories remain of his attempts to reclaim a stolen inheritance and a controverted benefice he believed to be rightfully his. During these years,

Vincent studied in Rome and eventually sat for and passed his bachelors exam in theology from the University of Toulouse. He eventually relinquished his claim to the benefice and returned to Paris in 1609. Here he secured the position of “official almoner” to Queen Marguerite, the first wife of Henry IV. The position made him one of several cleric almoners and placed him in rank below other clerics who would have served as confessor and spiritual director to the queen. Such a position provided him the time to study and successfully sit for his licentiate degree in canon law from the University of Paris (the Sorbonne). Ironically, this position of privilege also introduced him to the bleak lives of the urban poor at the *Hôpital de la Charité*, one of the queen’s favorite charities.

Vincent resigned the position of almoner in 1612 at the encouragement of his spiritual director, Cardinal de Berulle—founder of a priestly reform movement known as the Oratorians—and tried for a time to pastor the villagers of Cliche, France. In later years, Vincent would look fondly on those days in Cliche, but twelve months after his arrival, he returned to the halls of privilege to serve as family chaplain and tutor to the children of Monsieur de Gondi, Lieutenant General of the King’s Galleys and brother of the bishop of Paris. As before, his position ironically immersed him in the life of the poor.

Madame de Gondi owned extensive property in Picardy, Burgundy, and Champagne, and frequently asked her young chaplain to accompany her on her trips to inspect her lands. Here, Vincent quickly became familiar with the lives of the rural poor who worked Madame’s lands. He began to visit these workers regularly and to say Mass and hear confessions for them. These simple and regular interactions with their poor began to challenge Vincent’s career path of chaplaining wealthy benefactors. One story in particular served to summarize the changes in Vincent’s priorities. One day Vincent was called to hear the confession of an elderly, dying man on the de Gondi estates. Vincent heard the confession and was shocked to realize how close this man had come to dying with serious sin on his soul. For the simple lack of a priest, the man might have lost his soul. Within this theology that framed his concern, Vincent’s heart was deeply moved. The incident illustrated to him, and to those who began to join him for periodic missions on the estates, how completely the poor had been abandoned by France’s clergy at that time, and at what terrible cost to their salvation.

Nearly forty years of age, Vincent began to notice a progressively wider circle of people whose religious needs were unattended. He began organizing missions to the many laborers on Madame de Gondi’s widespread lands. He soon extended those missions to the convicts sentenced to row the French fleet’s ships, over whom Philip de Gondi was general. The desperate situation of these men and their families led Vincent to organize relief efforts on their behalf.

Desiring to apply himself full-time to the needs of the rural poor, Vincent accepted the pastorship of Châtillon-les-Dombes, in southeast France. Here he discovered a sick family at home who were starving simply because they were too sick to manage their lands, and Vincent preached on the situation

one Sunday. Chaos ensued for, by that afternoon, there was a line of parishioners all bringing food to the one house Vincent had mentioned. The food would have gone bad had it all been left at the one house, and Vincent knew well that there were other families in as much need as this one. In later years, Vincent would tell the story of this chaotic moment and his realization that the parish charity had to be better organized. He designed simple procedures that following week so that poor people within the locale received dependable assistance from their neighbors. This simple, parish-based "Confraternity of Charity," as he named it, soon spread to other parishes throughout France.

According to Vincent, much of what followed in his life sprung from these formative experiences. The combined entreaties of the bishop of Paris, Vincent's spiritual director, and Madame and General de Gondi convinced Vincent to return to Paris after only five months with the parishioners of Châtillon-les-Dombes. There he was promoted to chaplain of the de Gondi Estates and Chaplain-General of the Royal Galleys. The position offered him regular contact with the powerful of France, making it easier to fund and promote his charitable works and organizations.

Tapping this network, he organized the Ladies of Charity, a circle of France's wealthiest women, to fund and organize many charitable works throughout Paris. In 1625, he organized a band of priests and brothers—the Congregation of the Mission—to evangelize the poor and to see to their more temporal needs. He offered priestly training for seminarians and weekly conferences for diocesan priests so that they might learn priestly practice and spirituality, believing that the poor deserved good priests. At the request of the queen, he sat on the Council of Conscience and led the effort to reform the appointment process for bishops and abbots, ending the tradition of appointing children and unqualified individuals. With Louise de Marrillac, he founded the Daughters of Charity, a community of women who gave full-time, direct service to the poor. Louise also assumed the day-to-day organization of the many Confraternities of Charity spreading throughout France. Together with these many groups and individuals, Vincent and Louise provided religious education and spiritual guidance, created soup kitchens and job training programs, taught young women to read, trained priests and seminarians, organized hospitals for the sick poor, ministered to prisoners and galley slaves, nursed plague victims, raised abandoned infants and children, and found food and shelter for the vast influx of rural poor into Paris during the Thirty Years' War and Fronde.

Vincent lived long enough to see the work of his priests and sisters spread beyond France, to Italy, Poland, Ireland, Scotland, and Madagascar. He had organized charitable action on behalf of the poor throughout all of France, and then on an international scale. Through his work on the Council of Conscience, his training of priests and seminarians, the advice given to royalty and episcopacy, and the work of his priests, sisters, and other collaborators, he had helped transform the French Church. Popularly called the Father of the Poor and the Light of the Clergy, Vincent was given the honorific, Patron Saint of Charity at his canonization in 1737.

A Vincentian Spirituality

In the midst of an extremely active life, Vincent DePaul created no formal school of spirituality, *per se*. He did, however, have strong, experience-based beliefs about the way in which his similarly active collaborators should advance in holiness and integrity of life. To his mind, activity and prayer reinforced each other. People best fed their spirits when they gave their energies and talents to the service of the poor. People best directed and sustained their activities when they took time to nourish their spirits. High-minded ideas or spiritualities that failed to lead to useful action were suspect to Vincent:

Let us love God, my brothers and sisters, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brow. For it often happens that the various affective acts of the love of God and the interior motions of a humble heart—even if they are good and desirable—are nonetheless suspect if they do not result in effective love. Our Lord himself says: “In this is my Father glorified: that you bring forth very much fruit.”

Vincentian spirituality believes deeply that God works amidst the poor, and that time spent among the poor offers enormous opportunities for spiritual growth. One learns generosity, patience, deep respect, humility, and unconditional love. One grows in self-knowledge. The social values of fame, beauty, and wealth slowly lose their power, allowing the inherent beauty of all people, including the marginalized, to come forward. One also gains a fresh perspective on Jesus Christ, who was born poor and spent his own life among the poor.

Vincent considered all work for the poor to be a continuation of Jesus’ labors. He summarized this frequently with the maxim, “Jesus Christ is the Rule of the Mission,” by which he meant not Jesus’ teachings, but Jesus’ person. For that reason, Vincent encouraged his followers to examine deeply the life, motivations, and purposes of Jesus, with an eye toward incorporating those same virtues and goals.

If the Congregation, with the help of God’s grace, is to achieve what it sees as its purpose, a genuine effort to put on the spirit of Christ will be needed. How to do this is learned mainly from what is taught in the gospels: Christ’s poverty, his chastity and obedience, his love for the sick, his decorum, the sort of lifestyle and behavior which he inspired in his disciples; his way of getting along with people; his daily spiritual exercises; preaching missions; and other ministries which he undertook on behalf of the people. [Common Rules, 3]

The goal of such meditation was never simply for one’s own growth or salvation, but also to extend Jesus’ historical ministry to the poor into the present. The present Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission states it

this way: "The love of Christ, who had pity on the crowd (Mark 8:2), is the source of all our apostolic activity, and urges us, in the words of St. Vincent, 'to make the gospel really effective'" (SV, XII, 84 [Constitutions, 11]).

Vincent knew well and spoke often of the difficulties of working with the poor: their unreasonable demands, lack of gratitude, offensive odor or demeanor; of the overwhelming river of human need. To sustain oneself for a lifetime of service, Vincent insisted that his followers care for their spirits. This was critical to Vincent. "It is necessary to tend to our interior life; if we fail to do that, we miss everything" (Dodin, Andre, *Vincent dePaul and Charity*, 54). Toward this end, he recommended regular participation in the Eucharist and a daily period of meditation. The meditation, he encouraged, could be quite simple. Often beginning with Scripture or some other inspirational text, Vincent taught his collaborators to linger on the topic being presented (nature), consider how and why this idea might be helpful (motive), and finally create some simple way in which the idea could be put into practice that day (means). Finally, Vincent also recommended that, sometime each year, his followers undertake a retreat experience for more extended prayer and reflection, allowing God to refresh and reorient one's spirit.

Although Vincent encouraged time apart from the work in order to nourish one's spirit, he did not necessarily separate the spiritual and earthly realms. Vincent's spirituality was strongly incarnational, believing that God was best encountered in the persons of the poor. Vincent firmly believed that God's voice could be found and heard in the midst of service and activity. "We have to sanctify our occupations by seeking God in them and by doing them to find God in them rather than to get them done" (Dodin, *Vincent dePaul and Charity*, 55). One heard the voice of God best when one "listened" within the gambit of a day's work—whether from a co-worker, a lesson learned in the doing, or from the mouths of the poor themselves. Vincent took quite literally the passage from Matthew 25, that whatsoever is done to the least of these, is done to Jesus. This engendered enormous respect for those being served: "I must not consider a poor peasant or a poor woman according to their outer appearance, nor in what I see of the capacity of their mind. But see the other side of the picture and you will see with the light of faith that the Son of God, who became poor, is personified for us in the poor" (*Like a Great Fire*, 23).

The social and spiritual initiatives that Vincent came to understand and accept as "God's will" were enormous in scope. In response, his spirituality grew both collegial and institutional. He drew into the work all who could be helpful, and insisted that one's spiritual progress could be forged alongside others. Whether Queen Anne of Austria, the highly educated doctors of the Sorbonne, the youngest, illiterate volunteer for his "Daughters of Charity," or the poor themselves, Vincent would welcome the generosity of whoever put their skills at the service of the poor. He believed in the power of large-scale organizations to accomplish God's will, provided that these institutions constantly adapted and changed according to the changing needs of the poor. God's will always needed to be sought out, not only because human beings are slow to understand God's plan but also because the world is dynamic, and

God may at any moment send us new needs to which to minister. Organized together—religious and lay, poor and wealthy, women and men, educated and illiterate—Vincent sought to create a worldwide force that simultaneously assisted the poor and enabled its workers to grow in holiness.

Foundation and Evolution of Vincentian Colleges in the U.S.

Vincent DePaul never envisioned his followers entering into the work of higher education outside of seminary formation (Poole, 1973, vii; Poole, 1988, 291). The early Vincentian missionaries to the North American territories, however, found higher education a useful means to accomplish their seminary goals. A small band of Vincentian priests and brothers came to the United States in 1816, accepting Bishop DuBourg's invitation to evangelize the settlers in the upper Louisiana Territories and to found a seminary there. They found in America, at the time, a tradition of opening college preparatory programs that served both local lay students and clerical prospects. This model suited the Vincentians' traditional works, for colleges could serve as a base for rural missionary outreach and the lay students' tuition supported the cost of seminary education (Power, 36; Gleason 4).

The dual-mission was not to last long, however. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a trend toward free-standing seminaries progressively took hold. This trend contributed to the closure of several Vincentian colleges. Those that remained relinquished their programs or plans for clerical education, and adopted a new mission. Local bishops were concerned that the large waves of Catholic immigrants were not welcome or could not be accommodated in other U.S. colleges, thereby limiting Catholics' movement into the U.S. mainstream. The bishops hoped that new Catholic colleges would facilitate this movement, as well as reinforce the Catholic values of these young men as they graduated and entered more fully into the U.S. culture. The Vincentian priests and brothers accepted this mission. Soon, the Daughters of Charity and Sisters of Charity opened their own colleges to accomplish the same goals, focusing particularly upon the needs of young women.

By the 1980s, the Vincentian colleges and universities had grown substantially and had adopted Vincent DePaul's outreach to the poor as a primary source of institutional direction. Serving the children of the immigrant classes, the universities began to speak of the power of a college education to break the cycle of poverty, both for individuals and for the larger society. Financial aid was increasingly focused toward their needs. Statistics began to be kept on how many students from families below the federal poverty line were accepted into the universities. Opportunity programs to assist students from underprivileged backgrounds proliferated. Research centers were begun to investigate poverty. New employee orientation programs focused upon Vincent's life. Community outreach projects to poorer sections of the city were sponsored. Service-learning was required of students in the classroom, putting them in direct contact with economically poor people. Systematic efforts were begun to introduce all members of the university to the life and

teachings of Vincent DePaul, with the hope that all members of the university community would take inspiration and guidance from his example. Individuals were hired and charged to advance the university's "mission" and "identity." Institutions that had been formed to continue Vincent's mission of educating the clergy had now reinvented themselves as bearers of his legacy to serve the poor.

Putting the Mission into Practice

One need not work at a Vincentian university, nor necessarily belong to one of the groups Vincent founded, in order to take on this legacy and mission. One must, however, place the poor at the center of one's concern; work on their behalf and do so in partnership with the God that cares deeply for the least of his people. Most post-secondary institutions do some outreach to needy students. Some serve large populations of such students.

There are many direct ways to put higher education at the service of the poor. Faculty are permitted what is perhaps the most central role in this process. Through their instruction, faculty—whether teaching Thomas Aquinas, Virginia Wolfe, or John Maynard Keynes—educate the poor and their children and thereby break the vicious cycle of poverty within family units. Their education of first-generation college-goers enables new immigrant groups to the United States to enter the social mainstream. The stronger the education, the higher the standards and the better a student's future prospects and personal development. Stubbornly believing in students' potential, at times when they themselves do not appreciate it, is perhaps the greatest gift faculty offer.

All college students experience times when they need the assistance of support personnel in order to stay in college. This is particularly true of students from impoverished backgrounds. Without the intervention and interest of financial aid counselors, mentors, academic enrichment, and support services, student life professionals, coaches, dorm supervisors, activity coordinators, health professionals, secretaries, and many, many others, students from poor backgrounds often leave college prematurely. By offering such support services to needy students, these individuals make key and critical contributions to the success of these young men and women, and thereby further the Vincentian mission.

There are also less direct, but equally powerful ways of furthering the Vincentian mission within the world of higher education. Research agenda turned toward the poverty in society can help identify and moderate the underlying causes of this social evil.¹ Universities' considerable institutional resources (e.g., knowledgeable experts, volunteers, meeting space, contacts) can be offered to other agencies and community groups with complementary goals and, thereby, join in a larger effort to combat poverty in a given community. Perhaps most importantly, a university can instill within all its citizens—rich and poor alike—a love for the poor and a desire to improve the lot of the poor. By so doing, a university develops another generation of "Vincentians" to carry Vincent's vision forward.

Regardless of the particular work one might undertake on behalf of the poor, no one can reasonably call themselves "Vincentian," unless they pray. A Vincentian spirituality asks us to integrate our work lives and spiritual lives. These cannot be mutually exclusive in a Vincentian spirituality. One must bring the work to prayer, and bring the fruits of one's prayer to the work. The prayer helps enormously to keep focus, perspective, and motivation. So long as one is always aware that the care of the poor is God's work, and that we only play a part, one can avoid the disillusionment and burnout that is so common to those who labor among the poor. It also helps one remember the love God has for these people, and their inherent dignity. More importantly, as we slowly come to realize our own inner poverty, and the love God has for us, we are freed to serve generously with full hearts. We incrementally come to see the poor as brothers and sisters, rather than the objects of our charity.

No amount of prayer or hard work, however, can substitute for coming to know the poor personally. To be a "Vincentian," one must go a step further than working and praying for the poor. One must meet a poor person and come to know her or him. Vincent believed, with all his heart, that God most works upon our souls through the poor themselves. Their lives, their stories, their worldviews: all transform our own perspective. We grow because of our relationships with them. The prospect of meeting or conversing with the poor can cause no small amount of fear. Those who do not come from poverty must overcome their fear of rejection by the poor, the fear of danger, or the simple fears of the immense difference between the lives of the poor and their own more privileged backgrounds. Any Vincentian can easily recall the days of their initial fears, their awkward moments of first conversing with poor people, and the relationships that soon blossomed. While the initial fears are real, the courage to meet the poor leads to wonderful relationships, the learning that the lives of the poor are not as different from ours as we first thought, and an immense freedom that one's world has gone beyond the boundaries of race or economic status. To be a Vincentian, one must come to know the poor. Academe's "ivory tower" cannot—by definition—be true of Vincentian education.

To be a Vincentian, one must also seek out a community of support. Vincent never permitted his missionaries or Daughters or Ladies of Charity to work alone. Instead, he required that they always have at least one other person alongside them for support. Work for and with the poor can be tiring and frustrating, and one needs the company and wisdom of others who are similarly committed. This community can be as simple as a friend with whom one labors; as wide-ranging as a group that meets by website; or as formalized as a group that meets regularly for prayer, reflection, and group service. Any work for the poor is commendable, but without some sense of community support, it is not Vincentian.

Finally, for work to be considered "Vincentian," one must have a larger view of a poor person's "need." It is not enough merely to work for the students' financial and social advancement, one must also work for their spiritual well-being. In the end, Vincent was most concerned for the salvation of

the poor. While his theology may be somewhat different from our own, his central concern remains critical. The capitalistic and individualistic ethos of U.S. society is as easily assumed by the poor as by those with great means. Giving the poor money, resources, education, political power, and entrée into the mainstream of society does not guarantee that they will be any better off as human beings. Happiness and wholeness is not based upon one's resources, and Vincentians must always be careful to foster and support the values that lead to ultimate happiness. At Catholic universities, students can be taught the Roman Catholic tradition as an interpretive framework and spiritual support for their professional lives.

Presenting such students a religious tradition as an interpretive framework and spiritual support gives them a strong moral base for their professional lives and a protection against the real danger of confusing and reducing their economic advancement to mere financial enrichment.

Strategic Decisions of Who Will Be Served

Individuals and institutions that wish to implement Vincent's vision sometimes stumble on the question of who is to be served: Who are "the poor"? How exactly are "the poor" to be defined? The question is important, for definitions of who will be served are also definitions of who will be excluded. If one adopts a strict definition, such as limiting one's charity to those below the federal poverty index, the "working poor" would be excluded—a group that clearly struggles financially. Too strict a definition might also limit the number of wealthier students whose tuition dollars could offset the financial aid burden that the presence of needy students places upon a university. If one adopts a broad definition (e.g., all those without education are poor), the mission would apply to any student at all, and the ivy-league colleges could, in that one sense, call themselves "Vincentian institutions." The Congregation of the Mission itself wrestled with these questions through the 1970s and 1980s. In 1992, its Eastern province chose to define the poor using a U.S. government economic measure that included both those below the federal poverty line and those considered the working poor. Tacitly, the assembly also recognized the universities' financial need to enroll "full-pay" students as well, but encouraged the universities to expand the number of poor students who were served.

Strategically, the Vincentian universities in the United States have never aspired to become "Catholic community colleges," even if that would mean that larger numbers of poor people could be offered a college education. Nor have they sought to become highly selective, research institutions, since the attendant costs would prevent poor students from attending. Instead, they have sought to walk a delicate balance between selectivity and accessibility, between offering an excellent liberal arts education and keeping the costs low enough for poor people to attend. This strategic choice brings with it daily tensions and balances, but the Vincentian universities have chosen to live with those tensions in the name of providing an excellent education that is available to the poor.

Vincent himself did not have a narrow definition of the poor. When selecting those who would receive his charitable attention, he focused more upon the marginalized, unassisted, and needy, than upon a particular economic measurement of poverty. Generally, he responded to individuals and groups whose needs became known to him over time, rather than seeking out and restricting his charity to those fitting a predetermined economic profile (Carvin). At the same time, Vincent clearly believed that those with economic means had more access to resources than the poor, and preferred to give his energies to those without the financial resources to successfully manage their lives in society. This flexible but focused definition of “poverty” is important for those who would follow in Vincent’s footsteps, for not all charitable work is necessarily “Vincentian.” For example, offering tutoring to students whose grades are substandard is unquestionably an act of charity, yet Vincent himself left the tutoring of wealthy children to others, and focused his own energies upon those without economic means. Vincent’s heart was always with the poor. Within this subset of human need, however, there is extraordinary variety and opportunity for charitable work.

Educational Institutions and Vincentian Spirituality

Vincentian spirituality is not a “top-down” spirituality, but the stuff of grass-roots. People embrace this spirituality when they come to know and care about the needs of poor people. The power and advantage of institutions is that they bring together similarly committed people to support one another and to accomplish large works together. In the end, the Vincentian spirituality is a practical tradition meant to support those who accept and undertake this partnership with a God who actively cares for the poor.

Universities do not fully realize the Vincentian mission. Few of the world’s peoples have or require a college education. Even in the United States, little more than half of the population attains a postsecondary degree. Worldwide, there are nearly two million individuals who claim Vincent DePaul as the tradition and inspiration behind their work for the poor. Educational apostolates are but a fraction of their work to feed, clothe, house, train, employ, heal, organize, enfranchise, and evangelize the world’s marginalized.

Nor does the Vincentian mission fully encompass the mission of a university. Both are so much more than the other. As a *university*, a Vincentian university pursues all of the traditional purposes and activities of a university, particularly teaching, scholarship, and service—with rigor and generosity of spirit, for the poor deserve nothing less than a fine education. As a *Catholic* university, the university offers students the wealth of the Catholic intellectual heritage for their reflection and integration. It offers the Church a place where theological and philosophical scholarship is encouraged and nurtured.

The Vincentian character of the institution, however, adds additional focus and purpose. Those who work within the institution are part of a larger effort to educate the poor, to ameliorate the suffering of the poor, to instill a love for the poor. Education within the Vincentian tradition is a means to a

larger social and religious goal: the evangelization and social advancement of the economically poor.

Notes

1. "Fathers and Brothers of the Mission, search out more than ever, with boldness, humility and skill the causes of poverty and encourage short and long term solutions; acceptable and effective concrete solutions. By doing so, you will work for the credibility of the gospel and of the Church" (Address of John Paul II to the delegates of the General Assembly of 1986. Osservatore Romano, English Edition, August 2, 1986, p.12).

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