

COLLOQUE

Journal of the Irish Province of the
Congregation of the Mission

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Editorial

This is the first number of COLLOQUE to appear since Fr Mark Noonan succeeded Fr Frank Mullan as Provincial. Both have always been keenly interested in the Journal and encouraging in their comments.

An outstanding article from a quarter of a century ago by the late Fr William Purcell is reprinted by request. This article will also be available as a pamphlet; (see page 196).

Following the detailed examination of St Vincent and Jansenism in the last issue the article on the Irish in Paris throws light on one particular facet of Vincent's involvement.

The article on prayer makes available in English the substance of some authoritative writing which appeared in French a few years ago.

The 1986 General Assembly produced *Lines of Action 1986-1992*. One of the Irish Province delegates contributes his personal reflections on the Assembly which produced this document.

The final article "unpacks" two well-known words in a Vincentian perspective.

St Vincent de Paul

William Purcell

*(Reprinted from the All Hallows Annual, 1959-61,
with the Editor's permission)*

I

When he was about fourteen years of age, Vincent de Paul was sent away to school in the hope that he might become a priest. He pursued his studies first in Dax and, after a few years there he went on to the University of Toulouse where, four years after his ordination to the priesthood, he graduated a Bachelor of Divinity in 1604. In all, some nine or ten years had elapsed since he began his humanities in Dax. The help his family was able to afford him covered the cost of only about two of those nine or ten years; for the rest, he had to provide for himself. While yet in Dax, he had begun to do so by acting as tutor to a couple of younger boys, and some time after his arrival in Toulouse, he was fortunate enough to find himself in charge of a small school, a charge which allowed him and enabled him to carry on his own studies for the priesthood at the same time.

Vincent de Paul was not the first, nor has he been the last, to work early and late in order to pay for his own education. Nevertheless, the fact that he did so is indicative, as it would be in any similar case, of initiative, courage and perseverance. And the work that came to his hand is revealing too. Normally parents are careful about their children and do not entrust them to the care of the first stranger that comes along. Monsieur de Comet, a lawyer in Dax, was no exception to the rule. He knew Vincent's family and, realising that there was something in the boy, encouraged his parents to send him to school. After a year or so, when he saw how Vincent was getting on he took him into his home to teach his own two little boys. He knew, of course, the straitened circumstances of the de Paul family and was anxious to help, but he wanted to do so prudently and without hurting anybody's pride. Obviously, Vincent was making a good impression. And now that he had him in his own house and was able to observe at close quarters the promising youth he had taken under his patronage, M. de Comet's confidence increased. When

therefore the time came to go to Toulouse, the good opinion of M. de Comet went with his protege, and in due course, we find Vincent with a group of pupils around him. There was that in him, apparently, which inspired confidence in people like Monsieur de Comet and his wife. He was intelligent and reliable, even though he had the schoolboy's dread of ridicule; he had a way with him and the work that had fallen to him on his father's farm had matured him beyond his years. In short, during his time at school in Dax and at the University in Toulouse, he seems to have given evidence of that firm, sensitive and charming character which so distinguished him in later life.

Strength of character and charm of manner do not always go together. A determined character may easily be, or may easily become a forbidding character; one has but to compare Richelieu with St Vincent de Paul. On the other hand a charming manner may be a mere façade with nothing behind it. When however the qualities are happily blended in the same person, we may say that the two great virtues of temperance and fortitude are working together to give that man the mastery of himself and enable him gradually to face the world "with wide eyes calm upon the whole of things, in a little strength".¹

The young priest, Vincent de Paul, soon had need of all the strength he could muster, for in July, 1605, he was captured by pirates in the Gulf of Lions and sold into slavery in North Africa. Knowing, as we now do, that he escaped two years afterwards and got back to France, we are inclined to assume that he was aware of all this beforehand; and in consequence, we are inclined to overlook the ordeal he underwent during those two fateful years. In fact, when he was sold as a slave, he was faced with a life-sentence, and this bleak prospect must have tormented him as the weeks and months went slowly by. There were thousands of Christian slaves in North Africa at the time. Most of them left their bones there and who was Vincent de Paul that he might expect a better fate? As he was being sold like an animal and passed from one master to another, each of whom had the power of life and death over him, his heart cannot have been very high. The sea was on one side and the desert on the other; he knew nobody and nobody knew him; he was lost. And in the renegade to whom he was finally sold, we may sense the hell that screamed all around him. Like the three young men in the fiery furnace, however, Vincent remained unharmed and in the end emerged triumphant, leading captivity captive (Eph. 4:8). Speaking humanly, it was his stout heart that upheld him until such time as his high integrity and personal charm had won for him the co-operation necessary to plan and carry out his escape. But the letter he wrote soon

afterwards from Avignon to M. de Comet in Dax admits us to the real secret of his deliverance:

All the while, God wrought in me the belief that I should be delivered on account of the earnest prayers I offered to him and to the blessed Virgin Mary. I firmly believe that I owe my deliverance entirely to her intercession (1, 7).

Here we have first hand evidence of the strong faith and simple piety which constituted the citadel of his soul. The ordeal in North Africa had but served to strengthen that citadel while reducing to ashes the youthful illusions and worldly vanity that could only serve as cover for the enemy in a more determined assault. The more determined assault was made some years later; but without avail; for as in Africa so in Paris: "The Lord his God was with him and the sound of the victory of the king in him" (Nm. 23:22).

After his searching novitiate in North Africa, Vincent spent a year in Rome in the Italian household of his patron Pietro di Montorio, whom Vincent met as Papal Legate in Avignon. He went to school again in Rome; but for an observant Gascon in contact with a member of the Diplomatic Corps, Rome itself must have been the great school. The *Congregatio de Auxiliis* had just concluded. How the echoes of North Africa must have jostled in his mind with the echoes he now heard of the famous controversy! It was in the middle of its course when he was in Rome in 1600; and now he returns to find that while he and so many others were in slavery just across the Mediterranean, the great debate had continued as if they did not exist. Was he amazed at the contrast, or did he think to himself that, while the ordinary soldier is at the front, the supreme command has to safeguard the grand strategy upon which so many fronts depend? He certainly was no lover of controversy in later life, but he did not forget the slaves. Whatever his thoughts may have been during that year in the Eternal City and whatever wisdom he may have acquired there, the expected benefice did not materialise, and so, towards the end of 1608, we find him in Paris. By that time, he was well schooled in adversity. He had gone deeper than Dante into exile and knew at least as well as Dante how salt the savour of another's bread; but still he hoped that fortune might smile on him in the shelter of *Notre Dame*. It was perfectly natural that he should be concerned about his future. He had to live, and to live as a priest; and it soon becomes evident that we should be altogether misjudging him were we to think that in labouring for the meat which perishes he was forgetting that which

endures unto life everlasting (Jn 6:27).

As such the Wars of Religion in France were over. In the good providence of God, they served to give a rude awakening to the Catholic conscience of the country, and the Eldest Daughter of the Church was now hurrying to work, to the work of reform. Vincent got to Paris during the rush-hour of the new morning. There was no fanfare at his coming however significant his entry may seem to us now. And it was to be always thus where he was concerned. His coming was never heralded, but as he was leaving, people realised who had been with them, as did the disciples at Emmaus. Soon after his coming to Paris, he realised that Father Pierre de Bérulle was looked upon as a leader in devout circles in the capital. Vincent was attracted to the great reformer and Bérulle became his spiritual director. Their mutual acceptance of one another does credit to both of them. Neither of them could foresee the future, but “to the Lord was his own work known from the beginning of the world” (Acts 15:18) and while Vincent was engaged in the milieu to which Bérulle had introduced him, he discovered the path which the Lord would have him follow, though little did he think where it was going to lead him or what a wide and crowded thoroughfare it was going to become.

He was about two years in Paris when he suddenly found himself in a rather unpleasant situation. A gentleman with whom he was sharing a room missed his purse and accused Vincent of having stolen it. And the accusation was not whispered in a corner; it echoed through the house and down the street. Beyond calmly saying that he was innocent and knew nothing about the matter, Vincent made no attempt to clear his name. It was not in fact cleared until several years afterwards when the real thief confessed.

This incident throws an interesting light on the spiritual development of Vincent de Paul. Five or six years previously, just before he was captured and sold into slavery, he had been so ready to assert his rights that he had had a man clapped into jail in order to recover a debt from him; now the same Vincent allows himself to be injured and insulted and says nothing. It was not that he did not feel it or that his spirit was broken. He felt it keenly but kept himself in hand, and did so from the highest motives. Many years afterwards, in June 1656, when speaking to his community on fraternal correction, he referred to the incident, and the vividness of his reference after so many years would seem to show that here was a milestone in his spiritual life. Using the third person in order to conceal his identity, he said:

A member of the community was once accused of having robbed his companion, and that before the whole house (where they were staying). The charge was not true. Finding himself falsely accused, although he never meant to justify himself, the thought nevertheless did occur to him: "See here; you are going to justify yourself, are you not? You are being falsely accused, you know!" "Oh no", he said, as he lifted up his mind to God; "it is necessary that I suffer this patiently" (XI, 337).

It is necessary that I suffer this patiently. From the natural point of view, it was not at all necessary. The necessity was imposed by higher considerations; he had lifted up his mind to God. "The just man liveth by faith" (Rm 1:17). Again, the victory goes to the faith and prayer of Vincent de Paul. And this brings us to the crucial period of his life, to that time when he crossed the mysterious watershed that seems to divide ordinary living from great sanctity and found his life thereafter to be such as the Psalmist prayed that life might be for God's chosen people, "like a torrent in a south land" (Ps 126).

While he was attached to the household of the ex-Queen, Margaret of Valois, one of his fellow chaplains there was a learned divine who, before he came to reside in Paris, had been prominent in his diocese as a controversialist defending the Catholic faith against the Huguenots. After some time in his sinecure in the capital, the learned Doctor found himself troubled by temptations against the faith. He confided in Vincent, who advised and helped him as best he could. Despite these kind offices, the temptation continued, and with such virulence that the demon seemed determined to capture the soul of this good priest. As a result of all he suffered he fell ill and was in danger of dying in despair. Vincent was deeply affected by the critical situation and took the heroic step of offering himself to God as a substitute for this tormented soul. God heard his prayer and took him at his word. The mysterious temptation assailed him while immediate and unutterable peace rejoiced the heart of its previous victim. For three or four long years, Vincent was harassed by the diabolical vehemence and suggestiveness of this strange visitation. He wrote out the Creed and placed it as a shield over his heart, and whenever the temptation seemed to be redoubling its fury, he would place his hand on this shield in token of his firm adherence to the true faith. He carried on as usual, never arguing with the tempter but diverting his mind from the temptation by devoting himself more and more to works of charity. The temptation persisted; until at last he made up his mind to devote himself wholly and irrevocably to the

service of the poor out of love for his divine Master and in order to imitate him more perfectly. He had no sooner determined to do this than the temptation disappeared. He became a new man; the depression lifted; his heart sang for his new-found freedom; and as grace informed his soul and the Holy Spirit gifted him, the world of faith became his real home. Bérulle, playing Philip to his Nathaniel, had helped him to become intimate with Jesus of Nazareth, and St Francis de Sales was later to confirm his faith by telling him: "Feed my lambs" (Jn 21:15); but dwelling as his spirit now did at the feet of his divine Master, he had no further need of tutelage; he had himself become, as it were, an original disciple of the Incarnate Word.

Apart from recording it, writers on St Vincent have not paid overmuch attention to this temptation. Purification of the Christian spirit by trials and temptations of one kind or another is a commonplace in the lives of saints. For all that, these are very personal experiences and highly relevant to the labours with which divine providence would honour the labourer in question. It is significant, if not prophetic, to see the future Apostle of Charity taking over another man's burden, and such a burden. It is understood that he consulted his spiritual director about it, and we can only conclude that Bérulle must have thought very highly of Vincent to allow him become David to this Goliath.

In addition to its immediate importance in the spiritual life of Vincent de Paul, this temptation would seem to have had a wider relevance. As we have seen, it reached Vincent through a priest who had been prominent in controversy with the Calvinists. The wounds he received in the arena as champion of the faith and which later proved to be so nearly fatal were, therefore, wounds inflicted by the spirit of Calvinism; and his condition when Vincent came to his aid exemplifies the danger still hanging over the Church in France because of what we might now call the fall-out of Calvinism. In view of Vincent's important role during the next forty years or so, it is significant to find him standing so squarely in this gap of danger at the outset of his career. St Francis de Sales had been there before him. Each in his own way had met the challenge and prevailed by opposing to the madness of the age the humble "faith that worketh by charity" (Gal 5:6). But although in each case the temptation was, at a given time, over and done with, both Francis and Vincent were to spend the rest of their lives furnishing detailed and heroic proof of the faith that was in them. The Church has set the seal of her approval upon the sanctity of their lives; the piety of Catholics may however go further and see in the revelation of the Sacred Heart to St Margaret Mary the confirmation of heaven for the spirit of St Francis de Sales; it may

also find that the delicate and all-embracing charity of St Vincent de Paul is most graciously acknowledged in the radiance which streams down upon this globe from the open-handed gesture of the Immaculate as depicted on the Miraculous Medal.

The dark night of his soul coincided more or less with Vincent's first term in the de Gondi household (1613-1617), and his determination to devote himself to the poor explains sufficiently why he left the de Gondis in order to become Parish Priest of Châtillon-les-Dombes in the diocese of Lyons. It does not explain why he left without taking leave of the family; but the energetic and successful measures which Madame de Gondi immediately took in order to bring him back are sufficient indication that she would not have allowed him to go had she known he was leaving. According to the proverb, what a woman wills God wills. It would seem to have been so in the present instance even though what she willed was not all that God willed. It is obvious that the large de Gondi estates covering, as they did, a number of parishes in different dioceses offered a better starting point and more scope for the exercise of Vincent's zeal than a rather derelict parish far from the capital. And, of course, the See of Paris at the time was occupied by a de Gondi. Nevertheless, the four months or so that Vincent spent in Châtillon-les-Dombes established him in his vocation. It was really the first prolonged mission he gave; it was given without any suspicion of intrusion; it enabled him to begin his charitable enterprises; so that when he returned to the de Gondis, he had a good idea of what to do and how to do it. And he returned not as a tutor, tied to the education of a couple of young aristocrats, but as a chaplain to the household, with an *entrée* to every parish on the family estates. By the time he was through with the work to be done in those parishes, his good name was established in a number of dioceses and the ground prepared for the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission in 1625.

To get a glimpse of what was behind the activity of those years from 1617 to 1625, we may turn to one of the conferences he gave to his community in St Lazare in 1655:

It is certain that charity, when it dwells in a soul, completely occupies all its powers. There is no rest; it is a fire which is unceasingly active, keeping the person it inflames always keyed up and always in action (XI 215).

He goes on to warn his hearers about the danger to health arising from the indiscreet zeal that would do violence to nature and try to force

the hand of God. It is obvious that in August, 1655, he was speaking from a wide experience; but there can be little doubt that when he says charity sets the soul on fire the most decisive experience in question was his own. It was this fire of charity that powered the drive of his whole active life. It became intense as his soul was purified by the mysterious temptation against the faith, and its intensity, as manifested in the conferences given in the last years of his life, takes one's breath away. He was seriously ill, but the inner flame seemed to mount as the outer frame was crumbling.

In the early days of his conversion, from 1617 onwards, Vincent may very possibly have committed some of the indiscretions against which he later warned his young community. The way in which he more or less took the law into his own hands in order to get to Châtillon could be read in that light. The actual work done in Châtillon seems however to have been little short of the miraculous. In a little over four months, a neglected parish in which heresy was showing its ugly head was transformed. The Vincent of Châtillon is a more memorable figure than the Vincent of Clichy. In Clichy (1612-1613), he proved himself a good pastor; in Châtillon (August-December, 1617), he proved himself more than a good pastor. To all appearances, he was the same Vincent, but in Châtillon, things began to happen around him. As it were, "virtue went out from him" (Lk 6:19). The ice of prejudice cracked and crumbled. A general thaw set in and a new spring seemed to have come with the new pastor. It was a "showing of the spirit and of power" (1 Cor 2:4).

In such circumstances, one might naturally expect that Vincent would remain in Châtillon, He was but human and had his own feelings certainly; but these were now at the command of the charity which had set his heart on fire. When therefore it was made clear to him that in leaving Châtillon, he would not be deserting his vocation but rather gaining better opportunities for fulfilling it, he no longer hesitated, and Christmas, 1617, saw him back with the de Gondi family. As time passed and he realised his freedom to attend to the larger harvest now opened to him, he must have had second thoughts about the wisdom of hurriedly trying to determine where the divine vocation was leading him; and these thoughts must have received unexpected confirmation from a new experience, a most valuable one, and one that he would hardly have known in Châtillon; he met St Francis de Sales in Paris.

St Francis de Sales was in Paris from November, 1618, to September, 1619. Vincent saw him often and had a number of private talks with him. Their mutual accord must have soon become obvious to themselves; it became obvious to a wider circle when, early in 1622, the Bishop of

Paris, at the request of St Francis de Sales and St Jane Frances de Chantal, appointed Vincent superior of the recently established Monastery of the Visitation there. The fact that he knew himself to be acceptable to those two holy people must have been a great consolation to him during the years 1618 to 1623. These were trying years for him. He had come back from Châtillon more convinced than ever of the necessity of missions to the people of the countryside. He also realised that one man alone could accomplish comparatively little; it was necessary that some religious community should be found to undertake the work. With the approval and support of Madame de Gondi, he endeavoured to find such a community. He sought in vain. This was discouraging but perhaps understandable; religious communities usually have their sphere of operation already delimited. But what was far more discouraging and not at all understandable to Vincent was that Bérulle was opposed to the idea. Bérulle thought that the clergy should be first reformed and that in due time this reform would reach the people; Vincent was eager that something should be done immediately for the people. These divergent views may to some extent represent the different backgrounds of the two men; Vincent was a man of the people, Bérulle's family was higher up in the social scale. But such considerations apart, the principal difficulty that now confronted Vincent was that he had either to give up this idea of missions or part company with his spiritual director, Bérulle. Eventually he and Bérulle parted company, but in the meantime he was a worried man. And the worry manifested itself; he seemed to have become aloof and over-sensitive. His attention was drawn to this, and so, while leaving his main problem in the hands of God, he set about regaining his composure. In reference to a retreat made in 1621, we find him saying:

I turned to God and earnestly besought him to change my austere and distant manner into a mild and friendly one, and by the grace of our Lord and a little care in suppressing the ebullitions of nature, I have to some extent got rid of my ill humour.²

Not very long after he had thus braced himself against depression Vincent found that he had to do the opposite and restrain himself lest he should become overjoyed. For when it became clear to Madame de Gondi that there was no prospect of finding a community to give missions on the scale that was necessary, it began to dawn on her that it should be made possible for Vincent to establish such a community. We have his word for it that this was none of his prompting; he had not thought of establishing such a community. But his humility could

not prevent him seeing that Madame de Gondi's idea offered a way out of the impasse with Bérulle; for the approval or otherwise of what she had in mind would, in the first instance, be a matter for the diocesan authorities in Paris. With his spiritual problem thus referred to a higher and, as he had reason to believe, a more favourable court, Vincent was free to envisage the realisation of his dream. He was naturally delighted and full of eagerness to begin. Then the second thoughts came again. Whether Bérulle's frown had anything to say to them or not, we do not know; we are fortunate however in that these second thoughts found their way into a letter written hurriedly to one of his priests in 1642:

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, I beg of you to beware of natural enthusiasm in the matter about which you write to me. The Spirit of God proceeds gently and always goes hand in hand with humility. Do not forget that both you and I are subject to a thousand sallies of nature. When the project of the (Congregation of the) Mission was first mooted, I found myself so continually preoccupied with it that I became distrustful lest the whole idea should be but a prompting of nature or of the evil spirit; so much so that I made a retreat in Soissons expressly in order that it might please God to deliver me from the spirit of pleasure and bustling zeal which had taken such a hold on me. It pleased God to hear my prayer; with the result that in his mercy he took away from me both the one and the other and allowed me to lapse into the contrary disposition. And if God had given any blessing to the Mission, and if I am less of a scandal to it, in my opinion, it is due under God to this change of heart and to my desire to adhere to the practice of not making a decision or undertaking anything so long as I am all eagerness about it and full of hope that it will produce great results (II 246).

The retreat mentioned in this letter was made, it would appear, in the summer of 1622. On evidence of this retreat and of the one made the previous year, it would appear that about this time Vincent achieved firm command of himself before God and man. And the weapons of his successful struggle are obvious, namely, prayer and self-discipline. From North Africa to Soissons, and beyond that, to the day he died, the routine remained the same: "Watch and Pray" (Mt 26:41). Of the maturity and the rock-like steadiness of character now attained, he gave abundant proof as the years went by, and in a number of his letters the basis of his strength can easily be seen. Here is an extract from one

written in 1644:

Other things will follow in their own time. Grace has its moments. Let us abandon ourselves to the providence of God and be very careful not to go beyond it. If it pleases our Lord to give me some consolation in our vocation, I am inclined to think it is that we have endeavoured to be faithful to the supreme government of Providence and to confine ourselves strictly to what it has marked out for us (II 453).

The deep spiritual root of this vigilant and sensitive attitude to the ways and the will of God is evident in the conference on charity which Vincent gave to his community in 1655. Referring to the danger of presumptuously trying to force one's way, as it were, into the Interior Castle, he quoted St Francis de Sales:

A propos of this subject, I recall some words of His Lordship of Geneva, godly words, and well worthy of so great a man: "Oh, I should not wish to go to God if God did not come to me." Admirable words! He would not go to God if God did not come to him (XI 221).³

St Francis de Sales died in December 1622. When St Jane Frances de Chantal died in 1641, Vincent was favoured with an unusual vision. He saw a small globe of fire rising from the ground and ascending to join a larger and more luminous one in the upper regions of the air. Then the two globes, now become one, rose higher, and entering into an infinitely greater and more luminous globe, shone resplendent there. While this was happening, Vincent was told interiorly that the first globe was the soul of Mother de Chantal, the second was the soul of Francis de Sales and the third was the divine essence. A short time after he had had this vision, he received the news of Mother de Chantal's death and offered Mass for the repose of her soul. When he came to the Memento for the Dead, he saw the same vision again and felt that his prayers were not needed. He concluded his account of the incident by saying that he was inclined to regard the vision as genuine since he was not subject to visions and, apart from this one, never had another (XIII 127). There was no vision when St Francis de Sales died, but when giving evidence for his beatification, Vincent did not hesitate to say that he believed Francis de Sales to be more in the likeness of Christ than anyone he knew. One would like to think then that in leaving him the care of the

Visitandines in Paris, St Francis bequeathed to him some of his spirit also. At any rate, we shall not be far wrong if we take it that the influence of His Lordship of Geneva on Vincent, in his first fervour, was a calming one, and one that helped him to develop that supernatural prudence in discerning the will of God and that worshipful adherence to the divine good pleasure which characterised him. By the end of 1622, then, his spiritual formation was complete. He had definitely reached his majority and henceforth, as a faithful disciple of divine providence, he faithfully lived the prophetic word: "In silence and in hope shall thy strength be" (Is 30:15).

II

From this sketch of Vincent's spiritual formation, it emerges that the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity assumed in his life the primacy which is their due. They did not exist in splendid isolation; the tone of his moral life answered to their high imperative and the gifts of the Holy Ghost helped them to make Vincent in his time and in his degree an angel of the Incarnate Word of God. By his exemplary bearing in the spiritual combat, he had grown in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (2 Pet 3:18); in the words of St John of the Cross, his house was now at rest. If one may presume to say so, it rested facing God as he presents himself to us in the neighbour rather than as he is in himself: but at rest it was. One does not need a large acquaintance with the life of Vincent de Paul to know that he did not live in an ivory tower. He was acquainted with grief; and he was acquainted with it not as the priest and the levite in the parable, who seeing the wounded man lying half dead by the wayside, saw and passed on; he was acquainted with it as the Good Samaritan was, who, seeing the same tragic sight, "came near him and seeing him was moved with compassion. And going up to him bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine" (Lk 10:33). Vincent, the Good Samaritan of his day, bound up the wounds of a nation, pouring the balm of his charity upon the victims of war, famine, pestilence, social injustice and religious neglect and offering the poor of Christ the chalice of salvation. It was an overwhelming task; but as one studies his life or goes through what is left of his correspondence, one cannot help a growing feeling of amazement at the steadiness of the central figure in the drama. The angry waters of the Sea of Galilee offered our divine Lord calm and firm footing as he was overtaking the bark of Peter; the frightened apostle did not, however, find them such firm ground. The historic incident

comes to mind somehow and makes one presumptuous of an apostolic smile of understanding as one tries to hold on to Vincent, so calmly pursuing his simple way over the uncertain waters around Richelieu and Mazarin. In the official summary of his life given in the Roman Breviary for his feast-day, July 19th, it is stated that he was “always intent on God, always himself, and affable with everybody”. *Deo jugiter intentus* — always intent on God; this was the great simplicity of his life. It was the great purity and complete dominance of this pursuit that streamlined his days, mortifying any and every selfish motive out of existence. He had steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem, (Lk 9:51) thus assuring the tranquility of order in the house of his soul; and the calm born in him of this high purpose hallowed his humble presence with such majesty that for those about him, the Christ of the Beatitudes and of the Sermon of the Mount seemed to be speaking through him.

One who has steadfastly set his face to go to the holy city of God may have yet a long way to go to reach his goal. It was so with Vincent de Paul; but whether the way prove long or short, it goes through Jesus Christ, our Lord. “I am the way and the truth and the life. No man cometh to the Father but by me” (Jn 14:6). Vincent may be presumed to have been quite well aware of the capital importance of the mystery of the Incarnation when he met Bérulle — the *Imitation* was a “golden book” for him — but it may be also presumed that in the ten or twelve years, from 1608 to 1620, during which Bérulle was Vincent’s spiritual director, this awareness became more native to Vincent’s religious character and much better articulated as a governing principle in his spiritual life. It could hardly be otherwise. Vincent was, by the grace of God, progressing rapidly and his director was, in the words of Urban VIII, “an apostle of the Incarnate Word”. For all this, “star differs from star in glory” (1 Cor 15:41). Bérulle and Vincent de Paul were two very different men. Bérulle was a writer, given to probing deeply into the sacred mysteries of our faith. Vincent never wrote a line for publication. His was practical genius; the yardstick of his practice, however, was not just sweet reason, but sweet reason illumined and governed by a spirit of faith and prayer. For both of them, the mystery of the Incarnation was “the power of God unto salvation” (Rm 1:16), but while having the same mystery at heart, each of them applied it in his own way. At his best, Bérulle reminds one of the High Gothic as he soars into the empyrean in his effort to win men to worship and adoration. Vincent, on the other hand, seemed bent on bringing the vault of heaven down, like the Byzantine dome, to shelter man while its magic is at work upon him. Curiously, however, Bérulle’s high tone and aristocratic quality suggest the aloof majesty of Byzantine

decoration, while the Christian humanity of the West speaks in Vincent's more homely accent. He began his education, indeed, with the Sons of St Francis, and, when he was better able to read, Providence allowed him to read *The Rule of Perfection* by Benet of Canfield, O.F.M.Cap. He took what suited him from Father Benet, as he did from Bérulle and Duval and others, refusing, nevertheless, to be immersed in a theory or shut up in a school. Like the busy bee, he collected the nectar of heaven where God had it hidden for him, in the ample fields of experience over which his life ranged, but under God the honey of his wisdom remained quite definitely his own.

As a sample of this wisdom, we may take the advice he gave to Father Durand, C.M. when making him superior of one of the new seminaries. The year was 1656; Vincent was then seventy-five, and Father Durand was twenty-seven. Obviously the old man was not afraid of giving to young men posts of responsibility; he was well aware, quoting the example of David to prove his point, that a younger man may have a talent for the government and direction of others which an older man, however holy, may lack. Nevertheless, he thought it well to give a fatherly talk to this particular young man and Father Durand was wise enough to go and put the talk on paper while it was fresh in his memory. He laments, however, that he could not put on paper the zeal and vivacity with which Vincent spoke, even in a private talk such as this; it is a lament for which there is much more reason now. Even so, while we cannot catch his voice or gesture, Vincent's line of thought is clear. He was not attempting a treatise on the spiritual life; the talk was quite impromptu; yet, as from the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh, he enunciated, as a matter of course, the faith that was in him and how one might answer in life to the supernatural vocation with which God has honoured us in Christ. Here, then, is Vincent speaking to Father Durand.

How great a work is that to which God has called you, the government of souls. What a life, think you, is that of the priests of the Mission who are obliged to treat souls properly and guide them aright, a work fully understood by God alone. *Ars artium regimen animarum*. This was the occupation of the Son of God on earth; it was for this that he came down from heaven, was born of a Virgin, lived his life here below and died a most painful death. You should therefore have the highest conception of the work you are about to undertake. It is not the work of a man; it is the work of God. *Grande Opus*. It is the continuation of what Jesus Christ was given to do, and consequently human industry can but spoil

everything if God does not mingle himself with man's labour. Neither philosophy nor theology, nor preaching is effective with souls; it is necessary that Jesus Christ associate himself with us; that we work in him and he in us; that we speak like him and in his Spirit as he himself was in his Father and preached the doctrine his Father taught him; this is the language of Holy Writ. You must, therefore, empty out self in order to be clothed in Jesus Christ (XI 342).

For Vincent, then, the spiritual life was, quite simply, the Christian life, the life indicated by Christ when he said to his apostle: "I am the vine you are the branches" (Jn 15:5). Whether it was a question of this life as a whole or in part, Vincent's first care was to secure the predominance of Christ, or, as we might say nowadays, the Kingship of Christ. The mingling sap of the Word made Flesh should vitalise all flesh with its supernatural life; "I am the vine, you the branches. He that abideth in me and I in him, the same beareth much fruit; for without me, you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). This vital link with Christ or this continuation of the Mystery of the Incarnation into our days is secured to us through the Church and the Sacraments. And in this connexion, it will not be inappropriate to mention that, in 1628, when Vincent was giving evidence for the beatification of St Francis de Sales and had to give some information on oath about himself, he told the Commission among other things that he used to go to confession several times a week and that, by the grace of God, he said Mass nearly every day. (As he was liable to attacks of tertian fever, not to mention other ills, he was sometimes unable to say Mass). Later on, not only did he go to confession several times a week; he went every day. This was his practice for about the last twenty years of his life. As there was never any question of scrupulosity, this is a forcible reminder to us of the purity of conscience he maintained amid overwhelming public responsibilities. It is also a sufficient commentary on his love for the Blessed Sacrament and his great reverence at Mass. In this all-consuming devotion to the Saviour of the world, we may also see the source of the Mission; for the whole idea of the Mission was to bring people to their Saviour in the most holy sacrifice of the Mass and in the Sacraments. For Vincent de Paul, then, as for St Paul, it was true that: "To me to live is Christ" (Phil 1:21); or as Vincent himself was heard to say: "Nothing pleases me but in Jesus Christ".⁴

After some further elaboration of his basic theme, that nothing pleased him save in Christ, Vincent went on to say to Father Durand:

An important matter, to which you must carefully apply yourself, is to have a wealth of communication with our Lord in prayer. That is the reservoir where you will find the instructions necessary in order that you may acquit yourself properly in the office to which you are going. Whenever you find yourself in doubt, have recourse to God saying: "O Lord, Thou who art the Father of lights, teach me what I must do in this turn of events". I give you this advice not only for the occasions you will find distressing, but also in order that you may be enlightened by God in what you will have to teach... And I have to tell you that in contributing to the salvation of others one may get lost. Wherefore, in order not to fall into the misfortune of Saul or Judas, it is necessary to attach yourself inseparably to Our Saviour, and, lifting up to him your heart and soul, to say to him often: "O Lord, do not permit me to lose myself miserably as I try to save others; be thou my shepherd, and do not deny me the graces you communicate to others through my intervention and through the functions of my ministry."

You ought also to have recourse to prayer in order to ask Our Saviour for the things which those in your care have need of. Believe most certainly that you will reap a better harvest in this way than in any other. Jesus Christ, on whom you could model your whole conduct of affairs, was not content with preaching and good works, nor with fasting, nor with shedding his blood and dying for us; for to all this he added prayer. He had no need to pray for himself; it was for us then that he prayed so often, in order that we might learn to do the same, both in what concerns ourselves, and in what concerns those of whom we should be the saviours along with him (XI 344).

In these few passing remarks on prayer, Vincent managed to outline his mind on the subject and to give us some hint of his practice. One has to remember that he was speaking to a young man who had graduated in the spiritual life under Vincent's own teaching and influence. Father Durand did not need to be told that Vincent's life was summarised in his opening sentence: "You must carefully apply yourself so as to have a wealth of communication with our Lord in prayer". *Avoir grande communication*: the phrase is not one that lends itself to translation, but if a saint's views on prayer may be caught in a phrase, it would seem that St Vincent's views as well as his practice are here. The attitude revealed is simple and the scope is ample. It is not a question of praying now and doing something else by and by; it is rather a question of free and open

communication at all times. One is reminded of what our Lord said to the Apostles when “he spoke a parable to them that we ought always to pray and not to faint” (Lk 18:1).

Vincent’s first biographer, Abelly, whose work appeared in 1664, four years after Vincent’s death, tells us that the nature of his prayer was not known; at least those who survived him could not say whether it was ordinary or extraordinary. Reading through his letters and conferences, one does not get the impression that he was a mystic in the accepted sense of the term. One does, however, get the impression of a man to whom prayer had become second nature, the impression of a man who found prayer to be an infinite treasure whence he could draw forth new things and old with consummate wisdom. If one may so express it, his book of meditations contained on one page the life of our Lord and, gradually developing on the opposite page, the life he himself was called upon to live from day to day. In his prayer, then, he was mainly concerned that the life appearing in the mirror of the second page should, as it developed, be in the image and likeness of its divine model, for the greater glory of God. And if one were privileged to look over his shoulder while he was at prayer, it would soon become evident to such an observer that the Gospel page most frequently pored over by Vincent was the narrative of the sacred Passion of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. This was so, primarily, because in his great love for our blessed Saviour he had, like all the Saints, a tender devotion to our Lord suffering and dying for us as he did. But there was an added reason why he stood by the Cross of Jesus; there was the frightening narrative of human suffering that kept on writing itself into his life with such an iron hand. How could he prevent it from becoming a meaningless horror, save by relating it to the sufferings of the Man-God and teaching its victims, in so far as he could, to make it the Good Thief of their souls’ salvation. Speaking then in summary fashion, one might say that every one of the Christ-like activities that distinguished his life, as time went on, might well borrow the words of the twenty-second Psalm in order to say to his prayer:

Though I shall walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they have comforted me. Thou hast prepared a table before me against them that afflict me. Thou hast anointed my head with oil, and thy chalice which inebriateth me, how goodly it is. And thy mercy will follow me all the days of my life that I may dwell in the house of the Lord for ever and ever.

Whatever may have been the nature of Vincent's own prayer, his teaching on prayer was quite ordinary: meditation in one form or another, leading on to affective prayer and prayer of greater simplicity. As he said in later life, when we may presume he had most of his thinking done: *Il faut peu raisonner, mais beaucoup prier, beaucoup, beaucoup* (XI 357).⁵ He did not treat of contemplation, but there is an interesting reference to it in one of his conferences to the Sisters of Charity:

The other kind of prayer is called contemplation. In this prayer the soul, present to God, does nothing else but receive what he gives it. The soul is inactive and without its taking any pains, God himself inspires it with all it could seek for and a great deal more. Have you not, my dear daughters, experienced this kind of prayer? I am sure that it has been quite often so in your retreats, and that during them you have been yourselves astonished because, without any contribution on your part, God himself has filled your heart and given such insights as you have never had (IX 420).

One surmises that, without making any fuss about it, Vincent wanted to encourage those who may have had the experience he referred to, by letting them see that he understood them, while on the other hand, by assuming that all might have had the same experience, he was discouraging anybody from thinking that they might be in a class apart. He was the friend and counsellor of some of the great contemplatives of his time, but he was too well aware of the current dangers of false mysticism to make an unguarded reference to contemplation. Restricted and guarded as it is, this reference nevertheless intrigues one about St Vincent himself. Obviously, he knew what he was talking about, but just as obviously, he was not giving away any secrets. And this brings us back to Father Durand's account of what Vincent said to him; for after having spoken about prayer, he went on to speak about humility:

Another thing which I recommend to you is the humility of our Saviour. Often say: "what have I done, O Lord, that I should have such an office? What have I done that reveals any fitness in me for the responsibility placed on my shoulders? Oh, my God, I shall but spoil everything if you do not yourself take charge of all my words and actions." Let us keep constantly in mind all that there is in us of what is human and imperfect and we shall have at hand only too much cause for humbling ourselves not only before God but also before men and in the presence of those who are of humbler

rank. Above all have no ambition to appear superior or play the master. I do not agree with what somebody said to me recently, namely, that in order to govern well and maintain one's authority one should make it quite clear who is the superior. Dear Lord! Our Saviour Jesus Christ did not speak like this; he has taught us quite the contrary both by word and example, telling us that he himself came not to be served but to serve others and that he who would be the master must become the servant of all. Be then among them *quasi unus ex ipsis*.

Furthermore, we should always refer to God the good done through our instrumentality and, on the other hand, attribute to ourselves all the evil that occurs in the community. Yes, remind yourself that all the disorders stem principally from the superior, who, by his negligence or bad example, introduces irregularity just as all the members of the body languish when the chief member is not well.

Humility should also bring it about that you avoid all complacency, which slips in mainly where the office is of some distinction. What a dangerous poison to good works is vain complacency. It is a pest that corrupts the most holy actions and soon causes God to be forgotten. In the name of God, be on your guard against this fault; it is one of the most dangerous I know to progress in the spiritual life and to perfection. Give yourself to God, therefore, in order that you shall speak in the humble spirit of Jesus Christ, confessing that your doctrine is not yours, that it does not come from you but from the Gospel. And be particularly careful to imitate Our Lord in the simplicity of the language he used and of the comparisons he drew when speaking to the people, as is obvious from sacred scripture (XI 346).

It will be noted that when Vincent came to speak about humility, he recommended not just any humility, but the humility of Christ. This reflects his insistence on supernatural virtue. Like all the saints, and in accordance with the Church's teaching, he was not satisfied with merely natural virtue; he insisted on Christian virtue. Drawing waters with joy from the Saviour's fountains (Is 12:3), his favourite exhortation was: "Let us honour Our Lord by taking after him in virtue". Bérulle had been his guide during an important period of his spiritual formation and ever afterwards he was translating in his own way what St Paul had written to the Ephesians: "We are his (God's) workmanship, created in Christ Jesus in good works, which God has prepared that we should walk in

them” (Eph 2:10).

Humility is the truth, the truth of our position in relation to God. “What have you that you have not received? And if you have received, why do you glory as if you had not received?” (1 Cor 4:7). We are all God’s creatures, and were the creator to withdraw his sustaining hand, we should no longer exist. As of ourselves, then, we are nothing and, because of sin, less than or worse than nothing. It is easy to agree with this in theory and pay lip-service to humility. But when the theory comes alive and we find ourselves confronted with the Crucifixion, it is another matter. Yet we cannot evade the Crucifixion, for it is we that are on the Cross in our representative Jesus Christ. Many things are stated in the mystery of the Cross and much that passes our comprehension: but the Christian humility that allows God to take possession of the soul and man to hear: “This day thou shall be with me in paradise”, stands plainly revealed in the thunder and lightning of that afternoon air. Faced as we are with death and dissolution and harassed by so many miseries, no lesser voice could calm the quaking heart and bid us go in peace. It should come as no surprise to us then, when the saints, with their sixth sense of ultimate reality, do and say things that have the shock of Calvary in them. In this respect, Vincent shocks more than most. His remarks above about vain complacency give us a little taste of his mind.

“If we have not humility, we have nothing” (XI 440), he warned as he insisted that he was the greatest sinner in the world and that anything good said about him was but chastisement for his hypocrisy. He was as desirous of humiliation as a miser of gold and lost few opportunities of increasing his store, both because he believed that virtue needs practice and because he wanted to share in the humiliation of Christ. “Do you really understand that we are worse than demons?” he asked of his community:

Yes, worse than demons: because if God had given them a tenth part of the graces he has given us, great heavens! what use would they not have made of them. As for me, I have no difficulty in seeing this, because I see as clear as daylight that I am worse than the devil; for if the devil had received the graces God has given me (I do not mean extraordinary graces, I mean just ordinary graces), there is no devil in hell that would not be better than I am (XI 439).

As indicated in this outburst, he was anxious not merely that he himself and individual members of the Congregation should be humble;

he was anxious too that the Congregation as such should sit down in the lowest place.

Do you not see that one who is willing to be despised in his own person but cannot tolerate that the Congregation as a body should be despised in any way, and wishes that it be praised and highly esteemed, do you not see, I repeat, that such a one is finding himself again in the Congregation and taking back what he has given? (XI 323).

He usually referred to himself as “this miserable wretch”, and his references to the Congregation as a whole were just as flattering. He would allow no publicity to be given to the work of his spiritual sons or daughters because, as he said, the world’s way of doing business is not God’s way. One of the missionaries, back in Paris after having been through the siege of Limerick by the Cromwellians, asked if he might commit some of his experiences to paper; the answer he got from the saintly old man was: *Leave it to God!* Nor would he allow vocations to be sought after for the Congregation; he even hesitated about praying for them. Writing to one of his priests in November, 1655, he said:

For more than twenty years, I did not even dare to pray for the success of the Congregation. I considered that as it was God’s own handiwork, its growth and increase should be left entirely to the care of his providence; but the injunction given us in the Gospel to ask him to send labourers into his harvest convinced me in the end of the utility and importance of this devotion (V 463).

The counterpart of Vincent’s humility was his attitude towards divine providence; self was to be got rid of in order to make way for God. In his talk with Father Durand, therefore, the next thing we find him treating of is trust in divine providence:

Another matter to which you should pay very close attention is the maintenance of a great spirit of dependence upon the government of the Son of God ... This attitude of confidence and readiness to obey should be loyally extended to those who, as your superiors, take Our Lord’s place in your regard and represent him to you. Believe me, their experience and the grace that Jesus Christ, of his bounty, communicates to them on account of their responsibility, have taught them a great deal about the conduct of affairs... Do

not, I pray you seek to distinguish yourself or affect any peculiarity. Follow the royal road marked out by the rules and customs of the Congregation; and take care not merely to observe them yourself but also be exact in having them observed, for without this, everything would fall into decay (XI 347).

The loving worshipful submission of his life in detail to the sovereign Lord of all was Vincent's practical translation of St Paul's instruction: "With fear and trembling work out your salvation, for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to accomplish" (Phil 2:12). Vincent did not, however, vex himself with theories about the integration of human action with the divine assistance. In his own deliverance from evil, he had learned the supreme power of charity and this remained his guiding star. But not very long afterwards, he had learned another lesson; he had learned that one does not throw consideration to the winds in one's zeal to make the star of Bethlehem shine in all men's eyes. The Incarnation took place in the fulness of time, and what is true of the Incarnation itself remains true of its extension among men: there is always this mysterious fulness of time to be reckoned with in the divine economy. "The works of God are not done when we wish it but when it pleases him" (III 626). Vincent's fidelity to this principle may be said to characterise his spirituality. Here it is, expressed in more definite terms and also related to the Incarnation:

The works of God have their (opportune) moment; his providence arranges that they take place then, and not sooner or later. The Son of God saw the loss of souls and, nevertheless, he did not anticipate the hour ordained for his coming (V 396).

Vincent, obviously, was not talking about trifles when he gave such clear and weighty expression to what was, at that time of his life, 1655, the wisdom of a saint. He was in fact referring to the approval his agent in Rome was seeking for the vows to be taken in the Congregation of the Mission. The agent, one of his own priests, had written telling him of the opposition he was encountering and the consequent delay. But when Vincent was sure of his ground he was not deterred by opposition, and so, to encourage his subordinate in Rome, he wrote advising him not to worry but to keep knocking patiently and the door would be opened in God's good time.

The question is how could Vincent be sure of his ground? It was easy enough at this stage for it was only a question of completing what

was begun thirty years previously. The real question is how could he be sure of his ground when founding the Congregation in 1625. History offers only too many examples of people, great and small, who brook no interference — so convinced are they that they have a divine mission and that what they want is therefore what God wills. Vincent was not so full of himself; he and presumption dwelt far apart. He was sure of his ground in 1625 for the simple reason that he acted only in obedience to the wishes of his superiors. As has been mentioned already, when the project of the Mission was first mooted, he was all eagerness to begin, but suspecting that this eagerness was much too human, he choked it off, and by the grace of God remained inactive and indifferent about the matter until those placed over him beckoned him to begin. He rigorously maintained this attitude in regard to the inception of all his undertakings, never putting himself forward, but always waiting for the opportune moment and the authoritative signal. It was not always easy to keep things in line with this ideal, for zealous men are sometimes impetuous; and more than once he had to curb impetuosity and had to express himself firmly in order to do so:

You object that I take too long and that you sometimes wait six months for a reply that could be given in one: that, meantime, opportunities are lost and everything is at a standstill. It is true that I take a long time to reply and that I am slow about getting things done. Nevertheless, I have never yet seen anything spoiled by my restraint. Everything is done in its own time and with the consideration and precautions that are necessary. For the future, however, I propose to answer your letters more speedily after having considered the matter before God, who is greatly honoured by the time taken to give mature consideration to the things that concern his services, such as are those with which we are dealing. You will then, please, correct yourself of your readiness to make up your mind and go into action, while I will endeavour to correct my nonchalance (II 207).

As a result of this prayerful spirit and this nonchalance, as he calls it, or this waiting for things to ripen and the will of God to become more evident, Vincent could assure himself that he was not building upon sand but that what he undertook sprung from and was supported by the divine good pleasure. Then, with the devastating intuition or logic of the saints, he thought and spoke of the undertaking as the work of God; and thought and spoke of it as owing nothing to him but the deficiencies

occurring in its execution. On this he was adamant; so much so that, in addition to the very mortified life he led, he regularly took the discipline in order to make some atonement for such deficiencies or, as he preferred to call them: “the scandals and abominations of my life”. Despite this humility or, more truly, because of it, his conviction that a work of God had been entrusted to him made him tenacious in the extreme when he undertook any such work. The works of God should obviously be done. Difficulties were indeed to be expected, and he doubted the success of any undertaking that did not meet with difficulties; but in general he regarded such difficulties as obstacles to be overcome and as being allowed to exist in order to exercise the servants of God in virtue.

All our happiness consists in the accomplishment of God’s will, and true wisdom in desiring this alone. God often wishes to establish upon the patience of those who undertake them the good works that are to endure, and for that reason he allows such people to suffer many trials (IV 289).

This calm confidence in “the government of the Son of God”, which sufficed not merely to keep himself serene but to give heart to so very many others, reminds us that the Vincent we are now dealing with is the Vincent of hope, Christian hope. He is remembered as the great organiser of Christian charity; Christian hope becomes such an organiser. Voluntary organisation implies mutual confidence. If this is merely human confidence the organisation remains on a merely natural level. To elevate it to the supernatural level, the mutual confidence in question must become an exercise of Christian hope. As in loving the neighbour properly we are loving God, so in trusting the neighbour properly, our trust will be some extension of our confidence in God. Above all others, the leader is responsible for inspiring the members of the organisation with this ideal and for maintaining their spirit at this level. More than the others then he must set the example and see to it that the organisation is not built around himself but that it is centred on God. As the Precursor said in reference to our divine Lord: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (Jn 3:30). This axiom of the saints was faithfully adhered to by Vincent de Paul.

He employed all the virtues, or, might one say, all the tactics of the spiritual life in order to make sure that, while the work of God increased he would decrease. And so well has he succeeded in demeaning himself and keeping himself in the background that, despite all the publicity about what he achieved, he has defeated the historians of his life. He does

not impose himself and the impact of his personality is not conveyed. This presumably is as it should be; at least it is as he would have it; for if one sets out to understand a saint, one should find God.

He that hath the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom who standeth and heareth him rejoiceth with joy because of the bridegroom's voice. This my joy therefore is fulfilled (Jn 3:29).

The familiar picture of an old man with firmly shut mouth and mysterious youth in his eye might well have these words of the Baptist inscribed around it. When heresy and false prophets were flattering troubled minds with pride and presumption on the one hand and threatening them with despair on the other, Vincent de Paul, by word and example, was directing them on to the highway of Christian hope, and though he would decrease, the age-old work, which the Spirit of God made use of him to emphasise and exemplify anew, goes on increasing as men feel more responsible for their fellow-men before God and find hope for themselves in bearing one another's burdens in Christ.

At this point, we come to an interruption in Father Durand's narrative. It was a homely interruption, and it was a fortunate one because it led Vincent to express himself on temporal matters. His remark may have more point for us if we remember that in certain circles there was a tendency to treat man as if he were an angel. A high flown spirituality was preached, seductive to pride but really inhuman and quite out of harmony with the Incarnation. As Vincent speaks and rounds off for us his approach to the spiritual life, we can see how firmly his feet were on the ground while, as a disciple of the Word made Flesh, he linked heaven and earth and joined the humblest with the highest in the great *Exultet* of his heart.

After Monsieur Vincent had thus spoken to me with zeal and charity such as I cannot put on paper, a lay brother happened to come along seeking a directive on some domestic matter. When he had gone, Vincent took occasion to say to me:

You see how from the things of God about which we were just speaking I must turn to temporal matters. This should bring home to you that it is a superior's business to look after not only spiritual but also temporal affairs. Those of whom he has charge are composed of soul and body and he should attend to the needs of the one as well as of the other. In doing this, he will be following

the example of God. From all eternity he was occupied with the generation of the Son and the procession of the Holy Ghost; and then, apart from these operations *ad intra* he created the world *ad extra* and occupies himself continually in conserving it and all belonging to it, producing thus year after year new grain upon the earth and new fruit upon the trees. The care of his adorable providence extends itself so far that a leaf does not fall off a tree, save by its disposition; by it the hairs of our head are numbered and the most insignificant forms of life are fed. This seems to me a very effective way of bringing home to yourself the fact that one should apply oneself not only to what is noble and elevated, as are the functions concerned with spiritual matters, but that a superior, who in some fashion represents the range and expanse of God's power, should also concern himself with the humblest temporal details and should not consider that attention to such things is beneath him.

In the beginning, when the Son of God sent out his Apostles, he recommended them to carry no money; but afterwards when the number of his disciples increased he wished that there should be a purser among them who would not only attend to the needs of the poor but who would also provide what was necessary for *his familia*; furthermore, he allowed women to be of the company for the same purpose: "who ministered unto him" (Lk 8:3). And if in the Gospel he directed us not to take thought for the morrow, this should be understood as deprecating too much anxiety and worry about worldly goods. It certainly does not mean that we should neglect the ordinary means of livelihood; otherwise crops should not be sown. Give yourself, therefore, to God for the purpose of ensuring the temporal welfare of the house to which you are going (XI 349).

The reference in this last paragraph to the holy women who ministered to our Lord is interesting in that it reveals the bed-rock in the Gospel upon which Vincent founded the Sisters of Charity. Our blessed Lady was of course, the one who, beyond all others, ministered to her Son. Vincent's devotion to her was part of his life.

Apart from saying the rosary every day, he wore the rosary beads at his cincture, and the attribution of his deliverance from captivity to her intercession may be taken as symbolic of his constant attitude towards her. His greatest act of homage to our Lady was, however, in the foundation of the Sisters of Charity. By successfully organising dedicated women in

the charitable service of the poor and the afflicted, he opened up a new world in the name of Mary. His God-given associate in this great voyage of discovery was St Louise de Marillac. And it would seem that our blessed Lady has on more than one occasion signified her approval of their very practical devotion. It is not inappropriate then that, when after many trials and tribulations Vincent had emerged from the shadows to fulfil his manifold mission of charity, the first letter we should have from him as a spiritual director is a brief note written to St Louise in 1626. Brief as it is, it sums up fairly well what he had learned in the school of Christ and what he so faithfully exemplified in his own life:

I received your letter here in Loisy-en-Brie (Marne), about seventy miles from Paris, where we are giving a mission. I did not let you know I was leaving because we left sooner than I expected ... Be of good heart; our Lord will know how to turn this little mortification to good account, may it so please him, and will himself act as director. Certainly he will do so, and in such fashion as to make you see it is he himself. Be you then, his dear daughter, utterly humble, submissive and full of confidence; and always wait with patience for the evidence of his holy and adorable will (126).

When this vigilant patience was rewarded and the adorable will of God became sufficiently manifest, Vincent moved thoughtfully and prayerfully forward towards its fulfilment with a great heart and a willing mind (2 Mace 1:3). Even when death was near and the once busy feet refused to support him any longer, his heart was on fire and he was urging his community forward. We must go forward, he admonished them; *il faut aller toujours avant, plus ultra* (XII 77).⁶

It is certain that charity, when it dwells in a soul, completely occupies all its powers. There is no rest; it is a fire which is unceasingly active, keeping the person it inflames always keyed up and always in action (XI 215).

Notes

(Notes 4, 5 and 6 added by the editor)

1. Francis Thompson: *Anthem of Earth*.
2. Abelly: Bk. III, ch. 12.
3. The original text of the quotation from St Francis de Sales reads: "If God came to favour me with the sense of his presence, I would also go to receive him and to correspond with his grace; but if he did not wish to come to me, I would keep my place and would not go to him: I mean to say that I would not try to have this sense of his presence but would content myself with the simple apprehension of faith". *Conferences of St Francis de Sales* (French ed.) p. 459.
4. From the Second Nocturn of .Matins in the office of the Feast of St Vincent, 19 July, in the old breviary.
5. "There should be little reasoning but lots of praying, lots, lots".
6. "We must always press forward, still further on".

* * * * *

Copies of this article, in pamphlet form, may be purchased from:

The Secretary,
 All Hallows Renewal Centre,
 Gracepark Road,
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 Phone: 377685 or 377642.

Jansenism and the Irish Student-Priests in Paris in 1650-51

Thomas Davitt

I first became interested in what is called “L’affaire des Hibernois” about five years ago when I came across a two-part article which Thomas Wall contributed to *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record* in August and September 1944 entitled “Irish Enterprise in the University of Paris (1651-1653)”. I thought it would be interesting to go to some of the sources cited by Dr. Wall, and to some others, to see if there were more details available about the Vincentian dimension than he needed to use in his article.

A brief account of events leading up to 1650 is needed. Cornelius Jansen, better known by his Latinised surname Jansenius, died in 1638 as bishop of Ypres. As a professor in Louvain he had spent much time studying St Augustine’s theology of grace, with much support from Florence Conry OFM who was archbishop of Tuam from 1609 though he never visited his diocese. The fruit of Jansen’s lifelong reflection on Augustine and grace appeared posthumously in the book *Augustinus*, published in Louvain in 1640. A work of Conry on the fate of unbaptised infants, which had originally appeared in 1624 five years before his death, was printed as an appendix to *Augustinus*.¹ On 6 March 1643 Urban VIII condemned *Augustinus* in the bull *In eminenti* as containing the already condemned ideas of the 16th century Louvain theologian Michel du Bay, or Baius.²

On 1 July 1649 Nicolas Cornet, syndic of the Faculty of Theology in the University of Paris, told the Assembly of the Faculty, in the great hall of the Sorbonne, that he had been worried for some time about certain theological tendencies appearing in the Faculty. Louis Gorin de Saint-Amour, who had received his doctorate in theology in 1646, was present at this meeting and has left an account of it in his *Journal* which was published in 1662.³ An English translation appeared in London in 1664.⁴ He wrote that Cornet told the Assembly that he hoped for an improvement in the state of affairs:

if the Faculty would please to declare their judgement concerning

some Propositions which occasion'd all the disorders, and excited all those heats and contentions, that the propositions of that kind were few, and he conceiv'd might all be reduc'd to six or seven principal ones; which he also rehears'd (SA 10).

Cornet made no reference to any author or book which taught these propositions. There was much debate and a vote was taken on the matter, resulting in the setting up of a commission to examine the propositions. In order to facilitate the debate at the next Assembly, on 1 August, the propositions were printed within five or six days and a copy was given to every doctor (SA 13).

Although Cornet had mentioned no names the spate of writings which emerged in the month of July showed clearly that it was the teaching of Jansenius which was in question. His supporters, who always referred to themselves as the disciples of St Augustine, were busy arguing that the propositions could not be condemned as they stood because they were capable of an orthodox interpretation as well as the unorthodox one which was being put on them (SA 15-16).

By the end of July the signs were clear that the Faculty would proceed to a condemnation of the propositions. The Assembly on 1 August was interrupted by squabbles over procedure and the propositions were not, in fact, discussed. On the 2nd Saint-Amour was instrumental, he tells us, in getting more than sixty doctors of the Sorbonne to sign an appeal to the *Parlement* (the "High Court") "to whom alone appertaineth the cognisance and jurisdiction of the said Appeal against Abuses" (SA 17). The abuse against which they appealed was that Cornet had "packed" the Assembly in order to assure a vote along the lines he wanted:

having to that end caus'd to come into the said Assembly many Doctors, Religious and Secular, which the Syndic and his adherents had summon'd on purpose from their respective houses, intending by their number to represent the said Faculty (SA 17).

A sort of truce was negotiated out of court, which Saint-Amour later interpreted as a delaying tactic: "We did not yet perceive the bottom of the artifice" (SA 19). He regarded the First President of the *Parlement* as being "prepossessed by our Adversaries" (SA 18) which perhaps provided self-justification for some of Saint-Amour's methods of gathering information:

Of this my self was witness, the door of the Grand Chamber on

the side of the Clerk's Table being for some time half open, and I hapning to come thither at the same moment (SA 18).

In spite of the truce the matter was raised at the Assembly of the Faculty on 1 September, on the plea that the agreement at the truce was that nothing would be *done*; there was no agreement that nothing would be *said*, which made Saint-Amour write:

This juggling and equivocal answer was hiss'd at, as wholly unworthy of the place and the businesse treated of; and in this posture matters rested that day (SA 19).

The *Parlement* referred the matter to the General Assembly of the Clergy which was to meet in May 1650.⁵ At the end of December 1649 some bishops were already in Paris in connection with the meeting and a number of doctors of the Faculty of Theology had discussions with them. They all agreed that the best way to have the matter settled was to refer it to the Pope.⁶ The sixth and seventh propositions were dropped and from then on the others acquired the definite article and initial capitals and have gone down in history as "the Five Propositions".

Isaac Habert, a Paris theologian who had become bishop of Vabres, drew up a letter to the Pope requesting a clear statement on the Five Propositions.⁷ Before being sent to Rome this letter was circulated to the other bishops of France in order to obtain as many signatures as possible. In February 1651 Vincent de Paul, who is credited with being partially responsible for the composition of the letter,⁸ sent a copy of it to a number of bishops and urged them to add their signatures to the forty or so who had already signed (IV 149). The eventual number of signatories was eighty-five.⁹

Eleven bishops who did not sign drew up their own letter to the Pope and appointed Saint-Amour as one of their delegates to go to Rome; it was he who gave the letter to the Pope on 10 July 1651.¹⁰

Bishops were not the only people being canvassed for support by both Jansenists and anti-Jansenists. Both sides were trying to enlist the support of the Irish student-priests in Paris during 1650. On the Jansenist side the leading campaigner was a Corkman, John Callaghan, a doctor of theology." Rene Rapin SJ, a contemporary, has this to say:

Callaghan, who was more zealous than the others, offered to organise the young Irish students, who were studying in Paris to prepare themselves for pastoral work when they would return

to their own country, and to fill their minds with the maxims of the new opinion. He had no difficulty in taking advantage of the majority of these young people.¹²

Vincent de Paul saw the danger here and the need to counteract Callaghan's influence. Saint-Amour writes:

For a full and orderly account it is necessary to look back into the history of the Irish whose subscriptions against the five Propositions M. Vincent superior of the Mission solicited the foregoing winter (SA 106).

Another Irish Jansenist, "Le sieur de Clonsinnil, prestre Hibernois & Docteur en Theologie", sees the need to look back a few months earlier, to the summer of 1650.¹³ He says that the anti-Jansenists "though strong and powerful" could not manage to get any support among the Irish except from those "who have the least knowledge on the question of grace, or none at all". He says he writes only of matters about which he has personal experience. "The need to defend truth and uphold the honour of our Nation ... obliged me to mention by name those who were involved":

In the month of June last year, 1650, an Irish Priest of the Mission, of the family of the Rev. Fr Vincent, named Duygine,¹⁴ going to visit several priests, compatriots of ours, staying in the University of Paris, showed by word and deed how much he felt for them as he saw at first hand the poor conditions in which they were (C 4).

Duggan put a proposition to these priests, with Vincent's approval. A Monsieur de la Bidière, a member of the *Cornell d'Etat*, was prepared to better their condition. "These good priests, not knowing the poison which this Priest of the Mission was concealing" (C 4) went to M. de la Bidière who told them that he wished to establish an Irish foundation in the University of Paris; he asked them to contact other Irish priests whom he named. They were asked to draw up a document outlining the sort of regime they would like to have in the proposed foundation. At a further meeting M. de la Bidière said that a Jesuit or a Priest of the Mission would have to be superior of the proposed foundation, and that because the Irish were held to be Jansenists they would have to sign a declaration pledging loyalty to the Pope and acceptance of his bulls and decrees, with specific mention of those against Jansenius and his

supporters. The Irish were surprised at these requirements and refused absolutely to accept either a Jesuit or a Priest of the Mission as superior; they said that they were diocesan priests and that the superior should also be a diocesan priest. They had no objection, though, to signing a declaration of loyalty to the Pope in the form customary for Bachelors of Theology in the University of Paris. A few days later, however, M. de la Bidière sent for them again and said he would have to have a signed declaration which included an explicit rejection of Jansenist teaching. They said that as regards the bull against Jansenism:

it was not up to them, who had no authority in the Church and were only private individuals, to endorse what Bulls they accepted or did not accept; but they had to conform to the laws of the Kingdom of France where they lived, to the Clergy of their own country and to the University of Paris, and that this Bull against Jansenism had neither been accepted nor promulgated by the Bishops of their country (C 8).

Another Jansenist writer, a leader of the party, Dom Gabriel Gerberon OSB, whom Bremond calls the *enfant terrible* of Jansenism and whom he considers mad,¹⁵ introduces the episode this way:¹⁶

Fr Vincent, Founder of the Priests of the Mission, as they are called, whose zeal is as ardent as it is little enlightened, was thought to be just the man for this intrigue and for worming out of these poor Irishmen the sort of declaration he wanted against the five propositions. Among his priests he had an Irishman named Duygine whom he used for manipulating this business. Since June of the previous year this man had held meetings of other Irishmen who were studying theology and philosophy, and pointed out the extreme poverty to which they were reduced.¹⁷

Gerberon regarded Vincent as “one of the most dangerous enemies whom the disciples of St Augustine had”¹⁸ and he always added a slighting remark when he mentioned his name: “a supporter of the Fronde as ignorant as he is zealous”, and “who had more zeal than light”.¹⁹

Some of the Irish then went to Richard Nugent of the diocese of Cloyne, who was a doctor of the Sorbonne, for advice. It must be remembered that the Irish priests whose signatures were being sought were still pursuing their basic studies in philosophy and theology; they had been ordained early so that they could support themselves on mass

stipends.²⁰ Nugent's initial reaction was that

such a declaration should not be signed. He decided to go and see M. de la Bidiere, and he brought with him Nicholas Power who taught philosophy in the College de Lisieux (in Paris), and John Moloney of the diocese of Cashel. Although they were against the signing of a declaration they were not Jansenists. Gerberon, though, tries to suggest a Jansenist angle, saying that they,

remembering with what firmness their illustrious Florent Conrius, Archbishop of Thuame, and other theologians of their country, had upheld the opinions of St Augustine against the new ones of Molina, went to see M. de la Bidiere and lodged objections to his having made such approaches to them.²¹

The next move was that two Jesuits went to see Nicholas Power in the College de Lisieux and they brought him round to being in favour of signing. Power later told a group of Irish priests in the College des Lombards²² that the Jesuits promised a fine Irish foundation in the University of Paris, provided they signed an anti-Jansenist declaration. He also said that he had taken the opportunity to tell the Jesuits that he was a Molinist. Clonsinnil says that then:

all began to laugh, and said with one voice that it would never be said of Irishmen that they sold the doctrine of the Church for any temporal benefit (C 10).

Power was disappointed at his lack of success on this occasion, and he arranged a further meeting in his room in the College de Lisieux, a meeting which was to be kept secret from the people in the College des Lombards. Patrick Boyle quotes a contemporary source as saying that this meeting was at the instigation of Vincent de Paul and one of the Irish priests of his Congregation, George White.²³ Secrecy was breached, however, and someone in the Lombard College tipped off the Rector of the University about the proposed meeting. The Rector sent a beadle along to Power's room to point out that such a meeting, to discuss doctrinal matters which were in dispute, was against the rules of the University. The meeting dispersed quietly. This was on 13 February 1651, according to Saint-Amour (SA 106). Within a few days:

certain persons went to their respective lodgings and us'd so many sollicitations and promises to them, that at length they obtain'd

that the declaration drawn for them against the five Propositions was subscrib'd by twenty-six of their company (SA 106).

Clonsinnil's version of this is that the Jesuits approached the Priests of the Mission to try to get them to solicit signatures (C 12). Gerberon says that since Power's efforts were unsuccessful:

another Irishman called de Withe, Principal of the College des Bons Enfants, was better suited to handle this matter competently, being more subtle and very opposed to the so-called Jansenists.²⁴

"De Withe" is George White, as is clear from Clonsinnil's account:

The Irish used to meet at two o'clock every Sunday afternoon in the residence of the Priests of the Mission at the College des Bons Enfants to hold discussions in their own language.²⁵ These meetings were always chaired by a certain Priest of the Mission from their own country known to them as Vuhite and to the Priests of the Mission as Le Blanc. Although he had promised not to deal with grace at such meetings he could not stop himself from speaking about Jansenism at these conferences, nor refrain from constantly ranting against the Jansenists, going so far as to go down on his knees and beg God that no one who held these opinions would ever go to his country, particularly Fathers N and N whom he named (C 12).

Clonsinnil says that the Irish were fooled into thinking that these meetings were for their benefit when, in fact, they were merely to trap them into signing an anti-Jansenist declaration. He bases this on the fact that as soon as some signatures had been "extorted" all further meetings were cancelled on orders from Vincent and no more were ever held (C12). Clonsinnil, like Gerberon, did not rate the theological standing of Vincent and his Congregation too highly, though he is less brutal in his wording than the Benedictine:

Everyone knows that the Priests of the Mission do not want to be taken for great Doctors, because their continual ministry does not leave them time to read anything except Becan's *Summa*,²⁶ and that Fr Vincent himself also certainly has the humility to admit that he does not understand anything on the question of grace, which the Molinists try to destroy by their human philosophy; yet

nevertheless this Father revels in showing himself everywhere he goes as being enthusiastic in condemning something about which he admits knowing nothing (C 12).

Clonsinnil says that when White saw “that Power had not managed things well enough to trap his compatriots and get them to sign” such a declaration, White used to go around the University and meet a few Irishmen everyday and remark that it was a pity that M. de la Bidiere’s proposed foundation was still not a reality, through their fault. He urged them to sign, and gave some of them to understand that others had already signed. He also said that Vincent had agreed to do something for the Irish, but only for those who would have signed. He also intimated that Vincent had enough “pull” to ensure that anyone who did not sign would never get any sort of position in Ireland. If they signed, no one need ever know; and they themselves should also keep quiet about it. In this way, according to Clonsinnil, White got signatures from some:

who did not know what the Declaration contained, not even having read it, as they later admitted to many (C 12-14).

White’s attempt at secrecy was no more successful than Power’s earlier one. Some who had been asked to sign, but did not, brought the whole matter to the notice of Richard Nugent and deputed him and another Irish priest to go and lodge a formal complaint to Vincent about White’s machinations and to ask him to stop him. Clonsinnil says:

These delegates told the whole story to Fr Vincent and said that M. de la Bidière had not wanted to make a certain foundation for the Irish, which he had been thinking of making, because they had not been willing to sign a new Declaration of faith according to his way of seeing things; and when they thought things were quiet in that area they found that Fr White was stirring up a lot of trouble among them for the same reason, and they asked him to stop him because he was spreading rumours among the Irish that Fr Vincent had great plans for them, in order to get them to sign this Declaration.

Fr Vincent told them that M. de la Bidiere had done a good job; and, as a delaying tactic, he told them that he would check with M. de la Bidiere what exactly he was planning to do. As regards himself, he did, in fact, want to do something for the Irish, but only for certain individuals and not for all (C 14-15).

He adds that White did not discontinue his efforts after this; Gerberon says that he increased them, and that the delegates did not realise that Vincent himself “was part of the plot”, and that Richard Nugent himself eventually:

was so weak as to give in to the promises and threats of Fr Vincent and signed along with the others.²⁷

The final number of signatures was twenty-six, among whom were three doctors of theology (including Richard Nugent), two bachelors of theology (including Nicholas Power), fourteen who were studying theology and seven who were studying philosophy. The document became known as the *Declaratio Hibernorum*. It was written in Latin and was a straightforward acceptance of papal and conciliar teaching, especially that of Trent, together with formal rejection of the Five Propositions, which were quoted verbatim.

When the Rector of the University heard that a group of Irishmen had drawn up and signed such a theological declaration he called a meeting of Deans of Faculties and Procurators of Nations in the College de Navarre on 4 March 1651. From among the twenty-six signatories the four who already had degrees from the University of Paris were summoned to attend and explain their conduct.

The depositions given by these witnesses confirm the basic facts already quoted from Jansenist sources. Nugent mentioned the two o'clock Sunday meetings in the Bons Enfants, the solicitation of signatures by George White and the fact that a copy of the signed Declaration was given to Vincent de Paul; Nicholas Power and a Thomas Mede also mention this point. The visits of the Jesuits to Power, the promise of an Irish establishment in Paris and its foundation being conditional upon the Declaration being signed, also came out in the evidence. Thomas Mede said that it was he who drew up the Declaration.²⁸

The findings of this enquiry were published, mentioning the frequent meetings in “Collegio Bonorum, ut vocant, Puerorum” with a Priest of the Mission in charge, and the more recent meeting in Power’s room. The four signatories who were summoned to attend are recorded as having deposed that they had signed as individuals, and independently of each other; they were told that if they did not revoke their signatures they would be declared ineligible to hold or obtain degrees.²⁹

At this same meeting a group of more than sixty other Irish graduates, who had not signed the Declaration, presented a written petition that they should not be tainted with what:

was but the fault of some few particular persons, some of whom were circumvented by reason of their ignorance, others corrupted and seduced by the enemies of the University.³⁰

Some of this group also gave oral evidence, including that the two Jesuits had *religiosissime* promised a house for the Irish if they signed the Declaration, together with the hope of a foundation to be made by a gentleman and appointments to be obtained through Monsieur Vincent.³¹ The *Decretum* was confirmed by a General Assembly of the University, meeting in the house of the Mathurins, on 21 March.³²

The signatories had promised to revoke their signatures³³ but instead of doing so they had them confirmed before a notary, lodged an appeal to the *Parlement* against the Rector's *Decretum*, and in addition appealed against it to the Faculty of Theology of the University,

as if the Faculty had been a Tribunal Superior to the University and Parliament, and as if it had the right to judge of a Judgement of the whole University.³⁴

On the 24th the *Parlement* ruled that it would accept the appeal and ordered the University to suspend the *Decretum* temporarily.

Nicholas Power, "being chosen as the boldest"³⁵ and Thomas Mede presented their appeal to the Faculty of Theology on 1 April and the Faculty rejected the *Decretum* of the Rector and upheld the Irishmen's appeal to the *Parlement*.³⁶

This resolution of the Faculty raised the pride of these Irish so much that although the University had condemned their Declaration and ordered that it be suppressed they went and got it printed.³⁷

That explains how what started as a rather hush-hush handwritten document with only three or four copies came to survive.³⁸

A few months after this, on 9 August 1651, Vincent wrote to the Superior General of the Augustinian community of Sainte Genevieve, using the rather formal style which he could adopt, or which Brother Ducournau could adopt, for such letters:

Your great goodness gives me confidence to ask you very humbly to be good enough to recommend a Fr Mede to one of your Fathers who is Chancellor of the University and in charge of examining for the Master of Arts degree that he appoint him, in preference

to anyone else, as an examiner; he is an Irish priest, a Bachelor of Theology. This is asking a lot of you, my Reverend Father, but apart from his being a very worthy candidate I have been asked by persons outstanding in virtue and learning who, like him, will be very obliged to you (IV 237-8).

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the librarians of the following: The Early Printed Books department of Trinity College Library, Dublin; the Sir John Gilbert Library, Pearse Street, Dublin; the Russell Library, St Patrick's College, Maynooth; St Patrick's College, Thurles.

Notes

1. Clark: *Strangers and Sojourners at Port Royal*, Cambridge 1932, p 3.
2. *Ibid.*, p6.
3. The *Dictionnaire des Livres Jansenistes*, 4 vols., Antwerp 1752, says that the *Journal* was the work of Antoine Arnauld and M. de Saci (pseudonym of Isaac-Louis Le Maitre) based on notes given by Saint-Amour and de Lalane, their delegates to Rome. It was published in 1662. On 4 January 1664 Louis XIV ordered that it be burnt by the public executioner. On 28 March 1664 it was condemned by the Holy See. (See next note).
4. *The Journal of Monsr. de Saint Amour, Doctor of Sorbonne, containing a full Account of all the Transactions, both in France and at Rome, concerning the Five Famous Propositions*. This is a large volume, 13" x 9", containing 698 pages; the first 450 are the Journal and the remainder "A Collection of Sundry Tracts, Letters &c". References and quotations will be identified in the form (SA+page number). The President of St Patrick's College, Thurles, was kind enough to let me borrow a copy.
5. The General Assembly of the Clergy met every five years. In years ending in 5 there were four deputies from each ecclesiastical province, while in years ending in 0 there were only two. Abercrombie: *The Origins of Jansenism*, Oxford 1936, p175, n 1.
6. (Dumas): *Histoire des cinq propositions de Jansenius*, 2 vols., 2nd ed., Trevoux 1702, Vol. I ppl 1-12.
7. Abercrombie, *op. cit.*, pp 225-226.
8. *Ibid.*, p 225.
9. For a quick overview of Vincent's efforts with the bishops see the references in Coste's index volume, XIV 279.
10. Dumas, *op. cit.*, Vol. I p 16.
11. Patrick Boyle CM has an article on Callaghan in the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* in 1923.
12. *Mémoires du P. René Rapin SJ (1644-1669)*. These were published for the

- first time in 1865, in three volumes, in Paris. Vol. I p 411.
13. Clonsinnil: *Défense des Hibernois, Disciples de S. Augustin*, Paris, 1651, p 4. References and quotations will be identified in the form (C+page number).
 14. “Duygine” is easily identifiable, as there was only one Irish Vincentian at that time with a name bearing any resemblance to that spelling. He was 25 years old and already a priest when he entered the Congregation in Paris in 1645. He was entered in the Register of Entries as Germain Duguin; I have seen this spelling in the Register, which is now in the Archives Nationales in Paris. Boyle and Leonard have accustomed us to the modern spelling and form, Derrnot Duggan.
 15. Bremond: *Histoire Littéraire du Sentiment Religieux en France*, 12 vols., Paris 1929-1936, Vol. IV p 303.
 16. *Histoire Generate du Jansenisme*, par M. l’abbé *****, 3 vols., Amsterdam, 1700. The *Dictionnaire des Livres Jansénistes* identifies the author as Gabriel Gerberon on pp 231-232 of vol. II and that he was a Benedictine on p 42 of vol. I. On p 92 of the same volume he is called “one of the leaders of the party”.
 17. Gerberon, *op. cit.*, Vol. I p 459.
 18. *Ibid*, Vol. I p 422.
 19. *Ibid*, Vol. I p 392 and p 422.
 20. Boyle: *The Irish College in Paris, AD 1578-1901*, London, 1901, p 18, footnote. Wall, in IER August 1944 p 100 and September 1944 p 163.
 21. Gerberon, *op. cit.*, Vol. I p 473.
 22. The College des Lombards in the rue des Cannes, not far from the present Irish College, became the first Irish College in 1677 (Boyle, *op. cit.*, p 26). Joseph O’Leary in *The Irish-French Connection 1578-1978*, edited by Liam Swords, Paris, 1978, pp 25-26, suggests that the reference to the College des Lombards may be anachronistic, but as Clonsinnil’s account of events was published only slightly over a year after they had happened it would seem unlikely that he had his facts wrong; and he says he wrote only about what he had personal experience of. (Incidentally, Joseph O’Leary told me in Paris in 1982 that someone lost the eighty-one footnotes that should have gone with his article, and he had no second copy of them).
 23. Boyle, *op. cit.*, p 16, footnote. The White in question has to be George as neither Francis nor John White were priests in 1650.
 24. Gerberon, *op. cit.*, Vol. I p 464.
 25. Boyle has an article in the IER in 1902 on the use of the Irish language by Irish students in Paris, though he has nothing specifically about 1650.
 26. On 15 September 1628 Vincent wrote from Beauvais to Francois du Coudray in the Bons Enfants: “I urge you, Father, to get them to have a thorough grasp of the small Becan” (166). Martin Becan was a Belgian Jesuit who wrote, among other books, a textbook of theological controversies and a shorter version of this textbook.
 27. Gerberon, *op. cit.*, Vol. I p 464.
 28. Boyle: *Hibemia Vincentiana*, in IER October 1903, p 302. He had consulted the original deposition in the University library.

29. *Decretum Universitatis Studii Parisiensis*, two pages. This, together with the *Acta* and the *Mémoires Apologetiques* mentioned in later notes are in the Gilbert Library. They were reprinted by Saint-Amour in the appendix to his *Journal*; this appendix has its own pagination and references will be to the page numbers in the English edition. SA Ap 138.
30. SA 106. C 16 for “more than sixty”.
31. *Decretum*, SA Ap 138.
32. *Acta in Comitibus Generalibus universitatis Studii Parisiensis apud maturinenses, die 21 Martii*. The Mathurins were the Order of the Most Holy Trinity, founded by St John of Matha.
33. *Mémoires Apologetiques pour les Recteur, Doyens, Procureurs, & Supposts de L’Université de Paris, contre l’entreprise de quelques Hibemois, la plupart estudians en l’Université*, 36 pp. SA Ap 137.
34. *Memoires Apologetiques*, SA Ap 128.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. Gerberon, *op. cit.*, Vol. I p 473.
38. Saint-Amour printed the *Dedatio Hibernorum* “iuxta exemplar ab ipsis typis mandatum” in the Appendix to his *Journal*. Boyle prints it, though omitting the text of the Five Propositions, in *The Irish College in Paris*, pp 22-23, with the names and standing of the twenty-six signatories. The Notary, before whom they confirmed their signatures, is also listed and he, too, was Irish. In *Hibernia Vincentiana*, IER 1903, Boyle gives an English translation of the *Dedatio*, including the Five Propositions, but omitting the twenty-seven names.

St Vincent and Prayer

Stanislaus Brindley

What I am writing under the above heading is an expanded and edited version of a talk which I gave to the Vincentian Study Group on André Dodin's *En prière avec Monsieur Vincent*, Paris 1982, Desclee de Brouwer, 247 pp.

About 85 pages of Dodin's book had already appeared in 1951, printed in Arras and published with the tag *Pro manuscripto*. When I was seminary director in Nigeria in the early '80s I found it very helpful in preparing conferences for the First Years. Neither publication has appeared in English by 1986.

Outline of "En prière"

I The 1951 edition forms the first 84 pages of the 1982 book of the same title.

II 85 more pages give direct quotations from Vincent's conferences. This is Section II: *Monsieur Vincent en prière*. The quotes each get an introduction and range in length from four lines to one page. Vincent made these prayers in the course of the conferences he was giving; often at the end. They resemble spontaneous prayers made at charismatic meetings.

III *La prière d'un vivant* is less than half the length of the previous sections, 36 pages.

IV *La dévotion de M. Vincent a la vierge Marie* is the 14-page concluding section, less than half the length of Section III. Footnotes and tables take 15 pages.

Section I in summary: What is prayer? How to pray?

Introduction

Dodin gives useful, brief, notes on the history of mental prayer (oraison mentale) in three stages up to the time of Vincent:

1-XI centuries: *Meditatio*, silent prolonged reflection on a divine truth.
Oratio: petition for something from God, after a sort of dialogue.

Contemplatio: intimate affective knowledge of God, usually receiving impetus from Scripture. Developed a lot by the Eastern Fathers.

XII-XV centuries: Under the influence of scholasticism the approach to prayer becomes much more systematised. Meditation books appear. As a remedy to the breakdown in Christian social structures the *devotio moderna* sees meditation more and more as a means whereby individual Christians can strengthen their own moral fibre. With the result that contemplation suffers. The left brain, to use modern terminology, begins to predominate over the right brain.

XVI-XVII centuries: Method becomes still more important as new active religious congregations are founded and as laity take up prayer as a bulwark against humanism. The Ignatian was the more systematised of the two main methods. Affective prayer leading to active recollection and to quietude was given great impetus by Teresa of Avila. Francis de Sales derived much from the Ignatian method but, following Teresa and Luis of Grenada, stressed the affective side of this “prayer of the heart”. Vincent de Paul displayed a “wise eclecticism”, says Dodin, with regard to these two approaches which he knew well and whose books he recommended. He wasn’t in opposition to any method of prayer. Choice of method should depend on temperament, health, grace, effectiveness.

A: *The role of mental prayer*. This is twice as long as the introduction but can be summarised more briefly as the points are more obvious, beginning with Jesus Christ seen as a man of prayer.

The role of prayer *in one’s personal life* is viewed under four heads: learning the truths of faith, discerning the will of God, correcting one’s faults, growth of grace. Quotations from Vincent’s conferences are given throughout. Viewing prayer as an agent of growth, he is rich in metaphor: daily manna, fresh water, air or sun for the soul, the soul of our soul.

In the four pages on the role of prayer in the apostolic life we are reminded of the saint’s “axiomatic statement” that the grace of vocation depends on prayer, and the grace of prayer depends on rising in the morning. Preaching and seminary formation will possess no depth without prayer.

B: *The nature of prayer* is the forty-page core of Section n. Some homely Vincentian definitions are quoted, e.g. “Prayer is the soul’s chat with God ...”. In the same spirit Vincent, who knew the mystics and respected them, warned against seeking the extraordinary in prayer and

expressed many cautions about the prayer of quietude.

Remote preparation for prayer is seen as twofold: self-emptying by means of humility, mortification, silence, recollection; filling oneself with God through a spirit of simplicity and attention to his presence.

Proximate preparation comprises two stages: on the previous evening the subject is read from a manual and sometimes a thought on the reading is given out. Much stress is laid on the solemn silence so that the mind is given a chance to work over the meditation topic. Next morning the important acts are: faithfully rising (in Vincent's circular of 1650 are stated eight reasons for fidelity to 4.00 a.m. rising); offering one's first thoughts to God; thanksgiving for getting through the night; "morning offering" of the day's actions.

Immediate preparation is begun by directing our attention to the presence of God. In the tabernacle or in ourselves; through his omnipresence or through Christ's presence in heaven. All these are acceptable ways. Vincent warns against trying too hard to picture Christ in the imagination. Then we invoke God's help to enable us to pray. Next we listen attentively to the meditation point being read.

The body of the prayer is considered under four headings, each about two pages long, (a) *Considerations* may be either concrete or abstract. A particular mystery of the life of Jesus, for example, is pictured in all its aspects by the imagination. Or an abstract topic like a virtue is considered from various angles: its principal characteristics, the effects it produces, what it consists in, how I can practise it.

Once the prayer has been set in motion it is sustained and nourished by the food it has taken in at conferences, spiritual readings, etc. Which shows the importance of such spiritual nourishment.

An error would be to try too hard to imagine something abstract, as in the case of a brother who was causing himself headaches in this way. Another error is to pile up too many reasons; because their only function is to enkindle the affections. "When you want to get a light you take a flint and strike it; and as soon as the material has caught fire you light the candle. You'd look ridiculous if you still kept striking the flint!"

(b) *Affections* are far more important than considerations. But on 25 May 1655 Vincent had to complain about a fruitless accumulation of considerations which he was hearing from most of the missionaries. Three months later, a confrère returning from country missions was also struck by the prevalence of this error. "The will, and not merely the understanding, should be brought into play", said Vincent, "for all our motives are useless if we do not move on to affections".

Meditation on the Passion is recommended by Vincent as an excellent

means of arousing affections without any danger of useless reasonings. “It is the Fountain of Youth in which you will find something fresh every day.”

However, excessive efforts to produce affections must be avoided. “Three or four in the seminary are so bent on continually producing these acts night and day, always on the strain ... their blood becomes heated and boils, sending hot vapours to the brain ... followed by dizziness ... and many other inconveniences ... They render themselves quite useless for the rest of their days. I request the directors to pay particular attention to this.”

(c) “*Good resolutions* are the principal fruit of prayer” Vincent affirmed to the Daughters of Charity, “making them strongly, with good foundations, convincing oneself firmly and preparing oneself to carry them out, while foreseeing the obstacles which will have to be overcome”. And he complained to Louise about the excessive vagueness of the resolutions of one of her retreatants.

To the missionaries he stated: “Make no mistake about it: *Totum opus nostrum in operatione consistit*. And this is so true that the Apostle tells us that it is only our works that will follow us into the next life ...; in this age some appear devout but lead a soft life rather than one of solid and laborious devotion.”

In his 1982 thesis on Vincent and prayer Fr Josef Kapusciak’s main assertion is that Vincent saw prayer as the means of getting light to know the will of God and the strength to carry it out.

- (d) The *Conclusion* of prayer comprises three acts:
 - (i) Thanksgiving that God has enabled us to pray;
 - (ii) Offering our resolutions to God;
 - (iii) Asking for the grace to persevere in doing good.

Programmatic as Vincent appears to be from all the above, the next six pages of Dodin’s book show how adaptable he is when faced with the problems of various individuals. A book could be kept close at hand to nourish prayer which tended to flag. Scripture is particularly useful; one could even learn verses by heart or make a small personal collection of texts. Following St Jeanne de Chantal one could contemplate and pray about the eyes, ears, etc., of our Lady, with a view to imitating her. One could foresee in detail, and make resolutions about, the events of the coming day. A visual aid, such as a picture, was suggested to the

Daughters by Vincent, who had picked up this idea from someone else. A prayer of simple loving presence, whether at the foot of the cross or just before God. If time is really short one can make one's prayer while assisting at mass. Aridity should never lead to abandonment of prayer, rather to self-abandonment to God.

C Areas related to prayer (Complements de l'oraison). Four areas are treated.

1. '*Repetition of prayer* has never been heard of in the Church until now', said Vincent, "We have cause to thank God for having given this grace to the Company". He may, however, have picked up some inspiration from de Berulle, Duval, Mme Acarie and the Oratory of St Philip Neri (where he had glimpsed the good effects of collective religious emotions). Two or three times a week, in a spirit of great simplicity, Vincent would hold a repetition. He would call upon one or two brothers, then on a priest, to share their thoughts and affections in prayer. Vincent didn't share his own prayer, but concluded by delivering a short exhortation based on the meditation, or on what had been said or on a current event. Thus the exercise served as a means of spiritual direction in the community.

2. *Reading the New Testament* was made a daily obligation for the priests of the Congregation as nourishment for themselves and their preaching. Sisters should know the Sunday gospels and the Passion. Brothers should not go beyond the daily mass readings.

3. *Conferences* were approached in different ways until Vincent at last found the best method. From 26 April 1643 he followed the practice of asking the Daughters questions rather than simply giving them free rein. He reminded his hearers that Jesus had held conferences with his apostles, and that he was present in their midst. So there should be a spirit of simplicity, respect, obedience, prayerfulness. People should listen well, retain well (like our Lady), discuss what was said and, above all, carry out with no delay whatever was recommended.

4. *Spiritual reading*. "You speak to God in prayer; God speaks to you in reading. If you want God to hear your prayers, listen to him in reading". So taught Vincent with deep conviction. Right from 1617 it was prescribed for the confraternity members to read carefully each day a chapter of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

Later the missionaries and the Daughters were given a similar direction to read daily some spiritual book. And reading at meals is to be taken very seriously, even during missions. Great care is to be taken in reading and in listening well, in a truly religious spirit; Christ is present.

Section II of Dodin's book is as long as the section we have just been looking at. It comprises eighty-four excerpts and would be difficult to summarise. No summary was attempted in the paper read to the Study Group. The prayers quoted from the saint's conferences resemble those made more or less spontaneously at charismatic meetings.

Section III is half the length of the previous sections. Its subtitle, *L'évolution de la prière de Monsieur Vincent de Paul*, is more helpful than the main title *La prière d'un vivant*. But, *pace* Pere Dodin, in order to provide a better hint of what is contained in these thirty-six pages one would need a little something like *Vincentian Prayer in an Expanding World*.

Three developments had been combining, around the time of Vincent, to bring about an entirely new phenomenon, *religion of the book*. These developments were: (a) the invention of printing; (b) the evolution of cheaply produced paper; (c) the spread of literacy to a large part of the population. Prayer, as a consequence, gradually broke free from its moorings in monasticism. All western spirituality had been based on a monastic model, which was viewed as a reflection of life in heaven. The sung divine office was seen as the highest form of prayer, and normative for all collective prayer. But a change had begun, due to the rise of mendicant orders who were dispensed from choral office. Oddly, it was the Reformers who, holding on to psalm-singing, kept prayer within the confines of the Old Testament texts.

Now, as Dodin well puts it, "the doctrinal insufficiency of Old Testament prayer was perceived from the very first preachings of Christ Jesus. The disciples knew they had to pray differently from the Pharisees, from the pagans, from the disciples of John the Baptist". How well was this being achieved?

Lectio divina was an effort to penetrate into the meaning of the scriptures and the Fathers; and it was done apart from the divine office. But it was an activity confined to well-educated monks!

More successful, and more widespread, was the *devotio moderna* which resulted in a breaking away from the strict forms of meditation. The latter had come to be used too much as a means of bringing about good resolutions. It led to a moralism which distracted from the necessary dogmatic element in prayer. And it tempted the less-well-instructed to look upon God as the Great Accountant or the Request Granter.

For Vincent de Paul what is essential is “that effort to become empty of self in order to be filled with God”. Recitation of the psalms was to be secondary. Trinity, Incarnation and the imitation of the Virgin Mary are given prominence in his Common Rules.

Great flexibility is allowed to the individual in his “method” of prayer, as Dodin shows with a dozen examples on page 191. Humility and service of the neighbour are emphasised over and over again. The saint relies on these rather than on theological disputations to bring about spiritual growth.

Having treated of the extension of literacy and its consequences for prayer life, Dodin takes up the question of what might be called the world’s geographical and astronomical expansion, with its consequences for faith and theology. It was not long since people had been challenged by the idea that the Earth is neither flat nor the centre of the universe. They then had to relinquish their view that the world is a sort of infinite complement and prolongation of a stable limited Earth. A breakdown in understanding ensued between faith and science.

One result was that Vincent, along with the majority of contemporary theologians, believed that few people would be saved. He even expected the Church to be displaced out of Europe. Another result, arising out of new ideas about the meaning of “infinite”, was a greater emphasis on the mysteriousness of the ways of God. Vincent felt very strongly about this and stressed, therefore, that everything which isn’t of divine revelation is subject to controversy, so we shouldn’t be too ready to rely on our own faulty perceptions of the truth.

Against this background of change and uncertainty Vincent stands out as a spiritual guide of great practical wisdom. A wisdom which, I think, is very applicable to the present day. We must cling fast to Christ in his humanity (following Teresa of Avila, for whom Vincent had great respect) and in his mystical body. This last phrase wasn’t current at the time, but Vincent grasped and expressed the pauline idea forcefully:

Remember that we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and that we must die through the life of Jesus Christ, and that our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and full of Jesus Christ, and that to die like Jesus Christ we must live like Jesus Christ (1295).

God is a God who acts; acts in us. Our human strategies fail when we forget this. And Jesus continues to act; his Spirit acts in us. We fall down because we don’t submit ourselves to him. The vincentian remedy is to “give ourselves to God”.

Section IV: Monsieur Vincent's devotion to the Virgin Mary

“Vincent de Paul speaks of the Virgin only in passing, in conventional terms and in a moderate tone.” Dodin states this point and then seeks to analyse why Vincent was so different from his contemporaries and from what Abelly tries to make out regarding his devotion to our Lady.

A general historical point is that Catholics gave great emphasis to marian devotion when they saw the Reformers attacking Mary. King Louis XIII in 1638 consecrated himself and all of France to the Virgin in order to draw down her protection on his country. Anne of Austria, in the next quarter century, had at least five pilgrimages undertaken by Brother Fiacre to marian shrines.

Louis XIII requested that the feast of the Immaculate Conception should be extended to the universal Church. Among Vincent's close friends, Francis de Sales established a confraternity of the Immaculate Conception; and Pere Duval stated that even if the doctrine was not of faith it was accepted by all. Mariological writings began to abound, thanks to Olier, de Berulle, Eudes, several Jesuits, Capuchins and others. At the same time the advancement of women in society received considerable impetus from such outstanding people as Teresa of Avila, Mme Acarie, Mme de Sainte-Beuve, Alix Leclerc, Jeanne de Chantal, Louise de Marillac, Angélique Arnauld, Marie Rousseau.

What, then, did Vincent do? For the Chatillon confraternity in 1617 he took Mary as patron and model. For the Daughters he spoke of Mary being a model of silence and modesty. On three occasions he told of how he himself had viewed Jesus and Mary in the persons of Monsieur and Madame de Gondi. At the same time he guarded himself and others against superstitious practices and the sensuality which can creep into the pomp and display manifested at first masses and communions, and even at exorcisms. Constantly he was drawing people back to interiority, to the essentials: Trinity, Incarnation; and the three mysteries of Mary's life: Immaculate Conception, Annunciation, Visitation. In the Immaculate Conception Vincent loved to discern how much God wants of emptiness, of purity, of openness in his servants; qualities which he wants us to imitate, so that we may receive God and be filled by him. In the Annunciation he saw a humble self-giving to God so that God could use his creature in the service of the neighbour. In the Visitation he could see us being taken up into God's movement of service to the neighbour.

So the marial stipulations in Chapter X of the Common Rules about daily special devotion to the Mother of God are not mere words. They are meant to be fleshed out in a practical way.

And Mary is experienced in this way as being inseparably linked with

her son. Which is clearly brought out on the reverse of the Miraculous Medal: cross and M intertwined. Continuity rather than discontinuity can be detected between Vincent's marian devotion and the medal of the Immaculate Conception.

From Rome to Palermo

*Some Personal Reflections on the
General Assembly: June 18 - July 16, 1986*

Kevin Rafferty

After a busy year in All Hallows I found the four week period in the via Ezio in the company of 124 other delegates both a challenge and a shock to my system. Searching for “lines of action” for the next six years through the prism of the needs of the Irish Province and exchanging experiences with confrères from many diverse situations was certainly exhilarating. At times too it was depressing. Learning about the “lights and shadows”, the “hopes and fears” of these confrères in small group situations, watching this shared experience going through the wringing machine of plenary session reporting and the shredding process of committees left me wondering at the end about what had been accomplished. So much of the richness of the Vincentian experiences we snared in the small group sessions were lost in transit. However the “lines of action” do set out a challenging programme for the next six years and the real test of course will be what each Province does to implement these lines of action in the Pastoral Project for the years 1986-1992.

When the Assembly was over I travelled with Padre Marco from Rome to Palermo. On that journey and throughout the following days I applied the “Collins technique” to my four weeks stay in the via Ezio. What follows are ten experiences/events/reflections that lingered on in my mind after we departed from Rome. Arrived at through shared experience at the Assembly, through dialogue and discussion with confrères, and through moments of reflection on the road — and sea — from Rome to Palermo and back, these comments express my personal views on the significance of the 37th General Assembly for our Province. Frank and Mark, I’m sure, will express their own views, in their own way, and in their own time.

1. Dying and Rising

Many of the events described in Giuseppe di Lampedusa’s *The Leopard* are situated in Palermo. During my ten day stay there I re-read

his marvellous description of an old order dying and a new one coming to life. Sicily, where so many different civilisations have come and gone has made this mystery of dying and rising come home to me in a new way. It is this mystery of dying and rising that colours many of my memories of the General Assembly. As one listened to the various exchanges in large and small group sessions one could not help asking: Out of what experience of Vincentian life is this man speaking? — a Province that is painfully dying with very little hope of a future, putting a brave face on things and rationalising about the secularising forces which are spreading in all directions today — or a Province which has diligently husbanded its resources, painfully putting its house in order, committing itself to a limited number of new apostolates arising out of real needs in today's Church, and now blessed with renewed vitality and a flow of new enthusiastic members — or Provinces unaware that they are at a turning point in their history, living on the capital of the past and allowing these precious years to fritter away when something could be done to create new Vincentian life for the future?

Over the four week General Assembly my own moods and reflections in regard to the Irish Province fluctuated back and forth between these three possibilities. Our Provincial Assemblies over the last ten years have tried to take stock in a realistic way of our actual situation. The overlap between our three charism statements in Ireland, Britain and Nigeria points to a convergence of views on where our real values are placed. The production of a Mission Statement for the Province in September 1985 with the help of a facilitator and with plenty of fire in it was a real achievement, as was the first meeting of all the confrères working in Britain at Upholland last year.

On the other hand, considering the resources we have in our Province and the range of actual and potential contact we have with young people, one cannot but be alarmed by our inability to attract some of them to share our apostolates and our lives over the past 20 years in any sizeable numbers. It needs very little imagination to see that the next ten years are crucial for the future of the Congregation of the Mission in Ireland and England and in Nigeria too. It will require concerted action from many different quarters—or to put it in more Christian terms — radical personal and collective conversion — if we are to find our way forward into the 21st century, not living on the glories of the past but responding to real needs in today's Church in a Vincentian way.

2. *Radical Pruning!*

One of the delights of living in Italy for six weeks is the pleasure of

imbibing vino from Frascati and elsewhere. As I travelled through the Italian countryside my eye was often caught by the clusters of grapes on the branches of vine-trees in the middle of carefully tended vineyards on mountainsides and hillslopes. Here and there there was evidence of very radical pruning, the price that apparently had to be paid for the luscious new growth so much in evidence. The 1980 Constitutions advocate such pruning (cf Constitutions 10-20) in what they say about bringing our works into line with the ends of the Congregation. How many Provinces have done this? There was a reluctant admission from confrères represented in the groups I participated in, that not very much progress had been made in implementing the strongly worded Constitutions of the 36th General Assembly. There was also a reluctance among many delegates, especially those who had participated in the prolonged discussions at the 1980 General Assembly, to bring all this out into the open again. Nobody, or at least very few, wanted a repeat of the long discussions of the last Assembly on this issue. The lines of action, however, of this Assembly do in fact suggest that each Province should consider again the criteria of the 1980 Constitutions and Statutes and apply them to our works.

On the final day of the Assembly an English-speaking group proposed an alternative text which advocated a more indirect but, in my view, a more realistic approach to the pruning of works. It suggested that each Province and each local community should set up a process of discernment to work out what works we should commit ourselves to now and in the future, a process in which as many confrères as possible should participate. A more gentle kind of pruning or another way of postponing or escaping something difficult that needs to be done? One could argue both ways. However, it was felt by this group that there was more to be said for this approach in which through prayerful reflection at both community and provincial levels confrères would come to realise that there are new needs in the Church today which Vincentians should begin to respond to. This alternative text failed to win the approval of a majority of the Assembly delegates but the fact that there were only three votes between this and the section on “Evangelisation of the Poor” which has come through in the final document indicates a good measure of support for the idea of initiating a discernment process, both in our houses and Provinces, spelt out in some detail.

How to set up this process of discernment and getting as many confrères as possible to participate in it is, I think, one of the most important tasks on hand for all of us. To use all our resources at every level, local community, provincial, inter-provincial and general curia

level to set in motion this process of discernment would seem to me to be one of the most important lines of action for the future.

3. *From 'Resourcement' to 'Praxis'*

During the heady days of Vatican II and immediately afterwards “resourcement” was one of the words which came into fashion. “Aggiornamento” had a short enough innings. Many people quickly sensed the limitations of this word as a battle-cry for renewal and Jacques Maritain was certainly to point up these limitations in *Le Paysan de la Garonne* when he asserted that certain interpretations of Vatican IFs *The Church in the Modern World* were “kneeling to the world”. The recent synod has played out its own variations on this theme and there is no doubt that this debate was replayed, at least in a minor, if muted, key, at our General Assembly. The importance of “resourcement” in relation to our own Vincentian traditions came to the fore in a number of different ways. Fr Richard McCullen’s repeated references to the words and writings of St Vincent, suspended above the presiding desk, spoke to all of us. The new edition of Abelly’s life of St Vincent, brought out recently by our French Provinces, and on display at the Assembly, made me more aware that French confrères are, in virtue of their background and culture, in a privileged position to interpret the life and spirit of St Vincent de Paul and to transpose this into 20th century terms. (The suggestion that the renovated Chapel of the Maison-Mere in Paris might not only be a place of pilgrimage to visit the relics of St Vincent but also a centre of pastoral initiatives in the French Church, provoked some discussion in my linguistic group). The presence of Jose Maria Roman, Provincial Delegate from the Madrid Province, and the author of the most recent biography of St Vincent de Paul, running to over 700 pages, was a reminder of a very productive period of Vincentian studies and annual study weeks among the confrères and daughters in our Spanish Provinces over the past 20 years. In our own Province, the publication of COLLOQUE at regular intervals brought home to me that our own efforts in this sphere are very valuable and are appreciated by confrères from other Provinces too. “Resourcement” — there is plenty of it going on in the efforts a number of Provinces are making to get to know the mind and heart and spirit of St Vincent de Paul.

However, where I would have some reservations concerns the way all this very valuable knowledge and information is being used to “fire” the imagination and efforts of confrères to live out the Vincentian way of life today. Side by side with the efforts of confrères in many Provinces to get to know the spirit and charism of St Vincent de Paul lies what I

would call the spectre of Vincentian Fundamentalism. The pulling out of a text or saying of St Vincent from its source and the application of it as a “proof-text” to indicate the kind of works we should be engaged in today is to use a methodology we have long since abandoned in the area of both systematic and moral theology. One needs to be very cautious about jumping hurriedly from the 17th to the 20th century and ignoring the tremendous theological developments during this period and especially in the last 30 years, not to speak of the very different cultural situation we are operating in today. In using Vincentian sources as guidelines to what we should be doing today, what apostolates we should be engaged in, how we should live in community, how we should set up our formation programmes we need to consider very carefully the difference between slavish imitation of what Vincent did and encouraged confrères to do in the 17th century, and a creative application of his charism and inspiration to the needs of people and the Church in our day.

What I was hoping to find at this Assembly were examples of interesting and creative applications of the spirit and charism of St Vincent de Paul to the 20th century. A presentation often examples of this from provinces in different parts of the world and a critical analysis of the underlying assumptions, theological, sociological, etc., by the confrères involved would, I think, have been a far more fruitful way to have spent many of the plenary sessions of this Assembly.

Resourcement, yes — back to our beginnings, getting to know our charism, our heritage, and the history of our respective Provinces — all this certainly is an important part of renewal. But side by side with that must go a critical analysis of the religious and human needs of people of our day and discussion and exchange of information about how we, as Vincentians, can respond to these needs. “Resourcement” and “Praxis”, the two are intertwined. One goes from one to the other and back.

4. Popular and Not So Popular Missions

During the Assembly I made frequent visits to St Peter’s, especially during the siesta period. What led me there I am not quite sure. I have a kind of love/hate relationship with the place because I wonder from time to time what this pile of magnificent buildings has to do with the message of Jesus Christ to “come, follow me”. In the coolness of this gigantic space I watched pilgrims and tourists of all nationalities, and presumably of many different religious persuasions, walk around the Basilica. Over the month I reflected on the relationship of all this baroque splendour, the inculturation of Christianity of one particular epoch, to the teachings of Jesus Christ sixteen centuries previously. I wondered

about the religious needs of the pilgrims and tourists walking about, some of them into the Blessed Sacrament Chapel to pray quietly for a few moments or longer, some kissing statues and altars and ornaments, some confessing their sins in various languages to elderly priests in traditional confession boxes, some admiring Michelangelo's Pieta or Bernini's monuments in stone, or various paintings by artists of different periods scattered throughout the Basilica, some, munching sandwiches and taking furtive swigs from bottles of wine, seated behind pillars and hidden from the searching gaze of attendants, some being turned back at Giacomo Manzu's famous doors because they had arrived immodestly dressed, exposing too much flesh to view. Deep down what are these people looking for and indeed what are the people of Balbriggan, Naas, Turner's Cross and the Bogside looking for who turned up for our Parish Missions last year, and those who did not turn up?

The discussions of the Bogota meeting of Visitors in 1983 surfaced in a number of different ways at this Assembly. There was frequent mention of the discussions which took place there about the significance of popular missions as one of our foundational charisms. A good deal of discussion took place in my small discussion group about the significance of the terminology "popular mission", "foundational charism", and the appropriateness of these missions as our particular way to engage in direct evangelisation today. There are considerable differences among us, worldwide at least, as to how the creative genius of St Vincent de Paul in the area of parish renewal should be lived out in our time. It struck me that the models we are working out of in both Damascus House and All Hallows, mobile mission teams operating out of a centre of parish renewal in one case and operating out of a centre for ministry in the other, offer an interesting contrast to what is being done in other Provinces. One would hope that the exchange of information that has begun about Parish Missions in different Provinces, and reported in recent numbers of VINCENTIANA, will continue. With the exchange of information needs to go a critical analysis of the theology of Church and Ministry each Province is operating out of, as well as some effort to evaluate their success short-term and long-term in our efforts to preach the "Good News" of Jesus Christ to our contemporaries.

5. *Spiritual Leadership*

With Visitors from 48 Provinces at the Assembly and with the leadership of the Superior General and his Assistants under scrutiny, we were offered a fascinating insight into the way confrères in the key leadership roles in the Congregation saw their tasks as spiritual leaders

today. With three Visitors in my small discussion group I was offered a privileged insight into three quite different approaches to leading, motivating, inspiring confrères in three sizeable Provinces. The main focus of discussion in my small group was the role of the Local Superior and the role he had to play in getting the annual Community Project underway and evaluating realistically what had been accomplished.

All five of our American Provinces have availed of the services of a group known as INTER-COMMUNITY SERVICES who have helped confrères to formulate Community and Provincial plans, and to begin implementing them. There was a good deal of discussion about the use of facilitators, communication, coping with change, setting short and long-term goals, etc. In reaction to this some delegates from other Provinces made it quite clear that they would prefer to concentrate on the spiritual aspects of a Superior or Provincial's role and that his chief task is to lead a group of disciples in faith to exercise the theological virtue of charity in a life of prayer to God and service to others according to the inspiration of St Vincent de Paul in setting up the Congregation. The section of the Pastoral Project which deals with "Community for Mission" tries to synthesise these two approaches recognising that neither should be exclusive of the other and recognising also that a good incarnational theology in the best traditions and spirit of Vatican II's *Church in the Modern World* should take seriously the findings of the behavioural sciences on the management and inspiration of groups and how to facilitate and deepen communication between persons at all levels. In retrospect I think that it is a pity that, in the organisation and running of this 37th General Assembly itself, this line of thought was not followed through. It would have helped us to avoid a lot of frustrating sessions at Plenary Meetings when we were so flattened with words, words, and more words, that we could take no more and wanted to escape to the hills or elsewhere. Even more important, it would have set up a deeper process of interaction between confrères of different nationalities, different theologies, and different works, when we tended to get shut up in our own linguistic groups and so avoid exposure to a much broader range of lived Vincentian experiences. I hope the lesson will be learnt by those who prepare and run the 1992 General Assembly.

6. *Walking with Fellow Priests*

One of the neglected areas of discussion at the Assembly, at least at the Plenary Sessions and the meetings of the English-speaking group I participated in, was that of Formation for Priestly Ministry in today's Church. With a diminishing presence in seminaries in different Provinces

today, and in some cases withdrawal from them, we have to ask what our role is to be in this apostolate in the future, an apostolate which was given a good deal of attention at the Bogota meeting of Visitors and also referred to, like that of the popular missions, as a “foundational charism” of the Congregation. The *ad cleri disciplinam* phrase occurred now and again in discussions and the even less attractive one of *Lux cleri* also surfaced. I hope we will put both these patronising notions quietly to rest once and for all. I suspect that many of our delegates would prefer to live with the more humble expression “walking with diocesan priests” as a way of expressing our desire to live close to them and to give them whatever support we can. Indeed it strikes me that we may very well have to sit humbly at their feet and learn about many of the good things they are engaged in in their dioceses and parishes before we ourselves will discover what our foundational charism may be in their regard both now and in the future. I would have liked to see the question of our identity with diocesan priests, as opposed to our identity with religious congregations, albeit congregations of apostolic action, given an airing at this Assembly. Have our Vincentian historians really plumbed the depths of St Vincent’s mind on all this and applied their findings to the new Church structures which are developing in certain Provinces today?

Through contact with many diocesan priests in Ireland, Britain and the United States over the last four years I have come to realise that the “cutting edge” of renewal is the local Church in which diocesan priests have such an important part to play as the appointed spiritual leaders of these communities. At a time of transition when both the theology of Church and the theology of Ministry are developing we Vincentians have a role to play in the Post-Vatican II Church, no less exciting than Vincent’s in the post-Tridentine Church. It will not be by mere repetition of what Vincent did in the area of priestly formation in his own lifetime and which came to fruition in succeeding centuries. I would venture to think that it will be by examining very carefully his creative genius in linking up both direct evangelisation and formation for both priestly and lay ministry in his own day, building as many bridges as possible between these two groups, thinking this through theologically in our own post-Vatican II Church, and moving quietly to respond to real needs, priority needs, in our various diverse situations which we have learned about through patient listening to both priests and people around about us. We have a humble journey-man role to play in local Churches. The first part of this task may be to move out of the psychological, and sometimes physical, walls we have set up around our existing insitutuions and listen

to ordinary people talking about their needs, especially their religious needs. In this, participating in even a small way in the work of our mobile mission teams could have quite a spin-off effect on how we see the world and the Church and the poor today.

7. *Vincentian Identity*

We spent a good deal of time at this General Assembly like a dog searching for its tail. Those of us on the committee “Community for Mission” were told repeatedly (and this was true too for the committee “Formation for Mission”) that we could not proceed with our work until the committee for Evangelisation had come up with its principles and proposals for action. In fact, both the former committees had done their work before the Committee for Evangelisation had completed its task. This could imply different things; (1) because of the sea-changes in theology and pastoral practice we are no longer that sure what particular work we should be engaged in today from one country to another; (2) it could mean that because of the diversity of approaches from one Province to another about the works we are actually engaged in, and the nine-man committee reflected this diversity, the committee had considerable difficulty in reaching agreement on lines of action; (3) it could mean that the old battles of the 1974 and 1980 Assemblies about our works blocked progress towards reaching consensus regarding works we should be engaged in today. There could be a measure of truth in all of the above three points. However, there was no doubt among us that the mission did come first, and the kind of community life we should develop, and the formation we should set up for new members, should be determined by the mission.

It seems to me, however, that one can point to a more fundamental reason why we run into difficulties of this kind when we try to articulate what our mission is today. We have many confrères involved in frontline work for the poor from one Province to another. There are Provinces where missions are given in poor areas both in the country and in the cities. We have Provinces where marginalised groups are evangelised in inner-city contexts. In our own Province, two of our men, a Daughter of Charity, and lay persons, have worked with Travelling People and other confrères have been involved on a part-time basis, giving missions to them, for a four to six week period. The crucial question for me is not just what activities and forms of evangelisation do we want to be involved in but have we done sufficient reflection on what we are actually involved in? If, as an Italian group suggested, the poor are the Sacrament of God for us, in what sense are they so or in what sense does God manifest

himself to me if I am ministering to drug addicts in Turin or Genoa? If God manifests himself to me in the Travelling People in what way does this happen when I visit a halting site in Swords or Ballymun? What link is there between my prayer and my particular ministry? Or to put it in another way, do we Vincentians engage in serious theological reflection about our ministry and whom we minister to? One could say that in the Irish Province our charism statements are revealing in this context and that it is a compassionate Christ who is the focus of our attention in prayer and in the people we minister to. One could also say that we take pride in thinking of ourselves as doers rather than as thinkers or speculators. However, it seems to me that if we want to be more certain about Vincentian identity we have to do a lot more theological reflection on the various kinds of activity we are engaged in and learn how to articulate this to one another and to people interested in joining us.

Some serious discussion took place at the General Assembly about setting up an International Centre for Formation. We talked about the arguments for and against doing this and discussed the kind of activity such a centre might engage in. The fact that the issue generated a good deal of discussion and that nearly half the delegates present were in favour of the setting up of such a centre signified, I think, not so much a need to form our formation personnel in a Vincentian way or to help Provinces having difficulty setting up their own formation programmes. Both these are real needs in all or some of our Provinces that we have to respond to. The real issue underlying our discussions on an International Centre bears on the issue of Vincentian identity and this in turn depends on our willingness to engage in theological reflection on the activities we are engaged in at present and how God discloses himself to us in the people we minister to. In the Congregation at large and in individual Provinces and communities there is a need to tune in to theological reflection on our ministry and the people we minister to, in which we articulate to one another the God we search for and the God we minister to in the poor of whatever kind whom we encounter from day to day.

Vincent was an expert in moving from principles to praxis and from praxis to principles. I suspect that he had his own unique way of going from one to the other. Without imitating him slavishly we have to rediscover how to do the same today.

8. *Charity and Justice*

There was one moment on this trip when I felt physically afraid. Padre Marco and myself were returning to the Casa della Missione of the Padri Lazzaristi in Naples which happens to be situated in one of

the poor areas of the inner city. To get to the back door we had to pass through a number of very narrow streets in which many furtive eyes were watching us. Not far from the back entrance to the house we saw a large family gathered around a black and white tv set in one room. The room itself contained two large beds and we learnt later that it was more than likely that ten people were living and sleeping in this one room. It made me think a good deal about the comforts of the large spaces we have to move around in, in most of our houses. It also reminded me of Fr McCullen's gentle recommendation that each one of us at the General Assembly, and confrères back home, might in one way or another get to know one poor family living somewhere within striking-distance of our houses during the coming year, and also of Sr Pauline Lawlor's suggestion to a group of us attending a seminar in All Hallows in 1983 that we might get to know better one or two families living between All Hallows and the inner city where there is a large concentration of corporation housing, tenement flats, etc.

The urgency of the situation of the poor in the Third World and marginalised poor in our inner cities of the First and Second Worlds was kept under wraps at this Assembly. There was a fear, I suspect, that open warfare might break out between confrères on the two sides of the Liberation Theology Debate. Some discussion took place on changing unjust structures among the English-speaking group and one wonders how much of this was to assuage guilt feelings about our own psychological and physical distance from the poor. Medellín, Puebla and even *Populorum Progression* moderate statement that "striving for justice is an integral aspect of evangelisation" did not get much of an airing at this Assembly. One got the impression that some delegates regarded the word "justice" as a dangerous word and were not too keen to see it surfacing in our Pastoral Project. Whatever may be true about the extremist forms of Liberation Theology and whatever may be the motivation of any of us when we advocate changing unjust structures in society (more often than not it is changing the unjust structures of others in other countries that is under discussion rather than our own) surely the passionate call for the abolition of unjust structures both within and without our own institutions and within and without our own situations and countries deserved more attention at this Assembly. Can one see the spectre of Vincentian Fundamentalism at work again? We seem to be happier to work within the perspectives of the Theology of Charity of the 17th Century rather than the perspective of the Theology of Justice of the late 20th Century, I suspect, in most of our Provinces.

Side by side with our efforts to get closer to the poor physically and

psychologically must be an effort to engage in serious social analysis of the causes of poverty and what needs to be done to change the unjust structures which perpetuate poverty. In the light of our late 20th century awareness of ideologies permeating all our theology one needs to look with increasing suspicion at theologies or forms of spirituality that claim to be politically neutral. As human beings and as Christians we are involved in political struggles for justice whether we like it or not and to think that we can stand apart, above, or beyond this struggle is both theologically and politically naive. A political commitment to justice may take many different forms in the societies and countries in which we work but whatever form it takes it is an integral aspect of evangelisation and an important component of holiness and one that takes seriously our inculturation into a particular society at a particular period of history.

Charity and Justice — we have to find a place for both in all our apostolates. We have to live with the tension of taking both seriously. We have to be able to move from the 17th century world of St Vincent de Paul to the post-Vatican II world of the latter part of the 20th century and try to do justice to our own Vincentian heritage on the one hand and the cry of the poor on the other as it comes to us in the realities and political structures of our day.

9. *On-Going Formation*

There was a general recognition among many delegates that on-going formation is a vital part of any renewal. Some would regard it as the most important aspect of formation in Provinces, preceding even that of initial formation. In our different groups there were wide-ranging discussions about the different needs of confrères at different times in our lives. It was agreed that there was a need for continuing education in the following five areas:

- (a) Theological;
- (b) Pastoral Skills;
- (c) Spirituality, including spiritual direction;
- (d) Social Analysis of the causes of poverty;
- (e) Vincentian charism, Congregation and Provincial history, etc.

How to become more aware of the need of continual conversion and renewal (cf Constitutions No. 11), how to encourage one another to participate in serious programmes of renewal short-term and long-term, and how to become accountable to one another in all this — were issues touched upon in my group discussions. In the Irish Province there is

need of a wide-ranging plan of on-going formation covering all these areas. Part of such a programme would, I think, include facing up to the real reasons why we have not attracted very many young people to the community over the past 20 years and reaching a point where individually and collectively we accept responsibility for this and are prepared to do something about it.

One final point: the range of courses taking place in both Damascus House and All Hallows Centre over the past 10 years is impressive by any standards. Some of the best theological, scriptural, and pastoral theologians have lectured in both places. As centres of on-going renewal there is enough going on in both places to provide many of the courses needed by confrères. Perhaps the time has come when we should provide information to other Provinces about what is taking place in both centres.

10. The Vincentian Family

During this *Assembly* I became more aware of other members of the Vincentian Family, our Vincentian Brothers, the Daughters of Charity, and the members of the St Vincent de Paul Society. All three groups have captured, each in its own way, a portion of the Spirit of St Vincent de Paul.

A. Three *Brothers* were present at this Assembly, one elected in his own right from the Mid-Western Province of the U.S., and two invited by the Superior General — one from Madagascar and one from Madrid. Through talking to one of them I came to realise how we have tended to see our Brothers as auxiliaries of the clerics and not members of the Congregation in their own right. Brother Leo's work with the down-and-outs in the neighbourhood of De Paul University, Chicago, an apostolate which stands or falls in its own right, made me realise how much I have tended to see the work of Brothers in the Congregation as a watered down version of a clerical apostolate. Again is it because we have operated too much out of the model of a clerical religious order or congregation that we have done this? I suspect it is. The presence of lay Christians as full-time members of our Congregation in works arising directly out of the inspiration of St Vincent might paradoxically help us to rediscover what our true Vincentian identity is and what our role might be in the Church today.

B. Throughout the Assembly we were very well looked after by the *Daughters of Charity* in their Conference Centre at the via Ezio. Two

daughters acted as translators from French and English into German and indeed into some other languages too, throughout the Assembly. One often wondered how they felt about some of the statements they were translating from one language to another and especially our efforts to grapple with what works we should be engaged in today. The Mother General, Sr Ana Duzan, and Pere Michel Lloret came to speak to us on one day of the Assembly. One of the issues touched on in Sr Ana Duzan's talk to the delegates was the nature of the co-operation between our two communities and the kinds of interaction and co-operation that should exist today. Considering the changes which have taken place over the last three centuries in our understanding of evangelisation of the poor, the importance of a social analysis of poverty and its causes and in more recent years developments in our understanding of ministry and the role of women in the Church, I would have thought that it is time to have a good hard critical look at what one might call the "complementarity thesis" as regards co-operation between Vincentians and Daughters of Charity. Considering the pioneering work Vincent did in this whole area in the 17th century I have no doubt that he would surprise us all in what he might regard as ways we should co-operate in preaching the Gospel to the poor today, in the formation of ministers, and indeed in ways we might support one another in attracting vocations to both communities.

C. The last group of the Vincentian Family I want to refer to is the *St Vincent de Paul Society*. I was very impressed by the short address of M. Amin de Tarazzi to all the delegates during the Assembly. The number of St Vincent de Paul Society men and women around the world who commit themselves to two hours or more personal contact with the poor each week in a quiet, unobtrusive way, is impressive by any standards. (While in Rome I learned that a very active lay group known as the Community of S. Egidia, who meet in S. Maria di Trastevere each evening for evening prayer, also commit themselves to two hours work with the poor each week). One gets the impression that they would like much more contact with us. Perhaps we need to take more seriously our commitment to them and a willingness to play some part, if they so desire, in their spiritual, theological and Vincentian formation. The development of lay ministry in the Church today could also provide a useful point of contact between us.

One final comment: There is indeed something very attractive in the mind and spirit of Frederic Ozanam. Through his early contact with the Daughters of Charity and his own reflections on the life of St Vincent, he captured a very rich seam of Vincentian spirituality. Again I suspect

that we have to do a lot more listening to this Vincentian-inspired group if we want to recapture for ourselves today, and those we minister to, a greater portion of the spirituality of St Vincent de Paul.

Epilogue

I am writing these lines perched on the steps of the mobile Post Office in a corner of St Peter's Square, Rome, looking out on the evening shadows of Bernini's columns stretching across the *piazza*. There is some evidence that during the years 1607-1608 Vincent de Paul passed this way and that at this time he was still preoccupied with his own well-being and the benefits he hoped to obtain for himself and for his family. He had many setbacks and dark years to pass through before the excitement of Folleville and Chatillon-les-Dombes opened up new paths and new frontiers to be explored. At a time in all our Provinces when we are searching for new paths and new frontiers, it is, I think, on the years 1618-1635 in Vincent's life that we should be concentrating and reflecting as we attempt to live out some of his creative genius in responding to the religious needs of people in our time. To live merely on the capital of the past in the Irish Province is, I think, to court the risk of moving towards oblivion. On the other hand, if we can husband carefully our diminishing but still quite considerable resources and discern in a prayerful way the needs of people around about us this Province should be able to nurture some new shoots in our traditional works of parish missions, education of the young, and priestly formation, and recapture some of the excitement and enthusiasm that was Vincent's and his companions when they went forth "on mission" in those first few years of the Congregation's life, and the excitement too among Dowley's little band of diocesan priests when this Province was established in the middle of the last century.

Liberation and Charism

Thomas Lane

Over the past twenty years, one of the great triumphs of religious publishing has been Fr Austin Flannery's *Vatican II: conciliar and post-conciliar documents*. The two volumes comprise well over a hundred statements which touch the mystery of the church, in what add up to almost two thousand pages.

Recently, I found myself fingering through these pages in search of what would ring most bells for a member of a community which is trying to follow Christ the evangeliser of the poor. If I were a Benedictine, I would have taken a long stop at the constitution on the liturgy. If I were a Servile of Mary, I would have delayed at the eighth chapter of the constitution on the church. But, much as I admire the sons of St Vincent who have contributed to the renewal of the liturgy, and much as I thank the Mother of the Church for the many ways she has brought us God's favour, I had to search elsewhere for what would answer my immediate need. I read again the justice and peace statement of the 1971 Synod and the, largely unnoticed, letter on human advancement of 1981. I underlined some touching lines in the constitution *Joy and Hope*. I was impressed by the lovely words on the church of the poor in the constitution on the church, the decree on the renewal of religious life, and elsewhere. I read the various pages on the renewal of priesthood and ministry. I marvelled again at the riches of Pope Paul's great charter on evangelisation, which is an agenda for the whole church and not merely for those who must preach to the poor. I noted especially the pages in which he spoke directly about liberation and about the poor.

Two Statements. When I had wended my way through the two volumes, I decided to wait for the publication of volume three to find the two statements that help me most to situate the special charism of the patron of all works of charity. Both of these came too late for inclusion in the second volume.

They are *Certain questions on the theology of liberation* (1984) and *Liberation and freedom* (1986). The two statements have had a stormy history. They are an interim response to an approach to theology that is only in its infancy. As such, they are full of limitations, and nobody is ranking them among the great inspirational church statements. Besides,

I feel that a good deal of the language of liberation will not wear very well. Twenty years ago, when it was fashionable to talk about the sacraments in the language of encounters, I remember a student asking a distinguished lecturer whether the encounter language would ever be superseded. "I would give this language about ten years", he replied. Some of the students were amazed. They thought the new language was forever. But the lecturer was right. However, the language of encounter and the thinking behind it have opened up new doors to the sacred that will never be closed. It may well be that the language of liberation theologies will have a similar destiny. Already some devotees of the movement are tiring of the language. One of them has said recently that he prefers to speak of the theology of struggle than of the theology of liberation. There are exciting possibilities here. We would all welcome any theology that would help us bring a ray of hope into all the struggles in which human beings find themselves.

New language: old reality. But it would be very wrong to think that liberation theology is only a passing fashion. What is new and powerful is its starting point from the lived experience of millions of poor people rather than from the sheltered world of the schools of theology. But the notion of liberation is far from new in our religious tradition. Indeed it has been at the centre of our tradition. For a few thousand years, the children of Abraham have been using the liberation language of Exodus. Christians in particular came to talk of the God who has snatched us from the power of darkness. We have used the liberation language of ransom and redemption. We have prayed for deliverance from evil, past, present and to come. We have wished to serve God freed from fear and saved from the hands of our foes. We have followed a saviour who said in his inaugural address that he would set at liberty captives. It would be a misuse of words to say that our religion is about salvation rather than liberation.

Salvation is as much about freeing people from evil as it is about bringing them safe into paradise. The human family has to be freed from many robbers who would leave us blinded and half-dead before our eyes are finally opened in the beatific vision. It is significant that some of the finest statements about liberation are in Pope Paul's pages on evangelisation and salvation. Salvation is a process that touches on every area of human experience. The areas cannot be separated from each other. We have often heard it said that it took Christianity several centuries to reject slavery. But today we cannot help wondering whether slavery has been really abolished and whether it will ever be. And Christians are realistic enough to admit that we ourselves are in the slave

trade; in freeing people from one slavery we can walk them into another. The Roman statements do not fully answer all, or indeed any, of our questions about slavery and freedom. But they do pose the questions. Each of them begins by placing the question of liberation in the context of a hundred years of impressive church teaching on the social question. The two provide a useful biblical theology about poverty and human oppression. They give a perspective on attempts in recent centuries to alleviate the lot of the poor. They provide a rich vocabulary for any talking or writing about poverty. They are, in effect, a set of headings for a programme for those who are sent to evangelise the poor.

A hierarchy of poverties

The Second Vatican Council taught that there is a hierarchy of truths. It states that truths vary in their relationship to the central truths of revelation. Over the past twenty years, there have been many attempts to work out a hierarchy of truths and to show how some truths are based on others and are illuminated by them. It would also appear that there is a hierarchy of poverties, that different forms of poverty vary in their relationship to the central and worst forms of poverty and that some poverties are based on others and are further darkened by them. What the two Roman statements make clear is that sin and death are the foundation evils and therefore the foundation poverties. Other poverties take their sources from sin and death and they draw on their darkness. Over the past twenty years, our Vincentian communities have talked a lot about poverty. And we have often bogged down when we tried to decide what it is to be poor and to be for the poor. Maybe part of the mission of St Vincent's followers is to work out a kind of hierarchy of poverties that afflict human beings today, worldwide and locally. With a hierarchy of poverties should come a hierarchy of liberations. As we become clearer on these hierarchies, we would hopefully become clearer about a course of action. The foundational liberations must be from whatever keeps people from their destiny, the beatific vision, seeing God as he is.

It may be that the confusion about some aspects of liberation theology and the warning in the 1984 document arises out of the vagueness about our contemporary understanding of the eternal truths and our failure in preaching them. A Vincentian contribution to liberation theology might be a re-writing and a re-preaching of our foundational mission sermon which has come down to us as "do penance for the Kingdom of God is at hand". Re-written and re-preached it could be a whole programme to focus people on their real destiny, eternal life, and on the evils that demoralise and dehumanise them along the way. Maybe it is the

vagueness and fuzziness in the way we often teach and preach eternal life that has led some liberation theologies to analyse human needs in a Marxist framework, in a way that is a practical denial of eternal life and the beatific vision. Only a clearer focus on eternal life will put in perspective the social, political and other evils that beset human beings on life's journey.

Changing Structures

Recent approaches to the service of the poor would seem to vary from an emphasis on the works of mercy to a desire to change any structures of society that carry within them the seeds of injustice. At first sight it might appear that St Vincent was a works-of-mercy man whose concern it was to set up bigger and better charities, leaving it to others to tackle structures. But this would be a one-dimensional reading of him. In his concern for the poor he soon learned that any worthwhile work must be organised and structured. He kept in close contact with men and women who were able to change what we would call structures. He did not scruple to influence the appointments of those who could in fact change the face of society. His work for foundlings and beggars was not just the setting up of new charities. It was an attempt to influence people who could change systems. The same applies to his activity at the time of the Fronde and his relief work in Lorraine and the provinces. He was at the same time organising the distribution of relief and prevailing on Richelieu to put an end to the reason for the war. No wonder he came to be called the minister for devastated areas. The way of liberation today is to expose corrupt structures. It is the conviction of the 1984 and 1986 statements that this cannot be done by Marxist critique and methodology. But there must be alternative ways. Would it be too much to hope that the way in which they devise such good alternatives would be a sign, indeed a necessary sign, that the charism of St Vincent is alive and active in his disciples today?

Searching for a Utopia

At our meetings and seminars in recent years we have often asked ourselves what should be the special characteristic of a Vincentian parish/college/renewal centre. The answers have often been wearisome and they have generated their share of cynicism. But they have helped us to dream of the Vincentian Utopia. In that Utopia, walking into any centre directed by those who perpetuate St Vincent's charism would be an immediate opening of the eyes and ears and heart to the liberation of the poor. What catches the eye would indicate that we are working in close

and obvious liaison with such movements as Concern and Cafod. Our community libraries and our pamphlet racks would be well stocked with publications about liberation and the plight of the poor. Books like the recent "Faith in the City" would have a prominent place on the shelves. Information would be easily available from Vincentian communities as to where exactly are the twenty per cent of the population in England who, according to a recent calculation, are below the breadline. In our church porches, the visitor would be struck by publicity that points to the different kinds of prisoners of conscience. Our calendars would underline a variety of events that would draw the attention of both rich and poor to the lot of the poor.

Could the education of others in a conscience towards the poor be a way of keeping the poor at arm's-length from us? It is easy enough to support a project or a movement the immediate beneficiaries of which are several removes from our doorsteps. Exhibitions and exhibitionism about the poor do not necessarily ensure that Lazarus is fed at the door. But it can reasonably be hoped that as one becomes seriously orientated towards the poor who are some removes away, one would become more sensitive to the cry of the poor person nearer home. Whether one starts at the doorstep or further afield, conversion to the poor cannot be an easy process. It will always involve a search and a pain. It will also involve a likelihood that we will often mistake Lazarus for Dives and Dives for Lazarus.

Spotting the poor

A confrère from an affluent land recently stated that he envied the countries which had recognisable and identifiable groups called the poor. He admitted that there are many poor in his own country, but he said they are difficult to spot and they are strangely mobile and elusive. Maybe, as we exercise better the muscles of our charism to the poor, we will be able to be known as people who are quick at spotting the mobile poor and the elusive poor.

Image and symbol

It is the age of the image. A priest psychologist said recently that the decline in vocations to priesthood and religious life can be ascribed to the absence of strong images in either as they exist today. The Vincentian tradition has a number of powerful images and symbols that we can make much of. I believe that the most powerful symbols in our tradition are about liberation. St Vincent's letter to M. de Comet about his Barbary captivity is full of such symbols. While we wait for historians to decide

about what really happened, it might be well to move our attention from “did it really happen?” to “what does it mean?” Of Esau’s ruse, St Augustine said it was not a lie but a mystery. Maybe those who are unconvinced of the historicity of the Barbary story might settle for an interpretation that sees it as a letter full of the mysterious images of liberation that became the agenda for St Vincent’s life.

Our other powerful symbol of liberation is the appointment of St Vincent as chaplain to the galleys and the tradition about his wearing another man’s chains. Historically these occupy only a small place in St Vincent’s life. But as symbols they have a lot of hidden resources. It is worth recalling that, as a historical event, the crucifixion of Jesus had little significance; his execution was one of many at the time. The same applies to the Exodus; it made no impression on Egyptian chronicles. But who can measure the symbolic power of either event?

Would an emphasis on liberation take from the urgency of the renewal of priesthood? The search for new and suitable forms of ministry pervades the whole life of the church today. Maybe as we are developing our mission of liberation, we will keep discovering what must be our specific contribution to the work of renewal in church ministry. To take one example. The diaconate today has something of a crisis of identity. The development of the liturgical side of the diaconate seems to be running into difficulties. Maybe the future of this order and ministry will be more in the world of the social apostolate. The development of a theology and practice of liberation would seem to be an ideal setting for the advancing of a social diaconate. With the development of a social diaconate could come a whole new cluster of new ministries to the poor.

My favourite character in the Barbary letter is the old alchemist, that humane figure who was an expert at distilling perfumes and essences, and, having spent fifty years searching for the philosopher’s stone, had found a method of transmuting metals. Perhaps the ferment started by liberation theology will act as an alchemy that will help us locate many perfumes and essences that are resting in the Vincentian memory and are in need of release.

Forum

WHITHER MISSIONS AND RETREATS IN NIGERIA?

The Church in Nigeria is still (1986) very much in a stage of growth and development, and this development is occurring in an uneven way across the country. Similarly, the Nigerian Vincentian Community is still in the early stages of its development. Nonetheless, it may well be an opportune time to consider the development of parish missions here from the early days before the civil war up to now.

The obvious change is in the indigenisation of the Church. In the earlier stage it was a question of expatriate parish priests inviting expatriate missionaries to their parish. Now, in many dioceses, expatriate parish priests are about as common as snow in these parts. This is a many-sided change. Whereas, before, the norm was to use an interpreter, now if the missionary comes to speak through an interpreter it is like turning the clock back. So, in many dioceses now it is, naturally, the day of the indigenous missionary who speaks the language and understands the people. Of course this has its own complications. An Igbo priest is indigenous in Igboland and to the Igbos of the diaspora, but he himself is a non-indigene in vast sections of the country. The only real answer is the gift of Pentecostal tongues.

The large numbers in the seminaries here has had another spin-off. During the holiday time swarms of seminarians descend on the parishes to do some months of “apostolic work”. What better way to employ them than in giving retreats in the various stations of the parish, though one might wonder if their “doctrine is sound”. But this proves to be a much more economical way of having the annual retreat than calling in a mission team. It is also less complicated, as one is not exposed to the problems of communication in getting the message to and fro.

But there have been other changes also following on the move away from a mission Church to an established Church. In Onitsha diocese, for example, in recent years new parishes tend to be opened at the rate of three or four per year; this normally results in two smaller areas being covered by two parish priests. Our own parish of Oraifite is a break-off from a larger parish of Nnewi, which has also been the mother of a

number of other parishes. One feature of the earlier missions was the vast numbers of sacraments administered. I recall baptising, with others, up to 750 people at the end of one mission, and having up to 120 marriages. But this is rarely, if ever, a feature of the present-day mission. Rather, the emphasis is on baptismal life and married life, somewhat as would be the case elsewhere. Encouraging people to “marry for Church” still looms large, but such “marriage for Church” will normally be preceded by a marriage course, and not take place there and then. An interesting development in pastoral life in some places has been the introduction of “group weddings”. This means fixing a day when a whole number of people will come to celebrate their marriage, even though it may have “taken place” some time before, and have a combined reception organised by the parish. Among other things this cuts down on expenses which at times can be a prohibitive factor. Recently we gave a retreat which concluded with one of these celebrations for some fifty-six couples, though preparations had started long before the retreat. A neighbouring parish had just concluded a celebration for 275 couples!

While paganism, or traditional religion, still persists and influences the Christians, nonetheless it does not have the same sharp focus as before. The collecting and burning of “ju-ju”, or charms, was often the feature of the close of such retreats. Now this tends to be frowned on, but in any case it is not so much an issue. The multitude of other “churches” can be as much a source of lapsing as recourse to pagan “medicine”. So, what is called for now is emphasising the need to be faithful to one’s baptism into the Catholic Church, and not to go “shopping round” for the best bargain. The commitment involved in faith is what needs to be brought out.

This mushrooming of other “churches” has some other effects also. Inevitably their influence will be felt in the problem of questions which our members will be faced with as a result of contact with them; aspects of their belief and practice and worship will very often be called into question by them. So, an important part of any retreat today will be question-time, when an opportunity is given to air these objections and an appropriate answer is given, for the benefit of all. At times, devotees of such sects can infiltrate the retreat and really try to pin down the retreat master. So, agility and casuistry are very useful gifts on such occasions.

People in Nigeria were always very open to the bible. They respected the Holy Book. It was strong ju-ju, almost like the talking god. But, with the growth and spread of education, with the development of Bible Societies, with the new emphasis on the bible in the Catholic Church,

this has become a special focus of attention now. The bible strikes a very responsible chord with people. A parish mission should be very bible-centred if it is to strike home. Even special sessions on the bible have a very definite place now. Mere preaching of dogma, no matter how enlightened and hallowed by tradition, is not enough. It is necessary to be well up on your scripture, because they will have some searching questions for you, and they are not easily satisfied with a superficial explanation.

Penance Services are definitely “in”. Confessions were always a very big part of a parish mission (“No confession, no mission!”). But now, at least in many places, people expect and welcome a full-scale Penance Service. I have taken part in such, together with ten or more other priests, and we heard confessions for three or four hours. This is a great opportunity for instruction on the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which otherwise can, at least on occasions, tend to be somewhat of a routine or mechanical affair owing to the press of numbers.

One of the great “growth industries” of the Nigerian Church is the healing ministry. There is a tremendous thirst and hunger for it among the people. If they do not find a means of satisfying it in their own Church they will go elsewhere. In recent times some healing centres, organised by individual priests with special gifts, have sprung up and attract people from far and wide, rich and poor. So, now, in every retreat we have a day of healing, which includes special prayers for all the sick, and anointings in the church for a select number. If you asked the sick to come forward there would not be anyone left at the back of the church!

The growth of the charismatic movement must also be noted as a feature of the Church now. When they are functioning well they can be a very supportive group and should be very closely involved in the retreat so that it becomes a participated or shared enterprise.

There is really quite a variation in the format of retreats here now. The old style is still very acceptable in rural areas, with some developments. They have more time there. It becomes a local event and can often last a number of weeks. In the townships, however, there is much greater pressure on people and one has to use the little time available to best advantage. I should, perhaps, have mentioned the open-air Stations of the Cross as a very central feature now, and also a Day of Prayer, or Exposition, where possible.

Preparatory meetings with the parish priest and Church leaders can be very beneficial. We have got out a special booklet which we normally give to each parish priest who looks for us, detailing the preparations and general format. A lot of emphasis is placed on getting the word

round, now not as simple as before. In one parish a loudspeaker van featured for this purpose. Where possible, we go as a team and this helps visitation, among other things. But developments are undoubtedly only beginning. With more numbers coming to the mission team new possibilities are opening up. With Brothers trained in catechetics new catechetical approaches will be possible. A “tempo forte” on the mission apostolate has already been held and should be an annual event. Future developments will probably see us going to different dioceses as diocesan retreat-givers. The rest is in the hands of the Lord.

Roderic Crowley.

VINCENTIAN PARISHES IN BRITAIN

At the moment of writing the confrères in Britain are in charge of eight parishes, with twenty-four priests, and Brother Willie Smyth, working in seven dioceses. In six of these parishes the Daughters of Charity work in close partnership with the confrères.

Since the type of work being carried out in all our parishes is much the same as work in any parish here or elsewhere the question may be asked: “Why the Vins and not the diocesan clergy?” I will not even try to answer that one.

In trying to assess the work of the Vincentians, male and female, in parishes here two headings come to the fore: Service and Education.

Service

- (a) Commitment to help the poor and needy;
- (b) Pastoral ministry for all age groups, the young, the elderly, the housebound;
- (c) Social life within a parish;
- (d) Appreciation of the role of the laity.

By the very nature of our vocation we must live with the poor and the needy and be fully committed to them. We must do this without causing embarrassment to anyone. This can be very demanding and needs great tact and diplomacy.

Social activities in a parish promote the spiritual life of a parish. We must be committed to encouraging these, especially by our presence at them.

We must certainly encourage in an active way the role of the laity in parish life. It automatically follows that we show appreciation for the work being done by the laity in our parishes.

The Vincentian “attachment” to education is a tremendous help to us in the parish life.

Education

The missionary experience of confrères has a great influence on each of us and certainly helps in having a right and proper attitude to parishioners. Being “missionary” we are certainly encouraging our people to live their faith.

Working away from here, I feel, gives the added advantage of working with different cultures and broadens the outlook in helping to understand better the multi-problems of parish life.

The education angle helps us to make our preaching interesting and to the point. As Vincentians, and especially in Britain, we must be fully committed to Catholic education at every level.

The tradition and “continuity spirit” handed on to us from confrères in the past are tremendous aids to us at the present time working in our parishes. Their experiences, and the experience of confrères living in the parishes at this time, many of them having worked in our other parishes in Britain, help us all to carry out the service and education of our people.

In all our parishes we do play a great role in promoting all Catholic lay societies by encouraging our people to participate in an active way. In a similar way we try to help and encourage the laity to active participation in all liturgical celebrations.

Finally, the fact that we, as Vins, are very often “here today and gone tomorrow” helps us in our parochial work, having no attachment to any particular parish and not having any ambitious ideas as to seniority, or position or rank. We are here in the parishes to serve the people and we try to do so not as individual priests but as members of the Vincentian team.

Paddy Hughes.

THE VINCENTIAN STUDENT TOUR IN FRANCE, 1986

The summer of 1986 was a very enjoyable and educational one for the philosophers of De Paul House, Dan O’Connell, Luke Healy and

myself. A French confrère, Andre Sylvestre, invited the Irish students to join an international Vincentian student group who would follow the footsteps of St Vincent and Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre for three weeks. There were fifteen students: three French, one Austrian, seven Italian, one Cameroonian and three Irish. The Italians were accompanied by their Spiritual Director and another confrère waiting to depart for Madagascar, and the French had their sub-Director, making a group of eighteen in all.

This was the first time such an international trip had been organised and it was very successful. It lasted from 17 July in Paris till 7 August in Chateau l'Eveque. It was part of our pastoral work for the summer. We travelled in a minibus driven by a French confrère, Jean-Marie Lesbats (not included in the eighteen mentioned already). He had just finished some years in the house of the Paris Province in Isleworth, Middlesex. We also had the use of a few cars. There was the obvious difference of language, but we were able to cope.

We arrived in Paris on Tuesday, 16 July and stayed in the Maison-Mère; it was quite an experience. The Austrian and some of the Italians had already arrived and were waiting for us. We had one day to spend in Paris, but as we visited friends we did not have much time for sightseeing. We saw the chapel in the rue du Bac and that in the Maison-Mère, both of which have been recently renovated and are said to be vastly improved.

The following morning we left for Montauban, a journey of 600 kms. We were welcomed there by the French and the rest of the Italians and, of course, the inexhaustible Fr Sylvestre. We stayed for three days in the semi-derelict *grand seminaire* which is now used as a boarding school. It was moments like our stay there which helped us to appreciate Castleknock. We visited nearly every 16th and 17th century building in Toulouse in one day; as you can imagine, there are a lot of them. The novelty wore off after the first few and our interest went elsewhere. We also visited the university, part of which is supposed to date from Vincent's time, and we went to the *pension* which he set up for boys in Buzet-sur-Tarn. On another day we visited the sanctuary of Notre Dame de Grace where Vincent celebrated his first mass five months after his ordination. We "went public" on the Sunday when we visited the parish of St Livrade in Moissac, a Vincentian parish where Fr Sylvestre is Parish Priest. We went "two-by-two" to the homes of some local families in the parish, which was a great opportunity to speak some French unaided; it was all quite biblical!

From Montauban we headed for St Flour, and from this time on I

began to refer to our minibus journeys as “kangaroo trips”, as we hopped in and out every few kilometres to visit a church or some ancient building. Because of this it took us ages to get anywhere. The only time we got out of the bus with great enthusiasm was when we got back to where we were staying, or when we were going to eat. We stayed in the *grand seminaire* in St Flour, where John Gabriel Perboyre taught after ordination. It is now used as a hotel. It was a very nice place to stay and we were sorry to leave it. The room in which John Gabriel lived has a plaque commemorating this. It was from this area of France that many famous Vincentians came: Joseph-Martial Mouly, a bishop of China in the 19th century; Armand-Jean David, another 19th century missionary in China, famous as a botanist and zoologist, particularly as the first European to discover the giant panda; Fernand Portal, the ecumenist who died in 1926; Evariste Hue, another 19th century missionary, author of *Travels in Tartary, Tibet and China* and other works on China. We stayed three days in St Flour and went out to visit many places connected with these confrères.

From St Flour we went to Rocamadour, an old fortress town on top of a hill. The fortress itself dates back to well before the 12th century. It is famous for the statue of Our Lady of Rocamadour, the Black Madonna. Thousands of people go on pilgrimage there each year. There is a bell in the main chapel, where the statue is, which rings in the wind. It is said that seamen and fishermen, when lost in a storm, pray to Our Lady of Rocamadour and that they hear this bell and follow its sound, which brings them safely home. It is a very beautiful town and the fortress is spectacular when lit up at night.

From Rocamadour we travelled to Cahors, in one of the better wine regions in Franch. It is also the homeland of John Gabriel Perboyre. We stayed in a school for handicapped girls, the owner of which was once a Vincentian student and was under the care of Fr Sylvestre and they had remained in contact over the years; that’s why we were so well looked after. We visited Montgesty, the home parish of John Gabriel, including Le Puech, the Perboyre farm, where his great-grand-niece still lives. We joined in the celebration of mass there, which was a special occasion. The Vincentian students bring young people there each year to help the local community for a month in the summer; they also help with the maintenance of the house. We returned to Montgesty on Sunday for mass in the parish church where John Gabriel was baptised.

In Cahors we visited both the *petit* and *grand seminaire*, one of which is no longer functioning. On the last night of our stay in Cahors the Vicar General of the diocese joined us for dinner, armed with a few bottles of

the best wine of Cahors; he was soon going to be made a bishop. At this stage I would like to make the point that in nearly every small village or parish which we visited Fr Sylvestre knew the Parish Priest, or the Parist Priest had heard of Fr Sylvestre. This was great, because it meant that we were able to get into places that the public usually don't get to visit. A final point on our friend the Vicar General: before leaving us he gave each of us a medal honouring Blessed Alain de Solminihac, one of the most important men of the Catholic Reformation in France. Vincent and himself worked together in many ways for the Reform, especially in the fight against Jansenism. He was the only person ever to change Vincent's mind about missions. In Cahors he had Vincent's priests staffing his seminary but he would not allow them to give missions in the diocese. This was the only exception Vincent ever allowed in this matter. The bishop had a lot of power and the local priests were afraid of him. There are many interesting letters from Vincent to him about their fight against Jansenism. They disagreed over their attitude towards laxism, the bishop being against it. He asked Vincent for help but Vincent refused, because that meant going against the Jesuits, who were very powerful. Their friendship waned a little because of this and Vincent admitted in his letters that he regretted not having helped. The bishop died about a year before Vincent.

At Cahors we sadly parted from Fr Sylvestre. This was a big loss because we were very fond of him and extremely grateful for all he did for us. He had to return to his parish whereas we were going further south to Dax, into the very capable hands of Fr Jean Morin who had just arrived home from the General Assembly in Rome. We were headed for the proper homeland of St Vincent, Le Berceau. It was here that he was born, and a house, "Ranquines", is here, though it is not the actual house in which he was born; it is a similar one, near the actual site. We stayed with the Daughters of Charity in Le Berceau and during our stay we were able to do a couple of day-trips, including one to Lourdes. It was the first time for most of us to go there and it was a super experience. The only problem about it was that we spent only one day there and that day went very quickly. We, the Irish, had our first mass in English for three weeks when we joined the pilgrims of Salford diocese for their final mass. On some of the other days in Le Berceau we were able to visit the church in which Vincent was baptised, and where the original font still is. We also went to Notre Dame de Buglose, a place Vincent used to visit as a child. There was not very much to do around Le Berceau because it is very isolated; we had plenty of free time yet nothing to do except eat, drink and sleep. We got a great surprise one day when Kieran Magovern

dropped in on his way to Lourdes.

From the warmth and generosity of the Daughters in Le Berceau we went on to the warmth and generosity of the Daughters in Chateau l'Eveque, but this time without half the Italians and French, who had headed home. Here we visited the actual chapel (now a side-chapel of the parish church) in which Vincent was ordained a priest. We had mass in this chapel and this was one of the most special moments of the trip. We visited the chateau itself, but it is now closed and boarded up. It was a bit disappointing to see weeds taking over the place. Here we finally said our farewells, "with tears in our eyes"; the other students were heading home and we, only beginning our adventure, were heading for Taize.

On reflecting on the trip we found it a very worthwhile experience. It has given us a very good insight into St Vincent and has brought alive for us any biographies we have read. We did, though, find the trip long and tiring. On one of the last nights the whole group came together to reflect on the trip and to suggest some possible improvements. We felt that the course had much to offer but that three weeks of culture was too much. The three weeks were unbalanced in the sense that for the first two weeks we were on the go all the time, while for the last week we had little to do. The language was an obvious problem for all of us, but we did have some very funny and embarrassing moments as a result. We got caught out a couple of times when pretending we understood what had been said and then asking questions which showed we hadn't! We, the Irish, found the conferences very long; after about twenty minutes our concentration would dwindle and we would lose what was being said. It was noted that when we were given the text before the conference it was easier to cope. (Before the end of the trip we were given a copy of each conference).

One of our major criticisms of the trip was that there was not enough time given to prayer. We prayed together as a group only once during the trip, apart from the divine office and mass. We felt that a day of recollection would have been rewarding. I found, personally, that with all the rushing around ordinary prayer, never mind reflection, was difficult to fit in. I must say that any time we came together for office or mass we celebrated each with a great sense of community and joy. It was also noted that for any future trips it would be better if each national group of students was accompanied by a priest, for mass and translating. We concluded the meeting agreeing that the trip was a success even though we we did encounter some difficulties. Any future trips should be shorter and more balanced, with a stronger emphasis on the spiritual.

It was also an informative experience for us all. I found personally that I was able to get really in touch with the spirituality of St Vincent. People would ask me why I had joined the Vincentians. I always had difficulty in answering, but I think now I have found the answer. We had just finished a course on St Vincent, using Calvet's biography, with Fr Davitt; I now know what Fr Davitt was talking about, having been in most of the places he mentioned.

I would like to record my thanks to everyone involved in the organisation of the trip, Fr Mullan for letting us go and, of course, all the French confrères, especially Frs Sylvestre, Planchot, Morin and Lesbats.

John A. Murray.