

# COLLOQUE

Journal of the Irish Province of the  
Congregation of the Mission



# Contents

Editorial	224
Charity	
<i>Vincent de Paul</i>	225
André Dodin's	
"De Monsieur Depaul à saint Vincent de Paul"	
<i>Andrew Spelman</i>	236
André Dodin's	
"Monsieur Vincent Raconté par son Secrétaire"	
<i>Eamon Devlin</i>	255
Meetings and the Vincentian Tradition	
<i>Aidan McGing</i>	260
Forum	
What kind of a Society do we want?	
<i>Mark Noonan</i>	272
Vocations weekend in Cork	
<i>Frank Murphy</i>	275
Vincentian Month, Paris, August 1993	
<i>Joseph Loftus</i>	278
Miscellanea	
Two letters from Peking	
<i>Patrick Barry</i>	283
John Henry Newman and the Vincentians	
<i>Fergus Kelly</i>	286
Obituaries	
James Dyar	
<i>Seamus O'Neill</i>	289
Kevin O'Kane	
<i>Diarmuid Ó Hegarty</i>	291

## Editorial

Some days after leaving this issue with the printer I left Blackrock to take up my new appointment as archivist in the Curia Generalizia in Rome. I have been asked to continue as Editor and, with the continuing co-operation of Diskon Technical Services and Elo Press in Dublin, do not foresee any insoluble problems arising because of the move. All correspondence concerning COLLOQUE should be addressed to me in Rome. Distribution will, however, be from 4 Cabra Road, Dublin.

There are two articles in this issue which bring to those who do not read French the main ideas from two important books of André Dodin which appeared in recent years. The first of these is particularly important in view of the recent publication of the first translation into English of Abelly's book.

After the appearance in No 26 of my translation of the conference "On seeking the Kingdom of God" several confreres asked me to provide similar new translations of other conferences given by Vincent to the St Lazare community. This issue has a translation of the conference on charity of 30 May 1659.

T Davitt CM

# Charity

Vincent de Paul

(Conference given to the community in St Lazare on 30 May 1659. This is the most authentic of the surviving reconstructed conferences in the sense that it is the only one which has survived in Brother Ducournau's handwriting. Translation by TD)

My very dear confreres, paragraph 12 of chapter II, on the gospel teaching contained in our rules, reads as follows:

Charitable behaviour towards the neighbour should always be characteristic of us. We should try, then: 1. to behave towards others in the way we might reasonably expect to be treated by them; 2. to agree with others, and to accept everything in the Lord; 3. to put up with one another without grumbling; 4. to weep with those who weep; 5. to rejoice with those who rejoice; 6. to yield precedence to one another; 7. to be kind and helpful to one another in all sincerity; 8. finally, to be all things to all people so that we may win everyone for Christ. All of this is to be understood as in no way going against the commandments of God, or Church law, or the Rules or Constitutions of our Congregation.

The conference this evening, then, is on charity towards the neighbour, or more accurately, on the effects of this charity, the behaviour it should lead to.

This charity is obligatory; it's a divine commandment which includes several others. Everyone knows that the law and the prophets are summed up in the love of God and neighbour. Everything refers back to that; everything heads towards that; and this love has such thrust and primacy that anyone who has it fulfills all God's laws, because they all mesh in with it, and it achieves all God asks of us; *qui enim diligit proximum legem implevit* (Rm 13:8).

Now that goes not just for love of God but also for love of others stemming from our love of God; note that, stemming from our love of God. That's so shattering that the human mind can't come to grips with

it. We need light from heaven to help us see the height and depth, the breadth and excellence of this love.

St Thomas frames the question this way: who is better off, someone who loves God but ignores others, or someone who loves others because he loves God? He gives the answer himself by saying it's better to love others because we love God than to love God without reference to others. He proves it in this apparently paradoxical way: "To go into the heart of God and make that the whole extent of your love is not the most perfect love, because the fulfillment of the law consists in loving God and others". Show me a man who loves only God, a soul lost in contemplation who never thinks about his brothers; this person, finding great delight in this way of loving God, who seems to him to be the only thing worth loving, limits himself to enjoying this infinite source of joy. And then look at someone else who loves others, who, even if he's crude and thick, loves others because of his love for God. Which type of love, I ask, is purest and least selfish? The second, of course; there's no doubt about that, and that person fulfills the law more perfectly. He loves God and others; what more can he do? The first fellow loves only God, but the second loves both God and others. We really must give ourselves to God so as to impress these truths on our souls, to organise our lives according to his spirit and to carry out what this love calls for. There are no people in the world more obliged to this than ourselves, no community which should be more assiduous in hands-on, heartfelt, love.

Why? Because God brought this little Company, like all others, into existence for his love and good pleasure. All communities aim at loving him, but in different ways: Carthusians by solitude, Capuchins by poverty, others by chanting his praises. But if we have love we must show it by bringing people to love God and one another, to love other people for God and to love God for others. We've been chosen by God as instruments of his immense and fatherly charity, which wants to root itself in souls and spread. If we could only realise what this blessed commitment is! We'll never see it clearly in this life, for, if we did, we'd live in a different way; or at least my wretched self would.

So, our vocation is to go not just to one parish, not even to just one diocese, but all over the world. Why? To fan people's hearts into flame, to do what the Son of God did. He came to set the world on fire, to inflame it with his love. What are we for if not to want it to burn and consume everything? Let's tease that out, if you don't mind. It means I am sent out not just to love God but to make him loved. It's not enough for me to love God if my neighbour doesn't love him. I must love other people; they are God's image and loved by him, and I must love them so

that they, in their turn, love their creator who knows them, accepts them as his brothers and has saved them, and so that they love one another for the love of God who loved them so much that he surrendered his own Son to death for them. That, then, is what I'm obliged to do. My God, what mistakes I've made in this matter! How badly have I understood the importance of my rule and how little attention have I paid to the love, given and received, to which God calls me. Each one of us must be convinced of this in the sight of God. All of us should say to him: "My God, I've fallen behind in this; forgive me for slipping up in the past; through your grace keep your holy love clearly stamped up front in my heart; let it be the life of my life and the soul of my actions so that spreading out it gets into, and gets to work on, the souls with whom I come in contact".

Now if we really are called to bring God's love far and near, if we are to set other countries on fire with it, if our vocation is to go and spread this divine fire all over the world, if that's the way it is, I say, if that's the way it is, then, surely I myself should be afire with this divine love. Surely I should warm myself up enough to love those with whom I live, build up my own confreres by showing love, and lead these dear confreres to put into practice what this love leads to. At the moment of death we'll see the irreparable loss which we'll have suffered, perhaps not everyone, but at least those who don't have this brotherly love and don't show it as they should. How can we give it to others if we don't have it among ourselves? We need to take a good look at ourselves to see if it's here, not in a vague general way but each one to look at himself, and to check whether it's present to the degree it should be. For if it's not blazing away, if we don't love each other as Jesus Christ loved us, if this doesn't lead us to behave the way he did, what hope have we of bringing this love all over the world? You can't give what you haven't got. How could a Company set hearts on fire with real charity if it hasn't got it?

We'd normally explain this virtue by our usual method and say what it is. But everyone knows what it is so let's by-pass that and look at it through its effects.

What's the first? What comes from a heart empowered by it? What comes from it, as opposed to a man who does not have it and has only natural inclinations? Simply to do to everyone else what we would reasonably want everyone else to do to us; that's what charity boils down to. Is it true that I do to my neighbour what I want from him? That's an important test to make, yet how many missionaries are there who have even the minimum of this interior attitude? I'm afraid there aren't many. My God, where are they? There are several like myself who pay no attention whatever to giving others what they are only too happy to

accept for themselves. There's no charity there, since they don't have that attitude which prompts us to behave well towards others, something we'd have a right to expect from a good friend.

Look at the Son of God; what a heart of charity he had, blazing with love! Tell us a little, Jesus, you yourself, tell us who dragged you from heaven to put up with the curse of earthly life, with so many persecutions and torments. O Saviour, source of love brought down to our level, even as far as degrading suffering, did anyone ever love others more than you did in that? You came to leave yourself open to all our misfortunes, taking the form of a sinner, leading a life of suffering, and accepting a shameful death for our sake; is there any love to match that? But who could love in such an outstanding way? Only our Lord, so carried away by love of creatures that he abandoned his Father's throne to take on a body subject to weakness. And why? To set up among ourselves, by his example and teaching, love of one another. This love crucified him and brought about the wonder of our redemption. Now, Fathers, if we had a bit of this love would we lounge around with our arms folded? Would we allow people, whom we could help, to perish? Oh no, charity can't be lazy; it spurs us on to saving and consoling others.

This first effect enlightens the understanding; this light shapes our appreciation, and this appreciation spurs the will on to love, and anyone who loves is convinced of the honour and affection he should have towards others, and filled with this he puts it into practice in word and work.

Could anyone who has such appreciation and affection for others ever harm them by what he says about them? Could he do anything which would annoy them? If he has this attitude in his heart could he, in fact, ever meet his brother and not want to show him his love? From the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks and, generally speaking, what we actually do indicates how we feel; if we have genuine love we will act accordingly. Fire produces light and heat, love produces respect and goodwill towards the person loved. Have we noticed any signs of want of appreciation and affection for certain people? Have thoughts like this not bothered us, to some extent, for a time? If that's the case then we do not have that charity which immediately gets rid of the first inkling of ill feeling and the seed of hatred. You see, if we have this divine virtue, which is a sharing in the Sun of Justice, it would burn off the mist of our corruption and let us see what's good and attractive in others so that we could acknowledge and value such qualities in them. I must admit that if in the past we've had some failing in this matter God has, for now, looked on us with merciful eyes.



*[At this point Fr Vincent looked up to heaven in gratitude and repeated what he had just said]*

God has looked on us with merciful eyes; he took pity on us and rid us of certain warped characters in the Congregation who were the cause of this falling-off in charity, so much so that only recently someone said to me: “You know, Father, it seems to me that we’re living here like children, with the freedom of innocence and with genuine friendship for one another; we’ve no bragging, no gibes; we respect one another, no one tries to get one up on someone else”.

O Saviour, you have rid the Congregation of violations of this first effect of charity; keep this cordial union which, through your grace, it now has. Never allow it, please, to be upset by any whiff of pride, nor by cliques, waiting to ambush us, and never let it be seen in the unfortunate state it used to exhibit in the past; I say “in the past” because it’s a long time now since your goodness drew it from that, so that twenty, fifty or a hundred years from now, and for ever, this Company may live in this friendly appreciation of one another.

I ask you, Fathers, to pray frequently to God for this intention, and to do this as a body, each one for the others, so that all the missionaries always love one another. We can be pleased with the fact that this is the way things are at present, and we should pray to God that he will never allow them to slacken off in this brotherly love. Anyway, let’s move on to the other effects.

The second effect of charity is that we never contradict. We’re with other people and there’s talk about something good. Someone gives his opinion and someone else imprudently butts in: “that’s not right, you can’t prove it”. That sort of thing hurts the person contradicted, and unless he’s genuinely humble he’ll want to defend his opinion and then we’re into argument, and that kills charity. I don’t get my brother on my side by contradicting him, but by simply accepting in our Lord whatever he has put forward. Perhaps he’s right and I’m not; he wants to keep a simple conversation going and I turn it into an argument. And, anyway, what he says can have a meaning which I would agree with, if I saw it. So, down with contradiction which causes divisions! It should be avoided like a sickening fever, like a devastating plague, like a demon which ravages the holiest of Companies. We must get rid of this evil spirit by our prayers; let’s often turn to God, especially when we have the opportunity to see things from someone else’s point of view, so that he will give us the grace to profit from it in this way, something far removed from contradicting and hurting them. They simply say what

they think, and we should equally simply accept what they are saying. If some of them are backbiting others or making fun of them (O Saviour, never allow that!), but if this does happen, those men are not to be told off in public. No, that doesn't seem to me to be practicable, nor according to the rule, nor in line with theology or gospel teaching; it should be done face to face, in private.

I was wondering recently whether our Lord ever contradicted any of his disciples in the presence of the others; the only example that occurred to me was his contradicting of Peter, calling him: "Satan!" (Mt 16:23), and that was on the spur of the moment. And that other time when he was boasting that he'd follow his master to death: "Huh", he said, "you're going to disown me three times tonight!".

Anyway, whatever about that, we see that our Lord was very reluctant to contradict, so why can't we be the same? He had the right to reprimand his followers in public since he was the way and the truth; but we are liable to veer off the way and so must exercise self-control so as not to annoy other speakers, in case this would embarrass them, stir up argument and fight against truth. Let's give ourselves to God, Fathers, to protect us from that. If we don't agree with what's said we can either remain silent or simply say how the matter appears to us, without attacking either the way the others see it or the way they voice their opinion, accepting that they are right in behaving that way. That's how charity is kind, in the way St Paul means it (1 Cor 13:4). That's the second effect.

The third effect is shown in the way we put up with the failings of one another. Who'll call us perfect?; no one on earth. But is there anyone who won't call us imperfect, since everyone has defects? So, who is there who does not have to be put up with? Anyone who checks himself out carefully will find quite a lot of weaknesses and failings, and even admit that he can't avoid having them and therefore can't avoid trying the patience of others; he'll need to check himself out as regards both body and mind. You'll sometimes find someone, and this goes for us too, who is strangely annoyed by a man who does not deserve it, everything about him getting under our skin. Everything he does, the way he glances, listens, speaks or behaves, strikes us unfavourably, because of our warped attitude. Someone else speaks succinctly, grammatically correct, and we find his ideas vague and his words uninspired, because we don't like him; yet this attitude is not deliberately chosen. And if he notices all this we expect him not to take it badly and to excuse us. So why don't we also make excuses for him when he gives us an annoyed look or criticises what we say or do, for since he gets under our skin we too may get under his? Sometimes we're in good form, sometimes not;

yesterday we were seen in terrific form, today we're in the dumps. Now when we are at either extreme of our odd nature we expect others to put up with us, so isn't it only right that we put up with others in similar circumstances?

Let's put ourselves on trial; each of us is to examine the evidence, his physical limitations, undisciplined strong points, inclination towards evil, imagination running wild, infidelity and ingratitude towards God and his way of acting towards us. We'll each find in ourselves more evil deeds and reasons for embarrassment than might be found in a lay person, and have to tell ourselves bluntly: "I'm the greatest sinner and most intolerable man". Yes, if we look candidly at ourselves we'll see that those with whom we come into contact find us very hard to put up with. Now if anyone has arrived at that point, clearly recognising all his weaknesses, which is, of course, a grace of God, you can be quite sure he is also at the point of recognising his own obligation to put up with others. He won't notice their faults, or if he does he'll see them as small compared to his own and so from within his own weakness he'll put up with them in charity. Our Lord's tolerance was marvellous! Do you see that beam there, holding up the entire weight of the ceiling? If it wasn't there the ceiling would fall. Our Lord has held us up like that when we were slipping, or when our mind was blinded or we were in bad form. We've all, at times, been flattened by worries and difficulties, physical or mental, and this generous Saviour has taken them over and put up with the sorrow and shame they caused. If we think carefully about this we'll see how much we deserve to be punished and humiliated since we are the guilty parties, especially myself, a wretched pig-keeper who piles fault upon fault every day by my bad habits, and by my ignorance which is so great that I hardly know what I'm saying.

I was just saying that when we've reached that point, with good insight into ourselves, when we readily put up with each other... Now I forget what I meant to say; I've lost the thread... But sure you'll put up with me, won't you?

What do we do when we put up with one another? We put *alter alterius onera portate* (Gal 6:2) into practice... What do you do when you put up with your confreres? You are obeying the law of Jesus Christ. Let's all say to him: "My Lord, from now on the only failings I wish to notice are my own; from this moment grant that, seeing clearly by the brightness of your example, I may put up with them with your strength; grant me the grace to avail of it, inflame me with your love".

I'll move on quickly to the fourth effect of charity. It is that I never see someone suffering without suffering with him, never see someone

crying without crying with him. One of the effects of love is to enable hearts to enter into each other and feel what the other feels. This is far removed from the sort of people who have no feel for the pain of those who suffer or for the plight of the poor. How sensitive the Son of God was! They send for him to come to Lazarus; he comes; Magdalen gets up and heads off, crying; the Jews, also in tears, follow; everyone begins to cry. What does our Lord do? He cries with them, he's so sensitive and sympathetic. It's this sensitivity which brought him down from heaven; he saw people deprived of his glory; he was in touch with their misfortune. We also have to be sensitive to a person in trouble and share his worry. O St Paul, how sensitive you were in this! O Saviour, you filled your apostle with your spirit and sensitivity; make us say with him: *Quis infirmatur, et ego non infirmor?* (2 Cor 11:29). Is there anyone sick, and I don't feel ill with him?

And in what way could I feel for his illness other than by the sharing of it, which we all have because we are all in our Lord who is our head? Everyone together makes up a mystical body, each being a limb of the others. You've never heard of a limb, even in animals, which did not feel the pain of another limb; or, in the case of men, one part of the body bruised, wounded or injured, and the other parts not feeling it. That's not possible. All limbs are so interconnected and have such a shared sensitivity that pain in one is pain in another. With all the more reason, then, Christians, who are limbs of the same body, limbs of one another, should have common feeling. I mean, can one be a Christian and not cry with a suffering brother, not share his illness? That wouldn't be charity; that's being a like a Christian in a painting, lacking humanity, being worse than animals.

But sharing the happiness of those who are happy is also an effect of charity. It enables us to join in with what makes them happy. The point of our Lord's teaching is to unite us in mind, in happiness and in sorrow; he wants us to get inside the feelings of one another. St John's gospel tells us that the blessed Precursor used to say, with regard to himself and Jesus Christ, that the Bridegroom's friend was happy to hear his voice: "My happiness is complete" he used to say, "he must increase, I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). We should be happy like that, too, when we hear the voice of someone else who is happy, because that person represents our Lord to us. We should be happy at the good results of his work, happy that people give more respect and honour to him than to us, happy that he has more talent, grace and virtue that we have. That's how we should share his happiness.

That's also the way we share his sorrows, and virtue should lead us to

do what society people often do from human respect. When they call on someone who has lost a father, wife, relative, what do they do? Normally they wear black clothes, leave feathers and bouquets and other signs of joy at home, and arrive dressed in mourning. On arrival they put on a sad expression, come up to the bereaved and say: "I really can't tell you how sorry I am at your loss; I feel the loss too; I can't get over it; I'm crying here like yourself", and they go on with that sort of talk showing how they are sharing in the sorrow.

What's the origin of this custom? You know better than I do that good Christian ceremonies go way back, starting from the gospels and St Paul's letters. It was the custom of these early Christians to pay visits, sympathising with and consoling one another. These duties of friendship have come down to us, coming from the roots of Christianity; it was done then and it's still done. Nothing like this is done among the Turks, nor among the Indians, nor even among the Jews; they take off their hats only to greet one another. This shows that at the start these things were done as a sign of charity; unfortunately their origin has been lost sight of and the way they are done nowadays is an abuse, because they are done to make an impression or to show off, or done through self-interest or natural affection, and not because of the unity of mind and feeling which the Son of God came to establish in his Church. This unity makes people of faith, who as members of Jesus Christ have the same mind as he has, feel happy or sad at the happiness or sadness of their brothers. In line with this we ought to look on the misfortunes of others as our own.

We've covered five or six effects of charity now; there's another: we should not be slow to show respect to one another. Why? Because otherwise it might look as though somebody was being shunned, or someone was trying to imitate a gentleman, a lord, or be aloof. That sort of thing closes hearts, while the opposite opens and expands them. Humility is a genuine effect of charity and it makes us prompt in showing honour and respect when we meet someone, and it wins his respect for us. Is there anyone who does not love someone humble? If a fierce lion on the point of devouring another animal, which would normally show resistance, sees it cringing at its feet and, so to speak, showing humility, it immediately calms down. If someone shows humility what else can we do but love them? A missionary who goes down on his knees before their lordships the bishops, before parish priests, receives their blessing and kindness in the way a valley attracts moisture from the hills. And if we show respect among ourselves we will also experience the effects of humility because, since it is the daughter of love, it encourages union and charity.

The final effect of charity is that we show affection. We have to let each other see that we really do love one another. We do this by looking ahead, offering in a friendly way to do something for someone or to share some enjoyment together. If I say "I want to let you know how much I appreciate you" I must show this in my behaviour, in actual fact being of service to someone, in actual fact being all things to all people. Having charity in the heart, and saying so, is not the end of the affair; it must spread out into what we do; in that way it's perfect, it has an effect, since it stirs up love in the hearts of those who experience it; it conquers the world.

When we do the seven things I've mentioned: 1. Behaving well towards others in the way we'd reasonably expect them to behave towards us; 2. Never contradicting anyone, and accepting everything as good in our Lord; 3. Putting up with one another without complaining; 4. Crying along with those in tears; 5. Being happy with those who are happy; 6. Being prompt in showing respect to one another; 7. Showing affection for them and giving them a hand in a friendly way. In other words, making ourselves all things to all persons so as to win them all over to Jesus Christ. Now, what are we doing when we do such things? We are following in our Lord's footsteps, since he was the first to do them. He took the last place, so we do the same; he came to show his love to others, he was never slow with his kindness, so we should be prompt in letting others know of our affection, not at the wrong time or in the wrong way but at a suitable moment and in a suitable way, and not overdoing it. We do all the other things in this way too, when time and opportunity present themselves, always provided that what we do is not, as the rule says, against God's law, our rules or our constitutions; charity would not allow that. Apart from that we should always and everywhere do good when we see an opening; and that'll be quite often. And the more we do this in the spirit of our Lord the more we will be acceptable in his eyes. And so, Fathers, to wrap up all this, if God gives this grace to the missionaries what's your opinion of the Company as a whole? Their life is a life of love, the life of the angels, of the blessed, the earthly and heavenly paradise, if God gives us this grace of loving one another. It has been said that we live like children, but people will say: "Like the angels and blessed all together".

O Saviour, you came to fulfill the law of loving others like oneself, you put this into practice with people so perfectly, not in a merely human way but in a way without parallel; O Lord, may we show our thanks by having you call us to that way of living where we always show love for others, our state of life and our profession being to give ourselves to

that love, our work being the actual putting of it into practice, or at least wanting that, even to the extent of giving up other work in favour of charitable undertakings. Members of religious orders are said to be in a state of perfection; we are not a religious order but we can say we are in a state of charity because our work all the time is actually putting charity into practice, or being available for this.

O Saviour, how happy I am to be in a state of charity towards others, in a state which of its nature speaks to you, prays to you and all the time offers you what I do for others. Give me the grace to realise my happiness and to have a real love for this happy state, to foster the growth of this virtue in the Company today, tomorrow and always. Amen.

André Dodin's  
*De Monsieur Depaul à  
saint Vincent de Paul*

Andrew Spelman

*The sources used by Abelly in his "Vie"*

It was in self-defence against the trenchant criticism of Martin de Barcos that Abelly put on record the background to his writing:

The Priests of the Mission, no doubt moved by their holy founder's spirit of humility, thought that the worthy objective of making known the work and virtues of M. Vincent, should be committed to an outsider though, indeed, many of their own Congregation were singularly well fitted to perform the task. It seemed to them that having known M. Vincent over a long period of years I would be an appropriate person for the task. With this in view they sent me all the material concerning the subject which they had amassed from all sorts of worthy persons; in fact the material was in such well-defined order that I had little else to do but to transcribe what was there, because in many cases I could not improve on the original and, as to the actual words of M. Vincent, I can state on oath that I neither added to nor subtracted from them. Concerning M. Vincent's correspondence all I did was to transcribe the letters, the originals of which remain in the hands of the missionaries. I even sent them my rough notes before sending them to be printed so that they could make any corrections they deemed fit. All in all, one might perhaps blame me – as has been done – for not praising M. Vincent more highly than I have done (1).

So, the writer did not have to go to the trouble of seeking sources. The material sent to him fell into five separate files:

1. Letters written by or to Vincent.
2. Official documents, e.g. certificates, acts of notaries, contracts, etc.



3. Conferences given by him.
4. Testimony, individual or collective, about his life.
5. Words and statements recalled by Abelly himself, and rendered non-verbatim for (perhaps) familiar reportage.

It will be necessary to divide the above mass of material into two categories:

- a) Objective writings, i.e. those which of their very nature must be verifiable by their written form. The main requirement here is that the material be written before Vincent's death, and not destined for inclusion in any future biography. They were left intact by Vincent's death.
- b) "Accidental" writings, those whose content and form were guaranteed neither by an official authority nor by the approval of Vincent. Such were the reports of conferences, talks, etc., the form and wording of which might vary and in which the relationship between the thought presented and its form may have to be taken under close examination.

#### *The "objective" material*

These were so numerous as to be overwhelming. We know that Vincent wanted to go to the printer only what was absolutely necessary. His constant re-writing and re-modelling of the "Constitutions" over a period of thirty-three years, to the extent that what should have been the definitive copy was still showing an error in 1659.

He was constantly "dictating" to his secretaries, indicating his mind to them, changing, correcting his letters, leaving blanks, filling up blanks which he had deliberately left.

In the category of "objective" writings we must make the distinction of two other categories: juridical texts, and letters.

Juridical texts have to do with, in the first place, the life of Vincent himself. Then, also, the documents approving the foundation of the many works attributed to him: the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, the Tuesday Conferences, the Ladies of Charity, etc. Besides the above we must list a series of less structured regulations concerning activities of missionaries on special assignment, viz. Algiers, the army, galley-slaves, members of the "Thursday Conferences" of St Charles and, finally, a list of "laissez-passer" (identity cards to facilitate travel in warlike circumstances). These "legal" documents provide an assured basis for a consideration of the stages of development of the character and spiritual life of M. Vincent.

With regard to the letters it is estimated that he wrote about thirty

thousand, of which about four hundred were written by his own hand to Louise de Marillac between 1624 and 1660. Abelly cites three hundred and thirteen letters. Compared with the 3,548 whose text we possess even now this would appear to suggest that a rather restricted number of letters was actually handed over to Abelly when commencing his work.

Abelly cites ninety-nine letters of the period 1607-1643, but between 1644 and 1660 the number quoted mounts to two hundred and fourteen. Vincent's elevation to the Council of Conscience meant a wider and more frequent amount of letter writing, aided enormously by the two brothers, Ducournau and Robineau.

#### *The "accidental" writings*

These were not merely of secondary importance but, important or not, they were not vouched for by M. Vincent who, in fact, might even have been unaware of their existence in some cases.

For transcribed conferences, apart from those for which we have Vincent's own verified schema and in relation to which we know his mind and intention, we have to rely on notes which are often inexact and unreliable. Let us examine the conferences as delivered to five distinct groups of hearers.

#### *Conferences to the Paris Visitation nuns*

These never took down anything more than brief notes and were most reluctant to release any text. It would appear that their "resume" was normally in relation to faults in the community which Vincent would have commented on in his talks. Even in relation to the beatification process the Visitation nuns were unhelpful in releasing material.

#### *Conferences to the Ladies of Charity*

Vincent prepared these conferences very meticulously, but the Ladies did not furnish any close texts of them. We possess fourteen "schemas" today coming from this series of conferences. However, it is unlikely that Abelly had access to more than two.

#### *Conferences to the Daughters of Charity*

Louise de Marillac copied carefully, under the very eyes of Vincent, all that he said in conferences to the Daughters, and other sisters did likewise. He even supervised subsequent work on preparation of these

conferences. The reason for all this was his concern that the sisters living away from Paris would not be deprived of what he deemed essential for the development of the Daughters. In 1663 the fifty-four exercise-copies containing the conferences, which we still possess, already existed. We know from the statement of Sr Mathurine Guerin, who herself transcribed sixteen of these copies (Louise herself, twenty), how keenly Louise felt the necessity of preserving the exact words and form of the original. So much so that an offer by "a good father from St Lazare" to "re-write" the conferences was turned down, even though it might result in a more polished and streamlined result.

Abelly, though he knew of the existence of the above conferences, did not have an opportunity to consult them, confining himself to a statement that

he gave conferences to the Sisters, more than a hundred of which they still possess, many of which were circulated to Sisters further afield. These talks had the object of raising the spiritual level of the hearers and would last for a half-hour or even an hour. The Sisters read and re-read these words of their founder every day, awaiting their publication for the sake of those at a distance (2).

### *The Tuesday Conferences*

It seems that no summary or text of these allocutions was ever preserved. Abelly got an idea of the thought, and perhaps a summary, of an early allocation from one of the participants.

### *Conferences to the CM*

These were, in happy contrast to the Daughters' conferences, generously provided to Abelly. But we may well ask – which text was he provided with? We can be sure that there was no "Vulgate canonique", no constituted guaranteed text. It was as late as 1657 when Brother Ducournau got together a collection of conferences, relying on his own memory and those of other confreres. These eventually reached "two or three big volumes".

In 1715, in preparation for the beatification, Fr Jean Bonnet, the superior general, was frightened by the amount of material available purporting to convey Vincent's words and ideas at these conferences, and concluded that there was no certainty that they conveyed the exact

words of our holy founder. Years later, in 1880, M. Bonnet was quoted as having declined to send on any of the saint's writings to the tribunal at Rome, saying that they had only a collection made by a cleric "who had a great devotion to compiling what he heard M. Vincent to have said".

### *Witnesses*

These were of four types: individual; collective; given by Vincent's secretaries; and others, mainly anonymous.

Most of the above were available to Abelly while compiling the *Vie*. We know that many of the collected reminiscences of those who heard the conferences are now lost. Twenty of the twenty-six houses of the Congregation in existence during the generalate of M. Almeras sent in their reminiscences. A large manuscript, until the early 1900s attributed to Brother Ducournau but now rightly acknowledged to be the work of Brother Robineau, was available to Abelly (3). It lists virtues practised by the saint under twelve headings.

### *The composition of the "Vie"*

It is not easy to accept Abelly's statement that he did little else but transcribe the material presented to him. In fact his use of the "sources" depended, as did his witnesses, on what were his pre-conceived notions of "good" witnesses, those "deserving of credence".

In introducing his witnesses he is in the role of a hagiographer, a *promoter fidei* who works on his "beatification brief" along classical lines. The witness is there to promote a definite moral or religious objective. We can see in him a dichotomy between the author pursuing a "spiritual" ideal for whom the only reality is the metaphysical realm of the spiritual, and the writer of an existentialist historical account. Moreover, acting as a judge, he shows himself partial, never testing the reliability of those whom he has lined up as "reliable" witnesses.

Take the case of Vincent's "supposed" defects. The author admits that he had such "for, indeed, not even the apostles were devoid of faults", but while examining the two faults that he lists – his procrastination and his habit of speaking too ill of himself and too well of others – he finishes by making it clear that Vincent by "not treading on the heels of divine providence" was, in fact, achieving more, and more virtuously, than others. One would have to credit him with what St Jerome credits to St Paula "what was a defect in her would have been a virtue in others". Similarly, in regard to his self-deprecation, we learn that Vincent was

really following in the footsteps of his Master who was willing to fulfill the prophecy that he was "a worm, not a man", and who wished to be regarded as a sinner.

Having thus disarmed the reader the author can have no difficulty in the choice of his literary genre. He states clearly in his Preface that he will not be a panegyrist nor use oratorical language. However, he follows the example of Vincent himself who invited the confreres and sisters to contribute their thoughts always on "the virtues" which they witnessed in the deceased, whose death had just recently taken place. In fact in an earlier work Abelly states that "the exercise of biography is not to please but to benefit the reader's good". As in the case of the earlier book Abelly presents Vincent as "the true priest" and so he is "the priest according to the mind of the Fathers", whom he quotes fifty times on the subject.

The absence of miracles in the life of his subject does not dismay Abelly; in fact his whole life was a sort of miracle. Besides, many saints in history have not worked miracles (cf St John the Baptist). Anyway, God has shown his power through the great things that he has enabled him to do.

#### *Plan of the work*

Abelly wrote Book I on a purely biographical plan. It can be seen that he is less at home in this genre. Books II and III are dissertations on Vincent's works and on his virtues. The differing emphasis may be noted in the greater or less appearance of letters written by Vincent as compared with those sent to him. In Book III not a single letter addressed to him is quoted, by comparison with sixty-five written by him. "In other words" says Dodin "he [Vincent] is the only one to have a say" (4).

#### *The content of the biography*

Starting with an account of the state of the Church and country of France at Vincent's birth (which, of course, Abelly places in the year 1576) he goes on to describe his subject during the first forty-nine years of his life. From the time of the commencement of Vincent's great work for the Church, placed around the date of the founding of the Congregation of the Mission, he takes twenty-nine chapters to cover the last thirty-five years of his life. Finally, three chapters are devoted to his illnesses and death.

Many omissions from the biography make it less than acceptable, at least to the modern reader. We would, for instance, have welcomed some

evaluation of Vincent's financial and economic talents. There is no real discussion of the "revolutionary" character of the two foremost foundations, the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity. The matter of the canonical status of the CM vows is left without comment. The novelty of the status of the Daughters, and in particular their immense influence on so many congregations founded after – and in imitation of – them. There is no comparison made between the outlook, spirit and juridical status of the Congregation and those of the "old" religious orders. In particular he does not approach the subject of Vincent's relations with the Jansenists, the Liancourts, "the Disciples of St Augustine", his friendship with the abbe de Saint-Cyran.

Abelly avoids all sorts of difficulties. He finds it easier not to have to justify his subject. As a result "we lose a sense of the extent and permanence of his enterprises, the colour and variety, flexibility, unity amid diversity, of Vincent's spirit and work" (5).

Three fundamental errors can be pointed out in Abelly: a) The date of birth; b) His use of the "captivity" letters; c) References to Vincent's "lack of interest" in the pastoral apostolate in his early years of priesthood.

#### *Date of birth*

A correction of this point had to await Pierre Coste in 1922. We ask why this error was made. Manifestly it was to defend Vincent from the accusation of putting himself forward for ordination in his twentieth year.

To whom was it important to safeguard Vincent's adherence to the rule imposed by Trent? Surely to "the establishment", specifically Rene Almeras, the second superior general. Clearly Vincent himself should be the best judge in the affair, and he, on twelve separate occasions, gave the true version of his age (cf 1593; II 70, 314, 448; V 386; VIII 117; XI 364; XIII 67).

On his coffin only the date 1660 appeared, but on the tomb, in Latin, *aetatis suae* 85. Abelly would have had an opportunity to see this; it was engraved shortly after interment, and certainly before November 1660.

One assumes that Almeras did not want to embarrass future biographers by binding them to the date of 1581. Abelly, on reading Brother Robineau's notes, would have seen: "I marvelled that a man in his eightieth year could do with so little wine", yet he has transcribed this as: "a person worthy of credence said that he marvelled at the fact that an old man of eighty years and more needed so little wine"(6). By the time that Abelly wrote he may have had some suspicions but did not

wish "to disturb the water". Dodin says only: "Lecture de son attestation d'ordination en 1600" (7). To accept this, having put down 1581 as his date of birth, would "put the cat among the pigeons". So Dodin seems to take the ordination date as a "datum".

### *Captivity*

It is clear that Abelly treated the letters in a very cavalier and selective fashion. The acceptance of the captivity in our times presents too many difficulties:

1. Vincent's own silence. In this regard Coste maintained on his death-bed that Vincent's failure to speak on the subject, despite all the opportunities he had to do so, was no longer for him (Coste) a negative but a positive argument.
2. Many inexactitudes and unlikely details, for instance in regard to the corsairs and their ships; the ease of access of Vincent to this "Greek Christian woman"; the unlikely ease with which he converted a Moslem, merely by a recital of the Christian way of life, the Our Father and a psalm in Latin; the journey of 1,000 kilometers by sea in "a little skiff".
3. Contradictions, e.g. escaping from Tunis at a time and place where security was so tight. Vincent's alleged statement that his letter was delivered on a postal route which was not available at that time.
4. Vincent's clear desire to destroy the "miserable" letter.
5. Curious similarities between the captivity accounts and two contemporary stories, both Spanish.
6. His scepticism on learning of other marvellous escapes from Tunisian captivity.

All these problems lead one to believe: a) the letters certainly do not prove his being a captive in Tunis at the appropriate time; b) they are, rather, psychological documents.

### *Disinterested attitude of Vincent*

Abelly's approach to this aspect of Vincent's holiness seems to spring from his general desire to portray him as a genuine example of a Tridentine priest. He tells us that "he placed his parish purely and completely in the hands of a worthy successor, without retaining any emolument for himself" (8). Now we know, in fact, that the effective and legal handing over of the parish of Clichy did not occur till 1626 and that he received 400 *livres* for the operation.

Abelly mentions only three benefices of Vincent, but we can cite two more mentioned by Coste (XIII 19), and another mentioned by Dodin in *Mission et Charitè*. (9). Like many worthy priests of all centuries Vincent was anxious to assure himself of an honest subsistence. One could say that the facts of the case show in him a sharp and rather complex sense of earthly realities.

### *The works of Vincent*

There is a wide gap between the approach of Book I, where Abelly has been at pains to portray “the good priest”, and that of Book II where he endeavours to show by the example of his works that Vincent’s life was a vindication of the praise in Book I. Almost half of Book II deals with a discussion of religious operations in France and outside it, while the rest deals with the examination of the development of the various institutions of which Vincent was the author. It would be difficult to find any other contemporary biography – and their number in the 17th century was about five thousand – that gives such an indispensable insight into the life of the middle classes of France in the period 1630-1660, and the religious life of those times.

Yet, taking into account the apologetic intent of Abelly in Book I, we should balance his report in three ways:

- a) By a consideration of the many contemporary, and often parallel, religious/charitable activities of his day.
- b) By taking account of the critiques put forward by his contemporaries, which often throw his work into relief and allow us a fuller picture of him.
- c) By distinguishing at times the anti-Jansenism appropriate to Vincent from that better assigned to Abelly himself.

### *Foundation and parallel works*

A consideration of the “Spiritual Spring” of the France of the 17th century would be incomplete, or even false, if we did not stress that the various movements, in particular the four great “foundation families” Lazarists, Oratorians, Sulpicians and Eudists, were contemporary and subject to, as well as inspired by, the same divine movement of God’s spirit in the world. They were also sustained by a common purpose and a common vision of persons and things in their common world.

Unfortunately this vision of unity in diversity was absent from Abelly’s thinking and, as a result of following his blinkered vision, historians of



17th century religious thought have mistakenly either attributed the total religious reform to the Company of the Blessed Sacrament or, on the other hand, fought with bitter tenacity to defend every inch of ground for Vincent against those "modern historians" who would deprive Vincent of the credit of his great achievements (10).

Insufficient credit has been given to Port-Royal and the disciples of St Augustine in the aid-work of the whole Ile-de-France, as indeed Vincent himself acknowledged. The consistent support by the Company of the Blessed Sacrament for Vincent's works has been too long suppressed, as has their role in the establishment of the General Hospital. It is clear that Vincent himself and Lambert aux Couteaux were members of the Company, and that many of the Lazarist missions were financed by the it.

An objective examination of the facts leads to the conclusion that the similarity of the works of charity and their survival was not of an accidental working away of diverse elements, but at least tacit, and often overt, cooperation by elements diverse in ideas but with similar motivation.

#### *Critiques of his own person and works*

Not all the reactions to Vincent and his operations were favourable, but Abelly would not let us know this. In fact, unfavourable opposition continued apace from 1625 to 1660, and it was from three sources: from Bérulle, very clearly shown in 1628; from the Holy See, regarding the creation of this new type of congregation as inopportune; from certain parish priests in Paris who disliked the idea of a new religious group. Frequently the missionaries' manner and purpose in communicating the word were misinterpreted as, for instance, this criticism:

There were two missionaries, the chief one of whom had theatrical gestures, in common parlance *Hotel de Bourgogne* gestures and language, especially in catechising in his Paris twang, causing many to laugh who didn't take account of his zeal, albeit a spiritual zeal, but very naive. At the beginning they were greatly admired and supported, but later on the admiration failed through boredom (11).

There was also the opposition of Mazarin, made public in 1649, who in his private notes also showed an opposition to both the Vincentian outlook and Vincent's manner of proceeding.

Many of his critics came from the ranks of “the poor”, some of whom objected to his rigorous stance in relation to importunate beggars, or from *frondistes* who stooped so far as to accuse him of secretly officiating at a marriage of Mazarin (who, although a cardinal, was not in sacred orders) to Anne of Austria during the Regency period. When this accusation was revealed to Vincent by Brother Robineau he answered: “It is as false as the devil”. It can be assumed that the absence of any reference to this by Abelly is not unconnected with the fact that he dedicated his work to Anne of Austria.

Besides these hostile reactions there were those of the Abbe de Saint-Cyran, amounting to three separate criticisms:

- 1) That this man of charity, goodwill and (alleged) prudence could, only one year after the approval of his mission to the poor country people, have undertaken the work for the ordinands.
- 2) Criticism of the missions: too much preaching about poverty, too diffuse interpretation about sins in the confessional, and a too great emphasis on confessing of sins at the expense of interior dispositions of the penitent.
- 3) Vincent was using missionaries who were too young and lacking experience and virtue.

### *Anti-Jansenism*

When Abelly’s work appeared it was under fire from Martin de Barcos, the nephew of Saint-Cyran, who accused Abelly of being just a mouth-piece for the Jesuits and of concealing the fact of Vincent’s friendship for Saint-Cyran. In fact we should really separate Vincent’s attitude to Jansenism from that of Abelly himself, and distinguish two different phases in it. The first (i.e. during the lifetime of Saint-Cyran) is from 1624 to 1643, and in that time the relationship was generally cordial and, in many respects, of great benefit to the Congregation. He helped Vincent to acquire the College des Bons Enfants, aided his family, dissuaded de Gondi from breaking the contract with Vincent, and tried to help Vincent’s efforts at Rome to secure approbation. In return, Vincent gave him the hospitality of the Bons Enfants (1626). Saint-Cyran also aided Vincent in the dispute over St Lazare, and requested some missionaries to evangelize the poor of his benefice. After the arrest of Saint-Cyran Vincent was very reticent in regard to condemning him, visited him in prison and was present, and blessed his corpse, after death. Though he did not attend the funeral he was able to say to Jean Lescot: “I saw in him one of the finest men I ever knew” (XIII 87).

The second phase is from 1644 to 1660 and shows a profound change in Vincent's attitude, and in his references and actions, towards Saint-Cyran. While the latter was still alive Vincent could judge a person whom he admired and whose sincerity and point of view he could understand and admire, but now that the man is dead Vincent is left to judge a system of which he cannot approve and which is, rightly or wrongly, attributed to Saint-Cyran *the person*. Now that he is a member of the Council of Conscience he must, perforce, – as he writes explicitly to Jean Dehorgny – follow the opinions of the Queen, Mazarin, Chancellor Seguier and the Penitentiary (III 319).

The more often he hears denunciations of the doctrine attributed to Saint-Cyran the more he distances himself from the attitude he held towards him when alive.

His attitude towards Port-Royal and the Disciples of St Augustine was that of opposition to something more clear-cut and dangerous. He reacted to that, and to the issue of Arnauld's *Fréquente Communion*, with rigour. It could be said that his opposition was more from the practical than the theological viewpoint. He would have accepted much of what Arnauld wrote, but his concern was to safeguard pastoral practice. He revealed to the confreres that movements of anger, outbreaks of that fire, come to trouble the soul and change one's former disposition: "I find myself speaking in a loud and harsh manner" (XIII186).

It is surprising that all the above indications can have escaped the notice of Abelly. Better to assume that, for him, Vincent was no longer a mere human but rather a person who, from the start of his existence, knew everything and was a clear and disciplined instrument of divine providence.

The above summary of the Jansenist affair is the result of a great deal of modern scholarship to which Dodin feels himself deeply indebted – the work of Cognet, Orcibal and Ceysens. Orcibal noted:

The *Augustinus* was rather the occasion than the cause of the birth of anti-Jansenism because, in fact, its roots were deeply founded in the origins of modern Catholic theology and in the ecclesiastical history of the Spanish Netherlands (12).

### *The virtues*

Abelly would have felt very much at home with both the subject of Book III and the wealth of material at his disposal. His labours resulted in Book III having 372 pages whilst Book I had only 259. He says that

Book III will be no less useful for the task of bringing the reader towards perfection. After examining the pious sentiments which Vincent evinced, and his practice of them, he invites (in his preface) the reader to reflect on his own attitude to, and practice of, the virtue(s) and to make a corresponding resolution.

He starts by indicating five special characteristics of Vincent's virtues but, perhaps having found that there was little of the original in Vincent's virtues or his practice of them, he proceeds to abandon the formula on which he had embarked. He seems to have been enmeshed in three earlier works of his own and so we have the chapters on Vincent's virtues now following the method used in one of them, and then of another, as well as, in some chapters, following the method used by Brother Robineau in his notes of 1661-2. The result leaves a great deal of ambiguity.

Unlike the majority of writers Abelly in his treatment moves from the general to the particular, leaving the vibrant, intense, personality of Vincent reduced. There is an absence of illustrative references, no indication of the spiritual guides who formed him, just as in the preceding two Books information about his contemporaries is lacking.

We should have welcomed in Abelly a discussion of Bérulle's influence, that which aided him to institute the Congregation; also some allusion to Berullian spirituality which would have thrown light on Vincent's evangelical perspective. For instance, it would appear that his favourite maxim "Let us give ourselves to God for the service of the poor, the missions, etc." had a Bérullian origin, especially when coupled with the addition "In the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ". This is all the more surprising when we realise that the *Discours sur l'état et les grandeurs de Jésus* was published in 1623 and that a copy was available to Abelly in the St Lazare library.

Equally surprising is Abelly's omission of the influence of Francis de Sales on the Congregation, especially in relation to the two virtues, kindness and gentleness, which Vincent perceived as most revealing in the bishop of Geneva the kindness of the Son of God.

Abelly is equally silent about the influence of Benet of Canfield, whom for thirty years Vincent had used as his chief source of spirituality, under the guidance of Duval, and whose *Rule of Perfection* appeared in 1608.

### *Conclusion*

The question arises: "What did Abelly do for M. Vincent?" Firstly, it is fair to put the work in the context of its own century. In the year 1664 it had the effect of bridging a gap between the man known personally to a

lot of confreres and others, and those who had not known him and were hearing of his work and virtues for the first time. Abelly formed, as it were, a junction between the living person now recalled and a spiritual posterity yet to come.

Yet the colour and dynamism of Vincent are absent. In particular Abelly gives a picture of one who never changed. The Vincent of boyhood, of Toulouse, of the early days in Paris, of the Council of Conscience, are all just the same, a veritable *senex a puero*. Above all, Abelly missed the sense of the vitality of Vincent, a vitality which illumined his charity and became contagious. It was principally by his speech, according to Antoine Redier, that Vincent communicated his inner fire, that he gave inspiration to his great works, e.g. the mission at Folleville, the start of the *Charité* at Châtillon (13). The language he spoke was not the studied and classical language of the professional *dévo*t but that of a man of the people addressing the people, but at the same time with great delicacy.

We would welcome more of the human face of Vincent, more of the living world of the 17th century. Certainly he mentions the Fronde and the death of Louis XIII which leave us in no doubt as to where we are historically, but we must ask: "What part does this biography play in the drama of making Vincent live for future ages?"

#### *The destiny of "The Life of the Venerable Servant of God"*

In the history of every community there are times when the members consider their fidelity to their founder. Superiors are always aware of their responsibility and often draw attention to the maxims of the founder. For their part the subjects will often meditate on their founder's likely approach to circumstances in their own milieu which the founder has not encountered and perhaps never even imagined. These questionings may, at times, become a source of strife, of accusations of disloyalty. This is common enough. What is less so is the further extension of this interrogation into the sphere not merely of definitive documentation or statutes but into an imagined (either personally or collectively) "legend" of the founder which makes him the sole arbiter in every circumstance. The directives from Vatican II (*Perfectae caritatis*, 2) to strive to seek out the intentions and, above all, the spirit of the founder, and the clear injunction to see the connection between the spirit of the founder and the regeneration of religious life, were a cause of unexpected anxiety in some superiors. It is important to examine the rapport of Abelly's *Vie* with the evolution of the Vincentian tradition. We have to establish

the major facts, the invariable findings which characterised that tradition down three centuries, and analyse precisely the doctrinal principles which these major facts have established in our religious life.

Firstly we must take the literary tradition as to the *Vie* itself. After its first appearance it found its way into every Vincentian library and, in fact, into every religious library in Paris. The book was not re-published in its original form throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Its size, price and style meant that it became one of those irreplaceable classics which are destined never to be re-read. Conscious of this drawback the author published a slimmed-down version which, after four other editions in the 1667-1698 period, was not re-published at all in the 18th century. By the time of the beatification of Vincent the General Council of the Congregation was so conscious of the negative reaction engendered by the attacks on the book by Martin de Barcos (the nephew of Saint-Cyran) and by the Congregation's anti-Jansenist stance that it published only a meagre "summary" of the *Vie*. In the 18th century the *Vie* got a new lease of existence, thanks to translations into Italian, Polish, Spanish and German. After the French Revolution it gained fresh vitality, being re-printed fifteen times between the early 19th and early 20th centuries. However, even then it was being out-distanced by Collet.

Barcos, as we have mentioned above, attacked Abelly's book, writing at first anonymously. While entitling his own work *Defence of the Late M. Vincent* he is careful to point out that the Abelly work is an attack on the Abbé de Saint-Cyran and he takes time to accuse Vincent of being personally ignorant and of suppressing learning in the Congregation. There followed answer by Abelly, and counter-claim by Barcos, and Abelly demonstrating Vincent as a formidable anti-Jansenist. The whole affair had an unfortunate sequel in that Vincent was made to appear in the eyes of the Parlement of Paris as a reactionary ultramontane, and so they refused to register the bull of canonization, though eventually being forced to do so by the king himself.

Collet also deemed it prudent to tread warily in the controversy. While the attacks of the Jansenists were to be anticipated the Congregation at the same time had to endure criticism of their lifelessness in not stressing publicly Vincent's anti-Jansenist stance.

Even in the Congregation itself Abelly's book did not go unscathed, even to the extent that Almeras himself voiced the criticism. Ultimately the idea was put forward that Abelly was not himself the real author of the work, but only gave his name to what was actually written by a ghost-writer. It was left to Coste to scotch what became a common canard throughout the 19th century (14).

Leaving aside the changes made by Abelly himself to his original text, and the rather free versions of translations, the main fruit of Abelly's work was the "continuation" of the story of Vincent at the insistence of the Congregation, especially in the case of three authors: Collet in 1748, Maynard in 1860 and, above all, Coste in 1932. One simple thread was common to all three. They were mandated to hold on to the basic portrait of Vincent given by Abelly, but to append documentary evidence in relation to matters of importance or interest to a new reading public.

Collet was the first defender of Vincent against the Jansenists. He could be said to have re-modelled the portrait of his subject by making his anti-Jansenism his outstanding characteristic.

Maynard's brief was to portray Vincent as the Thomas Aquinas of charity. Just as the latter was, in his time, the author of the outstanding synthesis of theological expression so, in the 19th century, Maynard was to synthesize in the person of Vincent the whole work of charity. This was a very felicitous idea, but dangerous in that it ignored, to an extent, the great work of ecclesiastical reform, and the amount of charitable work which did not stem merely from St Lazare.

Pierre Coste was directed to produce a work, mainly based on the Abelly portrait, but maintaining a critical stance which would win the respect of scholars. He was secretary general of the Congregation and a great friend of the superior general François Verdier. He felt it incumbent on him, while being generous towards the work of Antoine Redier in the *Revue d'Histoire* Vol. XIV, to soft-pedal elements of the Vincentian story which by a too "liberal" interpretation might give offence to traditionalists, especially among the Daughters of Charity and the Priests of the Mission. Thus he felt obliged to state in a letter to Redier (1928):

I will describe the "captivity episode" as the saint himself describes it, but I will add a note to the effect that there are difficulties, and I will list them. That is what I must do if I want to have the book printed. It is necessary not to be too forthcoming with the "truth" where scandal might be caused to delicate consciences. I know my milieu and my reading public among the Daughters and priests, and I know that your book will be criticised by them.

In fact the director general of the Daughters had said of Redier:

This book, which aims to break entirely with the traditional picture of St Vincent, is very controversial on many points in relation to historical truth. The Congregation declines all responsibility for it.

It would not be listed among our catalogue of books (15).

Note that Redier had titled his work *La Vraie Vie de Saint Vincent de Paul*. So also Coste might be said to have “savaged” Redier in the *Annales de la CM* (16). He made use of a slight subterfuge in his review of the book in *Revue d’Histoire*, signing his contribution with an obscure use of initials, A.G. He never allowed his personal view of the “argument from silence” to see print. The general effect of the acceptance by the Congregation of Abelly’s *Vie* was that that version of Vincent’s life remained a kind of Vulgate. Moreover his letters and conferences were so closely guarded by “the establishment” that it was only in 1803 that the first printed edition of the conferences to the Daughters appeared, containing only forty-two conferences on the rules, and that even then the edition was disavowed by the superior general and mother general. The conferences to the confreres were allowed to be printed (and exclusively for the confreres’ use) only in 1844. One can understand the frustration of Bremond, who wrote: “Some religious congregations have an odd method of honouring their founder”(17). This attitude of “the establishment” did not stem from lack of interest, but from the fact that they wanted to keep Vincent solidly in the Abelly “canon”, an object of grandeur and isolation as portrayed by his first biographer.

The above effects of the writing and acceptance of Abelly’s biography have given rise to three principles whose effect in the religious tradition of the congregation has been enormous.

The first of these we might label “Transmutation”. When Almeras handed over to Abelly in 1661-2 the task of writing the *Vie*, together with the materials with which to proceed, he left us in a basic ambiguity. Was he standing over the work in the role of a long-standing witness (he had entered the congregation in 1637) or only in the role of newly-elected superior general? In other words, was he a witness calling on his own personal memories, or was he the superior general giving the official stamp of approval? The fourth superior general, Nicolas Pierron, died in 1703; he was the last superior general to have known Vincent personally, and with his death the “authoritative history” was well and truly in place.

The second principle is that of “isolation”. This could be termed both a doctrinal and moral principle, and affects three aspects of religious life.

Firstly, the vision of the founder. Each group has a tendency to see in its founder a preserver, a guarantee for the future, whose whole effort was confined to launching it into the future with one command: “Don’t



even pause". It is pertinent to recall that the founder should really be thought of as the mediator who keeps relaying to his followers the call of Christ, that he is an animator and "accuser" rather than a protector. Separated from Christ the founder becomes a sort of human absolute and instead of uniting he tends to separate. In keeping Vincent apart from his contemporaries, and from the Church in which he lived, Abelly has succumbed to the temptation of having us look back continually on ourselves.

Secondly, for the active religious life to continue smoothly it must be conceived and developed as a response to a twofold divine invitation, the first being the delegation by Christ of other human beings to achieve his aims, and the second being God's demands upon us through circumstances of our life, the masters whom God sends us. This analysis has been largely passed over by Abelly. He does not mention what Vincent considered the essential concomitant of God's gift, namely the effort to serve God through service of others. No one reading Abelly would guess at Vincent's formula for assuring the moral equilibrium, the doctrinal orthodoxy and the on-going health of his particular form of active religious life.

Thirdly, Abelly ignored "relations between workers for the Kingdom". Vincent was convinced that the workers for the Kingdom of God, trained in the same way, urged on by the same spirit, would, nevertheless, be under great temptation to have a spirit of rivalry. His antidote to this would be a conjunction of humility and charity, each of these virtues being mutually "daughter" of the other. Abelly seems not to have grasped what Vincent called "cordiality", which he defined as a matter of "giving one's heart with the object of gaining that of another".

The third principle in Vincentian tradition (which seems to have been instilled negatively in the congregation as a result of a too narrow emphasis on Abelly) is that of conservation. This principle affects not only the religious life but life itself, in its essence and depths.

What chiefly characterises the life, teaching and experience of Vincent is, as it were, a breath of spring, looking with hope towards the future summer. This is his breadth of outlook towards the future, always based indeed on his experience: "That is my belief and my experience" he said so often. But he also holds passionately to the need for the soul to "remain open, thrusting, seeking". "We must seek – that means careful action". "We have to move forward towards the interior life; if we miss that we miss everything" (XII 131). "We must perform our actions not just so as to have them performed, but to accomplish the will of God in them" (XII 32). "We must rush towards need as to a fire" (XI 31).

To sum up: without perhaps meaning to, Abelly helped by his writing and prestige to install the “institution” as a conservation-device of the past, the founder’s person as a reassuring model, the “institution” as a guardian-protector.

Collet and Coste both declared that the defects in Abelly were rather “those of his century than due to the author himself”. This is a bit too facile, a bit of a play on words. After all, every author is a man of his own age; and strictures on Abelly are not just an attack on a dead man; they are the indication of an effort in all sincerity to save a spiritual treasure whose frightening richness Abelly did not sufficiently grasp.

### Notes

1. Abelly, L: *La vraie défense des sentiments du vénérable serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul*, Paris, 1668, pp. 9-10.
2. Abelly, L: *La vie du venerable serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul instituteur et premier superior general de la congregation de la mission*, Paris 1664, livre II, p. 356.
3. Dodin, A: *La Légende et l’Histoire: de Monsieur Depaul à saint Vincent de Paul*, Paris, 1985, p 99. See also pages 255-259 in this issue.
4. Dodin: *op. cit.*, p 133.
5. *Ibid.*:pUl.
6. Abelly: *Vie*, livre III, p 305.
7. Dodin: *op. cit.*, p 142.
8. Abelly: *op. cit.*, livre I, p 27.
9. *Mission et Charité*, No. 8, p 495.
10. Coste, P: *Monsieur Vincent*, Paris 1932, three vols., vol. III, pp 310-327.
11. Quoted in Dodin: *op. cit.* p 162.
12. *Ibid.*, p 173.
13. Cf. chap, iv of Redier: *La vraie vie de saint Vincent de Paul*.
14. Coste: *op. cit.*, vol. III pp 550-553..
15. *L’Echo*, février 1928.
16. *Les annales de la CM*, tome XCIII, pp 207 ff.
17. Bremond, H: *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France*, Paris 1929-33, 11 volumes, vol. III p 245.

André Dodin's  
*Monsieur Vincent Raconté*  
*par son Secrétaire*

Eamon Devlin

Two years ago Andre Dodin published three hundred and thirty short paragraphs, the recollections of Vincent's secretary, Louis Robineau (1). These memoirs, believed to be the work of Brother Robineau more than of Vincent's first secretary Brother Bertrand Ducournau, can be dated to the period between September 1660 and September 1664. They were commissioned by the superior general René Alméras as an aid to Vincent's official biographer Mgr Louis Abelly. They are of interest for several reasons. Clearly they give us an insight into Abelly's biographical approach and emphases. They also throw some of Vincent's beliefs and characteristics into sharper relief owing to the brevity of the manuscript in comparison to Abelly's lengthy biography. Most significantly, however, Robineau's notes are of interest because they are the recollections of a man who spent much time in Vincent's company and who, while remaining an admirer of Vincent, yet brought his own perspective to bear on what engaged Vincent's attention daily. What follows are some personal reflections on reading Robineau's memoirs of Vincent.

I wasn't sure whether to summarise or review the book and in the end tended to neither entirely, though more in the direction of a review. I found that there was too much of Abelly, and therefore of well-known anecdotes, to merit summary. Having said this, I'm aware that some of the things which struck me with renewed force are to be found in Abelly so that what I have noted may not be completely new either. I found it enjoyable reading, chiefly perhaps because of the glimpses of Robineau's personality which sparkle here and there, and also because of the hint or impression of a lively relationship which he enjoyed with Vincent.

Robineau reminds us of many of the qualities Vincent prized highly, and desired to be inculcated in the lives of the confreres. Simplicity, mortification, zeal, prudence, resignation to God's will, charity, patience, reverence, all have their place, and Robineau is at pains to show how Vincent incarnated these in his own life. Humility takes pride of place,

however, and I was forced to stop and ponder again the centrality of this virtue in the life and outlook of Vincent.

Talk of humility, it seems to me, sits uneasily with much contemporary spirituality, and many spiritual writers continue to try to re-define it to make it more palatable. There is no getting away, however, from the straightforward attitude to humility which is perhaps the strongest echo in Robineau's memoirs of Vincent. Many well-known examples of Vincent's humility are repeated. His lifelong refusal to acknowledge his own role in founding either the Congregation of the Mission or the Daughters of Charity is noted, as are his efforts to conceal his theological qualifications. Robineau mentions several times how Vincent stressed, in particular to benefactors and others who might wish to elevate him, the fact that he was merely the son of a poor farmer, and that he had looked after sheep and pigs. On one occasion Vincent spoke thus to a nobleman who merely wished to see him to the door (33).

More striking still are some of Vincent's sayings about humility. Humility is the source of all the other virtues, and Robineau quotes how Vincent used the example of warfare to illustrate how when the chief town in a region is captured all others follow easily (11). Vincent says that after sixty-seven years of life he has concluded that only humility can bring about and maintain union with God and love of the neighbour (8). On the other hand, pride and sensuality are the only ways in which a missionary can lose his vocation (7).

Robineau cites several expressions of humility in Vincent's life which highlight his very clear understanding of the virtue in action. He notes that Vincent rarely gave an order, preferring to express what he desired in the form of a request (3). He insisted that the work with ordinands could be undertaken only in a spirit of humility, and that the work of formation would not bear fruit without humility (9). Others found Vincent's sense of humility unacceptable as, for example, the Ladies of Charity who objected when he did not address them at one of their "being sent on mission" gatherings simply because a Parisian theologian was present and Vincent felt that in this case charity should be subservient to humility (35). Perhaps the most salient expression of Vincent's personal humility was his tendency to go and ask pardon of others for the shortcomings of members of his community and even of people he hardly knew. Thus he asks pardon a country lady for the behaviour of a poor man towards her (25), and he seems to have frequently begged pardon of Adrien le Bon, prior of St Lazare, for the shortcomings of his confreres (24).

While his notion of humility contains profound spiritual insights there is no getting away from the fact that Vincent's practice of the virtue

included self-abasement. Furthermore, so thoroughgoing is his understanding of the virtue that it scarcely allows for picking and choosing, as his own practice of humility was so clearly a spontaneous expression of his reflection on it.

These memoirs also throw some new light on other facets of Vincent. While Abelly notes what he considers may be Vincent's two faults, Robineau highlights the two things which caused Vincent most anguish: the fact that the Congregation for which he had responsibility had so much imperfection in it, and the inability of the Congregation to respond to the pressing needs of so many poor people ravaged by contemporary disturbances (251).

I was also struck, reading Robineau's comments, by the opposition and hostility which Vincent encountered towards himself and the Congregation, and by the attitude he seems to have adopted in most of these cases. When the rumours that he had secretly officiated at a marriage between Mazarin and Anne of Austria were at their height, and Vincent was being widely criticised, he adopted an attitude of great calm, refusing to be drawn into public denials since the accusation was, in his own words, "as false as the devil" (185). Vincent was often caught up in legal transactions regarding property, and when these became bitter and embroiled he invariably responded by instructing his lawyers not to be drawn into a bitter exchange, and not to repudiate the personal slurs on his own character (165). Even the loss of the Orsigny farm, which Robineau considered a major blow to the Congregation, was received calmly by Vincent. Robineau suggests that it was believed by some well-informed sources that the decision in this matter was prompted by the fact that several judges were sympathetic to Jansenism and intolerant of Vincent's opposition to it. It is perhaps telling that Vincent himself, while receiving the news with the words "Béni soil Dieu" later claimed that this loss was caused by his own personal imperfections (164).

That Robineau's relationship with Vincent involved much more than purely secretarial work is clear from the way Robineau felt free to question and challenge some of Vincent's decisions. It is in this area of how to respond to those who would have community property, or who used personal vilification to attain this end, that the two men seem to have had most lively exchanges. For example, when protracted litigation over the community presence in Toul prompted Vincent to withdraw the confreres, Robineau convinced him to carry on the struggle (163). Robineau was clearly enraged by the loss of Orsigny as, in a lively passage, he both acknowledges Vincent's acceptance of the just decision of the august body of judges while, at the same time, comparing them to the sun

which even though it enlightens the world is prone on occasion to being eclipsed! (164). This is just one of the very colourful passages in the text where we sense the personality of Robineau bubbling through his testimony to the sanctity of Vincent. In another paragraph, which is intended to exemplify Vincent's interior mortification, Robineau describes how Vincent put up with a string of personal abuse in court without retaliation. While he doubtless stands in awe of Vincent's patience we feel that Robineau's sentiments are instinctively with a lawyer who is a bystander and who confides to Robineau that he would like to punch the offending client! (166).

Sometimes, in his zeal to portray Vincent's virtue, Robineau shows us another side of his own character. Taking for example the scriptural image of the prudence of the serpent Robineau stretches it as far as he can, not without an element of humour and, indeed, irony. The serpent crawling on the ground and hiding under stones becomes a symbol of Vincent's humility, while the annual change of skin by the snake, performed by squeezing itself between stones, is an analogy for our annual retreat, emphasised by Vincent as a means of changing from an old way of life to a new one (121).

Robineau's notes also highlight some interesting aspects of Vincent's devotion and outlook. His devotion to the Blessed Virgin, mentioned, and commended to confreres, in the Common Rules, is given further emphasis by Robineau. He notes that Vincent advised confreres to develop a personal devotion to our Lady (132), that he went on pilgrimage in her honour when he wished to bring about a change of mind in an individual with regard to an appointment (132), and that he insisted that all kneel for the Angelus every day except on Saturdays and Sundays (137). When he was in Clichy he established a Rosary Confraternity there, and in the houses of the Congregation he established the custom of fasting on the eve of Marian feastdays. All of this suggests a very specific devotion to the Blessed Virgin, and a sense of her role in preserving and directing the Congregation.

While Abelly tells us that Vincent as missionary constantly re-worked a single homily on the fear of God, Robineau notes that Vincent used to say that a missionary is "a teacher of the love of God and of the need to help others" (213). Vincent's discernment of when and where to evangelise was prompted by his sense of the pressing need of the moment. He decides to send confreres to villages where churches have been desecrated to make reparation there and to give missions to the people (211). On the other hand, his sense of when to withdraw from a place was formulated often in response to a hint or expression that the work

of the confreres there was no longer required. Despite his age, infirmity and the administrative demands on his time, the notes give the impression of a missionary active at every opportunity.

Though Abelly clearly drew heavily on Robineau's notes when compiling his life of Vincent, and both men are primarily hagiographical in intent, I detected in the short notes of Vincent's secretary much of the warmth and lively interaction which personal contact and close proximity to Vincent afforded him. For this reason these notes are a valuable record, not just for what they tell us of Vincent's personality and his particular way of living his vision of Christ, but also for the glimpses they afford us of his relationship on a daily basis with a member of his community.

#### Note

1. Dodin, A: *Monsieur Vincent raconté par son Secrétaire*, Paris 1991. Each paragraph of Robineau's manuscript is numbered and this number is given as a reference in the text of this article. Dodin comments on each paragraph, sometimes briefly sometimes very fully.

# Meetings and the Vincentian Tradition

Aidan McGing

The Prime Minister, who is busy enough already, spends days in conference with his cabinet. The Provincial spends days on end in discussions with his council. In a business concern the manager and the heads of departments usually have a weekly meeting in prime time. Now these are busy and (if you except the Provincial!) highly paid people whose time is precious. There must be something in the nature of human society which demands meetings.

My reader at this stage may say: “So what? I am not a Prime Minister, or a manager, or even a Provincial. If these people need meetings, good for them, but it doesn’t mean to say that I need meetings. Meetings are a pain, and in my experience are a waste of time. I should know, because I have sat in on plenty of them”.

I also have found meetings boring and time-wasting, but I believe we need them, and I believe we can make them both pleasant and productive. In this article I would like to reflect on the matter and I propose three points as follows:

- a) The Vincentian tradition has made meetings difficult for us.
- b) We need to be convinced that they are essential for us (and need not be all that bad).
- c) We need a simple method to ensure they are effective, rather like the “Little Method” that Vincent recommended for mission sermons.

## *The Vincentian tradition and meetings*

People value meetings very much according to the values of the society which influences them most. Speaking some two years ago, about the condition of Russia, Gorbachev said:

Unfortunately our society is not yet ready for the procedures of a law-based state. We don’t have that level of political culture, those traditions. That will come in the future. . .

Gorbachev is saying that while it is normal for all people to grow heated when they meet to discuss important matters Russians are more extreme.



They cannot turn meetings to good account, since they have not internalised the discipline and forbearance which meetings require.

In a less dramatic way I believe that our Vincentian tradition has left us less able to handle meetings than we might otherwise be.

Religious founders face two problems. One is spiritual, to lead their followers towards a spiritual goal. The other is organizational, how to maintain discipline among their followers, for wherever many people come together over a period of time there is going to be trouble of some sort. It is part of the problem of an incarnate Church, where the human and the divine intermingle.

The Rules of the various orders and congregations in the Church are seminal documents. They reflect the spirituality of the founder, but they also reflect the culture of the age in which he or she lived. And different times and places vary enormously in their attitude towards law enforcement.

In August 1579 John Stubbs, a Norfolk landowner, wrote a pamphlet against Queen Elizabeth's proposed marriage to a Catholic. Elizabeth was not amused. She had him arrested, his right hand was publicly chopped off by the executioner with a cleaver and mallet, and he was imprisoned in the Tower of London for eighteen months.

In April 1992 Jonathan Firth, among a crowd waiting for Prince Andrew in Merseyside, put on a rubber Fergie mask, and was promptly arrested and handcuffed. He was held for two hours in a police station, then he was cautioned and sent home. The police were quite apologetic about it. They explained subsequently that they took him in charge because they were afraid he might have frightened some elderly ladies who were present.

Now clearly, in this part of the world at any rate, governments do not find it necessary to chop off their subjects' hands in order to secure their compliance, so that public expectations about preserving discipline will be very different from those of Elizabeth's subjects. Religious founders also will have different ideas on the matter, depending on the age in which they lived.

The Rules of St Benedict and St Columbanus, for instance, both lay down beatings for delinquent monks, St Columbanus, it must be said, far more liberally than Benedict. St Teresa of Avila decrees that there must be a cell in which to incarcerate delinquent nuns. And these were great saints.

When we come to St Vincent we could not possibly imagine him incarcerating the Daughters, so in him humanity has progressed further. But when it comes to the missionaries he is very much a man of his time.

I quote below some of the disciplinary sections of the Common Rules to show what I mean.

5.2: They should submit their judgement and will not only to the superior general's stated will but even to his intention, and judge what he commands always better, leaving themselves at his disposition like the file in the hands of the tradesman.

5.5: On days and at hours specified all shall assemble every week at a designated place to hear whatever instructions the superior may give with regard to the good order of the house, and if they have any suggestions to make, to indicate them to the superior.

5.11: ... no one shall write, send or open letters without the consent of the superior. Each one shall hand over to him the letters he writes, so that he may forward or retain them as he sees fit.

5.13: No one shall go into another's room without a general or particular permission of the superior.

5.14: It is forbidden to bring others, especially outsiders, into one's room, unless the superior's permission has been obtained.

8.3: ... all shall show special respect to superiors and shall uncover their heads in their presence. They shall be careful not to interrupt them while speaking or, what is worse, contradict them.

8.12: No one shall out of curiosity ask questions about the administration of the house.

9.5: In our houses no one shall speak with persons outside the community or summon other confreres to speak with them, without the superior's permission.

9.7: No one shall bring messages, letters, or anything else to a confrere from someone outside the community, or vice versa, without the authorization of the superior.

9.11: No one shall leave the house except at the time, in the manner and with the person approved by the superior.

9.12: Whenever anyone asks the superior's permission to go somewhere he shall make known at the same time where and why he wishes to go. Immediately upon his return to the house he shall make a report to the superior of what he has done.

10.11: ... every confrere shall... make a manifestation of conscience to the superior or to one appointed by him for this purpose.

12.4: But should it be necessary to moderate someone's timidity by commendation... the superior will handle the matter, or shall appoint someone to perform the task prudently and in private.

It is hard to know how far all these restrictions were enforced, although Vincent in the introduction to the Common Rules states: "You

will not find anything in them that you have not been doing for a long time...". Nevertheless, their general tenor is clear. If we look at them realistically we will see that individual confreres were in a sense separated from each other and from the outside world by the superior. There is no sense of using their initiative, no sense of lateral communication among themselves. Everything went through the superior, who divided and conquered.

The same was true of individual houses. In his conference on obedience Vincent remarks on how obedient everybody is, because nobody will do anything without consulting him first. His correspondence with the superiors seems to bear this out. We know now what the historical reasons for such a regime were. France had been racked by civil and religious wars and the population longed for peace and order at any price. Louis' control of the state and of his own family (he boasted that no member of his family either received or sent a letter he had not read) were becoming stronger and setting the tone for French society. Through his *Intendants* Louis was struggling to gain control of the far-flung provinces in his kingdom. And further, public opinion allowed the prince to send his subjects to war in order to further his own family ends. He had personal control over them which we find hard to imagine.

It was also a pessimistic age, very aware of the evil in man and the need to restrain that evil. It was the age of Jansenism and Puritanism, of a certain mistrust of human nature. Like other saints Vincent in his practice was sometimes better than Vincent in his principles. He was essentially a kind man much given to friendship, and his correspondence shows that he could be infinitely patient with difficult confreres, one at least of them being a compatriot of my own. I am sure his internal arrangements for the community met the expectations of his confreres far more than we might think.

We in our age had the good sense to drop these restrictions tacitly and respectfully, and to recognise that they came from a different era. They did not at all prevent us from perceiving what was great in Vincent.

But to proceed with the argument: I have come to the conclusion that members of religious communities are far more influenced by their founders than one might at first think. I believe that as a result of the tenor of the Common Rules we have until recently thought of our communities as groups of individuals under a superior, and not as organic groups of volunteers who are all involved in what goes on.

Yet the only way we can all be involved in the guidance of the community is through meetings. If, on the other hand, we are convinced that we are not involved in decision-making then we will regard meetings

very sceptically indeed. I have opened up an enormous topic in a few words, but I hope I am aware of some of the nuances.

### *Meetings are necessary*

There are meetings and meetings. In this article I am concerned mostly with internal, community, meetings, in the broadest sense. It is also true that most of us have to attend external meetings too, and indeed take a leading role in them. Sometimes they are well run, sometimes they waste a lot of time, and sometimes they are unnecessary. This is a big question which I do not wish to delay over, but it is worth observing that we will tend to view community meetings negatively or positively. I argued above that if important people whose time is precious spend a lot of time at meetings, then meetings must be necessary. But what about the objection: "I am not an important person, so why should I attend meetings?" In answer, I believe we have to say that society, at least in the West, has changed radically, and for the foreseeable future we will have to be ready to make a real input to our local communities through meetings. This is not just my conviction, it is the conviction of our new Constitutions of 1984. Let us have a look at some of the relevant texts.

### *The Constitutions of 1984*

Article 2: With this purpose in view, the Congregation of the Mission, faithful to the gospel, and *always attentive to the signs of the times...* (emphasis added).

12.4: ... genuine community spirit in all our apostolic works, so that we may be supported by one another in our common vocation.

22: It is the gift of ourselves and of all that we have that will truly make us present to the Community. At the same time, however, due regard should be given to personal privacy and to the furtherance by the Community of individual worth. The initiatives of members should be evaluated in the light of the purpose and spirit of the Congregation. In this way the individuality and charisms of each member come together to foster community and make the mission effective.

24.1: We should strive to live in harmony to fulfill our mission, by supporting one another, especially in difficulties, and by sharing our joy in simplicity of heart.

24.2: We should become co-responsible, helped by the necessary services of authority and together with the superior, in seeking the will of God in our life and works, thus engaging in active obedience.

Moreover, we should foster mutual dialogue, and in this way overcome an excessively individualistic style of living.

24.3: We should pay close attention to the opinions and needs of each confrere...

24.4: With due care, we should try to create the conditions necessary for work, rest and prayer, and talking together...

27: Each community should work at developing a community plan, according to the Constitutions, Statutes, and the provincial norms...

37.1: To participate in this mystery of the obedient Christ requires us all to seek, as a community, the will of the Father. We do this through mutual sharing of experience, open and responsible dialogue in which differences of age and outlook interact, so that common directions may surface and develop, leading to decisions.

37.2: Mindful of the words of St Vincent, and in a spirit of co-responsibility, members should strive to obey superiors as promptly, joyfully, and perseveringly as they can. They should try by the light of faith to obey decisions of superiors even when they consider their own views better.

I have no doubt that the Common Rules, as a charismatic religious text, are immeasurably superior to the new Constitutions. I have no doubt either that the Common Rules constitute a seminal document which has influenced all the classic male congregations founded since the time of St Vincent, which I do not expect to be true of the Constitutions. And, of course, without the Common Rules there would be no new Constitutions. Nevertheless, the Constitutions are superior to the Common Rules when they discuss the question of internal discipline, and they are more in tune with modern thinking.

In fact they are a step ahead of us, and we have to catch up with them. What is essential to my argument is that they presume that we need quite a lot of meetings in order to manage our internal affairs. Their thesis is that while the superior must have the last word on disputed points, nevertheless each community is an organic whole which is arranged according to the insights of its members. For instance, instead of everything being arranged centrally we are asked to sit down and work out our own community plans according to our needs and insights. This clearly involves meetings, and a new discipline.

These new arrangements go against the traditions we have inherited from Vincent. They also go against the harsh economic theories which prevailed in the past, forbidding "combinations" of workers, and which I believe we internalised. But I also believe that the views of the Constitutions are rooted in deep contemporary needs.

Many years ago I did a Marriage Encounter weekend. Perhaps the Lord sees it differently, but I regard it as the single most positive experience since I was ordained. It is true to say that nothing has ever been the same since then.

I realised at the time that the world of Marriage Encounter was overheated, and a little unreal. The real world of marriage was tied together by laws, by property and money, by family pressures, by religious convictions, and so on. But clearly, beyond all this, these people were answering some other deep need in society. What was it? I pondered the matter for a long time until one day, reading through the Constitutions, I thought I saw what it was: the need for people to talk to each other at a deeper level, to support each other emotionally, the need to feel positively loved and even praised, the need to have one's views listened to, to be treated as somebody. That was how the Constitutions saw community life, and that was what Marriage Encounter was all about.

The awful thought struck me: does this simply mean that the Constitutions are from the same stable as Marriage Encounter, so that they both reflect the American Dream? I don't think so. Without being too starry-eyed I think they are very close to the New Testament. It also recommends mutual upbuilding, the valuing of individuals, and the drawing on members' gifts and charisms. But also, as I remarked above, the Constitutions answer some of the deep needs of an over rational, highly efficient society for emotional contact and reassurance.

I have no doubt about the primacy of the spiritual, but history shows that just as music, philosophy, literature, and all the expressive arts reflect the dominant needs and feelings of their era, so does religion. The Cure of Ars and St Leo the Great both spoke about God; but they expressed themselves very differently, not just because they differed in temperament but also because they reflected different cultures. Leo spoke with Roman *gravitas*, the Cure of Ars spoke in the tones of nineteenth century romanticism.

Similarly, Vincent's missions (although he may not have seen them this way) must be seen as part of the process of re-integrating French society after the excesses and libertinism of the Renaissance and the civil wars.

Now we are at a new juncture in history, to which in their own way the Constitutions correspond. And they demand meetings.

Recently a Professor Jones of Cardiff, who is always quoted as the great guru on motor car production, stated that no automobile manufacturer can hope in future to have a satisfactory work force if he simply regards his workers as individuals who are instructed to do something.

Even with the advent of automation there are still repetitive and soul-destroying jobs which people can no longer accept. Jones' thesis is (I did not keep the cutting, so I write from memory) that workers will have to be involved in designing the work process and even in designing and improving the cars. I don't know whether he has got it right or not, but it is interesting that he is saying the same thing as Marriage Encounter and our Constitutions. That is to say, in our working arrangements we all have an input and we all support each other formally and informally.

Yes, I know that happened in the past as well, but the accent is now different. Have we, in fact, re-discovered the ethos of the first primitive men who, we are told, roamed around hunting and scavenging in small bands, being brought close to each other by a common experience and common hardships? I would not be at all surprised.

Why are people thinking like this in our part of the world? Perhaps it is that they are better educated, that they feel freer through their increased prosperity and less dependent. They have been on foreign holidays, the days of the cloth cap are gone. Whatever the reason, the spread of egalitarianism since the 1960s has been remarkable. Many people now find it embarrassing to hear the plummy accents of British grandees and military officers in old films and TV clips. Recordings of speeches at Eton over the last forty years have shown that the Etonian accent has become increasingly plebeian.

At some future time it may well be that ecological problems, or a nuclear disaster, or a war with fearful weapons, or a combination of all three, will produce an emergency where strong and intrusive government will be welcomed, as in France during the life of Vincent. I can only reflect on the world I see before me. For whatever reasons, we view society differently from the saint.

#### *A little method for holding meetings*

I am writing these lines shortly after attending a disastrous (non-community) meeting. The business involved was serious, the persons attending were highly educated and well motivated and yet the whole thing, which could easily have been dispatched in one hour, was dragged out for two and a half hours. At the end we were not even told the meeting was over and I had to ask, like a little boy, whether I was now free to go. Yes, I too know about meetings.

Yet that meeting should have gone well. For one thing we had an excellent secretary who provided accurate minutes from the last meeting, and correct agenda for this one. But we just wandered around the agenda

without any method. I couldn't help thinking of Pope's lines:

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance.  
As they move easiest who've learned to dance.

In the same way, *we have to learn how to hold meetings.*

In order to clarify the matter let us consider the different sorts of meetings which we hold, for all meetings are not the same.

First of all, there is the general distinction between formal and informal meetings. Not all meetings require the same degree of formality. For instance if a community comes together weekly to consider the following Sunday's homily, in the nature of things the procedure will be less formal than if they are deciding on a far-reaching change of policy.

As far as possible we should avoid a formal vote on a topic. Sometimes of course a vote may be necessary if there are legal implications, or if a vote is required by the Constitutions, and so on. But if people are working well together the most they should be asked for is a proposer and a seconder. Then the matter can be debated according to the principles explained below. People naturally become heated if they argue about matters important to them, but if they are divided by a vote they can find it even harder to think clearly, and may even become embittered.

The meeting may be dominated more or less by the leader of the group. I assume that there must always be a leader, but the relationship between him/her and the others will differ according to circumstances. There can be no simple rule.

The types of meetings we hold will depend to a great extent on the reasons for which we meet.

The first reason may be social. People meet because they need each other and rely on each other, and must get to know each other if they are to co-operate.

The second reason is to gather information. If a group is going to work together they will need information about the project they are embarking on. They may meet to find out who has the information, or where it can be got.

The third reason may be exchanging ideas (brainstorming) or participants contributing their insights into the project under discussion. No matter how leader-oriented the group is, the wise leader will listen carefully.

The fourth reason may be mutual support.

The fifth reason may be reflection or study together, as ideally some community meetings should be; for instance, preparing a homily



together.

The sixth reason may be to receive a briefing, *modo militari*, when the leader explains the situation and then gives his orders. He may invite comments, but it is understood that he makes the decisions and accepts responsibility for them.

The seventh reason, finally, will be to reach one or more decisions. This is the classic meeting, the sort of meeting we instinctively think of when we hear the word “meeting”.

So, then, there are all sorts of meetings, and none of them are mutually exclusive. Most comings together will have elements from all the types described above. What is important is to recognise that there are different sorts of meetings in which the atmosphere and, indeed, the proceedings will differ.

I now propose a simple method for holding decision-making meetings, based on the video by John Cleese entitled “Meetings, Bloody Meetings”. It’s not the only method, but it’s a good one.

#### *The John Cleese method*

- 1) Somebody, usually the secretary in conjunction with the chairman, must have thought out and written down the precise objectives of the meeting, and listed the subjects for discussion.
- 2) There must then be a clear and specific agenda, with relevant information, documents, etc. for each of the participants. They must know what the meeting hopes to achieve.
- 3) Make sure that time is not wasted on trivial items, and that sufficient time is given to important items.
- 4) Structure and control. This is the heart of the meeting.
  - a) The chairman must ensure that items of the agenda are taken in agreed order, *and each item is finished before proceeding to the next one*: finished, in the sense that there is no more to say, or no more time to say it, or the item has been referred to a sub-committee, or postponed to another meeting.
  - b) In discussing each item, first ascertain what the facts are. There can be no serious discussion until participants know what they are talking about. Such an enquiry may require that some or many are deputed to find out the facts and report back at the next meeting. It may also mean that the item must be postponed.

c) Interpret the facts, i.e. ask and discuss what they imply. If, for instance, it is ascertained that many parishioners are asking for some sort of bible study the meeting must try to figure out what this means and how it might be met.

d) Lastly, the meeting reaches a decision.

If the chairman keeps the meeting in this order he will prevent people jumping backwards and forwards and wasting time.

5) Summarise and record all decisions, so that it is clear what the decisions are and who is responsible for implementing each decision, and by what date. Before the end of the meeting it is essential that the chairman ensures that all are aware of what they have undertaken to do, according to the motto: WHO DOES WHAT BY WHEN? The record (the minutes) can then be used at the beginning of the next meeting to ensure that the decisions were carried out.

The minutes are primarily to record decisions, but they also prevent the next meeting from going over the same old ground again, thus causing frustration. There must be minutes if progress is to be made.

N.B. Let me repeat, unless it is absolutely necessary, it is better to come to a decision through consensus and mutual compromise rather than by a vote. A vote can antagonise people and lead to splits.

### *Why do meetings fail?*

1) Because the sort of framework recommended by John Cleese (or something like it) was not used, so that the discussion became entangled.

In fact, once people get used to holding meetings in an orderly manner they tend to carry the discipline over into the most informal discussions.

2) The discussion moves backwards and forwards from item to item, so that the participants become confused and, of course, frustrated.

3) Hidden agendas. Participants may wreck a meeting if they feel they are not getting their own way.

4) Hidden agendas. Participants are afraid of having to change, or getting extra work if the meeting succeeds and decisions are taken, so they waste time on small issues and put off discussing the major issues. This is one of the commonest reasons for failure of meetings. The example is given of one of the English monasteries just before the Dissolution where the chapter had long discussions about the state of the piggeries just when their world was coming to an end. Parkinson's Second Law states that in

any meeting the time spent on discussing an item is in inverse proportion to its importance!

In this connection I would like to point out that the two and a half hour meeting which I mentioned above did in the end make important and correct decisions. Methodologically it was a disaster, but the participants were highly motivated and wanted some clearcut decisions, so they got them. All the technical sophistication in the world would have been useless if they had not wished to succeed.

*When do meetings succeed?*

When we use a proper procedure and we want them to succeed. We may not like meetings, but they can be very productive if we want them to be.

## Forum

### WHAT KIND OF A SOCIETY DO WE WANT?

(Talk to the Council of Ireland, Society of St Vincent de Paul, 30 January 1993)

What kind of a Society do we want? This is a question which has always to be asked. The question is not a criticism of the Society as it exists at the moment. The question is asked as a way to ensure that the Society is evolving according to the mind of Frédéric Ozanam and the spirit of St Vincent de Paul, whose name the Society bears. Bill Cleary, last year, talked about a year of improvement and he listed a number of areas where some improvement was called for in the Society. The late Frank Cox, God rest him, often talked about the renewal of the Society. Jack McMahon, during my six years involvement in the Society, talked about his concern for the spirituality of the Society. In a way, this morning, I am underlining the calls of all these men.

It has been a source of great pride for me in the last twelve months to see the Society of St Vincent de Paul named with the CMRS in a leader in *The Irish Times* as the voice of the poor in Ireland. It was also very encouraging to know that the 1992 Christmas collections are up on last year, in spite of the demands of Somalia and other charities. A million pounds was received from the government recently, surely a testimony of the confidence which the government has in the ability of the Society to bring help efficiently and fast to the poor. The confidence which the people of Ireland have in the Society is something we can be proud of. This must be the great strength of the Society – its ability to bring material help quickly to poor people.

But I have been asking myself, since the meeting of the presidents in St Pat's, Drumcondra, two years ago, if something more is needed. In the small group of which I was a member there were about forty presidents, and our topic was: "How can the Society become more effective in our service of the poor?" Practically all of the people present, without any equivocation, said the Society becomes more effective by developing the spiritual nature of our work.

For some reason or other the spiritual issue got lost in the reporting. It is almost as if it wasn't necessary or important. But it is important

because what we are is more important than what we do. The spiritual or faith dimension is about what we are. Perhaps we need to reach a common understanding of what spiritual means. For me, the spiritual is more than saying prayers or attending masses. It is also about gospel values, sharing faith, the development of relationships, the quality of listening and communication, reverence for the dignity of poor people, some awareness of the justice issues of our day, etc.

The issues which emerged at that meeting are all very important and very necessary, namely: the need to offer hope and leadership at national and local level; the need to increase income for expansion of our services; the need to recruit and train people for future developments; the need to improve the effectiveness of our communications. All of these issues are vital and necessary for the future of the Society. Yet, where is the faith and spiritual dimension? The faith dimension was part of the original vision of Frédéric Ozanam. Is it still an important dimension in the work of the Society, or is it something we take for granted?

While in no way questioning the issues that emerged at the meeting of presidents I cannot help feeling that what is lacking in those issues is an underlying philosophy or vision. Allow me to say a brief word about vision. Vision is the driving force behind an organization. The Book of Proverbs says: "Where there is no vision the people get out of hand" (Pr 29:18). To see a vision is to see beyond the present position. To dream a bit. To imagine possibilities that do not seem possible. To begin to see with new eyes. It is vision which gives enthusiasm, interest, hope and energy. Doing does not fire people in the same way.

People could say to me: "While you are dreaming your vision I will be bringing aid to the poor". That may very well be, yet there is a danger that in our effort and enthusiasm to bring aid to the poor we could be unaware of the importance of the quality of our relationship with poor people. The quality of the way we serve the poor must continue to be an issue for us, who are members of a Society which is named after St Vincent de Paul. St Vincent de Paul, St Louise de Marillac and Frédéric Ozanam believed that it was not enough to bring bread to the poor. We also have to bring them something of God's love, not necessarily by talking about God's love but by the way we are with them, by our relationship with them; by the quality of our listening; by the quality of our caring; by the quality of our concern; by our openness and flexibility as a Society in devising imaginative ways of bringing relief and being good news. That is where the spiritual or faith dimension comes in. At the end of the film *Monsieur Vincent* St Vincent says: "It's for your love alone that the poor will forgive you the bread you give them". We develop the

spiritual not for the sake of the spiritual but for the sake of the service of the poor. Otherwise, in time we become no different from other philanthropic organizations.

I don't know what is possible. I wish I had an easy answer to the need for ongoing spiritual renewal in the Society. The training weekends which Phyllis Murphy has organised are to be commended and encouraged and supported. To me this is an excellent way of improving the quality of the many excellent services which the Society gives to poor people. The weekends are geared to heightening awareness, getting in touch with the richness of our experience of dealing with poor people and developing the faith and spiritual dimension of the members themselves. We have to train our members to be with people. Being with people, especially poor people, is not as easy as it looks. Developing a relationship with people on the margins is fraught with difficulties. We need some training. The task of training is enormous but I think it is a job well worth tackling.

Apart from training weekends I would love to see the Society on this island becoming involved in a discussion on the topic: "What kind of Society do we want?", culminating in the writing of a vision or a mission statement, which would be included in our literature. Something that comes from the grass roots of the Society, articulating a vision for the future, could be an effective way of renewing the Society. In the course of the discussion other ways of renewing the Society could emerge.

Our vision for the future of the Society must be the vision of Jesus Christ who said: "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). This was the vision which inspired St Vincent de Paul, St Louise de Marillac and Frédéric Ozanam. It must also inspire all of us who are members of the Society.

My vision for the Society is where we will have more young people, who will be welcomed and made to feel at home in the Society; where there will be regular training for conference presidents and new members; where regular sharing of our experience of meeting poor people and learning from it will be part of the conference meeting; where there is regular use of scripture at meetings, to apply gospel values to everyday life; where every conference will have a spiritual director; where the poor will feel loved and listened to as a result of the quality of our relationship with them; where the Society will become involved with the CMRS and others in the justice issues of our time, so that we can begin to change the unjust structures in our society which result in the poor becoming poorer and the rich becoming richer; where there will be

mutual on-going support and collaboration between the four families of St Vincent de Paul; where the poor will be enabled to speak for themselves about their concerns.

And the Lord answered me:  
“Write the vision; make it plain upon tablets,  
so he may run who reads it.  
For still the vision awaits its time;  
it hastens to its end – it will not lie.  
If it seems slow, wait for it;  
it will surely come, it will not delay.  
(Hab2:2).

Mark Noonan

#### VOCATIONS WEEKEND IN CORK, 12-14 FEBRUARY 1993

I felt that the most valuable element in the weekend was the strong feeling among all the participants that “it was good to be here. We don’t do this sort of thing often enough. What we are doing is rare, too rare”. Some said: “It was the best experience of being Vincentian since the Convocation”. “This, and Hugh O’Donnell’s retreat, were the two best experiences I’ve had in the community”. There was a good sense of each other, of people meeting and sharing at different levels.

Through our talking and recalling the stories of our call, a very tangible feeling emerged of being proud to be Vincentians. There was a love of being Vincentian and a conviction that the charism of Vincent was needed in Ireland today. We would like young men to join us in struggling to find how to make that charism alive in a new way.

A clear conviction grew from the talking, that we are too work-orientated as a community and don’t put enough time and effort into each other and community life: “...can’t hear what you are saying because what you are doing deafens me”. We felt a call to get the balance between the apostolate and community into better perspective. Our life together is vital and needs to be seen to be vital and life-giving. This will require effort, and is a call to conversion to each one of us.

Out of this emerged a desire to invite young people to join us at different levels. Many expressed that they had been afraid to invite the young to be part of us. Now we see that there are all sorts of levels of association and that, hopefully, out of these may emerge who want to

live the charism in a fuller and more permanent way. There was a feeling of buoyancy and hopefulness that was quietly tangible.

Most of us were very aware of the role individual priests played in attracting us. They had time to spend with us. Many spoke of the strange turns their time as a Vincentian took, of going to work with the poor and being in education ever since. They spoke of feeling the “hand of God” in what they had been asked to do. It was noted that we speak a language that the young do not know. Young people do not connect with us. God is not experienced in such a secure way and not seen as someone worth offering your life for. How do we bridge this gap?

Two images were offered: One was of us walking along a sure and wide road for so long. But now, as a result of a landslide, the road is blocked. We’re not sure if the way forward is around, over, through, or that way at all. We need to struggle together to find where the new life and new road is going to emerge. Our life together in this search will be very important in the search for God’s will. Another image was of a moving floor that went up and down as you stood on it. There is no stability for the young to stand on. “Relativism” and “subjectivism” are so prevalent that there are no absolutes in the life of the young – not even God. The young find it hard to step on our moving floor.

There is a whole change in the culture and world in which we live. But there are some values that act as a stabilising influence. The young look to us for authenticity in the life we live. What do they see when they come in contact with us? They see the goodness of the men we are. But they also see us as overworked, overactive, very busy about doing, but no time for deeper things. Our “authenticity” suffers from the activity of our lives. Other words that were mentioned that seemed to keep surfacing were: listening, life, respect, don’t pursue, humanity, and gentleness. This is who we are and it is good to spend time naming this. Humanity, gentleness and respect are very central to the Vincentian charism. But we don’t use it well, don’t get it across to others.

What are we inviting young people to join? We have to be very honest with prospective candidates. Point out that we have to find a new direction; that we have to struggle to find our way forward. The convictions of the past have gone. There are now “scattered convictions” but we are not sure which is the way of God. We may have to look to something different, beyond our traditional works.

A community that is vital, struggling, searching, is the one thing we can offer. A community that believes in the charism of St Vincent de Paul and that invites young men to come and search with us. We don’t have to be clear and have our house in order first. The young will be



part of our renewal process. We are also going to struggle with others who share our spirit – the members of the Daughters of Charity and the Society of St Vincent de Paul. The struggle to clarify this vision of Vincent for today is not easy, but in doing so we give energy and life. There was very general support for more meetings together and outside our own communities.

Many of the agencies today are more committed to the poor, but they are not gospel-driven. Yet we can seem no different from them. We need to be clear and vocal on the difference. We believe in what we do because of particular faith experience. We often invite people to share in the work, but not in the motivation. We need to stress more the community dimension of sharing faith together and the “faithful doing our work”. We have not been tempted enough to look at community. The experience of the Task Forces was mentioned as a very good experience in preparation for the Convocation.

There was a discussion on the need to impact at the 13-14 year age group. We need to make them aware of the Vincentian family. This is happening more in our schools now. We need to give the young an initial experience. All preventative social education is focused at 12 and under. Is it at this age that the beginnings of a Vincentian experience take place? We have no literature for this age – a picture version of St Vincent. Those of this age listen to stories. We could sow a seed through making the charism of service more accessible. There is need for a group to sit down and look at how to update our welcoming of the young. We can also look at how to develop the symbols of “sacramentality”.

The question of a house for serious enquirers was discussed as one of the ways forward. In this way young men can be drawn slowly into community. There was strong agreement and support for the idea, provided that it was well thought out. The Vincentian Volunteers in England had three years of preparation before beginning. There is a natural progression for young people from the experience of a pilgrimage. What do we move them on to? We need to have a variety of experiences to move the young on to, and a house would be one of them. Again, it was mentioned that we needed an initial weekend, out of which might come this group.

It was said that the charism is not confined to priesthood, and that brotherhood needs to be explored. Ministry and priesthood are not the one thing. A need was felt in the group to further explore the meaning of priesthood today. Some sort of forum for this reflection is needed. We also need to think more internationally.

It was felt that a vocations weekend should be held in the future. We would have to learn from the past experiences and find a different way

for inviting young men to it. It might come naturally out of the different youth groups we are becoming involved with.

There was good support for the ways we are involved with the young at the moment. The pilgrimages to Knock, Paris and Taize; the Vincentian Volunteers in Great Britain and the hoped-for development of this in Ireland; the involvement with the Young St Vincent de Paul Society; the Young Adult Mass in Phibsboro on Saturday nights; the Marian Vincentian Youth.

Some of the ideas that emerged were:

- 1) The need for more meetings of this kind on an on-going basis, e.g. like the way the younger men meet together for support.
- 2) Support for the idea of a house for serious enquirers, provided it was well worked out.
- 3) Have a vocations weekend in the long-term.
- 4) Look at the idea of creating an experience for the 12-14 year old age group and develop some literature, like a cartoon story of Vincent, for them.
- 5) Put our weight behind supporting the involvement with the young that is listed above.

Frank Murphy

### VINCENTIAN MONTH, PARIS, AUGUST 1993

It seemed odd to be celebrating the Assumption on the 20th of August, particularly as we had gone through the rather elaborate festivities on the 15th, but this celebration was quite different. The confreres from the Ethiopian and St Justin (Eritrea) vice-provinces were celebrating the feast according to their calendar and invited us to join them. Abraha kept apologising for the absence of this or that which is normally considered essential, and indeed the severe 17th century style of the oratory did not immediately conjure up the high lands of Ethiopia, but once the three priests began to chant the mass such shortcomings became irrelevant. We were in Ethiopia, celebrating Mary's feast in a way altogether familiar and yet altogether strange. It was beautiful and very moving. It was one of many moments in our month when we pushed beyond the narrow understanding of what being a Vincentian is, to taste, if only fleetingly, the diverse character of the community.

*The format of the Month*

The “Vincentian Month” is a course in Vincentian studies organised by SIEV (The International Secretariat for Vincentian Studies) to promote a wider appreciation of Vincent by the confreres throughout the world. It is directed to the confreres at large, not just to the specialist community historians. Perhaps its greatest achievement is the gathering together for a considerable length of time confreres who would not otherwise meet. The exchanges which resulted, sometimes on the conference floor, sometimes in the cafe, were much more likely to build bonds between the provinces than the rather dry reports from more formal inter-provincial meetings. Our “Month” was held in St Lazare, with the main sessions requiring simultaneous translation at the rue du Bac. Each week had a similar pattern, a lecture in the morning followed by mass. In the afternoon the sessions were less structured and were often in language-groups to facilitate better sharing. Within this basic framework there were many other events, visits to sites in Paris, etc., The participants of this “Month” were all within twelve years of ordination, and it was rather disquieting to find that in a Vincentian gathering I was regarded as something of an oldie! The average age was about thirty.

*The sessions*

The foundations of the month were a series of lectures, one each day, on a Vincentian theme. They were drawn together under the title “New Evangelization, New Men, New Communities”. The individual talks ranged over many topics and some of them were excellent, but my own overall impression of these sessions was of a missed opportunity. The talks were almost all too long, delivered in an old-fashioned lecture style, and far too academic for the target audience. I understand that instructions had been given as to the length of the talks; only one person (the editor of this journal) respected those instructions. The result was that there was little opportunity to enter into a “creative dialogue” with the speaker after the lecture, as the moderator had to draw the session to a close in time for mass. Also, many of the speakers took refuge at question time with the safe answer, suggesting that not being from the questioner’s culture any response would be inappropriate; very correct, perhaps, but it killed debate stone dead.

There were, of course, other reasons why such lectures were less than inspiring. Simultaneous translation does have a delaying effect, and even response to the speaker’s jokes had a *Mexican wave* character to it, rippling across the language-groups as the translator succeeded in

communicating the humour. Also we were from five continents with differing expectations and concerns. For example, a fascinating lecture on French secularisation and New Evangelization was meaningless to the Latin Americans and the Asians, for whom these terms have very different meanings. In such circumstances it is impossible to find a formula which would satisfy everybody all the time.

If any talk registered more strongly it was that of Luigi Mezzadri. He described the development of the community in the 18th century when it became more and more linked to the establishment through the mixed blessing of royal patronage. While Vincent had been able to manipulate to his advantage such patronage during the reign of Louis XIII and the regency of Louis XIV, in the subsequent period the community simply had to acquiesce in the requests of an absolute monarch. The corrosive effects of such works on the self-understanding of the community was vividly captured by Mezzadri and brought interesting parallels with our own time to mind.

Other lectures were excellent. However, most, unfortunately, were prepared for publication and failed to inspire when read to us. In *Vincentiana* they are likely to engage one more fully.

### *The visits*

The visits to Vincentian sites were quite moving. Our lecturers kept counselling caution in attaching too much significance to any one event in the life of Vincent; however, simply being in the buildings with direct association with Vincent, for example the churches of Clichy or Châtillon, was very inspirational. Nowadays we hear so much about the importance of story in a society, and stories connected with these places, whatever their historical accuracy, are part of our self-identity as Vincentians. To listen to the account of what happened on the feast of the Conversion of St Paul in 1617 in the church in which the events took place was, for me, the most impressive of all the visits. Perhaps, strictly speaking, Folleville was only a moment in Vincent's journey to the poor, but saying mass there with confreres from around the world was more affirming of my vocation in the Congregation of the Mission than anything which was said in our lectures. On a completely different level, these visits brought us to parts of France far from the tourist trail, and Châtillon, for example, as well as its Vincentian associations, has many fascinating mediaeval buildings. It was a useful corrective to see small-town France, rather than have all one's images of the country defined by the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe.

*Impressions*

The overriding impression of the month was the diversity of the community. There were confreres from Western communities whose experiences and concerns echoed my own, and confreres from the second and third world whose experience of the community was vastly different. It was humbling to see how the confreres from India are trying to incarnate the charisma of Vincent in their culture. What impressed was that these were not western confreres striving for political correctness in their mission, but Indian confreres in an independent province struggling with the challenge of evangelizing the poor in a non-Christian society. In the stories we heard more familiar tensions, the competing demands of total dedication to the poor and the need for works which generate an income. Even in India idealism has to struggle with practicality.

One of the other memories of the month is of the extent to which New Evangelization has become a concern of the community world-wide. Our province seems largely unaffected by this new home missionary thrust which is being undertaken in many parts of the world in preparation for the second millennium. It has already begun to affect the thinking and resource allocations of some provinces and, given its currency in many parts of the Church, in time will influence many more. One tends to hear of the larger provinces, but many of the South American provinces are quite small. That they exist and function and seem unconcerned about disappearing was a useful corrective for our fears about vocations.

Lastly, I was deeply impressed by Vincent. This month was the first sustained reflection on the man and his charisma that most of us had done since the seminaire. Superficially, it was familiar ground; after all, the facts of his life hadn't changed since we learnt them in the novitiate. However, this time we were being guided by some of the greatest minds in the community and we had the experiences of the intervening years to temper our simplistic understandings of what Vincent must have gone through to achieve all that he did. At the end of the month, Vincent emerged as one of those extraordinary people who appear in every age with the ability to hold many concerns in tension. His range of interest was phenomenal, and the people he was able to inspire staggering, from the Queen of France to "heretic" Beynier at Châtillon. His genius, to me, was that he did not pass on all those interests to the Vincentian family *en bloc*, but rather allocated them as charisms to the two communities and the Associations of Charity. Each inherits different dimensions of Vincent's vision, and together we try to recreate the whole picture. Were any one community to have inherited the whole thing the weight of responsibility might have been too much. Shared out among the lay-

people, sisters and priests of the Vincentian family, the concerns which motivated Vincent remain alive in the Church today.

### *Conclusion*

The Vincentian Month was a fascinating experience of the world-wide community and of Vincent de Paul. It was uplifting to meet so many young confreres. Such a large group of them together rather upset the rather staid routine of the rue de Sèvres, (I cannot imagine the corridors echo to the sounds of risqué drinking songs every night!), but it made one realise how middle-aged we have become at home without younger confreres in any numbers. It was humbling to see the commitment and the work of these confreres, particularly those from the former mission provinces, many of whom must now work in difficult circumstances without the benefit of older confreres' experience. It was inspiring to hear again the stories of Vincent de Paul, teased out so that their relevance to this age could be assessed.

This month was an opportunity to experience, in a way that is rarely possible, the vigour of a community which is becoming more authentically international. During that time it was possible to see how the community is preparing for mission in the year 2000 and beyond. There is a great deal of vitality, idealism and creativity in the community today. To have been at Paris in August 1993 was to get a taste of those qualities. If nothing else, I learned that being a Vincentian in the highlands of Ethiopia or the plains of India may have many challenges which are quite alien to my western sensibilities, but that despite these differences there is an underlying unity in our desire to preach the gospel of Christ after the example of St Vincent de Paul. Being there made me proud to be a member of the Congregation of the Mission.

Joseph Loftus

# Miscellanea

## TWO LETTERS FROM PEKING

The Irish Province was in charge of St Joseph's church, Tung T'ang, Peking, from 1919 until the end of the 1940s. For this period of roughly thirty years there is disappointingly little first-hand documentation in the provincial archives. In November 1992 Dermot O'Dowd forwarded to me two letters written by Patrick Barry from St Joseph's, Peking. They had been found by an English Carmelite nun when she was sorting out papers in her convent in Salford, Manchester, and she sent them on to Fr O'Dowd. The letters were addressed to Mother Ethelreda, Carmelite prioress in Glasgow, before she moved to Salford. The letters are typewritten and are reproduced as they stand, with no paragraphing, and spelling, capitalisation and punctuation unchanged.

TD

Catholic Mission,  
Tung T'ang,  
Peking. Aug. 14th, '22.

Dear Mother Prioress,

I think it is nearly a year since I wrote you a few lines and had your stimulating reply. Pardon the liberty I take in communicating with you again. My excuse is that I have a great trust in the prayers of Carmel and that I am more in need of them than ever. We are getting no priests this year, there is a great shortage in our Province at present, but in a few years we shall have a great number. In these circumstances we cannot make any considerable progress, we must be content to sow the seed and prepare the ground. It will take time for the seed to ripen and perhaps when it does we shall not be there to see it. But we have no doubt that it will ripen one day, and, please God, bear a rich harvest too. It is wonderful how many English speaking priests are coming into the field now. Within the last two years several American Orders and Congregations have taken Vicariates in China. It is a great advantage to be able to speak English in China and much good can be done by means of it, especially in combating Protestantism. That is just what we are doing here. Previously the work was all done by the Continental nations – they really produce missionaries of an heroic type. It is not easy to say which

nation produces the most successful missionary, but all admit that it is the French who have borne the burden of the work in China up to the present. We are living in the midst of them here and the more we see of them the more we admire their generosity and self-sacrifice. They stop at nothing and take all manner of privations as a matter of course. While it is true that conditions in China have very much improved in modern times, it still remains true that there are here and there privations enough for the most apostolic souls. The old missionaries laugh and joke about them as if they were only schoolboys' adventures. It is one of the privileges of being in the mission field to be in touch with these great men. In 1900 there was the terrible persecution of the Boxers and at that time every missionary was on the verge of martyrdom. After that everything is of secondary importance. The Sisters too are, if anything, more admirable still. Here they are nearly all French – I mean the Europeans – but it is surprising at the number of Chinese Sisters who join the European Orders and what excellent Sisters they make. There is an abundance of vocations here to the religious life. We have here also a Congregation of purely Chinese Sisters who do a world of good. Their dress differs very little from that of lay people and this gives them great freedom in going into the country. European Sisters are obliged to confine themselves to the towns and cities. The Josephines, as they are called, go out in ones and twos into remote villages to teach the Catechism to the poor people and often spend weeks without hearing Mass. We were surprised to find on coming here that in this Vicariate there is a large Trappist Monastery with a Community of nearly 100, the large majority of whom are Chinese. It was a fine act of Faith on the part of the former Bishop, Mgr. Favier to establish a Trappist Monastery when priests are so scarce for the Missions. He was clearly convinced, and his example is a constant reminder to us, that in the conversion of pagans, prayer is of the first importance. Without it, there can be no success. While then, thanking you Mother Prioress and your Community for your former charity, I beg again, with increased earnestness to recommend to your Prayers my own great needs and those of our little Mission here. Pardon the many mistakes in this letter, I am a beginner at the typewriter.

Praying that God may grant you all the graces you need for your noble vocation, I remain, sincerely yours in Jesus + Mary,

P. Barry C.M.

P.S. Don't trouble to reply. P.B.



Catholic Mission,  
Tung T'ang,  
Peking.  
Feb. 28th '23.

Dear Mother Prioress,

You will remember having heard from me at intervals since I came to China two years ago. My reason for writing just now is that we are in great need of prayers at present and we know of nothing better to do in such circumstances than to write to a Carmel and beg of them to lend us the most powerful aid of their fervent prayers. If the continual prayer of a just man availeth much what cannot be done with the assistance of a fervent Carmel. What moves me to write is that our Visitor or Provincial, after making a Visitation of our houses in Australia is on his way here and will be making a Visitation of our house about the time this letter should reach you. Our whole future depends on this Visitation and we are naturally anxious that the blessing of God should be with us at the critical time. We would therefore take it as a great favour if at that time we had a special share in the prayers and sacrifices of your devoted Community. I have reminded you already, I think, that I have a claim on Scotland, having spent nine years in Lanark and given missions in many parishes through the Archdiocese. Fr. McArdle and myself, soon to be joined, I believe, by Fr. Conway may be said to represent Scotland on the Chinese Mission which is now occupying so much attention in Rome and all through the English-speaking world. What you hear about China at home is true, namely that the Chinese are ready in great numbers for conversion, not indeed the rich or those who live in towns and cities but the very poor people of the country places. It is also true that the need of European and Chinese priests cannot be exaggerated. I have just returned from a holiday in the country and I realized the truth of the matter very clearly, was saddened to see how vast was the number of Christians how few were the missionaries and how difficult it was for them to train the Christians as they would wish. In the immense district I visited there were no less than 70,000 Christians nearly all baptized within the past 12 or 15 years and therefore needing very special attention and there were only 4 European priests to aid the Chinese priests or rather to direct the Chinese priests in the work, for that is the role which the European priest plays, he is the guide the leader and the captain of the army. Were it not the maxim of the missionary "Never be discouraged" I would have been tempted to lose heart for no one can say whence the missionaries are to come who will reap the harvest. We would be proud to be called to

it, but that for the moment our work lies in education which in its way is not less necessary, but with the assistance of the prayers and good-works of our friends at home, perhaps at our approaching Visitation a way may be opened by which we too may lend our aid to the direct work of evangelizing the poor people. You will understand that it is therefore not without reason that I write to ask a share at that time in the prayers and good-works of the fervent Community which is committed to your care.

I shall thank you in advance and promise you shall have a place amongst our benefactors whom we never forget at the Altar.

I remain,  
devotedly yours in Jesus + Mary Immaculate

P. Barry C.M.

#### JOHN HENRY NEWMAN AND THE VINCENTIANS

1990 was the centenary year of the death of J H Newman and I attended a lecture given by Monsignor Anthony Stark. It appears that before Newman began his Oratory he looked at various other orders and congregations, among them the Vincentians/Lazarists. The following is a letter from Monsignor Stark to me:

As I mentioned in my Paper on “Newman the Oratorian”, there were four other bodies which he considered as possibilities for himself and his Littlemore friends in addition to Wiseman’s suggestion of the Oratorians. These were the Dominicans, the Jesuits, the Vincentians and the Redemptorists.

He refers to the Vincentians in two letters. The first is to T F Knox, written from Maryvale on August 20th 1846 in which he informs his friend that he is shortly off to Rome to study at the Propaganda. He hopes while there to settle his own future and that of his friends. He writes of your own Congregation:

The Vincentians seem the most extended body in Europe, nay in the world now – and the most influential. They share the theological schools of France with the Sulpicians – they are “Missionaries” in Italy – and they are spread over the East. They have lately been introduced into Ireland and are flourishing there. Their object

is twofold, as I have already implied – missions and theological schools. At this moment I am more drawn to them than to any other. But I can have no view about anything till I get to Rome... You know St Vincent de Paul is the founder. The mother house is in Paris – and we shall try to see it. But I shall do just what they tell me to do in Rome.

A few months later, on the 18th October 1846, he wrote to J D Dalgairns:

What we saw at Paris rather blunted our zeal in favour of the Vincentians.

Happily this apparent *volte face* regarding the Vincentians is explained in a later memorandum “Early Days of the Oratory” where he writes:

We seemed to feel that though a most important body of religious, they did not give to theology and literature that place in their system which we wished.

Although these are mere snippets you will probably feel they are quite revealing. One cannot help but wonder what influence Newman might have had on the development of the Vincentians in the British Isles had he joined.

The bits and pieces above might be woven into some piece in a future issue of COLLOQUE.

Fergus Kelly

In his letter to Fergus Kelly Mgr Stark refers to two letters of Newman in which he mentions the Vincentians. There is a third, which he wrote to Malachy O’Callaghan, President of Castleknock, in 1882. It was used on a printed leaflet issued in connection with an appeal for funds for the building of St Joseph’s, Temple Road, Blackrock. The original is in the archives in Castleknock. It was printed in COLLOQUE No. 7 but is worth repeating in view of what Fergus Kelly has contributed.

Birmingham  
15th November, 1882

Very Rev. Father,

If any words of mine can aid in furthering the success of such excellent objects as I learn from your letter you have in view, gladly do I, according to your request, send you these.

I recollect well, how, when I became a Catholic, the first religious body which attracted my reverent notice was yours; and afterwards, when I was resident in Dublin, with what kindness, on presenting myself at your House at Castleknock, I was received by your Superior and Community.

I am pleased, then, at the opportunity, which after so many years you give me, of expressing my sympathy and interest in the Congregation of St Vincent, and my sincere hope that your good work in England, as well as Ireland, may extend and prosper.

Very truly yours,

+ John H. Card. Newman

The Very Rev. Fr. O'Callaghan.

To complete this theme the reader is referred back to COLLOQUE No 10 for an account of Newman's visit to the Vincentian house in Cork.

## OBITUARIES

### Father James Dyar CM

The sudden unexpected death of Fr Dyar on January 10th was a great shock to his family and his confreres. As we mourn our loss we are left with our memories of respect, affection and inspiration.

One of my early memories of James occurred when we were deacons in Blackrock. The superior took the four of us to the parish church to practise preaching. The only other persons in the church were two women sweeping and dusting. While the first three of us gave out our homilies these ladies continued with their work. James was the last to ascend the pulpit and no sooner had he said a few opening words than the ladies downed tools, sat down in a seat, folded their arms and fixed their eyes on him.

This incident was typical of his whole life. What he preached was the result of his prayer and came from the heart. On another occasion James, Fr Tom O'Flynn and myself were on holidays in Cushendun. While there we said mass, one after the other, in a convent. Afterwards at breakfast the good sisters were commenting on the priests when one lady said: "Fr Dyar is the cream, the others are just skim-milk!". Later we discovered that this sister was not quite impartial as she was from James' home town of Castlerea. But what she said was true. There was something special in the reverence and simplicity that he displayed whenever he carried out the sacred ceremonies of the mass.

The last time I observed this trait was about eighteen months before his death. We were on holidays in the West, and as the weather was very bad we decided to move on to Cork. On the way we called to visit James' nephew Paul and his family. Paul was manager of a well-known hotel near Limerick. We were entertained to dinner and James was asked to celebrate mass next day, Sunday, in the hotel. There were about forty elderly Americans present in a huge hall. During the mass one could literally hear a pin drop, so great was the attention of the congregation. This was especially noticeable when James gave a brief homily on the gospel. Again "the eyes of all were fixed on him".

As a boy in Castleknock James was held in high esteem by all for his intelligence, wit and music. He was one of the few to win an all-Ireland scholarship in the then Intermediate Examination. He also

obtained a gold medal in piano playing from the London School of Music. After ordination to the priesthood he returned to the college as a gifted member of the staff, in the language department. He had a great love for the college. He donated a beautiful silver cup (with small replicas) to be presented each year to the boy who wrote the best essay on Church History. As sacristan he donated two full sets of vestments in cloth of silver. He was a good community man with a keen sense of humour. On one occasion his friend Fr Tom O'Flynn had just been elected to the Community Council. As Fr Tom emerged from the President's office after the first meeting James was heard to remark: "Here comes Councillor O'Flynn".

His next appointment was as director of students in St Joseph's, Blackrock, a position which he held for about ten years. One confrere mentioned to me that he was able to inspire students with an awareness of their own abilities in the academic sphere. This was also noted of him as a gifted spiritual director, where he helped one to rise above the routine, to a personal relationship with Christ.

It was during his time in Blackrock that the students became aware of his expertise on the piano. It happened that the students were invited to a concert. At the last moment it had been cancelled for some reason. Fr James took all the students and seminarists to the Students' Hall and entertained them for over an hour with music varying from Beethoven to Gilbert and Sullivan. After this they were amazed at the quality of his performance.

That reminds me of another occasion when he displayed his talent for music. Again we were in Cushendun on holidays. In the hotel a rather stoutish gentleman asked if either of us could play the piano. I suggested that James was very good, and he was immediately accepted. It so happened that the gentleman in question was a talented cello player and told us that he had a friend who played the violin. He explained that he belonged to the Church of Ireland and his friend was a Presbyterian. Anyhow, they formed a trio and entertained the guests on Sunday evenings with music based on a radio programme called Grand Hotel. The stout gentleman kept up communication with James every Christmas for years afterwards.

After his period in Blackrock he was appointed to parish work in England and Scotland, where he spent the remaining years of his life. During these years he liked to spend a good deal of time on holidays visiting his family. And when his brother, Dr Martin, took seriously ill he spent the last few weeks at his bedside, to the great consolation of his family and himself. He had this wonderful gift in assisting

the dying, which was often commented on during his parish work in Britain.

He had a great love for his family and his relations. To his brother Patrick, to his sister-in-law Mrs Martin Dyar, their families and all his friends, we offer our heartfelt sympathy.

Seamus O'Neill CM

#### JAMES DYAR CM

Born: Castlerea, Co. Roscommon, 12 July 1918.

Entered the CM: 7 September 1937.

Final vows: 8 September 1939.

Ordained a priest in the oratory of Holy Cross College, Clonliffe, by Dr John Charles McQuaid, archbishop of Dublin, 23 December 1944.

#### APPOINTMENTS

1945-54 St Vincent's, Castleknock.

1954-64 St Joseph's, Blackrock.

1964-67 St Vincent's, Castleknock.

1967-68 St Patrick's, Armagh.

1968-76 St Vincent's, Sheffield.

1976-78 St Mary's, Lanark.

1978-83 St Vincent's, Sheffield.

1983-87 St Cedd's, Goodmayes.

1987-90 Nithsdale Place, Glasgow.

1990-93 St Mary's, Lanark.

Died 10 January 1993.

Buried: Lanark.

## Father Kevin O'Kane CM

(Homily at funeral mass)

Fr Kevin suffered a stroke ten years ago. His biggest cross then was the loss of power in his left hand. He was so proud of his gifted hands. To realise that he would never again hold a golf club or a fishing rod was

indeed a heavy cross. He had mended watches – even though he did mislay the second hand on a watch of mine – he had wood-panelled and re-wired the little oratory in the Provincial House, he played the piano and the church organ. And now, all was denied him.

I remember a scene in the dining room of the parochial house in Dunstable, in happier days. Lunch time, a new curate starting an argument about the new theology of Vatican II. Kevin saying “That’s nonsense; show it to me in a book”. The young curate obliged. In disgust Kevin stalked away from the table, up to his room and out with his piano accordion. What he played was lost on the new curate, but what came wafting through the house was: “Give me that old-time religion”.

Later that night Kevin said to me: “I think I’ll write a book, even if I’ve never read one”. The irony of that was that a short time later Kevin was in New York reading books and studying the new theology.

Kevin never gave up hope of a cure and it was a long while before he could say with St Paul: “I have accepted the loss of everything, if only I can have Christ”. But, unlike St Paul, he could never forget the past.

In the Clino Home in Skerries Kevin found a new mission. He ministered to his fellow patients, anointing, absolving, praying. They appreciated his daily mass and other devotions. The caring staff may have had to put up with his tantrums, but he was a good friend and confidant to them and they shared many a laugh together.

Their request for someone to say mass in his room last Thursday afternoon and their shock and sorrow at his unexpected death are indications of the special place he had in their lives. Kevin himself said more than once: “This is the best appointment I have ever had because it was given to me, not by any human Provincial, but by God himself”.

One of Kevin’s favourite saints was Peter, the patron of the Church. He saw a reflection of himself in Peter’s temperament, experiences and mission. Both were men of action, men in a hurry, men who had to be doing something, impetuous and impatient. Like Peter, Kevin fancied himself as a bit of a fisherman. And there’s a contradiction here. As I understand it a fisherman has to have great patience, be prepared to sit immobile, on the bank of a river or in a boat and wait for the fish to rise. What the Lake of Genneseret was to Peter Lough Sheelin was to Kevin – and Cathal and Fr Pat.

Many years ago I translated for Kevin the lovely Irish hymn *Ag Críost an Síol*. When he heard the second verse he said simply; “I want that sung at my funeral Mass”.



To Christ belongs the sea,  
to Christ belongs the fish.  
In the nets of God may we all be caught up.

Something else that St Peter and Kevin had in common: Because they had answered a call they saw themselves as fishers of men. For Kevin that meant two things – preaching the good news, the gospel, in season and out of season and, like the fisherman playing the fish, being the patient, tolerant, confessor and guide in the sacrament of reconciliation.

The happiest years of his life were those spent up and down the country giving parish missions. He believed strongly that this was the first and principal ministry of the Vincentian community.

Kevin shared another grace with St Peter. They realised their own human weaknesses and their need for God's mercy and love. But, whereas Peter said: "Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" Kevin would never have said: "Leave me, Lord". Rather he would say: "I need you, Lord, because I am a sinner".

Some time ago Kevin drew my attention to a hymn in his breviary:

Alone with none but thee, my God,  
I journey on my way;  
What need I fear, when thou art near,  
O King of night and day?  
More safe am I within thy hand,  
Than if a host did round me stand.

The child of God can fear no ill,  
His chosen dread no foe;  
We leave our fate with thee, and wait  
Thy bidding when to go.  
Tis not from chance our comfort springs,  
Thou art our trust, O King of kings.

Diarmuid Ó Hegarty CM

#### KEVIN O'KANE CM

Born: Ballyconnel, Co. Cavan, 9 May 1920.

Entered the CM: 7 September 1938.

Final vows: 8 September 1940.

Ordained a priest in Holy Cross College, Clonliffe, by Dr John Charles McQuaid, archbishop of Dublin, 26 May 1945.

## APPOINTMENTS

1945-51 St Vincent's, Castleknock.

1951-53 St Kevin's, Glenart.

1953-65 St Peter's, Phibsboro.

1965-71 St Mary's, Dunstable.

1971-72 St John's, New York (studies).

1972-73 St Vincent's, Sheffield.

1973-74 St Cedd's, Goodmayes.

1974-77 St Joseph's, Blackrock.

1977-82 4, Cabra Road.

1982-93 St Peter's, Phibsboro.

Died 26 August 1993.

Buried: Glasnevin.