

COLLOQUE

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Congregation of the Mission

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Editorial

This edition of *Colloque* is unusual in that only one article is written by an Irish confrere, though Myles Rearden and Eamonn Flanagan are responsible for all the other articles.

Some time ago, the Irish province set up groups of confreres whose task was to take on some work in 'Mapping the Provincial Terrain', exploring options for the future and organising various initiatives.

The 'Spirituality Group' of which Myles and Eamonn, with Pat Collins and Eugene Curran, were members set itself two tasks; to organise, with other members of the Vincentian Family, a day on Vincentian Spirituality (to be held in All Hallows College on 24th June 2006) and to provide some useful texts for people attending that seminar.

There is a fund of useful resources in English but, for many of us, works in other languages remain inaccessible. For this reason, we are grateful to Eamonn and Myles both for providing the selections and doing what translations were necessary.

It is hoped that these texts will be a useful addition to Vincentian libraries and encourage our own reflection.

The obituary for Fr Diarmuid O'Farrell, who died in the Autumn of 2005, will follow in the next edition of *Colloque*.

Climbing the Mountain

Introducing the writings of Giuseppe Toscani CM

Myles Rearden CM

A young French priest, Benoît by name, recently spent a semester at Maynooth. When I introduced myself to him as a ‘Lazariste’ his eyes opened wide and he said ‘I really love that spirituality’. At the time I wondered what he meant. But a few weeks later I found an answer to the question ‘What is Vincentian spirituality?’ that seems to me to justify completely Père Benoît’s response. It is in a book by Giuseppe Toscani, of the Turin Province, called *The Spirituality of the Poor*. (1) Hugh O’Donnell, the director of the CIF course, gave me a copy after some talks I gave for him on prayer at the 2005 session.

By way of introduction to what Toscani says, it is worth recalling how we in the Vincentian family have usually approached our spirituality. We have always, I think, seen it as the internal spiritual tradition of our communities, ‘our home baked bread’. We have not usually thought of it as ‘a spirituality’, on a par, say, with Ignatian or Carmelite or monastic spirituality. It reached us through our formation programmes, conferences and retreats, circular letters from Superiors General and Provincials, supported by the Common Rules (printed privately for our own use), the conferences and selections from the letters of St Vincent and St Louise (likewise privately circulated), and officially commissioned biographies like those of Abelly and Coste, and others based on them. It is less than a century since this began to change, with the publication of the fourteen volumes of Coste’s work, *Correspondence, Conferences and Documents of St Vincent de Paul*, which started to appear in 1920 in French, was fairly quickly translated into Italian and Spanish, and has been coming out slowly in English over the past twenty years: we are still awaiting translations of three volumes of the conferences. The effect of the appearance of the writings of St Vincent on the open market, so to speak, was to attract a certain amount of commentary and analysis by writers who do not belong to any branch of the Vincentian family, as well as a more scientific study of our basic texts by members of the Vincentian communities, for example André Dodin. Giuseppe Toscani’s work belongs in this category, though it is unusually broad in scope and detailed in analysis. Even it, however, is quite short – his project could hardly be properly completed in less than many large volumes, instead of the short one (2) he has written. Nevertheless, he

has, it looks to me, brought us a long way forward. He makes a case for regarding Vincentian Spirituality as quite unique and of extreme importance for the contemporary Church and world. Significantly, a recent and very important study of spirituality (3) by the Titus Brandsma Institute at Nijmegen in the Netherlands, a Carmelite institution, gives Vincentian Spirituality a prominent place, and the fact that an article on it was commissioned for a recent English dictionary of spirituality (4) indicates that we are becoming the object of some attention.

Some considerations;

Toscani's target readership is clearly his own confreres and sisters, which is why he can write at relatively little length. His work is part of the post-Vatican II drive to recover the foundational charisms of various religious families. Its arrival rather late on the scene raises the question whether the Vincentian Family did enough homework over the past four decades. However that may be, it invites the communities to undertake a great deal of personal and collective spiritual work in the immediate and medium-term future.

As an example of how new this challenge is, and how big, take Toscani's outline of the principles of interpretation, or hermeneutics, in the Vincentian context: first, respect for unity in the totality, that is, following 'themes through the inextricable tangle of the virgin forest of the works of St Vincent'; next, a rigorous attention to the vocabulary, 'the mirror of interiority', only possible for the committed student and disciple; third, context, because all Vincent's writings are heavily contextualised, a crucial element of the context being the presence of St Louise at his conferences to the Daughters of Charity; fourth, the study of the Company, a shared commitment to study on the part of his followers; fifth, the love of the Poor, who are for Vincent 'a revelation of God in continuity with the Incarnation of the Word of God out of Love for us'; and finally, emphasis on mystical inspiration, 'the attraction of Divine Love, which illuminates the intuitions and dictates the choices of Vincent'. The last of these criteria is the most fundamental, because, Toscani writes, 'among the spiritually minded of his day [Vincent] was the great contemplative of Charity, marked out by an extraordinary mystical experience of Divine Love, unique of its kind. In a century of great mystics he is distinguished as the greatest mystic of the Love of God in Christ.'

The vocabulary needing interpretation is not just the list of familiar words like 'will of God', 'poor', 'community' and 'charity', but certain other words which I for one had rarely if ever come across in all my years in the community: in particular, 'adherence' and 'state'. When Vincent's works are translated into English, it is almost inevitable that some of the overtones of the original will often be lost. In the case of

those two words, their meaning comes from the Bérullian spirituality that was Vincent's entry-point into the spiritual life. The word 'adherence' takes us a long way into Vincent's thought.

Adherence

Here is a passage from St Vincent where he uses and gives an explanation of the Bérullian word 'adhere':

It is said in the Sacred Scripture that the one who adheres to God becomes one spirit with him, and so I ask, who adheres more to God: the one who never does anything except the will of God, and never his or her own, who neither wills nor wants anything except what God wills or does not will? I ask you, gentlemen and brothers, if you know anyone who adheres to God, and so is more united to God, that such a person? (SV, XI, 318f)

What St Vincent is giving us here is his own view of how best to 'adhere' to God: by doing what God is asking us to do. But the background to the usual word 'adhere' may still puzzle us. The clue to that background lies in St Vincent's mention of the scriptural use of the word, by which he means its use in the Latin Vulgate. It is used there in quite an extraordinary context:

Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said 'The two shall be one flesh' (Gen.2:24). But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him... Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? (I Cor.6: 16-19).

The word translated here in the NTSV as 'united' is the word 'adhere' in the Latin Bible used by Bérulle and St Vincent. The same word is used in Mt.19:5: 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and *be joined* to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' It refers then to the intimacy not alone of marital but of sexual union, that is to the whole world of love, commitment and shared life. So when St Vincent gives accomplishing the will of God as the central means of 'adherence' to Christ, he presupposes a union with Christ of great tenderness, power and commitment. Against that background, 'doing the will of God' cannot be just a matter of 'adherence' to the details of regular observance or carrying out orders, but involvement in the whole project of the life of Jesus, from his total dedication to the Father in the Spirit, to his no less total and respectful involvement in the lives of human beings. It is in that setting that another famous sentence of Vincent's, this time directed to Anthony Portail, is to be understood:

Remember Monsieur, we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ. (SV, I,276)

The point of all those prepositions is that there is no limit to the modalities by which Vincentian life is to be engaged with Jesus Christ. As Fr Toscani puts it, first quoting St Vincent:

‘The goal of the Company is to imitate Our Lord, so far as poor and weak persons can. What does that mean? It means that the Company proposes to conform itself to him in his conduct, his actions, his employment and his objectives. How can one person represent another without having the same traits, shape, proportions, manners, way of looking. It cannot be. What that means is that, if we have proposed to make ourselves resemble this divine model and feel in our hearts the desire and holy affection of doing so, we must, I say, strive to conform our thoughts, our actions and our intentions to his...’ [SV, XII, 75]. Imitation for him [Vincent] presents an aspect that is profound and mysterious: it means participation in the relations attributed by the Love of Christ to his humanity in the Incarnation; it is the ability to know and to love as Jesus Christ knew and loved, with the same richness, in all the domains of thought, affectivity and action. (*The Spirituality of the Poor*, p32f)

State

How such ‘adherence’ or personal closeness to Jesus Christ is to be achieved is revealed by means of another Bérullian word, ‘state’, and as we shall see shortly, two specifically Vincentian principles. Toscani puts it like this:

In the Christocentricism of Bérulle and his disciples, ‘state’ means in the widest sense, the ontological [i.e. real] condition of the humanity of Jesus Christ in the hypostatic union [that of divinity and humanity in him], as perfectly united with the Word, without any influence of sin and completely sanctified: all of which includes the manner of being and acting proper and exclusive to the Incarnate Word as man, in perfect Communion with the Father and with the whole human race. (p19)

To explain: ‘State’ means the actual condition of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, at this or any given moment. Equally, it means some-

thing from his historical life, for example his healing of Peter's mother, or his weeping at the death of Lazarus, or his words to Mary and the beloved disciple on Calvary: all of which, like all the acts of anyone, remain elements of his present self at every moment of his subsequent life, including his actual risen life. Turning to him in his present state is equally turning to him in any of his past states. It is the same idea as that of Blessed Columba Marmion when he writes of 'Christ in his Mysteries'. A mystery or state is a living reality from which we draw inspiration and grace if we turn to them in faith, hope and charity: perhaps the closest example is that of Thomas touching the wounds of Jesus after the resurrection. (John 20:24-29)

In the specifically Vincentian context, 'state' takes on a special meaning: 'a state of extreme abjection at the side of the very least of human beings, a way of acting that shown the greatest possible love...' (Toscani, p21) In other words, it is a state of self-identification with the poorest person, the worst sinner, the most unbelieving unbeliever, rooted in Christ's own radical identification with 'the whole human race', and indeed Christ's preference for the worst, as it continues now in his glorified state. The sending of the Holy Spirit enables one to move into that state of 'adherence' to Christ. Contemplation of a 'state' or 'the state' of Christ is directed to our acquiring the same state for ourselves, to the degree and in the form God wishes us to have it.

Becoming lovable

It is central to Toscani's reading of St Vincent that charity means becoming lovable. Here is a paragraph in which he expresses that point:

For St Vincent, no one is lost, because everyone is loved by the Father with an infinite love which calls for infinite gentleness and patience, even the Turks, who were so generally detested for their torturing Christian slaves to death. All that St Vincent was, thought and did was marked with the seal of gentleness, tenderness, delicacy, sweetness and amiability, so as to make himself loved and to give birth to harmony with Jesus Christ whom he contemplates as his model, as the 'eternal sweetness' of angels and men. (p23)

By way of comment on this point, it may be enough to recall St Vincent's success as a teacher. It was what he principally did all his life, from the time in the de Comet house at Dax when he was barely out of school himself, through his days at Buzet, at Clichy, with the De Gondi family, on the missions, talking to the old people at the Hostel of the Name of Jesus, to his fellow-priests in the Tuesday Conferences

and perhaps most of all conducting conferences for the Sisters and the Missionaries in his final years. To be in demand as a teacher, both by parents and by their sons, and later by his peers, indicates that he must have been very well liked. This is borne out by the success he made of a dialogic form in teaching the Sisters, and to a lesser extent in the repetitions of prayer for the Missionaries. Even though we do not have his own manuscripts of the conferences, or even the original records except for that of May 30th 1659 on Charity – the only one of Brother Ducournau's originals to have survived the French Revolution – they bring us into the presence, as Fr Dodin says, 'of a mind that is clear, robust and convincing [*éprouvée*].' The text of the conference on Charity just mentioned is so powerfully appealing that it would, it may be suggested, be worth learning French for no other purpose than to read it.

The constellation of good qualities which Toscani sees as making St Vincent amiable includes 'sweetness, integration, tranquillity, peace, prudence, serenity, certainty and gravity', to which he adds 'availability, adaptability, freedom, openness', with, as its constant and strict fixed point 'preference for the very least.' (p29)

The spirituality that culminates in lovableness in this way is always described by Toscani as a mysticism. Perhaps it would be better to call it a mystagogy, that is, a learning how to live in relationship to God, with the proviso that a mystagogy must grow out of a genuine experience of God, and needs to be cultivated by a mystology, that is reflection on that experience and its integration into one's whole mentality. The Vincentian way is not sternly practical to the point that living experience of the divine is played down, or little importance attached to intelligence and divine enlightenment, both in processing the experience of God and in planning the work inspired by that experience. That is not the Vincent Toscani discovers in his research, and neither is it the Louise, nor the Catherine, nor the John Gabriel Perboyre that we read about.

The poor, sinners and pagans

'The most direct route followed by St Vincent', writes Toscani, 'sets out from contemplation of the unity of Christ, takes the road of the Incarnation as far as the state of extreme poverty and humility, and climbs up to God in Love in favour of those people who are most remote from Christ.' (p46) It is entirely in favour of the most utterly wretched that St Vincent does everything, but not as if that were all his own idea or a human idea of any kind. It is because it is the divine idea, lived out by Christ to the point of his death on the Cross. St Vincent, unlike either St Francis de Sales or Bérulle, 'descends like the Son of God in the Incarnation, to the state of the human condition's lowest point. His

world is not that of the nobility or the bourgeoisie, but that of the poor in communion with Christ.’ (p49)

St Vincent does not have a single-track mind regarding wretchedness, as if it were confined to people like the refugees from civil war who crowded into Paris and the foundlings. His conception of wretchedness is a three-lane highway, including also sinners of every description and the entire non-Christian world – that of those who belong to Christ but do not know Christ. For him life in union with Christ is a life that seeks out human beings in those three dimensions of wretchedness. He had of course human reasons for doing so as well: from his own experience, he knew poverty and exclusion, he knew sin, and he knew, if not unbelief, a kind of Christianity that was utterly ignorant of the real meaning of the faith. These must certainly have coloured Vincent’s service of the poor, of sinners and of unbelievers. But nothing human could bring him to the point of total dedication he reached: only transformation by Christ into a sharing of the divine spirit could do that.

‘In literal fact’, to quote Toscani again, ‘in his words, [Vincent] proceeds always from Christ to the poor to return in the end from the poor to Christ in a constant circular movement around the central pole of attraction of the Word made flesh. The expressions he uses are at once passionate, exultant and terrifying. It is always really “God” he is seeing so that he can state: “Our Lord is really with this sick person who receives the service you are rendering him or her”. (p51) The service of the poor, he says a few pages later, is for St Vincent a point of arrival, not of departure: it becomes the synthesis of his contemplation. We may put it like this: if someone comes to St Vincent wanting to serve the poor, he will say to them. ‘Come and see’, and bring them to where Christ lives, because he knows that is the only place to learn to serve the poor, and that means learning to serve Christ first. Except that Christ does not want to be served, but only to serve, and to serve even those who are so wretched that they do not think they need to be served by him.

Ecstasy

Fr Toscani uses the word ‘ecstasy’ in the title of his epilogue, and does so with the air of a writer playing his last card: ‘this study’, he writes, ‘has been guided by a...hope, perhaps an excessive one: to grasp, to some extent, to succeed in explaining, at least in part, the mystery that carried St Vincent out of himself [*ecstasy*] in his mystical experience, but which his discretion concealed under the veil of humility.... What comes across with absolute clarity is [that for him]: Charity is everything.’(p70) Evidently, Toscani is summoning his readers to a life of utter holiness, corresponding to the sixth or seventh mansions of St Teresa of Avila. Nothing less, he is saying, is worthy either of God or of

the poor. Vincent's life and word, he concludes, 'evoke a profound sense of the important aspects of a transformation that only Love can realise in each person on the model of Christ's life.'(p75)

NOTES

1. Literally, 'The Mysticism of the Poor': 'La Mistica dei poveri', or in its French translation 'La Mystique des Pauvres'. The first Italian edition came out in 1986(5?) and the French edition in 1998.
2. There are actually three short volumes, the second being on contemplation in St Vincent and the third, by Sister Assunta Corona of the Sardinian Province of the Daughters of Charity, on the mystical experience of St Louise.
3. Waaijman, Kees, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, Peeters, Leuven, 2002, p 968.
4. Sheldrake, P, (ed), *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, SCM, Canterbury, 2005, p 680.

Experiencing St Vincent; A response to reading Toscani

Tom Lane CM

Fr Kevin Cronin is still admired and remembered for his work of building up and beautifying St Mary's College, Strawberry Hill. He was ordained in the era when the young priests at St Joseph's, Blackrock, went upstairs every day to join their senior brethren for a cup of coffee. Just days after Kevin's ordination, the community had a colourful visitor, Fr Gerald Robinson. In his early years of priesthood, Fr Ger was known as a very compassionate and eloquent preacher of parish missions. He was also known for his roguish humour which could take some interesting turns. An alcohol addiction kept him for some years at the hospital of St John of God, Stillorgan. The day he visited St Joseph's, the conversation came round to the topic of confession and confessors. "One thing I've lacked most of my life," said Fr Ger, "is having a regular confessor". He then threw his mischievous eye round the room, only to land on the man on whose hands the oil was still fresh. "Fr Cronin", he said, "would you be my confessor?" "Oh Father", said Kevin, "thanks for the honour of asking me, but I wouldn't be suitable. I have no experience". "Never mind the experience", retorted Ger, "you provide the words of absolution and I'll provide the experience".

The experience of God's mercy

Both Ger and Kevin recognised the importance of experience. In the seconds at his disposal, Kevin wondered what help he could be to a man with alcohol problems, and possibly related problems. I'm sure if he had time to reflect he would have realised that the words of absolution were far more precious than any words of wisdom of his own making. In those days, the words of absolution were "May almighty God have mercy on you... May the almighty and merciful Lord grant you pardon...I absolve you..." The words today are not much different: "God the Father of mercies has reconciled the world to himself... I absolve you". As a devout adolescent and during his eight years as a seminarian, Kevin must have regularly experienced the forgiving touch of the Father of mercies. One can presume that, shortly before his ordination, he received pardon, absolution and remission of his sins with special devotion.

In his mission days, Ger had been a kindly and generous dispenser of God's mercy. Over the decades, with or without the help of a regular confessor, he must have often knelt to receive the same mercy, some-

times, no doubt, with a cry in his heart. When I came to know him towards the end of his days, he had a basic serenity that made him ready for death. Fr Tom Donovan, our superior, told us that, in his final hours, he alternated between simple prayers and humorous quips. He asked that, when he had breathed his last, somebody would snip his jugular vein to make sure that he had really passed on. Truly Ger Robinson was a man of experience.

A charism of experience

It makes much sense today to describe the basic charism of St Vincent in terms of his own experience of the mercy and compassion of God and his resulting desire to make others share in the experience. And still, with the rarefied usage of the words “religious experience” up to recent times, many people are uneasy in applying them, even now, to what was happening in his inner depths as he changed from seeking a good benefice to seeking the reign of God and it alone.

In my early formation years, “religious experience” would have been a suspect expression. The emphasis was squarely on the will and on acts of the will. A much respected retreat director told us that the love of the angels for God is as cold as ice. In the nine-stage prayer plan that was strongly recommended to us, one of the stages was called “affections”. Fr James Cahalan, our wise director, was at pains to tell us that, even here, we should keep our feelings in their place and that the affections at prayer had little or nothing to do with the kind of love that surrounds siblings in the family circle. I sometimes wondered whether it was his way of keeping silent about his own rich experience of prayer as he tried to encourage those of us who were in continual dryness.

A new perspective

Times have changed. In a lot of approaches to spirituality today, the word “experience” has a central position. We are sometimes told that we are all called to experience God, to be confident in that experience, and that it’s time to move from the experience of authority to the authority of experience. Many people find new meaning in the words of a motet, attributed to St Bernard or to his influence, that we used to sing at Benediction. Paraphrased, one of its lines says that you are speaking polite, meaningless words until you come to experience for yourself the love of Jesus, the Son of God.

It is in the perspectives of my formation years and of changed times that I read Fr Toscani’s book on St Vincent. (1) A sentence that popped out of one of the early pages provides an overview of his understanding of Vincent:

- He was the great contemplative of Charity,
- marked out by an extraordinary mystical experience
- of divine Love

The whole book is an unfolding of the contents of this sentence. It explains the author's striking and sometimes surprising descriptions of St Vincent. They include: a man of ecstasy; a prophet of incarnate love; a man of the liturgy of charity; a man for whom the poor were the head, not the feet, of the Mystical Body; a man with a passionate experience of the mystery of the Incarnation; a man always angered by injustice; a mystic of justice.

A man who experienced God's love; a mystic; a contemplative. The words were certainly not at the centre of the understanding of the charism of St Vincent in which I was formed and in which I have been interpreting him over the years. I realise, of course, that it was only in recent years that we began to talk about charisms. I recall a pre-vows session that the ten of us second year seminarists had with the provincial, Fr James O'Doherty, in 1947. He asked us a disarmingly simple question: What was the greatest characteristic of St Vincent? Some of us opted for simplicity; some for humility; some for love for the poor; some for zeal; and there were a number of other contenders. Fr James declared us all winners. His own preference seemed to be for the implications of St Vincent's words that, if the love of God is a fire, zeal is its flame. The words experience, mystic and contemplative didn't feature. Reflecting on these words now, I see them as wonderful keys to unlock the question put to us by Fr James. They don't take away from the many virtues St Vincent practised and inculcated and the rules and constitutions he continues to ask us to observe in exact detail. All these are like the interlinking pieces of a large, composite picture. Some of the pieces are interesting in their own right. Others have little meaning if taken on their own. The pieces can fall apart. Some can slip out of place. They all need to be constantly re-assembled to help us see the total picture. For St Vincent all the pieces were kept in their rightful place by his continual absorption in the mystery of God expressed in the people he called his lords and masters. These lords and masters provided a daily focus on earth for his contemplation of the things of heaven.

Of his age; for all ages

All the while St Vincent was a man of his age. He interpreted reality in the perspectives of both the limits and the insights of the theology of his time. He classified the virtues in the ways they were commonly classified. His understanding of the unity of body and soul, his approaches to the faculties of the soul, and his convictions about the immortality

of the soul and the resurrection of the body were no more and no less illuminating than those of the best teachers of his time. He shared their perspectives on salvation and reprobation. Arguments for declaring him a doctor of the Church I have up to recently found unconvincing. Rather I have seen him as a great learner from the whole Church.

He learned much about two of his favourite topics, the will and providence of God, from Benet of Canfield; about approaches to the love of God and prayer from Francis de Sales; about the directing of consciences from men like Bérulle and Duval. The list is endless. One could say that his special gift was the making of connections, incarnational connections. He made daily connections between the various kinds of human poverty and the enfleshing of God in the Incarnation. He made connections between the love of God expressed in the Incarnation and the great mystery of love that is at the heart of the Trinity and that overflowed into the world when creation was begun. He made connections between his own friendship with St Louise, the other friendships of which he was part, and the bonds of knowing and loving that unite Father, Son and Spirit. He made connections between our daily acts of charity and the fire of divine love. He made connections between what we do every day and what will happen when the Son of Man returns in glory. He made connections between the loving kindness of God and the reality of divine judgement. He made connections between theology and what we now call spirituality. Maybe there is a space among the doctors of the Church for this great learner and maker of incarnational connections.

At all times, the whole mystery of God was mirrored for him in the people who have been called by different names: the poorest; the most wretched; the offscouring of humanity; the most unfortunate; those most in need of love; those at the human condition's lowest point; the marginalised. A good shorthand for these and similar descriptions is the three Gospel words: the least, the lost, the last. All of St Vincent's connections kept drawing energy from his own experience of God, his absorption into the mystery of God and his contemplation of the "states" of God incarnate. For him, devotion meant a reverent and loving readiness to move with Christ from one state to another, whatever the jolt involved. This readiness sometimes involved leaving God for God.

As he grew in appreciation of the priesthood of Christ, the God he thanked in his daily Eucharist was the God who set in motion the whole network of incarnational connections. There are various shades of opinion about the links between his conversion to the poor and his full conversion to the priesthood. In the working out of the two conversions, there was no tension in his life. In his daily handling of the body given and the blood poured out, he had an ever new experience of the

loving kindness of the heart of God.

A man who experienced

St Vincent was always ready to draw on experiences from various stages of his life. Whatever way we interpret the story of his captivity, it well illustrates his willingness to share life's happenings with those close to him. But, though he drew a lot from life's experiences, he said little or nothing directly about the great experience in the context of which he came to interpret all his experiences. He taught many people how to pray and regular repetition of prayer came to be a feature of his communities. Yet he said precious little about what went on in his own prayer. That was a secret of his heart that he preferred to disclose by his lifestyle and his daily work. The same applies to the experience of God that changed him from mediocrity to being a man on fire. We know some of the markers in his spiritual journey: the accusation of theft; the trial of faith; the mission at Montmirail; the confession of the dying man. It will never be clear whether experiences such as these were stages in which God showed the divine face to Vincent or whether there was a single experience that unified all such showings and that drove him to continual mission and to keep motivating others towards mission. Either way, Vincent became clearer and clearer that it was the God of love who always took the initiative in every new step he was to walk and in every good deed he was to do. We will never find the words to describe the loving initiatives of God in the deep recesses of the heart of Vincent. We do have words to describe their fruits, fruits that still last.

Mercy that can never fail

What aspect of the love of God did Vincent most experience? We are used to saying that the God of the covenant had two great qualities: mercy and faithfulness. In fact there was only one; ever-faithful mercy. This is the mercy that Vincent experienced. It goes by different names: mercy; loving-kindness; love. When St John said that God is love, he was saying nothing new. He was simply summing up the whole covenant. Of this love that is infinitely merciful and kind, Vincent became an untiring agent. He told a sick and anxious brother that God is creative to infinity. There couldn't be a better description of what became his whole life's programme.

As first year seminarists, a few of us were continually amused, sometimes to the point of irreverence, by Vincent's continual striking his breast and declaring his unworthiness. It took me some years to realise what he was really doing. He was speaking a mercy word rather than a crawl-thumping word. He was singing a continual song of thanks to God whose loving-kindness he kept experiencing and of which he

was privileged to be a carrier. He became inebriated with that loving-kindness. He kept detecting the need of it in the least, the lost, the last. But he wasn't content to do the detecting. In the spirit of the Son of God in the Incarnation, he was ready, whatever the cost, to touch into the experience and the pain of those in the very lowest forms of the human condition. To adapt the words of the Apostles' Creed, he was ready to descend with the crucified Christ into every human hell. His great desire was to be an agent of God's loving-kindness to those in the direst forms of poverty and in the greatest need of reconciliation, both in the sacrament that now bears that name and in the countless forms of alienation that are recognised by those who see with the eyes of the God of loving-kindness.

His outlook was strongly kenotic, a word that is being re-discovered in many ways in the Church today. More than most people, Vincent saw that the Son of God emptied himself (Phil. 2:7) that we might be filled (cf Eph. 3:19). It was in this kenotic spirit that he told the young Fr Antoine Durand that he must empty himself in order to put on Jesus Christ. Wherever he saw human emptiness, he was restless until, in the spirit of Mary in the Magnificat, he filled the hungry with good things.

A fire unceasingly active

A man who helped me very much to interpret the spirituality of St Vincent was Fr William Purcell. His article at the time of the tercentenary of St Vincent's death (All Hallows Annual, 1960/61) may need updating in some details. But it goes a long way towards touching the living nerve of the experience of God that was the source of Vincent's programme of charity. The last words of the article are taken from a conference of Vincent to his community, five years before his death: "It is certain that charity, when it dwells in a soul, completely occupies all its powers. There is no rest; it is a fire which is unceasingly active, keeping the person it inflames always keyed up and always in action".

It is clear that these words made a deep impression on Fr William. He had already quoted them, in full, early on in the article. I believe that they are as near as Vincent came to letting us in on his own very personal experience of the loving-kindness of the heart of God. They are his equivalent of St Paul's statement that Christ "took hold of him" (Phil. 3:12). They are his equivalent of what one writer has called "the impact of God" on St John of the Cross. In the words of wisdom of the seventy-five year old Vincent to the twenty-seven year old Fr Durand, of which Fr William made much, Vincent spells out the implications of what happens when the experience of God completely occupies all one's powers. The key words of this spelling-out are Vincent's appeal to the young seminary rector to have a great communication with Our

Lord in prayer. He went on to describe this communication in terms of drawing on a reservoir. In doing so, he was clearly describing the reservoir from which his own multiple enterprises of charity were resourced.

A man of mystery and of contemplation

In my younger days, the word “mystery” had a rather restricted usage. A mystery was a revealed truth that we cannot understand. We prayed the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary. The Irish language captured something of the riches of meaning in the mysteries. Each was a ‘rún diamhar’, a divine secret, the content of which is continually being unfolded. The great breakthrough came when the very first chapter of the Constitution on the Church came to be entitled The Mystery of the Church. Around the same time, we got more and more used to speaking of the sacraments as sacred mysteries. At the centre of the eucharistic celebration, we rescued the word “mystery” from hiding and we openly began to proclaim the mystery of faith. An important stage in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is the mystagogia, the introduction of the initiated into the deeper meaning of the mysteries of our faith.

As the understanding of mystery unfolded over the years, the word “mystic” lost some of its mystique. In the seminary, I knew that St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila were mystics. After that I wasn’t sure. There was a rumour that one of our recently ordained was a mystic. In those days, if I heard Karl Rahner’s dictum that only the mystics will survive, I would have been, at the very least, depressed. Nowadays I see the mystics as those who are steeped in the mystery of God and of the Church. I wouldn’t for a moment hesitate to say that St Vincent was a mystic. I know that, like Abelly before him, William Purcell said he would be slow to call Vincent a mystic. This may sound strange, coming from a man who had many marks of the great mystics. Anybody who saw him at prayer, behind the shadows of the choir stalls in All Hallows, saw a face looking into the face of God.

There have been many new stirrings in the language of spirituality since William Purcell’s time. There has been a lot of redefining of words connected with spirituality and mysticism. We have revised our understanding of nature and grace. We are wondering how normative are the Dionysian three stages of the spiritual life. We have new perspectives on the interacting of body, mind and spirit. Serious writers are asking whether the words “religious experience” are a misnomer, since all that are directly experienced are unaccustomed movements in the uncharted areas of body, mind and spirit. We have been so long emphasising St Vincent’s call to love God with strength of arm and sweat of brow and listening to him telling us to find all our work in activity that it takes some adjustment to recognise him as a mystic; but we are helped by the

new perspectives. His mysticism didn't dispense him from the normal ways of knowing and loving. His mysticism was of the earth, but it was of an earth that was always rising up to the heaven from which it kept receiving fruit-giving dew. We know the authenticity of his mysticism by its fruits.

St Vincent deserves the name contemplative as much as he deserves the name mystic. A con-templ-ative lives in the temple and in the temple atmosphere. Vincent had no rival in recognising and building up the living stones in God's temple, especially the stones most rejected by human builders. Though he talked little about beauty, he saw the rejected human stones as beautiful and precious stones reflecting the beauty of God. He told the young Daughters of Charity that they were tabernacles of God. This was a strong and continual reminder that God's Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. It was also a programme of life. Every day a Daughter of Charity is called to discover in what frail human flesh Jesus Christ is now tabernacling. This is how she is to be, in Vincent's words, a Daughter of God's love. In a famous address, he alerted the Daughters to the fact that they had all experienced contemplative prayer. With his usual reserve, he didn't say that he himself had the same experience but the implication is obvious. He was a temple man talking to temple women. He saw contemplation as a gift that only God can give, but he was assured that God gives the gift to those who live in the temple and in the temple precincts.

An urgent agenda

- Experience God's loving kindness and enable the poorest to experience it;
- Be a mystic;
- Be a contemplative.

This is the agenda that the Spirit of God, in new ways and old, keeps presenting to all who call themselves Vincentians. In the Congregation of the Mission, we have had a variety of forms of charism statements, mission statements, statements about our constitutions, and norms for action. They all have their place but there is a continual danger that we could lose sight of the total plot. We are called to perpetuate the charism of a great saint. Our vision of this charism is always in danger of being fragmented. We can read our Common Rules and notice what they say about the one course for the Friday evening meal as much as what they say about the Trinity. The truth is that Vincent saw that even the dietary and other minutiae can help us to focus all our energies into the mystery of the Trinity and of God enfleshed. The same applies to all he said about mortification, about indifference, about detachment. They

are so many helps to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2) and to identify with him in all his states. In the process, we learn to love as Vincent loved and do as he did. A founder's experience of God is very personal, but we can confidently hope that as we try to walk the walk of our founder, we will somehow share in and perpetuate his great experience.

I thank Fr Toscani for helping me see Vincent's charism in terms of experience, mysticism and contemplation. I thank him for disturbing me and calling me to a continual adjustment of my binoculars as I try to spot who are the least of the brothers and sisters of Jesus – now. Without that adjustment, I could become a blind and deaf Vincentian. Not that all my ministry or all the ministry of the Vincentian community to which I belong needs to be for the least, the lost and the last. We are part of a Church that is the sacrament of salvation not for the poor only but for all. What is dearly to be hoped is that the light of a practical concern for the least of the Lord's sisters and brothers in the human family will keep continually shining through the ministry of every member of every community that calls itself Vincentian.

I thank the Lord for having known many men and women who had received a spark from St Vincent's charism. Watching Ger Robinson when he was old and dishevelled but still chuckling gave me glimpses of the loving-kindness of the heart of God. Seeing Kevin Cronin's feel for the beautiful embodied in various ways in the building up of St Mary's reminded me of St Vincent's ability to see the beauty of God in people that many regarded as human junk. Watching William Purcell looking into the face of God helped open my own eyes. I pray that I will keep moving from shadows and images into the truth.

NOTES

1. *The Spirituality of the Poor* by Giuseppe Toscani CM, translated by Myles Rearden CM

Material From *Donna Nella Carita*

On St Louise de Marillac

Assunta Corona DC, Sardinia, 1991.

Translated and selected by Myles Rearden CM

HER SPIRITUALITY

The intuition of the mysticism of the poor

What is said of the mysticism of Vincent de Paul can also be said, indirectly, of Louise de Marillac: 'The degree of his mysticism is shown by (her) heroic Charity, based as it was on the consciousness that only 'effective' love is credible and loveable, because it is beautiful. The authenticity of (her) mysticism is guaranteed by the assessment that has to be made of his contemplation: God is Love and reveals himself as such in the lovability of the *kenosis* of the Son' (1). If there are any who raise unwarranted doubts regarding the mysticism of St Vincent, in the case of St Louise all uncertainty seems to be overcome to the point of making her a mystic of the Holy Spirit:

My prayer [the saint writes during her Pentecost retreat of 1657] was more contemplative than rational, and [I had] a great attraction for the Sacred Humanity of our Lord, with the desire of honouring and imitating it as much as possible in the person of the poor and all my neighbours, knowing that He [Jesus] has taught us charity to make up for the fact that we cannot do him any service in his own person. This thought entered my heart in a quite particular and most intimate way. (2)

Louise reached this liberating interior experience after passing in her spiritual journey through earlier stages of a very different kind. Her subjective experience of pain and marginalization did not become for her a motive of personal grief, something merely private producing a dispirited and inward-looking kind of religion, but became, in the light of the Holy Spirit, a formidable instrument of knowledge. Her personal short-comings shaped themselves into such a paradigm of universal impoverishment that it led her into the condition of a mother of the poor, and established her in the 'state' of Christ the poor person. Basically she came to an understanding of the relation between humanity and nature that excluded any possibility of escaping the determinism of events, guided mysteriously by forces beyond the mind's capacity to control or modify them (In this can be seen the influence of Renaissance culture,

which formed part of Calvinism and the Jansenist reinterpretation of Augustinian thought concerning grace. The negative rigorism, according to which human nature cannot raise itself up to God, seems to be the religious version of the secular idea of 'Fortuna' [Luck] which was very widespread in the 1500s.) It was Louise's destiny, or rather, grace, not to remain abandoned in the bleakness of her prospects.

Her meeting with Vincent de Paul was the decisive moment at which different aspects of her life came together, directing her contemplative and mystical gaze towards a precise point, in which the fullness of her femininity could re-awaken and come together in the form of authentic motherhood, with a single focus: giving life to those who were called to the same mystery of love as she was, by living in vital communication with them. In all of this, the unifying element, which arouses the desire of adhering to and coming to resemble the model, and calls Louise's whole affectivity into action, is the attractiveness of the Sacred Humanity of our Lord, and the consequent driving passion of honouring and serving him in his 'suffering members, the poor'.

Louise is by now totally invested in her affectivity, the dynamic mover of human action. Her prayer has passed beyond abstractions and reasoning. Once admitted by grace into vision, she experiences '...a great attraction for the Sacred Humanity of Our Lord'. The fascination of the vision resolves itself into a determination, felt as a 'desire', to honour this humanity. Everything converges in her 'heart', moved in an inexpressible manner. Words are not enough to express the intensity of the experience. The generic phrase 'in a quite particular way' is the apophatic profession of someone who knows that linguistic symbols are faint and powerless signs of what the soul has seen with the undeniability of a dazzling light, but could never express except hesitantly and with comparisons that are eloquent only to the extent of suggesting more than they can say.

The event of Pentecost 1657 is the third such experience singled out by biographers and specialists as being among the most convincing manifestations of the transforming union with which the Incarnate Word wished to enter into with this delicate and sensitive woman: the others being her Pentecost experiences of 1623 and 1630. It represents the crowning jewel of the series of experiences that progressively constitute a golden thread of graces granted to the Saint. There is a distinctive and almost feminine quality associated with them all, referring back to the 'Illumination' in 1623.

Anniversaries, whether of the Feast of Pentecost, or of her widowhood, continue to be mysteriously linked until the end of her life. God came to her in the hard realities of her life, in her tragedies and fears. He drew her out of these negative experiences into maturity and fullness of life.

The mystical nuptials

Louise had an experience on 5th February 1630 that has unique importance in her spiritual growth. It was the anniversary of her marriage to Anthony Le Gras, and there is no coincidence in her having the experience on that day. It reflects back to her Pentecost 'Illumination', when she was set free from the anxiety she had about having failed in her commitment to consecrate herself to God.

The experience occurred on the day Louise was preparing herself to set out on a visitation of the Confraternity of Charity at St. Cloud, which was her second mission. 'At Holy Communion it seemed to me that Our Lord was giving me the thought of receiving him as the spouse of my soul, and in fact this was a kind of espousal, and I felt myself more powerfully united to God by this thought, a very unusual one for me, and I had the thought of leaving everything so as to follow my Spouse and to consider him from then on as such and endure the difficulties I had encountered, accepting them as part of the sharing of his goods'. 'The Holy Spirit is always moving towards Jesus', as P Evdokimov puts it, and so it was with Louise, in her case knowing and loving Jesus as her spouse. That it was her wedding anniversary stands as a symbol of mystical nuptials and shows the affinity Louise saw between human spousal love and the love of God. She did not feel any need to conceal the symbolic model to which she referred. The spousal symbol came naturally to her from her familiarity with the Rheinland-Flemish tradition of writing and from the Spanish school of Teresa and John of the Cross, and merits some attention.

Louise's affectivity receives a decisive and irreversible orientation in her illumination of 1623, but the full awakening, capable of meeting the fundamental need of her affectivity, had not yet arrived. As someone deeply conscious of symbols, Louise was aware from her condition of life and her sensitivity, of the incompleteness in herself and never ceased her quest for fulfilment. So turning to the nuptial symbol to express the desire of an encounter with the Beloved is not simply the result of external influences. Her whole story can be summarised as a long journey towards the conjugal encounter. Louise's religious soul is by nature and by grace a spousal one. In her arduous journey, she recalls the journey of the lover who repeatedly turns towards the house of the beloved and attains a shared life with him only when she can say, 'I am you.' The nuptial symbol is connatural to her. The passivity of the mystical experience finds in her feminine soul a receptive availability to the life-giving action of the Holy Spirit.

The significance of this symbolic image is not, however, to be found in the psychological aspect of affective exchange between the spouses, but in the reciprocal and definitive commitment between the two lovers

never to leave each other. Marriage, essentially, is a binding of two people into a single life, all the more so when 'God is pleased so to unite himself to a creature as never to separate from her'. Louise insists on the point of fidelity to the divine loved one, to the point of wanting to abandon everything so as to belong exclusively to her spouse whose destiny of suffering she intends to share. She is not conscious that true love is not a matter of the emotions, but shapes the will in active co-operation: 'the highest point of interpersonal bonding, far from being fixed on affective exchanges, reaches to a universal dimension... It means sharing even in a life of action... True love does not isolate one from other people, but co-operates in the work of salvation.'⁽³⁾ According to the biographers, after this notable gift of herself, Louise carried out her visitation to the Charities with such zeal as to arouse the admiration and the concern of Vincent.

The period between 1623 and 1630 still represents only the approach to mystical union. She reached it as a definitive state after 1650. The document of 1657 above referred to is the most reliable evidence of her doing so.

CHAPTER 7; CONTENT AND SYMBOLISM

The Incarnation

In the Incarnation of the Word of God, Louise saw the realisation of the plan of God, intended from all eternity (in this she was influenced by the Scotist school, which she probably knew from youth because of her familiarity with the Capuchins of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré – and, in any case, the same position is held by St Francis de Sales in his *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book II, ch 5). It is not because of the fall of Adam that the Word assumed human nature, but to fulfil the Father's loving plan. No creature could ever have given due glory to God, except the Man-God, who is the true glory of God, created as such by Love, when 'the kindness of God appeared' (Tit 2:11)

In her retreat of 1628, Louise noted: 'The goal that God had in creating our souls with the capacity of being entirely possessed by him and of rejoicing in him and glorifying him, is a motive for us to love him and to learn about the love he has for us.' (A7, 811) In her mature years, this vision of the Incarnation remained with her as she had cultivated it in her youth, when she already recognised that God's love was the ultimate reason for creation. In her contemplation [she realises] that both the Divine essence and human nature, created in its image, require the intimate union of God and humanity. 'In heaven God sees God's own self in human beings because of the hypostatic union of the

Word made man, which God has desired, so that none of the human race should ever be separated from him.' (A15, 828)

This understanding of the Incarnation recurs repeatedly in the Saint's spiritual writings:

Reflecting that I belong to God alone because of who God is and by creation... I saw that I owed my ownership of myself to the plan of God in creating humanity, namely to unite us intimately to him for eternity, even if that meant availing of the only possible means, that is, the Incarnation of the Word. The Word, in his perfect humanity, desired that human nature should participate in the divinity, by way of his merits and his nature, so completely united [with it]. (A26, 983)

Louise puts it more precisely, illuminated by her own inner knowledge, when she says:

And my mind recalled the thought it had formerly, that it was the plan of the Holy Trinity for the Word to become incarnate right from the creation of humankind, so that we might attain the excellence of being that God wished us to have, by way of the eternal union he wished us to have with him.' (Id, 986)

This primary and excelling goal of union did not prevent her seeing the Redemption as an interior aspect of the Incarnation. Reference to Redemption is found in both the Scotist and the Thomist theories, which are not contradictory, but complement each other. 'Scarcely had human nature sinned, when the Creator, with a decision of his divinity, wished to put this fault to rights, and for this purpose, in the greatest and purest love ordained that one of the Three Persons should become a human being.' (A7, 813; A 13bis, 791ff)

Meditating on the beauty of Eucharistic communion, Louise is enchanted by the lovability of God expressing itself as a will to draw all to himself by way of the incarnation of the Word, the source and principle of unspeakable joy: 'Holy Communion in the Body of Jesus Christ brings us really into the enjoyment of the communion of the Saints in Paradise, which was merited for us by the Incarnation and death of the Son of God, in which God is reconciled to human nature in such a decisive way that God can never cease to love humanity.' (A15, 828).

In the same meditation the Scotist conception returns, according to which the 'design' and the 'will' of God bring it about that Humankind will eternally be the glory of God. All her life, Louise held on to the idea that the communion between God and humanity was of the essence of things. The influence of St Vincent introduced new and decisive elements into the already profound meditations of Louise. The

Incarnate Word acquired the human face of Jesus, reflected not in any abstract image, but in the poor.

For years, Vincent had inculcated into the mind of Louise the desire to encounter Jesus Christ, Jesus thought of in the various states of the incarnation, so that he might be the object of her prayer and the objective of her affectivity. Her prayer changed progressively. The presence of God in her soul took on the face of Jesus, desired as a hidden object of love, but made visible in the Eucharist, the outstanding spousal sacrament. ‘...On the feast of St Agatha, 5th February [her wedding anniversary], it seemed to me at Holy Communion that Our Lord gave me the thought of receiving him as the spouse of my soul’, (as we have already seen above). She does not enter into metaphysical abstractions but into the real ‘bodiliness’ of the Eucharist, and thus into relationship with the love of God to the point of experiencing perfect communion with him. The symbolic language of the Eucharist species anticipates the living sacrament of the Humanity of Christ, constituted by his suffering members.

The poetic soul of Louise seeks ‘signs’ that will reveal to her the intimacy and the tenderness of God’s merciful love:

On the feast of St. Benedict... when I had been refused permission to receive communion... I felt myself interiorly drawn by the desire of Holy Communion, and I asked God, if this was what he wanted, to make it known to my confessor. Then, without my speaking to him, he called me to tell me just that, which gave me great consolation. In addition, the goodness of God gave me a sense of his great love... and made me understand that not even sin could prevent his coming to me.

The language of love is not made up of reasoning, but of signs that only the lovers can notice and understand. Louise’s spiritual growth followed this exquisitely Vincentian theme of Jesus being the model and prototype of all humankind, whatever their condition.

Imitating Jesus Christ

In St Vincent, the imitation of Jesus Christ presents a profound and mysterious aspect. It is the capacity of knowing and of loving as Jesus knew and loved, equally richly in every sphere of existence. This produces a transformation of one’s whole being by a progressive assimilation to Christ, in accordance with the Bérullian theme of ‘adherence’.

The aim of the Company is to imitate Our Lord, insofar as poor and weak creatures can. What does that mean? It means that the Company has set itself to conform itself to Christ in its conduct, in its actions,

in its duties and in its goals... So it is necessary, if we aim at making ourselves comparable to this divine model, and if we feel our hearts inflamed with this desire... for us to aim at conforming our thoughts, our works and our intentions with his.' (SV XII, 75, first conference on the Common Rules, 6.12.1658)

As usual, Vincent leaves his earlier teachers, and distances himself from them very quickly with quite an original interpretation. For him, 'adherence' implies the idea of a transfusion into us of the very being of Jesus, with all his divine/human experience, in communion with the Trinitarian operations, so that he genuinely becomes our life. It could be said that 'adherence' to Christ fixes definitive union with God and proper closeness to all human beings, directly transforming relationships with God and the neighbour, that is, religion and charity: which for St Vincent are the two great virtues of Jesus Christ.

Louise enters into the dynamic of religion and charity to become 'conformed to the same inclinations and dispositions that Jesus Christ had on earth... (so as to) operate in the same manner as Jesus Christ'. (SV XII, 96)

Vincent with Louise accentuates participation in the Spirit of Christ in humiliation and suffering. ('Go to communion to honour the pains, the contradictions, the exhaustion and the fatigue that he underwent and so that he may wish ... to give you the grace to endure the pains that you have, in the same way as he endured his.' (Cf. SV I, 65) For this reason 'action in favour of the poor continues the Incarnation of Christ, places us in communion with him, makes us live in him: our paradise and our heaven... not in the abstractions of pious devotions, but in the misery of the poor... The kenosis of Love, in the painful offering [of self] for the poor, inevitably recalls the symbol of the Cross: the Love of Jesus always involves the Cross... with the attitudes of Jesus himself.'(4)

Jesus Christ in his kenotic state of Incarnate Word is the synthesis of all the sanctity that is possible for human nature and therefore the summit of union between creature and God. It is on that principle that is founded the criterion that sees Jesus as the perfect model to imitate in all conditions. This theology is fundamentally Bérullian, is developed by St Vincent, and is transfused in St Louise who absorbs it and makes it profoundly her own. 'To keep, as much as I can, my mind occupied in honouring the glory that the sacred humanity of Our Lord receives in heaven, and remembering the path he followed on earth, with the desire of imitating him.' (A10)

Just as the deer longs for water, so my soul longs for my God. I will prepare myself with a great desire of being united to God, so that, like the food that the human body takes in gives it the quality that it

(the food) possesses, so the union of God with my soul will make it conformable to him, and receiving the precious body of my Saviour will lead me to imitate his most holy life.' (A 42)

Belonging to Christ generates lovability and correspondence in Louise's following of him. Steps taken to imitate the humanity of Jesus are repeated to the point of applications [of his teaching] that are more original and unusual: '...The Son of God comes to make himself a pilgrim, because his life was a continuous pilgrimage, which should serve as an example for ours.' (A 36) The insistent recalling of the humanity of Jesus Christ leads Louise to utilise a deeply biblical symbol that she called 'air', which could be called 'breath', which she used to express the presence of God. It is a touch, a movement, a sentiment of the most delicate love, which the consciousness senses like a living presence. The Christian lives immersed in the breath of Christ's presence like the original inhabitants of Eden enjoying the Creator's invisible presence.

It seems to me that... the sacred humanity of Our Lord is continually present to us... like air without which the soul does not live... This thought came to me from the fact that I have desired for some time to have the love of the sacred humanity of Our Lord, so as to be impelled to practice his virtues, especially those of kindness and humility.' (A14)

In a synthetic view Louise comes to the knowledge of Christ as a privileged and unique symbol, capable of leading to the knowledge of God. For this reason the mysteries that took place in the bodily life of Jesus become a paradigm for the destiny of humanity. The whole life of Jesus, from his hidden existence in the Virgin's womb to his ascension, is the revelation of God. Christ, as a symbol, is the only way that permits us to reach the divine level. From the affective point of view it is fundamental that the creature should be led to God by way of sensible realities, and, among these, the principal is the humanity of Christ.

In the last days of her life, only two months before her death, in a loving prayer in which her desire is transformed into a yet more intimate sentiment of communion and into a more intense perception of union with Jesus Christ, it was finally revealed to Louise that everything is an expression of grace, or lovability, of harmony:

On the feast of St Genevieve (January 3rd) 1660, when going to Holy Communion, and seeing the sacred host, I felt an extraordinary thirst, which came from the sense that He wished to give himself to me in the simplicity of his divine Infancy. On receiving him, and for a long time afterwards, my spirit was filled with an interior communication,

which made me understand that He was giving not only himself, but also all his merits and all his mysteries. This realization lasted all the day, not as forced concentration, but as a presence and awareness in my various occupations. I felt this warning in myself: since Jesus is giving himself entirely to me...without my desiring it or seeking it, the grace of my God will accomplish his will in me.' (M 8bis.)

The symbolism of the life of Jesus obliges St Vincent and St Louise to transform their understanding of the human story, because they realise that only in concrete situations, in requirements of charity for those who are in need, is the mystery of God revealed. Jesus becomes the soul of their whole life. In their life he becomes their spirit [mind and heart], in their spirit their mission of charity [the commitment of their wills], and in charity their practise of mercy [in all its everyday details]. [Engagement in the project of Jesus Christ makes every human life a revelation of God.]

The lightness of the real

The life of Louise, marked from the beginning by great and disorienting pain, rises, in her contemplation of the Divine Word, to a lightening of the pain. There are two poles in her renewed existence: on one side, the weight of reality, like a journey dominated by the dullness that comes from the concreteness of things, of bodies, of the world, of sensations, almost a journey through hell. On the other side, the lightness of the gaze that, without denying reality, claims it as one's own, takes charge of it, looking at it not directly but through another space, with other eyes, with a different logic, with other ways of knowing. This vision is possible for those who explore the world with the eyes of God.

St Vincent puts it more simply by saying that it is necessary to turn the medal in order to see the poor as beautiful with the beauty of Christ's love:

I ought not to consider a poor countryman or woman by appearances; neither by their apparent mentality; very often they hardly have the facial appearance nor the intelligence of rational people, so rough and earth-bound they seem. But turn the medal, and you will see with the light of faith that the Son of God, who chose to be poor, is shown to us in these poor people; he hardly had the appearance of a man in his passion, to the Gentiles he seemed mad and to the Jews a scandal; but he called himself the Evangelizer of the poor: "He sent me to preach the gospel to the poor". O God! How beautiful it is to see the poor, if we see them in God, and with the esteem he has for them! But if we look at them in a sensual and worldly way, they will seem contemptible to us.' (SV, XII 95)

What is innovative about the mystics of Charity consists in this surprising capacity to transcend the real, not by escaping into a mystical and irrational dream, but in being able to retain the exactness, the precision, the weight of the real without turning it to stone, and rather lifting it up in the transfiguration of the divine. The two poles of the Incarnation are brought to life in this way, a perennial incarnation in which matter and spirit do not cancel each other out, but come together in transformation. In the Incarnation the Word of God makes an unequivocal choice. Of the infinite number of ways he could have chosen, he preferred as a matter of history to take on the darker and less elevating reality: the world of the poor.

Louise, in perfect harmony with Vincent, allows herself to move with this vision of incarnate Love. Like her teacher and friend, she does not have any sterile idealisation of the poor, does not reduce them to an abstract object of pointless dedication, does not make them a matter of ideology, but comes down with transformed heart to the level of the poor with whom she feels intimately connected. Within the limits of reality she abandons herself to desire, because her heart is disposed to an unlimited openness, like that of Jesus, infinite in Love, although limited in historical realisation. Her vision arises from the surprise of being captured by the divine presence that subjects her to Charity. She searches for the essence of the divine, intellectually at first, and therefore dimly and with difficulty, but now finds it in its undeniable reality, as the Love of God communicated to her mind. The beauty of discovering [the service of the poor] finally opens her to freedom, firmly rooted in the depth of Love.

In the mystical vision of the Incarnation, one symbol returns more frequently than the others, and governs them all as a unifying pole: the *heart*.

The heart – a privileged symbol

In his spiritual direction of St Louise, Vincent presents Jesus as *the heart of our hearts*.

The love of God follows different paths for everyone: in this case it brings Vincent and Louise into harmony with each other. In the light of Vincent's guidance, Louise reaches the same mystical intuition: Christ enters into mystical nuptials with them not in the brilliant light of Tabor, but on Calvary, where the Heart of the Incarnate Word, in humiliation and suffering, is the most powerful model and symbol.

Just as John sees the glory of God in the crucified one, so it is with Louise, in her mystical union with the mission of the Word, and in the devotion of her loving heart. Her eyes see the enormous and fearsome realities of history and of the world, in its inertness and obscurity, and

her heart trembles with the 'I thirst' of Christ on the cross. The cruel burden of the cross shows its saving power in the almost imperceptible luminosity of the divine thirst. Knowing that all had been accomplished. Jesus said: 'I am thirsty!' ...Let us understand, O my soul, how (this word) is said to you alone: I am thirsting for your faithful love. (A21.)

It would have been impossible for Louise, with her feminine sensitivity, not to be aware of the 'vulnerability' of the Love of God. The theology of the time, focused strongly on the philosophy of being, served to move her in another direction, so that she was moved by the 'passibility' of God, [God's capacity to suffer]. She was deeply wounded in her own affectivity, so that unlike John and many saints she could not rest on the breast of the Lord. (5) She was excluded from the strongest emotional states, and her language does not contain those expressions of ardent love that are the privileged expressions of powerful feelings.

Drawn by the mystery of Christ, Louise centres her affective attention on him. The flames that begin from the divine heart give rise to an awareness of the love of God, of real incarnate charity, which is superior to every other symbol. Her contemplative disposition leads here to extent her affectivity to the knowledge of God's plan for her. She spontaneously moves from the visible manifestation (an image of the heart of Christ) to the invisible reality, with the symbolic dynamism that is characteristic of her.

It is no surprise that she should undergo such suffering, being taken as she was from the ranks of the nobility and sent into the world of the misfortunate. Her consciousness of sharing in the Cross of Christ seals the inner core of her spirituality and her contemplation.

Right from its origin the emblem of the Company, representing a flaming heart with the crucifix at its centre, is the richest symbol of Louise's spirituality. It synthesises an infinitely rich body of meaning. It can be decoded with a view to expressing its salient points, but it should be remembered that all interpretation is also diminution, an impoverishment that cannot be helped. The best way to penetrate the symbol is to allow it settle in ones interior and in the memory, and gradually to analyse its details and its totality.

The image projects into a single space events that are successive, so that the delay in attaining salvation is overcome. The heart, which serves as the background to everything, declares the absolute revelation that 'Love is God'. Louise, unlike other mystics, although she does not use sensational images to express her won affective states, when she is mysteriously introduced into the intimacy of Christ, completes her vision with the image of the Heart (which by its oval line expresses fullness and perfection.)



An objection may be raised to the inherent risk of the Heart symbol. This depiction, considered outside a strong faith context, could hide the fact that the Love of God does not provide any cosy or self-indulgent delight, but is a redemptive and saving love, really aimed at overcoming all the obstacles that keep God's creatures at a distance. In this context the image acquires all its symbolic value: the heart stands for all human reality, soul, body and spirit. It speaks of a person, and of the only person, Jesus, whose heart is all love. The Crucifix within the heart seamlessly expresses that.

The Crucifix within the Heart

This striking and essential composition synthesises Louise's whole spirituality. The love of God chooses to reveal itself to humanity exclusively in the Son, by whose death on the cross is made visible what could otherwise not be known: 'the merciful love of God'. Although Louise lacks the extraordinary powers of imagination of other mystics, she is nonetheless captivated by the attraction of that heart which represents the object of her desire for communion, without any embellishments or further consequences. When she is conformed to the ecstatic state of Christ on the cross, her overwhelming raptures remain at the level of mystical graces, veiled in suffering and hidden from indiscreet eyes.

So far as our sources go, it seems that the secondary phenomena that often accompany mystical experience are almost entirely absent from Louise's life. Apart from a few exceptions, there are no visions, nor locutions nor other such phenomena to indicate that she had mystical gifts. Louise participates in the mystery of Christ in a humble (kenotic) way: it is mediated in the passion of her life, extending over a long time and always accepted as 'grace' whereby she can expend herself entirely for the sake of Christ suffering in his 'poor members'.

Initially, the agility of her spirit and her intelligence seems to be converted into a state of heaviness or paralysis. Only the vision given to her gratuitously leads her into the mystery of the suffering Christ and radically modifies her existence. After that comes unity in her life: her faculties become progressively ordered and acquire direction; her

heart, once the object of her love has been found, no longer disperses its energies, but uses them in a generativity that for all its seeming lowliness is extraordinarily fertile.

An essential element of this interior dynamic is the love that bound Louise and Vincent together: it is a love originating and sustained on the level of spiritual realities, based on an original genius for poetic symbolism, to the point that each saw in the other something uniquely and singularly sacramental.

The eye that is not illuminated by faith will see in every reality only a purely natural phenomenon, closed in on its own finiteness. But a spiritual person, guided by an indomitable prophetic intuition, continually confers lightness and freshness on reality; in everything, he or she finds an opportunity for entering further into the mystery. Where the majority will find only natural attraction, the saints see the irresistible imagination of infinite Love's delicate creativity. The affectivity of Louise, which was complex and sensitive to mystery, when bound to the earthly concerns of the essentially linear Vincent, comes to contemplate the mystery of Christ in an open, pliable, living, sparkling and expansive way, as is suggested by the flames surrounding the heart where the Crucified Lord resides. Flames, the eternal symbol of power and of the ardour of love, destroy and spread. These two tendencies recall the older symbolism of the primordial archetypes of 'eros' (love) and 'thanatos' (death). Only in the heart of Christ can be understood the positive thrust of the motto: *Christ's charity drives us on*. How best to translate St Paul's 'drives us on'?

Human existence is often tormented by many passions. The richer people are, the more many-sided and gifted, the more they are 'driven on' in many directions. Louise must have experienced this, constrained as she was by culture, social position, health and some aspects of her temperament, to keep the urgency of her spirit concealed within herself. Pentecost, the liberating festival, exploded within her the discovery that Christ's Charity mobilises all the faculties for the expression of love. It does not mean the suppression of any gift, but the exaltation of all one's inner dynamism, as the risk, indeed, of an explosion that is only superficial and eccentric, lacking in consistency. That eternal Crucifix is the guarantee of Love's authenticity. Charity is life that is born in mystical death.

The Crucified King of the soul

Louise made an altar to God of her own soul: 'On All Saints Day...it seemed to me that God wanted to enter my life... as into his own inheritance or into a place that belonged entirely to him, and for that reason I could not deny him entry, but that, being his property, I should

receive him joyfully as my sovereign owner whom I simply wish to please and desiring my heart to be his Majesty's residence.' (A 17)

Ruled over by Christ's love, the soul does not cease to love with a human heart. 'I should make Jesus to be master in my soul, as he has justly been made its king.' The symbol of kingship is universally used to indicate love's authority, because it expresses well the freedom, the power, the possessiveness and the strength of a loving lordship. But if the Latin poet states, 'Not well together in one house do stay / Majesty and love' (Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*) in Christ power and love are joined in harmony by the agreement of opposites. In the two sides when they are not separated, the feminine finds fulfilment, peace, consolation, and overwhelming joy.

The heart of Louise: image of the heart of Christ

The openness, availability and generativity of Louise's heart are expressed with charming simplicity when she writes to Sister Helliot:

If your heart is as courageous as I have been told, Oh, I love it with all my heart and more, because it must be honoured and loved for the way all these effects are brought about in it by the love of God. I beseech this holy love to inflame it completely... He is too good, dear sister, let us love each other greatly in him, but also let us love him in ourselves, because we are his. (A5)

It is rare to find in Louise's letters such spontaneous and genuine expressions. The written words here reveal a joyful and lively state of mind. The symbol of the heart once again unfolds a unifying but complex vision. It gives a glimpse of the rich interior experience of the Saint in the higher states of contemplative life.

The dynamism of the love of God takes possession of the heart of Louise so as to make true the line of the mystic 'let us go to see each other in your beauty'. What there is here is a threefold reciprocity of her heart with God: direct, love in God's own self; mediated, in charity, through the heart of the brother or sister; and interior, in herself, in the [divine] indwelling.

The heart offers itself according to the primordial spiritual dynamism in a marvellous affective exchange. The eternal opening of the heart of God, the source of all goodness, is affirmed: 'he is too good'. The symbolism of the flame, with the more explicit meaning of purification, recalls the themes of assimilation in the same divine fountain. The transparent simplicity of the language conveys the consciousness that only 'by grace' is anyone introduced into this state, whose guarantee is not to be found in the eccentric forms of mysticism, with phenomena like levitation, visions, locutions, etc., but in perfect conformity to the

will of God: ‘God has given us the grace of wanting to work for his glory alone and for the good of our sisters and of all our neighbours.’

It is not ascetical striving, but the passive contemplative state that places someone in the condition of working solely for the glory of God. The magic circle in which the lover encloses the beloved makes her conscious of belonging totally to the lover. Louise is by now established in a new cognitive form of love.

So, let Our Lord be in our heart and our heart in his, so that they may be three in one and one in three and we may wish nothing except what he wishes. (Vincent to Louise, Vol 2)

The one who loves, wishes to love more perfectly, because the measure of love is to love without measure. Louise’s love is overflowing: ‘Tomorrow is (the anniversary of the day) when the good God made me know his will once and for all, and on this day I shall see what his holy love will make over to my heart in perpetuity.’ The desire of Louise does not differ substantially from that of the greatest mystics.

The Lord of Charity

Like the spouse in the Song of Songs, Louise was a person of powerful desires. In the impassioned vigil of her life, Vincent was her privileged confidant. It was from him that she wished to obtain the image of Christ: ‘I ask... your kindness whether there is in any of your books an image that is somewhat like that of Charity. Could you do me the favour of giving me one?’

The watercolour representing the Lord of Charity is well known, and is ascribed by tradition to Louise herself. Beyond its somewhat stylised elements, it recalls the theme of the burning heart with reference to the heart of Christ.

Louise has left us also a text of remarkable depth, inspired by the parable of the sower, and linked to the symbol of the heart: ‘...I wanted to sow in the heart of Jesus everything that my soul produces and the actions of my heart, so that everything might receive from his merits the capacity to grow, since it exists only from him and in him, and since he has wished to lower himself from being by nature (divine)...’ (A15bis, left incomplete by Louise). The heart of Jesus exercises its lordship by promoting, in whoever gives himself or herself to him, a perennial conversion to charity. Those who honour him, fortified by his love, are not satisfied to venerate him with relaxed and pleasant devotions, but honour him by their compassion for the poor.

The poor within the Crucified One

To the eyes of the believer the poor appear as 'sorrowful images of him who in his passion hardly seemed like a human being. Christ resides mysteriously within them.' (6) To Louise, faithful worshipper of the crucified God, was disclosed the surprising truth that the 'kenosis' of the Son of God is perpetuated in the poor, and that action on their behalf places a person in the heaven of communion with Christ, there to reside thenceforth.

From 1630, Louise nourished her own prayer with elements borrowed from charity towards the poor: 'The one who does not love does not know God, because God is charity!... The love of creatures participates in this love...but its effects are united to the will in the practice of charity, whether towards God or towards the neighbour. This practice is so powerful that it gives us the knowledge of God... to the point that whoever has more charity has a greater participation in the divine light that with set them alight eternally with Holy Love.' (A 29)

Since charity alone is the source of knowledge, under a particular spiritual impulse, Louise longs to cast her own soul into the heart of Jesus, so as to perform the same actions as he. Her desire to share fully in the life of Christ makes her open to spending her entire life in the service of others, so that they can climb up the Tabor of the transfiguration:

...I will notice the charity of the Apostles, who were not content to go alone, but led there by their teaching and example a great number of people. I will try to imitate this way of acting as much as I can, bringing about the salvation of my neighbour for the glory of God.' (A 5)

While she was working on a draft for the rule of the Company of Charity, Louise clarified for herself that the service of the poor makes permanent the mission that the Christian community carried out in regard to the Sacred Humanity of Christ: 'The Confraternity of Charity... has been instituted to honour Our Lord... to honour in some way the ladies and girls who followed and provided for the needs of Our Lord and his Apostles. By so doing (they wish) to work for their personal perfection... and for the corporal and spiritual assistance of the sick poor.' (A 54)

The orientation of Louise's spirituality underwent a significant shift which radically altered her personal way of acting: she passed from a theocentric devotion to a markedly christocentric one. The centre of her religious activity progressively became the honouring of Christ.

The Virgin Mary provided Louise's feminine mind with its most attractive model for worship. Just as the Virgin underwent the loss of her

Son's presence to her sight, so Louise experienced the same absence. Her suffering was not lived in empty self-pity, but rather became the dynamic principle of charity for a perpetual presence of Christ in the world.

To keep my mind as occupied as I can in honouring the glory which the sacred humanity of Our Lord receives in heaven... with the desire of imitating him; and also to consider the Holy Virgin who accepted the loss of her Son, remaining on earth for the good of Christians. (A 10)

The measure of Louise's love derives from the intensity of her desire, which gives to her piety a virginal sensitivity, continually called on by the suffering call of the sacred humanity of Jesus: 'I thirst... I am thirsting for your faithful love.' The power of her piety is shown its capacity to hear the Word of Life. Only the Holy Spirit opens the soul to listen to the word of God in the realities of today. Her spirit will no longer wander in the cold immobility of a museum, or an empty heaven populated by spectres or imaginary beings. Now it will remain in communion with Christ in the only way possible: 'the incarnation of Love.'

Christ's divinity does not cancel his humanity: it renders it capable of perpetuating in history the mission of his incarnation. The thirst of Jesus, in the exercise of charity and in fidelity to the obligations imposed by love, becomes Louise's own thirst: see her reference to communion on the feast of St Genevieve above. (M 8bis. Cf. above, p359)

Like St Paul, Louise could say, 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me' (Gal.2: 20). Her piety, which was deeply emotional, injected dynamism and effectiveness into her life and led her to see in the actuality of daily life the presence of the Incarnate Word, to assuage the thirst of the soul.

It is said of St Vincent that in his contemplation he rejoiced in the epiphany of Christ and that in his life, by the exercise of charity, he entered definitively into the dwelling-place of Love, where the ecstasy of Jesus is also situated: the abjection of the poor. (7) Louise entered into the same vision, because the grace was given to her of inheriting completely the 'family property' (of Vincent). A new creation, invisible to the eyes of the world, took its origin, its lifeblood, in the secret of their two souls, united in the same charism.

With characteristic modesty, but quite clearly, Louise shows in her spiritual writings a conception of religion that is in perfect harmony with the idea of Vincent. For him, there is only one true religion: that of charity that unites affective and effective love in the Crucified one, and is found in the poor. Because, 'the person who looks at a poor man or

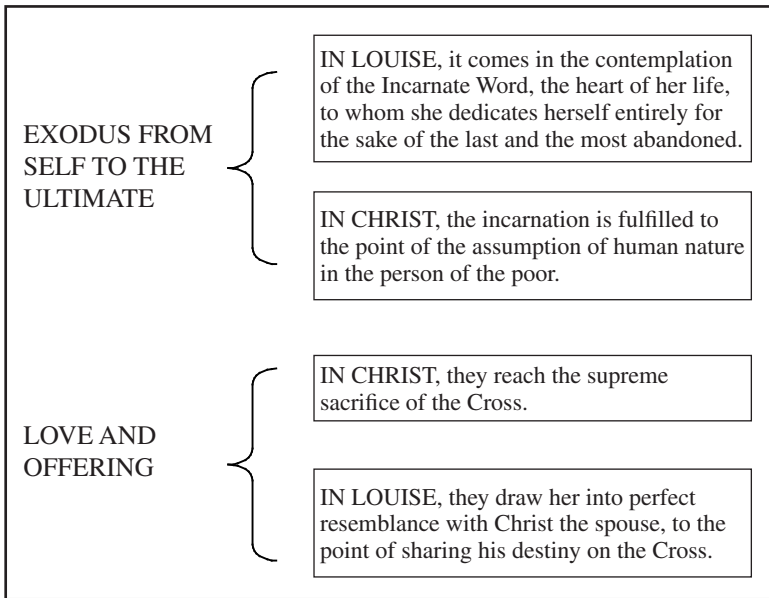
woman as the Crucified one is contemplated, sees the true God as he is in Christ Jesus... After burning away what was first adored in fantasy, another Christ comes to be adored in the poor.' (A 27) In prayer, Louise places herself in the state of extreme poverty so as to adhere fully to the requirements of the will of her Lover, Jesus Christ:

I want it, dear spouse, I want it; and as proof, I follow you to the foot of your cross, which I choose for my cloister. (A27)

She never again leaves this cloister, which is love alive in the Sacred Humanity of Our Lord. She remains there 'as far as possible in the person of the poor and of all my neighbours'. (A26) Guided by the 'intellectus fidei' in which the intelligence is illuminated and the spirit is moved by Love, Louise sees the fulfilment of her desire to 'conceive Jesus through love.' (A9).

What is, for Vincent, a transfusion of the being of Jesus himself into the loving soul, is, for Louise, like a real 'conception', similar to what occurs in fertilisation. Despite her modesty, very delicate in her femininity and her puritanical education, Louise shows a human maturity that is surprising by choosing often, in her reflection, her prayer and her contemplation, symbols taken from the sphere of sexual love. Her experience as a married woman certainly helped provide her with a model and a point of reference better suited (than Vincent's) to express her striving for union with God. Vincent attributed such feminine power to her when he told her, in a tone of paternal reproof, that 'he had never seen a mother who was so much a mother.' (SV, IV) It found its expression by grace in the sublimation of a spiritual maternity. '...This neighbour is given to me in place of Our Lord with a degree of love that his goodness knows and that he has made my heart understand, even though I cannot express it.' (A26)

Whoever tried to carry out a synthesis of the spirituality of Louise could recognise two constant points of reference in the interplay of her statements: exodus and offering.



From the mysticism of St Vincent, Louise had learned that Jesus Christ is the only response to her tormented questions. Having found his Lord among the poor, he undertook the journey of the cross so as to be crucified with him, in him and for the poor. For this reason in the end, for Louise, following Christ means: becoming like the poor, working for them to the sacrifice of her life.

In the contemplation of Louise, the incarnation projects into history the ecstasy of the Father, constituted by the activity of divine love in favour of humanity, which takes human form with surprising manifestations so as to move even the most hardened hearts. In action, the ecstasy of charity establishes Louise definitively in the dwelling-place of Love, where is situated also the ecstasy of Jesus: the abjection of the poor.

The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love! The cause of love is the esteem for the good (that is) in the thing loved. Since God is most perfect in the unity of his being, he is the eternal love of this essence, by the knowledge he has of his own perfection. The love of the creature participates in this love, so far as the nature of love goes, but the effects [of love] are united to the will in the practice of charity, whether towards God or towards one's neighbour. Such practice is so powerful that it gives us the knowledge of God, not as such and

such, but penetrating into himself and into his greatness, to the point that the one who has most charity has most participation in the divine light that will inflame him eternally with Holy Love. So I want to do all that I can to hold firm to the practice of holy Love, and to sweeten my heart against all the bitterness that could conflict with it. (A29, see p366 above.)

This mystical intuition underlies the whole spiritual evolution of Louise, who since her youth had been especially coved by the abjection to which the Son of God had chosen to submit in the Incarnation. Life condemned Louise to painful forms of poverty. But she received as a gift from Christ the wisdom of the mystery. In suffering she obtained the grace of the cross. On the cross she discovered the human face of Christ. In the crucifixion she lived the most intense participation in God's love for humanity. The cross became lovable for her. Its lovability produced in her detachment from everything that did not contribute to making her life a perennial act of love.

I certainly believe, dear sister, that Our Lord will have made you taste the sweetness that souls who are full of his holy love feel in the midst of the sufferings and anguish of life. If it were not so and you were still on Calvary, be sure that the Crucified Jesus rejoices to see you making your retreat there; and if you have courage enough to remain there, as he did for love of you, be most certain that your coming out (of retreat) will be glorious. (L545)

Adhesion (to the crucified Jesus) led Louise to practice true religion and true charity among the poor. 'You will not have difficulty in leaving any of your exercises... for the service of the poor for the love of God: that is what he asks of you.' (L 547bis)

NOTES

1. G Toscani CM, *Amore, Contemplazione e Teologia*, Pinerolo, Turin 1987, p86
2. St Louise, A 26 (1657)
3. Ch Bernard, *Teologia simbolica*, Rome 1981
4. Toscani, *Amore, Contemplazione e Teologia*, pp 154 & 156
5. Jn 12:25; cf the words of St Teresa of Avila in her *Conceptions of Love of God*, in *Complete Works* translated by EA Peers, Vol II, p384, 'But when this most wealthy Spouse...
6. A Dodin, in *Spiritualità dell'azione*, Rome 1962, pp124ff
7. Toscani, *Amore, Contemplazione e Teologia*, pp 87 & 153.

Selections From St Vincent De Paul; Spirituality and Selection of Writings

By Frs A Orcajo CM and M Perez Flores CM

Selections chosen by Eamonn Flanagan CM

On Prayer (pp 132 ff)

Mental prayer is made with the mind (*mens*) from which it gets its name. Meditation occurs when “having read the text, the spirit is placed in God’s presence, and there occupies itself in finding the meaning of the mystery set before it, that is, the instruction proper to it, and in producing affections to embrace good and avoid evil. And, although the will makes those acts, still the prayer is called prayer of the understanding, because its chief function, which is a seeking, is realised by the understanding.” (SVP IX. 424).

Ordinarily, Vincent de Paul teaches this form of prayer to all, since both learned and unlettered people can reach it. In order to practise this prayer, he proposes the Salesian method, of St Francis de Sales, as being “the easiest” (*idem*), but he gives the freedom to follow any other method, always respecting the action of the Holy Spirit.

(Fr. Orcajo then presents in summary form the method familiar to us: PIR CAR TOP. *PIR* – *Presence of God, Invocation of God and Saints, Representation*; *CAR* – *Considerations (mind), Affections (will), Resolutions*; *TOP* – *Thanksgiving, Offering, Petitions*)

The Prayer of Contemplation

It is that (prayer) in which the soul, in the presence of God, does nothing else except receive what God gives it. It does nothing except what God inspires in it, without any effort on its own part, giving the soul all it could look for, and more.

Have you never experienced this kind of prayer? I am sure you have, at your retreats, at times when you were astonished that without having set up anything. God himself fills your spirit and imprints upon it knowledge which you could never have reached. (SVP IX. 420/1)

Contemplation does not figure among the extraordinary forms of prayer. It is not at all strange, then, that humble village girls, led by the Spirit, can find that they enjoy God “lovingly” and “simply”, or in

wisdom discover the secrets of the Kingdom.

Having reached the prayer of contemplation, Vincent proceeds no further on the terrain of prayer. In regard to anything going beyond the line of the accessible, easy and secure, he is circumspect with an attitude of reserve close to diffidence. This policy, following 1630, in regard to the 'Guerinites', (It is not clear who Orcajo designates by this term, Ed.) who were inclined to Illuminism, shows us, on the one hand, his goodness towards those desiring higher prayer but, on the other hand, it reveals his prudence in not accepting unconditionally an "extraordinary case". Indeed, he thought it a great temerity...presumption and even deception to seek to depart from the ordinary way, and project oneself onto an unknown path, on the pretext of reaching a higher degree of perfection; "perfection, in effect, does not consist in following a form of prayer, but in charity". (Quote from Abelly).

The Nature of Prayer (pp 128 ff)

(Fr Orcajo introduces this section by referring to the prayer of St Louise, who was so deeply influenced by the Holy Spirit in her life generally but, most particularly, in her prayer)

St Vincent in a conference to the Daughters on 31 May 1648, says:

Prayer is an elevation of the spirit to God, through which the soul becomes detached from itself, and goes to seek God, It's a conversation of the soul with God, a mutual communication in which God says internally to the soul what he wants it to know and do, and where the soul tells God all that he himself (God) has given to the soul to know what to ask for.

This Vincentian definition of prayer is more complete than the Salesian but relies upon it. Let us look at the elements to see what he says to us.

'Elevation of the spirit to God':

By 'elevation' is meant the felt, natural transposing of the human person to God, made in his presence. This has nothing to do with the extraordinary phenomena...but is for the purpose of speaking to God, whom we love. Consequently there's a sense of divine presence and a colloquy, though brief and interior, with God, our Father, friend or spouse.

'Conversation of the Soul with God':

In prayer the initiative comes from God. Without that, the human person is incapable of having a single good thought, says St Paul to the Romans 8:26-27. With regard to this Pauline doctrine, St Vincent

comments on St Francis de Sales: “He would not wish to go to God if God did not wish to come to him. One does not force God, no, in those cases, nothing is obtained by force”. (SVP IX 221) God is love and wants us to go to him through love, he had advised Louise de Marillac, as her director in 1630, recommending her to read *The Treatise on the Love of God*, especially the chapters dealing with God’s will and indifference. In the matter of prayer, St Vincent says we must not force nature or be violent with our will to cause a sense-felt presence of God: rather we ought to be moderate, hoping that God may open a dialogue and give us to understand how we should pray and act.

When the Founder speaks to the whole community about the ‘sacred gift’ of prayer, he is assuming that it is something gratuitous which comes from the liberal hand of God, without depending on persons. The Spirit breathes where, to whom, and when she wishes, in a very sweet, gentle and loving manner.

St. Vincent speaks of how the Holy Spirit communicates with the simple and humble;

A doctor who has only his learning, speaks of God only in a way that his science shows him; but a person of prayer speaks of him in a very different manner. And the difference between the two comes from the fact that one speaks from merely acquired knowledge, and the other through all infused knowledge, full of love, in such a way that the doctor in that context is not the more wise, and he must be silent where there is a person of prayer (SVP IX, 423).

The Spirit Teaches Us to Pray and Do

St Vincent says: “The principal fruit of prayer consists in resolving well, and resolving with decisiveness (SVP IX, 32; SVP XII 101) About 1641, he remarks to St Louise;

It is right to make good resolutions on specific acts and be faithful in carrying them through. Otherwise, we are mostly living in the imagination (SVP XI, 87)

In similar vein, on 25 August 1655, he wrote to an internal seminary director, Fr Delespinay, saying that resolutions show the immediate fruit of prayer, as the response of the person to the word of God. Works show the degree of love we have for God.

My Father is glorified in that you bear much fruit (John 15. 8). Some people in prayer are satisfied in sweet conversation with God, and speak almost like angels. But, later when it comes to working for God, suffering, mortifying oneself; instructing the poor, going after the scattered sheep, the desire to do without something, to accept sickness

Vincentian Texts on Prayer

Myles Rearden CM

This was presented as part of the CIF programme over a period of four days. The dominant theme of the series was: praying with Christ as he prays with and for the poor.

A. CONFERENCES TO THE ORDINANDS ON DEVOTIONAL SUBJECTS

First Conference: On Mental Prayer
(*De l'Oraison Mentale*)

The text is taken from that known as St Sulpice 157, in the archives of Saint-Sulpice, Paris. Father Carroll places the copy between 1652 and 1662, and the text much further back, around 1635. He states, 'it was revised, it seems, after 1634 and before 1657 by François Perrochel, Nicholas Pavillon, Jean Jacques Olier and Vincent de Paul, and so quite likely provides us with the oldest text of the Conferences to Ordinands, and thus the closest to the content of the first retreat to ordinands given at Beauvais in 1628.'

The objective of the retreat for ordinands here is to dispose oneself well for orders, and for leading a genuinely ecclesiastical life. We shall say three things regarding mental prayer:

1. The importance for ecclesiastics and especially for ordinands of making it, and making it well;
 2. In what it consists and the method of making it;
 3. The means of making it well.
-
1. It is important for ecclesiastics and ordinands to make mental Prayer:
 1. Because it is a means well suited for enabling them to set aside their defects and advance in virtue. Ecclesiastics are more obliged than others to correct their faults, and to aim

at the highest standards of their rank. Now, one of the most efficacious methods for this is the exercise of mental prayer; because, in order to correct one's faults and advance in virtue, it is necessary to grasp the awfulness of vice and the beauty of virtue, to engender in oneself the motivation and the resolution to flee from vice and embrace virtue, and to obtain the graces of God for that end; which is exactly what one does in mental prayer, which consists precisely in these acts as will be seen in 2 following, and that is why Our Lord said in the Gospel of John 8.32: 'You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'

2. The person who devotes himself to mental Prayer carries out much better the functions of the ecclesiastical state; because, since in prayer one knows clearly the importance and honour of that state, and so applies oneself to it with more spirit, more attention and more modesty; and so one preaches better and one celebrates Mass better.

St Gregory, explaining this verse of Psalm 144(5):7, 'They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness, and sing aloud of your righteousness', applies it to those who come from prayer to the exercise of their divine functions. [*Moralia in Job*, LibXX,xx, PL 76, col 498.] It is recorded in a book about the outstanding preachers of the last [16th] century composed by Cardinal Borromeo, nephew of the Holy Father, that a preacher who was considered beyond compare in the time of his uncle [Pius IV], although he was not very talented, whenever he ascended the pulpit everyone was already touched. Now, the preparation he made for his preaching was to do two or three hours of prayer before entering the pulpit. That is what makes the difference between an Office celebrated by a good priest or an observant religious compared with the general run of ecclesiastics. This comes in part from the fact that they devote themselves to prayer, but the others do not.

3. This point is strongly confirmed regarding the tasks involved in the ecclesiastical state. Ecclesiastics who wish to live well, and especially those who have responsibilities, have to experience many great difficulties; and it is to them that the following word of Our Lord is addressed, Acts.9:16, 'I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name'. Now, an excellent way to fortify them in their employments is mental prayer, in which one comes to realise the great benefit and

honour there is in working for God; how blessed is the person who suffers in his service: one finds in oneself the zeal and the motivation to suffer yet more, one asks God for the grace and returns to combat with more spirit than before. That is why our Lord, on returning from work, invites his apostles to turn aside and recover their energy in the desert, Mark 6:31: ‘come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’

4. There is no practice which enables us to give better example and edification: we are more obliged than others to edify the neighbour; because, aside from the ordinary obligation to do so, we have one in justice as a result of our being a light to the world and the salt of the earth. That is why St Paul exhorts Titus (2:7) ‘Show yourself in all respects a model of good works’. Now, the exercise that contributes most to that is mental prayer, because what makes us most edifying to the neighbour is interior recollection. Hé! What exercise produces this recollection more in us than mental prayer what was said of Moses when he came out from his conversation with God: Exodus 34:29, ‘he did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God’.
5. We cannot teach the practice of mental prayer to laypeople, if we do not practise it ourselves. It is certain;
 1. that God wishes to lead many laypeople to perfection by means of mental prayer;
 2. that those who are meant to form them in it are ecclesiastics, for he has destined them to teach the law (Malachi 2:7) [For the lips of the priest should guard knowledge], and people should seek instruction from his mouth, [for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts]. Hé! If they do not themselves practice themselves the means [of perfection] which they are to teach, will they not be very deserving of the reproach: (Rom2:21) ‘You then that teach others, will you not teach yourself?’, and that of the Gospel: (Matthew, 15:14b) ‘if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit’.
6. The ordinands, so as to prepare themselves for Orders, ought often to consult God concerning this state [of being ordained], should make a good general confession, learn how to carry out well the Order they are to receive, and how to receive it well, and build one another up. Hé! What better way is there to do

each of these things than mental prayer which provides lights, graces and movements for everyone, so that it can be said of prayer what the Apostle says about godliness of which it is a part: (I Tim. 4:8) 'godliness is valuable in every way'.

Second point, in what mental prayer consists and how to make it]. Prayer is an application of the mind to the consideration of some matters of devotion so as to become more holy and virtuous, which teaches us three things about meditation:

- 1 That the subject should always be a matter of devotion, that there is the same difference between the other occupations of the mind and prayer as between someone who works on common material and someone who works on rich material [for example, a tailor];
- 2 that it is necessary to dwell mentally on the subject of prayer, and not pass over it lightly, just as a bee, in order to get its honey from flowers, stops on them for some time so as to draw out their juice. For those who pass lightly from one consideration to another only waste time and worry themselves. Indeed the words of the Gospel can be applied to people like that, 'Martha, Martha you are worried and distracted by many things', and that other word, 'You have sown much, and harvested little' [Haggai 1:6].
- 3 That while the subject of study and of meditation can sometimes be the same, the difference is that in study one aims at becoming more learned, and in meditation one aims at becoming better, and that anyone who meditated in order to achieve the instruction and advancement of other people rather than his own, would by that very fact not be praying.

Third point [regarding the method of prayer] it is important to know that mental prayer consists in three parts. The first is the preparation; the second the body of the prayer; and the third, the conclusion.

There are three stages in the preparation:

1. To place oneself in the presence of God, imagining that God is present to us in one of the four manners listed in the introduction, whichever of these is most attractive to us, and to make an act of profound interior adoration. [Note: the word 'introduction' probably refers to *The Introduction to the Devout*

Life, by St Francis de Sales, Part II, ch 2.] For, if we should keep ourselves in the presence of God in order to perform all our actions well, (Psalm 15[16]:8) ‘I keep the Lord always before me’, how much more so when we are about to speak to him, so as to avoid the reproach of the Scripture, Matthew 15:8, ‘This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me’, and Jeremiah 12:2 You are near in their mouths yet far from their hearts’;

2. To invoke his help, because in addition to the general need we have of the grace of God in all our actions, we especially need it in the matter of prayer, since as St Paul says, Rom. 8:26, ‘we do not know how to pray as we ought’; all the more so as all the lights and good movements [of the heart] which we ought to produce are above our power. This invocation can be made by using words of the Scripture of the Church, or any that devotion suggests to us;
3. To consider the subject one wishes to meditate on, which can be done in different ways: if the matter is something open to the senses, it can be imagined; if it is something purely spiritual, it can simply be thought about.

The Body of Prayer also consists in three stages:

1. The considerations, that is to say that it is necessary to reason and discuss [with oneself] about the subject so as to draw out from it the good sentiments [one is seeking]. For example, on the subject of creation one might think along the following lines: there was so much time when I did not exist, then God placed me in the world, made me what I am, because He loved me. I owe him everything.
2. The affections are also aroused by discourse and reasoning. One could aim at convincing oneself of such feelings as that God preferred to make us more than various other creatures of a less excellent kind, and that God deserves to be loved for his goodness towards us, and that he deserves our gratitude for his benefits to us; and of shame for our ingratitude towards him, and regret at the bad use we have made of our advantages as human beings. It should be noted that we should not remain with the considerations any longer than is necessary to be aroused to warmth of feeling, as Psalm 38 [39]:3 ‘while I mused, the fire burned’. Rather one should allow one’s feelings

to express themselves as much as possible. It is in fact one of the purposes of mental prayer to expand the heart so that it can be carried forward more easily to its duty, Psalm 118[119], 'I run the way of your commandments, for you enlarge my understanding'.

3. The resolutions: as a result of the truths one has come to realise and of the good sentiments one has given expression to, resolutions regarding particular practices should be made with a view to one's conversion and advancement in virtue. In the same way the prodigal son, having considered the miserable condition to which he was reduced, and that from which he had fallen, conceived a horror of the one and the desire of the other, which led him to resolve to quit the first and move on to the second, and to take the steps necessary for the accomplishment of his plan, Luke 15:18, 'I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you"'. The resolutions can take this form: O my God, if you have love me so much as to place me in the world and if it is your will that I should serve you, henceforth I shall do this and that. It should be noted that the resolutions to take are actions, particular virtues which are more necessary in the state of life in which we are and which may arise in the course of the day; for, in order to heal an illness, it is necessary to use the appropriate remedy and apply it as soon as possible.

The Conclusion of prayer also consists in three stages: First, thanking God for the graces recognised in the matter for prayer and received in the exercise of meditation, like the gratitude one shows to the master of a feast, Psalm 102[103]:2, 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, do not forget all his benefits', and the gratitude one shows to a prominent person who has given us a hearing, John 11:41, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me'. Second, Offering those graces to God as a recognition that he is always their owner, and that one wishes to use them in his service: They are yours, Lord, and what we have received we offer to you' [Offertory of the Mass of Pius V]. Third, prayer to God to have the further grace to put into practice the resolutions taken: It is for him to give, to will, and to perfect in his goodness. [Ibid] To recall the merits of God's Son and of his saints, especially those who contribute to the subject of prayer and to whom one has most devotion or obligation.

The Fourth Point regards the means for praying well.

2. To chose the most suitable place, time and posture for doing so. A secret place (Hosea 2:14) 'I will lead her into the wilderness'; the morning time (Sirach 39:5) 'He sets his heart to rise early to seek the Lord who made him'; on one's knees (Luke 22:41).
3. To prepare oneself the evening before, by reading about the subject in a book dealing with it (Sirach 18:23) 'Before making a vow, prepare yourself'.
4. On leaving prayer, to make note of what was most touching for you in it, and to ruminate on it during the day, like collecting the three or four flowers you liked best in a garden.
5. To be faithful in putting the resolutions into practice during the day (Song of Songs 7:12) 'Let us see whether the vines have budded, whether the grape blossoms have opened, and the pomegranates are in bloom', because so many resemble the Ephraimites, who, 'armed with the bow, turned back on the day of battle' (Psalm 77[78]:9) or those of whom Our Lord speaks (Luke 8:13) who 'when they hear the word, receive it with joy, but...in time of testing fall away'; and if one fails in his practice, to impose some penance on oneself.
6. At the start, to communicate to the director what has happened during prayer and the use made of it, and also regarding the progress made over time.
7. Not to let any day pass without making prayer, because, just as we need to eat food every day because our energy gets used up daily, so we need mental prayer to restore our spiritual energy.
8. To make it every day with the intention of becoming better, not cleverer, and not out of mere routine.

Fifth Point, Objections.

1. I cannot even get to the stage of considerations. Response: for a start, use the considerations you find in books or hear in conferences.
2. It all suffocates my mind and makes me unwell. Response: apply your mind gently, use your heart more, and do not pray for long.

3. I do not find myself being moved in meditation. Response: humble yourself about that, keep trying and move on to the practical part: that is the fruit that God wants from it (Psalm 118[119]:83) 'For I have become like a wineskin in the smoke, yet I have not forgotten your statutes'.
4. I do not get any better but always fall into the same faults. Response: be very ashamed of this, ask pardon for it, and renew your desire to make yourself more faithful in the future.

[To the lecturer:] Conclude by exhorting them to make their prayer, recalling succinctly some of the more important reasons, the more urgent ones, like the disgrace it would be for ecclesiastics not to practice mental prayer when many laypeople do so to great advantage; to draw them to make it well by the means just mentioned; and telling them that you see them already moving in that direction, thanking God for that, and asking him to continue giving them this grace by his blessing, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

B. FRAGMENTS ON PRAYER FROM ABELLY/DODIN

Cf. Dodin, A (ed) Saint Vincent de Paul, *Entretiens Spirituels*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1960, pp263-274.

1. Give me a man of prayer, and he will be capable of everything; he will be able to say with the holy Apostle, 'I can do everything in Him who sustains and comforts me' (Phil.4:13). The Congregation of the Mission will last as long as the exercise of prayer is faithfully practised in it, because prayer is an impregnable rampart, which will shelter the missionaries in every kind of attack; it is a mystical arsenal, or like the tower of David, which will provide them with weapons of every kind, not alone for their defence, but also for attacking and putting to flight all the enemies of the glory of God and of the salvation of souls.
2. Prayer is a sermon one preaches to oneself in order to convince himself of his need to turn to God and to cooperate with his grace so as to root the vices out of our soul and plant the virtues in it. It is necessary in prayer to apply oneself especially to combating the passion or evil inclination that is eating at us, and to always aim at mortifying it; because, once one has succeeded in that, the rest is easy.

M Vincent also recommended holding firm in the struggle; to proceed gently in the matter, and not to break one's head with the effort to concentrate or to think things through; [but rather] to lift up one's mind to God and to listen to him, because one of his words is worth more than a thousand reasons and all the ideas our mind can produce.

He added that only what God inspires in us and which comes from him can do us any good; that we ought to receive from God in order to give to others, following the example of Jesus Christ, who said of himself that he taught others what he had heard and learned from his Father. (John 12:49f)

3. You see the difference between the light of a lamp and that of the sun: at night-time, a lamp gives us light, and we can see things in it, but we only see them imperfectly, we only reach the surface, and that illumination goes no further. But the sun fills and vivifies everything by its light; it does not only bring us to the exterior of things, but, by a hidden power, it penetrates to the interior, it brings things to life and even makes them fruitful, according to their nature. Now, the thoughts and considerations what come from our understanding are only little lanterns, which show only part of the exterior of things,

and produce nothing more; but the lights of grace, which the Son of justice (Malachi 4:2) spreads in our souls, reveal and penetrate to the most intimate part of our heart, which they awaken and lead to marvellous productivity. So it is necessary to ask God to enlighten us himself and to inspire in us whatever is pleasing to him. High and sophisticated considerations are never prayer; they are rather outgrowths from pride; and it is the same for people who are content with what they find pleasant, like a preacher who flatters himself on his fine words and is delighted at the response of his audience to what he provides for them; which shows clearly that it was not the Holy Spirit but rather the spirit of pride which illuminated his understanding and produced all those beautiful thoughts; or rather, that it was the devil who was driving him and made him speak in this way. It is the same with prayer, when one seeks out beautiful thoughts, when one entertains extraordinary ideas, and most especially when the purpose is to churn them out for others during repetition of prayer, so that they will think well of him. That is a kind of blasphemy; it is making an idol of one's own mind; because, when in praying to God you are meditating on what can satisfy your pride, you spend your time seeking your satisfaction and fantasising for your entertainment, what you are doing is sacrificing to the idol of vanity.

Ah, my brothers, let us protect carefully ourselves from such folly; let us recognise that we are all full of wretchedness; let us only seek what can make us more humble and lead us to the solid practice of the virtues; let us reduce ourselves in prayer down to nothingness; and in repetition of prayer, let us state our thoughts humbly; and if some thoughts occur to us that seem impressive, let us be cautious, and wonder whether they may not come from the spirit of pride or be inspired by the devil. That is why we must always humble ourselves profoundly when fine thoughts occur to us, whether in making our prayer, or in preaching, or in conversation with others. Alas! The Son of God could have enthralled everyone with his utterly divine eloquence, but he did not wish to do so; on the contrary, when he taught the truths of his Gospel, it was always by using ordinary everyday words and expressions; he always preferred to be despised and put down rather than praised and thought well of. You see, my brothers, how we can imitate him; and for that purpose let us cut back these thoughts that come from pride whether in prayer or elsewhere; let us follow in everything the path of the humility of Jesus Christ; let us use simple words, common and familiar language; and if God so permits it, let us accept it calmly when no one takes any notice of what we say, when they mock us, and let us be quite sure that without

genuine and sincere humility, it is impossible for us to be of benefit either to ourselves or to anyone else.

4. The fact that one has been unfaithful in executing his resolutions, does not mean he should leave off making new ones whenever he prays; just as when one does not seem to get nourishment from the food one eats, one stops eating. For one of the most important, indeed the most important, part of prayer is the making of good resolutions; that is what we should aim to arrive at, not at reasoning or exposition. The principal fruit of prayer consists in genuinely making up one's mind, doing so strongly, making well-founded resolutions, being convinced about them, being prepared to put them into practice, and foreseeing difficulties so as to surmount them. Yet that is not all, because by themselves our resolutions are only physical and moral actions; and although we are right to form them in our heart and to affirm them, we should nonetheless acknowledge that what is good in them, practising them and enjoying their effects, all depend entirely on God. What do you think is the usual cause of our breaking our resolutions? It is because we rely on ourselves too much, we are too confident of our good intentions, we depend on our own strength, that is the cause of our not getting any fruit from our resolutions. For that reason, once we have made some resolutions in prayer, we must urgently pray to God and beg insistently for his grace, honestly mistrusting ourselves, so that he may give us the graces necessary for our resolutions to bear fruit; and even though after all that we still break them, not once or twice but often over a long period, even if we have never put even one into practice, one must never cease for all that to renew them and to turn to the mercy of God and implore the help of his grace. Past faults should certainly humble us, but not make us lose courage; and into whatever fault one falls, one should never lessen the confidence that God wishes us to have in him, but take a new resolution of raising oneself again and taking care not to fall. Although doctors see no effect from the remedies they have applied to a sick person, that does not make them give up or cease prescribing them, as long as they see some hope of life. If people continue thus to apply remedies to the sicknesses of the body, however long-lasting and severe, even when no improvement can be seen, with all the better reason should one do the same with the infirmities of our souls, regarding which, in God's good time, his grace will work very great wonders.
5. My brother, you have done well to divide up your prayer. Nonetheless, when one takes some mystery for the subject of his meditation, it is

not necessary nor expedient to settle on a particular virtue in regard to it nor to make your usual division regarding that virtue; it is better to consider the story of the mystery and to take note of all its circumstances, there being none so petty or ordinary that they will not contain great treasures hidden inside, if we know how to look for them. I noticed this lately in a conference of the gentlemen who gather here [the priests of the Tuesday Conferences]. The subject was how they should use the time of Lent in a holy manner. It is a very ordinary subject, one they discuss every year; but nevertheless so many good things were said that everyone there was greatly touched, myself in particular; and I can tell you in truth that I have never seen a conference more devout than that, nor one that made a greater impression on people's minds; because, although they had often spoken of the same subject, it seemed that it was no longer the same people speaking; God had inspired them in prayer with a completely new language. So you see my brothers how God hides treasures in the least circumstances of the truths and the mysteries of our religion; these are like little grains of mustard-seed, which produce great trees when it pleases Our Lord to pour his blessing on them.

6. Some people have beautiful thoughts and good sentiments, but they do not apply them to themselves and do not sufficiently consider their interior state; even though it has often been recommended that, when God gives some lights or some good movements during prayer, it is always necessary to make them serve one's own particular needs. It is necessary to consider one's own faults, to admit them and recognise them before God, and sometimes even to accuse oneself of them before the Company so as to humiliate oneself and crush oneself more, and take a strong resolution to correct oneself of them; which is never done without profit.

During the repetition of prayer, I was wondering in myself why some made so little progress in the holy exercise of meditation. There is reason to fear that the cause of this evil is that they are not sufficiently mortified, and that they give too much liberty to their senses. If one reads what the most gifted masters of the spiritual life have written about prayer, one will see that they unanimously hold that the practice of mortification is absolutely necessary for making one's prayer well, and that, in order to dispose oneself for prayer, it is necessary not alone to mortify ones eyes, tongue, ears and other external senses, but also the faculties of one's soul, the memory and the will; in this way, mortification will dispose one for praying well, and in return prayer will help one to practice mortification well.

7. To a brother who knelt down to ask pardon of the community because he had not for some time done anything at prayer nor even tried to apply himself to it, M Vincent said this:

My brother, God sometimes permits that one loses the taste one felt, and the attraction one had, for prayer, and even dislikes it. But that is usually a trial which he sends us, on account of which we should not be too disturbed, nor go as far as being discouraged. There are good souls who have been sometimes treated like this, as indeed have some of the saints. Yes, I know several very virtuous people who find nothing but insipidity and dryness in prayer; but, since they are very faithful to God, they make great use of this trial; it contributes to no small extent to their growth in virtue. It is true however, that when such insipidity and dryness come to those who are beginning in prayer, there is sometimes reason to fear that the cause may be some negligence on their part; and that is what you ought to pay attention to, my brother.

Then the saint asked the brother whether he had pains in his head. When the brother replied that he often felt headaches since during the last retreat he had tried to make the subjects of prayer perceptible to his mind, M Vincent added:

One should not do that, my brother, nor force oneself to make perceptible in prayer what is of its nature not perceptible; it is self-love that one is seeking in that. We should go by the spirit of faith in prayer, and consider the mysteries and the virtues that we are meditating on in the spirit of faith, gently, humbly, without making any effort of the imagination, but using rather our will for affections and resolutions, than our intellect for acquiring knowledge.

8. A brother who was called for repetition of prayer frankly admitted that he did not have enough intelligence to meditate. The only faculty of the soul that was of any use to him was the will. As soon as the subject was proposed, without any attempt at reasoning, he used his will to produce affections. He passed his time in thanking God, in asking him to forgive his faults, in arousing his heart to contrition and regret because of them, in asking for the grace to imitate Our Lord in some virtue; and then he took resolutions, etc. M Vincent interrupted him:

Stay there, my brother, and do not trouble yourself about applying the understanding, which is only done to arouse the will, since your will without any considerations goes straight to affections and to resolutions of practising virtue. May God

give you the grace to continue in this way and make you more and more faithful to all that he wills!

C. CONFERENCE ON PRAYER TO DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

May 31st 1648
SV, X, 407

English Translation, Joseph Leonard CM,
St Vincent de Paul and Mental Prayer, London 1925, pp 137-152

... [p141] Our honoured Father began:

The first and one reason for the importance and the advantage of praying every day is that our Lord often recommended it to his Apostles and disciples, when he taught them how they were to act after his death. 'Turn to my Father, ask my Father; whatsoever you ask the Father in my name, that will I do'. (Jn.14:13) And what he said to his disciples, my daughters, he says to us. Ought we not to have a high esteem of this recommendation of the Son of God, so advantageous to us, since it gives us freedom to turn to God in prayer, and should we not be so devoted to it as never to fail therein? And you ought to take great care, my daughters, to avoid any hindrance that may arise at the time of prayer, since we are inclined, by habit, to make use of such hindrances. But when that happens, and you notice it, oh! Stir yourselves up by the thought of how Jesus Christ recommended it. 'My God, you have recommended me to pray, and I should be a great coward to exempt myself from it. Yes! I shall go to prayer'. You may all experience, my daughters, how powerful this motive is, and the gifts that may be gained thereby.

To this I shall add another: it has been thought well that you should pray every day, and your rules oblige you to it. I say, my daughters, pray, if you can, every hour, or even, never cease praying, for prayer is so excellent that we can never pray sufficiently; and the more we pray the more we wish to pray, when God alone is sought in prayer. Hence, my daughters, since it is laid down in your rules that you are bound to pray, you should strive, as far as in you lies, never to fail in making it. And if carrying around medicine in the morning, at the hour of prayer, hinders you, you should seek out some other time, and put yourselves in the presence of God for that purpose.

A second motive that was mentioned is the confidence that should animate us when we pray, based as it is on the promises of the Son of God, a confidence he will reward. 'Ask', he said, 'and you shall receive'. There are certain people, naturally timid and fearful, who do not dare make a suggestion for fear of being snubbed, or ask anything for fear of being refused. Jesus Christ wished to give us every assurance that we will be welcomed by his Father when we pray. He was not satisfied with

making a simple promise, although that was more than enough, but he said 'Amen, Amen I say to you, that what you ask in my name will be granted to you'. In this confidence, then, my dear daughters, we ought to take every care not to lose the graces God's goodness intends to pour forth on us in prayer, if we make it as we ought.

Another reason brought forward was that our Lord himself was, above all, a man of prayer, and it was pointed out that from his earliest childhood he went apart from the Blessed Virgin and St Joseph to pray to God his Father. And in the whole course of his laborious life, he was always careful and exact about praying. He went up to Jerusalem, he went apart from his disciples to pray, and he went into the desert for no other purpose. How often did he not there throw himself flat downwards on the ground! With what humility did he not present himself before his Father laden with the sins of the world! Lastly he prayed even when quite worn out by the fasting to which he had subjected himself. Yes, his chief and constant exercise was prayer.

Again, on the night of his Passion, he separated himself from his disciples to pray; and it is said that he went apart to the garden where he often prayed, and there he prayed with such fervour and devotion, that his body, as you know, from his efforts, sweated water and blood.

Now, my daughters, I shall just repeat what I have already said: I shall go over the same ground again, because I am in a hurry. By the first motive we see that Jesus Christ advised us to pray, by the second we see that he gives us confidence, and lovingly urges us to it, and by the third we have the example given us by himself, for he was never content with words; he acted, and he did what he wished us to do, and he never willed anything except for our greater good.

From all I have just said, my dear daughters, you may see the importance of prayer, since it was first recommended and practised by the Son of God, and also how useful it is to the soul. Moreover, it has been said, and rightly so, that what food is to the body, prayer is to the soul, and that if persons were satisfied with taking a meal every three or four days, they would soon grow weak and be in great danger of death, or if they lived they would be very weary, incapable of making any useful effort, and at last would have a body without strength or vigour; and so, it was said, that a soul not nourished by prayer, or but rarely so, becomes tired, weary, without strength, courage or power, a source of annoyance to others and unbearable to itself.

And it was well pointed out that it is by prayer vocation is preserved, because it is true, my daughters, that a Daughter of Charity cannot persevere if she does not pray. It is impossible for her to persevere. She may continue for some little time, but at length the world will carry her off. She will find her mode of life too hard, because she does not

partake of this holy refreshment. She will grow bored, tired out, and in the end she will leave. And why do you think, my daughters, so many have lost their vocation? Ah! It is because they neglected prayer.

It was also said that prayer is the soul of our souls – that is to say, that what the soul is to the body, prayer is to the soul. Now the soul gives life to the body, makes it move, walk, speak, and do all that is necessary. If the body had not the soul, it would be an infectious corpse, fit only for burial. Now, my daughters, the soul without prayer is almost like a body without a soul; in what concerns the service of God, it is without feeling, movement, and has only worldly and earthly desires.

I may also add, my dear daughters, that prayer is like a mirror in which the soul can see all its stains and disfigurements; it notes what renders it displeasing to God; it arranges itself so that it may be conformable to him in all things. Fashionable ladies will not leave their homes without looking at themselves in a mirror to see that nothing is wanting, and that there is nothing unseemly about them. There are indeed some of them so vain as to carry mirrors in their girdles, so as to take an occasional glance to see if anything has happened that needs adjustment.

Now, my daughters, is it not reasonable that, just as fashionable people strive to please the world, those who serve God should strive to please God? They should never leave home without looking in their own mirror, so that every day and often during the day, by means of interior looks and aspirations, they may see whatever in them is displeasing to God, that they may ask pardon for it and remove it.

It has been said that God lets us know in prayer what we should do, and what avoid; now that is true, my daughters, for there is no action in life that makes us know ourselves better, or shows us more clearly what is God's will, than prayer. The holy Fathers, when they speak of prayer, do so triumphantly; they say that it is a fountain of youth in which the soul grows young. Philosophers say that amongst the secrets of nature there is a fountain, which they call the fountain of youth, from which if old men drink, they will grow young. However that may be, we know that there are mineral springs that are most beneficial to the health. But prayer rejuvenates the soul far more truly than the fountain of youth the philosophers speak of rejuvenates the body. In prayer your soul, weakened by bad habits, grows quite vigorous; in prayer it recovers the vision it lost when it went blind; ears formerly deaf to the voice of God are open to holy inspirations, and the heart receives new strength, and is animated with a courage it never felt before. And hence it is that a poor country girl who comes to you very uncouth, not knowing her letters, or the mysteries of religion, is quite changed in a short time and grows modest, recollected and filled with the love of God. And what is it but

prayer that brings all that about? It is a fountain of youth in which she has grown young; from it she draws the graces apparent in her, which makes her such as you now see her to be.

There are two sorts of prayer: Mental and Vocal. Vocal is made with words. Mental is made without words, but with the heart and the spirit.

When Moses led the people of Israel into battle, whilst they were fighting, he stood up before God with his hands stretched out to heaven; and the people, whilst he did so, defeated their enemies, but when Moses ceased to hold his hands uplifted, the people began to be beaten. Wonderful power of mental prayer! My daughters, for that was how Moses prayed, with his hands uplifted to heaven, without saying a word: and this was potent enough to win a battle for those for whom he prayed.

The Holy Scriptures also tell us that Moses was one day before God, and did not utter a word. And he heard the voice of God, 'Moses, let me alone, you are forcing me to do what I do not wish to do. This people is ungrateful and rebellious to my law; I wish to destroy them and you want to save them. Why do you force me? Depart, let me do what I desire'. You see, my daughters – do you not? – how God feels himself constrained by prayer, and by mental prayer, for Moses did not say a word, and yet his prayer was so well heard that God said to him, 'Let me alone; you want me to do what I do not wish to do'.

Prayer, my daughters, is an elevation of the mind to God by which the soul detaches itself, as it were, from itself, so as to seek God in himself. It is a conversation of the soul with God, an intercourse of the spirit, in which God interiorly teaches it what it should know and do, in which the soul says to God what he himself teaches it to ask for. A great excellence which should make us esteem and prefer it to everything else.

Prayer is mental or vocal. Vocal prayer, made with words, is divided into three kinds: prayer of obligation, prayer of devotion, and sacramental prayer. Vocal prayer of obligation is the office that priests are bound to say; vocal prayer of devotion is that which each one makes according to the impulse God given him, such as the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin, the Stations of the Cross, litanies, vespers, etc., which are said without any obligation, out of pure devotion. Sacramental vocal prayer is that which priests say during Mass as laid down by the holy Canons.

So far, my dear daughters, for vocal prayer. Although said in words, it should never be made without an uplifting of the mind to God and with great attention to what is being said. It is natural to pray, as we can see from children, and their little prayers are so pleasing to God that some theologians say he takes his greatest pleasure in them. And a great

man, the late Bishop of Geneva, held children in such veneration that when he saw them he took them by the hand and had himself blessed by them. I mention this in passing, because time presses, and this is not the sort of prayer we have to deal with now.

Mental prayer is made in two ways: one by way of the understanding, the other with the will.

By way of the understanding, when after something has been read the mind wakes up in the presence of God and then occupies itself in seeking to know the meaning of the mystery proposed, in seeking its suitable lesson, and in arousing the affections to seek good and avoid evil. And although the will produces these acts, yet it is called prayer of the understanding, because its chief function, which is to seek out the truth, is exercised by the understanding, which is occupied primarily with the subject put before it. This is what is ordinarily called meditation. Everybody can make it, each one according to his ability and the lights that God may bestow.

The other sort of prayer is called contemplation. In this the soul, in the presence of God, does nothing else but receive from what he bestows. She is without action, and God himself inspires her, without any effort on the soul's part, with all that she can desire, and with far more. Have you ever, my dear sisters, experienced this sort of prayer? I am sure you have, and in your retreats you have often been astonished that, without doing anything on your part, God himself has replenished your soul and granted you knowledge you never had before.

Now God communicates in both these ways many and excellent lights to his servants. In prayer, he enlightens their understanding with many truths incomprehensible to all save those who give themselves to prayer; in it he influences their wills; and lastly, in it in prayer that he takes more complete possession of their hearts and souls. Now you must know, my dear sisters, that, although educated people are more disposed to prayer, and though many succeed in it, and have, of themselves, minds open to many lights, still the conversations of God with humble souls are quite different. Jesus Christ said, 'I thank you, Father, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.'

My daughters, it is into hearts without worldly knowledge, who seek God in himself, that he is pleased to pour forth the most excellent lights and the greatest graces. He manifests to these hearts what all the schools have not discovered, and develops in them mysteries that the most learned fail to have the least sight of. And, would you believe it, my dear sisters, we have experience of this amongst ourselves? I think I have told you already about it twice, and I shall tell you once more: we have repetitions of prayer in our house, sometimes every second,

sometimes every third day, as Providence permits. Now by God's grace the priests do it well, the clerics also do well, some better, some worse, as God grants it to them; but as for our poor brothers, oh! The promise that God made of revealing himself to the humble and to little ones is verified in them, for we are astonished at the lights God gives them; and it seems certain that they come from him alone because they have no learning. It may be a poor shoemaker, a poor baker, a poor carter, and nevertheless they fill us with astonishment. We sometimes talk about it amongst ourselves, and are ashamed that we are not such as we see them to be. We say to one another, 'Think of that poor brother; did you not remark the good and beautiful thoughts God has given him? Is it not wonderful? For he said what he has repeated not because he had previously known it; it is since he began to pray that he has learned it.' Great and incomprehensible goodness of God, to take his delight in communicating with the simple, and the ignorant! Hence we may learn that all the knowledge in the world is but ignorance, in comparison with what he grants those who earnestly seek him in the way of holy prayer...

D. ADVICE FOR A NEW SUPERIOR

St Vincent to Antoine Durand, 1656

On Prayer

An important point, and one to which you should carefully devote yourself, is to have great communication with our Lord in prayer. Prayer is the reservoir in which you will receive the instruction you need to fulfil the duties on which you are now about to enter. When you have any doubt, go to God and say to him: 'O Lord, you are the Father of light, teach me what to do in this circumstance'.

I give you this advice not only for difficulties that cause you pain, but also in general that you may learn from God directly what you should teach, like Moses who proclaimed to the people of Israel only what God had inspired in him: 'The Lord says this'. Moreover, you should have recourse to God in prayer so that you may preserve your soul in his fear and love. I am bound to tell you, and you should know it, that people often lose their own souls while contributing to the salvation of others. Someone may do well in his own room, and yet forget himself when working outside. Saul was thought worthy to be a king because he had lived well in his father's house. And yet, after being raised to the throne, he fell miserably from the grace of God. St Paul chastised his body for fear that, after preaching to others and pointing out to them the way to salvation, he might become a castaway.

Now, if you are not to fall into the wretched state of Saul, or of Judas, you must attach yourself inseparably to our Lord, and raise your heart and mind frequently to him saying:

'O Lord, do not allow me, while wishing to save others, to be miserably lost. Be my shepherd and do not refuse me the graces you have given to others through me and my ministry.'

You should also turn to prayer in order to beseech our Lord to provide for the needs of those under your care. Be certain that you will gather more fruit in this way than in any other. Jesus Christ, who is the model for all your conduct, was not content with sermons, labour, fasting and even shedding his blood in death itself, but he also added prayer to all that. It was not for himself that he had to pray. He prayed for us, and did so very fervently, to teach us to do the same, both regarding what concerns ourselves and whatever concerns those of whom we, along with him, should be the saviours.

Vincem DePaul

E. 'A SHORT AND EASY WAY OF MAKING PRAYER,
IN FAITH AND OF SIMPLE PRESENCE OF GOD'

JACQUES-BENIGNE BOSSUET, 1627-1704
(member of the Tuesday Conferences and Bishop of Meaux)

Bossuet, who was formed by Vincent, gives an account of a form of prayer not unlike that of Vincent. It is interesting to compare with the texts reproduced above.

I

It is necessary to accustom one's soul to nourish itself with a simple and loving look, in God, and in Jesus Christ our Saviour, and for this purpose to separate it gently from reasoning, from discursiveness, and from the multitude of affections, so as to remain in simplicity, respect and attention, and thus approach closer and closer to God, its sole and supreme good, its first beginning and its last end.

II

The perfection of this life consists in union with our supreme good; and the greater the simplicity, the more perfect the union. That is why grace interiorly moves those who wish to be perfect to make themselves more simple so as eventually to be capable of enjoying the *one thing* necessary, that is to say the eternal unity: *O one thing necessary! I wish for one thing, I seek one thing, I desire one thing! One thing is necessary for me, my God and my all! O necessary one! It is only you I want, I look for and I desire! You are my one necessity, O my God and my all!*

III

Meditation is very good at its proper time, and very useful at the beginning of the spiritual life; but it must not stop there, because the soul, by its faithfulness in mortification and recollection, receives in the normal course of events the gift of a prayer that is more pure and intimate, which can be called the prayer of simplicity, and which consists in a simple look, gaze or loving attention within itself directed to some divine object, whether God himself, or one of God's perfections, or Jesus Christ, or one of the mysteries of his life, or some of the other truths of Christianity. Thus the soul leaving aside reasoning makes use of a gentle contemplation that keeps it peaceful, attentive and open to the divine action and inspiration which the Holy Spirit communicates to it. It does little, and receives a great deal. Its work is gentle but fruitful.

And as it approaches closer to the source of all light, of all grace and of all virtue, it is thereby broadened greatly.

IV

The practice of such prayer should commence as soon as one awakens, by making an act of faith in the presence of God who is everywhere, and of Jesus Christ, whose eyes are always on us, even if we were to descend to the depths of the earth. This act is produced either in an ordinary and perceptible way, for example by saying interiorly, 'I believe that my God is present', or by a simple faith-memory, dwelling in a more spiritual and pure manner on God who is present.

V

Then it is not necessary to produce a multiplicity of other acts or to express different dispositions, but to remain simply attentive to this presence of God, open to his divine gaze, simply remaining in this reverent attention or openness, for as long as Our Lord gives us the grace to do so, without being in a hurry to do other things that may arise, because this prayer is a prayer with God alone, and a union that contains within itself all the other dispositions that are needed. It creates a passivity in the soul, that is to say it allows God to be the sole master of one's inner life, and God works there more than normally at the time of prayer. For the less the creature is at work, so much the more powerfully does God work. And because the operation of God is a repose, the soul comes in a certain sense to resemble him in prayer, and to receive from it marvellous results. Just as the rays of the sun cause plants to grow, bloom and bear fruit, so the soul that is attentive and open to rays of the sun of divine justice in tranquillity receives better the divine influences that enrich it with virtues of every kind.

VI

The continuation of this of attention in faith will serve as a thanksgiving to God for the graces received during the night, and throughout one's whole life, for the ability to make the offering of oneself and of all one's actions, for the direction of one's intention, and for all his other gifts.

VII

The soul will fear losing a great deal by the omission of all these acts, but experience will teach it that on the contrary it benefits from doing so, because the greater the knowledge it has of God, the purer will be its love, the more upright its intentions, its hatred for sin stronger, and its recollection, mortification and humility more continual.

VIII

This will not prevent it producing some interior or exterior acts of the virtues when it feels moved to do so by grace, but its basic spiritual attitude ought to be its aforementioned attention of faith, or union with God, who will hold it free in his hands, and consecrated to his love, so as to do in it whatever he wills.

IX

When the actual time for prayer comes, one should begin it with great reverence by simply remembering God, invoking his Spirit, uniting oneself intimately to Jesus Christ, and continuing in the same way; and doing the same during vocal prayer, the choral Office, the Holy Mass, whether said or heard, and even the examination of conscience, since this same light of faith which keeps us attentive to God, shows us our least imperfections, and makes us have a great displeasure and regret for them. We should go to meals in the same spirit of simplicity, which will remain more attentive to God than to eating, and will give us more freedom to listen to the reading that is done. This practice binds us to nothing except having our mind free from all imperfections, and attached only to God, intimately united to him in whom all our good consists.

X

It is necessary to take recreation in the same disposition, so as to give the body and the spirit some consolation, without dissipating oneself with curious news, immoderate laughter or any indiscreet word or such things. But to remain pure and free interiorly, though without grating on others, frequently uniting oneself to God with simple and loving glances, and remembering that one is in his presence, and never wants anyone to separate himself from his holy will in any way: that is the most ordinary rule of this state of simplicity. The overriding attitude of the soul is that it must do the will of God in everything. To see everything as coming from God, and to go from everything to God, after the example of Jesus Christ, and united with him as to our leader; that is an excellent way of augmenting this kind of prayer, so as to tend through it to more solid virtue and more perfect sanctity.

XI

One should behave in the same way and in the same spirit, and remain in this simple and intimate union with God, in all one's actions and conduct, whether in the parlour, in one's room, at supper or at recreation; to which it should be added that in all conversations one should try to edify one's neighbour, using every opportunity to promote piety, the love of God and the practice of good works, so as to be the good odour

of Jesus Christ. 'If anyone speaks', says St Peter, 'let it be the words of God' (1 Pet.4:11), and as if God himself was speaking through him. For that it is only necessary to give oneself to his spirit; he will tell you, in every circumstance, whatever is appropriate and unaffected. Finally, one ends the day in the same holy presence, with examen, evening prayer, and going to bed, where one sleeps in the same loving attention, interrupting one's repose with some fervent and living words when one awakes during the night, like so many cries of the heart to God. For example: My God, be everything to me; I do not want anything except you in time and eternity; Lord who is like you? My Lord and my God, Nothing only you My God.

XII

It should be noted that this true simplicity makes us to life a continual death, and in perfect detachment, because it makes us go to God directly without stopping at any creature; but it is not by mere thought that one obtains this grace of simplicity, but by a great purity of heart, and by great mortification and contempt for self; and whoever flees from suffering, humiliation and dying to self, will never reach it. That is why so few do reach it, because so few are willing to part with themselves, to their own great loss. Oh, how happy are the faithful souls, who spare nothing to belong fully to God! Happy the religious people who carry out all their obligations, according to their institute! Such fidelity makes them die constantly to themselves, to their own judgement, to their own will, inclinations and natural repugnances, and thus disposes them in an admirable but hidden way to this excellent form of prayer. For who is more hidden than a religious man or woman who in all things follows only his religious observance and the common exercises of religion, without anything extraordinary about them, but which nonetheless consists in a continual and total death. In this way, the kingdom of God is established within us, and everything us is given to us in abundance.

XIII

It is important not to neglect the reading of spiritual books; but it is necessary to read in simplicity and in a spirit of prayer, and not by way of curious enquiry: spiritual reading means reading in such a way that we allow the lights and sentiments coming from the reading to impress themselves on our soul, and in such a way that this happens more from the presence of God than by our own efforts.

XIV

It is only necessary to add a few maxims. The first is that a devout person without prayer is a body without a soul; the second is that one

cannot have solid and true prayer without mortification, recollection and humility; and the third, that perseverance is required in the face of the difficulties one will encounter in it.

XV

It is important not to forget that one of the great secrets of the spiritual life is that the Holy Spirit leads us in it not only by way of the lights, consolations, sweetness and helps we receive; but also by way of obscurity, blindness, insensitivity, anger, anguish, sorrow, uncontrolled passion and ill-humour; I will say, more, that this way of crucifixion is necessary, that it is good, that it is the best and safest, and that it leads most quickly to perfection. The enlightened soul appreciates greatly the conduct of God who permits it to be sorely tried by creatures, and worn down with temptations and weaknesses. It sees clearly that these are favours rather than disgraces, because it prefers to die on the crosses on Calvary than to live in the sweetness of Thabor. Experience teaches it with time that these words are true: And night is light in my delights, and my night has no darkness; but all things shine with light. After the purification of a soul in the sufferings through which it will necessarily have to pass, illumination, repose and joy will follow from the intimate union with God that will make this world, though still a place of exile, into a little paradise. The best prayer is that where one abandons oneself to the dispositions that God himself places in the soul, and where one strives with the greatest simplicity, humility and fidelity to conform himself to the will and the example of Jesus Christ.

Great God, who, by a marvellous combination of very particular circumstances have brought about from all eternity the composition of this little work, do not permit that certain minds, some of them from among the most learned, others among those considered spiritual, may ever be accused before your fearsome judgment seat of having in any way closed to you the entry into innumerable hearts, because you wish to enter into them by a way whose very simplicity may shock them and by a door which, although opened by the saints from the very first centuries of the Church, they do not yet know well enough: grant rather that, by becoming the least of children, as Jesus Christ lays down, we may enter immediately through this little door, which we can then show more surely and efficaciously to others. So be it.

From the Migne edition of Bossuet's Works, Paris, 1856, Vol.3, coll.511-515.