

Who was Jesus for Vincent?

When we see Christ as Missionary and Servant we penetrate to the central core of the Vincentian Mystique and are assured of living today in his spirit. At the same time we know for certain that the encounter with the person of Jesus always generates an interior experience like that which St. Vincent himself lived profoundly with energy and conviction. It shows us how we can be, in our turn, wonderful witnesses of Christ today.

1. Jesus, our strength and our life.

When we speak of **Christ**, we are in Saint Vincent's privileged circle, namely, the French School of Spirituality, which was centered on Christ. Vincent lived "with his eyes fixed on Jesus Christ" very much like the listeners in the synagogue of Nazareth. His whole focus was on the Savior and he had his own vivid images to nourish our meditation today: Jesus is "our strength," "our life," "our food" (CCD VIII, 20); he is the living place of all virtues: "humility, meekness, forbearance, patience, vigilance, prudence and charity" (CCD, VIII, 268); he is "the rule of the Mission" (CED, XII, 130); "the eternal sweetness of men and angels" (CCD, IV, 59); "our father, our mother and our all" (CCD, V, 537); "the life of our life and the only aspiration of our hearts" (CED, VI, 576); "the great invisible portrait on whom we must fashion all our actions." (CCD, XI, 201) A fitting summary are these words etched by his first biographer: "Nothing pleases me save Jesus Christ." (Abelly I, 103 Engl.). Without a trace of doubt, the imitation of Jesus Christ is his attachment at every instant, "his book and his mirror," according to the beautiful expression of the bishop of Rodez. (Abelly, Book III, 88 Engl.).

Saint Vincent wrote to a confrere jealous of the pastoral successes of another: "Must not a priest die of shame for claiming a reputation in the service he gives to God and for dying in his bed, when he sees Jesus Christ rewarded for his work by disgrace and the gibbet. 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 (CCD, I, 276). Christ is at the center of Vincentian spirituality and also of our missionary strategy. First of all, we are the continuation of Christ and his mission and he is the principal agent and the Missionary of the Father. He is God's ambassador. Eight times in the few texts that are left to us of his, Vincent uses this passage taken from Luke 4, 18: "He sent me to bring good news to the poor." Vincent is profoundly struck by Jesus as Savior. He feels invested with the same mission. He also wishes to be liberator: "In this vocation, we're very much in conformity with Our Lord Jesus Christ, who seems to have made His principal aim, in coming into the world, to assist poor people and to take care of them. *Misit me evangelizare pauperibus.*' And if we ask Our Lord, "What did you come to do on earth?" 'To assist the poor.' "Anything else?" 'To assist the poor.' (CCD, XI, 98). We are, therefore, by all means missionaries following

the one and perfect Missionary. The Gospel is the essential word to announce to the poor: "It is our principal business." It cannot, therefore, be frustrated.

This insight will become clearer and more refined when we start from the contemplation of the mysteries of the gospel.

Our contemporary challenge

The Gospel is for all times. The person of Jesus is timeless. In his presence we face a perpetual challenge. Our first duty is *imitation*. To enter into his sentiments, to rediscover his thoughts and his directions, to contemplate his actions, to put our steps in step with his, is the first thing we have to do. Imitation does not mean simply copying Jesus magically, but implies an adaptation of his ways of thinking and acting to our time. It calls for the necessary contribution of *daily prayer* which makes us contemplate the responses of Jesus and adapt them to our time. This is perhaps the biggest challenge facing the Vincentian Family today. Pursuing *aggiornamento*, we often have done away with or reduced this daily encounter which is the only means to conform our lives to that of Christ. The celebration of the 350th anniversary gives us the opportunity to renew the hour of prayer prescribed by our Constitutions (CM) in n°47 § 1: "In this way we are enabled to discern the mind of Christ and to find suitable ways of fulfilling his mission." It is clear that the requirement of prayer for one hour is a personal responsibility. Part can be in common, for example, a half hour, and the other part individual. Beyond these prescriptions which principally concern the community plan, it is necessary to find again the spirit which animates them: to live in Christ as St Vincent did. There is no other way to sanctification and missionary action.

2. To know Christ and transmit his message.

To know Christ leads to the transmission of his message. Once this task of penetration is accomplished, everything then becomes a question of presentation. Above all, it is not a question of grand words. Saint Vincent avoided the beautiful expressions and flights of fancy prevalent in his time! He recommended *the little method* because "it is the method which the Son of God used to announce his Gospel to men." (CCD, XI, 242). Beyond the mechanics which makes one smile today: --nature, motives, and means --, Saint Vincent recommended a simple, concrete, familiar, ordinary manner of speech. Let the preacher beware of "dressing up and falsifying the word of God" (CCD, XI, 258). What is important for St. Vincent is to announce Christ and to do it with words which are simple and understood by the people. While his century breathed of sophistication and complicated language, he revolutionized preaching and recommended simplicity. He insisted on the use of examples: "Our Lord when He went to sit on that stone that was near the well, and, once He was there, began to instruct that woman by asking her for some water. 'Woman, give me some water,' He said to her.' So, he [the Brother] can ask

one, then the other, '*Eh bien!* How are your horses getting along? How's this? How's that? How are you doing?'" (CCD, XI, 344 – suggestions to the Brothers on evangelizing in their ordinary ministry). We still hear him say: "Oh! How happy they will be who can say, at the moment of death, these words of Our Lord: The Lord has sent me to bring good news to the poor! See, my brothers, the principal work of Our Lord is to work for the poor." (CCD, XI, 232-237).

Our contemporary challenge

It is easy to see the relevance today of such a recommendation, since the mission is addressed to the poor, the little ones, the simple, the ones thirsty for God and not the literati. Life is the primary interest of the true missionary. He starts from day-to-day events, the situation of each person, of his or her needs, of their concerns, of their concrete desires. Imperceptibly, as Jesus with the Samaritan woman, he passes from the concrete to the hidden, from what is seen to what is desired, from appearances to what is real. And he is careful about his **language**. Today, in order to speak with the hope of being heard, the missionary must watch his language. What do we say? How do we say it? We cannot put up roadblocks to the presentation of faith and catechesis. We can no longer present faith in terms of obligation: "...one must ... they should ... one has to..." but in terms of proposals. I remember a very interesting study on the language of Taizé, particularly that of Brother Roger whose way was **to suggest, encourage and motivate**. How are we to be clear, make suggestions, teach and challenge effectively? The question of language is a real question today and one that we need to study, verify and renew without losing the substance of the message. Paul VI has already awakened us to that which transforms without betraying, that which inculturates without denaturing, that which invigorates without emptying (E.N. 63).

Evangelizing today can therefore be perceived as a new proclamation, a new announcement. It is the social context which calls for *new* evangelization. There are realities which press on us: profitability, immediacy, efficiency at all costs, appearances, the dominant ideologies, the new ethical questions (cloning, ecology, the blurring of identity) and at the same time the fear of emptiness, hunger for the spiritual, the search for meaning, the thirst for the other... Viewed positively or even ambivalently, one sees the search for the Absolute, a desire for living together, a sensitivity to group and social feeling, and of all that constitutes the human. All of this is open to the possibility of announcing Jesus Christ. "We need to learn to convey solidarity and the originality of the Christian message, the emotion and the understanding of faith." (Christophe Rocrou of the Mission of France)

3. The Missionary and Servant Christ.

The missionary Christ of St. Vincent is inseparable from the Servant Christ. Beyond a contemplation of the mystery of Christ, of a transmission of his message, we

know very well that St. Vincent saw Christ in the poor and the poor in Christ. We live the unceasing and urgent call of Matthew 25, 40. All Vincentians are called to follow him in the way of service. Commitment to a pure and radical way of life is made daily by a movement of the heart: to serve the poor is to serve God! In order to do that, one needs only to look at Jesus Christ himself. He is the Word of God incarnate, a human among humans, who spends his time in prayer, living in a state of permanent communication with his Father: "My Father and I are one" (John 10, 30). But he is also the one who serves people every day with unbounded devotion: "Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom and curing every disease and illness. (Mt 9, 35) Jesus holds himself to service as he asks his disciples to do in Luke 12, 35: "Gird your loins." He calls us "servants", a word which we find 76 times in the four Gospels. But the supreme example is that of the washing of feet: "And I, I am with you as the one who serves" (Luke, 22, 27). He gives the witness of the one who lowers himself before the others and divests himself of any superiority, any divine claim in order to place himself in service and to wash the feet of his apostles, a gesture reserved normally to the slave:

"What touched me the most in what was said today and last Friday is what has been told about Our Lord, who was the natural Master of everyone and yet made himself the least of all, the disgrace and abjection of men, always taking the last place wherever he went. Perhaps, my dear confreres, you think that a man is truly humble and has really abased himself when he has taken the last place. *Eh quoi!* Does a man humble himself when he takes the place of Our Lord? Yes, brothers, the place of Our Lord is the last place. The man who wants to be in charge can't have the spirit of Our Lord; that Divine Savior didn't come into the world to be served but rather to serve others; He practiced this magnificently, not only during the time He stayed with His parents and with the persons He was serving in order to earn His living, but even, as several holy Fathers have felt, during the time His Apostles were staying with Him, by serving them with His own hands, washing their feet, and getting them to rest from their labors. (CCD, XI, 124).

Let us not forget that this washing of the feet took place on the eve of Calvary, the place of his supreme gift! Vincent understood well the fullness of Christ giving of himself in "this command of love and charity" (CED, XII, 13). This Christ brings us to our knees. "Let us ask God to preserve us from this blindness; let us ask him for the grace always to seek lowly places." (CCD, XI, 351) The Most-High becomes himself when he is the Lowest.

The Daughters of Charity who would call themselves and be known as "unworthy servants of the poor," were born of this abasement and it makes sense according to Vincentian logic. "To be true Daughters of Charity you must do what the Son of God did when He was on earth. And what did He do mainly? After submitting His Will and obeying the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph, He worked constantly for His neighbor, visiting and healing the sick and instructing the ignorant for their salvation. How

fortunate you are, Sisters, to be called to a state of life so pleasing to God! In addition, however, you must take great care not to abuse this and strive to become more perfect in this holy state of life. You, poor village girls and daughters of workmen, have the happiness of being among the first women called to this holy ministry.” (CCD, IX, 14) The confreres were to become themselves servants in unforeseen situations; they became administrators, attendants to the sick and even undertakers! To become servant after the example of Christ is a state of life. “To be at the service of” implies a total commitment at every instant. One is never “out of service” but always on the alert. Saint Vincent applies this condition instinctively to his followers. Service puts one in “the state of charity.” For all times and places.

Our contemporary challenge

It is clear that St Vincent wants to see his followers be experts in bodily and material service; he puts us on the path of the charitable Christ, open to all infirmity, to solidarity, to works of accompaniment. After his example, he sends them continuously to explore the ways of the Good Samaritan among "the rejects of society, the victims of calamities and of injustice." There is a vast field of mission, faithful to the intuitions of Saint Vincent, faithful to the vision which he has of Christ. The servant of the gospel, Jesus, challenges us when he cures the sick, listens to those who implore him, resurrects the dead, and performs the deeds announced by Luke 4, 18-22. The applications of this servant Jesus are numerous today, and lead us into the fields of ethics, justice, peace and social life in general. But beyond the distinct contingencies of each region, would not the Vincentian Family be well advised to target its charitable and social action at a precise objective? Perhaps we need to make a choice that would be unifying and dynamic. We can think of the world of drug addicts or that of migrants, for example. Will the Family not benefit from this concentration of our efforts?

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