

Vincentian Spirituality – Part 1

.....an Encounter with Christ in the Poor

Vincentian spirituality is not a doctrine but an encounter: an encounter not with Christ seen in a vision, but with Christ who lives in the poor.

Spirituality was in vogue in the 17th century. Holiness was thought to be a mystical reality; saints were those who had visions and performed miracles. It explains why people looked for extraordinary feats in the lives of the saints. This view, however, took away responsibility from the ordinary Christians, who saw holiness as out of their reach.

Holiness, it was suggested, was thought to be the province of monks and nuns. They were the “contemplatives;” those whose lives were dedicated to being in union with God. But St. Francis de Sales understood that holiness was for everyone. However, this idea was not accepted unanimously. St Vincent de Paul and St Louise de Marillac took hold of this understanding. Their lives were evidence that a person could be holy within the messiness of the world. But they came to understand this fact by very different means.

Though the spiritual experiences of St Vincent were very different from those of St. Louise, their routes, nevertheless, converged. The route of St. Vincent was one of "spiritualization": in the first phase of his life (up to 1608/1610) he looked after himself; later, a crisis led him to discover that people need God. The route of St. Louise was one of "humanization": in the first phase, she tried to escape to the monastery, later to escape from the responsibility of the family only to discover, after meeting St. Vincent, that God needs people. Vincent in the events of Folleville and Châtillon (1617) and Louise in the experience of the Light of Pentecost (1623) discovered their vocation of being: a) dedicated to God and, b) in order "to serve the neighbor," by responding to the hunger for Word and Bread.

Reflection Points

- 1. How did you come to understand that you need God in your life? Describe what happened.*
- 2. How did you come to understand that God needs you? Describe what happened.*

Adapted from a reflection by Luigi Mezzadri, C.M., Province of Rome