

# Vincentian Spirituality – Part 2

## .....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. We will develop this theme in three stages: knowing, meditating, and serving.

### ***Meditating***

#### ***A Spirituality of Love***

St. Vincent used the image of the heart very often. God is a God of the heart (XI, 156), "the lover of our hearts" (XI, 102; 145-147). "Let's ask God to give the Company this spirit, this heart, this heart that causes us to go everywhere, this heart of the Son of God, the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord, that disposes us to go as He went and as He would have gone, if His Eternal Wisdom had deemed it advisable to work for the conversion of poor nations." (Coste, XI, 291; English, XI, 264).

His was a spirituality of the mystery of the Love of the Son of God made human and present in every person. He was a person who saw Christ in the poor. The spirituality of St. Vincent follows the impulse of the Incarnation of "approaching the least person as God did in Christ." That is the reason why the poor become as Christ...his "lords and masters."

St. Louise, in her turn speaks about "pure love," i.e., about love purified of any residue of human love. "The more difficult a place is for service, either because of poverty or for other reasons, the more we must rely on assistance from heaven when we are striving to labor for the pure love of God, which I sincerely hope is your intention" (Spiritual Writings, 610).

#### ***In the heart of the Trinity***

St. Vincent placed all this within the Trinity. St. Vincent felt loved as a son by the Father and felt invited to the table of the Trinity. Like the great mystics he felt the flow of the love of the Trinity: the Father who takes the initiative of love, the Son who receives, and the Spirit who realizes the communion and the union.

St. Louise, in her turn, felt the indwelling by the Spirit, as if the Holy Spirit was infused in her: "O Eternal Light, lift my blindness! O Perfect Unity, create in me simplicity of being! Humble my heart to receive Your graces. May the power to love which You have placed

in my soul no longer stop at the disorder of my self-sufficiency which, in reality, is but powerlessness and an obstacle to the pure love which I must have as a result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit" (Spiritual Writings, 818).

It was from Vincent's and Louise's realization of this love of Father, Son and Spirit that their mission was born. It was a mission that draws people into this communion of life and love.

### ***Incarnation***

Vincentian spirituality is Christocentric. St Vincent did not propose particular devotions either for himself or for us (to saints, to places, to ideas), but he went right to the center of everything, to Christ. Vincent tells us that he had truly found Christ. Vincent heard Christ's voice in the suffering humanity of poor people, in the people hungering for bread and for the word. Seeing the poor, he found Christ. He saw Christ in the "other."

For the Saint of Charity the fact that God became human – the Incarnation – is the focus for it brings about a new relationship between God and humanity. St Vincent had found Christ – he saw the poor and he sought "to build God's Kingdom." Incarnation for Vincent was not a mystery to meditate on, but the source of action. According to Bremond, "it is not the love of others that has led him to holiness, it is rather holiness that made him really and effectively charitable; it is not the poor who gave him to God, but, on the contrary, God – i.e. the Word made Flesh – who gave him to the poor". We cannot, however, consider Vincent to be only a man of action and a distributor of alms, but a man of prayer who found the world in God, which made his prayer a prayer of love.

St. Louise invited the Daughters of Charity to let their love be strong, in such a way that they might be considered possessed by it and by the service of the poor, as if the two loves were only one thing. "...I desire all of them to be filled with a great love which will immerse them so sweetly in God and so charitably in the service of the poor that their hearts will no longer have place for so many of the thoughts that endanger their perseverance...Serve your masters with great gentleness" (Spiritual Writings, 75).

### ***To leave God for God***

The force of this incarnational principle was to invite the missionaries (Vincentians) and the Sisters (Daughters of Charity) to "to leave God for God". Because the poor are the poor of Jesus Christ, they are Jesus Christ, and leaving Jesus Christ in prayer, they would find him in his members. Humankind is, thus, the face of God and God is the face of humankind. Every day St Vincent would serve two poor people at table and he served them with supreme respect. When he became the prior of St. Lazare, he found

some insane persons abandoned by everyone, the rejects of humanity. He grew fond of them and treated them with tenderness, so much so that on the day that he had to leave the priory, he was asked what he would have hated leaving most and he came to the conclusion that it would break his heart most to leave those poor demented people no one was taking care of.

If he chose the motto "to evangelize the poor," it was because he was convinced that he was continuing the historical mission of the God-Man, who comes into the world, giving up his privileges and embracing poverty for the salvation of the human race.

Frederick Ozanam understood this very well, perhaps the most faithful interpreter of St Vincent, when he wrote of the poor: "We should prostrate ourselves at their feet and say to them with the Apostle: "You are my Lord". You are our masters and we are your servants; you are the sacred images of the God we do not see, and not being able to love him any other way, we love him in you" (To Louis Janmot).

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