

Who was Jesus for St Vincent de Paul? (Part 1)

An understanding of Jesus as the Servant of the Lord and as the Missionary who proclaimed the Gospel to the Poor is central to being part of the Vincentian Family. This understanding led St Vincent de Paul to encounter Christ within the depth of his prayer and in his experience of the poor and struggling people of his time. It was prayer turned into mission that gave Vincent the unrelenting energy to bring Good News to the Poor. Vincent is our example and our challenge.

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. Characteristics of this were:-

- the focus of life was on Jesus, the Savior, understanding Jesus as "our strength," "our life," "our food;"
- Christ is the living place of all virtues;
- Christ is "the life of our life and the only aspiration of our hearts" and the One on whom we must fashion all our actions.

Without any doubt, the imitation of Jesus Christ is Vincent's centre of attention at every instant in his life.

Christ is at the center of Vincentian spirituality and also of our missionary strategy. First of all, as members of the Vincentian Family, we continue the mission of Christ. We see Christ as the principal agent and the Missionary of the Father. He is God's ambassador – the One who is sent by the Father to bring Good News to the Poor. Vincent is profoundly struck by Jesus as Saviour. He feels invested with the same mission, as Vincent writes, "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...."

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. In this contemporary world, it is often difficult to pursue this daily encounter, which is the only means to conform our lives to that of Christ.

To know Christ and transmit his message.

To know Christ leads us to proclaim his message. It is not a question of grand words that seek to dazzle the listener. Vincent avoided the beautiful expressions and flights of fancy prevalent in his time! What is important for Vincent is to announce Christ and to do it with words which are simple and understood by the people.

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. Life is the primary interest of the true missionary of the Vincentian Family. The starting point of our Gospel proclamation is the day-to-day events, the situation of each person, of his or her needs, of their concerns, of their concrete desires. Today, in order to speak with the hope of being heard, we must be careful about not putting up roadblocks on a person's journey of faith.

Evangelizing today can 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 and at the same time the fear of emptiness, hunger for the spiritual, the search for meaning, the thirst for the other. Viewed positively, we are able to see in the lives of the poor and the struggling a search for the Absolute, a desire for community, a sensitivity to group and social feeling, and of all that constitutes being human. It is within the reality of today's society and the needs of the human heart that announcing Jesus Christ is a necessity. It is into these areas of human life that we are challenged to proclaim the Good News.

Adapted from a Reflection by *Jean-Pierre Renouard, C.M.*