

Who was Jesus for St Vincent de Paul? (Part 2)

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.

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 members of the Vincentian Family 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 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:

St Vincent, speaking to his Community of Priests and Brothers said, "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."

Let us not forget that the 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.” 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.” 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. Vincent understood the need to follow in the footsteps of the Master: to work constantly for our neighbours, to visit and heal the sick and to bring the truth of the Gospel. The priests and brothers of the Mission (The Vincentians) 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 whole “Family” 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.” The mission for the Vincentian Family is wide and open and must lead us into the fields of ethics, justice, peace and social policy in general. In particular our mission must focus on the poor, the needy, the stranger and the abandoned on our doorstep in Marsfield. These are the ones who cry out for the Servant Jesus to visit.

Adapted from a reflection written by Jean-Pierre Renouard, C.M.