

VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALITY – 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.

Knowing

Spirituality was in vogue in the 17th century. God was a common topic of discussion. Bremond spoke of “an invasion of mysticism.” Madame Acarie went into ecstasy every time she spoke of God. 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.

Among the Fathers of the Church St. Gregory Nazienzen developed the theory that there are three types of spiritual life: the contemplative (proper to monks and nuns, which was the highest), the active (proper to those who live in the world and was less perfect) and the mixed type (proper to pastoral action, which joined contemplation and action). As a result, contemplation was held to lead more easily to holiness, by way of mysticism, whereas for those who are immersed in the world only an ascetic holiness was possible, by way of asceticism. But St. Francis de Sales described two sisters, the first a nun, who was living like someone in the world, and the other a married woman, who was living like a nun. According to him, holiness was for everyone. However, this idea was not accepted unanimously. The religious vigorously defended the idea that it was only they who were “in the state of perfection.” It sharpened the contrast between active and contemplative life, between Martha and Mary.

Convergent experiences

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 1) dedicated to God 2) in order "to serve the neighbor," by responding to the hunger for Word and Bread.

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 man and present in every person. He was, as Giuseppe Toscani has written, a mystic who "was not taken up by a fantastic imagination of Christ," inasmuch as he saw the poor in Christ. Medieval spirituality tended, following Plato, to disregard the body and go rather for the heights of the soul. Prayer was seen as "an elevation of the mind to God." The spirituality of St. Vincent follows rather the impulse of the Incarnation of "approaching the least person as God did in Christ." In the "kenosis" of humility, St. Vincent found Christ and the poor. While in the mystical tradition one speaks of "the night of the senses and the night of the spirit" as moments of emptying in order to see the face of God, St. Vincent allowed himself to be nailed to the Cross of the poor, "his burden and his sorrow." 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. He expressed this idea with the verb "to honor", an expression that implies participation, filial recognition, and a sharing of Jesus' regard for the Three Persons. 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).

Mission is born of the Trinity; it does not come from a personal initiative. It is born by living in the Trinity. And from the Trinity a style of mission flows: "Let us ground ourselves well in this spirit, if we want to have within us the image of the adorable Trinity, if we wish to bear a sacred relation to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. What forms the unity and communion of the Three Persons? What shapes their love if not their perfect resemblance? And if there was no love between them, what would be lovable?" asks the bishop of Geneva. There is, therefore, uniformity in the Holy Trinity. What the Father wants, the Son also wants; and what the Holy Spirit does, so do the Father and the Son; all operate equally; they have but one same power and one same operation. Here is the origin of our perfection and our model." (Coste, XII, 256–257; cf. Spiritual Writings, 818).

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 ("You alone Lord"). "Smitten by love for creatures" (XII, 265), Christ left the throne of the Father to show God's tenderness: 'This tender love was the cause of His coming down from heaven; he saw humanity deprived of His glory; He was touched by their misfortunes'" (Coste, XII, 271; Leonard, 589).

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 Incarnation is the origin of a new relation between Christ and humanity; it is at the root of a new vital impulse: "Let us look upon the Son of God. What a loving heart! What a flame of love! . . . Does a similar love exist? Who could love with such surpassing love? Nobody but the Lord, who was so smitten by the love of His creatures as to leave the throne of his Father to come and take a body subject to weakness. And why? To establish among us by his word and example love for one another. This is the love that crucified him and accomplished the work of our redemption. Oh, Gentlemen, if we had just a little of this love, would we remain with our arms folded? Will we allow those to perish whom we might assist? Oh, no, love cannot remain idle, it urges us to save and console others" (XII, 264s; Leonard, 584f).

The Saint lost no time in looking for other ways. He found Christ, he saw the poor and he sought "to build God's Kingdom." The phrase "the people are dying of hunger and are being condemned" was not a ploy to obtain favors from the Holy See, but an urgent scream of pain, a wound of the soul. 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 Sisters 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. "Be very courageous then in the distrust you must have for yourself. I say the same thing to all our dear sisters. 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. Courage then, my dear Sisters. Seek only to please God by faithfully observing His commandments and evangelical counsels because the goodness of God has deigned to call us to this. This should lead us to observe our Rules exactly but also cheerfully and diligently. 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 and the Sisters 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. Incarnation was, therefore, at the origin of Vincent's anthropology. Calvet wrote, "(Vincent) is the one among us who has loved people most. He felt fully in his heart the feeling of fraternity, i.e., he believed, not by word, metaphor, or philosophical reflection, but completely and viscerally, that the beggar, the poor devil of the street, was his brother or sister. A sentiment to this degree is very rare. Every day he would serve two poor people at table and he served them with supreme respect. All the saints have served the poor in order to be conformed to the spirit of the Gospel; he served them with pleasure. 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. Hence, the evangelical character of his spirituality, which, without any other additions, is centered on the Trinity and Incarnation.

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).

Serving

In the face of truths like these we cannot limit ourselves to purely rational considerations. The mystery is not something to be fathomed and comprehended, but it is an open door which beckons us.

In this anniversary year we also have to "enter" into Christ's love. We, in loving Christ, are shaped by Him and adhere to Him, and therefore we are in a condition to love as he did, he who was the evangelizer of the poor (Lk. 4, 18-19). "God loves the poor; consequently, He loves those who love the poor; for, when we truly love someone, we have affection for his friends and for his servants. ... In this way, we have good reason to hope, that, for love of them, God will love us. Come, then. . . .let's devote ourselves with renewed love to serve persons who are poor, and even to seek out those who are the poorest and most abandoned; let's acknowledge before God that they're our lords and masters and that we're unworthy of rendering them our little services" (Coste, XI, 392f; English, XI, 349). This love has two movements: upward, towards the Trinity in wonder and adoration, seeking to please God, and downward, to the advancement of the poor through gratuitous love. It is like Christ's glance from the Cross: a look of love to those in need, of a God who needs to be loved.

St Louise said that we, "freed from all bonds," should "follow Jesus Christ." (Spiritual Writings, 689). From there flows a prayer that is free and Christocentric, that goes directly to Christ, steeped in the Gospel, without leading to many devotions; a prayer that is "in touch with pain" in the sense that in praying we cannot ignore the anxieties and the sufferings of humanity; an "evangelical" prayer, rich in expressions of faith in the Gospel: " Lord, that I may see, Lord, make me walk, Lord, say only a word and your son, your daughter, will be healed, Lord, Son of David, have pity on me ... "

Conferences

One of our most beautiful traditions is that of the colloquy (repetition of prayer). It means coming together to share thoughts, emotions, ideas. To speak together of God

Let us read some passages and reflect together on them:

1. "May God in his goodness be pleased to give us the spirit that animates them (the missionaries that Vincent was praising), a big heart, vast and ample! Magnificat anima mea Dominum! Our hearts must magnify and amplify God, and may God amplify our souls for that, may he give us a broad understanding in order to be truly aware of the greatness and extent of the goodness and power of God; to know how far our obligation to serve and glorify him in every possible manner extends; a fullness of will to embrace every possible opportunity to procure the glory of God. If we can do nothing of ourselves, we can do everything with God. Yes, the Mission can do anything because we have in us the seeds of the omnipotence of Jesus Christ. That's why no one can excuse himself on the grounds of his powerlessness; we'll always have greater strength than is needed when the occasion arises" (XI, 203; English, XI192f).

Is our vocation an encounter based on interior prayer or a mere adherence to a group of persons? Are we convinced that our Vincentian Family "can do all because we have in us the germ of doing everything in Jesus Christ?" Do you have an experience of this that you can share?

2. "I must not judge a poor peasant man or woman by their appearance or by their apparent intelligence, especially very often they scarcely have the expression or the mind of rational persons, so crude and vulgar they are. But turn the medal and you will see with the light of faith that the Son of God, who willed to be poor, is represented to us by these poor people; that He scarcely had a human face in His Passion, and passed for a madman in the mind of the gentiles and a stumbling block in the mind of the Jews. With all that, He describes Himself as the Evangelizer of the poor: Evangelizare pauperibus misit me. O Dieu!. How beautiful it is to see poor people if we consider them in God and with the esteem in which Jesus Christ held them! If, however, we look on them according to the sentiments of the flesh and a worldly spirit, they will seem contemptible" (English, XI, 26).

Are the poor present in our prayer? Do we bring to mind faces, situations, needs?

3. "Yes, Messieurs, we must be all for God and the service of the people; we have to give ourselves to God for that, wear ourselves out for that, and give our lives for that, strip ourselves naked, so to speak, in order to be clothed with Him – at least, we should desire to be so disposed, if we aren't already – we should be ready and willing to come and go wherever God pleases, whether to the Indies or elsewhere; lastly, to devote ourselves willingly to the service of our neighbor and to extend the empire of Jesus Christ in souls; and I myself, old and infirm as I am, must, nonetheless, have this disposition, even to go to the Indies to win souls to God there, although I were to die on the way or on board ship" (English XI, 357).

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