



Charity - Mission
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The spirit of saint Vincent de Paul

Introduction

In spite of the passage of three hundred fifty years since the deaths of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, the identity between their spirit and its expression in our own times is undeniable. Nevertheless, the past is past and many things have changed: people, cultures, forms, customs, ideologies. Only the spirit abides unchanged. This spirit gives character and identity to Mission and Charity and has to be maintained following the clear and express desire of Our Holy Founders, whose example guides us into the future.

If this were not so, Mission and Charity would cease to be what the Spirit of God intended in giving Saint Vincent the Founder's charism. No matter what was on Vincent's mind or whatever topic he was discussing, the theme of *"the spirit"* cropped up constantly in his teaching and in the experiences he shared, witnessing to his spiritual and apostolic life and animating the Missionaries and the Daughters of Charity. Vincent was absolutely convinced that nothing worthwhile could be achieved without the evangelical spirit. In this he was of one mind with Saint Paul, who wrote, *"If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong Christ"* (Rom 8:9).

Brother Bertrand Ducournau, the secretary of Saint Vincent, already in Vincent's lifetime, emphasized the great importance of recording the words and deeds of the Holy Founder, in order to live out the spirit he bequeathed to us. *"Now, it is important that the talks of M. Vincent be preserved in the Company so that, if God is pleased to maintain it, they may reveal in all ages and to every nation the spirit of this apostolic man, which will be even more esteemed when it is seen how similar it is to the spirit of the Gospel; and this esteem, necessary for Founders of Communities, will contribute notably to the growth and sanctification of our own"* (CED XII, 447; CCD XI, xxxix).

This conviction was shared by those who succeeded Our Holy Founder in the government of the Congregation of the Mission and the Vincentian Family. Undoubtedly, the most important theme for them was the cultivation of the "fundamental" spirit of the community, since only in this way would the community be a real witness to Christ and servant of the Church and of the poor. They put their trust in Our Holy Founder, because they saw he was authentic in *word and action* as Ducournau had said.

II. Clothe yourselves with the spirit of Christ

When we look closely at the words and the life of Saint Vincent de Paul, we are impressed by the efforts he made to empty himself of himself and fill himself with the Spirit of God and of his Son Jesus Christ, sent into the world to evangelize the poor. When Vincent speaks, however, it is not always easy to know which spirit he is referring to, whether it is to the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Holy Spirit, or to *"spirit"* with a small letter, which has many meanings, for example, style or way of being and action, vigor and strength, mood, energy, or apostolic drive.

It would have been wonderful if Saint Vincent took time to explain his experience of the Holy Spirit and the attraction of Jesus, but in fact he limited himself to a few words: “*When...the Holy Spirit is at work in someone, it means that this Spirit, residing in that person, gives him or her the same inclinations and dispositions Jesus Christ had on earth, and they cause the person to act in the same way—I’m not saying with equal perfection, but according to the measure of the gifts of that ‘Divine Spirit’*” (CED XII, 108; CCD XII, 196).

Judging from this, there is not the least doubt that there is a close link between dependence on the Holy Spirit and the spirit of Jesus. The trilogy (Jesus Christ, evangelization and the poor) puts Vincent’s thought and spiritual and pastoral experience in a nutshell and gives unity to his teaching, especially his teaching to the Missionaries and the Daughters.

Impelled by the Spirit, Jesus used to go pray alone in the desert and on the mountain and also frequented the synagogues, where he taught from the Scriptures and cured the sick. This example of Jesus moved Saint Vincent to act in the same way. The Spirit of God led him to resemble Christ, whose spirit of love and compassion transformed his followers into apostles of the Good News as well as disciples who would continue the charitable mission of the Savior of the World.

Dependence on the Holy Spirit, therefore, translates into following Jesus Christ – the missionary who was close to the people, simple, humble, meek, in control of himself and full of zeal for the glory of the Father and the salvation of the people. Such apostolic virtues constitute Vincent’s identity and are the proper and fundamental virtues of his congregations. Vincent comments that humility is our “*seal*” and our “*password.*” “*Let’s pray that, if someone should ask us about our state, the Lord may allow us to say, ‘It’s humility.’ Let this be our virtue. If someone says to us, ‘Who goes there?’ we can say, ‘Humility!’ May this be our password!*” (CED XII, Conference 203, April 18, 1659). Vincent used the same or similar words to refer to other virtues that constitute the spirit of Mission and Charity, comparing them to the potencies of the soul which enable the exercise of charity.

The Pauline formula “*clothe yourself with the spirit of Christ,*” was prized by Vincent, who made clear its necessity and urgency in contacting poor people. “*My idea was that men who are called to continue Christ’s mission, which is mainly preaching the Good*

News to the poor, should see things from his point of view and want what he wanted. They should have the same spirit he had and follow in his footsteps” (Prologue of the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission).

If the benefits reaped for the Church and the poor by those who make every effort to let themselves be penetrated by the missionary spirit are incalculable, the same does not happen for those who resist God’s Spirit, since, in refusing the Spirit’s sanctifying and apostolic action, they are like two-dimensional Christians, sleep walking, bodies without souls, dried up branches, shadows of true missionaries. These comparisons point out, on the one hand, that whatever they do fails to advance the mission of the Spirit, and, on the other, the urgency of putting on the spirit of Jesus Christ Evangelizer, in order to continue his work of salvation through love.

III. Filled with the spirit of Christ

When commenting on charity and speaking descriptively about solidarity with those who suffer, Vincent shared with us his deepest sentiments, “*To be a Christian and to see our brother or sister suffering without weeping with him or her, without being sick with him or her! That’s to be lacking in charity; it’s being a caricature of a Christian; it’s inhuman; it’s to be worse than animals*” (CED XII, 271; CCD, XII, 207).

In any case, if Saint Vincent does not always clarify the difference between obedience to the Holy Spirit and the vocation to follow in the footsteps of the compassionate and merciful Jesus, the context and the purpose of his presentations help us to know his meaning. His journey from his “*conversion*” through his formation in the spirit depended on the charism for extending the Kingdom of God and forming his disciples to evangelize by word and deed. We cannot forget that a founder’s charism remains in force, and in this case, it is the charism of Charity.

The facts are clear: the vitality of the apostolic works, missions and various services to the poor demonstrate that his apostolic zeal came from a fire within Saint Vincent and his first followers, who were real heroes in the struggle against evil. There isn’t any other explanation that will bring us to the above mentioned conclusion, although we can try to prove it with arguments reinforced by the behavior and historical data of our forefathers.

We have to remember that Our Holy Founder urged his companions to be filled with Christ and in this way live out the Christian gift they received in baptism. *“All the baptized are clothed with His Spirit, but all don’t do its works. Each individual, then, has to strive to be conformed to Our Lord, to distance himself from the maxims of the world, and to be bound in affection and practice to the examples of the Son of God, who became man like us in order that we might, like Him, be not only saved, but saviors; that means, by cooperating with Him in the salvation of souls”* (CED XII, 113; CCD XII, 196). It is for this that they entered the community: to be good Christians and followers of Christ.

He said very clearly to the Daughters of Charity, *“If you’re really faithful in the observance of this way of life, Sisters, you’ll all be good Christians. I wouldn’t be saying as much if I told you that you’d be good nuns. Why do people join religious Orders if not to become good Christian men and women?”* (CED, IX, 15) What “observance” was he referring to? Nothing other than the exercise of affective and effective love for the poor and needy, love poured out in their hearts by water and the Spirit.

It is a question, then, of putting into practice the demands of our baptism, because *“the grace received in baptism gives this desire. Yes, the Spirit of Our Lord gives the same penchant for virtue that nature gives for vice”* (CED, XII, 206). And also, *“the state of being Missioners is an apostolic state, which consists of leaving and abandoning all things, like the Apostles, to follow Jesus Christ and to become true Christians”* (CED XI, 163; CCD XI, 157).

Consequently, it is not possible in practice to separate docility to the Spirit and the following of Jesus Christ, whose closeness to people and goodness shine forth in the gospel and in the teaching of the Apostles. Christ was close to the people and the confidence he inspired in people who were poor in body and soul made them come close to him. He was full of compassion and mercy, performing signs and miracles, pardoning sins and bringing health to the sick.

As a conclusion to this section, we can be sure that *“to be in Christ”* is interchangeable with *“to be in the Spirit.”* This is the key to deciphering the spiritual and apostolic qualities of the life of Saint Vincent, who used to say: *“Let’s enter into His mind so that we may enter into His workings. Doing good isn’t everything; we have to do it well...”* (CCD XII, 201)

which is in accordance with what the Evangelist said of Jesus, *“He did all things well”* (Mc 7:37).

IV. Fidelity to the spirit of Christ

Everyone knows that the contemporary situation at present tends to threaten and militate against the genuine spirit of Mission and Charity. So we have to guard against present dangers, in order that we don’t lose or weaken the spirit bequeathed us by Our Founder. Every age knows the ebb and flow of history, has its ups and downs, its advances and defeats.

Saint Vincent was a man of his times in striving to provide suitable remedies for the calamities afflicting the Church and society of his day. At the same time, he prepared his congregations to face anything that might endanger or ruin the work of Mission and Charity by opposing the contemporary fashion of seeking innovation. His spiritual and pastoral prescriptions were summarized in *the development of the evangelical spirit*.

The consumerism and hedonism of our times is a constant test for those who are committed to a more radical following of Jesus, which presupposes death to egoism, the origin of every evil and of fighting among brothers and sisters. Weariness, laziness and the absence of fidelity to one’s word are commonplace today. A lack of perseverance and an excess of desires are opposed to the freedom of God’s children, whose primary vocation is to tend to holiness with determination.

Nevertheless, Saint Vincent always had in the mind the motto of Saint Paul, even if he did not mention it expressly: *“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit”* (Gal 5:25). It doesn’t matter what obstacles come our way, because nothing will be able to separate us from the love of Christ nor from savoring the fruits of his Holy Spirit: joy, patience, kindness and self control. This might look strange to the eyes of someone absorbed by his own self and the transient attractions of this world, but experience shows that no one is happier or freer, more effective and convincing, than someone who gives his or her life in love under the influence of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

To quote only one contemporary pontifical document, let us consider what Pope Paul VI wrote in the apostolic *Exhortation Evangelii nuntiandi*: *“The world calls for and expects from us simplicity of life, the spirit of prayer, charity towards all, especially to-*

wards the lowly and the poor, obedience and humility, detachment and self-sacrifice. Without this mark of holiness, our word will have difficulty in touching the heart of modern people. It risks being vain and sterile” (n. 76).

Saint Vincent points us to the future when he says, *“Do what you will, people will never believe in us if we do not show love and compassion to those whom we wish to believe in us”* (CCD I, 276f).

The many years that separate us from the Great Saint of Charity are not an obstacle to participating in his charism and spirit of love, because the source of grace is inexhaustible and has no temporal or spatial limits. It is a responsibility of every follower of Saint Vincent not to allow the fire of love to be extinguished, rather to hand on the torch of apostolic zeal to future generations for the good of the Church and of the poor. It is beyond doubt that the future of the Vincentian Family depends on cultivating the spirit in which and for which we were born, by adhering to the person of Jesus Evangelizer of the poor, source of apostolic dynamism and joy.



For personal and group reflection

1. Do I thoroughly know the spirit of Saint Vincent's, or do I limit it to knowledge and don't involve personal and pastoral commitment in the Church and in the world?
2. In practice can we separate docility to the Holy Spirit and putting on the spirit of Christ - simple, humble and full of zeal for the glory of the Father and the extension of the Kingdom?
3. How do I express in my own words and action that having (or not having) the evangelical spirit is a question of life or death for the community and for myself?

