

TAKEN FROM
'THE IRISH ECCLESIASTICAL RECORD'
ST VINCENT DE PAUL
* **TERCENTENARY OF HIS DEATH** *

By His Grace The Most Rev. John Charles McQuaid, D.D.
Archbishop of Dublin, Primate of Ireland

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Three hundred years go, tomorrow, an old priest of some eighty years of age, seated in his chair, and fully clothed, in a little room in Paris, gently died. The dawn was breaking over the city and the house was about to begin its morning prayers at a quarter to five. The Paris of Louis XIV knew nothing of the final moments of this very crowded life. It was a lonely death that God reserved for St Vincent de Paul, such as He seems to give to His most active servants. Very many persons of every walk of life, it is true, had been calling at St Lazare, during the last few months, to inquire for the health of the man who for forty years had dominated the life of Paris, and who was obviously soon to die. Increasing and painful illnesses had helped to isolate Vincent from the works that he had founded and the souls that he had directed. St Louise de Marillac, his most faithful collaborator, had been called back to God six months before. Vincent still received the members of his Congregation, but he was more and more withdrawn by God into a silence that resembles the atmosphere of his early life. In these closing months, his memory must have been thronged with a vast procession of persons and events. To the old man they meant little now in a human sense. Their only value was the enormous charity with which he had embraced them.

Today, we have met to commemorate that death. We are not alone. It can be truly said that the whole world has joined together to celebrate the memory of St Vincent de Paul. It is not in itself a strange event, this living contact of the present day with a person of another race, of a very different period, who died three hundred years ago? This year, books have been written about the saint, sermons preached, celebrations multiplied, in the effort to explain God's meaning in giving to the Church St Vincent de Paul. He is not easy to understand, this Gascon peasant, who bent to his will, in the service of Jesus Christ, so very many souls of every conceivable rank and type. Others have explained to you the marvellous activity of the saint. You are acquainted with the main incidents of his life, for you have had the privilege in this church of knowing the saint through the Vincentian Fathers, his sons who serve you, who, since he sent them to assist our distress in the days of Cromwell have faithfully preserved the image of his apostolic soul. What then, today, in this commemoration does St Vincent de Paul mean to us, this little old priest with the piercing dark eyes that read through men and things, with the broad mouth on which rested a smile of such serenity, with the speech that held an inner flame?

* Sermon delivered in St Peter's, Phibsborough, 26 September 1960

Though dead, he speaks to us even in this moment. For the most ordinary and lowly among us, he has, I venture to believe, a special and consoling message.

You will have been astonished at the record of the activity of St Vincent. For forty three years, since, in 1617, he had taken up the apostolate of the poor, he had

accomplished a gigantic labour, not thousands, but hundreds of thousands of poor persons had been assisted in their homes, in the galleys, in prisons, on the field of battle. In his work for those who were preparing for ordination, between 1628 and his death in 1660, he had provided a spiritual retreat for some 14,000 students.

The Fathers from St Lazare and other houses had given at least 1,000 missions. In this same mother house and in the College des Bons Enfants, at least 20,000 had been given an opportunity of making a retreat. It is not inaccurate to say that St Vincent had rescued from certain death at least 10,000 infants. These are but figures, but how can we estimate the effect of his influence on the Spiritual life of France and of the Church? 'He has all but changed the face of the Church', declared Monsignor du Tour in the funeral sermon. 'If I should live', declared Louis XIII on his death bed to Vincent, 'I would have every Bishop first spend three years under your guidance'. In the Congregation of the Mission and in the Sisters of Charity he had established a new form of religious life. The monastic framework Tuesday Conferences at St Lazare he had gathered about him the most zealous and intelligent Priests and Bishops of his day. His influence on seminary training has not been equalled since the Council of Trent. His emphasis on the pastoral ministry in visitation of the sick and the frequent insistence, in particular, on the simple preaching of the Gospel, at a level understood by the most unlearned of the faithful had made of St Vincent de Paul, one of the most permanent reformers in the Church.

Yet, this giant of saintly achievement did not quickly give himself to God. We who give ourselves so slowly to God can have comfort in the thought. The writers who stress the worldliness of St Vincent in his early years seem to forget that he had to find what for many years he did not possess: an assured means of livelihood. Yet it is true to say that in the Providence of God, Vincent waited for years, until he awoke to the absolute claims of the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

Short of a revelation - and in the life of St Vincent there is no evidence of revelations - this saint, like ourselves, could not have foreseen the plan of God in his life. He had painfully to search out, with the help of others, what was God's will in his regard. Duval, de Berulle, St Francis de Sales, each in his turn, was used by God to guide St Vincent; and each in his turn disappeared, leaving him to seek, by prayer and counsel, how he could understand the designs of God.

When St Vincent had found what his director declared to be for him God's will, suddenly the circumstances would demand a change, like ourselves, he was not allowed to rest in the work that seemed to suit him. for a year he was completely happily in the parish of Clichy la Garenne. Then his director, de Berulle, obliged him, at the age of 32 to become a schoolmaster to the children of de Gondi, in one of the most influential families of France. Vincent had wanted a respectable retirement, he now possessed it, but the leisure became to him a torment. He felt that his vocation was to minister to the poor, and, again on the advice of de Berulle, he accepted the abandoned parish of Chatillon. It was there that God gave him the first chance of organising the Confraternities of Charity. But, in five months, he was obliged to return to the prison house of the castle of the de Gondi. Again his life had been broken: but it was only God's way of opening up to him the missions among the wretched peasants of the vast estates of his patron. The change this time was decisive. Not he de Gondi nor the queen regent nor the King nor Richelieu nor

Mazarin could ever be his master; the poor of Christ were now his masters, and, within a brief space, he had founded the works that have endured to the present moment; His congregation of the Mission and his Congregation of the Sisters of Charity. Thus does God break the aims that we set before ourselves, that, out of our acceptance of His ruling, he may achieve his ends.

It may not be thought that St Vincent, is being given at last the definite purpose of his life, would meet with any repose. Like ourselves, he would never know rest. De Berulle, who had so decisively guided him became alienated. St Francis de Sales, who had profoundly changed him, shortly before his death in 1622, gave him the direction of the newly founded Sisters of the Visitation. For forty years he undertook the task. 'It has been', he said before his own death, 'my greatest cross'.

His friend, St Cyran, who he admired and followed, gradually passed to the camp of the Jansenists. Vincent's power of meditating in this conflict was gradually nullified. He found himself obliged to lead the very painful campaign against the new here say that would deprive men of what Vincent most wished to give them, the sacraments of Penance and the Blessed Eucharist. He saw himself advanced to the inner Council of Conscience at the Court, where he was able to achieve unmeasured good by the rightful appointment of good prelates and by the firm assertion of the Church's teaching. He was, in fact, for ten years, a Minister of Public Morality, supervising books and plays, founding hospitals, arranging for the spiritual needs of prisons, watching over regular observance in the abbeys. He was the Providence of God to every form of human suffering. Richelieu for all his power and Mazarin for all his finesse, were less than children in the presence of this shabby little priest, who was so clear sighted and so unafraid in the cause of Jesus Christ. In reward for his courage and zeal, he saw himself ridiculed and set aside by one whose unworthy intrigues had little in common with the teaching of the Gospel, Cardinal Mazarin. Cardinal de Berulle could oppose his Congregation of the Mission at Rome. Cardinal Mazarin could succeed in closing the house of the Congregation in Rome. In the end, he was eliminated from the Council, rejected by the capricious queen regent, ousted by the implacable Mazarin.

It is easy to realise, in the story of St Vincent, how the physical misfortunes of famine and small wars succeeded one another in Lorraine and Picardy, in Champagne and Ile de France. To one and all of the ravaged areas Vincent brought the assistance of an organising genius and a surpassing charity.

It is not so easy for us to realise how humiliation and anguish and frustration succeed one another from end to end of Vincent's life. To the sufferings inflicted in one way or another by his fellow men, was added the struggle against own depression. St Vincent openly admitted this tendency in himself. He was often ill: throughout life and he was subject to very severe headaches. There was, further, the difficulty of his unlovable temperament. He had in him a severity that could be frightening. There was the effort to restrain his vivid Gascon tongue. There was the temptation to impatience that his very keen intelligence must have felt in dealing with the triflers and fools and villains who surrounded him in such abundance. There was the renewed pain of spiritual direction, as he strove to teach men and women how to give themselves to God. There was, not least, the appalling fatigue of his daily life, the which he would never allow the indulgence of even a half hour's later rising. And his

day began at four o'clock in the morning. At the end of his life, he admitted that his one desire was to be allowed to retire to a little parish in his native country. We are very gravely mistaken, indeed, when we see in St Vincent de Paul only the serenity of a smiling charity.

What, then, is the explanation of this saint, whose life so closely resembles our own in its daily struggles and its broken purposes, but who so far outstrips us in his effective love of God? St Vincent himself gives us the answer: We must rid ourselves of self love and depend wholly on Jesus Christ. It might be thought that St Vincent de Paul in his many letters and instructions would chiefly speak of charity. It can be a surprise to learn that his emphasis is, first of all, set on humility. This is the word, not charity, that he wishes to be the watch word of his Congregation'.

For St Vincent de Paul humility meant the acceptance before God of one's positions as a creature who owes to God all that he is and has and who, as a sinner, has offended God and cost for his redemption the Precious Blood of God made man. Thus Vincent would have humility go further than we should care to follow; he would wish to accept, even with joy, humiliation and contempt as his proper wages. And more; he would gladly welcome every toil and contradiction, because in so suffering he would become the living image of Jesus Christ.

'Life of my life', he called our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ. The Letters and Conferences prove that Vincent saw in Him the Son of God who had taken upon Himself the nature of a slave, so that, in that nature. He might atone for sin and sanctify mankind. Vincent loved to think of Him in every aspect of His suffering life. He saw Him incessantly in His preaching, in His care of human wretchedness. 'Ask yourself,' he would say, 'how Jesus Christ would act in these circumstances. How would He preach to this people? How would He comfort this poor creature'?

It is clear from his writings that St Vincent saw in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who had come only to do the will of His Father, and, therefore, Vincent allowed Divine Providence to guide him in the smallest details of his life. He would wait; he would not press; he would go forward bravely, only when the will of God was manifest to him.

Had not Jesus Christ said that His very food was to do the will of Him who had sent Him? That will required the Sacrifice of the Cross. 'For those whom thou has given me' said Jesus Christ, 'I sacrifice myself'. Therefore did Vincent at every moment of his day embrace his cross. For forty years, moment by moment, in complete self sacrifice, he spent his life as Jesus Christ had done, that he might succour and redeem those whom God had given him. 'All human action', he said, 'becomes the act of God, when done in Him and through Him'. My strength, my life', he said of Jesus Christ: My strength, My life and He is the strength and life of all who are nourished by His love'. 'Jesus Christ, he exclaimed, 'the eternal suavity of men and angels: We cannot better make 'certain of our eternal happiness than by living and dying in the arms of Providence, in the genuine renouncement of ourselves, in the following of Jesus Christ'.

In one other respect, St Vincent was a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. He loved the Mother of Jesus with an ardour that, in its measure, resembled the affection of the

Sacred Heart. She was to him the perfect model of total submission to the will of God. ‘When the Mother of God’, he wrote, ‘has been invoked and taken for patroness in every cause of any importance, it cannot be that all will not go well, that all will not redound to the glory of her loving Son, Jesus Christ. ‘Can we, the, wonder that she should have chosen Vincent’s Congregation to give to the world the Miraculous Medal and her Scapular? Through her humble, loving servant, she has poured and at this moment still is pouring, a flood tide of redeeming grace upon her children, the sinners of the universe.

‘To do the will of God’, wrote St Vincent, ‘it to have begun our paradise on earth’. ‘Grant us, O Lord’, he cried in a sentence that I have not found in any other saint, ‘the grace to begin even now, at this moment, the blessed life that the saints possess in heaven, the life that is the union of our will with the will of God alone’.

And so, we have read the secret of this saint; to do the will of God on earth, as it is done in heaven, in obedience to God’s commands, in denial of our preferences, in constant imitation of our loving Saviour, Jesus Christ.

That alone is holiness before. Lovingly, exactly, constantly to do God’s will in the duties of our daily life is heroic sanctity, in the teaching of the Church.

‘Let us give ourselves to God’, wrote St Vincent, ‘and may God grant us the grace to be constant’.

It depends on us, through grace, to practise the virtues, without which our holiness is an illusion. It depends on God the Holy Ghost, through His Gifts, to perfect those virtues, till all our life be lived under the constant guidance of the Holy Ghost and thus become the living image of the life of Jesus Christ.

When it is said (wrote St Vincent) that the Holy Ghost operates in any soul, we mean that the Holy Spirit, dwelling in that person, gives him the same inclinations and disposition as Jesus Christ had on earth and these inclinations and dispositions cause him to act in the same manner as Jesus Christ, not, of course, with an equal perfection, but according to the measure of the Gifts of God the Holy Ghost.

‘Let us give ourselves to God’, in the exercise of the virtues and ‘May God the Holy Ghost grant us the grace to be constant’ in the loving imitation of Jesus Christ.

That is the sum and lesson of the life of St Vincent de Paul whose humble, constant fidelity to God this year the Church commemorates.