

## Vincent de Paul and Liberation

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### Presentation of the theme

In the synagogue at Nazareth Jesus described his mission by referring to the words of the prophet Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor* (Luke 4:18). What does this Good News consist of? Once again using the words of Isaiah, Jesus stated: *He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free* (Luke 4:18).

The Good News is essentially the proclamation of liberation: liberation from the confinement of physical imprisonment, liberation from the prison of blindness, liberation from oppression...

Vincent viewed the Lucan text as the fundamental text for his various establishments. He referred to this text when he explained how our vocation is a continuation of Jesus' mission (cf., CCD:XI:26, 98, 121-122, 282-284; XII:3, 71, 79, 299).

Good News for the poor, what a program! To proclaim freedom to all those persons who are chained in ignorance and evil and misery! Vincent, guided by events, engaged in some incredible activity. He was moved by the misery of the poor country people who had been abandoned to ignorance and vices by pastors who were ill-prepared and unworthy. Through the preaching of popular missions Vincent would bring light to the darkness that enveloped these people and would also free them from the evil that overwhelmed them.



Vincent was moved by the material misery of those suffering as a result of illness, war, hunger and various epidemics. He attempted to free those men and women by organizing people and establishing institutions that would provide people with an alternative: the Confraternities of Charity, distribution of provisions and food to the hungry, taking charge of relief services to the areas devastated by war, offering interior freedom to prisoners and the galley slaves.

The liberating activity of Vincent has two aspects: [1] evangelization or the proclamation of the Good News, which consists of telling those individuals who are enslaved in ignorance, superstition or sin that they are children of God and as such, called to live in the freedom of God's children and therefore they should conduct themselves as sons and daughters of God; [2] at the same time that the Good News is proclaimed, concrete action is necessary in order to make the proclamation credible ... the material life of those persons must be transformed. It is not

enough to tell people that they are children of God, something must also be done about the inhuman misery in which these people find themselves.

It was for this reason that the popular missions were always accompanied by the establishment of the Confraternity of Charity. The care and attention that was given to the material situation of people usually led to elevating their spiritual situation. This idea was expressed in the 1617 Rule for the Confraternity in Châtillon: *On her day ... she will prepare the dinner and take it to the patients, greeting them cheerfully and kindly. She will set up the tray on the bed ... she will kindly encourage the patient to eat for the love of Jesus and his holy Mother ... she will say some little word to him about Our Lord, making an effort to cheer him up if he is downhearted* (CCD:XIIIb:12-13).

Vincent was attentive to these two aspects in all his initiatives. The proclamation and the concretization of the Good News of liberation is what Vincent called *preaching the Gospel by words and by works, and that is the most perfect way* (CCD:XII:78)

Jesus, in order to proclaim the Good News to the poor, also became poor. He came to share in the condition of those to whom he proclaimed the Good News. Vincent, (in his own words), after he turned the medal over, after he discovered the face of the Divine behind the mask of those men and women whom he encountered, realized that the Good News for the poor could only be proclaimed by people who were themselves poor ... freedom from all that enslaved people could only be proclaimed by people who themselves free, free from the physical and moral enslavement of money and power.

Jean Anouilh, the author of the dialogue in the film, *Monsieur Vincent*, understood this reality. After Vincent de Paul met Marguerite Naseau, Jean places the following words on Vincent's lips: *Thank you very much, my God, for having allowed me to meet this poor girl. In her simplicity she has understood what I have come to know in the depths of my being: the poor will be saved by the poor.* Doing this in any other way simply makes a mockery of the Good News because then we would be proclaiming the joyful news of a liberation which we ourselves did not believe, a liberation which we did not want because we preferred the gilded enslavement to money and power. This is the accusation that has often been leveled against the Church when she has proclaimed the Gospel with words but failed to accompany those words with effective action ... when she has proclaimed the demands of freedom but continued to act in an authoritative manner ... when as teacher of the truth she has instructed the world but made no effort to become "servant and poor", made no effort to draw closer to people.

Vincent wrote to his confidant, Monsieur Portail and spoke to him about the proclamation of the gospel: *We do not believe a man because he is very learned but because we consider him good and love him ... people will never believe in us if we do not show love and compassion to those whom we wish to believe in us ... if not you will produce noise and fanfare* (CCD:I:276-277).

When Jesus was in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus spoke to his listeners and stated: *Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing* (Luke 4:21). Today, let us ask ourselves if this proclamation of liberation is being fulfilled in the Church. We have examples that speak clearly to our contemporaries, examples that speak louder than any words. Abbé Pierre was one of the

people who was listened to; he helped those who were most poor discover their dignity and free themselves from a degrading misery ... he became one of them in order to protect them. Countless sons and daughters of Saint Vincent have become poor with the poor and in turn the poor have become for these children of Saint Vincent the face and the presence of Christ who came to share in the condition of the poor.

Many bishops and priests in Latin America have abandoned their luxurious residences and other forms of ostentation; they have put aside their own comfort and security and have become poor with the poor in order to help them become aware of their dignity and in order to help them free themselves from misery and degradation. One of the temptations of the Church is to identify herself with the established order, with those who can provide her with financial resources. Bishop Hélder Câmara frequently referred to his affiliation with the Congregation of the Mission and stated: *When I go to live with the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask why are they poor, they call me a communist.* In all of this there is the danger of appearing to be involved in political activity and yet it is only by becoming “servant and poor” in the midst of those who have no resources that the Church in Latin America has become hope for the poor. Without this witness of the Church the only hope would be the arrival of some revolutionary movement.

Certain media sources have distorted the reality ... for example, a French reporter employed by a widely distributed newspaper, has written a hateful article in which he labels the Church in Brazil as crypto-Marxist. Instead of having made such calumnious statements it would have been better if had gone to see those humble people reflecting together as members of a base community of faith (gathered around their bishop) ... reflecting on the Bible, on spiritual lessons derived from different scriptural passages, on their duty and responsibility to defend the common good, especially as it pertains to the poorest of the poor.

The humble are in a position to open up for the whole Church a future path. These humble men and women speak about the Good News of liberation and also make liberation a reality: they evangelize with their words and their works. Thanks to them the Gospel has become a light and a path toward freedom for those who find themselves chained and enslaved.

## **Vincent de Paul and Liberation**

Is it possible to view Vincent de Paul as a precursor in matters regarding liberation? Why not? Certainly he was a prophet during his time. His tireless energy impelled him to liberate, spiritually and materially, “the little ones” and the weak who were victims of the absolute power that was wielded during the Great Century. Vincent became involved in prophetic actions which were animated by a gospel spirit.

### **Prophetic action**

#### ***Prophetic action on behalf of abandoned children***

**“...You are obliged to provide for them...”**

Children were being abandoned and measures that had been established did not seem to deter the continuation of that evil. Vincent, with the help of Louise de Marillac, began something different. We find Vincent encouraging the hesitant and timid women: *The means must be found to provide for their needs: (1) Because they are in extreme want; in which case you are obliged to provide for that. "You did not feed them, [and so] you killed them." A child can be killed in two ways: either by a violent death, or by refusing to feed him. (2) Because Our Lord has called you to be their mothers; and here is the sequence followed for that: [1] for two or three years he had the priests at Notre-Dame seek you out; [2] you held various meetings for this purpose; [3] you prayed fervently to God concerning it; [4] you sought the advice of wise persons; [5] You gave it a try; [6] and, in the end, you made the decision to accept it (CCD:XIII:421).*

### **Prophetic action on behalf of beggars**

**“...To avoid falling into idleness...”**

A new spiritual vision and understanding of the poor arose during the Middle Ages and continued into the seventeenth century. That concept would be labeled today as one of “blaming the victims”. Vincent reacted against this concept and established in the first place the center Nom-du-Jésus. There, through formation and work, beggars were freed from their degrading state: *To carry out his project, Monsieur Vincent bought two houses and grounds in the faubourg Saint Laurent in Paris. He furnished these houses with beds, linens, and everything else deemed necessary. He had a small chapel constructed, and even with this had enough left over to set up an investment that yielded an annual return. He was able to receive forty poor persons in the hospital, twenty men and twenty women, whom he housed and fed, and this has continued to the present. The income fell off these last years. A reduction in the number of guests would have been necessary had divine Providence not provided help from elsewhere. The forty poor were housed in two separate buildings, one for men and one for women. They were, however, so situated that both groups could attend the same Mass, listen to the same reading during meals, but the tables were so arranged that the two groups were entirely separate, with neither able to see or speak with the other. He bought tools and set up workshops so the forty could occupy their time and talent to the limit of their reduced strength. He wanted to avoid their falling into idleness. He commissioned the Daughters of Charity to care for these poor people and designated one of his priests of the Mission to celebrate Mass, instruct them in the word of God, and administer the sacraments. He himself was among the first to offer this instruction. He recommended especially union among themselves, piety, and above all a gratitude toward God for having provided such a peaceful home where their bodily needs and the salvation of their souls were attended to (Abelly I:225).*

### **Prophetic action on behalf of prisoners**

**“...to set his brother at liberty...”**



Vincent accepted the work of the reformatories at Saint-Lazare and we see that he did everything possible to obtain the release of a prisoner who had been detained unjustly: *Some time afterward, your eldest son, whom I did not know, also came to speak to me to see if we could admit to this house a young man who was rebelling against his father's wishes. I said that, provided it was ordered by the magistrate, we would admit him. And in fact, when he was brought here, with permission to confine him, we did admit him. This young man [allowed himself to be confined] and had me subsequently informed that he was the one [who had come] recently to get my advice, and had been [thus ill]-treated because he had [resigned his] benefice. When I [had] him brought to me, I recognized him; and [he related] how he had made his retreat at Saint-Sulpice, where he had decided, [on] the advice of his director, to marry rather than to burn, according to the counsel of Saint Paul. He added that, since he did not think he could hand over his benefice to one of his brothers, in accord with your wishes, Monsieur, because he did not judge him competent, he had resigned it in favor of a person who was competent, in order to safeguard his conscience, and that was why you had him arrested. Immediately following that, I sent someone to ask your eldest son to come and see me. I told him that, if he took my word, he would set his brother at liberty once again because I was sure that when the Parlement heard his reasons, it would have him removed, and it was better that you and he, rather than the law, be responsible for his leaving. He agreed to this, after consulting others. I had them embrace one another in my presence, and they went off together for the city (CCD:VII:619-620).*

**“...to remedy the infirmity of those poor people...”**

Vincent treated the insane with kindness and did not want the Missionaries to abandon this ministry: *“But Monsieur,” someone else may say to me, “is it our Rule to admit madmen to Saint-Lazare and those troublesome persons who are little devils?” I’ll answer him that Our Lord willed to surround himself with lunatics, demoniacs, madmen, and persons who were tempted and possessed. People brought them to him from everywhere to set them free and cure them, and he tried to remedy those things. Why find fault with us for that, when we’re striving to imitate Our Lord in something he showed to be pleasing to Him? If he welcomed the mentally ill and fanatics, why shouldn’t we? We don’t go out looking for them, people bring them to us; and how do we know whether his Providence, which ordains things in that way, doesn’t want to make use of us to remedy the infirmity of those poor people, an illness he loved so much in them that he seems to have taken it upon himself, having willed to appear in a frenzy, as it were, and out of his mind, to sanctify this condition in his own sacred person: *Et tenuerunt eum, dicentes quoniam in furorem versus est* (And they seized him for they said that he was out of his mind, Mark 3:21). O my Savior and my God, grant us the grace to see these things with the same eye as you do! (CCD:XII:78).*

**“...You did well...”**

As the Chaplain General of the Galley Slaves (February 8, 1614) Vincent was able to obtain better conditions for those individuals. In order to achieve this he sought the collaboration of others, namely, members from the Company of the Most Blessed Sacrament, the Confraternities of Charity, the Ladies at the Hotel Dieu, the Daughters of Charity and the Missionaries: *You did well, Monsieur, to give some spiritual consolation to the poor men on the galleys during the Christmas season, despite the bodily misery to which they are reduced, which seems to make*

*them incapable of instruction. I hope God will draw good results from it and will not fail to reward the trouble you have taken there (CCD:VIII:243-244).*

### **Prophetic action on behalf of slaves**

**“...give me the names of the ransomed captives...”**

Ministry on behalf of the slaves was a magnificent ministry and the house in Marseilles played a leading role in advancing this ministry. Vincent obtained financial help for the slaves and through the mediation of the confreres who ministered there, obtained the release of numerous prisoners: *I approve payment of his bill of exchange for one hundred piastres on what the men in Algiers owe him. Please put everything in writing so as to have a clear account for everyone. It would have been a good idea to give me the names of the ransomed captives you have welcomed (CCD:VIII:261).*

**“...Here comes our liberator!...”**

To facilitate these transactions confreres were appointed to the position of consul in Algiers and Tunisia ... the activity of Jean Le Vacher is most noteworthy: *Jean Le Vacher collected all the money he could, took with him an interpreter and another person to assist him, and set off. On his arrival, as soon as he could be seen from the galley from very far off and his clothing was recognized, those poor men began to burst into shouts of joy, crying out: “Here comes our liberator, our pastor, our father!” When he boarded the galley, all those poor slaves threw themselves upon him, weeping with affection and joy at the sight of their corporal and spiritual liberator; they even went so far as to throw themselves on their knees, some catching hold of his cassock, others gripping his greatcoat, with the result that they tore it, so strong was their desire to get near him. It took him more than an hour to move through the galley in order to go to pay his respects to the Captain, because they were blocking his passage, and he couldn’t advance amid all the applause and rejoicing of those poor men ... Next, good M. Le Vacher bought three of the fattest bullocks he could find, had them slaughtered, and distributed the meat to them. He also had a large quantity of bread baked and, in this way, gave those poor slaves a treat for their bodies, while he also did all in his power to provide them with food for their souls, which is much more necessary for the glory of God. He taught them the catechism, instructed them in the mysteries of our most holy faith, and, in a word, comforted them with the utmost charity. That went on for a week, to the great consolation and edification of those poor convicts, who called him their liberator, their consoler, the man who strengthened them spiritually and corporally. And so he left them, greatly consoled and strengthened in their faith, determined to endure their labors patiently for love of God (CCD:XI:394).*

### **Prophetic action on behalf of the illiterate**

Vincent wanted the Sisters to learn how to teach poor boys and girls: *After Mass, you should work at learning how to read in order to be able to teach little girls. Apply yourselves seriously to this, dear Sisters, because it's one of the two aims for which you give yourselves to God: the service of the sick poor and the education of youth, especially in country places. The city is*

*almost fully furnished with Sisters, so it is only right that you should go to minister in the country (CCD:IX:36)*

### ***The spirit of liberation according to Vincent de Paul***

The prophetic activity of Vincent de Paul was grounded on the foundational text, *the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord (Luke 4:18-19)*. The elements of a Vincentian spirit of liberation are derived from this text.

First of all, Vincent wanted poor men and women who would serve and evangelize other poor men and women. Therefore, he chose poor country women to become Daughters of Charity and called men who were willing to live the lifestyle of the poor.

#### **“...Imitating the spirit of good village girls...”**

*Blessed be God, Sisters! Blessed be God! I want you to know, Sisters, that, if I've ever said anything true and important to you, it's what you've just heard, namely, that you must strive to maintain yourselves in the spirit of good, true, country girls. You to whom God, by His grace, has given this spirit by nature should thank him for it, and those of you who don't have it should strive to acquire the perfection I've just pointed out as being characteristic of true village girls. If women of gentle birth present themselves with the desire to enter your Company, Sisters, it must be in order to live, in body and spirit, like those who truly have the virtues of village girls (CCD:IX:77).*

#### **“...they will be pricked by those thorns...”**

*My dear confreres, woe to the Missioner who wants to be attached to the perishable goods of this life! He'll be snagged by them, he'll remain pricked by those thorns and caught in those bonds; and if this misfortune befalls the Company, what would people say about it after that, and how would we live in it? “We have so many thousand livres in income,” he'd say, “we should take it easy. Why run around to the villages? Why work so hard? Let's leave the poor country people alone; let their pastors look after them, if they want; let's lead a soft life and not go to so much trouble (CCD:XI:71).*

#### **“...to serve the poor people in all these ways...”**

Vincent wanted his followers to accompany the poor and he reminded one of the Missionaries about this obligation: *If you were to go and serve the sick, it would be in a hospital or in their own homes. If it were in a hospital, alas! poor Brother, you would be going from the frying pan into the fire, for so many painful crosses and contradictions are encountered there that the ones about which you are complaining are nothing in comparison. The work is heavy, times of rest are short and interrupted, repugnance is certain, and reproaches and insults are frequent there. Almost all the poor grumble about things because they are never satisfied and usually complain to both the devout persons who visit them and the Administrators who are in charge of them.*



*They even make false reports to them about those who serve them because the latter have refused them something. Those poor servants are harassed on all sides, having as many supervisors and critics as there are masters, chaplains, and persons who have some responsibility in those houses. This is what our poor Daughters of Charity find the hardest ...these are only suggestions of the evil spirit who, to jeopardize your salvation, suggests to you extraordinary works that are beyond your strength, under the fine pretext of practicing, on your own, the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, as if our Company were not making its chief concern to serve the poor people in all these ways, even the sick in hospitals and in their own homes. Look at what has been done for the past two years in the border areas of Champagne and Picardy by many of our priests and Brothers --- as many as sixteen or eighteen of them. Look also at what is being done in the environs of Paris by six or seven of our men, who are looking after both the spiritual and corporal needs of the poor abandoned people. Why do we give missions in France and Italy? Is it not to instruct the country people and to assist the sick who are needy? (CCD:IV:440-441).*

**“...I haven't fulfilled my obligation...”**

Vincent taught his followers that the ministry of liberation ought to take into consideration the whole person, body and spirit: *For you see, dear Sisters, it's one thing to assist physically those who are poor; in truth, however, it was never Our Lord's intention in founding your Company that you should care only for the body, because there will always be someone to do that; but Our Lord's intention is that you assist the sick poor spiritually; and to do that you have to reflect interiorly, “How do I act in my parish? How do I serve my patients? Is it only with regard to their body, or is it body and soul together? For, if my intention is only to assist them corporally, alas! that's a small matter; anyone at all would do as much.” A Turk or an idolater can care for the body. That's why Our Lord wouldn't have instituted a Company simply for that reason, since nature sufficiently obliges people to that. But it's not the same for the soul. Not everyone can be of assistance in that regard, and God has chosen you principally to teach them the truths necessary for their salvation. Reflect within yourselves and say, “In the service I've given to poor persons, have I been concerned only with assisting them corporally? If, until now, my only thought has been to give them food, medicine, and other things that pertain to the body, I haven't fulfilled my obligation. Forgive me, Lord, for the past!” (CCD:X:269).*

**“...We have to help them in every way...”**

*If there are any among us who think they are in the Mission to evangelize the poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us and by others, if we want to hear those pleasing words of the Sovereign Judge of the living and the dead, “Come, beloved of my Father, possess the kingdom that has been prepared for you, because I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was naked and you clothed me; sick and you assisted me.” To do that is to preach the Gospel by words and by works, and that is the most perfect way (CCD:XII:77-78).*

**“...witnesses to the grace of our vocation...”**

The ministry of liberation should be done within the context of the Church and should also be carried out in a collaborative manner: *The Daughters of Charity are not nuns, but Sisters who come and go like seculars; they are parishioners under the guidance of the pastors in the places where they are established. If we have the direction of the house in which they are formed, it is because the guidance of God has made use of us to bring their Little Company to birth, and you know that the same things God uses to give being to things, he also uses to preserve them. Our little Company has given itself to God from the beginning to serve the poor corporally and spiritually; consequently, at the same time it has worked for the salvation of the poor through missions, it has also established a means of solacing the sick through the Confraternities of Charity ... The Ladies of Charity of Paris are also so many witnesses to the grace of our vocation through our collaboration with them in the many good works they do both inside and outside the city* (CCD:VIII:277-278).

Care for the whole person, prudence, vigilance, concern for details, patience, goodness, discretion, concern for the spiritual welfare ... these constitute the basic values of every Vincentian. This reality is made clear in the Rules for the Daughters of Charity who cared for the galley slaves:

*(3) With regard to the corporal assistance of those poor people, they will prepare their food at home every day, personally buying the meat and other things prescribed for them to eat, and bring them once a day at the exact time their usual modest fare, which should suffice for their dinner and supper. If the cooking pot is too heavy they will get the guards to help them.*

*(5) When the men are ill, the Sisters will take as much or even greater care than with persons in the parishes, taking the proper time to go to visit them, bringing them the food they need for their dinner and supper, and medicines when they require them. Above all, they will give them or obtain for them that spiritual assistance which consists in consoling, encouraging, and instructing them in things necessary for salvation, especially how to make a good general confession and to go to confession and Communion in due time. For those on the point of dying, they will see that they are given Extreme Unction, and when they die, they will have them wrapped in a shroud and attend to their burial. Should they recover, they will encourage them to lead a good life in the future.*

*(8) And, although it is very difficult to prevent the men from making these gross insolent remarks to them --- and this even when they are doing more good for them --- the Sisters will not fail to try to do so by showing great patience and, at the same time, by praying for them, as Saint Stephen did for those who stoned him. Above all, they will beware of giving them the slightest reason to complain about them, and to this effect will not speak to them rudely, or reproach them for the complaints they received from them. Neither will they answer them back to justify themselves when they accuse them falsely* (CCD:XIIIb:222-223).

## Questions for reflection and dialogue

[A] When we speak about “liberation”, what is our personal experience in this regard? What is our understanding of this concept?

[B] How is the gospel a source of liberation?

[C] How are our communities signs of freedom and liberation?

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