**SIMPLICITY AND LIFE’S JOURNEY**

Simplicity comes from the Latin roots *sine* (without) and *caries* (decay), or *sine* and *cero* (to smear or coat). Therefore we gain the understanding of simplicity as being without corruption or any pretence. Simplicity means to be what we say we are, without any deception or artifice. It is being authentic. This is the ideal of the virtue; complete honesty and authenticity. This is something that we do not reach, but are always on the journey toward. The spiritual journey is in many ways a journey towards simplicity. Vincent called simplicity his gospel.[[1]](#footnote-1) It was what he was working toward. We can see it is a journey he undertakes, becoming more simple as his life continues. Louise started out as a complex person and her life experiences and her spiritual journey purified her and taught her to become simpler. We can learn from both of these great teachers about the path to simplicity and what it requires of us.

**Vincent and Simplicity**

Vincent came from a fairly simple background, a family that was not poor but was not very well off. He looked after the sheep in his early years. However, his intelligence was recognised and he was sent to school. Here we see him show normal teenage behaviour, when for fear of embarrassment he refused to see his father. There is also the strong story of his captivity, which may or may not describe actual events. Fr Hugh O’Donnell says that if the story is not true what it reveals is that Vincent was captive internally.[[2]](#footnote-2) We are also aware of Vincent’s ambition and desire to improve his state in life. These things indicate that he was not always simple.

It is from his writings that we really understand Vincent and his practice of simplicity, as well as how he teaches others about it. Early on in Vincent’s correspondence with Louise we see that he was quite straightforward with her and challenged her. For instance, he did not tell her he was leaving Paris because it would upset her too much. [[3]](#footnote-3) He was both challenging her not be too attached to him and to use the suffering she felt to become closer to God. He also did not hesitate to challenge her when he thought that she was being too attached to her son.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Vincent wrote to one of his confreres in 1634:

Simplicity is the virtue I love the most and to which, I think, I pay the most attention in my actions; and, if it is permissible for me to say so, I would say that I am practicing it with some progress by the mercy of God.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In saying this he makes it clear how important simplicity was to him and stresses that although prudence is important , being simple and straightforward is even more important. [[6]](#footnote-6) Vincent showed us an example of how he put the virtue into practice when he wrote:

From this time on, may that loving heart belong only to Jesus Christ, fully and always, in time and in eternity! Please ask Him to give me a share of the candor and simplicity of your heart because I have very great need of these virtues, whose excellence is unfathomable.[[7]](#footnote-7)

He spoke the truth from his heart and was not afraid to admit his limitations. Simplicity is about aligning what one says with what one does.

In his dealings with his confreres Vincent teaches us the importance of simplicity in our relationships with those we have the responsibility to guide. A confrere had withheld a letter from his superior, and Vincent challenged him in the following way:

…you have failed in simplicity by acting that way; you have also failed against God Himself, who is simple and who was obliging you,[[8]](#footnote-8)

In speaking the truth, he gave the confrere an opportunity to rethink what he was doing. On another occasion Vincent wrote to Pierre Cabel about struggles he was having with his community. Vincent told him that, even though he was the youngest, he could be a good guide to the other men. His advice was to call for obedience but to:

Do so with simplicity, uprightness, and firmness of mind, but gently and pleasantly, as coming from a truly humble heart - or one striving for humility. We must be firm in the end and gentle in the means, using requests rather than any language that might smack of authority or commands.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In this we see Vincent leading by example, showing Pierre how to call forth the right behaviour from his confreres by his own example and the way he treated them. Simplicity is about speaking the truth, but it does not mean that we need to be harsh. Gentleness is necessary alongside simplicity.

Vincent also taught the Daughters of Charity about simplicity. He encouraged them telling them that:

…the spirit of true village girls is extremely simple - no slyness, nor words of double meaning; they're not opinionated nor obstinate because in their simplicity they believe quite simply what they're told. Daughters of Charity should be like that, Sisters, and you'll know that you're really so if you're truly simple, not attached to your own ideas, but accepting of those of others; if you're candid in your speech, and if your hearts aren't thinking one thing while your lips say another.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In this passage we see clearly the principle of speaking the truth, being straightforward and transparent. Part of this passage, a little difficult to swallow, is about believing what one is told without questioning. To a person in the twenty-first century this seems to be naïve and going a bit too far. However, we need to remember that most of the women to whom he was talking were poorly educated. Also we are more likely to believe someone we deeply trust. Vincent also told the Daughters about the way they should relate to superiors, encouraging them to “Tell everything to your Superiors quite simply; there's nothing you shouldn't tell --I don't mean to everyone, no, that's unnecessary”[[11]](#footnote-11). Then he goes on to remind them that God dwells with those who are simple. This need for simplicity is tempered by the need to be prudent and not to say everything to everybody, as some things are not meant for all.

**Louise and Simplicity**

Louise was a complex person; her spiritual journey was one that led her towards greater simplicity. Her early life was full of suffering and pain, causing her to develop a complicated system of rules for herself in order to try and become closer to God. We have a copy of her Rule of Life in the World which is full of the demands she put upon herself:

Upon awakening, may my first thought be of God. May I make acts of adoration, thanksgiving and abandonment of my will to His most holy will.[[12]](#footnote-12)

And:

I shall try never to be idle. Therefore, after these few minutes of meditation, I shall work cheerfully, until four o'clock, either for the Church or for the poor or for my household.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Sr Louise Sullivan describes Louise in the following way:

A struggle to maintain virtues painfully acquired by rigorous asceticism and numerous devotions will mark the early stage of Louise's spiritual development. There is little spontaneity and, curiously, despite the importance of the Holy Spirit at this time, little quiet openness to infused divine gifts. As a young woman, Louise would strive for sanctity by the sheer force of her will.[[14]](#footnote-14)

She was a woman striving for closeness to God but who did so in a way that was rigid and incredibly complex.

The experiences of Louise’s life began to strip some of this complexity away. Her rejection from religious life was quickly followed by the brief joy of marriage and the birth of her son. She then entered the dark period brought on by her husband’s illness and subsequent death. Louise experienced depression but her faith was able to sustain her. We see the beginning of her journey away from the darkness in the advice given to her by her Uncle Michel de Marillac:

it is good to learn from experience that God is not attached to our own plans and propositions, and that those souls find him everywhere who seek him according to the manner in which he wills to communicate himself; and not according to their own conception of the manner which would be useful and profitable to themselves, for very often such usefulness imagined by the mind is no more than the satisfaction of their own feelings.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Over time, Louise experienced this softening of the harshness of her spirituality, particularly once she met Vincent, and he encouraged her involvement in the mission to the poor. This focus on others helped her to let go of her anxieties and to trust more in God.

From the way she taught her sisters and, in particular, from the importance that she placed on simplicity in their lives, we become aware of how far Louise moved in her spiritual journey. To some of the sisters she wrote:

Gentleness, cordiality and forbearance must be the practices of the Daughters of Charity just as humility, simplicity and the love of the holy humanity of Jesus Christ, who is perfect charity, is their spirit. That, my dear Sisters, is a summary of what I think I should tell you about our Rules[[16]](#footnote-16)

Simplicity, therefore, is central to what she taught her followers, particularly this sense of being authentic and straightforward in all that we do. Simplicity is also important in the way we relate to others:

If humility, simplicity and charity, which produce support, are well established among you, your little Company will be made up of as many saints as there are persons. We must not wait, however, for someone else to begin. If it can be said that these holy practices are not universally in use, let each of us be the very first to start.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Simplicity is essential in creating trust, not only for religious communities, but for all relationships. Her advice about being the first to practice this is something that we could take to heart.

Louise also teaches about the importance of simplicity in our relationship with God. She gave the following advice:

While reflecting on the divine gentleness during your periods of meditation, speak to Our Lord with great simplicity and innocent familiarity. Do not be concerned whether or not you experience any consolation; God wants only our hearts. He placed within our power only the capacity to make a simple act of the will. He considers this alone and the deeds resulting from it.[[18]](#footnote-18)

This is wise advice because our relationship with God deepens to the extent that we are able to be authentic and honest in our prayer. Louise also wrote in her own retreat reflections about this need for simplicity.

To give life to Jesus in my heart by love, thus rendering Him present in me.

…The means to imitate Jesus at the moment of His birth is to have my soul completely united to God and my mind filled with true knowledge of my own nothingness.

…God demands great purity of intention from those who serve Him. Therefore, I must, in no way, seek to derive glory from any action. God must be guiding my intentions…

To imitate the simplicity of Jesus when He told the Jews that they wanted to put Him to death.

… To listen to the word of God spoken in my heart.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Focused on God, Louise’s heart was undivided. She had the intention of letting go of all that distracted her and of allowing God to purify her heart. The simplicity of her relationship with God sums up what is needed for a deep relationship with God.

You desire to draw all to Yourself. Teach us truly to understand these words. If we belong to You, we can no longer belong to ourselves. If we believe that we are Yours, would it not be stealing to use ourselves and to live ever so slightly at variance with the precepts of the pure love which You taught us on earth?

Once we have completely yielded our wills to the purity of Your holy love, our lives must be spent entirely in the observance of the rule given to us by our Beloved from the moment that He was lifted up until His death.[[20]](#footnote-20)

**Simplicity for Us**

Fr Laurence Freeman tells us that:

The essential work of a spiritual teacher is just this: not to tell us what to do but to help us see who we are. The Self we come to know through its grace is not a separate, isolated little ego-self clinging to its memories, desires and fears. It is a field of consciousness similar to and indivisible from the Consciousness that is the God of cosmic and biblical revelation alike: the one great ‘I AM’.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Louise and Vincent help us in our spiritual journey by showing us the path to simplicity and authenticity, a path that involves living in the truth, speaking the truth and being as authentic as we are able to be. Pope Francis also tells us

Goodness always tends to spread. Every authentic experience of truth and goodness seeks by its very nature to grow within us, and any person who has experienced a profound liberation becomes more sensitive to the needs of others.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Let us then model ourselves on the example of Vincent and Louise and allow ourselves to grow in simplicity.

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