# Saint Vincent de Paul and the “New Poor”

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## 1] Presentation of the theme

Some months ago, with the danger of damaging our ears, the surveys, reports and articles about the “new poor” seemed to multiply. On the feast of Saint Vincent the bishops of France alerted the public about this problem. Government officials were mobilized and provided us with some very moving words. It was as though they had made an unprecedented discovery. Television and movie stars and sports figures helped to form public opinion as they offered their different talents to work on behalf of those poor men and women.

Nevertheless those, who in their flesh and their very person experienced the sting of poverty, would certainly have preferred to not be the cause for such publicity.

Every society has poor people just as every face has wrinkles. At the time of Vincent de Paul society was basically rural and naturally there were poor people … people whose burden would have been bearable during normal times, but the war, with its consequent destruction of villages and crops, impoverished thousands of people. This brought about an economic disaster that crushed the most vulnerable and made them beggars. Hunger and disease afflicted countless people in the cities as well as in the rural areas.

Vincent had known ordinary poverty: the poverty of his village, the years of bad harvests … the poverty in the city with its beggars. But beginning in 1617 Vincent went from discovery to discovery and like Dante, it seemed that he was descending through the circles of purgatory. Up until that time Vincent believed, like many others, that misery was simply an every present reality of life, just as the clouds cast shadows on a bright sunny day … and therefore ordinary charity was sufficient to remedy that situation. But the misery that Vincent discovered was of a different nature: material, moral and spiritual poverty which were the result of the social upheaval of that time. Vincent reflected on this situation in the same way that the Samaritan surveyed the wounds and the marks of the beating that this unfortunate individual had received as he now lay half dead on the side of the road. Then Vincent shared his discoveries with his contemporaries who in the beginning did not want to hear his words: his vision of a harmonious world did not seem to conform to reality. Jean Anouilh, in his film, *Monsieur Vincent,* put the following words on the lips of the Chancellor, Séguier: *Before you sir, there were poor people but that fact did not disturb the sleep of decent people; but now the poor are everywhere and it will be said that you invented them.*

Yes, Vincent “invented” them, that is, he discovered them but all Vincent attempted to do was to view them with an *inventive love* and thus communicate this passion to others. He would “invent” poor people even at the extreme ends of the world.

Civilization, but perhaps it is more precise to say, the present economic system, has its own poor people, in fact it seems to create poor people in all those countries where this economic system is implanted. Such is the situation of the disabled, those who “have missed” the train of progress and who can never ever board that train. We have even begun to speak publicly about the following formula: *it is necessary to have a certain number of unemployed people because this provides us with a certain degree of security that the machine is functioning well.*

In a civilization that was basically rural, those who suffered some unexpected calamity, such as the illness or the death of the head of the family … those people at least had their home (even if it was only a hovel) and they had some land and some animals … and the neighbors also helped. But in the city where everything is bought and paid for, the poor are not taken into consideration … and this begins very early in their life.

* In school, children are conditioned to reproduce the system and enter into the circle of production and consumption. Those who show themselves as incapable of adapting to this system are destined to be street cleaners or dishwashers … or unemployable.
* Later in life those who work and provide some service, receive a salary and with their salary those individuals have obtained various social guarantees against the misfortunes of life. Those who lose their job, lose their salary … it is as though they have fallen from a moving train: the social guarantees will continue for a certain period of time and then, nothing … nothing, even though they might not have found another job. Therefore they have no means to subsist and many are reduced to seeking some form of public assistance and food subsidies.
* At the end, when one’s active life has come to an end, one receives a pension. But those who do not know how to speak up and demand that their rights be respected (often the case with many widows) … those individuals are left to fend for themselves in whatever way they find possible … many spend their final years in boarding houses or nursing homes.

The system has tentacles and extends itself throughout the world. Thus there is always a need for cheap labor in order for the most unskilled work to be done. The system has found this labor in those who can no longer work on their own farms, in immigrants from the South and from Europe, in those who travel across the oceans. The ideal situation is that when those people are no longer needed then they should be sent back to their country of origin. This system of exploitation is reproduced in country after country and in all the large cities of the world.

* The people who once lived in the rural areas are now found living in shanty towns and their world of marginalization constitutes a reserve of cheap labor … and they live just a few steps from the affluent neighborhoods.
* Extended throughout the world, the system acts like a suction pump and enriches those “who are on the good side”, those select individuals with money and power and knowledge. The same system marginalizes those who are unable to enter into this cycle … it marginalizes individuals, social classes and entire regions of the world.

In order to confront this general economic system whose motor is profit and in order to achieve a true civilization (our present civilization is merely a caricature) we must recall here the words of John Paul II who said that the key element in our world is the human person … the human person as a child of God. The philosopher has stated that the human person is the measure of all things. Those words provide us with a foundation to organize a world of greater equality, a world in which everyone will have a place and will find a certain degree of happiness, a world in which people will be reconciled with themselves, with their brothers and sisters, with nature and with the universe.

Vincent reminds us that Jesus Christ is in the person of those who are poor *and that is as true as that we are here* (CCD:IX:199).

## 2] Saint Vincent and the “new” poor

Those whom we refer to as “the new poor” are frequently “new” because we have just discovered them … yet in reality these men and women have been poor for a long period of time prior to “our discovery”. It seems to be difficult for society to see and recognize those men and women who are poor. Didn’t it take Vincent thirty-six years to come to this awareness?

### 2.1] The new poor according to Monsieur Vincent

During the first years of his life Vincent experience the poverty of his family. He referred to this reality in his conference of January 25, 1643 on the virtues of village girls (CCD:XI:66ff.). Certainly he encountered the poor before 1617, for example, when he visited the Charity Hospital where as chaplain to Queen Marguerite de Valois he presented that hospital with a financial gift (CCD:XIIIa:20-22). But in those encounters with poor men and women, did Vincent recognize those persons as poor? Certainly we can say that those individuals did not change the direction of his life.

For Vincent “the new poor” were represented by the poor man in Gannes and then the family that was living in an isolated house and were abandoned and ill in Châtillon.

**“…One day I was called…”** *Would you call the origin of our missions human? One day I was called to hear the confession of a poor man who was seriously ill. He had the reputation of being the most upright of men --- or at least one of the most upright men --- of his village. Yet, he was burdened with sins he had never dared to confess, as he himself afterward declared aloud in the presence of the late wife of the General of the Galleys. “Madame,” he said, “I would have been damned had I not made a general confession, because of the serious sins I had never dared to confess.” The man died shortly afterward and the said Lady, realizing the necessity of general confessions, wanted me to preach a sermon on this subject the next day. I did so, and God blessed it so much that all the inhabitants of the place made a general confession. There was such a throng of people that I had to send for two Jesuit Fathers to come to help me hear confessions, preach, and catechize. This led to doing the same thing for several years in the other parishes on the estates of the said Lady. In the end she wanted to maintain some priests to continue these missions, and, for this purpose, obtained for us the College des Bons-Enfants, where M. Portail and myself went to live, taking with us a good priest to whom we paid fifty écus a year. The three of us used to go off to preach and give missions from village to village. When we were leaving, we would give the key to one of the neighbors, or ask him to sleep in the house at night. However, everywhere I went I had only one sermon, which I adapted in a thousand different ways: it was on the fear of God. That is what we used to do; God, meanwhile, was doing what he had foreseen from all eternity. He gave a certain success to our works, which, when some good priests saw it, they joined us and asked to stay with us. O Sauveur! O Sauveur! Who could ever have imagined that this would reach its present state? If anyone had said that to me then, I would have thought he was making fun of me; yet, that was the way God was pleased to give a beginning to what you now see. Eh bien, my dear confreres, would you call human something no one had ever intended? For neither I, nor poor M. Portail ever thought of it. Ah, we never thought of it! It was far from our minds!* (CCD:XII:7-8).

**“…I was told that in an isolated house…”** *While I was living in a small town near Lyons, where Providence had called me to be the Pastor, I was vesting to celebrate Holy Mass one Sunday when I was told that in an isolated house a quarter of a league away everyone was ill. None of them was able to help the others, and they were all in indescribable need. That touched me to the heart. During the sermon, I made sure to commend them zealously to the congregation, and God, touching the hearts of those who heard me, moved them with compassion for those poor afflicted people. After dinner a meeting was held in the home of a good townswoman to see what help could be given them, and everyone present felt urged to go to visit them, console them with their words, and do what they could to help them. After Vespers, I took with me an upright citizen of the town, and we set out together to go there. Along the way, we met some women who had gone before us and, a little farther on, we met others who were returning home. Since it was summertime and the weather was very hot, those good ladies were sitting by the side of the road to rest and refresh themselves. In a word, Sisters, there were so many of them, you would have said it was a procession. 0n my arrival, I visited the sick persons and went to get the Blessed Sacrament for those in greatest danger --- not at the parish church for the district was not a parish but depended on a Chapter of which I was the Prior. So, after I had heard their confessions and given them Holy Communion, the next thing was to see how to provide for their needs. I suggested that all those good persons animated by charity to go there might each take a day to make soup, not for those sick persons only, but also for others who might come afterward, and that's the first place where the Confraternity of Charity was established. Now, Sisters, see whether that is the work of human persons or whether it is clearly the work of God, for was it human beings who had made those poor people ill? Was it human beings who had inflamed the hearts of all those who went off in droves to bring them some help? Was it human beings who had planted in their hearts the desire to provide them with regular assistance --- not only them but also those who might come after them? Oh no, Sisters! that's not the work of humans; it is clear that God was powerfully at work there, for human beings could never have done it; no, Sisters, there was no way they could have done it* (CCD:IX:192-193).

“New poor?” In this case it seems clear that Vincent saw and recognized these individuals as poor. This discovery brought about a radical change in his life … so much so that he was convinced that he had encountered Jesus Christ in those poor men and women and so he affirmed Matthew 25:40: When you do something for those least brothers and sisters, you do the same to me.

**“…that is as true as that we are here…”** *In serving persons who are poor, we serve Jesus Christ. How true, Sisters! You are serving Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. And that is as true as that we are here. A Sister will go ten times a day to visit the sick, and ten times a day she'll find God there. As Saint Augustine says, what we see with our eyes is not so certain because our senses sometimes deceive us, but the truths of God never deceive. Go to visit a chain gang, you will find God there. Look after those little children, you will find God there. How delightful, Sisters! You go into poor homes, but you find God there. Again, Sisters, how delightful! He accepts the services you do for those sick persons and, as you have said, considers them as done to himself. Another motive, also given by a Sister, is that God has promised an eternal reward to those who give a cup of water to a poor person; nothing is more true, we cannot doubt it; and that is a great source of confidence for you, Sisters, for if God confers a blessed eternity on those who have given them only a cup of water, what will he not give to a Daughter of Charity who has left everything and makes the gift of herself to serve them all the days of her life? What will he give to her? We cannot even imagine! She has reason to hope that she will be among those to whom he will say, “Come, blessed of my Father, possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you”* (CCD:IX:199-200).

This text is taken from the Conference of February 13, 1646 and was undoubtedly the result of his reflection that began in 1617 in Gannes-Follevilles and Châtillon.

### 2.2] From new poor to new poor

After the revelation of 1617, Vincent no longer saw the discovery of the poor as some sociological problem. Certainly every society produces poor people and that could be said about the seventeenth century as well as the twentieth century. Thus we find that Vincent was attentive to these people (abandoned children, the galley slaves, the victims of war, etc.). In order to find these “new poor” it was enough to see and confirm this reality with one’s own eyes (cf., CCD:IV:445-447); it was enough to look at the world in light of Matthew 25:31-46. Thus it can be said that all of Vincent’s establishments would move from one discovery to another and there was never the fear of becoming “scattered”.

#### 2.2.1] The Confraternities of Charity

In the beginning (Châtillon) the objective of the Confraternities was to provide for the sick poor in their homes, but these teams of laywomen and men quickly adapted themselves to all the different situations of misery that they encountered.

**“…will take food to the hospital…”** *Each Servant of the Poor will take her turn preparing the food of those who are poor; take it to them in their homes --- or at the hospital* (CCD:XIIIb:24)

**“…to provide for the able-bodied and disabled poor persons…”** *The Association of the charity shall be established to honor Our Lord Jesus its patron and his holy Mother, to provide for the needs of able-bodied and disabled persons, to have them taught the catechism and to receive the sacraments, to feed and give medicines to the sick poor* (CCD:XIIIb:54).

**“…children and the elderly…”** *The Directors of the association will place the children who are poor in a trade, as soon as they are old enough. They will make a weekly distribution, to the disabled poor and the elderly who cannot work, of what they need to live on; for those who earn only part of what they need, the association will provide for the rest* (CCD:XIIIb:54).

**“…learn some trade…”** *The Company of the Charity shall be established in the town of … to assist, corporally and spiritually, the poor persons of the town and the villages dependent on it … by seeing that those who are able to work learn a trade and earn their own living, and by giving others the means of subsistence* (CCD:XIIIb:79).

**“…poor prisoners…”** *They will take care to visit poor prisoners to give them some alms and console them* (CCD:XIIIb:43).

#### 2.2.2] The Congregation of the Mission

During the December 6th, 1658 conference Vincent spoke about the purpose of the Congregation and he marveled at the multiple commitments to serve the poor.

**“…What is the use of taking on so many things and so many poor persons?...”** “*But,” someone will say to me, “why burden ourselves with a hospital? Look at the poor people in the Nom-de-Jésus who are diverting us from our ministry” … “Why go to the border town to distribute alms, to run the risk of many dangers, and be diverted from our ministries?” … If priests devote themselves to the care of the poor, wasn’t that what Our Lord did? … Aren’t those who are poor the afflicted members of Our Lord? Aren’t they our brothers and sisters? … “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 will answer him that Our Lord willed to surround himself with lunatics, demoniacs, madmen and persons who were tempted and possessed … “But the Foundlings, why burden ourselves with that?” … Let us remember, brothers, what Our Lord said to his disciples: “Let the children come to me,” and be very much on our guard against preventing them from coming to us; otherwise, we will be opposed to him … It could happen that after my death, troublemakers and cowardly men may come along and say, “Why should we be weighed down with the care of these hospitals? How can we help so many people ruined by wars, and go to see them in their homes? What is the use of taking on so many things and so many poor persons?” … No matter; our vocation is: Evangelizare pauperibus* (CCD:XII:77-79).

#### 2.2.3] The Daughters of Charity

In the beginning the Sisters were destined to care for the sick poor in their homes, but they also discovered new forms of poverty and, encouraged by Vincent, they adapted themselves to these new situations.

**“…God said, ‘I also want to give them another ministry...’”** *That is what our Sisters began to do with the sick, assisting them with such care; and when God saw how well they were doing it, seeking out the poor in their own homes as Our Lord most often did, he said, “These Sisters please me; they have done so well in this ministry that I am going to give them a second one.” That referred to those poor abandoned children, Sisters, who had no one to care for them, and Our Lord willed to use the Company to look after them, for which I thank his goodness. So then, when he saw that you had taken that on with so much charity, he said, “I also want to give them another ministry.” Yes, Sisters, it is God who gave it to you, without your ever thinking of it, nor did Mlle Le Gras --- no more than I did --- for that is how God's works are accomplished, without human persons thinking of them. When a work has no author, we have to say that it is God who has done it. But what is this ministry? It's assisting poor criminals or convicts … abandoned into the hands of persons who have no pity for them! I've seen those poor men treated like animals; that caused God to be moved with compassion. They inspired pity in him; as a result, his goodness did two things on their behalf: first, he had a house bought for them; second, he willed to arrange matters in such a way as to have them served by his own daughters, because to say a Daughter of Charity is to say a daughter of God. He also willed to give those Sisters another ministry, namely, the care of the sick poor, the poor elderly people in the Nom-de-Jésus Hospice, and those poor persons who have lost their minds. Yes, Sisters, it is God himself who willed to make use of the Daughters of Charity to look after those poor mental patients. What a happiness for all of you!* (CCD:X:102-103).

### 2.3.] The new poor at the extreme ends of the world

When people become aware of those who are poor in their own society, they are then tempted to forget the poor who live and die in so many other parts of the world. In 1648 Vincent had already spent much time (thirty-one years) in cataloguing and analyzing the various situations of misery throughout France. He had mobilized and established various institutions. But there were always more poor people, poor people who lived beyond the boarders of France … as a result Vincent was not afraid to extend the Congregation to Madagascar. He did this despite the difficulties and the criticism of those who felt there was plenty of work to do in France: *We’re willing to give a mission in this country; there’s enough to do here without going any further* (CCD:XII:79). Vincent never failed to remind those individuals about their obligation as Christians and as Missionaries to listen to the cries of the poor throughout the world … throughout the whole world.

**“…Madagascar should be abandoned…”** *Someone in the Company may say perhaps that Madagascar should be abandoned; flesh and blood will use that language and say that no more men should be sent there, but I am certain that the Spirit says otherwise. Messieurs, shall we leave our good Monsieur Bourdaise all alone there? The death of those priests will, I am sure, astonish some … Could we possibly be so base and unmanly as to abandon this vineyard of the Lord to which his divine majesty has called us merely because four, five, or six men have died? And tell me what a fine army it would be if, because it lost two or three, four, or five thousand men … it abandoned everything! What a nice sight an army of runaways and poltroons like that would be! Let’s say the same of the Mission; it would be a fine Company of the Mission if, because five or six had died, it were to abandon the Lord’s work! What a cowardly Company, attached to flesh and blood! Oh, no! I don’t think there’s a single member of the Company who has such little courage, or who isn’t ready to go to take the place of those who have died. I don’t doubt that nature may tremble a little at first, but the spirit, which has the upper hand, says, “I’m willing; God has given me the desire to go; no, this loss can’t make me abandon my resolution”* (CCD:XI:372-374).

**“…I am from everywhere…”** *That is how you must act in order to be good Daughters of Charity, and to go wherever God wants: if to Africa; to the army, to the Indies, wherever people may ask for you, it does not matter, you are Daughters of Charity, you must go* (CCD:X:105); *Sisters, give yourselves to God from this very moment to go wherever he wants to use you, and say to him: “… I abandon myself to you and throw myself into your arms, as a child in the arms of her father, always to do your holy will. I am from Le Havre de Grâce, or I am from Metz or Cahors, or from here or there --- from wherever you like”* (CCD:X:411).

One day, mimicking lazy men, Vincent stated: *They will be men who coddle themselves, people who have only a narrow outlook, confining their perspective and plans to a certain circumference within which they shut themselves away, so to speak, in one spot* (CCD:XII:81).

Vincent was able to envision the situation in Madagascar, a situation of national and social misery. This was because Vincent always remained attentive to the person of those who were poor, attentive to their particular situation and their proper dignity. In every poor person Vincent encountered Jesus Christ. *Our Lord willed to experience in his own person every kind of distress imaginable … to show you that you can serve him in every poor afflicted person* (CCD:X:103).

## 3. Questions for reflection and dialogue

---*Soup is distributed daily to fourteen or fifteen thousand persons, who would die of hunger without this assistance. In addition, about eight to nine hundred girls have been placed in private homes* (CCD:IV:396); *just some days ago we had twenty thousand refugees in that situation in this city, who had to be fed for a long time, plus a large number of sick persons we were assisting in the rural areas … those who have an income, cannot draw it; those who have land, have not harvested their crops this year, and nothing can be planted for next year* (CCD:IV:453-454).

In the situation in which we find ourselves (work, residence, diverse activities…), what new dimensions do we see with regard to poverty? Are we able to discern the causes of this poverty? What questions are raised by these new situations?

---*They were to find a way to feed those who cannot work because of illness or old age, and to require those who can work to do so* (CCD:XIIIb:78); *see that a fund of voluntary alms is set up for a granary and storeroom, and have the young children learn some trade in order to give them the means of earning their own living* (CCD:XIIIb:75).

Vincent was not satisfied with providing only monetary assistance but rather he attempted to provide people with the means that would enable them to provide for themselves. How do we view service on behalf of those who are poor? (reflect on this in light of the extreme need that exists in so many places in the work, the multiple causes of poverty, solutions to poverty, plans/projects to change these situations).

---*They would also like to enable all the other poor people who have no land --- men as well as women --- to earn their own living, by giving the men some tools for working and the girls and women spinning wheels and flax or linen for spinning --- but only the poorest* (CCD:VIII:82); *I wish you could see the destitution of these poor Indians. They are even eating raw grass, like cattle. Little children are often seen eating sand when they are hungry* (CCD:V:522).

Vincent had a universal perspective as he viewed the poor in the world. Among those who were poor Vincent opted for those who were most poor. Do our vision and our solidarity reflect Vincent’s universal perspective?

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