

him happy—to bring him a step nearer to the only true source of happiness or joy, which is to be found in cleaving to God. Mercy and joy, then, go together, the doer of works of mercy must be happy and cheerful, not a kill-joy, but someone who has a true and living appreciation of ‘the joy of his Lord’.



MONSIEUR VINCENT: THREE HUNDRED YEARS AFTER

G. J. SHANNON, C.M.

MPIERRE FRESNAY, excellently made-up as a priest of the seventeenth century, walked quickly across the church. He threw open the door of a confessional, beckoned to the confessor who was ministering to the souls of a few *dévotés*; then, together, they turned their backs on such pious trivialities and set out for the field of practical philanthropy.

The concept of the projected image is quite familiar in contemporary publicity and propaganda. It involves the selection and exaggeration of some one aspect of a product, a political party, a public figure, and the stamping of the result on the imagination of readers, viewers, or listeners. The French film, *Monsieur Vincent*, in which occurred the scene mentioned above, is a typical example of image projection: it is not unfair to say that the impression left on its audiences was one of almost complete activism. The vivid episodes presented the saint in a way calculated to appeal to the mood of the mid-twentieth century. Here, they seemed to suggest, is a man who had broken free from the shackles of *bourgeois* ecclesiasticism; one who sat loosely to the routines and prejudices of institutional religion; who interpreted Christianity in the tempo of today as a remedy for social injustices and for the re-ordering of economic and administrative chaos. This image of St Vincent de Paul, focussed so compellingly by the genius of M. Fresnay, is not, of course, the creation of the cinema. St Vincent the social reformer, with no mystical nonsense about him, the man of action *par excellence*, fits admirably into the conventional categories of our times. In this guise he has appeared

in numerous books, articles and sermons; and the image is accepted all the more easily because the very multitude and variety of his charitable works almost force his commentators to take refuge in a *simplicite* interpretation.

There are other images, naturally: in the case of such a many-sided saint they are almost unavoidable. One of these, and it also is extremely popular, may be called 'the sentimental St Vincent'. It is typically represented by Falquière's statue which stands in the Panthéon in Paris, and depicts the saint clasping foundling babies in his arms, smiling approvingly upon his somewhat dubious companions, and sharing with them the orotund salute of the Third Republic: *Aux Grands Hommes La Patrie Reconnaissante*. The image is without doubt nineteenth-century in conception and belongs to the emotional climate which helped to shape the statuary of Les Buissonnets and to develop the *tendresses* which drape the memory of St Teresa of the Child Jesus.

The twentieth-century image of St Vincent the philanthropist and the nineteenth-century image of the soft-hearted sentimentalist are good examples of artificial emphasis and arbitrary selection. They distract attention from the true greatness of the saint; and yet they indicate aspects of his career and personality which are indisputably founded in reality. Another image of M. Vincent, however, has had a much longer history than the two just described; and it can be very much more misleading. Indeed, it has misled even members of his own families, and its influence can be traced in the unfortunately prevalent and uniformly depressing iconography of the saint. This image presents St Vincent as a pious naif: an anti-intellectual of few attainments and slender talents: a spiritual descendant of the *devotio moderna*: a country bumpkin stumbling into sanctity and accidental eminence: one whose employment as an instrument of divine purposes is an outstanding example of the inscrutable wisdom of God. This peculiarly distorted image, or better, cartoon, of St Vincent has had a long innings: indeed, only a few years ago a reviewer in one of our Catholic periodicals dismissed a translation of some of St Vincent's conferences with poorly-disguised contempt; and it dates back to the saint's lifetime. Some responsibility for the distortion may be attributed to pious editing: a good deal may be traced to Jansenist innuendo; one is left, however, with an uneasy feeling that this was the image that St Vincent himself desired to

project. His autobiographical references, his self-analyses and descriptions, are filled with so many personal devaluations and phrases of almost grovelling humility that the reader may be excused if he judge the saint to be a man who despised the world of ideas, who inculcated intellectual inertia, and who shrank from any association with what today's jargon calls the life of the mind.

St Vincent de Paul died on September 27th, 1660. In this year of his tercentenary his memory and the memory of his sanctity and of his achievements in sanctity are being honoured all over the world. Unfortunately, despite the efforts of P. Coste and of other scholarly biographers who have requartered the territory so splendidly pioneered by him, the misleading images of the saint will probably receive new leases of life. Yet, be it said with all respect, St Vincent remains something of an enigma. He is the most difficult of saints to reduce to a satisfactory summary. The number and diversity of his interests and activities, the magnitude of his accomplishment in the fields of charitable organization and social reconstruction tempt one to over-emphasize and to concentrate upon his superb administrative gifts at the expense of his interior life of prayer and contemplation and his yearning for the souls of the abandoned country people. A cursory reading of some of his conferences to the Sisters of Charity may foster the impression of the sentimental M. Vincent, the Vincent of the Falquière statue. Respect for truth demands, however, that one recall him as the man who eliminated the beggar menace from the streets of Paris: who mediated between Cardinal Mazarin and the rebels of the Fronde: who was appointed by the Queen-Regent to advise upon the selection of bishops and major ecclesiastics throughout her kingdom. A catena of quotations could be adduced to strengthen the image of the anti-intellectual, the unlettered peasant priest blundering through the salons of the aristocracy; but this must be matched with the subtle psychological insights, the luminous spiritual *aperçus*, which star his voluminous correspondence; the overt evidences of supernatural wisdom and prudence which so impressed St Francis de Sales. The paradox of St Vincent de Paul, the enigmas of his character, are perhaps inseparable from his greatness: or, to be more exact, they are entailed by the difficulty which smaller minds undergo when trying to fit such magnanimity and universality into the categories of everyday experience. A consideration of the saint's

career, however, in the light of his character, his dominant interests and his special grace may provide, not a solution—there is no hook to take Leviathan—but perhaps a hint or two of the lines along which a solution of the Vincentian paradox might be sought.

Vincent de Paul was born in the Landes in 1581, the son of one of those independent farming families often referred to disparagingly in English as peasants. All through his life he exhibited traits of character and temperament associated with this background and racial inheritance. The typical Gascon is a man with quicksilver in his blood; copious in speech, lavish in gesture: a man of restless moods, of easily aroused and infectious enthusiasms and equally easy lapses into melancholy and discouragement. These qualities are modified by the farmer's independence of judgment, tenacity of purpose and shrewd acceptance of reality: indeed, in the countrymen of the Landes there can often be found a sort of cancelling out leading to hesitancy and indecision, and something of this may be observed in Vincent. The young man who was ordained priest at the distressingly non-Tridentine age of nineteen shows many signs of this blending and conflict of characteristics in the somewhat erratic course of his early career. The details are well known: the self-reliance of his years of schooling; his connection with the university of Toulouse; his honourable yet prosaic quest for a competence for himself and his family; the disaster of his capture by Moslem pirates and two years of slavery in North Africa; the ephemeral patronage of Cardinal Montorio; the road to Paris and frustrated hopes of preferment; the dead-end appointment as almoner at the fantastic court of '*La Reine Margot*'. In 1610, Vincent de Paul, thirty years of age, eleven years a priest, hesitant and unsettled in a hired room of the capital, is certainly not recognizable as *le Grand Saint du Grand Siècle*, or, to use the words of Georges Goyau, 'the ubiquitous and manifold Monsieur Vincent'.

Vincent de Paul, it is often said, was a slow starter on the road to sanctity. This may be admitted without in any way acquiescing in the startling allegations of Grandchamp. On the other hand, at the turning point of his life, he did not stand in need of any critical act of conversion. Enough is known of his willing acceptance of victimhood and of sacrifice for the sake of charity to

indicate a gradual sharpening of the moral profile and steady, if unspectacular, growth in holiness. What he did stand in need of at this stage of his career was spiritual control and direction. Since ordination he had been making his own life: searching for stability, for an ordered mission, yet reluctant to commit himself and unwilling to surrender his independence. Submission to another was necessary if his abilities and spiritual possibilities were not to be squandered in a maze of fruitless experiments. God's grace introduced Vincent to that other just when the development of his character had made him ripe for the acts of humility and obedience which were to be required of him. In 1612 Vincent met Pierre de Bérulle, then taking steps towards the foundation of the Oratory, and, under de Bérulle's guidance, he moved into a field of acquaintanceship and opportunity where his unformulated ideals were focussed and clarified, where the latent capacities of his great soul were produced into action in correspondence with grace, and where all the sterling qualities of his mind and heart and temperament were subtly channelled for the purposes of the abundant harvest which is commemorated today.

The Abbé Brémond, for whom de Bérulle is the central figure of the seventeenth-century renaissance of the French Church, has emphasized the Berullian influence exercised upon this new disciple; yet Vincent was de Bérulle's disciple only up to a point: it was de Bérulle's sanctity rather than his ideas that Vincent revered and submitted to, and in many ways the disciple was to prove himself greater than his master. To begin with, however, Vincent accepted the guidance of his director without murmur. At de Bérulle's insistence he entered the household of the great family of de Gondi as chaplain and tutor to the children: very much against the grain, as one may imagine, when one contrasts the independence and self-reliance of the Gascon priest with the menial status allotted to chaplains and tutors in such aristocratic *milieux*. Obedience, however, was paramount; he humbled himself and submitted to the directive which he had received; and this humble obedience bore fruit in a manner which no one could have foreseen. Through the de Gondi's Vincent made contact with the peasantry of the estates, with the criminal derelicts of the prison hulks, and with the commanding personalities who were to bulk so largely in the political and social upheavals of the

day. Here Vincent found many parts to play, many openings for the employment of his special gifts, a rising tide of opportunity upon which to unfurl the sails of his genius; and an extraordinary spectacle began to spread itself before the eyes of the century: an unknown and poverty-stricken country priest deploying the resources and commanding the services of one of France's ruling families and its ramifying connections to further and foster the mission to which he was called by the calamitous necessities of his people.

The fires in Vincent de Paul kindled slowly: even after his meeting with de Bérulle in 1612 and the speedily-won admiration of his new patrons, thirteen years were to elapse before what may be called the period of mental and spiritual orientations was over and he entered into his fulness with the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission in 1625. This intermediary period of thirteen years cannot be regarded, however, as a long-drawn-out retreat or novitiate; it constituted an epoch of almost miraculous maturation and spiritual path-finding. The man who faced his contemporaries in 1625 as the leader and superior of the little band of missionaries based upon the Collège des Bons Enfants was no longer the mercurial Gascon with his easily deflated enthusiasms, his quick temper and his black moods; no longer the man of swiftly alternating inspirations and fits of apathy, of prosaic ambitions and restless experiments. Vincent de Paul in the third decade of the seventeenth century had become a man of controlled energy, of tenacious strength of purpose, of balanced judgments, of far-sighted zeal, of ineluctable patience, of unquenchable trust in the loving providence of God. The earlier fickleness had extrapolated into flexibility; the capacity for moodiness had refined into a well-spring of compassion; the tendency towards irritability had been transformed into sensitivity, an extremely rare power for entering the hearts and feelings of others. The Gascon pride and the farmer's prickly self-reliance had been reshaped into that winning blend of meekness, charm, tolerance, sympathy, loyalty and single-mindedness which was to render his campaign for the cause of Christ almost irresistible. The projects which dominated his youth, the desire for security and position, the rapidly dissolving schemes and dreams concerning advancement in the Church, had been sublimated into that abiding vision of greatness which, according to the late

A. N. Whitehead, is an essential pre-requisite of moral education.

In 1625 it is too early to speak of M. Vincent as a saint; but the strands to be woven into the manifest pattern of Christ were already present and recognizable. St Francis de Sales was not easily deceived in such matters: he was well aware of the spiritual heights achieved by de Bérulle and by many brilliant members of his circle; in Vincent however he saluted a man after his own heart and bequeathed to him the direction of St Jane de Chantal and the nuns of the Visitation. Already for six years Vincent had held the post of Chaplain General to the French fleet with its hells of convict labour below decks and in the prisons of Paris. The foundations of the Confraternity of Charity had been laid with astonishing attention to detail at Chatillon-les-Dombes in 1617. In the same year his missionary experience at Folleville had led to the emergence of the twin aims of his subsequent career: *salus pauperum; cleri disciplina*. One is forced to the conclusion that the years 1612-1625 in the house of Gondi under the guidance of de Bérulle were years of decision and fruitage rather than of postulancy. The Vincent who comes out of them is the product of re-creation in grace; already advanced, if not perfected, in the depths and balance of prayer and supernatural love which we associate with his name. The founder of the Congregation of the Mission, commencing his great work in 1625 has acquired a fund of tender strength, of practical wisdom, of unwearying devotion, which will be enriched and widened, but will remain radically unaltered during the next thirty-five years. *Deo iugiter intentus; cunctis affabilis; sibi semper constans*.

Vincent de Paul does not belong to the select company of the mystics: that is agreed. He was, nevertheless, a man of vision. The Vincentian vision was a vision of the Church as the mystical body of Christ: a vision of the body of Christ which is focussed upon the lineaments of the Saviour where they are most clearly discernible, in the poor and in the priesthood: it is in terms of this vision that his life of prayer and of action in virtue informed by prayer may be interpreted.

The career of St Vincent during the thirty-five years which stretch from the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission in 1625 to his death in 1660 is bewildering in its complexity. Great works succeed one another in a dazzling panorama of charity and mercy. Missions to the French countryside are extended to

include Ireland, Scotland, Poland and Madagascar. Memories of his own years of slavery and the first-hand information he had obtained of the misery of the convicts in the French fleet stimulate his active concern for the Christian slaves held captive in Tunis and Algeria and lead to the establishment of consulates by his priests, the raising of funds for ransom, the foundation of a bank and postal service, and, in the last years of his life, the organizing and financing of a naval expedition to liberate the unhappy prisoners by force of arms. Practical charity to the poor and destitute expands until its sweep embraces hospitals, orphanages, refugees, the armies which his priests served as chaplains, wounded and dying soldiers nursed on the battlefields by the Sisters of Charity, entire devastated provinces which were rehabilitated and restored to civilized life. The compassionate heart of the saint, so touched by the sight of abandoned babies and exploited children, is stretched out to the dying king and to the state racked and torn by civil strife. While Vincent is delivering his simple and endearing conferences to the Sisters of Charity, Cardinal Mazarin is plotting, as the diaries reveal, to undermine his influence for good upon the Queen Regent and the boy Louis XIV. A brief article cannot even touch upon the myriad events of so crowded a life. In the face of such massive and varied accomplishments one is almost forced to retreat to one or other of the accepted images. The career of M. Vincent is, however, the career of a saint one of whose favourite virtues was the virtue of *simplicity*. The tapestry is rich and kaleidoscopic; but the theme is simple: and the Vincentian theme, the theme of his multiple works and organizations, the theme of his sanctity, is the theme of priesthood. The offertory prayer from the mass of the feast on July 19th states clearly this *idée maîtresse* of St Vincent's life and work: *Deus qui beato Vincentio divina quotidie celebranti mysteria tribuisti quod tractabat imitari*. And the collect for the same day translates this central grace into terms of its abiding effects: *Deus qui ad evangelizandum pauperibus et ecclesiastici ordinis decorem promovendum beatum Vincentium apostolica virtute roborasti*. . . . Everything else is ancillary and accessory.

M. Vincent was not always a saint: he was always a man of the Church. His reverence for the Church as such in its ordinary day-to-day institutional setting and ministrations may be deduced from the efforts he made to retain the priests of his Congregation

within the fold of the diocesan clergy and to prevent the formalization of the Sisters of Charity as a religious order. The canonical stratagems which he employed to obtain these ends are subtle and ingenious and the tenacity of his purpose was unshakable. With the clarification of vision, however, which followed his meeting with de Bérulle the reality of the Church as a supernatural organism, the shining concept of the body of Christ, became for him the very light of life. In the illumination afforded by this vision Vincent is a priest very much on the Pauline model: 'My little children of whom I am in labour again until Christ be born in you': 'By Christ in the gospel I have begotten you'. The Pauline phrases spring to mind unbidden in any consideration of Vincent de Paul: the parallel is compulsive: 'God is my witness, I long after you in all the tenderness of Christ . . . caring for you as a nurse cherishes her children . . . entreating and comforting you as a father does his children'. To such a man the plight of rural France revealed itself as a horror and a heartbreak. Material conditions were often desperate; but it is no exaggeration to say that the primary tragedy of the French countryside in the seventeenth century was not one of war and famine but of spiritual abandonment. Over wide areas the people were almost lost to the faith and the sacraments. The clergy in their midst, too often ordained without reference to the Tridentine reforms, were plunged in complementary ignorance and spiritual squalor. The priest in Vincent reacted vigorously to the twin challenge. From the early days of his conversion, or rather, *éclaircissement*, his aim was twofold: to re-establish the poor of Christ in the kingdom of Christ by missions to the souls of the abandoned, resurrecting in them the life of faith and sacraments; and to consolidate the position of the souls so recovered by re-energizing the pastoral zeal and knowledge of the diocesan clergy. These were the aims for which the Congregation of the Mission was established in 1625; they were stated definitely in the Common Rule printed in 1658: 'To preach the gospel to the poor, especially those of the countryside; and to help the clergy in acquiring the knowledge and the virtues necessary for their state in life'. The dazzling pageant of Vincent's charities and feats of organization may blind the reader to these fundamental aims; but surely one may be absolved of rashness for thinking that the saint would have chosen that twin statement as his exhaustive autobiography.

Vincent de Paul was by no means alone in his pre-occupation with the spiritual peril of France. No purpose can be served in trying to depict him as a solitary reformer. In the 1620's the conscience of the country was troubled, and St Vincent moved among a galaxy of brilliant and saintly men and women who strove anxiously to remedy the ills of their people. The response of the women of France, noble and *bourgeoises* alike, to the challenge of the Ladies of Charity was almost startling in its enthusiasm. The earnestness and devotion of the members of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament both stimulated and supported the activities of the saint. Above all, the outstanding priests of the Bérullian circle whose names honour the pages of Henri Brémond were consumed by ideas and desires similar to his own. Vincent was, nevertheless, the dynamic focus of his age. His Tuesday conferences for the clergy which commenced in 1633 rapidly became the centre of all that was most edifying in the clerical life of Paris. Within a year or two Richelieu was looking to them for the personnel of the episcopate. Ordination retreats were held regularly in Vincent's headquarters of St Lazare and were so markedly successful that the custom spread to all the dioceses of France and to Rome itself, where Alexander VII established them at the house of the Vincentian Congregation. The obvious value of these retreats, brief as they were, showed clearly the necessity of seminaries where a longer training could be given; Vincent strained all his resources to provide these and, by the time of his death, had established more than thirty in France alone. By these means and others besides Vincent was instrumental in harnessing the clerical zeal of his contemporaries towards the re-ordering of the French Church, just as by means of the Confraternities of Charity and the Sisters of Charity he helped to channel the widely spread goodwill of the laity towards the rebuilding of a Christian social order.

For two brief periods of his life St Vincent was a parish priest: at Clichy in 1612, and at Château-les-Dombes in 1617. In a wider sense of the word he was eminently a parish priest for the entire period of his active career: the parish priest of France, equally at home in the slums of the poor, at the deathbed of Louis XIII, on the bench of the galley-slave, amid the passions of the Fronde, in the confessional, in the wards of hospitals, in the council chamber of the Queen-Regent. He himself gave the ultimate

accolade to his saintly collaborator, St Louise de Marillac, when he proclaimed her to be 'the most motherly woman I have ever known'. Vincent in turn can be described in all truth as one of the most fatherly of saints: his fatherliness is the quality which Catholics love to associate with the ideal of priesthood.

It has been suggested earlier in this article that the priestly life of St Vincent corresponds very closely to the ideas and to the heart of St Paul; and in Vincent, as in Paul, priesthood is irradiated by the vision of Christ in his mystical body. It may prove helpful then to look to the essential priestliness of St Vincent for principles of synthesis which will unify the far-flung activities and paradoxical aspects of his career and character. The functioning of Christian priesthood, in the last analysis, is reducible to the virtue of religion: the Christian priest must receive his radical orientation from the religion of Christ which was the essential work of the incarnation and, as it were, the 'professional virtue' of the eternal high priest. The excellence of temporal priesthood is to be found in the closeness of its imitation of the priestly life of Christ; so, in the good priest, the infused virtue of religion will be perfected by the gift of piety, in response to which the spirit of Christ's filiation will shine through all his worship of the Father and draw all the beloved of the Father and all the children of God into the heart of worshipping love. The burgeoning in his soul of the virtue of religion and the gift of piety, following the connection established by St Thomas, will lead the priest to carry out activities enriched by the fruits of the Holy Ghost, goodness and benignity: these in turn will be consummated in a life reaching to the heights of the associated beatitudes: meekness, hunger and thirst after justice, mercy.

It will be obvious how closely what we are permitted to know of the sanctity of M. Vincent follows the thomistic plan of sacerdotal virtue: how accurately his life in priesthood corresponded to the heart of Paul and to the heart of our Lord. In saluting the priestly charity of St Vincent, the Apostle's words to Titus force themselves upon the mind: 'Then the kindness of God, our Saviour, dawned upon us, his great love for man'.

Lack of advertence to the pattern of priestly virtue which is engraved into every word and action of St Vincent is at least partly responsible for the misleading images referred to earlier in this article. No one who understands that the great works of

charity and of social reconstruction are manifestations of the fourth and fifth beatitudes could possibly explain St Vincent as a philanthropist or activist. No one who has contemplated the influence of the fruits of goodness and benignity on the soul would be tempted to depict the warm-heartedness, the Pauline tenderness, of this great priest as the amorphous softness of sentimentality. No one who has studied the development of sanctity on the model of Christ's sacerdotal meekness will misinterpret the lowly *Confiteors* which punctuate so frequently the saint's references to himself. St Vincent had pondered deeply the lesson of *kenosis*: he had learned how necessary for the life of priesthood is the emptying of oneself: *Semetipsum exinanivit formam servi accipiens*. The dynamic force of his character, the vivacity of his temperament, the charm, the attractiveness, the winning ways perfected by the gift of piety, had made him almost irresistible to men of goodwill and enabled him to play like a virtuoso on the generosity and altruism of his contemporaries. Little wonder, then, that in his profound awareness of the essential instrumentality of priesthood he humbled himself before God and before his grace in phrases which may sometimes seem to be exaggerated but which spring from his consciousness of the utterly sacramental function of the sacramental man. This abiding realization of the complete self-abnegation entailed by priestly religion and priestly *pietas* may help also to explain the vehement disgust with which the saint turned away from and rejected all forms of spiritual humbug and intellectual snobbery: that sterile knowledge which knows nothing of love.

In *A Companion to the Summa* Fr Walter Farrell wrote: 'The careful preparation of the soul of man by the virtues and the gifts is a secret of the soul, a secret that might never disturb the equanimity of men. But the divine-human action of the fruits and of the beatitudes is something that no human being can ignore; it comes from God, and God, whether we like the fact or not, is the beginning and the end of every human heart. No human being can stand in the crowd along the road and see God passing by without crying out in prayer or in hatred.' No one who meets M. Vincent can ignore him: few, surely, can hate him: for to know him even slightly is to learn something of charity. For this reason, perhaps, he would smile tolerantly on the various images projected under his name on the screen or in print or in

plaster; and even—is it too much to suppose?—quote once again from his Common Rule the words of Moses, who, when asked to prevent certain people from prophesying, said: ‘O that all the people might prophesy’.

‘My very own saint’, wrote Voltaire to the Marquis de Villette, ‘is Vincent de Paul; he has merited canonization by Christians and philosophers alike.’ It would be interesting indeed if St Vincent in the Panthéon could be induced to comment on such a tribute from such a source. We do know, however, that St Vincent’s charity recognized no frontiers and that his *pietas* reached out to embrace all the creatures of God. So the gentle ironist of St Lazare might admit the relevance of the speculation and refer the curious enquirer to a letter he had written to Warsaw in 1645 in which he instructed Fr Ozenne to pass on some good news about the Queen of Poland’s small dog which had been boarded out with the Sisters of Charity in Rue du Faubourg-Saint-Denis: ‘Please tell Mlle Villiers that the little pet is beginning to condescend to recognize me’.



CHESHIRE HOMES

FRANCES PHIPPS

WHAT a distance there is between the words ‘works of mercy’ and that irritating slogan of prosperity, ‘We’ve never had it so good’.

It is the distance between the good Samaritan and the welfare state.

Perhaps it is true that people in England are being better cared for than ever before. It is comfortable to believe that most of the natural tragedies of humanity—sickness, old age, incurable disabilities—come under some heading or other in health services or charitable organizations, and that everyone is taken care of ‘from the cradle to the grave’. We only have to look a very little way under the surface and behind the scenes to know that it is not true.

It is a sad fact that all round us are numbers of men, women and children, chronically sick, or dying slowly of incurable disease, or