

THE SPIRIT OF ST VINCENT DE PAUL¹

BY

JOSEPH LEONARD, C.M.



WHEN I was told I should have the honour of speaking to you today I thought I would like to submit for your consideration some thoughts on the spirit that animated St Vincent de Paul and inspired the works associated with his name. He was, as you know, proclaimed to be, and constituted, the patron of all Catholic associations of charity throughout the world by Pope Leo XIII. But he is, I venture to think, in a special way your patron. It is not perhaps generally known that, when he instituted the Confraternities of Charity, he established them for both men and women. The ladies of 17th-century France seem to have had both more energy and independence than the men, for, whilst their confraternities flourished and still flourish, those of the men were soon absorbed into a body that came to be known as the Company of the Blessed Sacrament which, a few years after St Vincent's death, was suppressed, on alleged political grounds, by Mazarin.

It was not until the 19th century that a Confraternity of Charity, such as was envisaged by St Vincent de Paul, was established by Frederic Ozanam, who was guided and aided in the work by one of the saint's daughters, Sister Rosalie.

I have been led to speak of the spirit of St Vincent by re-reading a sermon preached in the church of St Joachim, Rome, in December, 1938, by our Holy Father Pius XII, who was then Cardinal Pacelli. This panegyric is, I think, the best short life of the saint to be had, and that for two reasons: In the first place it is based on a full and intimate knowledge of the results of the most recent historical researches into the life of St Vincent and, in the second, it reveals a profound and heartfelt sympathy with the soul and spirit of your great patron.

The sermon is an exquisite commentary on, and development of, a text taken from the fifth chapter of St Paul's epistle to the Galatians: 'For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith that worketh by charity'. In the opening paragraph of the sermon the Pope says: 'He was a man in whom faith in Christ supernaturalised a natural tenderness of soul, in whom the charity of Christ stimulated faith, and in whom faith and charity

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combine to conquer evil by good, and to work miracles for the relief of every human calamity and misery. The sun of his intellect is his faith, and the flame of his will is his love: two virtues, light and heat, which made him a hero of action on earth who was afterwards to pour down the rays of his goodness from heaven, not like a wandering planet, but like a fixed star whose beneficent light shines over the entire universe'. If I were asked to say what, in my opinion, were the truths of this faith which were most deeply impressed on the mind and heart of St Vincent de Paul, I think I would say, in the first place, the truth that all human beings are the children of God. With God there is no respect of persons: 'neither Jew nor Gentile, Greek or barbarian, bond or free'. All of them have been created by him; each of them is made in his image. He makes no exception on grounds of age or sex, or colour, or race or nationality. And, in the second place, I would say the truth that all men are likewise the brethren of Jesus Christ. He is the Word made flesh, the only begotten Son of God, the perfect image and likeness of God. We are God's children, made in his image; he is our brother. He is the head of a body of which we are the members, and it was to the poor suffering members of this body that the heart of St Vincent went out.

Now Vincent de Paul was a man not only of great heart but of great intellect, and he was certainly not a sentimentalist. He had no illusions about the poor. He had indeed a most varied and extensive knowledge of poverty in all its forms. He knew what he used to call the 'bashful poor', those who had fallen on evil days and preferred to starve at home rather than beg for their bread on the streets. He was well acquainted with Irish, English and Scotch refugees, who had fled from the persecution of their religion by Cromwell. He had to deal with thousands of refugees from Lorraine, Picardy and Champagne who had sought refuge in Paris from the rapacity and cruelty of the armies that had invaded these provinces. It is well for us to remember that he lived through one of the most frightful struggles that ever devastated Europe, the thirty years' war, which lasted from 1618-48, and which was, in some respects at least, even more cruel and terrible than the modern world wars. He was moreover brought into the closest contact with criminals of all classes, with convicts, thieves, assassins and bandits, as well as with professional beggars, swindlers and prostitutes. He saw quite clearly and he even sometimes said that many of these poor people were filthy, physically repulsive and suffering from loathsome diseases, that they were dishonest, drunken, hypocritical and ungrateful, but to use his own phrase, that is one side of the medal;

turn it and, with the eyes of faith, you see that each of these wretched creatures is stamped with the image of God and is a brother of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, he believed that God so loved the world as to give us his only-begotten Son, that this Son so loved men as to lay down his life for them, and that he had given them a new commandment to love one another as he had loved them. Accordingly Vincent de Paul spent his life in putting, with God's help, that faith into practice, in showing that his was the faith that liveth by charity, that was inspired and vivified by love.

Christ said that he had been sent to bring good news to the poor, to tell them they were the children of God and his brethren. He went about doing good, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, seeking out the lost sheep. He came, as he said, not to rule but to serve, and St Vincent accepted this teaching literally. He too would serve the poor in soul and body, and in the spirit with which Christ served them. Accordingly he looked on the poor as his masters and he taught his disciples, both men and women, priests, laymen and Sisters of Charity that they must always look on the poor as their masters. When one comes to think of it, surely this is a surprising attitude. And yet he adopted it and did not think there was anything wonderful about it. It was simply the teaching of Jesus Christ as set forth in the Gospels. He insisted that to serve the poor is not only a duty but a privilege, and that those who were in a position to do so, because they were endowed with wealth or ability or both, should be most grateful to God for this privilege. That is the lesson of charity he taught not only his priests and sisters but the men and women who formed the Confraternity of Charity, some of whom were members of the most illustrious families of France at the height of its greatest temporal glory. 'The poor are your masters: thank God you are allowed to serve them'.

What steps were they to take to fulfil this duty, to exercise this privilege? First of all they were to wait until God had shown them the way. He was never tired of insisting that they were to rely on divine Providence. The word he uses is '*abandon*', for which it is difficult to find an English equivalent. It does not exactly mean abandonment; self-surrender is more akin to the idea he wished to convey. It may be compared to the attitude of a child that holds its father's hand and is cheerfully prepared to go wherever its father may lead. It is expressed in two lines of Cardinal Newman's poem, *Lead, kindly light*: 'I do not ask to see the distant scene: one step enough for me'.

Needless to say, such an attitude sometimes provoked protest from

the ardent and the zealous. Some of the Ladies of Charity said: 'How good he is, how holy, but oh! how slow'. And yet he could not be forced to move a step forward until he believed that God was leading him and that he was doing his will. He had a profound conviction not only of the goodness of God but of his majesty, and it was to this feeling, I think, that his apparent reluctance to embark on a particular undertaking was due. But once he was convinced that God was leading, then nothing could hold him back. There is something not merely heroic but awe-inspiring in the pertinacity with which he calmly continued to carry on, in the face of opposition, grievous losses and disasters, every charitable work he had once undertaken.

To spend a very long life in acting consistently on such a principle calls for a heroic degree of self-abnegation. There is one aspect of this renunciation of self to which I should like to draw your attention for a moment. Vincent de Paul was not, I think, a man who was naturally inclined to rejoice when confronted with difficulties, or eager to encounter and overcome opposition. He was by temperament averse from conflict, ready to meet others even more than half-way. But when the interests of God were at stake, his courage never faltered. There is not, I think, a single one of the works of charity he established that did not meet with opposition. And what is more, this opposition proceeded not only from worldly-minded men and women but on many occasions from upright, conscientious, good Christians. Yet he never wavered; never ceased from his labours, but at the same time, never did he attribute base or unworthy motives to those who opposed him or ceased to treat them with courtesy and charity.

All that I have been saying was summed up in a letter of four lines which he wrote to a layman who was also a member of his Congregation. This was John Barreau, who, before he joined St Vincent, had been a lawyer. He was sent by St Vincent to Algiers to act as French consul there. His primary duty was to collaborate with a priest of the Congregation in promoting the spiritual welfare of the thousands of Christian slaves in the galleys or in the convict hulks of Algeria. He had also to look after their temporal welfare and his position was no sinecure for he was imprisoned three times by the Bey of Algiers, bastinadoed on one occasion and otherwise tortured on another. Writing to Barreau on the 4th December, 1648, just two hundred and ninety years to the day before our Holy Father preached his panegyric already referred to, he said: 'We cannot better assure our eternal happiness than by living and dying in the service of the poor, between the arms of divine Providence, in the practice of self-renunciation that we may follow Jesus Christ'.