

## St. Vincent de Paul - His Spirituality and Mission



### What is it to be a Christian? In the tradition of Vincent

In the Encyclical 'Redemptoris Missio' Pope John Paul II says 'the universal call to holiness is closely linked to the universal call to mission'. He calls on Christians to become docile to the Spirit so that they can be moulded by the Spirit and so become ever more Christ-like. This, he says, will lead to 'apostolic charity', which takes the form of concern, tenderness, compassion, openness, availability and interest in people's problems especially the least and the poorest'. According to Fr. Peter McVerry, S.J. the defining characteristic of a Roman Catholic or any Christian should be our compassion. 'Compassion towards those in need determines, more than anything else, God's relationship to us. It is the defining characteristic of those who profess to do what God wants and to follow Jesus'

St. Paul tells us 'In short there are three things that last: faith, hope and love. The greatest of these is love'. *1 Cor. 13:13*. Vincent de Paul's experience at Chatillon was a conversion experience that opened his heart to people living in poverty and led him on a new pathway of love. 'The facts are simple as Vincent describes them: 'On Sunday as I was vesting for holy Mass word was brought to me that in an isolated house a quarter of a league away everyone was ill, not one being on his feet to help the others, and that all were in indescribable need. I had only to mention this in the sermon when God touched the hearts of those who heard me and found themselves deeply moved with compassion for these poor suffering ones.' Vincent then sees how the people have responded most generously to the needy family and he recognises that the present is taken care of, but what about the future?

He realised that organisation is required if needs are to be met systematically. He then began the charities to minister to the needs of people which would not be met otherwise and could not be handled by single individuals working alone. He recognises that the needs of the people suffering from poverty, sickness and exclusion are the responsibility of the entire Christian community and that it is only when the community is mobilised together that these needs can be met and the people concerned served effectively.

For Vincent de Paul love was always very concrete, very practical. It was love in action. 'Let us love God, my brothers and sisters, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows. So very often many acts of love of God, of resting in his presence, of benevolence and of such interior affections and practices although very good and very desirable, are nevertheless to be suspected if they do not reach out in the practice of effective love.' *St. Vincent XI, 290*. He certainly found the essence of his faith and the inspiration for his good works within and through the scriptures, for him there was only one driving force, the person and mission of Jesus Christ. His spirituality and action flowed from his contemplation of Jesus. He was particularly inspired by two scenes from the Gospel which he often quoted. 'The Spirit of God is upon me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor.' *Luke 4:18-19* and the judgment scene *Mt. 25:31-46*. He said to the Daughters of Charity 'you must do what the Son of God did when he was on earth. And what did he chiefly do? He laboured unceasingly for his neighbour, visiting and healing the sick and instructing the ignorant unto their salvation'. *St. Vincent, 5 July 1640. The Vocation of a Daughter of Charity'. Conf 2*. It was in the light of the Gospels that he saw and acted. The people struggling with illness, poverty, or exclusion became for Vincent divine revelation. 'Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do unto me' *Mt. 25:40*.

He had a vision of Christ who is present in people living in poverty, for him they were the new embodiment of God's own person, Jesus himself. He was aware that it was not always easy to recognise this presence. In one of his most quoted passages Vincent encouraged his community 'One should not judge poor men and women by their looks nor by their apparent denseness. Very frequently they hardly seem to have the appearance or intelligence of human beings, so gross looking and offensive are they. But turn over the coin and you will discover by the light of faith that the Son of God, whose will it was to be poor, is presented by just these people.' *Confèrence to Priests of the Mission, 6 December 1658, Coste, CED, 12* He taught the Sisters to see the face of Christ in every foundling, every invalid, every beggar and to serve them accordingly. 'A sister will go and visit the poor ten times a day, and ten times a day she will find God there.' When Vincent looked out at the world it was these little people, the invisible ones, the outcasts that he saw. His goal was to highlight and make visible the almost concealed dignity of these people oppressed by poverty, illness and exclusion, to reach out to them so that they would feel wanted and needed and to get others involved.

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