

August 2019

Dear Fellow Vincentian:

As we discussed in our Spirituality meeting sessions with many of you, I will be providing spiritual readings and questions for prayers and discussion for meetings during the following year.

The first two readings center on St. Vincent de Paul and his words. I recommend that you use either (or both, if you have two meetings) for the month of September.

The first reading is from physical description of St. Vincent de Paul. Our physical and facial expressions often reveal something about us and our personality.

The questions for the first reading are:

1. What do these descriptions of St. Vincent de Paul reveal to you about him?
2. Without giving names, describe the physical and facial expressions of a Vincentian who has had a great positive influence on you.
3. Again without giving names, describe the physical and facial expressions of a “neighbor in need” whom you have visited and has made a great impression on you.
4. What does the description above tell you about the face of Jesus today?

The second reading is from the writings of St. Vincent de Paul, especially important on his feast day September 27th. Of course the reading may be used at any meeting in September.

The questions for the second reading are:

1. In your experience how do poor persons take the place of the Son of God?
2. St. Vincent de Paul says all of us must be and are poor if we are to serve poor persons. Without necessarily giving intimate, personal details how would you describe your poverty?
3. In what way are we collectively as the Society of Saint. Vincent de Paul poor? How can we better deepen our poverty so to better serve poor persons?

I will be forwarding material about Louise de Marillac for October to be followed by reflections on Blessed Frederic Ozanam and Sister Rosalie Rendu. By advent I will return to selected gospel passages.

I would appreciate feedback on the material and the discussions, prayers and meditation reflections.

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Blessings and happy feast day of St. Vincent de Paul.

Msgr. Sam Bianco

Spiritual Advisor

and for the Spiritual Committee

PHYSICAL AND MORAL DESCRIPTION DEATH – APOTHEOSIS

Physical description of Vincent

Vincent's modern biographers all agree that the popular image we have of him is not really the true one. He is represented as an aged, stooped, ugly man, whose ugliness is, however, offset by his endearing kindly expression.

Actually, he was entirely different. His first biographer, Abelly, who had known him well, describes him thus:

Father Vincent was a well proportioned man of average height. His head was rather large, but well shaped and in proportion to the rest of his body; his forehead was broad and majestic, his face was neither full nor too gaunt; he had an affable expression, a keen eye, a sharp ear, and an imposing carriage. A benign sweetness enveloped his whole person.

This description was borrowed almost verbatim by one of the saint's most accurate and knowledgeable biographers, Father Maynard, whose impressive life of Vincent first appeared in 1860 and was reprinted many times afterward.

Much closer to us is Monsignor Calvet, whose excellent biography appeared in 1948. He writes that, on the whole, we are uncertain of what Vincent looked like:

We would certainly like to find out what this man looked like. We know that he was unlike anyone else in appearance. But his missionaries and friends decided only after he was quite old to have him painted. It was necessary to surprise him, to conceal in his audience a very able painter, Simon Francoise, who watched him as he was preaching and then worked from memory. We do not know what has happened to this portrait. The engraved reproductions that we do have, especially Pitau's, which is the best, are revealing; they show an eighty-year-old man whose face, lined by age and asceticism, wears a wan look from long exercise in humility. His eyes are still lively, though not sparkling, and as piercing as a pointed tool. His thin-lipped, well defined mouth is slightly open with a kind smile that brightens his whole face. His head, set deep on his stooped shoulders, is not inclined forward only because he deliberately keeps it erect.

A little further on, Monsignor Calvet ventures another portrait, one that he visualizes "in the fresh-ness of youth":

His rustic, clumsy appearance had nothing thick-set about it; he was very robust and agile. A little over average height, he had massive shoulders; a wide, rectangular head that was rather lengthened by a pointed goatee like the Bearmais' King's (note: This was Henri IV); a prominent nose; small, bright eyes under well defined, arched brows; a large mouth; thin lips that suggested wit and good-natured mischievousness; a well built, supple body, endowed with exceptional mobility, which he preserved right up until old age; and quick, active hands, whose gestures were always accompanied or followed by expressive facial move-ments. He was perhaps more a well spoken person than a talkative one; he had a rich, masculine voice, like the Basque highlanders. In short, he was a force born of nature and fashioned by it to be a leader. This is how we conceive of him in his youth

Finally, Daniel-Rops, whose relish and talent for description are well known to us, portrays him at forty-five (which would take us back to approximately 1625, when the Mission was founded), in *L'Eglise des Temps classiques*, which appeared in 1958:

He was entirely himself at forty-five. He longer the cassocked youth of Gascony who could be seen at Rome and in the drawing rooms of Queen Margot, nor the young pastor of Clichy whose bound-less enthusiasm astonished his Bishop. Something in him had settled down, but without any consequent lessening of his bold fervor. His face had become gaunt; fatigue and anxiety had produced deep wrinkles. At a rather early age his legs stiffened and he became stooped. In the end, he was just as films and pictures depict him: the gentle soul with the beard, the long, Cyrano-like nose, and the short neck sunken deeply into the shoulders. Under the black skullcap that covered his entire head, a high forehead disclosed his intellectual endowments. His eyes were bright and penetrating, and the very soul of our saint shone through the smile that adorned his generous mouth. Wisdom and goodness illuminated him.

There was, then, an incontestable parallel between his physical traits and his character, between his body and his soul. His body was the faithful servant of his soul, but in the end the soul had graven on the body the marks that betrayed its own qualities.

St. Vincent de Paul

These words of St. Vincent de Paul so clearly capture the essence of his vocation and ministry that they are read every year on the occasion of his feast day on September 27. The poor, when viewed with eyes of faith, take the place of Christ and so give us the opportunity to love and serve Jesus. Charity is greater than any rule or pious exercise.

Even though the poor are often rough and unrefined, we must not judge them from external appearances nor from the mental gifts they seem to have received. On the contrary, if you consider the poor in the light of faith, then you will observe that they are taking the place of the Son of God who chose to be poor.

Although in his passion he almost lost the appearance of a man and was considered a fool by the Gentiles and a stumbling block by the Jews, he showed them that his mission was to preach to the poor: He sent me to preach the good news to the poor. We also ought to have this same spirit and imitate Christ's actions, that is, we must take care of the poor, console them, help them, support their cause.

Since Christ willed to be born poor, he chose for himself disciples who were poor. He made himself the servant of the poor and shared their poverty. He went so far as to say that he would consider every deed which either helps or harms the poor as done for or against himself. Since God surely loves the poor, he also loves those who love the poor. For when one person holds another dear, he also includes in his affection anyone who loves or serves the one he loves. That is why we hope that God will love us for the sake of the poor. So when we visit the poor and needy, we try to understand the poor and weak. We sympathize with them so fully that we can echo Paul's words: I have become all things to all men.

Therefore, we must try to be stirred by our neighbors' worries and distress. We must beg God to pour into our hearts sentiments of pity and compassion and to fill them again and again with these dispositions.

It is our duty to prefer the service of the poor to everything else and to offer such service as quickly as possible. If a needy person requires medicine or other help during prayer time, do whatever has to be done with peace of mind. Offer the deed to God as your prayer. Do not become upset or feel guilty because you interrupted your prayer to serve the poor. God is not neglected if you leave him for such service. One of God's works is merely interrupted so that another can be carried out. So when you leave prayer to serve some poor person, remember that this very service is performed for God.

Charity is certainly greater than any rule. Moreover, all rules must lead to charity. Since she is a noble mistress, we must do whatever she commands. With renewed devotion, then, we must serve the poor, especially outcasts and beggars. They have been given to us as our masters and patrons.

This excerpt from the writings of St. Vincent de Paul (Epist. 2546: Correspondance, entretiens, documents, Paris 1922-1925, 7) is used in the Roman Office of Readings for the Feast (liturgical memorial) of Saint Vincent de Paul on September 27. St. Vincent was born in Gascoy, France, in 1581. He was ordained a priest and went to Paris where he was stationed in a parish. He founded the Congregation of the Mission to supervise the formation of priests and to give support to the poor. With the help of Saint Louise de Marillac, he also founded the Congregation of the Daughters of Charity. He died at Paris in 1660.