

Topic 19: Vincentian Spirituality: Practical Charity, Part 1

Overview: St. Vincent DePaul, St. Louise de Marillac, and Elizabeth Ann Seton are the three major figures we will examine in this spiritual tradition. Vincentian spirituality was firmly rooted in the world. Vincent and Louise brought the practice of charity to the forefront in seventeenth-century France. His achievements in the history of Christian spirituality are quite remarkable. In an age when many still adhered to an inward looking spirituality tainted by Jansenism, Vincent brought the focus to the larger world in need of redemption through the practice of Christian charity. Vincent was a practical man so his teachings on charity were not amorphous platitudes and lofty ideals. He got to the heart of charity, i.e., that charity is the greatest gift of all and the most important quality to be cultivated among Christians.

Vincent: Journey to Freedom (1600–1625)

- Vincent was born in France in 1581 to a farming family.
- In his early life he decided to become a priest. He was motivated primarily by a desire for social advancement and wealth. He lied about his age so he could be ordained at the age of 19.
- While he was studying, he ran a small boarding school. When debt began to mount, he convinced a generous woman from Toulouse to write him into her will.
- From 1605 to 1607, Vincent disappeared. There is a legend that he was carried away by pirates. It is thought that he was sold into slavery, though this remains unproven.
- While in Paris, he took charge of a parish.
- Vincent was touched by a sermon he preached on the conversion of St. Paul.

Vincent: Apostle of Charity (1625-1660)

- He began a ministry to the galley slaves and founded the Confraternity of Charity.
- Other priests began to gather around him. He founded a community called the Congregation of the Mission. He told the first three priests that joined that their mission was “to aggregate and associate to ourselves and to the aforesaid work to live together as a Congregation and to devote ourselves to the salvation of the poor country folk.”

1) The primary focus of the Congregation was service to the poor.

2) Vincent also got involved with the reform of the French clergy. He held retreats and workshops for the clergy.

(a) He gave Tuesday Conferences to priests.

- He met Louise during this time and helped found the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity
- Vincent shows us a way of love. His way was not spirituality; it was a way of life.

1) Experience: Vincent paid attention and learned from his experiences. Action always followed experiences.

2) Faith: after his conversion, Vincent had faith in Divine Providence. God was present in the activity. He built on Ignatius's notion of seeking God in all things.

3) Practical wisdom: Vincent's life was shaped by three rules.

(a) Act with purity of intention and singleness of purpose.

(b) Consider an action as manifesting God's way when it effectively embraces the extremes. Affective love must always be expressed as effective love.

(c) Mirror God's fidelity to His own being and His great flexibility towards human beings. Vincent was firm and persevering in regard to goals, but flexible and gentle in regard to means.

We can see from Vincent's work and spiritual life that he was extremely creative.

1) He created "the Little Method."

2) He developed a methodology called the Repetition of Prayer.

3) Vincent shows us a way to God and a way of living in the world.

- "Surely, the great secret of the spiritual life is to abandon all we love to Him by abandoning ourselves to all God wishes in perfect confidence that all will be for the best. . . . He will take the place of father and mother for you. He will be your consolation, your virtue, and in the end the recompense of your love."

- “Sisters, an interior Daughter of Charity is one who devotes herself only to God. For what is the meaning of being interior if not to be occupied with God and with our neighbor?”
- The motto of the Daughters of Charity is “It is the charity of Christ that urges us on.”

Review Questions

1. St. Vincent was known for his practical charity. Practice five acts of charity today.

2. The early Vincent was far from perfect, yet he changed and did great things for God through his service of the poor and the needs of priests. Spend some time praying about those things in your life that might stand in the way of your doing great things for the Lord and the Church.

3. The Catholic school system as we have known it in the United States is diminishing. How might we bring the pioneer spirit of the Vincentian-Setonian tradition to create new ways of educating people in the twenty-first century?