



ST VINCENT  
DE PAUL

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JOANNES CAN. GRAY

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ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

*Frontispiece*

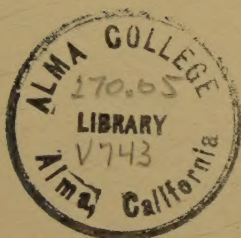
ST VINCENT DE PAUL

By

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## INTRODUCTION

DEAR St. Vincent ! He is a saint who wins his way into every heart, for he stoops to all our miseries, consoling the captive, kissing the plague-stricken, folding the foundlings in his arms. He has left us as his legacy a host of saintly daughters to carry with them, beneath the white wings of their cornettes, his message of comfort, peace and sweetness. St. Vincent does not frighten us as do those mighty saints who are rapt in God so far above our feeble reach. Although the Church has raised him to her altars, we still feel that he is very near. Yet we must be careful to make no mistake : because he bows down to our lowliness let us not belittle him. For Vincent also was a mighty saint who attained great heights ; but slowly, gently, step by step—we had almost added “peacefully”, were it

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not that the struggle of the Christian soul against the things of earth must needs be a continual warfare. He experienced no violent strokes of grace, no road to Damascus, no seventh heaven. And it is for this reason that he seems so accessible, a saint whom we can imitate, for he had neither revelations nor extraordinary favours, but was content to seek with patience, not his own ends nor his petty human interests, but the designs of God both for himself and for his fellowmen.

Yes ! Vincent de Paul was undoubtedly a great personality, one of the most active and most noted men of his time, the founder of innumerable works of which we are still witnessing the marvellous development. But when we draw near and look into his life we find him, even as ourselves, slowly building up his little enterprises, ever directed by human prudence, even when acting under divine inspiration. He will not cut himself adrift, though he soars so far ahead of us, but gently says : "See, I was but a poor pea-

## INTRODUCTION

sant who never thought to do anything extraordinary, but when we serve God and not self he amplifies our actions, even to infinity. Serve him humbly, daily, solely, and the Almighty will do great things, in and through you, even as with me.”



# ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

## CHAPTER I

### YOUTH AND EARLY AMBITIONS

VINCENT DE PAUL was born in 1581, at Pouy, near Dax. The little village is situated in the Landes, that wide sweeping plain which stretches to the foot of the snow-clad Pyrenees, and, here, in this peaceful, sun-bathed land, he spent his childhood, occupied, like Genevieve and Joan of Arc, in keeping his father's sheep.

The Depauls, or de Paul (the article was not at that time a sign of nobility) were poor and simple, though by no means destitute. Except when war or the burden of taxation weighed too heavily upon them, they had

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means sufficient for the decent upbringing of their four sons and two daughters. Truth to tell, they have no history—they were plain honest folk, Godfearing and industrious, such as make the strength of France.

In their little circle one child stood out among the rest, sturdy, brave of heart and quick of wit, a true Gascon—Vincent. And the parents were determined that this son of theirs should rise above his humble station; the other children could remain at home, Vincent must be set to study. Accordingly, one day they took him to be educated at the Franciscan college at Dax. It was no small sacrifice. Sixty pounds a year weighed heavy in the family budget, but it was not wasted. The child worked well and with such success that in the following year M. de Comet, a lawyer at Dax, began to take a special interest in his future. He took the boy to live with him and helped to pay his schooling. “You should study for the Church, my boy,” he told him. It was a sound advice, for the Church alone

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at that time held out to a son of the people any prospect of a great career. Yet Vincent hesitated. The thought of the priesthood frightened him. In his eyes it stood for such a high ideal, even at a time when many men took orders from ambition or some unworthy motive. At length Comet's insistence won the day; Vincent decided to study for his degrees at the university of Toulouse, second only to that of Paris itself. Jean de Paul sold a fine pair of oxen to help to defray the costs. His hopes for his son showed fair promise of fulfilment.

The little peasant bade a long farewell to his village. He spent eight years at Toulouse, from 1596 to 1604, a period of which, unfortunately, we know almost nothing. When the price of the oxen was consumed he found that if he were to continue as a student he must become a master. The Lord of Buzet, a stronghold in the neighbourhood of Toulouse, entrusted his son to him for the holidays, and for a time he conducted a sort of little school for a few young nobles. This enabled him to

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carry on his studies, and in 1604 he received his degree in theology.

Doubtless he could have continued his education to a much higher point and become in later years a learned Doctor of the Sorbonne. But he had no such wish. All through his life he fought against the knowledge which puffs up with pride, saying: "Do you look for God? He dwells among the simple." Yet let us not forget that this man, who chose to appear ignorant, started life with ten or twelve years' study, that he understood Saint-Cyran and could confute Arnauld, that he was fitted to take part in the subtle controversies of Jansenism, that he was worthy to co-operate with the choicest spirits of the age in restoring to the Church of France, not merely piety and discipline, but light and learning.

During this obscure period of Vincent's life there occurred certain important events of which the dates at least are known to us. In September and December 1598 he received the Subdiaconate and the Diaconate, and in





ST. VINCENT'S FIRST MASS



N D. DE GRACE. NEAR RABASTENS, WHERE  
ST. VINCENT SAID HIS FIRST MASS

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September 1600 he was ordained priest by the Bishop of Perigueux. He was but nineteen years of age, but we must not be surprised at this irregularity. Indiscipline and disorder were rife throughout the Church of France, and the decrees of the Council of Trent had not as yet been applied. Vincent acted as did so many others. Yet it seems that he himself felt he was too young. He had delayed his ordination for a year, and he chose as the scene of his first Mass an isolated chapel, hidden in a wood, the little oratory of Notre Dame de Grace, de Buzet, built long ago by the monks of the Abbaye de Conques. Here, for the first time, alone with a priest and an aged server, he consecrated the Body of his Lord. "He was heard to say," wrote his first biographer, Abelly, "that not having the courage to celebrate his Mass in public, he chose to say it in a chapel withdrawn apart, assisted only by a priest and server."

How touching is this lonely Mass, when we think of the tragic worldliness of the greater

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number of vocations in that age which made so light of things divine. In the little chapel of Buzet we have a foretaste of the future of the man who was later on to become one of the chief agents in the reformation of the clergy, who was to restore the very ideal of the priesthood, and to re-establish in the hearts and minds of men the sublime dignity of the priest of God.

But we must not go too fast. Vincent was a good priest indeed, but he was not yet a saint. For the moment his studies ended, he set out to fulfil his modest ambitions, to make his way in the world. He refused the curacy of a village in the Landes and left for Bordeaux, where the Duc d'Epéron held out hopes to him of a good living. It would have involved considerable expense, and the affair fell through. Returning to Toulouse, Vincent found that an old woman in the town (possibly his former landlady) had left him a little fortune; a few bits of furniture and a small property. The latter, however, was in

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the hands of a bad debtor, and Vincent, having obtained a judgment on the case, found himself obliged to proceed to Marseilles, whither the rascal had fled in order to escape his obligations and carry on his intrigues. "Having no means, I sold the horse I had hired at Toulouse, intending to pay on my return. My ill luck in being so delayed was as great as my dishonour in having allowed my affairs to become so entangled. . . I caught my man and had him imprisoned and afterwards released for the sum of three hundred crowns which he was glad enough to pay."

Vincent's next thought was to return to Toulouse, but here Providence intervened, launching him on a series of adventures in which, only at a much later date, did he discern the hand of God. By the advice of a gentleman with whom he lodged at Marseilles he decided to take boat to Narbonne, a cheaper way of travelling, for his debts must now be paid. The weather was fine, the sea calm, the port at hand, when three brigantines hove

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in sight, manned by the dreaded Turks who were the terror of the Mediterranean. "The wind would have been sufficiently favourable to bring us to Narbonne, fifty leagues, the same day, if God had not permitted three Turkish sloops coasting the Gulf of Lyons to give chase to us and make so sharp an attack on us that two or three of us were killed and the rest all wounded, even I myself receiving an arrow wound which has left its reminder for all my life." They were forced to surrender to these "scoundrels worse than tigers."

Taken prisoner, his wounds roughly dressed, Vincent was carried off in chains to Barbary and sold in the slave market at Tunis. A long letter to his friend, Comet, tells the tale of his surprising adventures—strange prelude to the life of a saint. During two long years he served several masters. A fisherman, who had to resell him because of his sea-sickness; an aged alchemist, whose life had been spent in searching for the philosopher's stone, and whose mysterious furnaces it was Vincent's



ST. VINCENT ESCAPING FROM BARBARY WITH HIS  
CONVERT



ST. VINCENT SINGING THE "SALVE  
REGINA" TO THE MUSSULMAN WOMAN

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duty to attend; and finally, a renegade from Nice, who at the price of apostacy had been placed by the Turks in charge of an estate. Amid these varied fortunes Vincent at least learnt by his own bitter experience the hard conditions of the Christian captives: their physical sufferings, their moral destitution, the many temptations both moral and religious, to which they were exposed. He did not waste his opportunities; he discussed Christianity with his alchemist, he converted the wives of his renegade, he brought the man himself to repentance. Finally he escaped with him in a "little skiff" and landed at Aigues-Mortes in June 1607. He was saved. They proceeded to Avignon, where the vice-legate, Montorio, received the abjuration of the renegade, at the same time conceiving a warm friendship for the young priest who had won him back.

Montorio expected much from Vincent, for he hoped to learn from him the secrets of alchemistic lore which was a subject of

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such interest in those days, even among churchmen. But in return he rendered Vincent a still more valued service by taking him to Rome. "He honours me by showing me much honour and affection because of certain secrets I have taught him concerning alchemy, by which he sets greater store, as he says, than if 'io gli avessi dato un monte di oro.' My Lord, knowing that I am an ecclesiastic, has made me send for my papers, assuring me that he means me well and will provide me with a good living."

Thus, thanks to Montorio, Vincent came to know Rome, the centre of Christianity. "I was so consoled," he wrote, "to find myself in this city where dwells the head of the Church militant, where are the bodies of St. Peter and St. Paul ; I considered myself happy to be walking the earth which so many of the great saints had trod." Here, too, Vincent breathed the air of the Roman Curia, and learnt to understand the subtle spirit of the Italians, both things which were

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to serve him well in after years, when he had to treat with them on delicate and weighty matters. Moreover, he made himself appreciated. His wide outlook, his courtly manners, won him the friendship and confidence of all, even of Pope Paul IV, who is said (though this is by no means sure) to have entrusted him with a political mission to the French king Henry IV. In the beginning of 1608 he was back in France. There is no telling whether the reported mission failed or succeeded; there is no record of it in the archives. It mattered little. Providence had other things in store for him than to wear the scarlet of a cardinal.

Let us make clear to ourselves what was Vincent's state of mind at this period of his life. He was twenty-seven years of age. He had proved that he could easily make his way in the world, for he had attracted all those with whom he had come in contact: the lawyer Comet, the people of Toulouse, the Mahommedan alchemist, the vice-legat,

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the pope. Each had wished him well, each in turn had proposed to make his fortune. But he built no castles in the air. His sturdy common sense, his natural modesty, did not desert him. His dream was of a congenial post in his own country, some quiet curacy which would enable him to do good to those around him and at the same time contribute to the support of his own people. He wrote to Comet : "My present position is that I am continuing my studies in this city of Rome, where I am supported by the vice-legate, who honours me with his affection and desires my advancement. . . . This solicitude and interest lead me to hope (as indeed he has promised) to be enabled to retire to some suitable benefice in France."

Two years later, when he was back in Paris, he wrote to his mother: "I hope much by the grace of God that He will bless my labours and that he will supply me with the means of an honourable retirement, so that I may spend the remainder of my days beside

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you." A modest ambition truly, guided strictly by the dictates of prudence, following closely in the counsels of the Lord, but none the less an ambition which remains purely human—the SAINT is not yet born.

## CHAPTER II

### THE THRESHOLD OF A GREAT LIFE

So we find Vincent back in Paris. While awaiting the post which was to satisfy his desires, he led a hidden, silent life, devoting himself already for the most part to works of charity. Much of his time was spent in the Hôpital de la Charité near to which he lived, and where he helped the Brothers of St. John of God in their ministrations to the sick. He also frequented the court of Queen Marguerite of Valois, to whom he had been nominated chaplain by one of his friends; no doubt with a view of affording him some means of support. This strange princess, the repudiated wife of Henry IV, had been converted from a life of scandal to one of piety; yet she still retained her taste for art and gallantry and still loved to entertain, at her palace of St.

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Germain, poets and wits, noble lords and high ecclesiastics. It is hard to picture Vincent in this mixed and brilliant court. But a Gascon is never at a loss! Others might have seized the opportunity to press their fortunes; he more probably withdrew into his shell. None the less, in these surroundings Vincent learnt something of the great world, and his observant mind did not fail to profit by this first experience. He had no liking for it; he does not even seem to have cared to make use of the openings offered to him. His friend, M. de Fresne, thus describes him: "At this time M. Vincent impressed one as very humble, charitable and prudent. He did good to all and was dependent on none. He was circumspect in speech; he listened patiently to others without ever interrupting them."

In reality he himself was in suspense, waiting, for as yet he knew not rightly what he wanted. The love of the poor had won possession of his heart. The thought, the crying need of a new and vast apostolate was stirring

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in him, and, when the coveted post was at length offered him (St. Leonard des Chaumes in the diocese of Saintes), maybe he no longer wished for it! It was at this moment that he was brought in contact with a man who, from the first, made a deep impression on him, one who was destined to revolutionise his whole life and throw him completely into the arms of God—Cardinal de Bérulle.

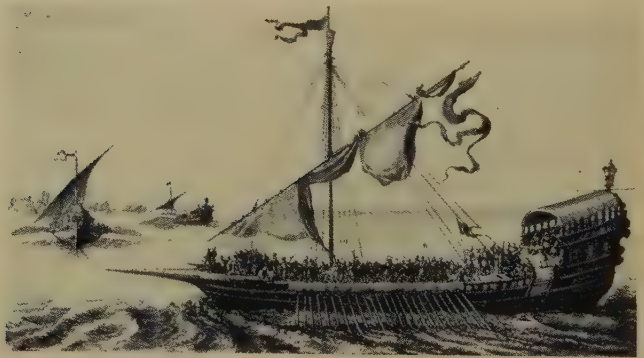
Bérulle was one of the great leaders of the day, a theologian capable of confuting the most learned of the Protestants; a politician who had courage to refuse all the tempting offers of the court. He was a man of action: he had brought the Carmelites into France and was about to found the Oratory; but he was also a man of prayer, a mystic whose teaching had a profound influence on the religious thought of his age. Vincent de Paul admired and loved him and decided to place himself under his direction.

It is from the retreat he made under Bérulle in 1611 that we may date the true “conver-





THE MILL WHERE ST. VINCENT AS A CHILD USED TO  
GET GRAIN FOR THE POOR



A CONVICT GALLEY

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sion" of St. Vincent. From that moment he set aside his private views and renounced his personal career. As yet he knew not what his future was to be, but he left it to God and to Bérulle, as his instrument, to do with him what they pleased. A few years there were still to be of hesitations and struggles against self, and then the surrender would be absolute; he would leave his soul completely in the hands of him who fashioned it. It was no question of a violent stroke of grace or a rude awakening such as has come to certain of the saints; rather we are shown the still more moving spectacle of the gentleness of God, his delicacy, his patience, his respect for the liberty of the soul he claims all for himself, ending at last in perfect union between the Creator and his creature.

It is God who makes the saints, but Vincent has shown us how a man may respond to the divine call, and slowly, patiently, with self-sacrifice and goodwill, model himself unto the likeness of his Master.

## CHAPTER III

### FIRST EXPERIENCES

CARDINAL BÉRULLE'S first act of authority was to nominate Vincent de Paul to the parish of Clichy. At the beginning of the seventeenth century Clichy was a rural parish near the capital, composed chiefly of the peasantry, with a sprinkling of well-to-do townfolk who came there in search of country air. Here Vincent served his apprenticeship with souls, and here he learnt that part of mediator between rich and poor, great and lowly, which he was to practise so successfully throughout his life. He soon made himself beloved—instructing, preaching, administering the sacraments, visiting the sick; he proved a true apostle, a shepherd who spent himself for his flock. The results in less than a year were astonishing. A religious who had come

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to preach at the church at Clichy wrote: "I undertook to preach to the good people of Clichy where he was curé, but I own I found these worthy folk living the lives of angels. I felt in truth that I was carrying light to the sun." Vincent was happy as he had never been before. Long afterwards this year stood out in his mind, a radiant memory. He would often speak of it to the Daughters of Charity: "Ah! I used to say to myself, 'How happy you are in having so good a people. The pope himself is less blessed than you. . . .' One day Cardinal de Retz asked me: 'Well M. Vincent, how are you?' 'Monseigneur,' I replied, 'I am happier than I can say.' 'And wherefore?' 'Because I have a people so good and so obedient to all I tell them that I say to myself that neither the pope himself nor you, Monseigneur, can be so content as I.' "

Like all earthly happiness it was short-lived. At the end of one year Bérulle ordered Vincent to go as chaplain to the family of the

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de Gondi.\* It was a hard command, but Vincent did not hesitate, though the sword drove through his heart. "Sadly I left my little church at Clichy. My eyes were full of tears as I blessed the men and women who gathered round me and whom I had loved so much. My poor were there as well and they fairly broke my heart." Rich and poor, all wished to accompany him. They begged a blessing; a souvenir, they touched his garments, they even made off with his old hat. It was a touching scene, but he had to leave at last. "I reached Paris with my few movables, and went to M de Bérulle." He threw himself at the feet of the cardinal: "Do with me what you will." Vincent's victory over self was already well-nigh complete.

What was Bérulle's object in this exercise of authority? Doubtless to perfect his disciple in obedience, but also to assure him, through the de Gondi, a wider influence, a larger

\* M. de Gondi, General of the Galleys, was brother to the Bishop of Paris.



MONSIEUR DE GONDI



MADAME DE GONDI

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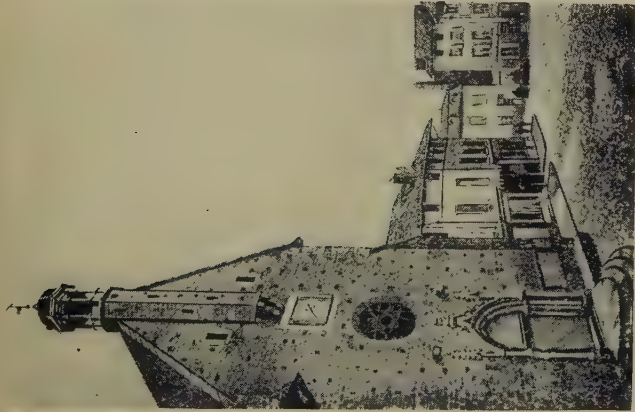
scope for his activities. He had firm confidence in this peasant's son. He had discerned the strength and keenness of his mind, and now he launched him—much against his will—into the great world. He seems already to have foreseen what Vincent would achieve by combining his deep love of the poor with a skilful handling of the rich.

But even the saints may be subject to the reactions of human nature! After spending four years with the de Gondi, Vincent felt that he was being suffocated in the "fine air of the world." He persuaded himself that he was a failure as a tutor, and that Mme. de Gondi was profiting little by the spiritual direction she sought from him for her scrupulous, tormented soul. He was overwhelmed by a wave of homesickness for the country fields, and one fine day, seizing the opportunity of a journey, he disappeared without a word and vanished for six weeks into oblivion. This sudden impulse would seem to prove that he was not as yet completely master of him-

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self. Bérulle had been warned, but he had not interfered. He felt that he must stand aside and leave to God the guidance of this soul.

We next find Vincent at Châtillon des Dombes, where he was to serve his second apprenticeship in the ministry, and to forge the first weapons of his charity. This time he found himself in a large country town which had been left for some time without a priest, owing to the disorganisation of that troubled time. Itinerant chaplains hurried over Mass, raced through the catechism, held public confessions for the children. The place was filled with Huguenots, with one of whom Vincent lived, a young man of the name of Beynier, whose morals were no sounder than his faith. But the new curé proved irresistible. In a few months the chaplains had been brought back to the practice of their rule, the Protestants to their faith. Vincent won them by his words, but still more by his charity, his patience and his sweetness. St. Francis de Sales would have done no more.



CHURCH AND MARKET PLACE,  
CHATILLON



ST. VINCENT'S PRESBYTERY AT  
CHATILLON

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The conversion of Beynier and his family, and that of the Comte de Rougemont, the famous duellist who broke his sword across a rock because he loved it over well and it was leading him into sin—such episodes as these recall the spirit of the Middle Ages.

But while Vincent was thus restoring order to the house of God he was at the same time laying the foundations for his great works of charity. One day, calling together the ladies of his parish, he exhorted them to visit the sick poor ; to tidy their rooms and beds, to prepare their food, to comfort, help and cheer them, and to speak to them of God. He formed them into a little confraternity with president, secretary, and treasurer, and drew up for them a simple rule, a model of insight, practical detail and Christian charity. “The first thing she (the president) will do is to see if the invalid has need of a white nightgown, or a white shroud. She will then persuade him to confess his sins and to go to communion on the following morning. She will

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take him a crucifix, which she will hang up in some place where he may fix his eyes upon it and will provide him with anything else of which he may have need. Each of the servants of the poor in turn will carry them their food and wait upon them for the day. She whose turn it is, having taken from the treasury the necessary sum, will prepare the dinner and take it to the sick. She will greet the patient cheerfully and lovingly, set a little table on the bed, placing on it napkin, bowl, spoon and bread. She will then wash his hands, say grace, pour out the soup, and dish the meat, arranging all upon the little table, and then coax the invalid to eat for the love of God and of his holy Mother. All with as much love as though it were for her own son, or, rather, for God, who accepts as done to Himself what we do for His poor. She will whisper to him some little word about Our Lord, should he be very low ; she will cut up his meat and pour out his drink, and having started him on his meal, will leave him,

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if there is anyone to attend to him, and go in search of someone else to care for in like manner.”

His directions with regard to the spiritual assistance of the sick are equally minute, showing a like delicacy and respect for the souls as for the bodies of the poor.

Finally, Vincent does not forget the welfare of the servants of the poor themselves. There is one chapter treating of their religious life in common and another on “the spiritual exercise of each one apart.” Thus he completes the circle, a living whole welded together by the charity of God which flows throughout it without the loss of one particle of its heat.

The most sublime rules are merely paper: it is in practice that their worth is proved. Vincent waited until his experiment had been on trial for several months, and then, in December 1617, he obtained the sanction of the Archbishop of Lyons for his rule. Thus was founded the Confraternity of the Servants of the Poor, his first work of charity. The idea was beautiful and simple; the rule elastic;

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its foundation—the love and service of Christ in his poor—was firm and sure. The work spread very rapidly, first in the country on the estates of the de Gondi, then in the towns and villages. Before long a further development took place, and, to the societies of women, he added those for men. He adapted the rule to place and circumstance. In certain towns, such as Beauvais and Maçon, he went so far as to inaugurate a complete scheme of public assistance with the most modern methods, classification of the poor, case papers, workshops, etc. And everywhere this revival of good works was found to go hand in hand with a renewal of the faith in this unhappy land, oppressed so long by the double curse of religious strife and civil war. It was at this time that he commenced his wise collaboration with the women of France, of all ranks of society, who were to be the instruments of his overflowing charity. He taught them much, it cannot be denied, but he also received much from them—in devotion, in



THE CHURCH AT FOLLEVILLE WHERE ST. VINCENT  
GAVE HIS FIRST MISSION



THE CHURCH AT CHATILLON



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alms and in influence. They even ventured to suggest new ideas to him; they urged fresh enterprises upon this apostle whose motto was always "Prudence," who would ever retire into his shell rather than run ahead of Providence. Let us render them this testimony, the more so that he himself was ever the first to acknowledge it.

Clichy, Châtillon! How gladly would we linger over these first pages in the life of our saint, bright with the radiance of the dawn. How full they are of enthusiasm, of romance, of promise! After the discords and the desolation of the preceding centuries, life was once more stirring in the land of France. The apostle had appeared who was to revive the forgotten message of the Gospel. The sources of religious life were stirred, the spirit of peace awoke, the flowers of charity began to blossom, for, in a little unknown parish, the faith had once more risen from the dead, the herald, pale indeed as yet, but radiant, of a new religious dawn.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE FOUNDING OF THE MISSIONS

WE must now retrace our steps a little and return to the de Gondi. The General of the Galleys and his wife, gentle Marguerite de Silly, were broken-hearted at the loss of their chaplain, and sent endless letters and messengers to persuade him to come back. At length Bérulle intervened, and Vincent had to obey. He thought he was being driven into bondage; Providence, on the contrary, was opening to him new spheres of activity.

The de Gondi owned vast estates, and no sooner did Vincent return than he accompanied Mme. de Gondi on a visitation of their many villages and properties. He enjoyed these informal "missions," which brought him into touch once more with his beloved "poor folk of the fields," whom he loved so

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dearly, and whom he found sunk in appalling depths of religious ignorance and moral degradation. He set to work to instruct them and to arouse their dormant souls, and he met with so much success that before long he was obliged to call upon the Jesuits from Amiens to help him. Later on the priests of Paris, the very doctors of the Sorbonne, were summoned to his assistance. In view of these results, Mme. de Gondi offered him a sum of money to found a company of missionary priests, but so great was his natural prudence, both human and divine, that he temporised and refused. Mme. de Gondi, whose health was failing, made provision for the work in her will, so that the idea might not die with her, but Vincent still awaited a clear lead from Providence. He was to wait for ten more years. Meanwhile he continued to evangelise the land alone or with a few voluntary companions, men of single mind, worthy of apostolic times, who were impressed equally with the immensity of their task and the utter

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insufficiency of their means. Without money, without influence, they shouldered once again, after 1600 years, the work of Christ among his poor. "We went simply and in good faith, sent by their lordships the bishops, to evangelise the poor as Our Lord himself had done. That was our part, and God, on His side, acted as He had foreseen from all eternity: He poured His blessing on our labours, and this being seen by other good ecclesiastics, they asked to be allowed to join us."

These humble priests were to rebuild the Church of God upon the unshakable foundation of humility and poverty. Urged on by de Gondi, by the archbishop and by Bérulle, Vincent at length consented to enrol a few companions—du Coudray, Portail, and Jean de la Salle. On the death of Mme. de Gondi, in 1625, they installed themselves in the Collège des Bons Enfants, and in the following year removed to the Priory of St. Lazare, which was presented to him in spite of all his efforts at refusal. The object of the Priests

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of the Mission (the name was later changed to Lazarists) was to "labour for the salvation of the country folk." They were to be ready at the summons of the bishops to catechise, to instruct, to hear confessions, to give communion, and afterwards, the mission ended, they were to retire to St. Lazare to rest and to make their own souls.

The following is the account by M. Olier of one such mission, given at Brioude in 1636: "The mission opened on the Sunday after the Ascension and lasted until the 15th of this month. They begged me to take leave of them in the evening in presence of the Blessed Sacrament, which we did with all reverence for the majesty of God there exposed, and with so many sighs and tears that I think you would not believe it, Monsieur, unless you had been there. Blessed be God in all! Almost the same thing took place at the children's procession and the Communion, when the crowd was so great (as also at the other functions) that wine had continually to be

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brought into the church for those who turned faint, one of whom, among others, remained ill for six weeks. From the beginning the people came in crowds to confession, as was to be hoped, and such was the out-pouring of grace that it was easy to know where the priests were hearing from the sobs and sighs which arose on all sides. But before the end the people pressed us so closely and their numbers were so great that we had sometimes to call in twelve or thirteen priests to satisfy their zeal. There they remained, from early dawn, throughout the midday heat, which was excessive, till the last sermon, without food or drink. At times, for the sake of the strangers, we found it necessary to catechise for two hours or more, yet they went away as eager as they came. We were quite overcome. We had to speak from the pulpit, for there was no room in the church, every corner of the cemetery being crowded, the doors blocked, and the windows full of people. It was the same both at the sermon

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in the morning and at night. I could but exclaim 'Benedictus Deus, benedictus Deus! who communicates Himself so freely to all His creatures, but most especially to His poor.'"

Such was practically the order of every mission: first, instructions and services, then the general confession, closing with Communion. And afterwards, in the true spirit of the Church, as a concession to poor human nature, there followed an alfresco farewell banquet, at which the great folk waited on the poor. St. Vincent was careful to avoid friction by first seeking the support of the bishop and the curés; and, for the rest, the humble and prudent zeal of the missionaries, their wisdom in avoiding violence or controversy, their marvellous success, and the sweet odour of their virtues, won them general popularity. They were universally in demand. Everywhere bishops were crying out for them; soon Vincent was short of men. Yet he refused to recruit for his institute; he chose to wait till Providence should send him wor-

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kers, for he preferred his company to remain insignificant rather than to fall through pride.

“Oh, how I fear numbers and rapid growth,” he cried; “and how we should praise God, in that he allows us to do honour to the small company of the disciples of his Son.”

In 1635, ten years after their foundation, Vincent’s missionaries still numbered but a handful, and we stand amazed at the results obtained by so slight a means. For, despite their modesty and their voluntary obscurity, the mustard seed was fast becoming a great tree. As the missions multiplied, Vincent established centres in different towns, wherever means allowed. Houses were founded in the dioceses of Agens, Richelieu, Luçon, then in Champagne, at Troyes and Montmirail, then in the dioceses of Sens, Rheims, and Meaux.

The reputation of these priests of M. Vincent soon spread to foreign lands; requests for them came from Italy, Turin, Genoa, even Rome, where Popes Urban VIII and Alexander VII gave them every encouragement





PREACHING TO THE CONVICTS ON A GALLEY

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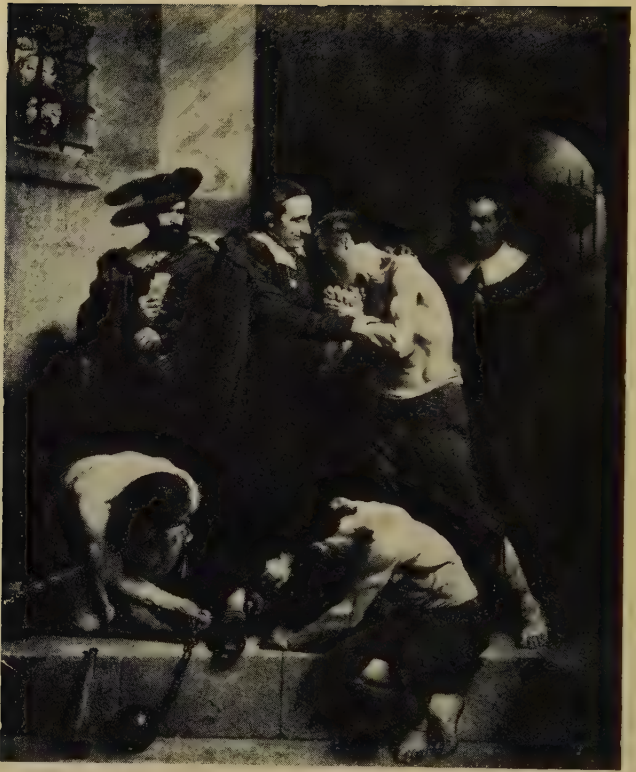
and blessing. Then from Poland, where the Queen, Maria Gonzaga, insisted on their coming. But it was Vincent himself above all who was continually enlarging his own ideas and widening his horizon. From the year 1660 we find him taking interest in the general state of Catholicism, not in France only, but in the rest of Europe, threatened as it was on all sides by heresy, and rent by wars, schisms and the clash of new opinions. What if it should disappear altogether beneath the blows of its enemies? Was it wise to carry on a mere war of defence when it was of such urgent necessity to conquer new provinces for Christ? In following the correspondence of the saint we see the gradual growth of this idea, which became at last a positive obsession. Cost what it would, he must obey this call of God! And behold! Rome placed this very task in his hands. In 1645 Propaganda asked him for missionaries for Babylonia, the East Indies, and for Ireland. Vincent did not hesitate: he would do all in his power to

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send them, but how could it be done with so few men and so much work in France? It mattered not! He picked out one man here, another there; he inspired them with enthusiasm for their new task, telling them of the sufferings which awaited them, of the martyrdom to which God was perhaps calling the more generous among them. "What reason have we not to render thanks to God, my brothers, for having bestowed upon this company the spirit of the martyrs? This light, I say; this grace which represents it to us as something brilliant and rapturous to die for our neighbour in imitation of Our Lord."

So he sent his sons far afield—to Poland, to Ireland, to Madagascar. He dreamt even of the Indies and America. He followed them in spirit on their way and wrote long letters to encourage them—letters of a father who is mindful of the smallest detail, of an apostle whose heart is burning with the love of God. "Oh, my more than dearest sir," he wrote to M. Nacquart, whom he had chosen to





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carry the Gospel to Madagascar, "how does your heart react to this news? Does it feel the due shame and confusion on receiving such a grace from heaven, a vocation as great and wonderful as that of the apostles and the highest saints of the Church of God? Eternal destinies are to be accomplished by you in time! . . . If it pleases His divine goodness to give you the grace, I doubt not that our Lord will make use of you to prepare for our company a great harvest. Go forth then and boldly cast your nets."

St. Vincent never wearied of inflaming the zeal of his priests at St. Lazare by speaking to them of the foreign missionaries. To him they were an ever-living presence, and he clearly showed how he loved to picture them to himself and follow them in their strenuous labours. And so this humble peasant who, up to the age of thirty years, had no ambitions beyond the reach of his own narrow horizon, now opened wide his heart and his imagination to embrace the very confines of the world, if

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only he could bring them within the kingdom of Our Lord.

How inspiring is this epic of the sons of Vincent de Paul among the infidels! The historian who could do it justice has not yet been born. The story of the Barbary mission in particular has never yet been fully told. It was a long and toilsome work, which had its origin in Vincent's enforced sojourn there in his own youth. Its first act was his being brought in contact with the convicts in Paris through de Gondi, the General of the Galleys. Vincent's heart was moved with love and pity for these men whose crimes were being expiated in the vilest dungeons, the lowest circle of the human hell. He did all he could to succour them; not fearing even to have himself shut up with them like Daniel in the lion's den. He secured them less inhuman treatment, and arranged that they should be grouped together in one prison while awaiting their departure for the galleys. He went to visit them at Bordeaux on board His Majesty's

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vessels, and another time he organised a mission for them at Marseilles. He won their hearts, and brought many of them back to God. In 1643 the Duchess d'Aiguillon (who was niece to Richelieu, and had been charged with the carrying out of his charitable bequests) offered a considerable sum for the foundation of a hospital for convicts at Marseilles. Other contributions followed, with the result that a permanent mission was established at Marseilles to serve the hospital, attend the galleys, and evangelise the country of Provence. An article of the foundation provided for the despatch of missionaries overseas to succour the Christian slaves among the Barbary pirates and the Turks. Thus one of Vincent's earliest dreams came true. In 1645 he sent as chaplain to the French consul at Tunis, Louis Guérin, to be followed two years later by Jean de Vacher. The correspondence of these men with St. Vincent reveals the chivalrous courage, the heroism, verging on presumption, of the missionaries:

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labours, trials, diseases, prisons, floggings; the ill-temper of their Turkish masters, the betrayals of the French authorities, the advances and withdrawals, the apparent humiliations, the secret triumphs—it is only by studying this divine tale of human trials that we can appreciate what a few men succeeded in accomplishing, without resources or support, for the honour of their country and the glory of their God. Vincent himself appears throughout almost as a minister of state. His letters to his sons deserve to rank as diplomatic correspondence.

These new-born churches of Tunis and Algiers can boast their martyrs, too, and the names of Guérin, Husson, the brothers Vacher, Jean Barreau, should stand in golden letters across the annals of the Church of Africa, together with that of Vincent de Paul, who first inspired them. Thus through the foreign missions, the Catholic reform of France was extended to many lands. The missionaries set before themselves a double aim: to plant the





ST. VINCENT PREACHING TO THE SEMINARISTS

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Faith among the infidels, and to enthrone the Kingdom of Christ throughout the world. The achievement of these ends remains, alas, still far to seek, but the sons of Vincent, true to the spirit of their father, are yet foremost among those who labour for their accomplishment.

## CHAPTER V

### REFORMER OF THE CLERGY

THESE wider interests did not prevent St. Vincent from applying himself to other more urgent and immediate needs, most important of all being, perhaps, the reform of the French priesthood. His apostolate among the country folk had brought sadly home to him the inadequacy of the rural clergy, their ignorance, their sloth, their often unseemly conduct. He knew as well as anyone that immorality was rife among the high ecclesiastics, and he realised with Bérulle and with Olier that there could be little hope for the Church of France unless she were provided with priests worthy of the name. But, as in all his undertakings, he advanced by slow degrees, allowing his ideas to mature in silence, and seeming often

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to take suggestions from those around him, rather than to initiate schemes of his own.

From the Bishop of Beauvais he borrowed the idea of summoning the seminarists together for a retreat, during which they should be instructed in their duties, the greatness of their vocation, and in the virtues necessary for the priesthood. His first effort, at Beauvais in 1628, was so successful that the idea became an institution, and in 1631 the Archbishop of Paris made such a retreat obligatory on all the students in his diocese. Before long other bishops followed suit.

Two years later St. Vincent took another step. In order still more to confirm these young priests in the virtues of their state, he instituted the "Tuesday Conferences" at St. Lazare. Soon the best and most distinguished of the French ecclesiastics were taking part in them—Olier, Pavillon, Duval, Bossuet himself. The Conferences of St. Lazare became a sort of forcing house for bishops and directors of seminaries. In 1643 Vincent was able to

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write: "Those who have been educated in this place stand out among other prelates so that everyone, even the king, remarks upon the difference."

This work among the students and the young ecclesiastics was brought to its completion by the spiritual exercises at St. Lazare, to which Vincent invited all such priests, and even laymen, as wished to reform their lives and renew their faith and fervour. He trained his missionaries in the giving of these exercises, enjoining on them that delicacy and gentleness in the art of handling souls which renders zeal more fruitful. The house of St. Lazare soon came to be regarded as a port of refuge by shipwrecked priests, who came, often from afar, to repent their sins and renew their vocations. It was a new inn of the Good Samaritan where many wounds were healed and many lives set straight. "It is the House of God," cried Rance, and St. Vincent himself declared: "The Holy Spirit is here continually coming down on souls." The place was never empty.

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Sometimes there were eight hundred exercitants in one year. It would be impossible to guess the secret good which Vincent brought about by these retreats, to tell how he revived the piety of the faithful, or to estimate his success in producing an atmosphere favourable to his great work of reform among the French priesthood.

But the chief step in this reform had yet to be undertaken: the creation of the seminaries. All the efforts made in France at different times, first by the Jesuits and then by various bishops, had failed. Parliament refused to help him in the matter, the University was opposed to it, the assemblies of the clergy preached to the desert air. Everyone seemed to be discouraged. Vincent returned to the plan laid down by the Council of Trent and opened a small college at les Bons Enfants, in accordance with the rules of the Council. Then in 1639, thanks to the assistance of several friends, to Ste. Chantal and Bishop Guérin of Annecy, he sent a few priests to

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found a house at Annecy, where, in the following year, they opened a seminary. In 1641 the Bons Enfants likewise became a seminary. Vincent recognised the full importance of this work. "Our Institute has two main ends: the instruction of the poor in the country districts, and the seminaries. At first our little company was concerned only with its own spiritual welfare and with preaching to the poor, but in the fulness of time Our Lord has called us to help in the making of good priests. Oh, how great is this work! How sublime! The more we consider it, the more we shall realise that we could share in no higher work than the forming of good priests."

We cannot record all his efforts. After several years experience Vincent arrived at a definite plan for the constitution of his seminaries, which were to provide France with a new clergy full of virtue and of learning, thoroughly instructed in the duties of their calling. According to the mind of Vincent,

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good priests need not necessarily be learned theologians, but men of solid spiritual foundation, loving the house of God, His liturgy, His services, leading a pure devoted life. "It needs capacity and a good life. Without the latter the former is useless and dangerous. They should be made to balance equally. Remember the spirit of St. Paul who bids us be wise and sober. . . If you will know nothing but Jesus crucified, if you will live by his life alone, doubt not that He Himself will be both your wisdom and your fulfilment."

If St. Vincent condemned mere learning, he was no less severe in the matter of vain eloquence. Among the errors of the clergy he courageously attacked the pompous style of oratory then in practice, and he inaugurated what he called the Little Method, a simple way of preaching, direct and homely, and aimed solely at the good of souls. This method he enjoined upon his students and upon the ecclesiastics at the "Tuesday Conferences," and he ended by making it the

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fashion. St. Vincent never ceased his war on those who make use of the Word of God to acquire honour and reputation, those who "preach not God, but themselves," and he left to his sons this striking precept: "One should mount up to the pulpit as to Calvary and bring down nothing but the shame."

The French bishops were not slow in calling on the Priests of the Mission to establish seminaries in their various dioceses, and the movement thus began continued to expand long after the death of St. Vincent. But his reforms were to reach higher still—to the very heads of the Church of France, the highest born in the land. For these princely dignitaries, many of them of royal blood, were, as a whole, fully as wanting in their duty as the lower clergy. This was a task which fell to Vincent when he was nominated to the Conseil de Conscience by Anne of Austria, on the death of Louis XIII. A formidable task indeed, and one which his modesty led him at



ST. VINCENT PREACHING BEFORE THE COURT

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first insistentlly to refuse. Who was he, a peasant's son, to denounce and reform the abuses of the great ecclesiastics? None the less, once forced to undertake the work, he acquitted himself with a firmness, delicacy and tact which cannot be too much admired. His contemporaries thought him strangely bold, to us he seems almost indulgent, in the list he drew up of abuses which must forthwith cease. He stood unbending before the Queen and Mazarin, whose good intentions were apt to fail in practice; before the great lords, furious at his attacks upon their privileges; before the great ladies, who bewailed the fact that their children were no longer to be enriched by benefices. He prevented many scandalous nominations, repressed many flagrant scandals, and ended by winning the respect of all for his own disinterested zeal for the honour of the house of God. But none can tell how much it cost him nor how terrible were his secret struggles. It is hard to know which to admire most: the acuteness

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of the Gascon in winning clear of all intrigues; the strength of the man who bit by bit enforced his views; or the patience of the saint who accepted all his trials solely that God might be more fitly served.

Vincent de Paul was by no means the sole contributor to the marvellous renaissance which took place in the Church of France in the first half of the seventeenth century. Cardinal Bérulle, M. Olier, St. Jean Eudes and many others had their share in this tremendous movement. To each of these was assigned his especial task, but St. Vincent undoubtedly stands out as the chief agent, for his multiplied activities extended to every rank of society and embraced every need. Forty years later Fléchier could truly say: "It is to him the clergy of France owes its splendour and its glory." And we might add: "To him the faithful owe the solid piety, the simple faith, the love of good works, which are so strong a feature of French Catholicism." The fact that St. Vincent is so widely known

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as the pioneer of charity must not blind us to the fact that he is, above all, a great apostle, and that if he sought to relieve the body, he aimed still more at the healing and fortifying of the soul.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE GREAT MASTER OF CHARITY

WE now come to that wonderful story which can never be too often told or too much dwelt upon: the story of the great charities of St. Vincent. For if he is one of the most popular of our saints, it is because of his boundless compassion for every form of misery and because he stands to us as the figure itself of charity, the exemplar of Him who had compassion on the multitude and opened wide to them His heart.

We have seen how the work was born in a tiny village, spreading through the country districts to the little towns. During the years 1629 and 1630 it was established in several parishes in Paris. Many ladies of the highest rank took part in it, but there soon appeared a weak spot in the organisation. Some of



ST. VINCENT ELECTED SUPERIOR OF "THE  
VISITATION"

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the great ladies found their zeal grow cold, others drew back from force of circumstance—it was difficult to combine their worldly duties with the fatiguing care of the sick. There was danger, too, from plague, so frequent a visitor at that time to the capital. In order to ensure the continuity of the work, the necessity arose of calling in a number of poor women who would shrink from nothing and be always at the post of duty. This was the moment set by Providence to bring across the path of Vincent a woman who was to be his devoted fellow worker, Mlle. le Gras.

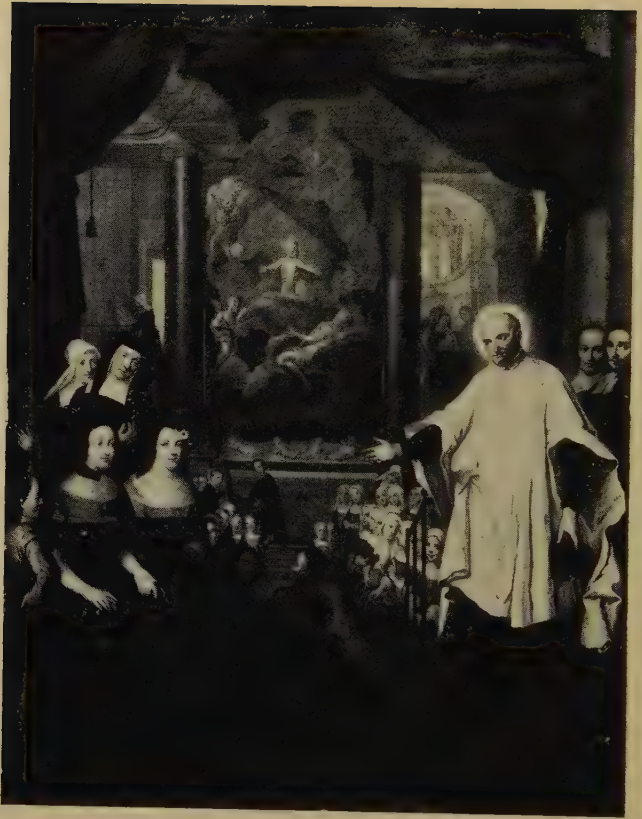
Louise de Marillac had married Antoine le Gras, one of the secretaries of Queen Anne of Austria. Early left a widow, she longed to devote her life wholly to the service of God. She was a woman of remarkable intelligence, high minded and strong of will, a truly noble soul, but torn with anxieties and scruples. When Vincent became her director, she was painfully debating what she ought to do. Should she remain in the world and educate

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her son? Should she marry again? Should she enter religion according to the ideal of her youth? Vincent de Paul came to her assistance ; he cleared her mind and simplified the issues. She should devote her life to the service of the poor while yet remaining in the world. He approved of her idea of training a number of simple country girls to instruct the children of the poor and to tend the sick. But true to his usual prudence, he restrained her zeal, forbidding her as yet to make any definite foundation. "As for the rest (the idea of a foundation) I beg of you once for all to think no more about it. One often desires good things with a desire which seems to come from God and yet does not. You wish to become the servant of these poor girls, and God wishes you to be the servant of Himself and of, perhaps, a greater number than you could be in this other way. But should you be His alone, is that not sufficient?"

It was only after three years that, satisfied at last that her zeal was absolutely pure, he





ST. VINCENT AND THE FOUNDLINGS

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disclosed to her her vocation. He summoned her to work with him at Montmirail (1629): "Go forth, Mademoiselle, in the name of our Lord. I pray his divine goodness to accompany you, that it may be your solace on your journey, your shelter in the heat, your covering in the rain and cold, your strength in your labours, that you may at last return in health and full of good works."

From this moment Mlle. le Gras became his close fellow worker, unfailingly obedient, yet full of initiative, heroic through the very human weakness which is her great attraction; a devoted daughter, a wise counsellor, a valiant woman, whom the Church has now raised to her altars.

Mlle. le Gras made a visitation of the various charitable foundations in town and country, encouraging, correcting, and rendering her account to St. Vincent. At the same time she continued in Paris to train her girls, afterwards sending them out to the different parishes, where, under the direction of the

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ladies, they soon proved indispensable. Yet it was only after repeated application that she obtained from St. Vincent a rule of life for her daughters. Towards the close of 1633 he at last chose out a few whom he formed into a sort of novitiate in her house, and on the 25th of March, 1634, he allowed her to bind herself by solemn vow to this work.\*

Need we wonder at the hesitations of the saint in face of such a bold adventure? He was binding by religious vow women who were not religious, who had no cell but the chamber of the sick, no grille but their own modesty, no chapel but the parish church, no common life of prayer but the few moments snatched from their exacting duties. It was a thing unheard of in those days. Vincent recalled the hostility aroused in Rome by his missionary institute, and expected even greater opposition for the Daughters of Mlle. le Gras.

\* Year by year on this day the Sisters of Charity repeat this action of their foundress, vowing themselves to the service of God in his poor.

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We need not then be surprised that he allowed his idea to mature slowly, that he desired it to take shape as one of the tiny beginnings he loved so well. For in all his undertakings he was careful (if we may so express it) to leave to God time to approve his plan, and to himself the opportunity of binding it more closely to the divine will. The less man puts of himself into his creations the more there is of God. It is all gain. "Be passive rather than active," was the paradoxical motto of this man of action.

It was only in 1646, at the instance of Mlle. le Gras, that S. Vincent asked the Archbishop of Paris to erect the Daughters of Charity into a confraternity, and it was not until nine years later that they were actually so established. He called a general assembly of all the Daughters of Charity then in Paris and named their officers. Mlle. le Gras was appointed superior, Antoine Portail assistant. He read and explained to them the rule: simplicity, humility, modesty, mortification;

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absolute detachment from possessions, persons, and employment; utter abandonment to the direction of Providence: such was its spirit. St. Vincent never wearied of instructing his Daughters in their rule and enlarging on the beauty of their vocation. To this work he devoted all his love and patience, exciting their fervour by such delightful maxims as the following: "The rules are sweet and gentle and the Daughters who love them feel their weight no more than the bird does its wings."\*

About the same time St. Vincent formed another confraternity of the great ladies who supported the Daughters of Mlle. le Gras by their money, their influence, and very often by their personal devotion. To them also he prescribed a rule, and he presided at their meetings, sometimes to stimulate, at others to moderate, their zeal. One can but honour these generous women who rallied round the saint so nobly for five and forty years, helping

\* The original name of the Sisters of Charity was "Daughters of Charity."

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to radiate his influence and to make possible the realisation of his wide ambitions. They emulated one another as to who should provide the largest sums of money or the best ideas. Vincent followed them as often as he guided them. Rivalries died away, jealousy vanished; the authority of the saint, his tact and delicacy, resulted in the most magnificent co-operation between the peasant priest and these high-born ladies. During the last twenty years of his life it may truly be affirmed that Vincent de Paul, with his Daughters and his Ladies, was the soul of every work of charity, both temporal and spiritual. Not one was founded but he had some share in it. He might be fitly styled: "Minister of Public Welfare and Grand Master of Charity." He was most progressive in his methods, many of his rules sounding to our ears completely modern. Yet he seems never to have been mistaken, because his work was based upon a spiritual foundation and inspired with one only thought: To save the souls of men through

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the medium of their bodies, to honour Jesus Christ in the persons of His poor.

The instrument once created, works sprang up in quick succession. The ladies proposed to nurse and instruct the sick in the Hotel Dieu, who were being somewhat inadequately cared for by the Augustinian Sisters and the Canonesses of Notre Dame. St. Vincent hesitated, for he had no wish to "put his sickle in another's harvest." However, Mme. Gousault approached the Archbishop, and the matter was arranged. In a few months a transformation had been effected. The ladies showed much tact in avoiding the anticipated difficulties with the Augustinians, and were worshipped by the patients. Before long St. Vincent wrote to them: "You will be consoled, Mesdames, when you hear me say, what you perhaps already know better than I myself, that the religious are highly satisfied with the Company, that several hundreds of the poor invalids have made their general confessions, a number of Huguenots have

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been converted, and many girls rescued from sin—in fact, that all goes well at the Hotel Dieu.”

Next came the foundlings. These unhappy children had been hitherto either farmed out or allowed to die by the wretched hags who were supposed to look after them in the infamous *Maison de la Couche*. Mlle. le Gras now provided a number of good nurses who took the poor little waifs out to the country, where they could be brought up properly. The work was costly and was more than once in danger, but St. Vincent besought the ladies in moving terms not to let it fail. It was the only time he allowed himself to indulge in eloquence, and his hearers responded nobly.

After the children, followed the aged. The generosity of an anonymous donor enabled him to receive forty old folk, both men and women, in the *Maison Dieu*. Here he provided them with work, amusements, visits from the ladies and attractive religious ser-

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vices, and the house became so popular that soon it proved all too small.

Finally, there was that grand affair, the General Hospital. In reality this was a work in which Vincent had only an indirect concern, drawn in by the ladies somewhat against his will, and the results, more pretentious far than anything he had conceived, did not meet with his full approval. The suppression of begging and stealing and the internment or reform of the innumerable loafers, who were a real source of danger to the city, was a problem which had for ages baffled kings and parliaments. It was a question which concerned the police fully as much as it did the charitable. However, the ladies proceeded courageously to attack it in conjunction with the parliament and the Offices of State. Immense resources were thrown into the gulf, huge buildings were erected. Nothing remained but to force the vast army of beggars into them. But—they suddenly disappeared.

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“Never in Paris had been revealed  
So many folk so quickly healed.”

Vincent would have acted by persuasion rather than by force, with more modest but more efficacious means. None the less, he did not refuse his support. He gave one of his priests, Louis Abelly, as chaplain to the hospital, though he refused to allow the Priests of the Mission to undertake its direction. The failure was not complete: a little good was accomplished with a great deal of noise, and many folk who ignored the real work of St. Vincent praised to the echo this pretentious hospital as one of the “most wonderful works of the age”—another of the glories of the “Great King.”

The glory of the Great King had a terrible reverse side of suffering and misery. The Thirty Years War, coupled with the troubles of the Frondes, had brought desolation to the most fruitful provinces of the country. During the years 1635-60 France, outwardly on the

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pinnacle of glory, was in reality a sorrowing, bleeding land, crushed by taxation, ravaged by the constant passage of armies, both French and foreign, a prey to invasion, plague and famine. Callot's pictures, entitled "The Miseries of War," depicting villages in flames, their inmates mere skeletons who devour the grass and carcasses of animals, are but a pale image of the sufferings of the people at this period. St. Vincent de Paul was overwhelmed by the sight of their boundless miseries, in face of which the public authorities stood by indifferent or powerless. Slowly and by degrees he mobilised his forces for their relief: the Priests of the Mission, who were sent out to discover the most urgent needs and to organise the distribution of food and clothing, tools and seed; the Daughters of Charity to nurse and tend the sick; and finally the Ladies, to whom he looked to provide the means, and to act as treasurers for this great national work of rescue. Brother Regnard was despatched around the provinces, carrying a large sum of money. He had to

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beware of ambushes, and was frequently obliged to disguise himself for fear of highwaymen, but he passed as by miracle through every danger, and returned home in safety, only to start out once again.

St. Vincent took thought, too, for the churches which had been destroyed by the soldiers, and sent them altar linen, chalices and vestments. He thought of the religious communities, especially the women, who were often starving, deprived of alms and rents. He thought of the young girls whose virtue was exposed to so many dangers, and confided them to the care of Mlle. le Gras. He was mindful of the secret destitution of many of the nobility who sought refuge in Paris, and he formed an association of gentlemen to bring them aid. Was there a single need of which he did not think? Truly he bore them all in his heart, the oppressed, the refugees, the homeless. He it was who first set in motion the countless channels of relief which we have seen revived in the late war. Furthermore,

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when the horrors of civil war brought the desolation to the very gates of Paris, he succeeded in arousing a sentiment hitherto unknown, a sense of universal brotherhood throughout the provinces of France. He bade each of his missionaries draw up a statement of his experiences in the devastated areas. These papers were read out in the churches, with the result that the rich poured forth their alms, the poor held out their pence, even the misers were moved to pity. And thus a new spirit awoke throughout the land, forerunner of the political union of the nation. Historians are silent as to this national rôle of St. Vincent, but among the innumerable letters of gratitude which he received is a sentence from the governor of a northern town: "You who are the Father of our country," a title no less truly merited than that so often given him of "Father of the Poor."

As St. Vincent had been one of the chief agents in drawing together the classes and provinces of France, so, during the distracted





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epoch of the Frondes, he undertook the part of mediator between the various parties: the king, the princes, and the people. It was a thankless task, and one which met with small success, and most certainly brought no personal advantage. The people whom he tried to help thought he was betraying them, and the Parisians once actually rose up in revolt against him. We know few details of his efforts, apart from one or two famous episodes which have come down to us—as when he boldly intervened with the Queen at St. Germain to prevent the siege of the capital. “Is it just, Madam, to cause the death by starvation of a million innocent people in order to punish twenty or thirty guilty ones?” Or his brave appeal to Mazarin: “Monseigneur, yield to the times and throw yourself into the sea to calm the storm.” “This is a bold saying, Father. No one has yet dared to address me in such language.” Vincent was not always successful in his efforts, but he did induce Mazarin to disappear

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for a time in order to facilitate the return of the King and Queen to Paris. And he invariably upheld above all party passions the image of peace and national interest—an ideal at that time little known. In 1652 he wrote a moving letter to the Pope, describing the ills from which France was suffering. “The royal house is torn by dissension; the people are divided into many factions; the towns and provinces afflicted by civil war; the villages and cities ruined, burnt. All is at the mercy of the soldiers. The majority of the inhabitants of the country, if they escape the sword, succumb to hunger. But one remedy remains to us in all our trials, most Holy Father—the help Your Holiness can bring to us by your paternal solicitude, your love and your authority.”

It was St. Vincent alone, who, in these chaotic days, could speak in such courageous and exalted tones, and he was spokesman for the whole of France.

## CHAPTER VII

### A VAST FIELD OF LABOUR

WE have even yet by no means taken count of the vast field of work embraced by St. Vincent. We have still to note his share in the confused issues of Jansenism. Impressed at first by St. Cyran and the early reformers of Port Royal, he soon took alarm at their pride and detected the danger of heresy. He satisfied himself that "Arnauld's Frequent Communion" was emptying the altar rails, and from that moment his mind was clear. Armed with the authority he had already won in the Church of France, he threw himself wholeheartedly into the conflict, and denounced the new opinions in no measured terms.

We might also enumerate the religious communities he helped to reform; the bishops he directed and consoled in their anxieties.

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We might recall (as his vast correspondence reveals to us) the many saintly souls, the many anxious-minded nuns, the many discouraged priests whom he enlightened and encouraged; and, above all, his personal visits to the poor, which no stress of work or business could cause him to omit. We see him, like the very least of his brethren, tramping the streets on foot, or, as old age drew on, driving (sorely against his will) in a little carriage, lost in meditation, or maybe, scribbling a hasty note to Mlle. le Gras.

The eight huge published volumes represent a mere fragment of the prodigious correspondence which often occupied him the whole day and far into the night. Each one of the letters gives proof of deep and weighty consideration. His style is concise and clear, very different from the pomposity then in fashion, and his lucid thought, though free and even humorous in expression, strikes straight home to the soul. We can but stand amazed at his complete disinterestedness and





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at his marvellous understanding of the human soul. It has been said that his correspondence reveals him as a leader who directs his people, as a father who bears his children in his heart, and as a saint who has but one end in view in all his acts—to serve and glorify his God.

But what shall be said of the two great spiritual creations of St. Vincent, that work above all others to which he devoted his life, and which has continued throughout three hundred years to bear its precious fruit?—the societies of his Sons and Daughters, the Priests of the Mission and the Sisters of Charity. We can only say that he modelled them upon his own likeness, for he never tired of impressing on them the virtues he prized most for himself: humility, charity, sweetness, complete forgetfulness of self, absolute abandonment to the will of God.

First thing in the morning he would make the meditation with his Priests and Brothers. Often he would call them together again in the course of the day to read them the letters

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of their absent brethren, to hear their confessions, to rebuke or encourage them, and to discourse to them on the virtues of the perfect missionary. He was simple and forcible, always severe upon himself and indulgent to all the rest, making free with his brethren, yet manifestly living very close to God. His discourses, secretly taken down by Brother Ducurnan, are very moving, and, despite their homeliness, are one of the great spiritual productions of the seventeenth century.

M. Vincent took no less keen an interest in the Daughters of Mlle. le Gras. No engagement, however important, could keep him from these poor illiterate girls. He would question them on the subject of their meditation, listening patiently to their answers. "And you, Sister, what do you think of modesty, of obedience? What are the motives which should attach you to your vocation of servants of the poor?" Such as could not answer were not allowed to feel abashed, "for

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those who can speak little often act the best." When each had had her turn, Mlle. le Gras was questioned, and finally the saint himself would have his say. All faces at once turned eagerly towards him, all ears were opened wide, as he enlarged upon the difficulties and discouragements the Daughters of Charity must expect to meet. He never tired of repeating his advice, and delighted to linger on among his little flock. He wept with tenderness over their little faults and virtues, and seemed unable to tear himself away from them. It almost seemed that this old man, who bore upon his shoulders more weighty matters than a minister of state, had no other care than to teach a few poor village girls the love of Jesus in his suffering members.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE MAN AND THE SAINT

IT is hard to realise that this humble country priest who up to thirty years of age dreamt of nothing higher than to dwell among his own folk in "honourable retirement" had now, despite himself, become so great a personality. In this surprising change of fortune we cannot fail to see the hand of Providence. Vincent de Paul was the instrument of designs far greater than himself. There is no denying his natural gifts, which were very marked, but on close examination we are forced to own that these gifts of themselves could never have attained his actual achievements. If, like the rest of us, he had pursued his own ends by the mere use of his human qualities, he would have lived and died a good inconspicuous priest, or at most the zealous bishop of

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his province. The story of his life would have been amply told by a few lines in history and the simple Latin epitaph upon his tomb. But how different was the reality! "I will raise up a faithful priest who will act after my own heart and follow my desires" are the words of the Church in the office of the saint. It was indeed God who raised him up, that God to whom he surrendered himself so unconditionally and with whose grace he co-operated so faithfully, in complete effacement of himself. For he knew—none better—that the work was done by God, though Vincent might be his instrument; and so, even at the height of his power, he remained the same, simple in his bearing, humble in his manners, claiming nothing for himself, seeking not his own. He stood bareheaded in the presence of the great, he was the last to give voice to his opinions at the council table.

· But neither must we think of him as the mere rustic he has sometimes been depicted. He was most certainly no country bumpkin!

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He knew how to converse with princes and with ladies, and though at times he chose to show almost too great humility, he could always hold his own with tact and dignity. One of the witnesses in the process of canonisation affirmed: "I have often seen him at the Louvre, where he bore himself with a modesty and prudence fraught with prudence." "His presence enjoined great respect," said Abelly, and one of his correspondents wrote: "You are humble amid the great, simple with the simple, poor among the rich, and the continual miracle to those who know you is that you get on well with all, even though they follow different ways and have conflicting aims." Undoubtedly throughout his life Vincent's singular gift of charm made itself felt by all with whom he came in contact.

He was endowed with the qualities of his race, and the love of the soil was deeply rooted in him—a homely touch beneath his sanctity. Just as his face retained its slightly heavy features, despite the beauty of his fore-

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head and the depth of his eyes, so there lingered something of the peasant in his mind and character: a slow deliberation, a clear sense of the realities, a fear of self-delusion. He possessed a shrewd knowledge of men and, above all, a tenacious, patient energy which no obstacle could arrest or discourage. When things went badly, like the peasant, he would say, "I will wait." He never endangered an enterprise by haste or by excess of speech, nor yet by undertaking more than he had power to carry through. He never let himself be discouraged either by men or circumstances. And he never met with failure—surely a striking fact, in view of the endless schemes he set on foot. He left nothing to chance; indeed, in his eyes there was no such thing as chance. There were the strivings and the reckonings of man—and there was Providence. Yet St. Vincent was in no sense a visionary; he had not even much imagination, which may seem curious in a man of his active temperament. How then did he work? Did he visualise a

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vast creative scheme and set before himself some wide sweeping plan of action? No! Such was not St. Vincent's way. He saw the ills of the Church and the society around him; he directed his patient gaze upon them; he sought first one remedy and then another; he proceeded by slow prudent steps. Thus, stone by stone, his great constructions rose, and as each was brought to its completion, he would gaze at it with unfeigned humility, saying that he had had no such end in mind and that it was God alone who had accomplished it. Speaking to the priests of the Mission, he once said: "As for me, when I consider the means it has pleased God to use in bringing forth this congregation in His Church, I own I no longer know where I stand; it appears to me that what I behold is a dream. All these rules and the rest you see in the Congregation, all this has come about I know not how. For I never thought of it, and all has happened bit by bit without its being possible to say who has been the cause."

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In the same way with regard to the Sisters of Charity: "How can it be said that I founded the Daughters of Charity? I had no such thought, nor Mlle. le Gras, nor yet M. Portail."

This is no exaggerated humility. It is the avowal of a man who did not dream great things, but who allowed himself to be guided by events, enlightened by God and who in his grandest enterprises sought no more than to carry out his daily task.

It now remains to show how St. Vincent spent the last forty years of his life in transforming his natural qualities into supernatural virtues; and perhaps the most touching aspect of the change is to watch how sanctity, instead of overthrowing nature, raised it up and purified it, thereby enabling it to attain its utmost possibilities. The saint remains a man, our brother still, the while he far outstrips us, even as day by day he outstripped himself.

Take his characteristic slowness: he deliberately emphasised it to escape the risk of self-reliance, till at last he learnt to efface

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himself entirely, leaving all to God. "It appears to me that the things of God move slowly, little by little, almost imperceptibly, and that His spirit is neither violent nor tempestuous." He quotes the example of the Carthusians, whose constitution was only made one hundred years after their establishment, and of St. Ignatius, who did no more than draw up a plan, leaving it to his Society to work it out. He wrote to Jean le Vacher: "It seems to me that you are undertaking too much to start with. We so often spoil good works by going too fast. Mon Dieu! Monsieur how I wish you would moderate your zeal!" And to Mlle. le Gras he wrote: "All comes to him who knows how to wait. This is true in common things; how much more so in the things of God."

So gradually this natural prudence is merged into a supernatural understanding of the divine action in earthly matters. On no account will he outrun Providence. The one thing necessary is to want what God wants

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and not to counter His designs by our blind and muddled interference. And then "the good which God desires comes about almost of itself without our noticing it."

It was the same with his sweetness. He himself would refer to his sour, repellent temper and his melancholy expression, but in reality he possessed a warm and generous disposition and a great gift of sympathy. He did not need to force himself to love the poor; they quickly found the way into his heart, as is proved by a thousand instances. But can we seriously believe that anyone can enjoy himself among the convicts, and kiss the chains of galley slaves, or even spend days and months in hearing peasant folk's confessions without supernatural charity? Again, his treatment of the heretics, a miracle of tact and gentleness (then so rare), was inspired by his clear insight into the evils of controversy and persecution; but to this, too, was added a purely supernatural element—that love which by love alone seeks to attract souls to the truth.

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“We merely drive the poor souls from us (by controversy). They will think we are acting from vanity and will not believe us. We do not trust a man because of his learning, but because we think him good and love him. Our Saviour had first to win by his love those whom He called to believe in Him.”

During his long life as superior he naturally had occasion to rebuke certain of his sons; in his office of reformer he found much to correct and improve, but what tact and delicacy he displayed in the handling of souls! He would first humble himself, and by proving to his sons his own worthlessness he won them to repentance. He would never hear of violence against heretics, nor of the excommunication of unworthy religious. The burning flax must not be quenched. As a reformer he had nothing of the spirit of Savonarola, and he was successful because he knew so well how to combine strength and tenacity in principle with a sympathetic handling of the individual. God is Love, and He would have us act by love.



CHURCH OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL, PARIS



THE FAUBOURG OF ST. GERMAIN, PARIS, IN THE  
TIME OF ST. VINCENT



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Finally, as to humility. This also was a natural quality, due to his origin and his want of ambition. To push himself forward was not his line, and consorting with the rich was no pleasure to him. When offered a dignity, his first impulse was to draw back. It seemed absurd to him to be made a member of the Conseil de Conscience, and he did all he could to escape, never thinking that it was perhaps a duty to which God was calling him. But here again we see this native modesty transformed into heroic virtue. His life was one long exercise of self abasement, at times carried almost to excess, as when he kissed the hand of the courtier who insulted him, and gloried in recalling the fact that he was the son of a labourer and had spent his youth in guarding swine. When alone with his intimate companions he displayed a sort of genius for making himself appear a fool, even to the point of rolling in the mud. This was but the outward aspect. In his inmost heart he was convinced of his worthlessness: he was an

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unprofitable servant, and he wished to be treated according to his deserts. He was careful to minimise his own share in all he did in order to leave more room for God, and it was no paradox when he declared that he had done nothing. He has left many very simple but striking sayings as to the little we can either be or do without the help of God. How true it is that the nearer a soul draws to the divine model of all perfection the more she realises her own imperfection! It is the mediocre only who can afford to have a high opinion of themselves.

This is why St. Vincent made humility the essential virtue of his missionaries. "Fly as far as possible from ever appearing to be anything. Do not seek honours which are but the smoke of hell. Do not even seek esteem. Did you become priests in order that people might think well of you and call you a great preacher—or to be praised and flattered on all sides? Lose no opportunity to annihilate yourselves. I beseech you in all

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your work to look for nothing but shame and ignominy, and in the end the death that shall please God." But, above all, he warned them to be careful that the desire of glory so innate in man, when driven from their own hearts, did not return as a subtle temptation to lay hold of the Congregation. He bade them beware of corporate pride. "Is it not strange that, while we quite admit that the individuals of a company—Peter, James and John—ought to shun esteem and seek contempt, none the less we think that the Company itself should love and covet honour. It must most certainly be recognised that these two things are incompatible. I say that we should rejoice if men say that our congregation is useless to the Church, that it is composed of poor men, that it fails in all it undertakes, that its country missions are useless, its seminaries lacking grace, its ordinations lacking order."

This, surely, is a spirit of abnegation rare enough among founders, but he went further

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still. The success of his missionaries raised up other congregations in different parts of France, having the same ends in view, and these sometimes made profit out of the confusion of names. He would never cross them; he was untouched by any spirit of monopoly. When others were aroused to indignation for his company, he wrote: "It is better to have a hundred missions established by others than to prevent a single one. Let us have more confidence in God. Let us leave Him to steer our little boat. If she is useful to Him He will keep her from shipwreck." And on another occasion he wrote: "It is our motto to give up to others the good works which they are ready to undertake."

Here, surely, we touch the bedrock of renunciation.

Thus, gradually the saint was being modelled in the man, and as we watch we see how, less and less, he lets himself be guided by any purely human motives. Next to humility, his favourite virtue was abandonment to Pro-

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vidence. In all things he first sought the indications of God's will, and in proportion as he himself was called to wider rule so much the more submissive did he show himself to the Ruler from on high. This explains why this great man, so pre-eminently a man of action, unceasingly proclaims his policy of "non-action"—a surprising paradox to those who do not understand that the strength of the saints is not their own, and that the more they efface themselves, so much more does the Almighty do great things in and through them. He remained what he had ever been, Good M. Vincent, approachable to all, laying himself out for all. The first to rise; in the chapel by daybreak to say his Mass in the midst of his brethren, then back to his fireless room to attack his crushing correspondence. This done, he would attend some charitable meeting—a council at the Louvre or a reunion of his daughters. Again, he would return to prepare his students, instruct the youthful clerics, entertain the retreatants. Afterwards

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he would welcome his beloved poor, listening first to one and then another, eating with them, waiting on them at the great table always open at St. Lazare. He would harbour the refugees, visit the sick: in fact, could his day better be described than to say of him as was said of his Master, that "he went about doing good" ?

Yet we must not let this kindness deceive us; step by step this homely man was developing into a great saint. He was no wonder worker; not once was he surprised in ecstasy or rapture; he never went about the public ways preaching the kingdom of God to admiring multitudes; he was not gifted with that halo of youth and romance which has adorned the brows of certain of the saints of God. The espousals of St. Vincent with Humility are less picturesque than those of Francis with Dame Poverty, but they are no less genuine. My Lady Poverty may at times appear clad in shining robe. My Lady Obscurity has never yet been hailed by poets. Vincent chose the

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least attractive and the most forsaken as his spouse, but he graced her with the elegance and refinement of a Frenchwoman, for he was himself a son of France. He recalls St. Geneviève and St. Joan, those saints who were the natural flowering of the soil and who towered above their fellows, not on account of their outstanding gifts, but because they obeyed more humbly and more faithfully than the rest the will of God.

Vincent de Paul died as we might have expected—simply and in harness. He was seventy-nine. Throughout his life his health had been good, though he suffered much from various infirmities. A recurrent fever often laid him low, and a weakness in his legs made walking a constant difficulty. Some time before the end his feebleness became very painful, and sleepless nights left him utterly exhausted. But still his mind retained its marvellous activity and he worked unceasingly. Eight days before he died he was sending missionaries out to Poland, conducting the

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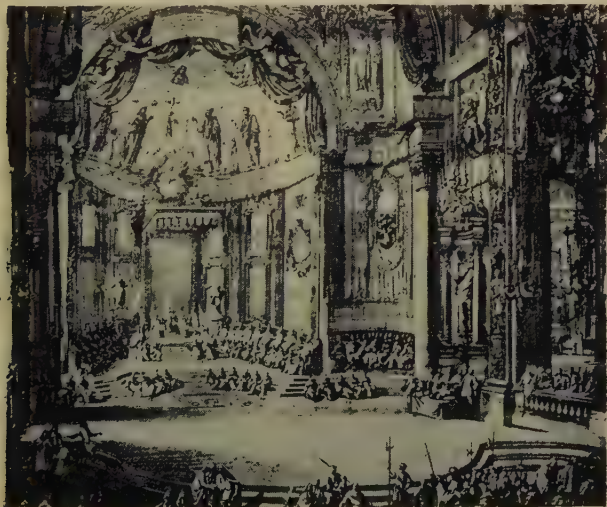
elections of the Daughters of Charity and dictating endless letters. He insisted on being carried to the chapel where he heard Mass and received Communion. This he did again on Sunday 26th of September, 1660. That night he was given Extreme Unction. He took leave of his friends and then joined in the last prayers, kissing his crucifix and saying again and again the words "Credo, spero, confido." As daylight broke, sitting in his chair, he gave his soul to God.

His body was laid out in one of the chapels of St. Lazare. Crowds pressed in, eager to touch the garments and, if possible, to carry off some relic of the saint. The funeral was very simple. Although Bossuet assures us of the presence of six bishops, a prince and many noble ladies, it does not seem to have ranked as a great event, for this year 1660 marked the climax of a glorious reign, and feasts and victories were of more account than the passing of a saint.

Two months later a memorial service was



ST. VINCENT BLESSING HIS FIRST COMPANIONS



THE CANONISATION OF ST. VINCENT



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held at St. Germain l'Auxerrois, when, in presence of a brilliant assemblage, Henri de Maupas de la Tour preached a panegyric, unsurpassed in eloquence, but very certainly little to the taste of M. Vincent.

The cause of beatification of Vincent de Paul was introduced in 1705. "The long and severe examination of his very innocent and very saintly life," as the address of the clergy of France expressed it, furnished incontestible proof of the heroism of his virtues; the miracles wrought through his intercession were abundant; on 13th August, 1729, the Servant of God was beatified by a brief of Benedict XIII, and in July, 1737, Clement XII signed the bull of his canonisation.

To-day his statue may be found in many churches, and yet his name is not so often on our lips. But ought it not to be a joy to us to pray to so dear a saint? Does not the child he carries in his arms remind us of our own weakness, our own misery? He knows them well; he wants to offer them to God. His

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words are full of consolation; let us recall a few before we leave him. The following, for those who are afraid: "Do you want to find God? He dwells among the simple." Or this to encourage us: "Be merry, be happy. Try to be contented in the midst of all that causes you unhappiness." Or, again, "Only let Him work His will in you. Oh how little is needed to become a saint!" But how can we draw God down to us? It is Vincent himself who tells us: "Empty yourselves of self, and God will fill you with Himself."





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