

THE SOCIAL CONSCIENCE OF VINCENT DE PAUL

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Introduction

As far as the poor were concerned, the social fabric of seventeenth-century France was a tapestry of loathing, fear and of repressive measures. The first part of this article traces the development of these attitudes in order to situate St Vincent's response in its historical milieu.

The second part of the article analyses the development of St Vincent's social conscience, using a framework developed by Brian Johnstone. In this part, St Vincent will be allowed, as much as possible to speak for himself.

Cursed be the hour in which a pauper is conceived

Despite the economic growth in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, by the beginning of the fourteenth century poverty had widened its grasp on an ever growing number of people, both urban and rural. Dislike for the poor was on the increase.

A contemporary writer, Guillaume de Lorris, expressed the popular conviction in these words:

The Social Conscience of Vincent de Paul

Cursed be the hour
In which a pauper is conceived!
Never to be well fed,
Well clothed, well shod,
Nor ever to be loved and exalted.¹

The negative attitude was set to worsen. The confluence of at least four factors contributed to an increasing hostility against the poor and to the bleak conviction that not only was poverty a curse, but the poor were a danger to society, and for that reason needed to be controlled and isolated.

The first among these was the outbreak of the plagues, destined to devastate Europe. The Black Death arrived in Provence in 1347 and had ravaged most of France by 1348. While it subsided in 1350, it remained endemic with regular epidemic outbreaks. The first wave of the plague carried off one-third of France's population, and by 1450 Normandy's population had fallen by two-thirds. It was not uncommon for towns to lose half their population in a few years; Toulouse was a case in point, dropping from 40,000 to 20,000.

The outbreak of 1347-1350 was particularly virulent in that the disease appeared in all its three forms: bubonic, septicemic and pneumonic. While the first two forms were carried by fleas, the highly contagious pneumonic form was spread from person to person by airborne particles. Not only did the plagues exacerbate poverty and increase

¹ "L'eure puise estre la maudite/ que povres hom fu conceüz!/ qu'il ne sera ja bien peüz/ ne bien vestuz ne bien chauciez/ n'il n'est amez ne essauciez." Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, lines 456-59, in *Le Roman de la Rose* publié par Félix Lecoy, tome I (Paris: Honore Champion, 1968), 15. This poem was commenced about the middle of the 13th century by Guillaume de Lorris and completed some forty years later by Jean de Meun. It gained enduring popularity for at least three centuries thereafter, and was translated into other languages including a translation into English by Chaucer.

begging, the poor, particularly the vagabonds, became significant factors in spreading the disease.

Measures began to be put in place to curb begging and to limit the movement of beggars. Such restrictions appeared very quickly after the first outbreak of the plague: in England in 1349; France in 1350; and Spain in 1351. Generally speaking, legislation seeking to control beggars and vagabonds developed throughout Europe. While such legislation did not displace the Benedictine (and widely held) view of the poor as a representative of Christ on earth, it did lay the groundwork for a drawing an ever-sharper distinction between the “good, deserving poor” and the “bad, undeserving, able-bodied poor”. Stern sanctions were enacted: those who gave alms, particularly to the “undeserving”, were threatened with fines and even prison; the punishments for “undeserving” beggars increased in severity and included the pillory, whipping, banishment, the galleys, and even branding with a hot iron and hanging.² The fact that such laws and ordinances were repeatedly promulgated indicates that either they were ineffective, or unenforced, or that the problem with the poor was becoming intractable. It was most likely a combination of all three.

The increase in vagabond poor was a second factor. If people tolerated the beggar, they despised the vagabond. These people operated outside the social system – they had no allegiances and no place in society.³ They were not a homogeneous group; their numbers were made up of those who had been evicted from land and home, those who had lost employment, discharged soldiers, fake pilgrims, wandering preachers, rabble rousers, and journeymen in search of a job. Made up largely of

² Jean-Pierre Gutton, *La société et les pauvres en Europe (XVI^e-XVIII^e siècles)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974), 95-96; Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages. An Essay in Social History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 290-291.

³ The phrase in french for a vagabond, “homme sans aveu”, is instructive: literally it means “without avowal”, that is, without a lord or master to acknowledge; “sans aveu” in its extended meaning denotes untrustworthiness and cunning.

men between the ages of fifteen and fifty, they were feared and hated for the crimes which they committed (or were expected to commit): theft, arson, rape, poisoning wells and livestock. The arrival of the Gypsies in France in 1419 only served to increase suspicions, particularly since their womenfolk were regarded as sorcerers.⁴ Evidence that the vagabonds were a group whose existence could not be ignored comes from the books which attempted to classify their various types and to describe their slang, tricks and ill-doings. Among the better known books are: the *Mirror of Charlatans* (*Speculum Cerretanorum*, written in Italy around 1485); the *Book of Vagabonds* (*Liber Vagatorum*, written in Germany around 1510); and the *Fraternity of Vagabonds* (*Fraternite of vacabones*, written in England around 1561.)

God made the poor to aid the rich

The third factor was the changing economic and social conditions which accompanied the decline of the feudal system and the growth of commercial economies. Although the conditions for land cultivators improved from the tenth to the thirteenth century, it worsened thereafter. By the middle of the fifteenth century peasants were considered to be

the basest order in society, naturally born 'inferiors', inspired in their dealings with the rest of mankind by 'malice', 'malignity' and 'insolence'. ... In Italy, as in Europe generally, the peasant was transformed in the Middle Ages from a subject of admiration into an object of contempt and mistrust. ... In most writing, where noticed at all, the peasant remained the figure of medieval satire, a creature more animal than human, dirty and

⁴ Gutton, *La société et les pauvres en Europe*, 15-23; Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages*, 246-50.

deceitful, ill-housed, worse-fed, dressed in ‘hempen homespun’.⁵

By the fifteenth century trade and industry had undergone considerable changes: the traditional guilds of craftsmen had given way to journeymen who sought employment from emerging companies of merchants who, through mercantile capital, controlled the entire process of manufacture in important areas such as textiles, leather goods, mining and metallurgy. “The growing preponderance of the town finally corrupted the atmosphere of the country. A world dominated by a commercial bourgeoisie could not but despise the peasants...”⁶ A money-economy had already developed, and the groundwork was laid for the consolidation of a middle-class, bent on its own betterment, forgetful of its origins, and disdainful of the poor.

Indicators of the moral issues which accompanied such a development are evident from the types of questions raised by writers such as Jean Gerson (1363-1429) and Gabriel Biel (1410-1495). Gerson, and particularly Biel, focussed on the morality of issues such as price regulation, monopolies, taxation, interest rates and currency fluctuations.

The emergence of an economic system directed at the creation of wealth had two direct consequences. Firstly, the definition of a poor person no longer only meant one who lacked the basic necessities of life: a person could be considered to be poor by comparison with those better off. Secondly, it questioned whether anyone could be considered as having superfluous goods; that is, having more than one really needed, since if the so-called superfluity could be used to better one’s station in life, could it really be considered a superfluity?

⁵ M. M. Postan (ed), *Cambridge Economic History of Europe. Volume I: The Agrarian Life in the Middle Ages*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 419-420.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 702.

This posed a direct challenge to three long-held views within the catholic tradition: (1) that while private ownership was acceptable, it was only so, *quoad usum*, and the goods of the earth were for all; (2) that in the case of necessity, all goods were considered to be common property; and (3) that since one's superfluous goods were to be given to the needy in the form of alms, the amassing and habitual use of such goods was morally unacceptable.

Antonino of Florence (1389-1459) responded forcefully against this growing tendency to limit almsgiving. It was a duty to give alms; anything in excess of what was needed for oneself and one's family, and with due allowance to one's estate, was superfluous. The need of the poor person established an absolute obligation, provided that the recipient made good use of the alms and did not use the gift wastefully or in order to live idly. The degree of the person's poverty was the indicator of how much should be given.⁷

Tomaso de Vio [Cajetan] (1496) also defended the Tradition's viewpoint emphatically. "The use of superfluous goods", he declared, "is inordinate". As far as accumulating money in order to change from the social class in which one was born and raised, he maintained that it was licit to do so only once, otherwise there would never be any superfluous goods with which the poor could be aided.⁸

Cajetan's reply was ineffective. Casuistic analysis of what constituted superfluous wealth continued unabated, and with ever more accommodation to the prevailing socio-economic situation. This is evidenced by the 1679 condemnation of the laxist proposition that hardly any lay person, even royalty, is obliged to give alms, since

⁷ Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages*, 261.

⁸ A Bondolfi, "Elemosina," in *Nuovo Dizionario de Teologia Morale* a cura de Francesco Compagnoni, Giannino Piana, Salvatore Privitera (Torino: Edizione Paoline, 1990), 318-325, at 320-321 citing Cajetanus, *De eleemosynae praecepto*, c. 3.

practically no one can be considered to have goods superfluous to one's state in life.⁹

With such social and economic changes, personal almsgiving lost its much of its traditional justification, that of aiding the poor out of one's superfluous goods, precisely because such goods were already supposed to belong to them. Personal almsgiving, however, continued, but frequently with a justification much less honorable. One gave alms, not so much because of the obligation to do so, but to "buy" one's eternal salvation.

Charity was not the only reason for treating the poor decently; prudence was another, especially given late medieval man's concern with the hereafter. It was often repeated that charity wipes away sin. The craze for accurate accounting was reflected in detailed computations of purgatorial punishments. Alms were like a bill of exchange drawn on Heaven. Bishops advised the faithful to amass a treasure safe from worms and mites...¹⁰

In this way of looking at things the poor are reduced to being a means to an end for the self-interested and economically better off members of society. The tables had been turned: "God made the poor to aid the rich, rather than the rich to aid the poor".¹¹

⁹ Propositio 12, in H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer (ed), *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 33rd edition (Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder, 1965), par. 2112.

¹⁰ Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages*, 259.

¹¹ Tomás de Trujillo, *Tratado de la limosna* (Estella, 1563), 225 cited by Maureen Flynn, *Sacred Charity. Confraternities and Social Welfare in Spain, 1400-1700* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 76.

The poor are actively harmful to themselves

The fourth factor was the emergence of humanism. If the first two contributed to entrenching a fear of the poor, the third to use them for one's own spiritual ends, this fourth one, regarding them as an embarrassment to humankind, and as the agents of their own misfortune, proposed that they be forced to help themselves.

With humanism, contempt for the poor took a subtle and perfidious turn, becoming disdainful and philosophical and – height of irony – invoking the dignity of man as justification. The social failure of poverty stood at the opposite extreme from personal self-fulfillment; to those who exalted success and *fortuna* it made no sense. Eulogy of poverty gave way to praise of wealth.¹²

Humanist writers regarded poverty as a handicap to human flourishing, and as a condition which rendered one ridiculous. The sole feature which could confer respectability was acceptance of one's lot with humility and docility. To do so was evidence that such a person belonged to the ranks of the "good, deserving poor". Great emphasis was placed on the virtues of hard work, on the divine command to earn one's bread by the sweat of one's brow, and the dangers of idleness were decried. A well governed State was to foster work and enact measures against the idle.¹³

The treatise *De subventionem pauperum* written by Juan Luis Vives and first published in Bruges in 1526 brought these insights together and provided a theoretical foundation for efforts already begun to bring the poor and poor relief under governmental responsibility and control. The treatise was quickly translated into the vernacular languages and

¹² Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages*, 255.

¹³ Gutton, *La société et les pauvres en Europe*, 99-101.

widely read. Vives' treatise received a good reception in France – it was re-printed in Paris and in Lyon in 1530 and 1532.¹⁴

Vives' thesis was that government should be directly involved in working against poverty by creating employment opportunities for the jobless, by providing skill training for them, and through the construction of centres for the support of the needy, abandoned children and the mentally ill.

The reasons brought forward by Vives for governmental intervention focus on the benefits that it will bring, firstly to the State and secondly, to the poor themselves.

For they who take care of the rich only, scorning the poor, act just as the doctor would who should take little thought for healing hands or feet because they are at a distance from the heart, which would result in grievous harm to the whole body. So too in a State the poorer members cannot be neglected without danger to the powerful ones....

Look, again, at the public danger from infectious disease, as we have often seen, some one man bringing a great and terrible disease into a city from which many die – the plague for example, or the French sickness, and so on. Suppose there is at some church or other a high festival drawing great crowds: one has to make one's way into the building between two lines of diseases, vomitings, ulcers, or other afflictions disgusting even to speak of. ... Especially when ulcers of this sort are not only forced upon the eyes, but upon the nose and mouth, and are almost touched by the hands and bodies of the passerby, so insolent are they in begging; I pass over the fact that some of the crowd have but just left a plague-stricken

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

corpse. These are matters not be neglected by the rulers of cities, both for curing the diseases and to prevent them from spreading. Moreover, it is not the part of a wise magistrate, and one that studies the public welfare, to allow so large a section of the citizens to be not only useless but actively harmful to itself and to others. ... The young children of the poor are villainously brought up, they and their sons lying outside the churches or wandering round begging; they do not attend the Sacraments or hear the sermon; nothing is known as to their manner of life, or as to their religious or moral opinions.¹⁵

Vives' plan encompassed five aspects: a centralisation of poor-aid with fiscal responsibility for it vested in the public authority (Book II, chapters 2 and 6); a moral reform particularly for the poor, and secondarily for the rich (Book II, chapters 3, 4 and 5); detailed suggestions for putting everyone, even the blind and infirm, to gainful work and skill training (Book II, chapter 3); education of abandoned children (Book II, chapter 4); and, most importantly, a justification for the compulsory registration of the poor, a censorship of their lives and behaviour and punishment for non compliance (Book II, chapters 2 and 5). Although presented as a Christian response, Vives proposed poor relief as "an important tool for the maintenance of social order and control".¹⁶ Some local ordinances reflected this very concretely: licensed poor were obliged to wear a distinctive badge – a yellow cross on the shoulder.

The originality of Vives lay not so much in proposing concrete measures – much of what he proposed had already been tried – but in

¹⁵ Juan Luis Vives, *De subventionem pauperum*, Book II, Chapter 1, in *Some Early Tracts on Poor Relief*, edited by F. R. Salter (London: Methuen, 1926), 6-9.

¹⁶ Abel Athouguia Alves, "The Christian Social Organism and Social Welfare: The Case of Vives, Calvin and Loyola," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 20/1(1989): 3-21, at 7.

the theoretical foundation he provided for already existing schemes and for subsequent ones.¹⁷ The Emperor, Charles V, issued a decree in 1531 forbidding begging throughout the Empire. This decree resulted in an increase of local ordinances along the lines proposed by Vives: Ghent and Brussels issued their ordinances in 1534, and Bruges in 1560. In Spain, a royal decree of 1540 limited begging to the “truly poor” within specified distances of their abode and local ordinances, based on the Belgian models were enacted in Zamora and subsequently in Salamanca and Valladolid.¹⁸

There is a notable utopian element in Vives’ scheme. He claimed that, under it, not only will crime decrease, but envy as well; peace and concord will reign, there will be less sedition, less prostitution, and the city will be healthier and more pleasant. The greatest boon to the city will be the improvement in so many citizens: the youth will be trained to live good lives, thousands will be reclaimed for Christ, and there will be an increase of mutual affection. Furthermore, money for the scheme will not be lacking: people seeing how well and wisely their money is used will give readily and generously out of christian love.¹⁹

The quality of mercy is strained

A more significant element of the humanist approach to poor relief lies in the relationship created between almsgiving, charity and justice. In

¹⁷ Schemes with many elements similar to that which Vives proposed had already been tried: Nuremburg (1522), Strasbourg (1523), Mons (1525) and Ypres (1525). The text of the Ypres scheme (*Forma subventionis pauperum*) is given in *Some Early Tracts on Poor Relief*, 36-76. The city of Rouen initiated its own scheme in 1534. The text of these ordinances and subsequent edicts of 1534 to 1535 is given in *Some Early Tracts on Poor Relief*, 108-119.

¹⁸ Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, 88-93.

¹⁹ Vives, *De subventionem pauperum*, Book II, Chapters 6 and 10, in *Some Early Tracts on Poor Relief*, 20-21, 30-31. Evidence from the Rouen scheme suggests that the money did not come abundantly, and eventually a direct tax for poor relief was imposed. For details see *Some Early Tracts on Poor Relief*, 107.

answer to the question how such a vast number of poor are to be assisted Vives began by explaining that reliance on charity will not suffice:

If charity had any power over us, she herself would be a law for us (although love needs no law), to hold all things in common; none would consider the needs of another less carefully than his own. Now there is no one who spends his care outside his own house, sometimes not outside his own chamber, or even his own self, for there are many who do not trust their parents, sons, brothers or wives sufficiently. Therefore at times recourse must be had to human remedies, especially for those for whom the divine have little efficacy.²⁰

For him, charity as a basis for assisting the poor is unworkable because of human self-interest. What he proposed is that rather than almsgiving to the individual out of compassion, citizens should give to the public authority who will then attend to the needs of the poor. The motive for almsgiving is, principally, not compassion for the poor, but for the good of society, and only secondarily for the good of the poor. Even in the case of those who lacked the very basics for life the gift was for reasons of justice rather than compassion, since the recipient who remained in the town was expected to reciprocate, making a contribution through gainful work. Thus, no one was ever to be refused food, not even vagabond beggars being expelled from the town, nor those who had fallen into poverty through their gambling, immorality or other fault. However, these latter were to be given the more disagreeable tasks, harder work and scantier food.²¹ The basis of the assistance is justice – commutative justice demanded that all receive food and distributive justice required that the less-deserving received less. Further evidence that Vives placed justice at the centre of the

²⁰ Vives, *De subventionem pauperum*, Book II, Chapter 2, in *Some Early Tracts on Poor Relief*, 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Book II, Chapter 3, in *Some Early Tracts on Poor Relief*, 12-13.

enterprise is contained in his advice on how the necessary funds are to be collected.

If at any time there should not be sufficient alms in hand, let rich men be approached and invited to assist the poor, whom God has thus recommended to their care, or at least to lend the amount required. Afterwards, if they desire it, this should be repaid to them in good faith, when there is a greater supply of alms.

The city, too, should itself withdraw something from its public expenses ... But if a city does not like to take this line, it can at any rate make a loan which can be repaid when more alms money has come in.²²

Almsgiving became, therefore, only an act of justice under its form of liberality, not an act of charity under the form of mercy. It was no longer “a deed whereby something is given to the needy out of compassion and for God’s sake.”²³ Justice, under the form of liberality, was, in the earlier synthesis, that which merely removed obstacles to almsgiving, but Vives placed it at centre stage and downplayed the role of mercy. The word “mercy” still appeared in his writings, but with a meaning gutted of its traditional content and closer to the meaning of “beneficence”.²⁴

This shift in theory and in practice with regard to poor relief did not go completely uncontested. An appeal, charging that the Ypres scheme treated the genuine poor harshly and even smacked of heresy, was made to the Sorbonne in late 1530. In reply, the theologians of the Sorbonne judged the “system of poor relief which the Magistrates of Ypres have instituted is severe but valuable; it is healthy and pious,

²² Ibid., Book II, Chapter 6, in *Some Early Tracts on Poor Relief*, 24-25.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 32, art. 1.

²⁴ It is not insignificant that the word “beneficence” first appears in French and English at this time.

and not inconsistent either with the Gospels or with the example of the Apostles or of our forefathers”.²⁵ The judgement also insisted that, in view of the importance of charity, almsgiving to any beggar, either publicly or privately, should not be punished. The theologians further advised that the scheme, good and wholesome as it was, should be left open to modification. In essence, the Sorbonne blessed the scheme.

More spirited contestation of such schemes came from Domingo de Soto in Spain. Although he initially supported the introduction of poor relief ordinances in Zamora (1540) which took account of the qualifications placed on reform by the Sorbonne, de Soto changed his position. By 1544 he was engaged in public controversy with a supporter of the scheme, Juan de Medina (also known as Juan de Robles).

De Medina argued that begging was not a natural right, but was rather an unwelcome necessity. Consequently, laws prohibiting private almsgiving in favour of centralized giving and administration rightly curtailed the individual’s freedom for the sake of the common good. Furthermore, there is no injustice done by attempting to restrict almsgiving to the deserving poor – even if Christianity encouraged people to give to all who beg in the name of God, the good governance of the state required that they give only to the deserving poor.²⁶

De Soto stoutly maintained that begging was a fundamental human right, and curtailing it could result in the poor endangering their lives. Furthermore, natural law and customary law allowed everyone to go freely where they can best provide for their necessities. He vigorously

²⁵ “Judgement of the Sorbonne, 16 January 1531,” in *Some Early Tracts on Poor Relief*, 76.

²⁶ Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, 96-97. De Medina’s book, *De la orden que en algunos pueblos de España se ha puesto en la limosna para remedio de los verdaderos pobres* was first published in Salamanca in 1545. Subsequent editions in Valladolid (1757) and Madrid (1766) bore the title *La charidad discreta, practicada con los mendigos, y utilidades que logra la republica en su recogimiento*.

decried any attempt to allocate charity on the basis of a person's supposed moral worth and opposed efforts to use poor relief as a method of social control. He was particularly critical of the social mechanism of only licensing people as "truly poor" after they had confessed their sins and received Holy Communion, making the rather pointed observation that the rich did not have their food denied them simply because they had not been to confession.²⁷

The fundamental point of disagreement between de Soto and de Medina was the nature of mercy. For de Soto compassion was an essential ingredient: confining the poor to institutions deprived mercy of its major focal point – that of personal contact with the poor.²⁸

While de Soto's position won the battle in Spain, at least for a time, it was not so in Italy and northern Europe where poor relief reform went ahead undisputed, with ever growing efforts either to drive the poor from the cities or to lock them away in institutions.²⁹ With them under control, out of sight and out of mind the assertive middle class could concentrate on what it strove to do best – to better its own situation.

The middle class attitude did not succeed in eliminating the more traditional views and practices of almsgiving. Despite official edicts prohibiting almsgiving in the streets, the practice continued, even if not always motivated by mercy. Nor did the poor completely lose their status as "the suffering members of Jesus Christ". Seventeenth century paintings continued to depict St Augustine, on bended knees, washing

²⁷ Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, 94-95. De Soto's book was published in Salamanca in 1545 in both Latin (*In causa pauperum deliberatio*) and Spanish (*Deliberación en la causa de los pobres*).

²⁸ Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, 97-98.

²⁹ Good analyses are given by: Edward R. Udovic, C.M., " 'Caritas Christi Urget Nos': The Urgent Challenges of Charity in Seventeenth Century France," *Vincentian Heritage* 12/2 (1991): 85-104; and Gérard D. Guyon, "St Vincent de Paul and the Internment of Minors in Seventeenth-Century France," *Vincentian Heritage* 15/2 (1994): 77-96. For a more detailed treatment see: Gutton, *La société et les pauvres en Europe*, 122-136.

the feet of a poor man who is none other than Christ himself. Nevertheless, the existence of such paintings quite probably indicates that the general populace needed to be reminded of this element of the Christian tradition.

The ideology of locking the poor away did not create new theological foundations for almsgiving, and did not need to do so. In the minds of many the theological reasons had already shifted focus from assisting the poor for God's sake to assisting them for one's own benefit. Those who changed the Hospitals into prisons for the poor were able to present the initiative as thoroughly in accord with the Gospel and as a more efficient manner of helping the poor.³⁰ What the ideology did create, however, was a safe haven for those who wished to have little or nothing to do with the poor.

This was the society in which Vincent de Paul grew up and the one in which he had to choose with whom he would cast his lot: with the upwardly mobile, or with the poor. As a young priest Vincent de Paul had already thrown his lot in with the former. While social mobility was limited, it was possible; the crucial step was to have a university degree in law which allowed one to attain the rank of "advocate".³¹ Vincent had that, and, in his own view, the only thing thwarting his progress was bad luck. In a letter written to his mother from Paris in early 1610, he observes:

The assurance that Monsieur de Saint-Martin has given me with regard to your good health has gladdened me, as much as the prolonged sojourn which I must necessarily make in this city in order to regain my chances of advancement (which my disasters took from me) grieves me, because I cannot come to render you the services I

³⁰ Gutton, *La société et les pauvres en Europe*, 136-144.

³¹ Roland Mousnier, *The Institutions of France under the Absolute Monarchy. Volume I, Society and State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 278-279.

owe you. But I have such trust in God's grace, that He will bless my efforts and will soon give me the means of an honourable retirement so that I may spend the rest of my days near you. ... I should also like my brother to have one of his nephews study. My misfortunes and the little service that I have as yet been able to render at home may make him unwilling to do so, but let him reflect that the present misfortune presupposes good luck in the future.³²

The work in which he was involved at the time was distributing alms on behalf of Queen Marguerite de Valois. However, "he was giving hand-outs, not practising charity; he filled hands, not hearts. He was just making the system work; he had not undergone any real transformation."³³

The emergence of a social conscience

The emergence of a social conscience is best understood within the narrative of a person's moral experience. In that "story" there are four distinct and successive elements: the raw experience of a contrast situation; a conversion; the formation of a critical conscience; and a commitment to solidarity.³⁴

³² Vincent de Paul to his mother, 17 February 1610, in *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, edited by Pierre Coste, C.M., 14 volumes (Paris: Gabalda, 1920-1926), I, 18-19 (hereinafter cited as Coste, *CED*). The translation is from: *St Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, newly translated, edited and annotated from the 1920 edition of Pierre Coste, C.M. (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1985 --), 1, 15-16 (hereinafter cited as Coste, *CCD*).

³³ Luigi Mezzadri, C.M., *A Short Life of St Vincent de Paul* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1992), 14.

³⁴ This section will draw heavily on the analysis provided by Brian Johnstone, C.Ss.R., "Solidarity and Moral Conscience: Challenges for our theological and pastoral work," *Studia Moralia* 31 (1993): 65-85.

In a contrast experience, the person reacts against a situation experienced as morally confrontative and negative. The immediate reaction is that this ought not be so, and should not be allowed to continue. The person must then take a stance: either to ignore the experience or to heed the call of conscience and become personally involved.

I know that I must become involved; I must take on myself the lot of those who are afflicted. I cannot find rest, while they find no rest. It is within this experience that there emerges the call of conscience.³⁵

For such a call of conscience to crystallize a non-negotiable basis for it must be found, otherwise it is likely to remain nothing more than a future item of agenda. Achieving non-negotiable status requires that the basis be beyond further questioning; to be an absolute which makes a permanent, irrefutable claim upon the individual. For a Christian, this basis is God; or more precisely, God's sharing of the human condition in all things, but for sin. Not to heed the call of conscience will mean not simply being inauthentic and untrue to oneself, but unfaithful to God present in the situation.

At this point the call of conscience becomes a call to personal conversion, requiring a re-orientation of convictions and patterns of behaviour. The conscience that emerges is a critical one; that is, able to recognise and critique the institutions, structures in society and theories that support the convictions and behaviours that one has to leave behind. A critical conscience acquires not only a self-critical aspect, alert to the possibilities of error in its own operation, but also a social dimension.

A commitment to solidarity with those whose suffering initially provided the contrast situation forms the final element. They become a locus for encounter with God.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

The idea of taking on the lot or destiny of others, especially the other who suffers and is oppressed is the Christological root of the notion of solidarity. God has entered into solidarity with humankind. This fact is the foundation of moral solidarity with all, and especially with the afflicted.³⁶

Vincent's contrast experiences and conversion

Historians of St Vincent's life generally point to three significant contrast experiences. First, the general confession made by the man from Gannes-Folleville (1617); second, the poor invalid at Châtillon-les-Dombes (1617); and finally, the reproof made to Vincent by the man from Marchais in 1620, claiming that the Catholic Church could not be led by the Holy Spirit because it had abandoned its poor.³⁷

Before the two significant experiences in 1617 Vincent, although aware of the material and spiritual misery of the poor, had not been challenged by it.

He had been immersed in poverty for the first fourteen years of his life and he suffered from it. Then he wished to get away from it for twenty-two years. But this lived experience of poverty nevertheless had not for him been transformed into awareness of a challenge to be met. Besides, during all these years, he did not try to remedy it, but only to get away from it, he and his family. The reason for this is that he was still centred on himself and on his immediate family as extensions of himself.³⁸

³⁶ Ibid., 67.

³⁷ Emeric Amyot d'Inville, C.M., "Seeing and Discerning the Challenges. From St Vincent's eyes ... to ours," *Vincentiana* 41/4-5 (1997): 219.

³⁸ Ibid., 218.

Earlier experiences of the powerlessness and the misery of the poor had not moved Vincent in the same manner as those of 1617; they had not crystallized into that type of personal conversion which issues into solidarity with the poor. An instructive example can be drawn from Vincent's experience of being wrongly accused of the theft of 400 *écus* in 1609.³⁹

It was six years before his innocence was established, and yet he did not seek to defend himself against the false accusation. Years later, speaking in the impersonal, he described his reaction in these words:

... when this false allegation was being spread around the house, [this man] preferred not to defend himself, and he used to reflect, seeing himself falsely accused: "Are you going to deny the accusation? You are accused of something which is not true. Oh no!", he exclaimed, turning to God, "I must put up with it patiently." And that is what he did.⁴⁰

This incident is regarded by historians as being an important step in Vincent's process of conversion. Mezzadri observes that "it was the first time he did not run away."⁴¹ Román comments:

³⁹ In 1609 an *écu* was worth 3 *livres*. The value of a *livre* can be estimated from the data in a letter written by St Vincent to Jean Martin in 1655: "a thousand *livres* a year are needed to maintain two priests and a coadjutor Brother who go on the missions, and not much less is required for those who remain at home." (Coste, *CED*, V, 479; Coste, *CCD*, 5, 485.) On the assumption that the cost of supporting three confreres on mission would be about the equivalent of \$A25,000 per annum, a *livre* would be worth about \$A25. However, inflation in France between 1609 and 1655, meant that "everything doubled in price every fifty years" (Vincent de Paul, Letter to Louise de Marillac, November 1637, in Coste *CED*, I, 394; Coste, *CCD*, 1, 384). Consequently, the amount of money stolen would have been at least the equivalent of \$A15,000.

⁴⁰ Conference, 9 June 1656, in Coste, *CED*, XI, 337.

⁴¹ Mezzadri, *A Short Life of St Vincent de Paul*, 15.

Pierre Debongnie has seen the false accusation of theft to be the key event in Vincent's conversion. This is too simplistic a view. Vincent's conversion is much more complex and the process takes far longer. Over the years he will be touched by a whole series of events and influences; this accusation of theft is only the first step. However, there can be no doubt that Vincent's reaction on that occasion marks a significant turning point in his standards and in his conduct.⁴²

The significant element is that while Vincent "turned to God" and found support, the conversion was not to God found in the face of the poor; it was, in his own words, a misfortune which hampered his chances of advancement.

The years 1617-1633 are regarded as the time in which St Vincent's conversion matured and gradually took hold of him. He still had to search and to work through the issues, but they were the years in which his personal commitment to the poor became the guiding standard of his life-vision. His convictions and patterns of behaviour changed and his solidarity with the afflicted became ever more marked.

Solidarity with the poor

This section will examine way in which St Vincent's spoke of solidarity with the poor, although he never used the word. His thoughts will be brought together under five themes. Firstly, solidarity requires attending to the needs of the whole person; that is, attention only to the person's physical, corporal needs is not sufficient – spiritual needs must also be addressed. The converse is also true. Secondly, mercy is the source of solidarity; without it the enterprise will wither. Thirdly, working for justice only removes the obstacles to solidarity, it does not

⁴² José María Román, *St Vincent de Paul. A Biography*, translated by Joyce Howard, D.C. (London: Melisende, 1999), 89.

create it. Put in another way, justice is a necessary condition for solidarity, but not a sufficient one. Mercy brings forth the full flower of justice. Fourthly, solidarity requires from its practitioners a re-orientation of their perspectives and values; without that it remains a sham. Finally, solidarity requires one to be hard-headed and realistic; not hard-headed in any mean-spirited fashion, but hard-headed in the sense that authentic love of others does not require submitting oneself to exploitation.

St Vincent will be allowed to speak for himself in this section, and it is interesting to note that much of what he had to say comes from the latter years of his life. Perhaps it was only at this time that his social conscience had matured to such an extent that he felt able to share its insights with those around him.

Look after the whole person

Vincent's two contrast experiences of 1617 – the general confession of the dying man from Gannes-Folleville, and the indigent invalid at Châtillon-les-Dombes – are best considered as mutually reinforcing events. While the first impressed on him the spiritual want of the poor, and the second highlighted their need for corporal assistance, the two aspects formed a unity in Vincent's emerging social conscience. His introduction to the statutes for the first Confraternity of Charity, established in Châtillon in 1617 state:

Love of one's neighbour is an infallible sign of the true children of God, and one of the principal acts of love is to visit and provide food for the sick poor. ... Given that these poor people have often suffered much, due more to a lack of organisation in helping them rather than a lack of charity, ... [a group of women] ... has come together to assist the poor of their town both spiritually and corporally. ... This Conference shall be known as *The Conference of Charity* and its principal members as *Servants of the Poor* or *Servants of Charity*. ... The

Confraternity shall take as its Patron Our Lord Jesus Christ, and for its goal His fervent wish that Christians put into practice works of charity and mercy, so that in them His words may ring true: “Be merciful, just as My Father is merciful.”⁴³

Further evidence that Vincent regarded spiritual and corporal assistance as inextricably bound can be seen in a Conference he gave to the Vincentian community, some of whom, it seems, did not share his conviction.

Are the poor not the suffering members of Jesus Christ? Are they not our brothers? If the priests abandon them, who would you suggest assist them? If there is any among us who think that they are in the Mission in order to evangelise the poor and not to look after them, to see to their spiritual but not to their temporal needs, then I have to tell them that we must assist the poor and see that they are helped in every possible way, either by ourselves or by other people, if we hope to hear those beautiful words spoken by the sovereign Judge of the living and the dead, ‘Come, you blessed of my Father, and enter into the kingdom that is prepared for you because I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you cared for me.’ When we do this we are evangelising by word and by action; it is the most perfect way of action and this is what Our Lord did. Those who represent him on earth by reason of their calling and their mission, as priests do, are called to act in the same way. And I have heard it said that what enabled Bishops to become saints was their almsgiving.⁴⁴

⁴³ Coste, *CED*, XIII, 423-24.

⁴⁴ Conference, 6 December 1658, in Coste, *CED*, XII, 87-88.

Let compassion be your watchword

The motivation for assistance to the poor is centred on mercy, and, as such, is holistic, able to blend assistance in the spiritual dimension with alleviation of the corporal needs of the poor without one dimension suffering at the hands of the other. This approach, in line with the traditional basis for poor assistance, differs significantly from that proposed by humanist thinkers for nearly a century. For them, as already noted, poor relief was governed by justice, apportioned on the basis of perceived moral worth, and demanding that the poor work for what they received.

Mercy enables one to feel with the poor, to take on the lot of the afflicted, and to find no rest until they find it. It goes deeper than justice and does not seek nor depend on a response from the poor. God's mercy is not conditional on our moral worth, nor on a response from us.

When we go to visit the poor we should so identify with them that we share their sufferings. We should have the same attitude as the great apostle who said: "I make myself all things to all people". Let us do this to such an extent that the complaint of Our Lord, made through the prophet, would not be made to us: "I looked for someone to grieve with me in my sufferings, but none was found". We must open our hearts so that they become responsive to the sufferings and miseries of the neighbour. We should pray God to grant us an authentic spirit of mercy, which is God's very own spirit. For, as the Church says, it is of God's nature to practise mercy and to bestow the spirit of mercy. Let us, therefore, my brothers, ask God for this spirit of compassion and mercy: to so fill us with it, to preserve it in us, that anyone who sees a missionary may say: there goes a person full of compassion. Let us reflect a little on how much we stand in need of mercy, obliged as we are to exercise it towards others, to bring it

to all sorts of situations and to suffer much for it. ... Let us be merciful, my brothers, and exercise it toward everyone. Never may we meet the poor without seeking to console them, or the uneducated without seeking to help them understand, in a few words, that which they need to believe and do for their own salvation.⁴⁵

For Vincent, solidarity with the poor required more than cool, calculating justice. Empathy with the poor and with their miseries was essential. Missioners, obliged by their state in life and their vocation were to give themselves to the service of the most miserable, the most abandoned, and those who suffer most from corporal and spiritual ills. Four things were needful: empathy with the suffering of the poor; an attitude which clearly displays such empathy; compassionate language; and lastly, practical assistance. A missioner is “to help the poor as much as he is able in order to bring about a partial or a total end to their suffering, because the hand must be, as much as possible, in accord with the heart.”⁴⁶

Let your work be just and fair

A telling example of the depth of his convictions in this matter can be found in the forceful, even angry reaction of Vincent when he discovered that the boarders in his own house of San Lazare were being given inferior food and wine and even food left over from the night before. The boarders in the house were made up of two groups: youths sent there to mend their ways and the mentally ill. In all likelihood, the second-rate food and drink was being given to the mentally ill.⁴⁷ Speaking to the Brothers and Priests, he reminded them that was never to happen again: these people are to be treated exactly

⁴⁵ Conference on the Spirit of Compassion and Mercy, 6 August 1656, in Coste, *CED*, XI, 340-342.

⁴⁶ Conference on the Spirit of Compassion, in Coste, *CED*, XI, 77.

⁴⁷ Stafford Poole, C.M., “Saint Lazare as a Prison,” *Vincentian Heritage* 8/2 (1987): 127-140, at 132.

the same as the Vincentian community of the house. It was a matter of justice, he reminded them several times. “This is a matter of confession”, he declared, “and those in charge of the house are to ensure that these good people receive exactly the same as the priests.”⁴⁸

Reorient your perspectives

Personal contact with the poor was essential. It was in them that God was to be found. This was not a perspective that would have been supported by the culture in the time of St Vincent. In fact, he had himself spent many years fleeing from the poor. To suggest that one’s spiritual exercises should be abandoned for the sake of poor was offensive to the pious ears of his age. Time and time again he exhorted his followers to leave their prayer, their spiritual exercises, and even to be absent from the celebration of the Eucharist, in order to encounter God in the poor. “Leave God for God” was the phrase he used to make the point.⁴⁹

The poor were to be considered as one’s “Lords and Masters”. This is another phrase Vincent used repeatedly to inculcate the breadth of solidarity with the poor, whose needs were to be placed first. In a society, strictly arranged by classes and estates, and in which the poor occupied the lowest estate, this was social heresy.

Let us go then, my brothers, and devote ourselves with a new love to serve the poor, and even seek out the poorest and most abandoned. Let us acknowledge before God that they are our lords and masters, and that we are unworthy to render them our small services.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Repetition of Prayer, 16 March 1656, in Coste, *CED*, XI, 331.

⁴⁹ Conference, 30 May 1647, in Coste, *CED*, IX, 319; Conference, 23 July 1654; Conference, 11 November, 1657; Conference, 17 November 1658; in Coste, *CED*, X, 3; 332; 595.

⁵⁰ Extract of a Conference, January 1657, in Coste, *CED*, XI, 393. Similar sentiments are expressed in: Conference, 19 July 1640; Conference, 22

In St Vincent's time many people sought to become priests because of the easier life-style it offered and Vincent himself was not an exception to that general rule. Many of them were work-shy, sought little but their own comfort and shied away from anything that would disturb them. In an emotionally charged Conference he spoke to his confreres in no uncertain terms:

Will there be some who wish to divert us from the good works we have begun? They will be those bent only on their own self-centred freedom, self-centred freedom, self-centred freedom; who will seek nothing more than their own enjoyment; those who, provided they get their meals, will not put themselves out for anything else. Who are they? They will be ... it is better that I say it not. They will be lazybones [he said this, folding his arms in imitation of the lazy]. They will be people of narrow outlook, whose vision and plans are enclosed in a circle as large as a pin head. Try to show them something outside of that, and if they come close enough to have a look at it, they immediately withdraw to their little circle, like a snail into its shell. [While saying this he made gestures with his hands and his head, and used a certain contemptuous tone of voice, which expressed better than his words what he wanted to say. Then, calming down, he went on].⁵¹

A lack of gratitude is a certain sign of the work-shy, the self-centred and the lazy. During a Repetition of Prayer in July 1655 he reminded his listeners of the plight of the poor because of the wars in Europe,

October 1650, Conference, 24 June 1654; in Coste, *CED*, IX, 26; 531; 708; Conference, 22 November 1658, in Coste, *CED*, X, 612;

⁵¹ Conference, 6 December 1658, in Coste, *CED*, XII, 92-93. The sections enclosed in brackets are notes made by the Redactor of the Conference.

Ireland, England and Scotland, and of the wretchedness and misery that was being caused. He then cut to the point:

If there is a true religion – may God forgive me, I am speaking generally – it is amongst them; it is amongst those poor people that true religion and a vibrant faith are preserved. They have a simple faith that does not examine everything minutely; they submit to orders; despite the breadth of their miseries, they have the patience to suffer them as long as it might please God. Some suffer from the wars, others from working throughout the heat of the day such as the poor vine-dressers who work for us, expecting us to pray for them, while they wear themselves out in order to feed us!

We seek out the shade; we do not wish to go out into the sun; we love our comfort so intensely. During a mission we are, at least, inside the Church, shielded from inclemencies of the weather, from the heat of the sun and from the rain to which these poor people are exposed. We bleat for help if we are given a little more than the usual work to do. My room, my books, my Mass! Enough of that for the moment! What is it to be a missionary – is to have all one's comforts? God is our provider, furnishing us with all we need and even more, providing us with what is sufficient and even more than that. I wonder if we think enough about thanking God.

We live on the patrimony of Jesus Christ, on the sweat of the poor. On going to the dining room we should always think: “have I earned the food I am about to take?” I have often had that thought and it caused me embarrassment: “miserable man, have you earned the bread you are about

to eat – the bread which comes to you from the labour of the poor?”⁵²

Let your love for the poor be made of sterner stuff

From the foregoing, it could be easy to form the impression that St Vincent was had a somewhat naïve, rosy view of the poor; a view that did not take account of what some of them were really like. His solidarity with them did not blind him to their faults. Writing to Fr Jolly, the Superior of a house in Rome, he cautioned him to watch out for those who, under the pretext of making a retreat, merely sought a few days of free board and lodging. “There are persons”, he wrote, “who are only too glad to spend a quiet week or so at no cost to themselves.”⁵³

In an even more pointed fashion he advised Denis Laudin, Superior in Le Mans, to be more hard-headed in his business dealings. After advising him to retain a general lease on a property Vincent continued:

Furthermore, I feel that a *fermier général* will get far more satisfaction from the tax farmers under him than you could do, and if those tax farmers are expressing the desire to do business with you rather than with him, it is because they hope you will treat them more gently, will give them a reduction, will not pressure them, and will not put them to any expense. Yet, you can get satisfaction from them only by dint of threats and seizures, and the more indulgent you are toward them, the less they will pay you; if you use harsh measures, no matter how little, they will say that you are treating them more ruthlessly than a *fermier général* and will noise it abroad that you are avaricious persons and pitiless, merciless tyrants.

⁵² Repetition of Prayer, 24 July 1665, in Coste, *CED*, XI, 200-01.

⁵³ Letter to Edme Jolly, 22 November 1658, in Coste *CED*, VII, 377; *CCD*, 7, 391.

That is how the spirit of the world treats priests, and especially poor people who imagine that priests should not consider their own interests. Let me know when the lease expires.⁵⁴

Another example of Vincent's realistic view of tenant farmers can be seen in a letter he wrote to the Superior in Montmirail, admonishing him for having renewed a lease. These farmers seemed to have caused him a deal of trouble.⁵⁵

Despite the reasons you had for your haste in signing the farming leases, I persist in telling you that you should have informed me about this and waited for my reply. Even if the opportunity had been lost, I think it would have been for the better, especially since these are farmers who will probably not pay, as is common in that region. If you farmed the land yourself, you would have lost nothing.⁵⁶

A final example of Vincent's realistic view of the poor, and of how he recognised that they could be spoiled by charity, rather than getting down to the task of helping themselves, is evidenced by the advice he gave to Brother Jean Parre in 1659. The letter is worth quoting at some length.

⁵⁴ Letter to Denis Laudin, 17 December 1659, in Coste, *CED*, VIII, 199-200; Coste, *CCD*, 8, 227-28. A *fermier général* was the highest ranking tax farmer.

⁵⁵ Jean Jacquart, "Saint Vincent's Real Estate Policy," *Vincentian Heritage* 7/2 (1986): 181-203, at 195.

⁵⁶ Letter to Guillaume Delville, 29 February 1652, in Coste, *CED*, IV, 324; Coste, *CCD*, 4, 326.

... as Mademoiselle Viole has already written to you, ... a small sum of money will be set aside to help a few poor persons to sow a little patch of land – I mean, the poorest, who would be unable to do so without such assistance. There is nothing for them just now, however, but an effort will be made to collect one hundred *pistoles* for that purpose, while awaiting the season for sowing. Meanwhile, you are asked to find out in what parts of Champagne and Picardy there are very poor people who may have need of such assistance – I mean, the greatest need. You could recommend to them in passing to prepare a small plot of land, to plough and fertilize it, and to ask God to send them some seed to plant in it. In addition, without making them any promises, give them the hope that God will provide.

They would also like to enable all the other poor people who have no land – men as well as women – to earn their own living by giving the men some tools for working and the girls and women spinning wheels and flax or linen for spinning – but only the poorest. When peace is restored, everyone will have something to do and, since the soldiers will no longer seize their property, they will be able to put something by and gradually get back on their feet. With that in view, the assembly felt that they should be helped to get started and then told that they must no longer look for any relief from Paris.

So then, my dear Brother, locate those poor persons who are in the greatest need of being aided for the last time.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Letter to Jean Parre, 9 August 1659, in Coste, *CED*, VIII, 72-73; Coste, *CCD*, 8, 82-83. A *pistole* was worth about ten francs. The assembly referred to was that of the Ladies of Charity of the Hôtel-Dieu.

Conclusion

The first part of this article spent some time drawing a picture of the poor, and how it had evolved up until the time of St Vincent. It was a disagreeable portrait, and although sketched in lines of disdain, bias and revulsion, it did have its elements of truth. The poor were not appealing, many were lazy, others were criminals. Did Vincent recognise with whom he was dealing? Did he appreciate the challenge he was presenting to his followers when he exhorted them to see in the poor their Lords and Masters? It would seem that he did, and despite that, or perhaps because of it, he urged them to take up the task. His words express well the Christological foundation for solidarity.

I ought not consider a poor peasant, or a poor woman according to external appearances, nor according to what seems on the surface to be their disposition. Often enough, being so gross and earthy, they have neither the appearance nor the disposition of a reasonable human being. But turn the medal over and by the light of faith you will see that the Son of God, who chose to be poor, is present here in these poor people. During his passion, he seemed to be a fool to the gentiles and a stumbling stone to the Jews, and in all this he called himself the Evangelizer of the poor: *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me*. [“He has sent me to preach the Gospel to the poor”]. O God! May it be good for us to come face to face with the poor, if we see them in God, and in the light of the esteem Jesus Christ had for them. If we regard them according to our bodily feelings and with a worldly spirit, they appear contemptible.⁵⁸

There is one major feature of a social conscience that has received no more than passing reference in this article. A social conscience is alert to the institutions and social structures which support injustice and

⁵⁸ Extract of Conference, Coste, *CED*, XI, 32.

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which provide fertile ground for distorted forms of solidarity. Such forms of solidarity are those that claim to support the afflicted, but in reality support the *status quo*, or some elements thereof. Vives and his followers are an example, and there were many in France at the time of Vincent who shared their view. The manner in which Vincent dealt with this will be looked at in another article.
