

March 15, 2001

The following article was written by Fr Kevin Canty CM for the September 2001 issue of 'Oceania Vincentian' . ('Oceania Vincentian' is a Publication in the Australian Province of the Vincentians):

Vincent and (Contemplative) Prayer

Kevin Canty, CM

It is the year 2000, and an Australian Vincentian, (whom we shall call Harry), reflects upon words of St Vincent de Paul spoken many years before. *"Donnez-moi un homme d'oraison, et il sera capable tout ;...."* *"Give me a man of prayer, and he will be capable of everything; .."*¹ Some 50 years ago Harry first heard those words. Familiar, haunting, challenging words; if not constantly in his thoughts, at least a part of Harry's very being that they can often come to mind. This day Harry recalls them as he reads other more contemporary words.

*"In the coming age we must all become mystics – or be nothing at all."*²

These words also challenge, for they come from someone Harry admires and respects – the great theologian, Karl Rahner. They haunt him as do those other words – *"Donnez-moi un homme d'oraison,"*

Harry, in his early sixties, has been a Vincentian priest for over 35 years. His ministry has been varied and generally fruitful, if not always satisfying or life-giving. Harry acknowledges that there is so much for which he is thankful, but his future is uncertain as he faces a possible change in ministry. Also, disappointments and hurts from the past have come back to haunt him, and he admits to occasional anxiety and fear about the unknown future, where changes, possible illness, and ultimately death await him. More recent plans and enterprises have suffered frustrating setbacks. He is not in charge or in control of what happens in his life, and he feels incapable of doing very much, let alone 'everything'. Fear, sadness and frustration are there as Harry reflects upon the world, the church, his community, his life, and his future. *"Give me a man of prayer;..."* With much in his life that leaves him struggling, he concludes that he is not 'a man of prayer'; and he is tempted to conclude – 'I am nothing at all!

"Donnez-moi un homme d'oraison..."

Vincent's words are provided for us by Abelly as an extract from a Conference. There is more to the 'mantra' that Harry and others have learnt by heart and can readily quote.

*"Donnez-moi un homme d'oraison," "Give me a man of prayer, and he will be capable of everything; he will be able to say with the apostle: 'I can do all things in him who strengthens me and gives me support'. The Congregation of the Mission will continue in existence only as long as mental prayer shall be practiced. Mental prayer is the impregnable rampart which will protect the Missionaries from all sorts of attacks. It is like a mystical arsenal, a tower of David which will be the source of their arms, not only to defend themselves, but to attack and rout all the opponents of the glory of God and the salvation of souls."*³

In the France of his time, Vincent is a significant person among other notable figures. A modern author includes him among the "saints and mystics" of his time.

*"Mainstream Catholicism was well represented by a host of remarkable saints and mystics, including Francis de Sales, Jeanne Françoise de Chantal, Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, and John Eudes. Other, nonmystical, currents were set in motion by the French Oratorians, Cardinal Berulle, Jean-Jacques Olier (the founder of the seminary of St. Sulpice), and Charles de Condren."*⁴

In 17th Century France many were drawn to mysticism, but were cautious, afraid of the mystical. Fear of the excesses of the great mystical movement of previous times led to the popularity of mental prayer, disciplined prayer, where the emphasis would be on method, and one would be warned about putting too much trust on feelings. The effects of Jansenism on the spirituality of this time were also evident. Strong sentiments of human unworthiness, a focus on the supreme holiness of God, and a preoccupation with acquiring religious virtues, especially humility and obedience, were common. These replaced the felt and habitual sense of the presence of God, which had animated the great mystics of previous times.

It is at this time that the term "spirituality" came into prominence, *"a word sufficiently vague and encompassing to capture the widely disparate movements of the age. Safe from the implications of mystical prayer and contemplation, 'spirituality' came to suggest what had been known as 'devotion', a life of methodical prayer and active service distinct both from 'mere' theology or doctrine and also from fanaticism."*⁵

"Mental prayer Is like a mystical arsenal,..."

When Vincent speaks of prayer during conferences, repetitions of prayer, and in his letters, he offers more than just guidelines for methodical prayer and active service. He reveals to us his spiritual way as a way of life, a mystical or contemplative way. He speaks of prayer, of his prayer, as relationship, his relationship with God. He speaks more of prayerfulness than of prayer.

*Mysticism is a "...multifaceted term, which can bear a variety of meanings. In its most important sense, the term refers to the union with God which is seen as the ultimate goal of the Christian life. This union is not to be thought of in rational or intellectual terms, but more in terms of a direct consciousness or experience of God."*⁶

In his words and in his life Vincent certainly reveals to us the importance of his relationship, of his union with God in prayer. How often did he speak of the things of God, not just because he should, but because God had become the centre of his life. Those who knew him well, as Abelly tells us, would speak of his spirit of recollection, and of those occasions at the end of a conference, or in a repetition of prayer, when he so easily and freely turned in prayer to his God.⁷

Contemporary writers often speak of prayer as a personal relationship with God, suggesting that we see prayer not as performance but as encounter.⁸ When we reflect upon Vincent's life, we witness his encounter with God, his encounter with Christ. We notice how his relationship with God affected the way he responded to the challenges that he and his communities faced. Vincent is the contemplative, not just a 'contemplative in action', but the mystic who experiences God, and who responds out of his experience of God's love, desiring and striving to share that love with others.

"The balanced Christian enters into the very real world of which we are a part, seeing the pain and anguish there, and not denying it, but struggling to alleviate it. Yet at the same time and in the same place, we celebrate the life that is there too, see the beauty, accept the love, and constantly hope for the fulfillment of the promise that is present.. Our task is to hold the tension together, denying neither side of it. Put in other words, our Christian call is to rejoice in the constant, mystical presence of God in people, in events, in myself, in the whole of the world; yet at the same time, we speak, in some fashion, a prophetic word to that world where it is not yet fully redeemed."⁹

Vincent's words and example are there to guide and challenge us as we face that call to be mystics and prophets today. Can we then look beyond his reference to "mental prayer" to see and hear him speak of that deeper reality to which "mental prayer" refers. Can we hear him speak, not just of a commitment to time spent in prayer, but of a way of life, an attitude, a spirit, a striving to be attentive to the presence and action of God in our lives. He speaks of being contemplative, of taking our God and our relationship with God seriously, as Thomas Merton would suggest : *"The contemplative is not one who takes his (or her) prayer seriously, but one who takes God seriously,...."*¹⁰

When Vincent urges us to place our trust and confidence in God, being attentive to the workings of God and God's Spirit in our lives, he offers us his own discovery of a God who is trustworthy. He reveals his experience of an ever-deepening relationship with Christ, developed as he discovered who Christ was for him. Within his heart was the experience of unconditional and faithful love in which he placed his confidence, his faith, his hope. United with his God in prayer, he sought to discern what came from God and what came from some other source, and he would urge us also to become discerning people in our lives.

"Prayer is a sermon we preach to ourselves, to convince ourselves of the need we have to turn to God, to cooperate with his grace, to root out vices from our souls, and to replace them with virtues. In mental prayer we must particularly apply ourselves to combating the passion or evil inclination to which we are especially addicted, and we must mortify this tendency, for when we do, the rest is easy. We must fight forcefully, but act calmly, not breaking our head in trying to force anything or to be too subtle. Though we have to lift our minds to God, we must above all listen to him speaking to us, for one single word from him is better than a thousand reasons and all the speculations of our minds. We must from time to time raise our hearts to God, conscious of our nothingness, awaiting his speaking to our heart, uttering a word which leads to eternal life. It is only what God inspires, what comes from him, that is useful for us. What we receive from God we must give to our neighbour after the example of Jesus Christ who, speaking of himself, said: 'I say only what the Father has taught me.'"¹¹

"We must above all listen to (God) speaking to us,.."

Discernment may be for some a method or process for finding God's will among the many alternatives, the choices or decisions that are before us. But discernment is more a way of life, a developing relationship, where I am able to pay prayerful attention to the inner movements of my self, my spirit, as I confront the daily experience of living. Discernment is recognizing and coming to understand what happens when I take myself and God seriously in order to admit the impulses which lead me to God and reject those that would lead me away, so that I can choose more and more particularly to live according to God's will. Discerning people are those, then, who take their experience seriously growing to trust it as the forum in which God communicates; and a precondition for good discernment is a daily, living relationship with God.

"Its overall context is a covenant with God: an alliance by which God and God's people live in mutual love and fidelity. Everyday life poses a continuous succession of choices between two paths, the one leading to fullness of life in the love of God; the other leading in a direction that is ultimately dehumanizing and destructive. Discernment is the capacity in the changing circumstances of daily life to distinguish between these two paths, these two modes of living, and to 'choose life, so that you and your descendents may live in the love of Yahweh your God' (Dt. 30:15-20). Discernment is the capacity to live a fully and truly human life."¹²

To be contemplative, to be a mystic, is facing that call to be a discerning person, as Vincent was a discerning person. Being contemplative means being challenged to look at my attitudes to myself, to my God, and to my world. As Vincent challenges me by saying : " Give me a man of prayer and he will be capable of everything,..", he also encourages me as he says with St Paul : "I can do all things in him who strengthens me and gives me support". (Philip. 4:13)

As I strive to become that "person of prayer", perhaps I can ask myself these questions. What basic assumptions lie beneath my way of relating to God, to myself, and to my world? Do I believe that God acts concretely in our world? Do I believe that God is present in all human experience and that God can be experienced in my heart / mind / imagination / psyche / body? Do I believe that God always takes the initiative in coming to me? Have I experienced God as always giving God's self away in loving self-communication, and do I believe that this communication is always loving and for my good? Do I believe, also, that I can refuse this communication?

"...one single word from (God) is worth more than a thousand reasons..."

An opportunity arose for Harry, our contemporary Vincentian, to make a directed retreat. To reflect upon the story of the two disciples heading off to Emmaus was a welcome text for Harry. But, something unexpected happens, as Harry relates to Clare, his retreat director.

Harry: I wasn't going to mention this. Clare: Mention what? Harry: Well, I guess I'm not sure that it actually happened.

Clare: Something happened you're not sure of? Can you talk about it?

Harry: Well, it was when I was reflecting on the last part of the story – Jesus was about to move on and the other two were urging him to stay with them. It was strange.

Clare: It was strange? What happened?

Harry: Well, what happened seemed a little strange. The two disciples wanted Jesus to stay with them – that is how it is in the scene, in that passage from Luke – but somehow I seemed to hear something different.

Clare: You heard something different?

Harry: What I thought I heard was Jesus saying : 'I want to stay with you!'

Clare: 'I want to stay with you!' To whom was he speaking?

Harry: This is where it seemed strange, and perhaps I imagined it. But, I had a sense that Jesus was speaking to me.

Clare: Jesus was speaking to you, to Harry?

Harry: Well, that's what it felt like.

Clare: Felt like?

Harry: Well it was more than just a thought – I didn't imagine Jesus speaking to me. Somehow that's what seemed to happen. I have never had anything like this happen to me before. It was strange, different from any other time of prayer, and I kind of came to the conclusion that I must have imagined it. That's why I almost didn't mention it. It's a bit weird, isn't it?

Clare: Harry, obviously something happened for you. You said 'it felt like Jesus was speaking those words to you'. If Jesus did say them to you, what was it like hearing him speak that way to you?

Harry: What was it like? Surprising, yet good to hear. I liked hearing them, although I didn't believe he would be saying that to me – that he would want to stay with me...

Clare: That he would want to stay with you? You found that hard to believe, but you liked hearing what he said?

Harry: Well, it wasn't like he was offering me something – you know when we say 'Help me forgive me! – so he assures me of forgiveness, of help when I need it – it wasn't like that.

Clare: It wasn't like that? It was different to that?

Harry: Yes, it was like he was saying - "I would enjoy just being with you". It was like that, you know, just as a friend, someone close to you just enjoys your company, is relaxed and comfortable with you. That's probably why I said it felt like he said those words to

- me.
- Clare: Harry, what was it like having Jesus say it that way – just like a friend would say ‘I like being with you’?
- Harry: It was kind of like .. ‘Wow!’ Surprising But it was good, even though I found it hard to hear him say that. You know, as I talk about it now, I’m just realising how different Jesus was in that prayer. That’s not how I have seen him for most of my life.

"I can do all things in him who strengthens me....."

To be discerning people we need to be attentive to the movements that lead us to God or take us away from God. As God appeared to Moses in a flame blazing from the middle of a bush, God also takes the initiative in my life, just as Jesus seemed to be there for Harry in a new, surprising way. Moses reflects, appeals to tradition, for it is not usual for a bush to burn and yet not be consumed. Harry also reflects, for this encounter with Jesus surprised him. This is different. Moses removes his sandals because where he stands, is holy ground, a place of mystery. Harry also becomes aware that he, too, stands within a place of mystery. He is invited to look at what is happening within him, to see how he feels when Jesus says, "I want to be with you".

Hearing Vincent’s words as a call to be contemplative, to be discerning people who take ourselves and our God seriously, can we, like Harry, face the possibility of a new experience, perhaps a discovery that our image, our experience of ourselves and of our God could be different? As Thomas Merton would suggest : *"the only cure for the angst of modern man is mysticism."*¹³ Can we then accept the possibility for Harry and for ourselves of a developing and deepening relationship with our God that will enable us to hold in balance what our life and the lives of others provide – what we rejoice in and joyfully celebrate as well as what we struggle with and painfully endure? Can we be open to the mystical presence of God in ourselves, in people, in the events of life, and in our world? Can we then face what life brings, enduring what confronts us, letting go of what deserts us, and living peacefully with what remains unanswered, because the one who journeys with us helps us to live with the struggle, the tension and the questions? Like Vincent in his time, we might then speak a prophetic word to our world, because of our union with ‘him who strengthens me and gives me support’.

To be contemplative, to be persons of prayer, is our call as Christians, as Vincentians. Contemplation is the indispensable, touchstone experience of discernment. Without it, there is only decision-making, or going, acting on our feelings. With it, we have the experience of fundamental truth in relationship with God, and it is to this relationship that we can return over and over again with our doubts, our questions, our struggles, our decisions. Striving to become a discerning person each day will enable us to say with St Paul and St Vincent : "I can do all things in him who strengthens me and gives me support."

- 1 *St Vincent de Paul: Conférences, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, CM, 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926) Extrait D'Entretien – 67, Abelly, Vie du venerable serviteur de Dieu, Vincent de Paul, L. III, chap. VII, p. 56.
- 2 Karl Rahner : [As quoted in *Why Not Be a Mystic?*, Frank X. Tuoti (Crossroad, NY, 1996 (Cover)] *Christian Living Formerly and Today : Theological Investigations VII : Further Theology of the Spiritual Life I* (New York, Crossroad, 1977) page 15. "The devout Christian of the future will either be a 'mystic', one who has 'experienced' something, or he will cease to be anything at all."
- 3 Louis Abelly : *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*. Book Three. Translated and edited from the Pemartin edition of 1891 by Edward R. Udovic, CM. New City Press, New Rochelle, NY, 1993. Chapter VII, pages 62-63.
- 4 Richard Woods : *Christian Spirituality : God's Presence Through The Ages*. Christian Classics (a division of Thomas More Publishing), Allen Texas, 1996. Page 294.
- 5 Richard Woods : *Christian Spirituality : God's Presence Through the Ages*. op. cit, page 295

- 6 Alister E. McGrath : *Christian Spirituality*. Blackwell Publishers, Malden, Mass. 1999. page 187.
- 7 Louis Abelly : *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*: Book Three (New City Press, New Rochelle, New York, 1993) chapter six : 'His Constant Attention to the Presence of God', pages 56 – 58.
- 8 For example, William Barry, SJ : *God and You* : Prayer as Personal Relationship. Mahwah, NJ. Paulist Press, 1987. William Barry SJ : *Seek My Face*: Prayer as a Personal Relationship in Scripture. Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press, 1989.
- 9 Katherine Marie Dyckman, SNJM, L. Patrick Carroll, SJ : *Inviting the Mystic Supporting the Prophet* : An Introduction to Spiritual Direction. Paulist Press, New York / Ramsey, 1981. pages 78-79.
- 10 Thomas Merton : *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*. Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota. 1960. page 33. "A contemplative is not one who takes his prayer seriously, but one who takes God seriously, who is famished for truth, who seeks to live in generous simplicity, in the spirit."
- 11 Louis Abelly : *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*. Book Three op cit. pages 63-64.
- 12 David Lonsdale, SJ : *Listening to the Music of the Spirit* : The Art of Discernment. Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana. 1992. pages 50-51.
- 13 Thomas Merton. As quoted in *Why Not Be a Mystic?* : Frank X. Tuoti. Crossroad : New York, 1995. page 32.
