# The Value of Mercy According to Vincent de Paul

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## Introduction

*When we go to visit poor persons, we have to sympathize with them in order to suffer with them, and put ourselves in the dispositions of that great Apostle, who said, omnibus omnia factus sum; I have made myself all to all, so that the complaint Our Lord formerly made through one of the prophets, sustinui qui simul mecum contrisaretur, et non fuit, doesn’t fall on us: “I waited to see if anyone would sympathize with me in my sufferings, and there was none.” For that purpose, we have to try to stir our hearts to pity and make them sensitive to the sufferings and miseries of our neighbor, and ask God to give us the true spirit of mercy, which is the characteristic spirit of God; for, as the Church states, it is the distinctive feature of God to be merciful and to impart His Spirit. So let us ask God, my dear confreres, to give us this spirit of compassion and mercy, to fill us with it, and to preserve it in us so that whoever sees a Missioner can say, “There is a man full of mercy.” Let us reflect a little on how much we need mercy, since we have to practice it toward others and bring it all sorts of places, and to suffer everything for its sake* (CCD:XI:308).

Vincent spoke those words during the conference of August 6, 1656, which dealt with the theme of the spirit of compassion and mercy. During that conference Vincent reminded the Missionaries from Poland about the necessity for this virtue and also spoke about the way to practice said virtue.

Basing myself on this text, I will attempt to present the manner in which Vincent, as a person and in his ministry, practiced this virtue.

The words **mercy, compassion and charity** have much in common and are often used as synonyms for one another. We could differentiate these words but in the end we would find ourselves with very imprecise lines of distinction.

The descriptive definition that Father Celestino Fernández provides us with in his study of “*Los Pobres”* (the poor) in the *Diccionario de espiritualidad vicenciana,* (Dictionary of Vincentian Spirituality), clarifies the concept of *mercy: in its most profound and authentic and etymological sense mercy means that one’s heart takes the side of misery.*

We are not dealing with a mere feeling of compassion which could very easily be some form of sentimentality. We are also not referring to the so-called “works of mercy” because these do not get to the root causes of suffering and poverty. In fact very often the works of mercy involve providing relief for individual needs. Finally, we are not referring to anything that would even hint at a paternalistic attitude, which very often veils the injustices of our society.

## We are doing an act of justice and not of mercy

From the beginning Vincent stated that there was no lack of charitable people … what was needed was some form of organization for charitable activity. Charity was not meant to be a substitute for justice but rather was meant to cry out for justice. In the March 8th, 1658 letter that was written to the superior in Marseilles, Vincent wrote: *God will grant you the grace, Monsieur, of softening our hearts toward the wretched creatures and of realizing that in helping them we are doing an act of justice and not of mercy* (CCD:VII:115).

Vincent did not invent mercy or compassion or charity … rather he incarnated in himself the mercy, the compassion and the charity of Christ and practiced these in his everyday life.

The theology of Christ could be summed up with the following words: *I desire mercy, not sacrifice* (Matthew 9:13). Usually as human persons we want sacrifice; we prefer rites that palpitate but God asks for mercy … mercy is something interior and flows from the heart. God does not want material sacrifices but rather desires a love that is willing to struggle on behalf of justice and that never excuses itself with the words: *this is not my concern!*

It would be good to pause and to reflect on the image of the father in the parable of the prodigal son so that we can discoverer the very essence of mercy in the father’s attitude.

Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Dives In Misericordia,* states: *There is no doubt that in this simple but penetrating analogy the figure of the father reveals to us God as Father. The conduct of the father in the parable and his whole behavior, which manifests his internal attitude, enables us to rediscover the individual threads of the Old Testament vision of mercy in a synthesis which is totally new, full of simplicity and depth. The father of the prodigal son is faithful to his fatherhood, faithful to the love that he had always lavished on his son* (John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia,* #6).

Therefore, *while he* [the prodigal son] *was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him* (Luke 15:20),

## The obligations of justice have priority over those of charity

In our time, we refer to charity as something that must be promoted and encouraged and developed. We struggle for justice so that charity will be not necessary. Vincent expressed this same idea when he stated: *The obligations of justice have priority over those of charity* (CCD:VII:633).

Thus we can see that Vincent understood charity not as some vague feeling but rather he saw charity as that which motivated him to love another and motivated him to be concerned about helping others. Compassion allows us to approach another but in doing this we do not make ourselves equal to others but rather want to remove the others (our brothers and sisters) from the situation in which they find themselves … we want to free them from their problems. We extend a hand to them and fill them with hope and with the awareness that they are not alone. Those whose hearts are filled with compassion can never say to another: *I will not help you!* Compassionate men and women will reach out to others and will provide for those who are unable to provide for themselves.

John Paul II, in the previously cited encyclical, affirms: *Especially through His lifestyle and through His actions, Jesus revealed that love is present in the world in which we live - an effective love, a love that addresses itself to man and embraces everything that makes up his humanity. This love makes itself particularly noticed in contact with suffering, injustice and poverty - in contact with the whole historical "human condition," which in various ways manifests man's limitation and frailty, both physical and moral. It is precisely the mode and sphere in which love manifests itself that in biblical language is called "mercy."* (John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia,* #3).

In Vincent’s charitable activity we see that more than anything else mercy shines forth … this mercy is palpable in his dealings with others. Where there is great suffering and pain and need Vincent’s mercy becomes more obvious. While others spoke about the poor in theory, Vincent reached out to and encountered the poor in a direct way.

Here we are dealing with an intelligent and critical charity. Therefore, when Vincent spoke to the Missionaries, we notice his concern for justice and charity and good example. *We must be firm but not rough in our guidance and avoid an insipid kind of meekness, which is ineffective* (CCD:IV:571)

There was to be no distinction with regard to the religion that one practiced. People are as they are and not because they are Catholic or Protestant. Therefore justice does not depend on one’s beliefs and/or religion. Vincent stated: *there is a great difference between being a Catholic and being an upright [just] man* (CCD:II:494). *Vincent, in his charitable activity, made no distinction between Catholic and Protestant; both groups of people were the beneficiaries of alms giving. On more than one occasion Vincent told the Missionaries to act in the same way when providing assistance to those who lived in the Provinces that had been devastated by war[[1]](#footnote-1).*

Mercy, according to God’s desires, has no limits and in fact, if it is like God’s mercy, it embraces everyone. Therefore, *it is the distinctive duty of priests to procure mercy and to be merciful to criminals … it is not your intention to defend crime but rather to practice mercy* (CCD:VII:443).

In this regard *Dives In Misericordia* states: *we must note that Christ, in revealing the love - mercy of God, at the same time demanded from people that they also should be guided in their lives by love and mercy. This requirement forms part of the very essence of the messianic message, and constitutes the heart of the Gospel ethos* (John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia,* #3).

It would be interesting to review anew the fourth paragraph of this encyclical of John Paul II as he explains with great detail the content of the word “mercy” as it appears in the Old Testament. Mercy is always divine and is always extended to human beings.

Here we highlight certain ideas: *The concept of "mercy" in the Old Testament has a long and rich history. We have to refer back to it in order that the mercy revealed by Christ may shine forth more clearly … It is significant that in their preaching the prophets link mercy, which they often refer to because of the people's sins, with the incisive image of love on God's part. The Lord loves Israel with the love of a special choosing, much like the love of a spouse, and for this reason He pardons its sins and even its infidelities and betrayals … Both physical evil and moral evil, namely sin, cause the sons and daughters of Israel to turn to the Lord and beseech His mercy … The Lord Himself triumphed over this act of breaking the covenant when He solemnly declared to Moses that He was a "God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" … "you hold nothing of what you have made in abhorrence.” These words indicate the profound basis of the relationship between justice and mercy in God, in His relations with man and the world. They tell us that we must seek the life-giving roots and intimate reasons for this relationship by going back to "the beginning," in the very mystery of creation. They foreshadow in the context of the Old Covenant the full revelation of God, who is "love”* (John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia,* #4).

Vincent understood that Christ identified himself with the poor. He had read the twenty-fifth chapter of Saint Matthew’s gospel; he had meditated on it and had internalized its content. If he wanted to follow Christ, then he had to do what Christ did … he had to serve the poor. *And if we ask Our Lord, “What did you come to do on earth?” “To assist the poor.” “Anything else?” “To assist the poor.”* (CCD:XI:98).

John Paul II clarifies his thinking about those who are poor: *It is very significant that the people in question are especially the poor, those without means of subsistence, those deprived of their freedom, the blind who cannot see the beauty of creation, those living with broken hearts, or suffering from social injustice, and finally sinners. It is especially for these last that the Messiah becomes a particularly clear sign of God who is love, a sign of the Father. In this visible sign the people of our own time, just like the people then, can see the Father* (John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia,* #3).

## I worry about our Company, but to tell you the truth, not so much as I do about the poor

To maintain some theory in this regard would mean that one was compassionate without being committed. Sentimentality has no value unless is leads one to action. Vincent took this matter seriously and so he did not remain on the level of contemplation but moved into action. He realized that the language that is best understood by the heart is the language of action. *I worry about our Company, but to tell you the truth, not so much as I do about the poor. If we need to, we could ask for help from our other houses and appeal to the vicar in the parishes. But where can the poor turn? Where can they go? This is my worry and my sorrow* (Abelly III:117).

Vincent had seen much suffering and ignorance and poverty … in his conscience he carried one poor person after another, so much so that the poor not only weighed upon him but also caused him to suffer. For Vincent the poor were a reality and not some figment of his imagination. They were persons and not garbage that had to be removed from the city in order to beautify these places and therefore not offend the sight of the powerful.

All that Vincent discovered made him more concerned because anything that dealt with suffering touched his heart and led him to act with mercy.

But Vincent acted in a realistic manner. Vincent wrote to Jean Parre (who was working with those in need) and told him: *You are also asked to help the poor people to be able to earn their living in this season by supplying them with implements to gather in the harvest* (CCD:VIII:27).

Later, Vincent stated: *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 … As I told you, they have almost nothing definite so far but will make some effort as soon as you tell us approximately how much will be absolutely necessary for these three things: seeds, implements, and repairs* (CCD:VIII:82-83).

A large stained glass window surrounds the tabernacle in the chapel of the community in Cartagena. A flame arises over the tabernacle. On one side, in another window, Vincent is holding a child in his right arm and is supporting an infirm person with his left arm. The heart (in red) in the center of the cross, which passes over Vincent’s chest, receives all the heat and warmth of the flame which arises from the tabernacle. The whole scene is surrounded by and engulfed by these flames.

The place seems to dazzle. The image cries out in the powerful words of the one who was attempting, through his charity, to provide for all the needs that he encountered during his journey.

Monsieur Vincent, through his awareness of his true mission in this world, had become the Good Samaritan. It would be irreverent, however, to speak of Saint Vincent as the Good Samaritan and then to forget Saint Luke who has presented us with one of the unforgettable gospel stories. Who cannot identify with the compassion that is revealed by the Samaritan, who has received the name “Good” … his mercy is the same as that of the father of the two sons (the one who left home and the one who remained with the father) … a matter that was previously discussed. Here, the compassion of the Samaritan was stirred when he saw the man who had been beaten and robbed lying on side of the road.

Vincent shared that same mercy and was moved by all those men and women in need who presented themselves before his eyes. All that he encountered made him more concerned because everything that has to do with suffering had a profound effect on him. *Mercy - as Christ has presented it in the parable of the prodigal son - has the interior form of the love that in the New Testament is called agape. This love is able to reach down to every prodigal son, to every human misery, and above all to every form of moral misery, to sin. When this happens, the person who is the object of mercy does not feel humiliated, but rather found again and "restored to value"* (John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia,* #6).

For Vincent it was the infirm family in Folleville that led him to search for a way to organize the charity of the people and thus, gave birth to the Confraternities. Then it will be the poor people in the countryside who will lay claim to Vincent to provide for their spiritual and their material needs. Vincent attempted to resolve the situation of these poor men and women through the popular mission and the formation of the clergy. Later, Vincent found in his path the galley slaves, the children who are abandoned, the mentally challenged and he involved the members of the Confraternities, the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission in caring for the those various men and women who were poor.

## If we abandon the poor, who will take care of them

The question of the mission must be viewed from the perspective of the mission of the Son of God who came into the midst of this world in order to evangelize the poor. Integral evangelization means that one is totally dedicated to the poor. In the December 6th, 1658 conference on the purpose of the Congregation, Vincent told the Missionaries: *If priests devote themselves to the care of the poor, wasn’t that what Our Lord and many great saints did, and they not only recommended poor persons to others, but they themselves consoled, comforted, and healed them? Aren’t those who are poor the afflicted members of Our Lord? Aren’t they our brothers and sisters? And if priests abandon them, who do you think is going to help them? So then, if there are any among us who think they’re in the Mission to evangelize poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us and by others, if we want to hear those pleasing words of the Sovereign Judge of the living and the dead, “Come, beloved of my Father; possess the kingdom that has been prepared for you, because I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was naked and you clothed me; sick and you assisted me.” To do this is to preach the Gospel by words and by works, and that is the most perfect way; it is also what Our Lord did, and what those should do who represent Him on earth, officially and by nature, as priests do* (CCD:XII:77-78).

Vincent was insistent on this idea and on February 6, 1660, a few months before his death he wrote to one of his Missionaries, Jacques de la Fosse, and stated: *Our Little Company has given itself to God from the beginning to serve the poor corporally and spiritually; consequently, at the same time it has worked for the salvation of the poor through missions, it has also established a means of solacing the sick through the Confraternities of Charity* (CCD:VIII:277)

This is a reality that is very relevant to the present time … mercy is proper to the Church of every era. Father Pablo Domínguez, in an unpublished work entitled, *The New Evangelization in Europe,* states: *The church convokes and proclaims when its hands, like those of Jesus, are available for service and therefore willing to touch the lepers and wash the feet of the disciples; the church also convokes and proclaims when it reveals, in an understandable manner, the mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ, thus breaking preconceived and distorted images of the Christian faith.*

Vincent, after deepening his understanding of the person of Jesus and his activity, set out on a true following of Jesus. According to Father Pedro Opeka, a faithful follower of Saint Vincent, this Jesus *is a humble man, close to his friends, one who forgives seventy times seven and who is filled with love, compassion and mercy; one who lifts people up and fills them with joy and peace. Jesus always walks with people, calls people to respond and never ceases to do this. Jesus gives people strength and courage so that they are not afraid of anyone or anything … Jesus did not hesitate to appear “ridiculous” and die on a cross for all people. Jesus gifts us with the Holy Spirit and sends us forth as “fishers of men and women” … Jesus makes present the Kingdom of God.*

Father José Ignacio Fernández de Mendoza affirms: *This Christ, who is near to us, can be imitated. It is possible to clothe ourselves anew in his sentiments and to do and to continue to do what Jesus did. How great are the poor! The Son of God came in person into this world in order to evangelize the poor. The poor are a theological focus because they reveal Christ to us[[2]](#footnote-2).*

As always, so also during Vincent’s lifetime there were different opinions with regard to the poor. According to Henry Kamen *there were two very distinct visions of the poor that were held by Christians of the seventeenth century. One of these flowed from an ancient humanist and Christian line of thought that affirmed the fact that the poor deserved to be treated well by society because it was society that treated them badly. Another vision, sustained by some Catholics, bur primarily held by Protestants, affirmed that the poor deserved punishment because their lack of ability had placed them in their present situation[[3]](#footnote-3).*

Vincent shared this first opinion and reflected this in his writings: *Quoi! To be a Christian and to see our brothers [or sisters] suffering without weeping with them, without being with them! That is to be lacking in charity; it is being a caricature of a Christian; it is inhuman; it is to be worse than animals* (CCD:XII:222).

He had learned the lesson very well: *Whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me* (Matthew 25:40). Thus charity is the most significant language in the process of evangelizing those who are poor. In fact, those who reflect on the life of Saint Vincent often reflect on his charity. There is no doubt that from the time that Vincent was in Châtillon he not only was effective in his practice of charity but became a great organizer of charitable activity.

Vincent’s fundamental intention was to give food to the hungry because this was an urgent need but even more importantly Vincent wanted to promote the dignity of the poor. Vincent was not indifferent to anyone who was hungry and in fact, was angered by the multitude of hungry people who were living on the streets.

Vincent felt it was necessary to know the reality of the poor, to experience their physical condition and to understand their situation as human beings. In light of such an experience Vincentian ministry ought to be focused on changing the life of those persons who are excluded from participation in society and ought to affirm their dignity as human beings.

Vincent did not accept, nor could he have accepted, the situation of the poor with an attitude of resignation and/or fatalism. Rather, when confronted with the practice of an inauthentic charity Vincent defended the dignity and the freedom of those men and women who were poor.

At the same time Vincent did not focus on just one form of poverty or one class of poor people, rather he reached out to all those in need and, in those places where he and the Missionaries were unable to minister, the Daughters of Charity and the Ladies of Charity served the poor. *I worry about our Company, but to tell you the truth, not so much as I do about the poor. If we need to, we could ask for help from our other houses and appeal to the vicar in the parishes. But where can the poor turn? Where can they go? This is my worry and my sorrow* (Abelly III:117).

Father Vicente de Dios states: *Vincent never criticized those who were poor but always saw them as victims and therefore not responsible for their misery. He did, however, see them as people who provided for those who lived and ate well[[4]](#footnote-4).*

## Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy

Because the situation of the poor weighed upon Pope John Paul II, he spoke about Vincent de Paul as a merciful man in his homily of September 27, 1987 and did this from the perspective of the beatitudes. *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy* (Matthew 5:7). *Today we are gathered in this square, in front of the Basilica that stands over the tomb of the Apostle Peter, in order to remember* a man who, in an extraordinary way, practiced this beatitude in his own life and ministry: *St. Vincent de Paul!* (John Paul II, September 27, 1987).

Vincent was a practical man and did not allow himself to be deceived by appearances. On April 26, 1651 he wrote to Marc Coglée, the superior in Sedan and spoke about the poor and the infirm: *In fact, as soon as anyone is strong enough to work, tools of his trade are bought for him and nothing more is given to him. Accordingly, the alms are not for those able to work on the fortifications or to do something else, but for seriously ill sick persons, orphans, or the elderly* (CCD:IV:188).

Thus Vincent promoted the poor and helped these individual become aware of their dignity and also aware of the fact that they must be the primary agents of their own development.

The Second Vatican Council made this same idea very clear in the Decree on the Laity: *It is imperative that the demands of justice be satisfied lest the giving of what is due in justice be represented as the offering of a charitable gift. Not only the effects but also the causes of these ills must be removed and the help be given in such a way that the recipients may gradually be freed from dependence on outsiders and become self-sufficient* *(Apostolicam Actuositatem,* #8).

Mercy acquires its greatest expression in the Incarnation of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who is not a spirit, but a man of flesh and blood who ate and drank. *Christ proclaims by His actions even more than by His words that call to mercy which is one of the essential elements of the Gospel ethos* (John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia,* #3).

We see then that Jesus Christ was the center of attention for Vincent de Paul, but since the whole mystery of Christ could not be fully understood Vincent focused that which most impressed him, namely, the Word of God who became man … Jesus’ humanity … Jesus moving from village to village, Jesus the missionary who draws near to and affirms those who are poor and infirm.

These poor and infirm men and women are the individuals that “good” society has marginalized and yet in the gospel of Saint Matthew, it is precisely these people with whom Jesus identifies.

These are the poor person whom we must serve because, as Vincent stated, they are *our lords and masters.* Therefore, *let’s devote ourselves with renewed love to serve persons who are poor, and even to seek out those who are the poorest and most abandoned; let’s acknowledge before God that they are our lords and masters and that we are unworthy of rendering them our little services* (CCD:XI:349).

## Leaving God for God

Our first obligation is to serve those who are poor. At one time Vincent reflected on a possible situation that the Sisters might have to confront and in words that might appear to be lacking in piety he told them: *If the good pleasure of God were that you should go on a Sunday to nurse a sick person instead of going to Mass, even though that’s a matter of obligation, you should do it. That’s called leaving God for God* (CCD:X:76).

After listening to Vincent there can be little doubt about what we, as members of the Vincentian Family, must do and how we must act. The wisdom of our Founder ought to lead us to a spirituality in which our activity on behalf of the poor is converted into affective love and above all else, converts our activity into effective love. *Let us love God, brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows; for very often many acts of love of God, of devotion and other similar affections and interior practices of a tender heart, although very good and desirable, are, nevertheless, very suspect if they do not translate into the practice of effective love. “By this,” says our Lord, “is my Father glorified, that you may bear much fruit.” We have to be very careful about that; for there are many who, recollected exteriorly, and filled with lofty sentiments of God interiorly, stop at that, and when it comes to the point of doing something, and they have the opportunity to act, they come up short … No, No, let us not fool ourselves: totum opus nostrum in operatione consistit [All our work consists in action]* (CCD:XI:32-33)

In these words we discover that as we serve the poor we cannot maintain some theoretical, lofty and spiritual concept with regard to the situation in which the poor are found. Rather Vincent himself leads us into action. *Let’s devote ourselves with renewed love to serve persons who are poor, and even to seek out those who are the poorest and most abandoned* (CCD:XI:349).

Through his contact with men and women who were poor Vincent’s faith and experience took on ever greater significance and inspired him to establish three distinct institutions: the Confraternities of Charity (today known as the AIC), the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

We should understand that the religious communities were established in order to make a prophetic contribution to the Church. In a specific era they denounced injustice and wanted to change those situations that were contrary to the gospel. As time passed, these groups lost their initial fervor (the book of Revelation refers to this when speaking about the church in Ephesus) and they established rigid structures and erected protective walls … this was followed by fear of risk and fear with regard to the future. This occurred at a later era but in the beginning this was not the reality.

The Vincent de Paul, who was committed to charity and the mission, was born anew in 1617. Nevertheless, the mission and charitable activity needed to be organized. This organization would take place during 1617, 1625 and 1633 when the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity were established.

In 1617, a providential coincidence touched Vincent’s heart and moved the parishioners in Châtillon to provide for the sick family that had no resources. Vincent immediately realized that this display of charity, while good and praiseworthy, was too much at one time. This charity had to be prolonged over time and yet he wanted to be careful not to dampen the first fervor of these people.

On August 23rd, 1617 Vincent, gathered together a group of pious women from the village and encouraged them to create an association that would assist the sick-poor. Thus the Confraternities of Charity were born.

Father José María Román states: *It was thanks to the charities that the church could be mother of the destitute. At a time when women were regarded as nothing more than men’s servants or, worse still, as instruments of the devil, Vincent de Paul gave them pride of place in the noblest work of the Church, the proclamation of charity*[[5]](#footnote-5)*.*

## Their life and death are in your hands

Later it would be the members of the Confraternities who, together with the Daughters of Charity, would care for the children who were abandoned. *Well then, Ladies, compassion and charity have led you to adopt these little creatures as your own children; you have been their mothers according to grace since the time their mothers according to nature abandoned them. See now whether you, too, want to abandon them. Stop being their mothers to be their judges at present; their life and death are in your hands. I am going to take the vote; it is time to pass sentence on them and to find out whether you are no longer willing to have pity on them. If you continue to take charitable care of them, they will live; it, on the contrary, you abandon them, they will most certainly perish and die* (CCD:XIIIb:423-424). This dramatic scene is portrayed very effectively in Jean Anouilh’s film on the life of Vincent de Paul.

The year 1617 witnessed the effective establishment of another of Vincent’s institutions which occurred after the confession of the peasant who lived in Gannes. Here we refer to the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission. If everything began at Châtillon, the experience in Folleville was equally fruitful. The situation of the dying elderly man led Vincent to preach to those poor men and women about the need to make a general confession. The people were touched by Vincent’s words and all of them presented themselves for confession. Vincent, in addition to his words, felt a burning compassion for those sisters and brothers who were abandoned. *That took place in the month of January 1617, and on the twenty-fifth, the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, that lady asked me to preach a sermon in the church of Folleville to urge the people to make a general confession, which I did, pointing out to them its importance and usefulness. Then I taught them how to make it properly … that was the first sermon of the Mission* (CCD:XI:4). That day, January 25th, 1617 is considered to be the day on which the Congregation of the Mission was born.

Charity on behalf of the poor, when carried out by those who view themselves as servants, makes those who are the beneficiaries of such charitable action “lords and masters”. Vincent told the Missionaries: *Let’s devote ourselves with renewed love to serve persons who are poor, and even to seek out those who are the poorest and most abandoned; let’s acknowledge before God that they are our lords and masters and that we are unworthy of rendering them our little services* (CCD:XI:349).

These are the elements that were seen in the distinct works of Vincent de Paul … and all of these elements are in function of service on behalf of the poor. This was communicated to Mother Chantal in a letter that is dated 1639: *And because you wish to know what constitutes our humble way of life, I shall tell you then, most worthy Mother, that our Little Company is established to go from village to village at its own expense, preaching, catechizing, and having the poor people make general confessions of their entire past life. We try to settle the disagreements we find among them and do all we can to see that the sick poor are assisted corporally and spiritually by the Confraternity of Charity, composed of women, which we set up in places where we give the mission and which desire it* (CCD:I:553)

With the outbreak of war it became difficult to minister to the people in the rural areas. Nevertheless, Vincent saw that the people who were seeking refuge in the city had to be cared for. Writing to Lambert Aux Couteaux in June 1652, Vincent stated: *We are unable to go and give missions in the rural areas because the poor people are so scattered --- some here, some there, driven from their homes by fear of being mistreated by the soldiers --- so we have decided to give them to the people who have taken refuge in Paris. We began today in our own church, with eight hundred of those poor persons living in these faubourgs, and we will go to the others next. One of our men has also gone to open the mission for the refugees at Saint-Nicholas-du-Chardonnet* (CCD:IV:398-399).

We are in the year 1633. Some years before Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul had begun to work together. Both of them, filled with compassion, would continue to work together for many years on behalf of the poor.

## She became the servant of the most abandoned

After a period of initial enthusiasm, some of the Ladies of Charity (not accustomed to difficult service or work) began to delegate their responsibility to care for the poor to their servants. Vincent did not like this idea because he wanted whole-hearted dedication. Providence responded to this desire: *Then a simple young woman from the country, named Marguerite Naseau (1594-1633), presented herself to perform the menial tasks which the ladies of the confraternities were unable to assume. Inspired by true evangelical love, she because the servant of the most abandoned* (Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity, P.18).

During that same year, 1633, several young women under the tutelage of Louise de Marillac, came together to form a community. Thus, the Company of the Daughters of Charity was born … a group of women who had experienced God’s call to serve the poor. This is exactly what Vincent desired. Indeed, Vincent justified this establishment when he stated: *But because the ladies who make up the Confraternity belong, for the most part, to a social class that does not allow them to perform the most menial and abject services proper to the work of this Confraternity, such as carrying the soup pot through the city, doing the bleedings, preparing and giving enemas, dressing wounds, making beds and watching at night over the sick who are alone and near death, they have taken some good country girls to whom God has given the desire to assist the sick poor, who attend to all these little services, after having been trained for this purpose by a virtuous widow … and what is still more noteworthy in the work of these poor girls is that, besides the corporal services they render to the sick poor, they try to contribute to their spiritual welfare* (CCD:II:600, 602).

As we know, these young women were very clear about what they wanted and what they had to do in order to be faithful to their vocation. They told Vincent that to provide for a person who was not in need of their service was not an act of mercy. Vincent was surprised by the responses of these Sisters but he accepted their words because he realized that they were manifesting their desire to remain faithful to their vocation. *Yesterday, because I was being hard pressed by Madame de Combalet to send her the Sister, and since it was for her, I spoke to Marie Denyse about it. She seemed to me better suited for the situation, but she gave me an answer worthy of a girl with a vocation from God to the Charity, which was that she had left her father and mother to give herself to the service of the poor for the love of God, and she begged me to excuse her if she could not change her intention in order to go and serve that great lady* (CCD:I:322).

From 1632, when Vincent was established in Saint-Lazare, his charitable activity began to expand and he confronted new needs. Indeed, with the establishment of the Daughters of Charity the Sisters were able to respond to all the needs that were presented to them.

Yes, this included every form of mercy: abandoned children, the galley slaves, beggars … poverty had thousands of faces. It was typical of Vincent that he was able to recognize the many different forms of poverty and thus denied assistance to no one.

Vincent was equally concerned about looking for ways to reform the clergy. From the time that Madame de Gondi alerted him about the ignorance of the clergy, he felt a heavy weight upon his shoulders because he believed that *the people were a reflection of their priest.* In the repetition of prayer, January 25th, 1655, on the origins of the Congregation, Vincent reminded the Missionaries: *Now the fact is that, one day, when the late Lady went to make her confession to her Pastor, she noted that he did not give her absolution; he mumbled something between his teeth and did the same at other times when she went to confession to him … when she told me this, I was on the alert and paid special attention to the priests to whom I made my confession* (CCD:XI:163)

First came the retreats for the ordinands (September 17, 1628) and Vincent considered these men as *the richest and most precious deposit the Church could place in our hands.[[6]](#footnote-6)* Finally, this concern for the clergy took on a new form when in 1635 Vincent played an influential role in the establishment of seminaries.

The galley slaves were for Vincent another of the countless groups of poor people who had to be cared for. Indeed, no group of poor people could be excluded from the outreach of Christian charity. Therefore, Vincent entrusted these individuals to the Missionaries and saw to it that the galley slaves were provided for.

Vincent exhorted the Daughters of Charity to serve these prisoners because he had seen them treated like animals. Thus, Vincent’s words clothe this horrible situation with a cloak of humanity … these individuals take on concrete form and have concrete faces, faces of suffering and pain: *Vincent was just as concerned with the spiritual welfare of the galley slaves as he was with their material welfare. He visited the galleys and showed great zeal in preaching missionary style to these people who were as distanced from God as they were abandoned by men. His success was beyond all expectations[[7]](#footnote-7).*

Again we recall the fact that mercy was the motivating factor behind all of Vincent de Paul’s charitable activity. He clothed himself in the spirit of Jesus Christ and thus revealed the spirit of Jesus Christ in everything that he did. Therefore Vincent’s ministry revealed what the Son of God did in the name of the Father in order to reveal the Father … the Father is a good Father, filled with mercy, one who is profoundly moved by all his children.

Vincent de Paul, because of his children, the poor, was able to do anything. He was able to confront even the most powerful … and was able to do this regardless of the consequences.

Those who approach Saint Vincent, even if in a superficial manner, will find themselves confronted with many bold actions and prophetic denunciations as well as with a commitment on behalf of justice and actions and words … all of which were intended to prevent (with all the means at his disposal) society from continuing to create more poor people. Because of its boldness, we highlight here first, Vincent’s meeting with the Prime Minister, Richelieu, during which Vincent asked him to stop the war. Here we also mention his public and radical opposition to the exploitive policies of Cardinal Mazarin: *Cast yourself into the sea and the tempest will be calmed[[8]](#footnote-8)* … this resulted in Vincent’s exile.

## The genuine face of mercy has to be ever revealed anew

In light of everything that we have said we can affirm that Saint Vincent continues to be relevant at the present time. Pope John Paul II stated: *The genuine face of mercy has to be ever revealed anew. In spite of many prejudices, mercy seems particularly necessary for our times* (John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia,* #6).

With regard to Vincent’s relevance, the following text seems to echo the words that have been placed before us for our reflection. On December 7, 1965, when Pope Paul VI closed the Second Vatican Council, he said: *Consequently, if we remember, venerable brothers and all of you, our children, gathered here, how in everyone we can and must recognize the countenance of Christ (cf. Matthew 25:40), the Son of Man, especially when tears and sorrows make it plain to see, and if we can and must recognize in Christ's countenance the countenance of our heavenly Father "He who sees me," Our Lord said, "sees also the Father" (John 14:9), our humanism becomes Christianity, our Christianity becomes centered on God; in such sort that we may say, to put it differently: A knowledge of man is a prerequisite for a knowledge of God* (Final Address of Paul VI at Vatican II, December 7, 1965)*.*

These words of Pope Paul VI are a restatement of the thinking of our Founder. It is as though Saint Vincent had been present at the Council or perhaps had inspired the Council. Vincent’s attitude toward the poor was grounded on the same text from the twenty-fifth chapter of Saint Matthew’s gospel. Vincent saw the face of Christ in the face of the poor and he treated the poor in the same way that he would treat Christ.

Vincent, filled with mercy, would say that the poor are *men and women who are created in the image of God … our brothers and sisters … suffering members of the body of Christ … the primary beneficiaries of the gospel and the Kingdom of God … incarnational representatives of Jesus Christ … our intercessors in heaven … our lords and masters[[9]](#footnote-9).*

We add to these ideas those of Benedict XVI, who in his 2011 message for the World Day of the Sick, said: *If every man is our brother, much more must the sick, the suffering and those in need of care be, at the centre of our attention, so that none of them feels forgotten or marginalized.*

## To accept the others who suffer means that I take up their suffering

In the above cited document the Pope refers to his own words which he wrote in the encyclical, *Spes salvi: The true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer. This holds true both for the individual and for society. A society unable to accept its suffering members and incapable of helping to share their suffering and to bear it inwardly through “com-passion” is a cruel and inhuman society … Indeed, to accept the “other” who suffers, means that I take up his suffering in such a way that it becomes mine also* (Benedict XVI, *Spes Salvi,* #38).

Those of us who are accustomed to Vincent’s language are not surprised by the words of Paul VI or Benedict XVI. Those texts affirm the fact that Vincent’s concerns continue to be a concern at the present time and therefore Vincent’s ideas are also valid in the twenty-first century. We should not forget the words of Jesus: *The poor you will always have with you* (Matthew 26:11).

In summary, if we take the side of those who are living in misery, then as Vincentians we cannot respond with true mercy to the needs of the men and women who are poor unless we first penetrate the mechanisms that produce poverty, marginalization and exclusion … unless we attempt to make the “structures of sin” and the “evil mechanisms” a thing of the past (John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei sociales,* #40)

Let us leave open the door that leads to hope as we paraphrase the last paragraph of Father José María Román’s biography, *St. Vincent de Paul* … today, as in every previous era, there are countless men and women who are ministering and struggling in the Church in order to keep alive the spirit of Vincent de Paul.

Translated: Charles T. Plock, CM

1. S.E.V. de Salamanca, 1982, p. 68 [Translator’s Note: I have researched the meaning of S.E.V., but have been unable to discover the meaning of these initials]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jose, I. Fz. De Mendoza, *Anales,* 1985, p. 598. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. H. Kamen, *El siglo de hierro,* edt. Lecturalia, Madrid, 1977, p. 465. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Vicente de Dios, *Biografía,* Mx., 1991, p. 257. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Roman, *St. Vincent de Paul: a biography,* [Translated: Sr. Joyce Howard, DC] Melisende, London, 1999, p. 445. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Roman, *op.cit.,* p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Roman, *op.cit.,* p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Roman, *op.cit.,* p. 560 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A. Orcajo, *El seguimiento de Jesús según Vicente de Paúl,* Editorial La Milagrosa, Madrid, 1990, p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)