

November 2017

Vincentian Social Justice: A Work in Progress

John E. Rybolt

DePaul University, Chicago, IL

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.stjohns.edu/jovsa>

 Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rybolt, John E. (2017) "Vincentian Social Justice: A Work in Progress," *Journal of Vincentian Social Action*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://scholar.stjohns.edu/jovsa/vol2/iss3/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by St. John's Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Vincentian Social Action by an authorized editor of St. John's Scholar. For more information, please contact JoVSA@stjohns.edu.

Vincentian Social Justice: A Work in Progress

John E. Rybolt, C.M.
DePaul University, Chicago, IL

I. A "universal" figure?

Rightly or wrongly, St. Vincent de Paul has become a "universal" figure, a polymorph or shape-shifter, if you will. As a classic figure, somewhat like Jesus in certain circles, he is represented in various guises: founder, saint, simultaneously traditional and modern, even a revolutionary. This is why people find in him, as well as in Jesus, the figure he or she is looking for. To cite Ted Kennedy, eulogizing his brother Bobby, "We need not enlarge him in death beyond what he was in life."

I like to think of him fundamentally as a human being: a kid, an adolescent, fishing at a nearby pond, playing in the Roman ruins in Dax while attending school, a young man who celebrated occasions with his large and extended family, maybe dancing at weddings, learning how to drink wine and appreciate its effects. He wasn't born an old man, in other words, although, to honor him, our early confreres borrowed a Latin phrase dating from as far back as Livy: *Senex a puero* ("an old man [or: mature] from his childhood"). He did his studies, became a priest, and then thought ahead about a rapid retirement for him and a comfortable old age for his mother based on his assured income. His life passed through the normal developmental phases of human existence until his death in 1660, surrounded by his confreres in Paris. He was about eighty.

Both the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity were anxious to see him canonized, or, as they said in those days, raised to the "honors of the altar." For that reason,

...St. Vincent de Paul has become a "universal" figure, a polymorph or shape-shifter, if you will.

Vincent's successor, René Alméras, commissioned a biography, published in 1664. Alméras recommended it to his confreres so that they could have a model for their own lives.

Vincent never sat for a portrait—undoubtedly he found the idea abhorrent for someone dedicated to the service of the poor—but Louise de Marillac and others saw to it that his image was preserved. At his canonization, he was depicted as an evangelizer of the poor. The massive statue by

Pietro Bracci in St. Peter's in the Vatican became the canonical version: standing in a baroque wind, holding high a crucifix, and stepping out of his niche into the world to proclaim God's word. In France, by contrast, and beginning even before the Revolution, the preferred image

was Vincent with the babies, the foundlings that he confided to the care of the Ladies of Charity. Unfortunately for later generations, this image of the kindly old bearded gentleman with children in his arms or on his lap has degenerated into something like Santa Claus.

No, he was a Roman Catholic priest, devoted to the Church, its prayer life and institutions, and ready to evangelize everywhere, even in distant parts of the world (Vincent de Paul, 1655, June 13, 11:180).

II. What he was not and what he was

Let's now examine what he was not.

First, he was not a philosopher interested in systems, in systemic change, in large-scale ideas.

This kind of thinking gained currency with the Enlightenment; the *philosophes*, for all their anti-Christian bias, have guided our speculations and developments in the west.

Second, he was not a radical thinker. Rather, he accepted received ideas, as about royalty, the class system, and crime and punishment. In the last case, he accepted, apparently without comment, the brutality of life that he experienced. Criminals were punished as they deserved, and often publicly. He never condemned the *estrapade* (which winched up a victim on a high pole and dropped him eventually to his death), nor the “wheel” (on which a victim was tied, his bones smashed with a flail, and then left to die in agony). Remember, too, that he was the chaplain general of the galleys of France, where prisoners, formed into chain gangs, walked to the nearest river before being taken down to ports on the Mediterranean. They then had to learn how to row the large coastal vessels amid whippings and other brutalities. Never do we hear our kindly grandfather Vincent condemning this iniquitous system. Instead, he focused on the prisoners’ spiritual and even physical needs. He wrote: “I praised them for their resignation and sympathized with them in their sufferings;... I told them they were fortunate to have their purgatory in this world;... I kissed their chains, showed compassion for their distress, and expressed sorrow for their misfortune...” (Vincent de Paul, n.d., 58). It was not his way to remove their chains nor advocate the overthrow of violent systems.

Now, as to what he was. Care for individuals, caught up in the beastliness of his time, marked his work. After his early experience as a pastor in Châtillon-lès-Dombes, he realized that he could organize charity in individual parishes. He did this himself and then instructed his confreres to do the same whenever they preached a mission in a country parish. Now, this was something new and exciting. He worked to find charitable people, largely married women and widows in the parish and rally them to the cause of caring for their needy sisters and brothers in the same parish. In fact, his interest in “public service” (*service du public*) is one of the important, although lesser

known, aspects of his thinking¹ (Koch, 2002, October, pp. 17-23).

In some of the rules for these groups, which he dubbed the Confraternities of Charity, he recommended that the members also care for any prisoners in or near their parishes. He also had charge of a prison himself, at St. Lazare in Paris. He inherited this practice from the monks who ran St. Lazare before him. Those sent there, with royal approval, included criminals, but mostly others convicted of minor offenses, such as young men who had slipped off the rails and whose families wanted them to be punished and corrected—bad food, whipping, and long sermons were some of the means—as well as mental patients, and priests in difficulties. He wanted his young novices to visit and console them. This, too, was fairly new and exciting, but too much for later generations, including my own, when, as novices, we were kept fairly confined and urged to think about our inner commitments rather than eventual ministry.

Vincent was also a hard-headed financial manager, insisting on good records, professional advice, and regular reporting. He regarded the funds under his control as the patrimony of the poor, to be spent for their good. As part of this, he gave good example in providing a just wage and helping employees injured in the line of their work (Rybolt, 2005).

III. What his confreres did and did not do

It is my conviction that the members of the Congregation of the Mission (and, of course, the Daughters of Charity) have always tried to remain faithful to the founder’s inspiration. Who he was in the seventeenth century marks us out as who we are today. In general, his insights led to both what we do and how we do it. As to what we do: Vincentians give missions. We are known officially as the Congregation of the Mission. You certainly know this history: how Vincent experienced the poverty of the country people and determined that he would dedicate himself to the most abandoned, both spiritually and physically. When his confreres concluded their missions in the villages, they

were instructed to establish the Confraternities of Charity to care for the sick and the poor there. This would guarantee that the parishioners, who received lessons of charity in the mission sermons, would move from theory to practice.

The clergy of those rural parishes, too, were often ill-prepared for their ministry. Seminaries barely existed, but some priests, like Vincent himself, had studied at the best universities—he attended Toulouse—to prepare themselves for their work. This led the bishops to request the founder's help to provide teachers and spiritual guides for the ministerial candidates.

He did many other things that you can read about, especially concerning promoting women and their abilities, but I want to point now to what has been called the Vincentian way, as André Dodin and others have qualified it (Dodin, 1993). It begins with experience, the inductive process—the French call it Anglo-Saxon—in contrast with the French standard of beginning with ideas or principles, the deductive process of reasoning. The confreres have continued to try to be faithful to Vincent's way of acting, how he lived. It is here that we perceive his attention to individuals in their needs. This formed the basis of his attitude toward social justice, but exercised on the personal level. Let me offer a few examples.

His disciples, beginning with experience, often found themselves outside their comfort zone in working with the rural poor. Because of their philosophical upbringing, they knew what life should be ideally, but they discovered that they had to adapt their ministry to new circumstances. For one example, the reality of ministry among hostages brutalized in North Africa, far beyond what the founder encountered while preaching in bucolic villages in France, caused the Missioners to adapt their service to that reality.

In the eighteenth century, the Church and the French State summoned the Congregation to continue the mission work founded by the Jesuits, who had been forced to leave the Ottoman and Chinese Empires. New worlds opened up for the Vincentians. Their French legal, cultural, and educational approaches remained, but

the missionaries now had to observe their new situation and accommodate themselves to the demands of the Gospel in these specific circumstances, including, of course, social justice (even though they did not call it that).

Slavery was one of those issues. The Société Française de l'Orient supplied African and Malagasy slaves to work the fields there, particularly to raise sugar cane. The company kindly provided the Vincentians, sent to minister to the French settlers there, with slaves to manage Church lands. Where was the social justice in this? What was the Vincentian response? It was not all negative, as one of the confreres at the end of the Vincentian period, Jean Lafosse (1745-1826), worked strenuously for the liberation of the slaves. His burial in Mauritius—the only white man among the liberated slaves—testifies to his devotion.

Slavery existed in the United States and Brazil as well, and the Vincentians were slaveholders. The histories are complicated: some Vincentians accepted slavery as biblically-based, ecclesiastically sanctioned, and financially necessary; others worked for abolition. Russian and Central European serfdom—being bound to the land—also influenced the Vincentians. How they reacted against the practice on their lands in those countries is poorly documented. It is clear, however, that the sons of St. Vincent de Paul did their best to alleviate the spiritual and physical destitution of the people committed to their care.

The practice of justice certainly implied involvement with governments, for or mainly against their demands. It is clear that the Vincentians mainly chose to center their works in national or imperial capitals so as to influence civil authorities: Beijing, Constantinople, Damascus, Manila, Rio de Janeiro, Lima, Mexico City, San José de Costa Rica to name a few. Interestingly, the Congregation did not make the same decision in the United States. Although we eventually had a house in Washington, it was focused on Catholic University rather than on the halls of government.

Colonialism was another concern. Confreres from colonizing nations, such as France, Spain,

Belgium, and Portugal, generally accepted this reality. My supposition, based on written reports, shows that the Vincentians were concerned about the people living under a colonial government but generally did not react against this system. When agitation for decolonization began, therefore, some Vincentians feared and opposed it. Others, generally younger men, supported these movements. The same can be said of other countries in more recent times involved in the overthrow of dictatorial regimes. One of Fidel Castro's confidants, for example, was a Spanish Vincentian who had come to know the Comandante while Fidel was a prisoner and the priest was a chaplain.

Just like Vincent de Paul, the somewhat universal figure, his sons have attempted to follow Christ the evangelizer of the poor.

Vincentians also promoted the cause of women. As the Missioners experienced educated Daughters of Charity and their commitment to women's education in their home countries, they supported the same procedures in mission lands, despite the objections of traditional Orthodox and Muslim families in the Ottoman Empire and China. Another issue was foot-binding among women. A Vincentian bishop in Mongolia, Florent Daguin, pioneered in working for its elimination.

A specific Vincentian commitment to social justice, it must be said, was not one of the original hallmarks of our work, though it developed later (Clark, 2012). It was no one's hallmark. Many Vincentians shared the ugly racist prejudices of their neighbors (concerning Eastern European Jews, Gypsies, or Filipinos). However, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the contributions of Karl Marx slowly opened Vincentian eyes and hearts. As a mark of this, those whom the Vincentians served gradually perceived in them a ready openness to respect native peoples of all races and conditions, and to consider new solutions—equivalently, social justice. Interreligious relations have been noteworthy, for example, in Vincentian schools in Persia, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, and Egypt, which enrolled Christians, Shia and Sunni, Jews, and others without discrimination. Such

testimonies as we have, show that people perceived an ideal in their Vincentian teachers and directors, modeled in some way on Vincent de Paul: meek, humble, austere, zealous, self-effacing. These men focused on caring for individuals, not on changing systems. Only later in our history did this care blossom into the more radical concern for social justice as we understand it today, thanks to the social teaching of the Church, which was also developing. In all this, we Vincentians owe a huge debt to the Daughters of Charity, the Ladies of Charity, and Frédéric Ozanam and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. They and countless others—teachers, catechists, and lay leaders—have taken initiatives concerning labor relations, child welfare, and penal systems. They have shown us justice in action and invited us to join them.

Just like Vincent de Paul, the somewhat universal figure, his sons have attempted to follow Christ the evangelizer of the poor. Some have been more successful than others. But I am proud to be among their number: rich or poor in virtue, rich or poor in commitment, rich or poor in initiative or inventiveness.

Let me conclude with the first prayer that the Congregation developed to honor the founder and pray for its confreres: *O Lord, arouse in our Congregation the spirit that animated your servant Vincent, that, filled with the same spirit, we may enthusiastically love what he loved and practice what he taught. Amen.*

John E. Rybolt, C.M.

References

- Clark M. J. (2012). The complex but necessary union of charity and justice: Insights from the Vincentian tradition for contemporary Catholic social teaching. *Vincentian Heritage Journal*, 30(2), 25-39.
- Dodin, A. (1993). *Vincent de Paul and charity*. (J. M. Smith & D. Saunders, Trans.). H. O'Donnell & M. G. Hornstein (Eds.). New Rochelle, NY: New City Press.

Koch, B. (2002, October). Tout à dieu et au service du public. *Bulletin des Lazaristes de France*, 184, 17-23.

Rybolt, J. E. (2005). Saint Vincent de Paul and money. *Vincentian Heritage Journal*, 26(1), 81-103.

Vincent de Paul. (1655, June 13). Repetition of prayer, 121. In P. Coste (Ed.), *Vincent de Paul, correspondences, entretiens, documents, 14 vols.* Hyde Park, NY: New City Press.

Vincent de Paul. (n.d.). *Correspondence, conferences, documents of St Vincent de Paul* (Vol. 4). Hyde Park, NY: New City Press.