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# THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION IN THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF VINCENT DE PAUL

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## O MY GOD, YES!

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Mass media are a modern phenomenon. Their widespread use has ushered in a new era. Today, we immediately know about, and even see – live – events that are occurring thousands of miles away. On top of that, we continually hear about, and start to use, new means of communication which are being invented month after month and year after year. In their wake, we find ourselves wrestling with new ethical questions: is so much communication making us deaf to the deepest voices of reality? Along with information, are we absorbing misinformation? How can we learn to make wise, moderate use of the means of communication and teach others, especially young people, to use media beneficially? How can civil society, churches, families, and individuals deal with the superabundant pornography that just a click of the mouse makes instantaneously available?

Those are all relatively new questions. But the need for good communication is not new at all. Vincent de Paul spoke about it often and eloquently. At a meeting of the General Council of the Daughters of Charity on June 20, 1647, he exclaimed *O my God! Yes! That is a real need: close communication with one another; sharing everything. Nothing is more necessary. It unites hearts, and God blesses the advice received, with the result that things go better.*<sup>1</sup>

Of course, long before Vincent, philosophers were analyzing what went into good communication. Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, identified three elements, using three Greek words: 1) *ethos* – the personal character of the speaker; 2) *pathos* – the frame of mind of the audience; and 3) *logos* – the words of the message itself.<sup>2</sup>

Communication skills are crucial for everyone, but especially for those called to lead. Leaders have varied gifts. Some are wonderful organizers. Some are innovative thinkers. Some are clever politicians. But one gift is indispensable in a leader: the ability to communicate.<sup>3</sup> If a leader has poor communication skills, few will follow.

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<sup>1</sup> CCD:XIIIb:281.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, book 1, part 2.

<sup>3</sup> Leaders who lack this skill personally sometimes use others as their spokespersons. As readers will recall, Moses had difficulty speaking. Cf. Ex 4:10: “If you please, my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and tongue.” Consequently, God allowed Aaron to speak for Moses. Cf., also, Ex 6:12. According to one of many Jewish traditions, Moses was unable to pronounce the labials, b, f, m, p, v. Some rabbis, reflecting on Ex 4:10, concluded that Moses was a stutterer, which a midrash

Communication is a two-way process that requires considerable back-and-forth interaction. Leaders must not only convey their ideas convincingly. They must listen to their constituents well. If their vision does not resonate with the needs of their followers, failure is inevitable. Conversely, if followers fail to listen to their leaders – as Moses often complained was the case<sup>4</sup> – then no forward movement will occur.

In this article, I will describe, under six headings, what Vincent de Paul said about communication<sup>5</sup> and how he put it into practice:

1. interpersonal communication
2. letters as a tool for communication
3. his conferences to the Daughters of Charity
4. his conferences to the Congregation of the Mission
5. the “Relations”
6. the formal “communication” between a superior and a member of the community

But first let me begin with two cautions.

1. As is evident, Vincent lived in another era. Huge horizon shifts have taken place within civil society and the church since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. I have treated many of these shifts at length elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> Here, let me simply recall a few that influence the topic of communication significantly.
  - a) Vincent lived in, and took for granted, a multi-tiered society, with kings and queens, nobility, clergy, and peasants. Within that society, each tier had its place, and the rules for communicating

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story attributes to his having burned his tongue on hot coals as an infant. Though much has been written about Moses’ speech defect, most of what is said is pure speculation.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ex 6:12.

<sup>5</sup> This article does not treat a technical use of the word “communication” that Vincent employed from time to time when he spoke of the “communication of privileges.” Over many centuries, this phrase was commonly used among religious communities and occasionally still is. It meant that, under certain conditions, communities could enjoy privileges that were granted to other communities (like faculties to hear confessions in certain places, faculties to absolve certain reserved sins, faculties to dispense from certain obligations, etc.). Canon 63 of the 1917 Code of Canon Law spoke explicitly of acquiring privileges by communication. Vincent was quite aware of this legal procedure. He wrote, for example: “The Nuncio did me the honor of coming to see me to tell me that, since the Fathers of Christian Doctrine have obtained the favor of making simple vows as we do, they also want to give missions as we do. He also said he was coming to ask me if we had any objection to that. I replied that, far from being troubled by it, we would be very glad if they and many other religious worked earnestly for the instruction and salvation of the people. Whereupon he asked me for a written declaration on that and added that those good Fathers would be very glad if our Company would share with them by communication the privileges it has.” (CCD:VII:484)

<sup>6</sup> Cf. R. Maloney, *The Way of Vincent de Paul, a Contemporary Spirituality in the Service of the Poor* (New York: New City Press, 1992) 48-52, 90-96.

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among the tiers were well defined. While multi-tiered societies continue to exist today, the French Revolution brought about a dramatic change in Vincent's own land and in many other places.

- b) In Vincent's time, the superior-subject relationship was very strongly emphasized. For instance, 63 out of the 142 articles in the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission speak of the superior-subject relationship.<sup>7</sup> The tone today is different: the regulations of most communities emphasize dialogue and participation in decision-making.
  - c) In that period too, brothers were commonly regarded as inferior to priests. Vincent himself related well with the brothers and spoke highly of many of them. Brother Bertrand Ducournau, for example, was his confidant, his secretary, and perhaps his closest friend. Still, Vincent sometimes said things about brothers which readers today find difficult to comprehend.<sup>8</sup>
  - d) In Vincent's period too, community life tended to be more rule-oriented than today; it put less emphasis on the interpersonal. "Keep the Rule and the Rule will keep you" was an oft-quoted axiom.<sup>9</sup> Vincent, while placing strong emphasis on observing the rules, clearly recognized that flexibility was necessary and that rules must sometimes be bent since "charity is the queen of all virtues."<sup>10</sup>
2. While we have rich resources for doing research in the fourteen volumes of Vincent's correspondence, conferences and documents, we possess only a small percentage of what Vincent said and wrote. Sadly:
- Though Vincent founded the Congregation of the Mission "to preach the gospel to the poor" and though he preached numerous missions himself, we possess only a couple of the many sermons that he preached.
  - We have nothing at all of what he said, over decades, to the Visitation nuns of Paris, whose spiritual care Francis de Sales entrusted to him in 1622.
  - We have almost nothing of what he said at the Tuesday conferences, which, beginning in 1633, he and a group of colleagues organized each week in Paris.<sup>11</sup> Vincent remained the director of the conferences until his death.

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<sup>7</sup>For a treatment of the institutional aspects of community in the Common Rules, cf. Jaime Corera, "La Congregación de la Misión: La comunidad en las Reglas Comunes" in *Diez Estudios Vicencianos* (Salamanca: CEME, 1983) 89-106.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. CR V, 16, where Vincent requires that brothers obtain the Superior General's explicit permission to learn to read and write.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Religious Life in the 21st Century: The Prospect of Refounding* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016) chap. 8.

<sup>10</sup> CCD:VII:473; IX:226.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Alison Forrestal, "Venues for Clerical Formation in Catholic Reformation Paris: Vincent de Paul and the Tuesday Conferences and Company," *Journal of the Western Society for French History*, 38 (2010) 44-60.

- We have only a small portion of what he said to the Ladies of Charity, whom he met with frequently from 1634 on.
- Over the course of thirty-five years, Saint Vincent presided over about two thousand Repetitions of Prayer for his priests and brothers. We have the text for only fifty-two of these, dated for the most part in the years 1655-1657. He also gave frequent conferences to them. Of those given before 1655, we have only a total of about 60 pages, which are mostly excerpts or synopses.
- While we have many of his conferences to the Daughters of Charity, many others are missing. Numerous contracts signed by Vincent remain unpublished. For the year 1650 alone, we know of 20 such notarized documents.<sup>12</sup>
- We have limited access to the leaflets, called “Relations,” that Vincent used to publicize relief efforts.<sup>13</sup> More will be said about this below.

How regrettable it is that we possess so little of what Vincent said. The great preacher, Bossuet, who knew Vincent well, wrote to Pope Clement XI, attesting that when he listened to Vincent, he felt that the words of 1 Peter 4:11 were being fulfilled: “If anyone speaks, let his words be like the words of God.”<sup>14</sup>

## 1. INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

As is clear from his statement to the Daughters’ General Council, cited above, Vincent encouraged good communication.

In a conference given on July 28, 1648, he said to the Daughters, “A great means to combat the spirit of the world, Sisters, is to think about those who have lived in the spirit of Jesus Christ. The lives of the saints are full of it; otherwise, they would never have become saints. Do not think that you must be separated from the world to acquire it. The Apostles preserved it while living among the people, and communicated it to them by their conversation, for conversation is derived from the word *versatio*, which means the pouring out of the thoughts and feelings of one mind into that of another by mutual communication.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Bernard Pujo, *Vincent de Paul: the Trailblazer*, translated by Gertrud Graubart Champe (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 2003) 188 and 301.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 195 and 303-304.

<sup>14</sup> CCD:XI:XVII-XVIII.

<sup>15</sup> CCD:IX:343.

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Just a month before he died, Vincent told the sisters, with a bit of nostalgia, how decisions were, and should be, made at meetings of their General Council: “You see, Sisters, everything we do is discussed there; we come together and ask the opinion of our Sisters. That is what we did when Mademoiselle Le Gras was alive. M. Portail, Mademoiselle, our Sisters, and I would meet, and the agenda was presented. We asked our Sisters what they thought, then each gave her opinion and we gave ours. Our Sisters were in no way influenced by the opinion of others, and sometimes were of an entirely different mind than Mademoiselle and the others; in a word, only God was considered there.”<sup>16</sup>

He told Bernard Codoing, the superior of the Congregation of the Mission in Richelieu: “I would also like to see a little more communication and trust between you and M. Maillard, the procurator of your house. I assure you that you can act with him as with the wisest, most loyal, most understanding person I know among us, and that he has the interests of the Company very much at heart.”<sup>17</sup>

Yet, for various reasons, Vincent often told his followers to avoid communication with others. This list is long, and the reasons are many.<sup>18</sup>

Here are a few samples:

1. *The Jansenists*. “It is true that the Five Propositions of Jansenius have been (condemned), but the Doctors who upheld them have not yet been obliged to sign the censure, as they are obliged to do for the Sorbonne's censure of those last two propositions of M. Arnauld, which differ from the others. So, before using this severe measure with those Doctors who refuse, wait until Our Holy Father chooses to pronounce on the whole matter. Meanwhile, it is advisable to avoid too close communication with them.”<sup>19</sup>
2. *Nuns*. “Our Blessed Father the Bishop of Geneva expresses this so well in his *Introduction*, ‘If a Bishop wanted to follow the spirit of a Carthusian and live like one, he wouldn't be acting according to the spirit God has given to his office, and therefore he wouldn't acquit himself of his duty.’ So it is important, Sisters, that you have no communication with nuns. But, don't say that to them because they might perhaps think it is through contempt.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> CCD:X:593.

<sup>17</sup> CCD:IV:40.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. CCD:4:127-128; CCD:4:217; CCD:5:434-435.

<sup>19</sup> CCD:5:587.

<sup>20</sup> CCD:9:460; CCD:13b:207.

3. *Surgeons, pharmacists and hospital officials.* “To avoid many inconveniences, they (the sisters) will have no communication with the surgeons, pharmacists, and other officers of the Hôtel-Dieu, and accept nothing from them under any pretext whatsoever...”<sup>21</sup>
4. *Priests.* “With regard to priests, Sisters, never have any communication with them outside of confession; for we see the evil caused by this, and it is only too true that the majority of disorders arising in religious Communities are caused by us clergymen.”<sup>22</sup>

This last citation gives us an idea of how Vincent viewed the clergy of his time!

## 2. LETTERS AS TOOL OF COMMUNICATION

Letters were one of Vincent’s principal tools in maintaining relationships.<sup>23</sup> He was a prodigious letter-writer. It is estimated that, over the years, he and his secretaries, Brother Bertrand Ducournau and Brother Louis Robineau, wrote more than 30,000 letters. Today we have only about 10% of them. His most frequent correspondents were Louise de Marillac, as one might imagine, Firmin Get (the superior in Marseilles), Jean Martin (Superior in Turin), Edmond Jolly (Superior in Rome), Charles Ozenne (Superior in Warsaw), and Etienne Blatiron (Superior in Genoa). After them came Bernard Codoing, Brother Jean Parre, Antoine Portail, Louis Rivet, Jacques Pesnelle, and Marc Coglée, all of whom were members of the Congregation of the Mission. For several years, he wrote weekly to the Vincentian superiors in Marseilles, Rome, Genoa, Turin, Warsaw, and other places.

Until 1645, Vincent wrote the letters himself. After that, Brothers Ducournau and Robineau did the actual writing, though Vincent continued to write to Louise de Marillac in his own hand. Whether he literally “dictated” his letters to the two brothers or allowed them, considerable freedom in composing the letters varied, depending especially on how busy he was and, in later years, on his deteriorating health.<sup>24</sup> Pierre Coste felt that the letters written by Vincent’s own hand were more concise, lively, and authoritative than those that just bore his signature.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> CCD:13b:207-208.

<sup>22</sup> CCD:13b:280-281.

<sup>23</sup> In this section of the article, I have relied heavily on Pierre Coste’s introduction to Vincent’s correspondence, found at the beginning of volume I. I have supplemented this, as the reader will see in the footnotes, with other sources.

<sup>24</sup> Vincent sometimes explicitly states that he is dictating a letter. Cf. CCD:VI:412.

<sup>25</sup> CCD:I:XXVII.

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He got to be so busy that he sometimes wrote while out on the street, as he told Jean Martin on July 28, 1651.<sup>26</sup> Was he walking along, dictating to Brother Ducournau? Was he riding in a carriage with one of the brothers and catching up on business? Sometimes he was so tired that he nodded off while writing, as he confessed candidly to Lambert aux Couteaux in 1638.<sup>27</sup> One surely wonders if he was falling asleep when, at the end of a long letter, he addressed Pierre Escart as “Madame”!<sup>28</sup>

His letters were lively, newsy and warm. At times he was also very firm, especially when offering admonitions or dealing with crises. As he wrote, his spirituality flowed out spontaneously.

He often opened his heart and wrote with considerable affection. Some of his letters to Louise de Marillac closed with lines filled with human tenderness. In October 1627, he told her: “I am writing to you at about midnight and am a little tired. Forgive my heart if it is not a little more expansive in this letter. Be faithful to your faithful lover who is Our Lord. Also, be very simple and humble. And I shall be in the love of Our Lord and his holy mother....”<sup>29</sup> On New Year's Day 1638, he concluded his letter to her: “I wish you a young heart and a love in its first bloom for him who loves us unceasingly and as tenderly as if he were just beginning to love us. For all God's pleasures are ever new and full of variety, although he never changes. I am in his love, with an affection such as his goodness desires and which I owe him out of love for him, Mademoiselle, your most humble servant....”<sup>30</sup> In another letter he remarked, both tenderly and teasingly: “I am not asking you to remember me in your prayers, because I have no doubt that, after little Le Gras (her troubled son), you put me in first place.”<sup>31</sup>

Vincent addressed Jane Frances de Chantal as “so much our honored Mother that she is mine alone and whom I honor and cherish more tenderly than any child ever honored and loved its mother since Our Lord; and it seems to me that I do so to such an extent that I have sufficient esteem and love to be able to share it with the whole world; and that, in truth, without exaggeration.”<sup>32</sup>

While rejoicing in the many letters of Vincent that we possess, we can only lament that we have lost so many others.

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<sup>26</sup> CCD:IV:237.

<sup>27</sup> CCD:I:454.

<sup>28</sup> CCD:II:122.

<sup>29</sup> CCD:I:28.

<sup>30</sup> CCD:I:408.

<sup>31</sup> CCD:I:375.

<sup>32</sup> CCD:II:101.

### 3. CONFERENCES TO THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION

In his introduction to the eleventh volume of Vincent's works,<sup>33</sup> Pierre Coste stated: "If care had been taken to collect and preserve all the conferences of Saint Vincent to his confreres at the College des Bons-Enfants or at Saint-Lazare, ten thick volumes could not contain them. He spoke to them often: every Friday, at chapter in the morning and at the conference in the evening; on Sundays, Wednesdays, and feast days; and at Repetition of Prayer." On such occasions, he spoke about the virtues that should characterize a missionary, explained the Common Rules, and offered lessons that could be drawn from feast days. In addition, he gave news about what was happening in Madagascar, Algiers, Scotland, Ireland, the Hebrides, Poland, and Italy. Often, he had so much to say that he did not realize how long he had been talking and went far beyond the appointed time.

His words flowed simply and spontaneously. If he could not remember something, he asked someone who might know. In one conference he said, "We've seen ancient philosophers who disdained wealth to a very high degree, even though they were pagans; look at one of them – I forget his name. Do you remember it, M. de la Fosse?" Jacques de la Fosse, who was an expert in ancient philosophy, said that it was Diogenes. Vincent did not seem convinced; he continued, "All right, Diogenes, if he is the one."<sup>34</sup>

At times, he was eloquent, even mystical. When he spoke about Christ, he could be rapturous. In 1655, he cried out, "Let us ask God to give the Company this spirit, this heart, this heart that causes us to go everywhere, this heart of the Son of God, the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord, the heart of Our Lord, that disposes us to go as He went ... He sends us, like the apostles, to bring fire everywhere, to bring this divine fire, this fire of love ..."<sup>35</sup>

He was sometimes so caught up in the mystery of God's love that his words spontaneously revealed how closely united with God he was:

*Let us look at the Son of God; what a heart of charity He had; what a fire of love! Please tell us, Jesus – Who pulled You away from heaven to come to endure the curse of earth and the many persecutions and torments You suffered? O Savior! Source of love humbled even to our level and to a vile agony – Who showed, in that, greater love for the neighbor than You yourself did? You came to lay yourself open to all our misfortunes, to take the form of a sinner, to lead a life of suffering and to undergo a shameful death for us; is there any love like that? But who else could love in such an outstanding way? Only Our Lord, who was so enamored with the love of creatures as to leave the throne of His Father to*

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<sup>33</sup> In this section of the article, I have relied heavily on Pierre Coste's introduction to Vincent's conferences to the priests and brothers of the Congregation, found at the beginning of volume XI. I have supplemented this, as the reader will see in the footnotes, with other sources.

<sup>34</sup> CCD:XI:156.

<sup>35</sup> CCD:XI:264.

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*come to take a body subject to weaknesses. And why? To establish among us, by His word and example, love of the neighbor. This is the love that crucified Him and brought about that admirable work of our redemption. O, if we had only a little of that love, would we stand around with our arms folded? Would we let those we could assist perish? Oh, no! Charity cannot remain idle; it impels us to work for the salvation and consolation of others.<sup>36</sup>*

His gestures were lively, so much so that sometimes he felt that he had overdone it and asked pardon of the community. Had someone pointed this out to him when, on August 16, 1655, he said to the priests and brothers: “Last Friday, I gave the Company reason to be scandalized because I was shouting so loud and clapping my hands that it seemed like I was annoyed with someone; that's why I ask pardon of the Company for this”?<sup>37</sup>

He did not hesitate to give admonitions. But often, when he did so, he accused himself of the same fault. In fact, he frequently humbled himself, applying to himself Psalm 73:22: *I became like a brute beast*,<sup>38</sup> a citation which may have startled some of his listeners.

Unfortunately, the Congregation of the Mission awakened only slowly to the opportunity it was missing by failing to preserve Vincent's conferences. On August 15, 1657, Brother Ducournau wrote a forceful, convincing memorandum to Fr. René Alméras, urging that someone take notes during the talks, despite Vincent's reluctance.<sup>39</sup> He proposed how it could be done surreptitiously and wound up getting the job himself!

## 4. CONFERENCES TO THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

The Daughters of Charity were more provident in that regard.<sup>40</sup> Louise de Marillac had a constant concern for the formation of the sisters, so she started to work early at getting Vincent's conferences written down and she even managed to get him to cooperate in the project. Still, by no means were all

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<sup>36</sup> CCD:XII:216.

<sup>37</sup> CCD:XI:236. Vincent repeated this self-criticism a week later; cf. CCD:XI:267. Conversely, on one occasion he apologized to the sisters for speaking so softly that they could not hear him. The sisters immediately corrected him, saying that they heard him quite well! Cf. CCD:IX:491.

<sup>38</sup> CCD:X:561; XI:179; XII:192, 248, 310.

<sup>39</sup> CCD:XI:XXVII.

<sup>40</sup> For this section of the article, I have relied heavily on Pierre Coste's introduction to Vincent's conferences to the Daughters of Charity, found at the beginning of volume IX. I have supplemented this, as the reader will see in the footnotes, with other sources.

his talks to the Daughters of Charity preserved. The first two are missing; the third, given on July 31, 1634, is followed by a gap of six years!

Vincent met with the Daughters at their Motherhouse, sometimes on Sundays and sometimes during the week. Only twelve sisters were present at his conference on July 31, 1634. In later years, their number fluctuated between eighty and a hundred. He urged them not to miss. In fact, he stated that the conferences should take precedence over Vespers, sermons, and other obligations. He told them, "Sisters, since this is a meeting that concerns God, He'll be as pleased with it as with Vespers. It is leaving God for God. During the winter, please try to be ready so that we can begin punctually at three o'clock, and don't worry about going to Vespers."<sup>41</sup>

Fr. Portail usually accompanied Vincent. He or another confrere took Vincent's place if, for some reason, the founder could not make it. A notice was sent out ahead of time to the houses in Paris and the suburbs informing them of the date and time, as well as the topic and the points of the conference. We still have one of the notices distributed before the conference of July 3, 1660. It states that "the topic for the conference concerns the late Mademoiselle Le Gras. First point: The reasons why Daughters of Charity should discuss the virtues of their Sisters who have gone to God, especially the virtues of their very dear Mother, the late Mademoiselle Le Gras. Second point: What are the virtues that each Sister noted in her? Third point: What are the virtues that impressed them the most and that they want to imitate with the help of God? For Saturday at two o'clock."

The gatherings were really "conferences", not monologues. The sisters made observations, asked questions, and humbled themselves. At the meeting of April 26, 1643, Vincent introduced a new method. He explained, "In the preceding conferences, I noticed that you needed some help in finding motives or reasons for what had been suggested to you. That is why I felt it would be better to change the method in order to make it easier for you to understand what you will be taught, and this will be a big help to you in making your prayer. I'll ask you questions, as is done for catechism lessons." To encourage the more timid and uneducated, he added, "If anyone can't give an answer, please don't worry about it because persons who say little sometimes do better, and those who catch on quickly and have no trouble discussing what is proposed to them sometimes don't do as well, although there are some who speak and do so well. Those who speak well, Sisters, should humble themselves profoundly – this is a gift for which they should express their gratitude to God – and those who have a hard time understanding what is suggested, or have difficulty expressing their thoughts, should put themselves in God's hands and make renewed resolutions to do good."<sup>42</sup>

Some who did not know how to read or who had never spoken in public were very nervous about being called on. Vincent encouraged them to do their best and congratulated them for good answers: "Right you are, Sister!" or "That was well said, Sister!" or "Blessed be God, Sister!"

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<sup>41</sup> CCD:X:556.

<sup>42</sup> CCD:IX:XII.

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Many, like Louise de Marillac, who was always well prepared, wrote out their thoughts ahead of time and read them.

There were lots of touching scenes. On March 15, 1648, a Sister who was speaking about the good use of correction added, "Recently, I was so proud that, when admonished of a fault by one of my Sisters, whom I myself had asked the charity to remind me, I showed that I didn't like it. I most humbly ask your pardon for this, and I ask pardon of you, Sister, who did me that act of charity." On hearing this, the other Sister knelt down and said, "Sister, I'm the one who asks your pardon. I didn't admonish you as I should have done, because there were other people present." Vincent cried out, "Isn't that wonderful! One accuses herself for not having taken the reproof well, and the other for not having given it properly; in this way, each tries to put the blame on herself."<sup>43</sup>

At the end of conferences, Vincent always gave his blessing. On May 30, 1647, recalling his own faults, he said, "I'll ask Our Lord Jesus Christ himself to give you His holy blessing, and I won't say the words of it today because the faults I've committed in your regard make me unworthy of it. I ask Our Lord to be the one to do it." Then, he kissed the floor, recited the usual concluding prayer, and got up to leave. But Louise and the sisters were unwilling to let him go without a blessing and pressed him so strongly that he finally gave in.<sup>44</sup>

As soon as a conference was over, the Sisters would write it down as accurately as possible. Those who had been questioned would hand in their notes. Louise did not hesitate to ask Vincent for his outline. "I hope," she wrote to him on January 25, 1643, "that our Sisters will make good use of the instruction Your Charity gave us today. Their hearts are filled with the desire to do this and they would really like to remember it forever. This causes me to entreat you most humbly to send us the little memorandum of the points you had in it. It seems to me that this would help me to recall a large part of what our good God said to us through your mouth."<sup>45</sup> The principal editors of the conferences were Louise herself, Elizabeth Hellot, Julienne Loret, and Mathurine Guérin (who was later elected Mother General on four separate occasions and served a total of 21 years, between 1667 and 1697!).

At least sometimes, when the sisters finished putting together a copy of a conference, they gave it to Vincent for correction. This is clear from what he wrote to Louise on August 25, 1646: "Enclosed is a summary of the conference of our dear Sisters, written out by dear Sister Hellot. I just read part of it and must confess that I shed a few tears in two or three places."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> CCD:IX:300.

<sup>44</sup> CCD:IX:260.

<sup>45</sup> CCD:II:392.

<sup>46</sup> CCD:III:28.

## 5. THE “RELATIONS”

The Ladies of Charity came up with the idea that it would be good to publicize the relief efforts in the regions devastated by war. Realizing that this would be a good fund-raising tool, they gathered excerpts from the letters of people working in those regions, printed them in leaflet form, and had them distributed in Paris and other large towns. These publications were called the “Relations.” Remarkably little has been written about them, though Coste occasionally alerted reader to portions of letters written to Vincent that appeared in them.<sup>47</sup> A 130-page collection exists in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.<sup>48</sup> The first edition came out in September 1650; the last appeared in December 1655. During those five years, the “Relations” came out monthly for the most, though with some gaps. They were about four to eight pages in length. 4000 copies were printed. Their style was direct and dramatic. Each leaflet ended with a direct appeal for financial assistance, asking that donations be given to certain parish priests or to Ladies of Charity like Madame de Lamoignon and Madame de Herse. As a fund-raising device, they were a great success.

Much could be written about the role of Charles Maignart de Bernières (1616-1662) in the publication of the “Relations.” Pierre Coste wrote of him: “The success of these publications depended on the skill of the person who directed them. It was necessary that the quotations be well chosen and well presented, with a small preamble, a short commentary, and, finally, an urgent appeal for charity. The choice fell on Charles Maignart de Bernières, a highly educated character, versed in the knowledge of Holy Scripture and the Fathers and also animated by the flame of charity... Bernières was, it is true, from the school of Port-Royal, but what was asked of him did not touch on doctrine and those involved had the conviction, and perhaps his promise, that he would confine himself to the field of charity, without digressing into burning polemical territory. This appeal for help from a Jansenist, made by Saint Vincent and the Ladies around him, may seem strange, but it is certain nonetheless.”<sup>49</sup>

The format was basically the same in each edition. The leaflets cited letters, often written by members of the Congregation of the Mission working in the poorest parts of France, frequently in war-zones. They contained graphic descriptions of the poverty encountered there. For example, readers of the January 1651 edition learned that, in the villages of the deanery of Guise, missionaries had found 500 sick

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. CCD:IV:94 and 151; V:79-80; VII:348.

<sup>48</sup> Besides this collection, much material from the “Relations” can be found in Alphonse Feillet, *La Misère au Temps de la Fronde et Saint Vincent de Paul*, fourteenth edition abridged and corrected (Paris: Didier et C<sup>ie</sup>, 1868). Unfortunately, only bits and pieces of the “Relations” have been translated from the original French into other languages. Since historians have known about the “Relations” for centuries, I find it strange that these leaflets have not received more attention. Maynard, Coste, and Román all mention them, but they offer few details about their content, perhaps because the leaflets do not focus on St. Vincent himself. Cf. Abbé Maynard, *Saint Vincent de Paul* (Paris: Ambroise Bray, 1860) IV, 143f.; Pierre Coste, *The Life and Labours of Saint Vincent de Paul*, translated by Joseph Leonard (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1935) II, 403f.; José-María Román, *St. Vincent de Paul, a Biography*, translated by Joyce Howard, D.C. (London: Fox Communications, 1999) 572. More details can be found in Alexandre Féron, *La Vie et les Œuvres de Charles MAIGNART de BERNIÈRES* (Rouen, 1930).

<sup>49</sup> Pierre Coste, “Saint Vincent de Paul au secours des provinces désolées,” *Revue des Questions Historiques*, n° de janvier 1930.

people and 300 wounded. They were also attempting to assist more than 600 people “whose misery was such that, having already eaten the small amount of grain that they had picked up here and there, they threw themselves upon the cadavers of dogs and horses after the wolves had had their fill of them.”

## 6. THE FORMAL “COMMUNICATION” BETWEEN A SUPERIOR AND A MEMBER OF THE COMMUNITY

Vincent had great esteem for a practice that was called “communication” or “interior communication”. He urged the sisters and his confreres to engage in this practice with simplicity and regularity, telling them in numerous letters to open their hearts to superiors. The practice of “communication” became part of the Rules of both the Congregation of the Mission<sup>50</sup> and the Daughters of Charity.<sup>51</sup> It involved meeting with a superior once a month or once every three months (or writing to him or her), or speaking with a confessor, and opening one’s heart. Vincent’s letters and conferences contain numerous exhortations to be faithful to the “interior communication”. A few samples follow.

- “Be exact in having them (the priests and brothers) make the interior communication every month.”<sup>52</sup>
- “... I neglected to speak to you at that time about the openness of heart we should have in order to disclose properly to the Superior our illusions, faults, and interior sufferings; in a word, to make our communication to him.”<sup>53</sup>
- “Several also really open their heart during the communication, as I’ve been told, and so much progress has been made in this that all of you know that many men, before making their communication, ask the Company to pray for them, that God may be pleased to grant them the grace of seeing their faults clearly, of making them known, and of really putting into practice the advice or admonition given them to correct themselves. What a great reason to praise and thank God for this grace He has given to the Company!”<sup>54</sup>
- “Don't give up. This is a trial God is sending you. And even though you think you're getting nowhere, don't grow tired of doing it because, when communication is made to those to whom it should be made, it has the same effect on the soul as blood-letting does on the body. So then, be faithful to this practice.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> CR X, 11.

<sup>51</sup> CCD:XIIIb:158-159.

<sup>52</sup> CCD:2:403.

<sup>53</sup> CCD:12:290.

<sup>54</sup> CCD:12:291.

<sup>55</sup> CCD:10:359.

- "So, when you make your communication to the confessor – M. Portail or someone else – the main thing is to tell him what your predominant passion is, and what is causing you the most trouble, so that he can give you some means of overcoming yourself. It's up to the Director or the Directress to ask the Sister who speaks to him or her, 'Sister, now that you've made your communication, what passion gives you the most trouble?' And she should reply, 'It's this one, Mademoiselle' 'O, fine, Sister! Try to take the means to get rid of it; and for that purpose, work at the contrary virtue.'"<sup>56</sup>
- "This letter is a kind of spiritual communication to ask your advice with regard to situations that have arisen, so that I may know how to act in them. It will also reveal to you what sort of person one must be to live in this place."<sup>57</sup>
- "You should present yourselves to the Directress at least once a month to give an account of your conduct. What a holy custom of your Company that is, Sisters! Do not fail in it. But let your communication be sincere and cordial. Speak at that time not only about your failings but also of the good you are doing by the grace of God..."<sup>58</sup>

From these citations, it is evident how important the practice of "interior communication" was to Vincent. He regarded it as one of the manifestations of the simplicity of heart that should characterize his Family.

## A final word

In 1941, C.S. Lewis wrote a series of satirical letters in which a senior devil, Screwtape, mentors his nephew, a junior devil named Wormwood. Screwtape rejoices at the spread of the "Kingdom of Noise", where people lack the peace and quiet needed for reflection and good communication.

*Music and silence – how I detest them both! How thankful we should be that ever since (Satan) entered Hell – though longer ago than humans, reckoning in light years, could express – no square inch of infernal space and no moment of infernal time has been surrendered to either of those abominable forces, but all has been occupied by Noise – Noise, the grand dynamism, the audible expression of all that is exultant, ruthless, and virile – Noise which alone defends us from silly qualms, despairing scruples, and impossible desires. We will make the whole universe a noise in the end. We have already made great strides in this direction as regards the Earth. The melodies and silences of Heaven will be shouted down in the end. But I admit we are not yet loud enough, or anything like it. Research is in progress.<sup>59</sup>*

How much noisier the world has become since that time! And how much greater is the challenge of clear, simple, engaging communication!

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<sup>56</sup> CCD:10:485-86.

<sup>57</sup> CCD:3:570.

<sup>58</sup> CCD:9:177.

<sup>59</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Letter XXII. The book can be found in many places, including: [http://www.truechristianity.info/en/the\\_screwtape\\_letters\\_download.php](http://www.truechristianity.info/en/the_screwtape_letters_download.php) Cf. also Letters XXIX and XXXI.