DePaul University

From the SelectedWorks of John E Rybolt

February 24, 2010

Vincent de Paul and the Reform of the Clergy

John E Rybolt, DePaul University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/john_rybolt/56/
VINCENT DE PAUL AND THE REFORM OF THE CLERGY

The role of Saint Vincent de Paul as a saint of charity, even an “Apostle of Charity,” is widely known. Another of his roles is less known, namely his work for the reform of the clergy. His biographers, however, appreciated this aspect of his life. Louis Abelly, writing in 1664 shortly after Vincent’s death, devoted several chapters in volume 2 to the subject, as did Pierre Coste. Calls during more than a century for the reform of priests led to the Reformation and to the Council of Trent. Looked at from our experience before and after the Second Vatican Council, we realize that we live in a similar period: calls for the reform of clerical life leading to conciliar declarations, principally the “Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests” (7 December 1965) and “Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church” (28 October 1965). Both councils, Trent and Vatican II, were followed by eras of reaction and reassessment. What concerns us here, however, is Vincent de Paul the reformer.

Reforms

What needed reforming? There were some small issues, small to us, at least, but grave for Vincent.

Oh, if you had only seen, I don’t want to say the ugliness, but the diversity, of the ceremonies of the Mass forty years ago, it would have made you ashamed! I don’t think there was anything uglier in the world than the different ways people were celebrating it: some began the Mass with the *Pater noster*; others would take the chasuble in their hands and say the *Introibo*, and then they’d put on that chasuble. Once I was at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, where I noticed seven or eight priests who all said Mass differently; one did it one way, the other another way; the diversity was worthy of tears.¹

The saint may not have reflected on the fact that priests in those days followed varying practices for the liturgy used in their home dioceses that differed from one another, the so-called Gallican rites that disappeared only gradually from Church life in France. At any event, he was not condemning the unworthiness of the priests or the nonchalant ways they were celebrating the Eucharist, only the variety that he found unbecoming. He, himself, had followed such rites while he was a pastor in Châtillon in 1617, using the required rites of the archdiocese of Lyons.

Of far greater weight was the life and behavior of priests. An official of a diocese wrote him with surprising eloquence:

---
¹ Conf. 206, CCD, 12, p. 212.
Here in this diocese the clergy are undisciplined, the people without fear and the priests without devotion and charity, pulpits without preachers, knowledge without honor, vice without punishment. Virtue is persecuted, the authority of the Church hated or held in contempt. Private interest is the ordinary shekel of the sanctuary; the most scandalous are the most powerful, and flesh and blood have, as it were, supplanted the Gospel and the spirit of Jesus Christ.\(^2\)

Even more pointed was this next complaint from another bishop. He and his vicars had been laboring to reform his clergy, "but with little success because of the large and unaccountable number of ignorant and corrupt priests who make up my clergy and who are unable, either through word or example, to mend their ways. I am horrified when I think that in my diocese there are nearly seven thousand drunken or lewd priests who ascend the altar every day and who have no vocation."\(^3\) We need to examine this passage. First of all, is it conceivable that any diocese in the world today has seven thousand priests? Seventy is not bad, seven hundred is very large, but seven thousand? Was the bishop exaggerating? No, since we know that the number of the clergy, both diocesan and religious, was very high in France in Saint Vincent’s time. In today’s Church, Rome has around 5000 priests, but the other largest dioceses (Krakow, New York, Turin, Guadalajara, Munich, and Valencia for example) all number between 1300 and 2000. Pierre Blet, the well-known scholar of ecclesiastical life in France, quotes the estimate of 100,000 diocesan priests in France, with an equal number of religious in the period of Louis XIV.\(^4\)

A second point is that the bishop pointed to these immoral priests “who ascend the altar every day.” It seems normal to ask why immoral priests would celebrate the Eucharist every day. Isn’t there something contradictory between the sacred character of the Mass and the lack of personal holiness of the celebrant of the Mass? Of course, priests are sinners too, which is why, especially in the old liturgy of the Mass, the priest always made a public confession of sins at the foot of the altar and asked divine forgiveness. In the situation under discussion here, however, we should understand what was often referred to as “My Mass.” This meant the Mass that the priest celebrated, for which he received a stipend, an amount more or less regulated by statutes in the diocese, or guaranteed by a donation made by a member of the Church to offset the costs involved in the celebration (in general, the support of the church building as well as the support of the clergy.) In this light we appreciate the need to celebrate “My Mass” daily.

A third point refers to the moral situation of the 7000 priests of this diocese—perhaps it was Bourges, one of the largest dioceses of France. The bishop called his priests “drunken and lewd.” He perhaps was referring to their general or habitual

\(^3\)Letter 683, CCD 2, 473, cited from Abelly, ibid.
condition rather than their actual condition as they began the celebration of Mass. After all, the celebrant was to have fasted from all food and drink since the previous midnight, but perhaps we have an indication here of late nights spent in various sorts of debauchery. What could our friend Vincent have thought at hearing this? Certainly he knew of the inner lives of priests since he heard so many confessions and counseled so many clergy making retreats at Saint Lazare.

A fourth and final point is the matter of vocation. The bishop wrote: “[they] ascend the altar every day and ... have no vocation.” For us, who have gone through the reforms of the Council of Trent and subsequent councils, the concept of vocation and priesthood are complementary. The old registers of the names of seminarians, kept in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, often contained brief remarks about each one’s condition, plus the remarks made at the departure of a seminarian, whether voluntary or involuntary. The most common reason given for those going elsewhere is “no vocation.” In other words, the seminary director or staff judged that young Mr. X did not belong and should not advance toward priesthood since he lacked God’s call. This was, however, not often the case in earlier times—although, to be sure, we do not have many of these registers from those times.

Vincent might have found himself in a similar situation. He reflected once in a letter to a compatriot, Canon Saint-Martin: “As for myself, if I had known what it was when I had the temerity to enter [the priesthood]—as I have come to know since then—I would have preferred to till the soil than to commit myself to such a formidable state of life.” He developed a high esteem for the priesthood, something central to the French School of spirituality growing around him, and I presume that he could look back on his own life and draw a lesson from his experience. He was ordained at nineteen or twenty, years before the required age of twenty-four. Bishops made exceptions, of course, when they thought there was sufficient reason. What the reason was, if any, in Vincent’s case is unknown. The document he received from his home diocese of Dax giving permission for a bishop to ordain him states that he was “of legitimate age,” and clearly he wasn’t. Some have suspected fraud here, but it is more likely that the person issuing the document was simply copying a standard form, with little attention to the niceties.

It gets worse. Vincent’s own hope as a young priest was that he could soon retire. He wrote to his mother ten years after his ordination: “But I have such trust in God’s grace, that He will bless my efforts and will soon give me the means of an honorable retirement so that I may spend the rest of my days near you.” He hoped that his priesthood would offer him the means to support himself, and probably his mother, but where was his sense of calling? It has often been suspected that he was involved in

---

5 Ltr. 2027, CCD, 6, p. 569.
6 Doc. 7, CCD, 13a, p. 7.
7 Ltr. 3, CCD, 1, pp. 15-16.
some maneuvers to assure a future through his appointment as a bishop, thanks to influential friends in his native South.\footnote{Abelly, bk. 1, ch. 4, p. 42.}

All this shows the conflicted, or better, corrupt, ecclesiastical culture into which Vincent de Paul was stepping at the dawn of the seventeenth century.

**Finances**

A few comments on finances would seem be in order here. How were the clergy supported in Saint Vincent’s time? There were two major methods. To be ordained, every candidate had to have what was called a “title.” This refers to a source of funding to guarantee that he would not become a burden to his parish or diocese. One important “title” was the person’s own wealth, what was called his patrimony. If he could live off his own income, that was sufficient to allow him to be ordained. Most clergy, however, did not have such wealth, and they had to live from the income from their “benefice,” another canonical term referring to an office with responsibilities, to which an income was attached. We are not certain what Vincent’s title was, but his ordination documents state that he had one. It was perhaps the parish of Tilh, a few miles east of Dax. He would spend some anxious years in Paris accumulating benefices, like other young clergy were doing in his day, so as to guarantee his “honest retirement,” the sooner the better.

Other clergy developed ingenious ways of increasing their income. Bishops knew what income they could expect from individual dioceses, and this helps to explain why some bishops moved from a poorer diocese to a richer one. Individual examples exist of bishops who nominated a relative to succeed them (often a nephew), on condition that the successor grant his predecessor in office a percentage of the income from his benefice, that is, his diocese. Of course, many bishops managed to accumulate multiple benefices, such as vacant parishes. This was the case even in the twentieth century, when Cardinal O’Connell of Boston deliberately left important parishes vacant so that he could build up his own funds.\footnote{See: Douglas J. Slawson, *Ambition and Arrogance: Cardinal William O’Connell of Boston and the American Catholic Church*, San Diego, 2007.}

Another ingenious method was for a religious entity, often a monastery, to auction off one of its leading offices to someone who was not a member of the monastic community. The purchaser was basically investing his funds in the monastery to help both the monks and himself, since he would be given the right to a certain income for a period of time. Besides, he would have a lofty title, often Abbot, or *abbé*, in French. The widespread use of this method led the French language to generalize the title of *abbé* to apply to all diocesan priests, even today. There was also what we might call a secondary market in these investments, with the office-holder disposing of some part of
his benefice to someone else for financial considerations. Vincent was as guilty as the next person in engaging in the forbidden accumulation of benefices as a young priest, but he was successful at it and was able to live the first twenty-five years of his priestly life in this fashion. He renounced all of these later in life.

**Bishops**

Being named bishop entailed its own intricacies. Careful analysis of the nominations of bishops in this period by Joseph Bergin has shown that the candidates for bishops of large and influential dioceses were almost universally members of the nobility. Several noble families came to think of the dioceses as their property, such as the Bourdeilles of Perigueux, one of whose members ordained Vincent de Paul. The film *Monsieur Vincent* portrays a fearful Madame de Gondi, Vincent’s employer, demanding his return from wherever he had gone. The words are not hers, but those of the playwright Jean Anouilh, but they are clearly indicative of the time: “We are the archbishops of Paris,” she said. The Gondis held the diocese of Paris for nearly a century, through four members of their family: Pierre (1568-1597), Henri (1597-1622), Jean-François (1622-1654), and Jean-François Paul (1654-1661). It was the latter who was the youngest of the children of the Gondi family, and who knew Vincent as a tutor in his family. Vincent would ask him to approve the rules of his Congregation, even though he was forbidden by Cardinal Mazarin to set foot in Paris once he had evaded arrest in 1652 and fled to Rome two years later.

This also gets worse. Quoting now from Bergin: “[Henri IV] made arrangements for [the diocese of Metz] to pass to one of his bastard sons, Henri de Bourbon-Verneuil, who was an unconsecrated bishop there from 1612 to 1652, when Louis XIV unceremoniously obliged him to abandon it in order to marry!” Henri de Bourbon was bishop in name only, but he had the rights to the considerable income from his diocese. It is no wonder that the pious regent, Anne of Austria, called Vincent and his friends to engage in a major mission in Metz to reform the Church in that sorry diocese.

**Vincent’s reform initiatives**

So far, we have seen many of the problems about the clergy and even Vincent’s own peripheral problems as a priest.

---

12 “…alors que nous sommes archevêques de Paris.”
What did he do to counteract these? In fact, what made him want to counteract the problems? Beginning with the second question, the idea of reform was literally in the air, part of the atmosphere of early seventeenth-century France. Anyone who had a part in the reflective thought-world of that time was interested in reform.

In my judgment, one of the first things that Vincent did was to found his own Congregation. In establishing a community for giving missions he was following a path trodden by many others. Such foundations have been a feature of Church life for many centuries but, like small businesses or new restaurants, the majority of them do not succeed. To make his group succeed, to be faithful to his original inspiration, he wanted to make his Missioners (what he regularly called the members) models of priestly life. The men were to live in common, pray and work together, and be nourished together through external supports. One of these was his habit of giving spiritual talks—we call them conferences—to his men every week. He hammered away at his favorite themes for more than thirty years, so it is no wonder that his followers developed a sense of their own identity and purpose. In particular, he praised the priesthood and urged his men to respect and support priests in their simple, humble, gentle, self-denying but zealous way.\textsuperscript{15} When they gave missions in rural parishes, they often used their time to help the local clergy through retreats.

An outgrowth of the parish missions and clergy retreats was the association called the Tuesday Conferences. These were meetings of interested clergy who voluntarily agreed to bind themselves to a reformed way of life and to be nourished by the support of weekly conferences and discussions of spiritual and pastoral topics. The amount of reform these conferences accomplished is incalculable. The initiative, it should be mentioned, came from the clergy themselves. Vincent was like their sponsor or godfather.

Seminaries were another such development. They were preceded by specialized brief programs to prepare candidates for ordination. Actual seminary programs were of various types and achieved only modest success in earlier times, but Vincent and others in his period began the laborious task of founding or refounding seminaries and imparting the lessons that the directors and teachers had learned and assimilated in their own lives.

With the death of Louis XIII and the accession of his mother, Anne of Austria, to the regency of the kingdom—quite against the king’s own wishes—new winds of ecclesiastical reform began to blow in France. The queen regent expanded the purview of the council of ecclesiastical affairs, popularly known as the Council of Conscience. Formerly it had dealt with the appointments of bishops and abbots, but she added the supervision of all other religious affairs of the kingdom, such as ecclesiastical discipline,

\textsuperscript{15} See especially the fragment of a conference, Conf. CM 4, CCD 11, pp. 6-7.
the repression of abuses, and even the encroachment of Protestantism. It is regrettable that we do not have the minutes of these meetings, but it is known that Vincent de Paul was the secretary for about ten years, 1643-1653. He tried to insure that appointees would be good churchmen, pious and dedicated, and not simply men using the office of bishop to enrich themselves and to enhance their families’ honor.

His extensive correspondence with individual bishops, particularly Alain de Solminihac of Cahors, shows his attention to the details of clerical life. Solminihac was an extremely austere person and rigorous in enforcing clerical obligations on his priests. They responded by numerous lawsuits and Vincent supported the bishop (who has now been beatified by the Church).

The reforming activity that most endeared him to the Church in later years, however, was his rejection of Jansenism. This term describes a tendency in the theology of the period to exalt the omnipotence of God at the expense of human freedom. As with many similar movements, this one became involved in politics, not only in Vincent’s lifetime but a century later. In recognition of his stand against this movement, the Church took Vincent de Paul as a model. The text of his canonization document, for example, concentrates on this rather than on his many works of charity, although these were not neglected. When all this is considered, however, we readily see that Vincent was a leader in the reform of the Church in seventeenth century France.

He well deserved the praise lavished on him on 23 November 1660 by Bishop Henri de Maupas du Tour, bishop of Le Puy. He gave Vincent’s lengthy funeral oration in which he exclaimed, “He nearly changed the face of the Church.”

John E. Rybolt, C.M.
February 2010

---

16 See, for example, Coste, *Life and Works*, vol. 1, pp. 559-62.