Vincent de Paul as a fundraiser: his attitudes and practices

John E Rybolt, *DePaul University*
VINCENT DE PAUL AS A FUNDRAISER: HIS ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES
BY
JOHN E. RYBOLT, C.M.

In the Parisian church of St. Sulpice, a side chapel is dedicated to Vincent de Paul. He had worked there with the founder of the Society of St. Sulpice, Jean-Jacques Olier for some years, and assisted him on his deathbed. One of the painted elements in the ceiling of the chapel shows the saint in a gesture unique to this chapel. He is seated and turns away in horror from a richly-dressed man standing before him, undoubtedly someone asking a favor in return for some financial consideration. He never indulged in this kind of corrupt practice, well accepted in the patronage society of his time. Exactly what event the image refers to is unknown, but it must reflect a common understanding about Vincent de Paul and fundraising.

Fundraising is a new area of study relative to religious organizations. Except for periods of close relationship with civil governments, religious organizations (dioceses, religious communities, and charitable institutions of all sorts) were independent of them, such as in the earliest days of the Church, or in more recent times. As a result they had to depend on the goodwill offerings of benefactors. One of the standard complaints of religious leaders has been about their lack of men and money. Unfortunately, this drive toward financial support entailed practices that became corrupt over the years. This managed to alienate the faithful in many places. Calls for reform, concerning dogma and pastoral practice, as well as finances, reverberated throughout the Church, and by the time of Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), they led to a search for best practices.

Only a relatively few studies on the subject of fundraising (as part of the larger question of finances) have been published. The most notable of these is by Sister Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., “Vincentian Values and Fund Raising for the Mission,” Vincentian Heritage, 13, no. 1 (1992) 13-35.¹

For this study, I have chosen to review mainly unpublished materials previously overlooked by others. Why were they unpublished? Pierre Coste and his predecessor Jean-Baptiste Pémartin omitted from their collection of Vincentian texts many that they found to be too secular and lacking in what they decided was spirituality. That decision deprived generations of followers of St. Vincent from knowing authentic and interesting texts that give insight into the daily life of their founder.

As to the methodology employed here, I have attempted to uncover both what he did, his methods, and also why he acted in particular ways, his attitudes. Examining these methods and attitudes will demonstrate not only how he related both to those whom he was inviting to share in the financing of good works, but also to the recipients of this support. One caution should be made at the beginning, however. A simple solution to the issue of Vincent’s fundraising would

be to impose contemporary best practices on his period and then look for similarities between the two periods, ours and his, to illustrate a point. Instead, we need to let the texts speak for themselves, allowing us to draw the lessons of wisdom for today from the experience of the past.

**Context**

Colin Jones, the British commentator on poor relief in Europe in St. Vincent’s period, pointed to the “charitable imperative” of the Catholic reformation.²

But under the pressure of the Wars of Religion, the crown gained control of poor relief and hospitals from the municipalities (of whatever confession), and found itself competing with a revitalised Catholic Church. Jones sees here what he calls a “charitable imperative,” a moral obligation to give. To take an active role in the care of the poor came to be a sign of a renewed Catholic, seeking to put into practice an *imitatio Christi*. … The ideology of renewed Catholicism was crucial to developments in health care and poor relief in France.

It was precisely here that we see Vincent de Paul operating. He shared the same general sense about the social condition as did his acquaintance and near contemporary Antoine Godeau (1605-72), bishop of Grasse. His exhortation to the practice of works of charity was founded on a concept of atonement for sins: “From whence come these changes [the social disorder of the early 1650s] that are so wicked? From the war; and what has lit the fire [of conflict]? Your sins. What has fed [this disorder] for the last twenty years? Your sins. Thus atone for your sins through your acts of charity.”³ Vincent de Paul’s expressions were less stark than Godeau’s, but both he and the bishop were interested in the same project, the relief of the poor in the devastated provinces.

Another of the saint’s contemporaries was Charles Maignart de Bernières (1616-1662).⁴ It was he who developed the practice of gathering the reports from the Vincentians dispatched to serve the poor in the provinces of Picardy and Champagne, and then publishing them in increasing quantities for distribution around France. Their purpose was to advertise the needs of the poor. Although Vincent did not publish these reports personally, he did use them to motivate the Ladies of Charity—the Parisian noblewomen who organized to serve the poor—and to direct the apportionment of the funds received.⁵

---


⁴ Alexandre Féron, *La vie et les oeuvres de Ch. Maignart de Bernières (1616-1662); l'organisation de l'assistance publique a l'époque de la Fronde* (Rouen, 1930).

⁵ These reports were reprinted: *Recueil des relations contenant ce qui s'est fait pour l'assistance des pauvres, entre autres ceux de Paris et des environs et des provinces de Picardie et de Champagne, pendant les années 1650, 1651, 1652, 1653 et 1654* (Paris, 1862). Many of them were used in Alphonse Feillet, *La misère au temps de la Fronde et Saint Vincent de Paul* (Paris, 1862.)
One family that strongly felt the influence of this “charitable imperative” at the same time was the Bretonvilliers. Madame opened areas of her large Parisian mansion on the Ile St-Louis for the storage of goods collected in the capital. Charity so marked her family that her son, Alexandre, joined the Society of St. Sulpice, and Vincent de Paul presided at his installation in 1657 as their second superior general.

**Attitudes**

Vincent’s leading attitude toward the relief of the poor was the sacredness of the task. This guided his attempts in his own life, as will be seen below, as well as in his relations with possible donors. His work was to sensitize them, as he was, to the inner meaning of what they were about.

As is well known, Vincent strove throughout his long priestly life to be aware of the presence of God. He worked to see the hand of God in all that he did and in all that happened to him through divine providence. The presence of so many poor and suffering, which increased during his lifetime, must have caused him to reflect deeply on the meaning of their presence. He embraced an ancient perspective: seeing the suffering Jesus in the person of the poor. The contemporary view was to see the poor as a problem to be dealt with, hopefully to be excised from society. He, however, was countercultural in seeing his poor—and ignorant—brothers and sisters as the real presence of Jesus in society. Since all Christians form one body with their Savior, if any of them suffers it becomes incumbent on the others to relieve their distress.

He was able to focus on this theological perspective because he had plenty of time to reflect on it. He rarely missed his daily hour of morning meditation, and he admitted occasionally that the insights he gained in prayerful reflection on the tasks facing him during the day that was beginning helped guide his thoughts and actions.

When speaking to his confreres, he also returned to thoughts or inspirations that he received in his meditative reading of the Scriptures. One such is his presentation of the Rechabites, a group of counter-cultural tribespeople who maintained the ancient form of life of pastoral nomads. They figure in Jeremiah 35:1-11. Vincent presented them as examples of those who relied in a radical way on Providence alone. “But the fact remains that the trust of this man [Rechab] was so great that he deprived himself of all the conveniences of life to depend absolutely on the care of Providence.” In an unpublished conference on the same topic he exclaimed:

Oh, *mon Dieu*, my brothers, let us ask of the divine goodness a perfect confidence in his province, since, provided we are faithful to God, we will lack nothing. … Oh, the misery of the one who dares to rely more on his own work than on the goodness of God. … Let

---

6 Conf. to CM 198, CCD, 12:118. He generally read the same passage as an encouragement to remain faithful to the customs of the past (Conf. to DC 16, CCD, 9:112; Conf. to DC 59, CCD 9:546; Conf. to CM 128, CCD 11:202; Conf. to CM 180, CCD 12:6.)
us take our rest in the loving care of a God who watches over our needs and whose wisdom is infinite. Let us think only about serving Him well.\(^7\)

**Practices**

His theological attitudes, prayerfully considered, guided his practices. Just as he respected the recipients of charity, so he respected the donors. These same attitudes also guided those deputed to seek the support of others. For this reason, the following section is divided into three, dealing with donors, petitioners or fundraisers, and recipients.

**I. Donors**

Those approaching donors should in all cases respect them by presenting an honest and simple presentation of needs. The following forms part of his instructions to his confrères sent to solicit alms for the poor:

The distributor of alms should present the condition of the poor truly and simply, without exhorting those who help them to continue or to increase their alms. … This happens without anyone talking about it, but it suffices to present the need. Donors love directness [solidité] and not discourses. And since they act well in all things, it is good for them if someone writes them about the good that they have seen their donations accomplish, and it is right to put oneself in the place of the poor to show great thanks in a few words. Tell them how many poor we are helping ordinarily, what we give them daily, weekly, or monthly, the order that we observe in the distribution, and what this can amount to weekly.\(^8\)

Several lessons are found in this paragraph. First, respect for the donors should lead the fundraiser (or “distributor,” since Vincent pictured them as already having distributed alms and now are returning to the same donors) to rely on the strength of first-hand experience of the needs of the poor: “it suffices to present the need.” His own experience told him that “donors love directness and not discourse.” He wanted his men to thank the donors in the name of the poor, showing that the distributors of the alms had had personal acquaintance and contact with the poor. This would make the presentation more direct. Lastly, he urged good accounting of where the funds went: “what we give them daily, weekly, or monthly….”

Although the document lacks a note that claims St. Vincent as the author, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that it came from him. This set of recommendations continues:

---


[Tell them] how many weak Catholics have been strengthened in their faith, how many have been brought back to the right way, and the other results brought about by their temporal help when they are joined to good instructions and the good examples of those who have distributed the alms. … how many parishes in towns and country; how many poor girls in each parish, the number of children, especially orphans and widows who are being helped or who need help, the number of the sick, if there are any.

His own experience showed that almsgiving should have a spiritual component to it as well, particularly the “good instructions and the good examples of those who have distributed the alms.” The distributors of alms were charged with giving both temporal assistance and spiritual help through instructions and especially the good examples of their lives. Vincent was also aware of the plight of young women, who were among the most needy because they were regarded as the weakest of society. He placed them first in the list of other classes of the disadvantaged: children, orphans, widows, and the sick.

Point out the families without beds or furniture, without clothing or any way to earn a living or to look for work. … Recount everything that could lead to compassion; always help those most in need and testify through personal experience their real need, without bringing in someone else’s experience, and do not be moved by personal recommendations [i.e., special pleading].

Vincent was more than a benefactor or channel of funds. In this document, as elsewhere, he wanted to be certain that the impoverished would have a “way to earn a living,” to be empowered, and for this purpose he was known to have seen to the distribution of tools and seeds for those working the land. His conclusion to this remarkable document was to concentrate on “those most in need.” He was engaged in a sort of triage among the poor, probably hoping that their neighbors who were at least a little better off would help those in greater need. His own experience also taught him that the demands of clout, or special pleading by interested parties, should have no place in the care of the poor. In another document he praises this precise case: “This gift should never be forgotten: a poor woman gave away her wardrobe and her shoes and came back in bare feet; when someone told her about this, saying that she would be in greater need to receive than to give, she answered with all simplicity of heart that she had donated her best.”

In appealing to the Ladies of Charity, he sought to involve them in the service of the sick poor, both individually and collectively, even reaching outside the close-knit group of noblewomen that constituted their organization. Their rule read:

Besides the service mentioned above that the ladies will offer to the sick poor, each one of them will contribute to the necessary expenses, and each one will donate according to

---

9 Guichard, Notes et Documents, vol. 6, p. 22, citing the printed “Relations,” for January 1653, p. 78bis; original in Bibliothèque nationale (BN): Lb. 27 3189.
their devotion and will try, as much as they can, that others contribute, in money, linen, bedding, cloth, preserves, or other items that can help the sick poor.\textsuperscript{10}

Embedded in this appeal was the concept of “holy rivalry,” the mutual encouragement to do good that would spur others to charity. A note in the document cited above attempts to engender this competition:

The liberality of the butchers of St. Sulpice, Ste. Genevieve, of the place aux Veaux, and of St. Nicolas des Champs, who gave five to six thousand pounds of meat for free. The milliners who generously responded with money, decorations, and the materials of their profession…. We expect the same of the chief overseers of merchandise, those in charge of the crafts, and from other groups. The ardent zeal of the pastors to recommend this work in their exhortations, the preachers in their sermons, the hospitals that have allowed collections, the poor who have given from their own necessities, the rich from their abundance, good clergy who have donated their altar vessels [to devastated churches], and the ladies who have given their holy handiwork and their generous contributions for an assortment of so many needs.\textsuperscript{11}

Vincent also understood that donors needed recognition. Rather than referring, as we would, to their psychological needs, he couched his approach in terms of respect for them. The noblewomen had everything that they needed and more besides, hence gifts and souvenirs were out of the question. He appealed to a larger scriptural perspective by showing that what they were doing was similar to what the widows of the ancient Church did. He told the Ladies at the Hotel Dieu: “You practice what widows of the primitive Church did, namely, to meet the material needs of the poor as they did, and even the spiritual needs of persons of their own sex, as they did.”\textsuperscript{12} He was scrupulous enough to add that they were “released, as it were, from the prohibition placed upon you by Saint Paul in 1 Cor 14….” He hoped their commitment would be deepened by realizing how similar they were to the blessed widows of centuries past.

Similarly, he also showed them respect by joining special events to their meetings. Pierre Coste, the saint’s major biographer of the twentieth century, wrote: “Saint Vincent, in order to give greater solemnity to the meetings, from time to time offered the position of chairman to some ecclesiastical dignitary; the Archbishop of Reims on at least two occasions accepted his invitation.”\textsuperscript{13} In this way, the saint was offering them recognition for what they were doing, and doubtless increasing their zeal for the work.

His respect also helped him to handle the case of a hostile benefactor. Brother Louis Robineau, his secretary, reports this occasion:

As we will see there was another act of heroic charity that he often repeated. He greatly displeased a gentleman from Paris…, who wanted to alter his will and take back what he

\textsuperscript{10} “Mémoire de ce qui est observé par la Compagnie des Dames de la Charité de l’Hôtel-Dieu de Paris, pour en former d’autres semblables és autres villes du royaume,” in Guichard, Notes et documents, 6, p. 92; printed original in Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, ms. 2565, n° 2, recueil de règlements de charité.

\textsuperscript{11} Quoted from the report of January 1653, p. 15, cited in Guichard, Notes et Documents, VI, 34, p. 76.

\textsuperscript{12} Doc. 186, CCD 13b:381.

had given to the Company. This was quite burdensome. At the same time, this same man uttered atrocious insults against the honor and reputation of Monsieur Vincent. Despite all this, Monsieur Vincent never ceased to pray for him. When the man died, Monsieur Vincent would not omit anything that we owe to a benefactor on his death, namely prayers and suffrages.\textsuperscript{14}

Along the same line, he realized that by receiving a donation for the works of the Congregation, he had entered into a relationship with that person. The donation involved much more than a financial transaction. Robineau informs us:

> Once he wrote a letter to a benefactor of the Company in 1655, offering to return the gift he had given since he believed that this benefactor might need it. He begged him to consider what belonged to the Company as his own. He told him: “We will sell on your behalf whatever we have, even the chalices. In this way we will do what the canons require, namely to give to our benefactor in his need what he had given us when he was well-off.” Then, continuing his discourse, he added: “What I am telling you is not to seek a compliment, but to see it as it is seen in the sight of God, and as I experience it in the depths of my heart.”\textsuperscript{15}

It is clear how strongly he felt about this and similar cases. He also respected the wishes of the donors, although he felt that when he received a special donation from the queen, Anne of Austria, he was obliged to inform others to enflame their charity. Again, Brother Robineau is the source:

> … it was mentioned that one day the queen mother gave Monsieur Vincent her earrings to help the poor…. When the queen had given her earrings to Monsieur Vincent, she insisted that he not talk to anyone about this, and even repeated this request. Then Monsieur Vincent answered with an exclamation: “Madame, Your Majesty will please pardon me, if I cannot keep hidden such a beautiful act of charity. It is good for all Paris to know of this, Madame, and I will talk about it everywhere.” Monsieur Vincent told us this himself.\textsuperscript{16}

In other words, the need for charity trumped the need for privacy.

2. \textit{Petitioners}

Those who asked for funds were never to be immune from obligations touching their own lives. Vincent knew well enough that access to wealth and power could corrupt even the most devoted person. As a result, he maintained great prudence and reserve in dealing with the rich and powerful, foreswearing any exercise of power through influence.

His basic practice was to be poor himself. It has been said that one of the great turning points in his life was when he realized that he was poor and consequently powerless.\textsuperscript{17} This was

\textsuperscript{15} Robineau, \textit{Remarques}, art. 283, p. 132.
\textsuperscript{16} Robineau, \textit{Remarques}, art. 233, pp. 111-12.
\textsuperscript{17} My thanks to Hugh O’Donnell, C.M., for this insight.
part of his commitment to searching for the presence of God in all he did and in all that happened to him. When he had to look for financial support, he maintained his own low profile, avoiding the trappings of power through outward show. In this way, he anticipated the modern concern about the cost of fundraising by using the funds well, and by acknowledging that the resources were to help the poor. Brother Robineau preserved a major excerpt from a conference in which Vincent dealt with the property of the Congregation:

However, before doing so, there are two essential truths that must be presupposed: the first is that the temporal property of the Church is something dedicated to God, and that one may not legitimately use it for another purpose than for the service of his divine Majesty; the second is that it is the patrimony of Jesus Christ and of the poor that allows us to benefit by taking only: 1) our food and very moderate support; 2) what is needed to furnish the other costs of the foundation. And when that is done, the rest should be used for the nourishment of the poor, who are the members of the same Jesus Christ.18

Writing for the members of the Tuesday Conferences—a voluntary group of clergy devoted to their personal spiritual improvement and the help of others—he urged them to proceed simply during the missions they were called on to give. During the closing procession, for example, he urged them “to avoid grandiosity, too many vestments, ceremonies, and expenses, doing these actions with all necessary simplicity and modesty.”19 Put another way, the petitioner was to follow the old adage: Practice what you preach. He should avoid show, use funds well, avoid useless expenses, and especially give from his personal funds, thus offering the good example of charitable giving. This was Vincent’s his own practice, as Robineau recorded:

Before [Monsieur Vincent’s] death, a Master of Requests [a high-level judicial officer of administrative law] asked him to ask the Ladies Charity for alms for a poor person. He did so but obtained nothing. When he returned from the meeting, he had me called and asked me to find this good gentleman and tell him that he had unable to obtain anything for the poor man that he had mentioned to him. However, Monsieur Vincent then gave me six écus to give to this good gentleman to distribute them as he judged best. This so edified this Master of Requests that he told me: “This is marvelous. Monsieur Vincent does not only content himself with asking others to provide charity for the poor, but he also gives from his own funds.”20

To concretize the need, Vincent urged that the plight of the poor be portrayed in such a way as to elicit compassion, and then the petitioner should experience their plight in his own heart. As to the first, his “Relations” were carefully written to appeal to the senses of the readers by presenting sights, sounds, smell, even taste, as in the following written about St.-Quentin:

While another priest was making his rounds, he found many doors closed, but he had them opened and found that the sick were so weak that they could not even open the door, since they had not eaten for three days. They had only half-rotten straw to lie on. The number of these poor folk was so large that, without the help sent from Paris when they expected a

18 Robineau, Remarques, art. 60, pp. 47-48.
20 Robineau, Remarques, art. 270, p. 126.
sieve, the gentlemen of the city, unable to feed them, had decided to throw them over the city walls…. In the monastery of the Franciscan Sisters, the need was such that its fifty nuns were reduced to eating bread made of grass and barley, along with some onions.\textsuperscript{21} 

He shared with his community his deepest feelings about such disasters: “He told us one day that there were two things that bothered him terribly because of the responsibility that he had [as superior general]: … the second was that we could not hurry to the aid of the poor as we ought. He said this concerning the two provinces of Champagne and Picardy.”\textsuperscript{22} 

All things considered, it could also be said that, for him, fundraising more than just an occupation; it was a calling. As such, it demanded deep personal commitment and engagement with the range of issues facing the poor.

3. Recipients

One of the most illustrative examples of Vincent’s respectful approach to the poor is found in a talk he gave to his confreres about the duty of evangelizing the poor. Some of them had been ignoring this task, but he held up to them the figure of Jesus speaking simply to the Samaritan woman at the well in Nablus: “once He was there, [he] began to instruct that woman by asking for some water. ‘Woman, give me some water,’ He said to her.” On this basis, even the brothers in the farmyard could approach a poor and uninstructed person: “So he [the Brother] can ask one, then the other. ‘\textit{Eh bien!} How are your horses getting along? How’s this? How’s that? How are you doing?’, beginning in this way with something similar and then moving on to our plan [for evangelizing].”\textsuperscript{23} Using these simple words, the brother could approach the poor person with respect, beginning with something that he or she could talk about.

Another example comes from the rules for the Confraternity of Charity at Châtillon—an organization established to serve the poor of the parish—describing with what respect the women members should serve the poor sick:

… she will prepare the dinner and take it to the patients, greeting them cheerfully and kindly. She will set up the tray on the bed, place on it a napkin, a cup, a spoon, and some bread, wash the patient’s hands, and then say grace. She will pour the soup into a bowl, and put the meat on a plate. She will arrange everything on the bed tray, then kindly encourage the patient to eat for the love of Jesus and His holy Mother. She will do all this as lovingly as if she were serving her own son—or rather God, who considers as done to Himself the good she does for persons who are poor.

This document dates from 1617, therefore early in the saint’s life. It shows the thoughtful approach he already had and which formed part of his manner throughout life. Brother Robineau preserved several recollections about this way of acting.

\textsuperscript{22} Robineau, \textit{Remarques}, art. 300, p. 136.
\textsuperscript{23} Conf. to CM 161, CCD 11:344.
When some poor peasant from the country came to see him, or some poor prisoner or slave released from captivity, he had them sit down next to him in his room. He used to talk with them with such happiness, goodness, and humility that everyone who saw them was edified by it. This is what I have seen several times.  

Another act of respect has to be placed in the hierarchically arranged society of his time, when the type and use of head covering had social significance: “Whenever he would speak to some poor person, it was most often with his hat or his biretta in his hand. He conferred with them and spoke to them at meetings with such meekness and humility that those who saw him were edified by it.”

Conclusion

Many other examples could be cited, but they all center on Vincent’s seriousness of purpose, focused on the centrality of God’s work, and respect for every human person. As a sensitive individual, he understood in his own heart the trials of the poor. As a contemplative in action, he took the time needed to reflect deeply on his response. This is what has led him to be called, among other titles, the “Apostle of Charity.”

---

24 Robineau, Remarques, art. 54, p. 44.
25 Robineau, Remarques, art. 46, p. 42.