



TRAINING REFLECTION
September 2021

Saint Vincent de Paul: Spirituality and Commitment

Getting to know our Founder, St. Vincent de Paul, will make us love him more every day. It will deepen our sense of belonging to the work he founded, and make us better witnesses of the love that Jesus has for people who lack the most basic things because they are in a situation of poverty.

In honouring our Founder, we have been inspired by the book *Vicente de Paúl, un corazón sin medida* (“Vincent de Paul, a Heart Without Measure”) by Father Celestino Fernandez, CM. He describes St. Vincent as an indefinable man:

Kind and energetic; active and contemplative; intelligent but not given to intellectual reflections; reserved and communicative; traditional and innovative; critical of power yet able to collaborate with it; affectionate and unsentimental; ironic and serious; idealistic, but with his feet on the ground; flexible and inflexible; a tireless worker, but who resented activism. In short, all of these adjectives can be illustrated by his writings, anecdotes and the decisions he made throughout his life.

We know the life of our Founder, but sometimes we are unsure about what is **Vincentian spirituality** and what is the **Vincentian charism**.

We will begin by defining what “**Christian spirituality**” is. This is the part of theology that studies the dynamism that the Holy Spirit produces in the life of the soul. In other words, how it is born, how it grows and develops until it reaches holiness: a state in which God calls us from all eternity, a state which He transmits to others through the word, the witness of life, and the effective apostolate.

The Holy Spirit enlightened St. Vincent to imitate Jesus Christ through the attention he gave to people living in poverty. St. Vincent, who followed this prompting of the Spirit through his own example and perception of life, invites us to do the same.



St. Vincent's spirituality was forged through the great masters of his time: Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle, St. Francis de Sales, Thomas à Kempis and St. Teresa of Ávila. He assimilated the best from each one and added what none of his teachers had discovered: **the poor as the living presence of the Lord.**

This understanding of people living in poverty is vital in Vincentian spirituality. St. Vincent taught the members of the Confraternities of Charity, the priests of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity that the only path to perfection was to see people living in poverty as the living and suffering image of Jesus Christ. To travel this path, we should work to satisfy the bodily, intellectual, moral and spiritual needs of these people. The spirituality of St. Vincent de Paul is not a spirituality of "theories" but of "life".

Charisms in general are special graces that the Holy Spirit gives us, through which the faithful "are prepared and disposed to assume various tasks or ministries that contribute to renewing and continuing to build the Church" (Letter of his Holiness Pope Francis to the people of God on pilgrimage in Germany, 29th June 2019, n.9).

In short, the Vincentian spirituality is "what" St. Vincent taught us and the Vincentian charism is "how" St. Vincent asks us to care for those who need us most.

Father Celestino describes three pillars that support Vincentian spirituality:

1. **The primacy of God: God's love and love for God** always occupied the most important place in Vincent de Paul's life, and he was able to become the great defender of people living in poverty because he made his love of God radically effective.
2. **The centrality of Jesus Christ:** This centrality of Christ can be summarized in the famous phrase that Vincent wrote to Monsieur Portail: "Remember, Monsieur, we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ" (CCD, I:276).
3. **Passion for the poor:** Vincent de Paul teaches us that the poor, people that many look down upon, are in reality above us; and that we are their humble servants and "unworthy to render them our modest services". And above all, the poor are our judges because they can condemn us or save us: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father [...] For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink" (Mt 25:34-35). "Depart from me, you who are cursed [...] For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink" (Mt 25:41-42).



Vincent de Paul found that people living in poverty are far more than the beneficiaries of our services – they are the worldly presence of the crucified Lord.

To conclude, we leave you with two thoughts from St. Vincent. Although his messages were addressed to priests, if we as AIC volunteers, and all the members of the Vincentian Family, want to live in the spirit of Jesus Christ and St. Vincent de Paul, then we must strive to make them come alive.

St. Vincent told missionaries in 1659: **“What I retain from my experience of this is the discernment I’ve always made that true religion – true religion, Messieurs, true religion – is found among the poor”** (CCD, XII, p.142).

“In this vocation, we’re very much in conformity with Our Lord Jesus Christ, who seems to have made His principal aim, in coming into the world, to assist poor people and to take care of them” (CCD, XI, p.98).

Questions to discuss in your groups:

1. Use examples from the life of St. Vincent to illustrate the virtues that Father Celestino describes in the first quote on page 1.
2. Of the two thoughts from St. Vincent that we shared with you, which one caught your attention the most? Explain the reasons.
3. Which parts of St. Vincent’s spirituality most struck you when you heard the call to your Vincentian vocation?

Bibliography: Celestino Fernández, CM, *Vicente de Paúl, un corazón sin medida*. Editorial La Milagrosa.

