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Vincent de Paul: The Principles and Practice of Government, 1625-60

BY

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In 1626, the government of the Congregation of the Mission was not an especially complex task. As an urgent priority, this small foundation of four priests had gained sound legal and financial footing under the terms of the contract signed one year earlier by Vincent de Paul and his longterm employers, the Gondis. This guaranteed the Congregation a capital sum of 45000 livres, the income from which would be devoted to maintaining at least six priests who would perform missions every five years on the rural Gondi lands and amongst galley convicts. The youthful association's legitimacy and security was safeguarded further when the archbishop of Paris formally approved its foundation in April 1626, and granted it the medieval college of Bons-Enfants three months later. However, one month before the crown issued letters patent for the Congregation in May 1627, the foundation contract was modified, and the alterations to it bore the marks of a superior who was already being obliged to consider the future expansion of the still tiny association as well as the potential pitfalls that might bedevil it in the future. Now, excepting the plan for five yearly missions on their lands, the Gondi family agreed to withdraw all contractual clauses that had ascribed them any power over the Congregation's missions as well as over 'the manner of life' of its members. Significantly, the initial contract's instruction that the Congregation's superior should be elected triennially once Vincent de Paul died was revoked in favor of an order that the election of superiors should be left 'to the Regulations or Constitutions that will be made and drawn up' by him.¹

By this time, Vincent had joined his companions in Bons-Enfants, and the path was now clear to establish a distinctive structure for the Congregation that was not so tightly bound to its patron founders. From a tiny and quite inauspicious beginning the group expanded, at first slowly, then with pace: landmarks included its acquisition of a new base for operations at Saint-Lazare in 1632, papal approval of the Congregation in 1633 and the distribution of its Rules and Constitutions in 1658. By the time of Vincent's death, its infrastructure included twenty-one establishments in France, mainly established from 1638, and it had sent members to Italy,

¹ Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. by Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., et al, 1-10, 13a & 13b (New York: New City Press, 1990-2003), 13a:213-25. Hereinafter cited as CCD.

Savoy, Poland, Ireland, Scotland, North Africa and Madagascar. Recruitment flourished from the mid-1630s, with at least four hundred and twenty-six members during Vincent de Paul's superior generalship, while an extensive network of patrons was cultivated wherever the Congregation operated. In addition, the association allied with two other 'Vincentian' organizations, the Ladies of Charity and the Daughters of Charity. De Paul maintained a vigilant eye on the activities of these female organizations, in collaboration with Louise de Marillac, a succession of able presidents of the Ladies, and the Daughters remained formally under the authority of the superior general of the Congregation. Excluding their Parisian bases, the Daughters had forty-two establishments in France by 1660, and it is reasonable to assume that branches of the Ladies of Charity existed alongside them as well as in other areas in which the Congregation operated.

The constellation of Congregation, Daughters and Ladies ensured that the range of activities which required the superior general's input moved far beyond the guidance of a small community and the delivery of rural missions: it extended to the administration of seminaries, running of retreats and charitable initiatives. When Vincent de Paul gazed outward from Saint-Lazare in the twilight of his long career, how did he explain this dramatic and sustained growth? He would surely have assumed that divine providence was the principal architect of the steps and events that had enabled the three organizations to emerge initially, to expand and to consolidate. As he consistently reminded himself and others, the fate of humans, their institutions and their work remained entirely in the gift of providence. This, he believed, was the fundamental maxim of faith that gave direction and purpose to his own life, the lives of his comrades and the work of the Congregation and its fellow associations of charity.² It necessitated trusting abandonment to God's will, and acceptance of success and failure as elements of the history of salvation.

Yet, a worldview based on providence did not spawn feelings of utter powerlessness, pessimism or inertia. Firstly, in refusing to judge events solely by the world's normal standards of accomplishment, Vincent was able to interpret them according to the Christian teachings of hope, struggle and salvation. Secondly, he scrupulously reminded himself and others that he approved 'of the maxim that all licit and possible means should be used for the glory of God' provided, of course, that 'we expect everything from His Divine Providence, as though we had no human means.'³ While initiatives in government, therefore, were not direct means of celebrating the 'glory of God', they would play a crucial role in providing the mechanisms and structures that would allow Vincent and his associates to do so.

² Vincent de Paul to René Alméras, 11 September 1649, *CCD*, 3:477-79.

³ Vincent de Paul to Marc Coglée, 24 April 1652, *Ibid.*, 4:362.

Government placed Vincent de Paul in the position of figurehead, inspiration and model, but also required him to become a wellspring of spiritual and practical support and direction, and the fosterer of collegiality, common purpose, discipline, initiative and confidence. Their exhibition was colored profoundly by the spiritual values and goals that he envisaged to be central to Christian vocations and to Christian engagement with the world. Vincent's undeniable prowess in developing the Congregation and its sister bodies rested on an acute understanding of human psychology and a consistent acceptance of key spiritual principles. In other words, his governing methods kept a close eye on both natural or human and supernatural or divine principles. He did not see these as opposing but as complementary and co-operative.

Characteristically, as a result, Vincent moved cautiously in developing governmental structures and techniques, reflecting carefully on the benefits and risks of innovations and drawing heavily on his and the Congregation's experiences, the experiences of similar organizations and the advice of trusted confidants. In its basic governing structure, the Congregation operated hierarchically; when each local house was established it replicated the organization's universal structure. The Congregation did not operate on a 'one man, one vote' democratic basis in important matters. From its inception, a superior general headed the Congregation, and governmental levels and offices, similar to those of traditional religious orders, were incorporated as its operative complexity evolved. Most noticeably, when new houses were established, Vincent appointed a superior who reported directly to him, and the superior appointed a range of officers with special responsibilities. Each superior was advised by two experienced assistants appointed by the superior general or the house visitor, just as Vincent de Paul sought the guidance of assistants and an extraordinary assembly of superiors and seasoned members for major decisions. The house superiors who sat on this council acted as the representatives of their communities, and were told to take into account the needs of all those under their care in making and contributing to decisions. Further, as Vincent recommended in 1632 and had witnessed in other religious associations, provincial visitors travelled a circuit to houses in the four provinces (established in 1642) in order to identify problems and good practice, and to offer supportive recommendations for the future. They were also required to meet triennially to monitor general progress and to counter the superior general's 'infractions,' if necessary.⁴

As the system of government evolved, Vincent provided a charismatic connection between the Congregation, Daughters and Ladies; his governmental approach never permitted systematic or impersonal organization to

⁴ 1651 Council, *Ibid.*, 13a:374-95.

overshadow personal relationships. However, his close relationship with Louise de Marillac, and his regular meetings with the Daughters and some branches of the Ladies, could have resulted in their remaining entirely dependent on his personal custodianship, perhaps with detrimental results when he died. This was a particular threat to the perpetuation of the Ladies. The association operated democratically, with each member voting on options proffered. Many of the local associations were not formally under the Congregation's authority; Vincent relied on Congregation superiors as well as patchy and intermittent visits by Louise de Marillac to maintain practical links with them. Equally, the only formal connection between individual associations lay in their adherence to basic common rules. It was therefore a more autonomous and fragmented body than the Daughters; Vincent probably endorsed the self-contained model so individual divisions could prosper even when the Congregation or Ladies were not permanently within close range. But this strategy did not always work and a few failed to thrive without energetic promotion and steerage from outside. However, in general, and crucially, the consolidation of the Ladies and Daughters did not destroy the valuable spiritual affinities and practical links that attached them to the Congregation. Beyond the Daughter's formal affiliation to the Congregation, there are two principal reasons for this: firstly, Vincent ensured that the three collectives retained a fundamental unity of purpose; secondly, he devoted enormous energy to the nurture of effective leaders within them.

Vincent understood unity of purpose to be an essential component in each of the three groups with which he worked, as well as being a thread that bound all three together. He could not allow that he formed the only or main connection between them, nor was it sufficient to state simply that all three sought the glory of God. He needed to clarify the general terms of that objective: the imitation of Jesus through the work of salvation. Yet he also needed to highlight aspects of it that each group could embrace as their specific and special value, model and mandate: the Congregation members as ministers of rural evangelisation, and the Daughters and Ladies servants of God through maternal nurture of the sick and poor. In this way, despite differences in the type of functions carried out (missions, seminaries, nursing, fundraising and so on) and in the social, ecclesiastical or sexual status of their members, they could all share a common sense of identity and familial fraternity.

This balance between the particular and the general was naturally easiest to perpetuate within the Congregation and Daughters, within which Vincent de Paul acted for years as the paternal founding authority. However, in Paris, he was careful to nurture the Ladies' sense of inclusion and shared possession, through regular meetings to reflect on their spiritual motivations, review their projects, share with them the ways in which their funds were being used and

consult them on potential initiatives. This was a form of flattery that offered the Ladies an authentic influence, tying them even more closely to the work of charitable welfare. Their assertive input also permitted them significant control over their schemes and balanced their relationship with the Congregation and Daughters. At the same time it indicated that Vincent did not just admire their deep financial pockets, but valued the practical common sense and spiritual intelligence that were such essential elements of their contribution to the charitable imperative that sought to meet Jesus in the vulnerable:

While waiting to be able to share your letters with the Ladies who are helping the people in the ruined border areas and to find out from them whether you might extend your distribution to the Huguenots (Protestants), as well as... to the poor people who can work... their original intention was to assist only those who cannot work....⁵

In this instance, Vincent implicitly trained a local superior in the importance of recognizing and endorsing the active and special contribution made by lay volunteers. He also tutored him on the best means of ensuring their continued benevolence. On one occasion, he offered Coglée meticulous instructions on composing a written request for funds to the Ladies. The attention to persuasive detail is compelling, but it illustrates Vincent's assumption that those with responsibility for taking initiatives should possess all relevant information. Therefore, Coglée was asked to provide complete information on the person involved, her previous good character and work, her present hardships in terms of income, age and health, and future intentions; he should suggest a sum of money that would be sufficient to answer her needs.⁶ Clearly, Vincent was very familiar with the merits of this particular case, and it is indicative of the conscientious gathering, collation and transmission of massive amounts of information that characterized his career.

To foster their sense of corporate loyalty, Vincent de Paul dispersed the vivid language of familial affection liberally through his correspondence to the three associations. He often read letters from the outposts aloud to residents of Saint-Lazare, disclosing highs and lows of Congregation life, and acted as a conduit for developments that affected all members at least indirectly. When writing to Congregation members living far from the mother-house in Paris, he frequently concluded his letters with assurances that he and all those at Saint-Lazare were praying for the health, safety and success of their brethren. For example:

⁵ Vincent de Paul to Marc Coglée, 26 April 1651, *Ibid.*, 4:188.

⁶ Vincent de Paul to Marc Coglée, 6 October 1655, *Ibid.*, 5:445-47.

We have prayed in common and privately for the preservation of your sick men, especially for M. Dufour, who is in danger. *Mon Dieu!* Monsieur, how anxious I am about him and how I fear losing such a good servant of God.⁷

Several days before Vincent expressed his concern, he wrote an inspirational letter to Dufour's superior, Marc Coglée, who was encountering distressing challenges in war torn Sedan:

I shall continue to recommend to the Company that they place your needs before God ...If your family redoubles its courage and fidelity for the good use of the common affliction and the consolation of the souls His Providence places in its path, this will be the means of drawing down blessings on the town and on yourselves.⁸

In this excerpt, it is clear that Vincent sought to bolster the energy and courage of Coglée and his fellows by reminding them that they should be inspired by the hopes and prayers of colleagues who understood and shared their objectives. He also advocated that the family endure their trials and tribulations in unity and in anticipation of future consolation. Vitally, he firmly positioned their Sedanese family within the familial circle of the Congregation and then placed both within the larger protective ambit of the earthly and heavenly family of God and men.

At the core of Vincent de Paul's ability to situate government within a familial identity, however, was his presentation of Jesus Christ as the primary unifying force of the family. Before concluding a letter to Lambert aux Couteaux, superior of the far-flung house in Warsaw, with a heartfelt admission that he missed his associate, he commented:

We are just about finished with preparations for ordination, and the solemnity of Christmas is almost upon us. I ask Our Lord to grant you the grace of entering fully into the love and practice of the virtues resplendent in his holy birth and to be more than ever the life of your life and the unifying bond of your little family, whom I embrace tenderly.⁹

⁷ Vincent de Paul to Marc Coglée, 4 December 1650, *Ibid.*, 4:122.

⁸ Vincent de Paul to Marc Coglée, 26 November 1650, *Ibid.*, 4:117.

⁹ Vincent de Paul to Lambert aux Couteaux, 21 December 1651, *Ibid.*, 4:292.

Once again, Vincent entwined the life of the individual with that of the larger family of the Congregation, and subjected both firmly to the creative impulse of Jesus in their actions. Additionally, he explicitly suggested that Jesus should be the model for Congregation life, so that his virtues would become the badges of an exemplary priest and the collective marks of the association. It is certain, as a result, that he considered Jesus to be, specifically, the archetype from which the Congregation should draw its values for government. Importantly too, by presenting Jesus as a unifying bond, he found a way to circumvent early modern social barriers that might preclude him from using familiar familial language when addressing the Ladies of Charity. This particular concept dislodged attention from his personal relationship with the Ladies in favor of their relationship with the divine. Advantageously, it also enabled him to link the three organizations with which he worked in a shared value which gave them direction and a sense of combined purpose, even as they assumed a variety of tasks over a wide geography.



Saint Louise de Marillac. Period engraving.
Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

As the three organizations expanded, the importance of maintaining their particular priorities in work as well as a sense of common mission became a more pressing problem. In order to ensure that the members of the three groups continued to carry out the work to which they had dedicated themselves while keeping sight of their collective goal, Vincent knew that it was absolutely essential to nurture leaders on whom he could rely to live up to and perpetuate these values. He prepared individuals such as Louise de Marillac and Lambert aux Couteaux to assume mantles of responsibility that he would not be able to wear indefinitely and, as they gained experience and confidence, he regarded them increasingly as collaborators rather than as subordinate administrators. His confidence in Louise was such that he relied

upon her to maintain absolute steadiness amongst her Daughters and in the management of their work.¹⁰ Rather than simply being a dogmatic authority, their dialogues indicate that he acted primarily as a constantly available source of honest spiritual and practical advice, who encouraged Louise to trust her ability to initiate, judge and supervise. Importantly, Vincent earned Louise's respect for his opinion by his generous availability, frankness and edifying example of piety and leadership; this proved just as influential as the existence of a formal constitutional link between their organizations. As they deepened their collaboration, each assumed complementary roles in government and Vincent kept a lighter rein on her actions. For example, he urged Louise to ensure that the 1640 contractual agreement for the Daughters' first venture into a provincial hospital clearly elaborated their duties and rights in order to ensure the viability of the project; having been led through the process once, Louise was able to use this document as a prototype for the subsequent agreements she engineered.¹¹

The Daughters routinely operated as an internally cohesive association whose members, under their superior's eye, were encouraged to contribute to the cultivation of spiritual norms and a rule of life as well as to physical work. Vincent de Paul's willingness to view his members' vocations as spiritually valid and fruitful meant that he did not tend to emphasise the subsidiary aspects of their liaison with the Congregation. Rather, he chose to emphasize the particular charisms that made the groups complementary, mutually beneficial and even dependent on one another, as well as their shared focus on emulating Jesus in distinctive ways.

One of the principal governmental skills that Vincent displayed was a willingness to integrate flexibility into the governmental system. In the Congregation, it proved crucial to provide a stable and sustainable structure for management that was sufficiently elastic to react to specific, often unfamiliar, situations and circumstances arising from its relations with the Daughters and Ladies and with local ecclesiastical and secular authorities. So, it was crucial that Vincent de Paul ensured that he was as well informed as possible about local circumstances and individuals before offering thoughtful insights and suggestions for resolving difficulties. He often made preliminary queries to acquaint himself with details and context, without concern for the fact that he revealed his ignorance in doing so.¹² Vincent did not value authority as innately praiseworthy; instead, the point of his position of authority was to ensure that that the Congregation and its sister

¹⁰ Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 14 August 1646, *Ibid.*, 3:15-18.

¹¹ Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 11 January 1640, *Ibid.*, 2:1-3; same to same, 22 January 1640, *Ibid.*, 2:10-12.

¹² Vincent de Paul to Jean Martin, 24 August 1657, *Ibid.*, 6:433-36.

associations could perpetuate the reign of Jesus wherever they operated. He used his written discourses with superiors as a didactic device to demonstrate this modest attitude. He anxiously coached officers to avoid the simplistic temptation to turn the means into the end, or to believe that the end would justify the use of autocratic or underhanded means. Governors and the system of government should correlate to the exemplary virtues of Jesus, the true means and end of the Congregation and its affiliate groups. For this reason, Vincent suspected Marc Coglée's motivation in establishing good relations with the Jesuits in Sedan in 1652:

You did the right thing in establishing good relations with the Jesuits in Charleville, but saying that you did so in order that they might support us when people speak ill of us to them is a very base motive and a far cry from the spirit of Jesus Christ, according to which we should consider God alone in our actions... You [have] your own reputation in view... This is vanity.¹³

In a conference with the Daughters in 1647, Vincent de Paul coached them to assess choices by measuring in what way they contributed to God's glory, the interest of the Daughters and the welfare of the interested parties.¹⁴ In Coglée's case, Vincent acknowledged the good result of his action, which contributed to the Congregation's ability to maintain equilibrical relations in Sedan and operate more efficiently there. But the decision was fundamentally flawed. It did not contribute to God's glory, the Congregation's interest or anybody's welfare because it was inspired by the 'base motive' of vanity. De Paul made his point explicitly and bluntly, but he assumed a classic approach which he adopted when forced to exert his authority through criticism: he began his censure with praise of the action itself, before proceeding to a devastating deconstruction of the motivation that polluted it. Vincent did not offer criticism independently of constructive suggestions and gentle support, but sought to encourage his officers to learn from their mistakes. This tactic effectively reduced the risk that a superior would become depressed or disillusioned with his failures. By offering optimistic celebration of the leadership displayed in sound decisions, Vincent provided the superior with heartening evidence of his progress in office, while setting an attainable goal towards which to aim in the future.

Vincent often returned to two key influences upon his approach to government: Christ as the model and the sovereignty of providence. Both drove

¹³ Vincent de Paul to Marc Coglée, 25 September 1652, *Ibid.*, 4:471.

¹⁴ Council of 19 June 1647, *Ibid.*, 13b:271-76.

his wish to instill in Coglée the consoling belief he was under God's care, that he was an instrument in the divine plan and that he could respond confidently to the call to be so through grace. Vincent reiterated in his letters to his superiors that they did not work alone and that their work was important because it served a higher purpose than mere oversight of rules and quarrels. Yet, as divine instruments, any success they accomplished in their work was due entirely to God.¹⁵ He added the cautionary reminder that they must remain entirely humble and trustful of God's responsibility for achievements:

Yesterday I received your letter... which gave me great consolation, not only because it is one of your letters, which all have the same effect, but also because of your fine leadership – or rather God's leadership over you.¹⁶

This note succeeded Vincent's effort a few months earlier to warn Lambert that he should expect setbacks as superior in Warsaw:

Entrust yourself confidently to His guidance and prepare your own guidance for all sorts of events in order to make good use of any that will be unfavorable to you. I have no doubt that you will experience some.¹⁷

Lambert was, by this stage, a very experienced officer, having acted as superior of four other establishments. Vincent surely alerted him to pitfalls that awaited an unwary superior, partly because Lambert had only recently arrived in Warsaw (1651). But part of Vincent de Paul's policy in governing and in training governors was to repeat the general principles of trust in providence, faithfulness to Christ's example, edifying and compassionate discipline and informed assessment that should become automatic elements of their decision making. Here is a further principle in relation to supervision, the lesson that inability to take action, while superficially frustrating, could be beneficial:

If God does not allow you to do either a little or a great deal for others, you will be doing enough by adoring His ways and remaining at peace... God often wants to build lasting benefits on the patience of those who undertake them; that is why He tries them in many ways.¹⁸

¹⁵ Vincent de Paul to Lambert aux Couteaux, 21 December 1651, *Ibid.*, 4:289-93.

¹⁶ Vincent de Paul to Lambert aux Couteaux, 12 April 1652, *Ibid.*, 4:352.

¹⁷ Vincent de Paul to Lambert aux Couteaux, 21 December 1651, *Ibid.*, 4:290.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Superiors in the Congregation and Daughters (sister servants) generally went through a form of training that included residence in several houses and tenure as officers. Vincent zealously pursued the policy of transforming potential into wise experience from the beginning. Louise de Marillac was a veteran of the Ladies of Charity before acting as visitor to its branches, and first superior of the Daughters. A similar pattern of experience and preparation for promotion was evident in the career of the able René Alméras, chosen by the Congregation assembly as Vincent de Paul's successor in 1661. Vincent groomed this former state councilor for government, placing him in a variety of locations and roles in order to give him first-hand experience of all facets of the Congregation's work and to foster his skills of judgment, initiative and leadership. Before he became Vincent's assistant, he was superior in two establishments, distributed poor relief in Picardy and Champagne, performed visitations, and took charge of retreatants.



Official portrait of René Alméras, C.M.
Second Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission.
Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

It became standard practice for superiors to have performed special functions in Saint-Lazare, and to return there at intervals to refresh their skills. Saint-Lazare loomed very large in the perpetuation of governmental principles, and Vincent de Paul resorted regularly to it to illustrate effective organization and regulation. In 1657, he warned Jean Martin, superior in Turin, against deviating from the Congregation's longstanding and formal restriction of its preaching and confession:

You must also point out [to the Marchese (patron of the Turin house)] that the inhabitants are laying down a condition contrary to our customs, which is to preach and hear confessions in the town. We cannot submit to this because of the consequences and because of the Rule that forbids us to do so. You know that at Saint-Lazare we do not preach or hear the confessions of people living in the city.¹⁹

Saint-Lazare was the hub of the Congregation's government; the superior general resided there, it functioned as an oasis of rejuvenation for Congregation superiors and other members, and it provided the model that ensured uniformity of structure and operation throughout the organization. For this reason, it was a natural refuge for those in need of reassuring direction or disciplinary correction.²⁰ However, although Vincent sought to instill uniform discipline in the Congregation, his personal style was that of a concerned advocate for the wellbeing of his charges. At times, he worried that he and his superiors had not placed an individual in a location or office for which they were suited; the effective governor should consider the character and gifts of each person in their community, assigning them to duties that would allow them to make a full contribution to their vocation, house and local society. So, in 1652, he hesitated to send Jean Ennery on a mission to Corsica as Étienne Blatiron, the superior in Genoa, suggested:

I do not think he is gentle enough for that region, where the people are uncouth and used to being rough.²¹

However, he was elated when Blatiron displayed solid initiative in his second recommendation. Nicolas Duport, Vincent agreed, possessed the qualities of zeal, judgment, prudence, discretion, gentleness and cordiality that were essential for this region.²²

In instructing Jean Martin, Vincent told him to correct a local patron rather than undermine the universally applicable rules of the Congregation. It was important that a community make every effort to establish good relations locally, but effective government required that decision makers be prepared to turn down an offer which although immediately attractive could prove detrimental in the longer term; the Congregation Rules warned against the vice of 'undisciplined enthusiasm' that would forfeit the

¹⁹ Vincent de Paul to Jean Martin, 5 October 1657, *Ibid.*, 6:521.

²⁰ Vincent de Paul to Donat Crowley, 28 August 1655, *Ibid.*, 5:420-22.

²¹ Vincent de Paul to Étienne Blatiron, 16 August 1652, *Ibid.*, 4:439.

²² Vincent de Paul to Étienne Blatiron, 19 January 1652, *Ibid.*, 4:305-6.

association's independence to local pressures of unrestrained fervor and social prestige.²³ For this reason, Vincent generally sought to clarify all obligations for resources and duties before the Congregation or Daughters traveled to a new establishment. He also tended to favor initially modest foundations while the Congregation tested the resources and requirements of a new environment, as well as a variety of funding sources in case one or more collapsed. Crucially, when the mutual obligations of initiatives were not firmly established, projects suffered. He apparently felt impelled to withdraw the Congregation from Alet when the bishop did not fulfill his promise to provide them with a residence in which they could practice the Congregation's common rule.²⁴ Indeed, Vincent de Paul emphasized the superior's role in confidently enforcing judgments for, as he remarked to Edme Jolly, many proposals went 'up in smoke,' because good intentions were not followed through energetically.²⁵ Once again, Vincent provided examples of this resolution in his own negotiations. His painstaking efforts to justify his opinions did not always meet with approval, but while normally open to respectfully considering views contrary to his own he was often obliged simply to forbid or reject them. So, house superiors might bypass the opinions of their assistants, as Vincent told Charles Ozenne, superior in Warsaw, in 1655:

Everything should be directed only by the Superior and his two assistants, so that, if the Superior is of a mind different from that of the assistants, he can and must act according to his own if, before God, he judges it to be best.²⁶

However, they should anticipate hostility in order to steel themselves against it:

We should be ready to accept [suffering] so that, when it comes, we will not be surprised or saddened by it... envisage upsetting situations that may arise, to struggle against them, and to train ourselves for combat until we feel we are in command of the situation.²⁷

Having trained governing officers to make judgments based on the interests of God, the Congregation and concerned parties, Vincent de Paul

²³ Rules, *Ibid.*, 13a:468.

²⁴ Nicolas Pavillon to Vincent de Paul, October 1642, *Ibid.*, 2:340-1.

²⁵ Vincent de Paul to Edme Jolly, 28 December 1657, *Ibid.*, 7:47.

²⁶ Vincent de Paul to Charles Ozenne, 2 April 1655, *Ibid.*, 5:348.

²⁷ Vincent de Paul to Marc Coglée, August 1650, *Ibid.*, 4:55.

was surely unsurprised when they used their experience, common sense and reflection to question whether it was desirable to introduce vows into the Congregation. Seeking counsel within and outside the Congregation, for twelve years Vincent considered several options on the taking of vows, and watched attentively for pitfalls as some members voluntarily took simple vows binding them to the Congregation. He deliberately followed the same procedure when seeking to produce a definitive Rule for the association, on the basis that Jesus had established practices before he made them part of his teaching. However, when Vincent convened an extraordinary assembly of superiors and other experienced members in 1651 to resolve the issue of vows, he encountered vociferous opposition. In particular, Étienne Blatiron's tenure in Genoa had convinced him the vows would never prove acceptable to Italians, who would invariably assume they demonstrated that the Congregation was a traditional religious order. This cultural division did not persuade Vincent who, having allowed the assembly's fourteen members to air their views, overruled the arguments of the five who opposed the vows outright, and the four who expressed strong reservations, and concluded that it was God's will that they should be formally introduced.²⁸

In this episode, so pivotal for the Congregation's future, Vincent proved uncompromising and relied heavily on his authority as superior general. He judged that the vows were beneficial to the cohesion and stability of the Congregation: the vote demonstrated that they accorded with the interests of all concerned parties, divine and human. However, he occasionally reminded his superiors that intractability was not necessarily a desirable quality; while certain principles and practices should invariably be safeguarded, they should use their initiative to adapt rules and customs if possible and suitable for local needs. Concurrently, they should weigh the benefits and risks of principled intransigence against those of pliable adaptation so that they might not forsake opportunities and resources. Striking a balance was not straightforward in fundamental matters; Vincent was not ordinarily in favor of the Congregation assuming parochial benefices, but he accepted that this was necessary in denominationally divided and war torn Sedan if it was to have any hope of establishing the funding essential to its mission there. When the Congregations' patrons in Turin continued to urge the house to preach and administer confession in this Episcopal town, Vincent was twice forced to reiterate that this was impossible. But he then noted that the refusal conflicted with the wish of the local bishop, to whom the Congregation owed 'absolute obedience' in external affairs. He concluded that, temporarily, the functions could be performed until the questions might be resolved by the

²⁸ 1651 Council, *Ibid.*, 13a:374-95.

higher authority of the pope.²⁹ Vincent struggled, and really did not manage, to reconcile several conflicting claims in this situation: the need to please sponsors, the principle of obedience to bishops and the stipulation that forbade preaching and confession in Episcopal towns.

One of the difficulties of addressing governmental dilemmas such as this was that Vincent, or his colleagues on the ground, were not able to anticipate every event or were not sufficiently familiar with local culture, politics or history. For example, Lambert aux Couteaux had to inform Vincent that the proposal to provide the Congregation in Warsaw with a German church had come to nothing. De Paul was unperturbed, stating 'I always suspected that the people involved would raise some objections to it unless they were much better than we are in France.'³⁰ For Vincent, human nature tended to raise the same problems wherever the Congregation operated, but he had to accept that political and patriotic rivalries could throw obstacles in their path that were unforeseen to local or central authorities.³¹

Vincent de Paul regularly expressed his anxiety that those in authority did not reduce their role to instilling discipline through rigorous application of regulations, elaborated in writing for communities and specific positions as the Congregation expanded; he described how superiors should nurture their charges positively through well-judged methods appropriate to the situation. Therefore, in cases of discipline, a superior should initially admonish the individual, and Vincent, as we have seen, advocated gentle, cordial and timely correction, cushioned by fraternal comfort and constructive remedies for conversion. But he did suggest that it was sometimes useful to involve the community in the disciplinary process; first, if private admonitions were not effective; second, if the individual possessed a markedly good character but was sensitive and easily hurt, a 'recommendation given in general' to the community would be sufficient. This was sound advice, surely based on Vincent's own governing experience, for he knew that a person singled out for admonishment might wilt, deny or react defensively. A tactful warning issued to the collective made the same point but in a less provocative manner.

Vincent's sensitivity to the ways in which personalities should inform tactics of government was tied to his willingness to listen to the views of

²⁹ Vincent de Paul to Jean Martin, 9 November 1657, *Ibid.*, 6:600-03; same to same, 30 November 1657, *Ibid.*, 6:638-40.

³⁰ Vincent de Paul to Lambert aux Couteaux, 17 May 1652, *Ibid.*, 4:382.

³¹ Vincent also liked to account for personal and cultural idiosyncracies. See, for example, the advice that he sent to Charles Ozenne, Lambert's successor in Warsaw, in regard to a troublesome Polish colleague, Stanislaus Zelazewski; Vincent urged Ozenne to reprove Zelazewski privately and gently, an approach which he thought to be always preferable, but especially amongst Poles whom "I have heard are more easily won over by this cordial, charitable method than by harshness." Vincent de Paul to Charles Ozenne, 10 July 1654, *Ibid.*, 5:167.

others, to seek wide and wise advice when deliberating, and to establish consensus as possible. His secretary, Robineau, observed that he treated everyone with respect, a trait which was a result of Vincent's willingness to see Christ in all mankind, no matter what their moral or social state. De Paul was alert to the risk of ascribing greater influence to individuals because of their social and economic status:

Those who direct the houses of the Company must not look upon anyone as their inferior but rather as their brother... They should, therefore, be treated with humility, gentleness, forbearance, cordiality, and love... It is not the spirit of the Mission to make courtesy calls on prominent persons in the places where we are established.³²

Furthermore, Robineau recorded an incident in which Vincent sought his opinion on a project to establish a general hospital for the poor in Paris, before devoting three hours to elaborating in writing the benefits and risks of the proposal. This project required very careful reflection on Vincent's part, for he had serious practical and moral misgivings about involving the Congregation.³³ At this time he must have remembered how easy it was to err, even having sought sound advice. In 1658, he fought a claim made on a large farm in Orsigny which had been donated to the Congregation in 1644-5, having been assured by eight lawyers and a procurator that the Congregation's case was watertight. On losing the case, Vincent refused to bring a civil action against the litigants, and warned Congregation members that to do so would damage the association's reputation and could not be accommodated with its much more important mission of reconciliation and edification. As such, the material loss was negligible when compared to placing the Congregation's ethos and driving purpose, its lifeblood, in jeopardy.³⁴

It was judicious of Vincent de Paul to seek to involve coadjutor brothers such as Robineau in the plans for the Congregation's development because it gave them further investment in the association, and it also counteracted the possibility that those who felt their voices went unheard would become aggrieved. Vincent advised Coglée of this policy of inclusion at length:

³² Vincent de Paul to Marc Coglée, 13 August 1650, *Ibid.*, 4:56-7.

³³ Louis Robineau, *Remarques sur les actes et paroles de feu Monsieur Vincent de Paul notre très Honoré Père et Fondateur*, no. 278-80 (pp. 130-1in the manuscript). I have used the most accurate copy of this manuscript, that transcribed by George Baldacchino, rather than the version published by André Dodin. I would like to thank Claude Lautissier, C.M., for drawing my attention to this copy in the Archives of the Congregation of the Mission, Paris.

³⁴ Vincent de Paul to Monsieur Desbordes, 21 December 1657, *CCD*, 7:422-5.

I often consult even the Brothers and ask their advice on questions involving their duties. When this is done with the necessary prudence, the authority of God... is in no way disadvantaged. On the contrary, the good order which ensues makes it more worthy of love and respect.³⁵

As a corollary of this rule of consultation, the governmental system Vincent promoted allowed any member of the Congregation to have direct recourse to the superior general. While this accessibility clearly implied that house superiors were subsidiary officers, despite Vincent's insistence on their authority, it opened a valuable alternative avenue to those who disagreed with their superior or simply felt unable to open their conscience to him, as the Rules required. Vincent de Paul did not offer this route because he wished to undermine the liberty of his superiors to manage their communities, rather he knew that mediation and communication were essential to the healthy functioning of a governmental system from top to bottom; this safety mechanism enabled individuals to feel that they were not helpless within an inflexible hierarchy of authority.



Statue of Saint Vincent de Paul.
Motherhouse, Congregation of the Mission, Paris, France.
Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

Vincent was exceptionally attentive in ensuring that it did not become a path for gossip, the embittered or the spy, however. Here is a vivid example

³⁵ Vincent de Paul to Marc Coglée, 9 July 1650, *Ibid.*, 4:41.

of his ability to act as moderator and conciliator in government, taken from a case in which a young priest experienced a personality clash with his superior. In his response to a situation so unsettling to the individuals immediately involved, and to the harmony of the community, Vincent was careful to diffuse any resentment or patronage that the complainant might feel when the superior general wrote to him. Equally, Vincent ensured that he balanced his criticisms with recognition and praise of the complainants' work and a ringing affirmation of his affection for him. However, he refused to undermine the position of the superior before his charge, and requested that the complainant submit to he who personified the goodwill, authority and wisdom of Jesus:

Our Lord approves of the trust you have in your Superior as the representative of His Divine Person, He will inspire him to say whatever is most appropriate for you.³⁶

To rally Jean Martin, who judged his ability to act as superior in Turin very harshly, Vincent wrote bracingly:

You win over [your men] through your advice and example... if there are a few who are not keen on learning the language well and helping you, you must remember, Monsieur, that there is no Superior in the world who does not have a great deal to put up with from the persons he governs... even Our Lord himself.³⁷

Furthermore, Vincent de Paul reassured Martin by telling him that he would soon benefit from the presence of the visitor, the governmental officer whose circuits supplemented the local routine of government. Jean Berthe, Vincent wrote optimistically, would edify by his presence and encourage by his advice. In particular, on Martin's suggestion he would be able to offer a concrete recommendation that the Congregation should establish a seminary in Turin.³⁸ In doing so, the visitor would demonstrate the key constituents of government as Vincent fostered them: guardianship of fundamental rules and customs that articulated the organization and purpose of the Congregation and were transferable to all environments, flexible guidance of individuals and the community in a spirit of familial unity and recognition, and nurture of the individual skills and virtues that benefited the entire organization.

³⁶ Vincent de Paul to a Priest of the Mission, 20 February 1650, *Ibid.*, 3:601.

³⁷ Vincent de Paul to Jean Martin, 9 November 1657, *Ibid.*, 6:601.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6:600-03.