



Rome, February 19, 2020

LENTEN LETTER 2020

“THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF PRAYER”

Dear sisters and brothers in Saint Vincent,

May the grace and peace of Jesus be always with us!

In this Lenten season, we continue to reflect on the foundations of Saint Vincent de Paul’s spirituality. What made Saint Vincent a Mystic of Charity is the fact that prayer was at the center of his life. How do I understand prayer? What does prayer mean to me?

Depending on the answer, on the one hand, prayer can become a burden to be carried out day after day. It can be a collection of texts, formulas, body positions, and rules that I am required to follow. In that case, prayer eventually becomes useless, something that does not speak to me personally or to the reality of my life. However, as Saint Vincent said, “One cannot hope for much from someone who does not continually converse with God. Further, if someone does not serve the Lord as they should, it is because they are not attached enough to God, and have not asked for his grace with perfect confidence.”¹

On the other hand, if prayer becomes indispensable for my life, something that cannot be detached from my person, from what I think, say, and do, then it takes on a transforming power. Prayer is a state of being, a continuous relationship with Jesus, and a source of meaning. In it, I find my life focus, my vocation, my mission, and responses for questions in my life. Because prayer originates in God, its transforming power within me continually makes “all things

¹ Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul* (Books 1-3), edited by John E. Rybolt, CM; translated by William Quinn, FSC; notes by Edward R. Udovic, CM and John E. Rybolt, CM; New City Press, New Rochelle, New York, 1993; book III, chapter six, page 56.

new.” Transformative communication is God’s nature.

When God wants to communicate himself, He does it effortlessly, in a perceptible, very pleasant, gentle, loving way; so, let’s ask Him often and with great confidence for this gift of meditation. On His part, God asks for nothing better; let’s pray to Him, but let’s do it with great confidence, and be assured that, in His great mercy, He’ll grant it to us in the end.²

Prayer is the place where I meet Jesus, talk to Jesus, listen to Jesus, and share with Jesus. It is where I put questions to Jesus, where I confidently put myself into His hands. When I approach everything I think, say, and do as part of a personal relationship with Jesus, all my thoughts, words, and actions become prayer. I am in front of Someone. I am with Someone. I am talking, listening, and sharing with Someone who is the “Love” of my life and whom I long to resemble. Such a relationship requires humility in order to open myself to Him and give Him the right to pilot my life.

Take my word for it, my dear confreres, take my word for it, it’s an infallible maxim of Jesus Christ, which I’ve often proclaimed to you on His behalf, that, as soon as a heart is empty of self, God fills it. God remains and acts in it; and it’s the desire for shame that empties us of ourselves; that’s humility, holy humility. Then it won’t be ourselves acting but God acting in us, and all will go well.³

During the day, as well as at night, whether I am awake or asleep, I thus remain in constant contact with Jesus, in constant prayer. This is the meaning of Saint Paul’s exhortation to the Thessalonians, “pray without ceasing”⁴ or Saint Vincent’s appeal to the Daughters of Charity, “...if you can, pray every hour, or even never stop praying at all, for meditation is so excellent that we can never make it too much.”⁵ All becomes prayer, and all becomes Love when my primary concern is this divine relationship.

Christ said: *Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things which you need will be given to you as well.* That is the basis for each of us having the following set of priorities: matters involving our relationship with God are more important than temporal affairs; spiritual health is more important than physical; God’s glory is more important than human approval.⁶

Indeed, prayer transforms my hierarchy of values and my relationship to people, objects, places, and time. My priorities become different from those of the world even as I live in it. The so-called letter to Diognetus offers a description of early Christians that should apply to me as well:

2 *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume XI, p. 208; conference 129, “Repetition of Prayer,” 4 August 1655. Future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials *CCD*, followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, *CCD XI*, 208.

3 *CCD XI*, 281; conference 141, “The Ecclesiastical State” [September 1655].

4 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

5 *CCD IX*, 325; conference 37, “Mental Prayer,” 31 May 1648.

6 *CCD XIIIa*, 433; document 117a, “Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission,” Chapter II, 2 (17 May 1658).

Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. Their teaching is not based upon reveries inspired by the curiosity of men. Unlike some other people, they champion no purely human doctrine. With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign.

And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives. They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law.

Christians love all men, but all men persecute them. Condemned because they are not understood, they are put to death, but raised to life again. They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything. They suffer dishonor, but that is their glory. They are defamed, but vindicated. A blessing is their answer to abuse, deference their response to insult. For the good they do they receive the punishment of malefactors, but even then they rejoice, as though receiving the gift of life.⁷

The Christians described above never could have survived, remained faithful, overcame incredible sufferings and persecutions, and witnessed through it all – even to death – if their prayer life were not a deep relationship with the Love of their life. Jesus was their all and thus guided all their choices. This entails knowing Him and “entering into His spirit,” according to the advice Saint Vincent gave his confreres:

When the occasions arise, we may ask ourselves. ‘How did Our Lord judge such or such a thing? How did He act in such or such a circumstance? What did He say and do regarding certain matters?’ and thus we may adapt our whole way of acting in accord with His maxims and examples. So then, let’s take this resolution, Messieurs, and walk confidently along this royal road on which Jesus Christ will be our leader and guide, remembering that He has said that heaven and earth will pass away (cf. Matthew 24:35), but His words will never pass away. Let’s bless Our Lord, brothers, strive to think and judge as He did, and do what He recommended by His words and examples. Let’s enter into His Spirit to adopt His ways of acting; for doing good isn’t everything; it must be done well, in imitation of Our Lord, of whom it is said. *Bene omnia fecit*: He has done all things well (cf. Mark 7:37). No, it’s not enough to fast, to observe the Rules, to carry out the ministries of the Mission; but we must do this in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, that is, with perfection, for the purpose, and in the way

7 Office of Readings for Wednesday of the fifth week of Easter, Chapter 5, “The Christian in the World.”

He did them.⁸

One example of Jesus that I should adopt concerns His prayer. Jesus often prayed by going to a place of solitude where He could remain alone with God the Father. Over the course of history and still today, many saints and other Christians took and take time away from their regular duties and ministries to go into the “desert” to be alone with Jesus.

Besides the prayer, in community or alone, that I already practice on a daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly basis, can I find any other ways of going into the “desert” to deepen my intimate relationship with Jesus? The desert can be a place to which I go physically or a state of mind not linked to a concrete place. Where can I find that desert? How often can I go to the desert? How long can I stay in the desert?

May our prayer become a gift for each other. Let us be witnesses of the “transforming power of prayer.”

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

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8 *CCD XI*, 43; conference 35, “Prudence.”