



ADVENT LETTER 2019 “ODE TO PROVIDENCE”

Rome, 21 November 2019

My very dear sisters and brothers in Saint Vincent,

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

For all of us, life is a pilgrimage. We are constantly in motion. This pilgrimage is not so much a physical movement from one place to another, but an inner movement of our thoughts, reflections, sensory perceptions, and prayer.

The Church offers us special times of the year, pauses along the way, to help us deepen our understanding of our life’s pilgrimage and find meaning in every single day, even minute, that makes up that path. We learn to be more and more attentive to daily events, people whom we meet, thoughts and emotions that arise, and the nature – trees, flowers, rivers, mountains, animals, sun, moon, etc. – that surrounds us. Through our attention and care, we progressively embrace all humanity and the whole universe.

One of these special moments is Advent. **In this privileged time of year, we continue our reflection on the elements that shaped Vincentian spirituality and led Saint Vincent de Paul to become a Mystic of Charity.** In addition to those on which we reflected over the past three years, another foundation of Vincentian spirituality is **Providence**.

The following terms could express **the essence of Providence**: “Jesus’s vision for my life,” “Jesus’s project for my life,” “Jesus’s recipe for a meaningful life.”

Providence works its way into our being, our mind, and our heart on one condition: **trust**. **Trust in “Jesus’s vision for my life,” “Jesus’s project for my life,” “Jesus’s recipe for a meaningful life.” We put ourselves in Jesus’ hands**, trusting that His vision for our life is the best possible vision, His project for our life is the best possible project, and His recipe is the best possible model for a meaningful life.

Providence will be effective in our lives according to the depth of our trust in Jesus. The deeper our trust in Jesus, the more we will allow Providence to perform miracles in lives. The more we place ourselves in the hands of Jesus, the more we are able to read daily events, encounters, and places as means through which Jesus communicates to us. The more we come to trust in Jesus’s plan for us even if what is happening may be somewhat incomprehensible or even very painful, the more we will rely on Providence. What helps us to let Providence work in us in all life’s circumstances is placing ourselves in Jesus’s hands, **trusting Him to the fullest**.

This way of “**abandoning**” ourselves into Jesus’s hands in all situations changes our perspective. We will not evaluate life events as good times or bad times, but will look at them through Jesus’s person, **trusting**

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Him totally, and recognize them as “the right times.” This choice will make two terms, “fate” and “chance,” disappear from our vocabulary. We will realize that they are not compatible with our way of understanding the Gospel and Jesus.

Total abandonment into Jesus’s hands, total trust in Jesus’s plan, and total trust in Providence help us discover or rediscover the beauty, the positive, and the meaning behind every event. This contrasts with looking at events through just our human eyes, mind, and feelings. In that case, the mentality of fate and chance points to the negative and conceals the beauty, the positive, and the meaning of all that touches and shapes us.

A wonderful expression of this trust in Providence is found in a beautiful prayer written by Blessed Charles de Foucauld after his deep personal conversion that led him down surprising paths on which he could trust in God alone. Often called the prayer of “Abandonment”, it conveys his total desire to put himself in the hands of the Father in accordance with the model of Jesus’s abandonment into His Father’s hands and make himself a tool to allow the Father to do whatever He wants with him. He is ready for all, accepts all, and places his soul into the Father’s hands, without reserve and with boundless confidence:

Father,
I abandon myself into your hands;
Do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.

Let only your will be done in me,
and in all your creatures –
I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul:
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
For you are my Father.

Three hundred years earlier, Providence became one of the pillars of Saint Vincent de Paul’s spirituality. In going through his letters and conferences, we are struck by how often Saint Vincent speaks of Providence. Providence was one of the key factors that shaped Vincent into the person, the saint whom we know. His path of conversion, from the Vincent of his childhood, youth, and early years as a priest, to the Vincent who embraced Providence and whom we call saint, was not an easy road for him.

He had his own plans and understanding of the role of a priest, his own ambitions, and selfish goals. However, he came to renounce his own will, put Jesus first, place all his trust in Jesus’s plans and not his own, and “sing” often and in varied ways what we might call an “Ode to Providence.” This radical change was, in fact, itself a miracle. **Saint Vincent, trusting totally in Providence, became himself Providence for others, for the poor.** This was the climax of **a mystical union, not an abstract mystical union, but a mystical union that brought about an affective and effective response.**

I would like to offer for your meditation a portion of **Vincent’s composition of an “Ode to Providence,” the fruit of his reflection on his life’s experiences.**

“...what great hidden treasures there are in holy Providence and how marvelously
Our Lord is honored by those who follow it and do not try to get ahead of it!”¹

1 *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 I, p. 59; letter 31 to Saint Louise. Future references to this work will be use the initials *CCD*, followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, *CCD I, 59*.

“... let us abandon ourselves to Divine Providence. It will know quite well how to procure what we need.”²

“... reflecting on all the principal events that have taken place in this Company, it seems to me, and this is quite evident, that, if they had taken place before they did, they would not have been successful. I say that of all of them, without excepting a single one. That is why I have a particular devotion to following the adorable Providence of God step by step. And my only consolation is that I think Our Lord alone has carried on and is constantly carrying on the business of the Little Company.”³

“... let us leave it to the guidance of the wise Providence of God. I have a special devotion to following it, and experience has shown me that it has accomplished everything in the Company, and that our acts of foresightedness hinder it.”⁴

“Grace has its moments. Let us abandon ourselves to the Providence of God and be on our guard against anticipating it. If Our Lord is pleased to give me any consolation in our vocation, it is this: I think it seems to me that we have tried to follow Divine Providence in all things and to put our feet only in the place It has marked out for us.”⁵

“The consolation Our Lord gives me is to believe that, by the grace of God, we have always tried to follow and not to anticipate Providence which knows how to conduct all things so wisely to the end Our Lord destines for them.”⁶

“We cannot better assure our eternal happiness than by living and dying in the service of the poor, in the arms of Providence and with genuine renouncement of ourselves in order to follow Jesus Christ.”⁷

“Let us be submissive to Providence; He will see to our affairs in His own time and in His own way.”⁸

“Ah, Messieurs! Let’s all ask God fervently for this spirit for the whole Company, a spirit that will take us everywhere, with the result that, when someone sees one or two Missioners, they can say, ‘Those are apostolic persons ready to go to the four corners of the world carrying the word of God.’ Let’s ask God to grant us a heart like that; there are some who have it, by the grace of God, and all are servants of God, but to go there and not to be deterred! *O Sauveur!* That’s really something! We must have a heart like that, everyone having the same heart, detached from all things, so that we may have perfect trust in the mercy of God, without wondering, or worrying, or losing courage. ‘Will I have this item in that country? How will I get it?’ *O Sauveur!* God will never fail us! Ah, Messieurs! *O Dieu!* When we hear talk of the glorious death of those who are there, who wouldn’t want to be in their place? Who wouldn’t want to die like them, to be assured of an eternal reward! *O Sauveur!* Is there anything more desirable! So then, let’s not be bound to this or that; let’s be courageous! Let’s go wherever God may call us, He will be our provider, let’s not fear anything. *Or sus*, blessed be God!”⁹

2 CCD I, 346; letter 245 to Robert de Sergis.

3 CCD II, 237; letter 559 to Bernard Codoing.

4 CCD II, 462; letter 678 to Bernard Codoing.

5 CCD II, 499; letter 704 to Bernard Codoing.

6 CCD II, 502; letter 707 to Bernard Codoing.

7 CCD III, 384; letter 1078 to Jean Barreau.

8 CCD III, 449; letter 1109 to René Alméras.

9 CCD XI, 264-265; conference 135, Repetition of Prayer.

As we enter this Advent season, let us be inspired by Blessed Charles de Foucauld's prayer of Abandonment. Our Holy Founder, Saint Vincent de Paul, and all the other Blessed and Saints of the Vincentian Family embodied total trust in Jesus in their own lives and, in their own time and place, composed an "Ode to Providence." May each one of us compose our own "Ode to Providence."

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

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Superior General