

St. Vincent de Paul

Today I want to talk to you about who St. Vincent de Paul was. I'm sure you all already know a lot about him. If you want to take notes, there are four things that I want you to take away from this talk – The first three are:

1. His trust in God
2. God's providence in his life
3. His compassion
4. I'll tell you the 4th at the end.

St. Vincent lived at a time in France when priests and bishops were well paid and could support their families, so his father sold a pair of oxen to get him into the seminary. When a priest would say his first Mass, it was celebrated with pomp and ceremony with the right people to make a 'good living'. Vincent celebrated his first Mass with just a server at his side. He was a priest to serve God, not for financial gain. He trusted in God to take care of him and his family.

God's providence for Vincent's life was very evident when he was asked to tutor the children of the de Gondi Family in Paris. The Count and Countess Gondi were a very wealthy family in Paris. Vincent had a bigger influence on the parents than the children, helping them to be charitable, prayerful, and to care for the poor. We'll continue to hear about the de Gondi family as Vincent's story progresses.

When Vincent was serving as a pastor in Chatillon, he founded Ladies of Charity. One Sunday, a parishioner told him of a family in the parish that was in need. Vincent talked about the family in his homily and over the next two days, the family was overwhelmed with generosity of the parish. But Vincent realized that the food delivered to the family needed to be organized as they had too much for a few days then had nothing. He met with the women of his parish and organized them into the first Ladies of Charity – the first Vincentian organization. This is where we first see his deep compassion for those in need.

Once again, we see God's providence at work when the de Gondi family begged for him to return to Paris. Madame de Gondi began a Ladies of Charity chapter in Paris where she recruited many of her wealthy friends. These wealthy ladies would financially support several of Vincent's efforts.

Count de Gondi was the General of the King's Galleys. This was before steam engines so convicts and prisoners were chained to the oars in the galleys. Vincent visited the galleys and was in horror of the conditions – damp, filthy, crawling with vermin, the men covered with sores and ulcers – he described it as a picture of hell. Vincent did not see these men as convicts and prisoners, but as children of God and wanted to help. He raised enough money to build a hospital

for their care which included support for the hospital to continue this ministry. Vincent's compassion for all people was a core part of who he was.

Vincent along with two other priests began to preach to poor rural areas in France. He soon realized that the priests needed ongoing training. With funding from Madame de Gondi, he began the Congregation of the Mission for priest training. They became so popular that the retreats were opened to everyone, and this was funded by the Paris Ladies of Charity. Once again God's providence to place Vincent with the de Gondi family allowed him to evangelize.

We really see Vincent's compassion when he was in Paris and saw a beggar mutilating a newborn baby in order to use it as an object of pity. He grabbed the child and brought the baby to an orphanage. What he found at the orphanage horrified him – starvation, neglect, and filth. He once again received help from the Paris Ladies of Charity, and also the King and Queen of Austria (another example of God's providence), to build an orphanage. This orphanage could hold 4,000 children. Of all of the good works that Vincent did, this was his favorite and he knew each child by name.

During the 30 Years War in Europe, Vincent saw that many people were dying of hunger and the number of aging poor was dramatically increasing. His compassion for these people pushed him to action. Yet another time, he called upon the Paris Ladies of Charity to support a public soup kitchen and a home for the elderly.

I hope you can clearly see that St. Vincent trusted in God, believed in God's providence in his life, and had a deep compassion for everyone he met that was hurting or in need. I told you at the beginning that I would give you the last 'take away' at the end of this talk. The one thing that I really want you to take away from this is that St. Vincent is 'the heart'. When we look at the 3 major Vincentian saints, I look at St. Vincent as 'the heart', St. Louise as 'the mind', and St. Elizabeth as 'the soul'.

It's hard to get a good understanding of St. Vincent without understanding his relationship with St. Louise. Their friendship would revolutionize the religious life of the Catholic Church and its ministry to the poor. St. Louise founded the Daughters of Charity which dramatically changed religious life. Up to this point, all women religious were in cloistered convents. The Daughters of Charity worked among the poor and took vows annually. Louise was a very smart, radical thinker. She developed methods and instructions for managing most of the charities that St. Vincent founded and the Daughters of Charity worked in these charities.

One last note about St. Vincent – his dying word was "Confido" which means "I Trust".

St. Louise de Marillac

Today I want to tell you about St. Louise de Marillac. I have four things that I want you to take away from this talk. They are:

1. God's divine providence along with her deep faith and quest to do God's will.
2. She was very smart and a radical thinker.
3. She possessed practical, creative, and organizational skills.
4. Where St. Vincent was the 'heart', St. Louise was the 'mind'.

Louise had a difficult young life. She was born out of wedlock – illegitimate. As an infant she was placed in a Dominican convent school where she got a solid education. Her father loved her and visited often but he died when Louise was 12 years old. She was moved to a boarding school where she received a 'practical education' in cooking, housekeeping, etc. These skills served her well in later years.

She had an arranged marriage at age 22. She had a son, Michael. After about 7 years of marriage, her husband's health worsened, and he passed away five years later. Louise blamed herself and became angry and depressed.

St. Vincent was appointed Louise's spiritual director. In the beginning, they really didn't like each other. Vincent didn't want to be a spiritual director for a young widow. He had many demands from the Ladies of Charity and had just established the Congregation of Missions. Eventually, they both acknowledged that God's providence had brought them together. Louise had a great desire to know God and accomplish his will and Vincent taught her to trust God and herself.

Their friendship would revolutionize the religious life of the Catholic Church and its ministry to the poor.

Louise soon understood Vincent's principles and took them to heart.

- The poor are Jesus Christ.
- Personal service must be compassionate, gentle, respectful, devoted, and from the heart.

Vincent asked Louise to go 'on mission' to visit the various Ladies of Charity groups. This journey began the intense collaboration between the two.

When a young peasant woman came to Vincent asking to serve the poor, he sent her to Louise who sent her to work with the Ladies of Charity. When more young women came to work with the Ladies of Charity, Louise discerned that these women needed a community. She founded the Daughters of Charity.

The Daughters of Charity dramatically changed religious life. Up to this point, women religious were in cloistered convents. The Daughters of Charity were one of the first to work among the poor and took vows annually.

Louise and the Daughters of Charity supported many of Vincent's efforts as follows:

- Foundlings/orphanage – Louise provided training on feeding, clothing, prayer, and education.
- Hospitals – Louise negotiated agreements and directed how hospitals should be run.
- Galley Slaves – Louise wrote rules on how to treat the men, how to dress, and how to stay safe among the slaves.
- Ladies of Charity – Louise assumed increasing direction of the Ladies of Charity groups.

Louise organized the Hospice of the Holy Name of Jesus for the elderly. She also founded schooling for needy children. They were free schools for poor girls wherever they were and at whatever time available. Sometimes it was in the fields or late at night. She also taught the Sisters reading, writing, mathematics, and religion.

The one thing that I really want you to take away from this is that St. Louise is 'the mind'. Coupled with St. Vincent as 'the heart', they changed the world. I also hope that you can see Louise's deep faith and God's divine providence in her life; her intelligence and radical thinking; and her skills for organization, practicality, and creativity.

Louise's death bed request was to take good care of the poor, live together in great union, and continue to ask God for his blessing. She signed all of her letters with 'I am, in the Love of Jesus Crucified...'

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

As I joined Ladies of Charity, I wasn't sure why we considered St. Elizabeth Ann as one of our founding saints, especially when she lived about 200 years after St. Vincent and St. Louise. Through researching her, I now understand. St. Elizabeth Ann brought the Vincentian spirituality to the United States. She also founded the Sisters of Charity religious order. For our association, the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth have had a key role in the origination of Seton Center, Villa St. Francis, Duchesne Center, and Cristo Rey High School.

Today I want to tell you about St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. I have 4 things that I want you to take away from this talk. They are:

1. Her mind, heart, and being were focused on eternity.
2. She had an amazing prayer life – she prayed without ceasing.
3. Doing God's will was her life's goal.
4. Where St. Vincent was the 'heart' and St. Louise was the 'mind', St. Elizabeth Ann was the 'soul'.

It is said that Saints are canonized not for what they do, but for what they are. To understand the depth of what St. Elizabeth Ann was, you need to understand a little about her life's journey.

In her life, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton experienced more heartache and pain than most of us can even imagine. She lost her husband at just 29. She had two of her five children die in her arms. She was left a penniless widow, who had every reason to lose faith and hope.

She was born in New York City in 1774 and raised a devout Episcopalian. She grew up with riches and in affluent social circles. At age 19 she married William Seton, a wealthy businessman and moved to Wall Street. Her husband's business went bankrupt, and her father soon died. Then William contracted tuberculosis. They sailed to Italy to seek treatment but were quarantined on arrival. William died eight days after being released from quarantine. Elizabeth visited Catholic Churches while in Italy and was called to convert to Catholicism because she came to believe in the Real Presence of God in the Eucharist. Her family and friends rejected her because she became Catholic, thus leaving her penniless.

She was determined to earn a living and keep her children with her. She knew that her best asset was her education. A priest invited her to Baltimore to begin a Catholic school for girls. As she began the school, other women came together and Elizabeth Ann began the first religious community in the U.S., the Sisters of Charity. She based the community on Vincentian Spirituality. She considered the Daughters of Charity that was founded by St. Louise, but there was one rule that she couldn't live with – any widow joining the congregation would need to give up their children.

Elizabeth Ann died of tuberculosis at the age of 46. But in the end, she became the world's First American-Born Saint in 1975 — perhaps the most important Catholic in our country's history because of her work to begin the Catholic school system.

That gives you an idea of her life's journey. Now for who she was.

Eternity was the motivation of St. Elizabeth Ann's life. To her, eternity was more than just everlasting life, it meant God, happiness, and reunion with loved ones. Her understanding of eternity began at a very young age. When she was four years old, her little sister died, and she was asked why she didn't cry. She said because her sister Kitty was in heaven with her mother who had died the previous year. St. Elizabeth Ann was not only concerned with eternity for herself, but for everyone she knew. She sat and prayed with her husband until the end. She focused on building a strong faith in her children. Beginning the Sisters of Charity order and the Catholic school system were both focused on bringing as many souls as possible to eternity with God in Heaven. One of her quotes; "Eternity, eternity, when shall I come to you at last? In eternity we will love with a glance of the soul."

St. Elizabeth Ann's prayer life as a child and teen was exceptional, but as an adult, prayer truly became her way of life. Her prayer life was built on the True Presence of God in the Eucharist. It is said that she had instant communication with the Father early in her life. St. Elizabeth Ann attributes her strength and successes to prayer; including the terrifying ordeal of her husband's death, her call to become Catholic, her establishment of a religious community, and the beginning of a school. Another one of her quotes; "God raises me to feel near him, and drives away sorrow. He is my guide, my friend, my supporter."

St. Elizabeth Ann's brother-in-law described her to her grandchildren as 'a kind of John the Baptist'. She was a voice crying out in the wilderness of a new land. She had two essential vocational callings; to the married state and bringing salvation to her husband and children, and to religious life. The two main thrusts of her religious life were education and the poor. When she took her vows, she wrote, 'To speak the joy of my soul at the prospect of being able to assist the poor, visit the sick, comfort the sorrowful, clothe the little innocents, and teach them to love God.' This was her whole religious vocation and it shows that she was a spiritual daughter of St. Vincent de Paul.

The one thing that I really want you to take away from this is that St. Elizabeth Ann is 'the soul' because of her focus on eternity, her unceasing prayer life, and her dedication to doing God's will.