

Irruption of the grace

At the end of 1613, Vincent was appointed as a private tutor to an illustrious family in Paris. Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi was Governor-general of the Mediterranean fleet. Madame de Gondi received in their mansion in the Marais: the aristocracy and the experts in the fields of science, literature and the arts. A fervent Catholic, she would appreciate Vincent's qualities more and more each day. He would become her spiritual counselor.

As soon as he obtained what he sought, an honorable position in a great family, Vincent's whole horizon and perspective changed. In 1617, in the middle of winter, God gave him a sign while at the bedside of a sick peasant. On the Gondi's territory, while staying at the Chateau de Folleville, near Amiens, Vincent was called to the dying person. After having been confessed, the man confided to Madame de Gondi: "Madame, without this confession, I was damned!". Stunned, Madame de Gondi caught a glimpse of the enormity of evil and begged Vincent to act. On the 25th January in the Folleville church, Vincent urged all of his parishioners to confess their sins. The people were deeply touched by God and they all went. This first mission would see the birth of a new congregation.

But he felt a bit cramped at the Gondi's. He left to go to Chatillon-les-Dombes, near Lyon. On the 1st August 1617, he was nominated priest there. One Sunday, just before mass, he was told that a poor family were very sick. Like at Folleville, Vincent gave a powerful sermon. The parishioners took action. Vincent then united the most determined women and outlined the rules of a charity. On the 8th December 1617, the first **Confraternity of Charity** was solemnly declared. Through this, Vincent had given the lay women, a mission within the Church, the ministry of charity.

The love of the Church

As for the other great figures of his time, like Bérulle, Olier, St Jean Eudes, there was an urgent need to reform the clergy. He himself had desired material wealth, he had also discovered the ignorance of the rural clergy during his missions. He had the desire to remedy all these things.

In 1631, Vincent started "retreats for Ordinands", which were a resounding success. The following year, 1632, he organized the "Tuesday conferences" for young priests in the St Lazare Priory – hence the name the Lazarists. He would then set up open retreats for all priests and even laypeople. Vincent founded a seminary for schoolchildren, and a seminary for adults for the needs of his congregation in 1642. He participated in the creation of seminaries in numerous dioceses. Vincent undertook the renewal of the Catholic hierarchy in the Kingdom.

In 1642, Anne of Austria asked Vincent to preside over the "Council of Conscience" that deal with the affairs of the Kingdom. For ten years, he placed priests that were pious and had integrity in the Episcopal seats.

Vincent continued the revolution in charity which he had begun in 1617. With Louise de Marillac, first engaged in the Ladies of Charity, he founded on the 29th November 1633 the **Company of the Daughters of Charity**, ladies who had given themselves to God, but not cloistered, for the service to the poor. Marguerite Naseau, the first one, died while caring for the plague victims.

Another of Vincent's tasks was to maintain the integrity of the faith. With intelligence, charity, perseverance, faithful to the Gospels and Rome, Vincent disapproved of current thinking: Jansenism, condemned in 1653. His numerous and written interventions, showed his theological knowledge, his sharp critical mind, and his gift as an able teacher, always concerned about bringing souls back to the path of truth.

Vincent chooses the poor

With the spiritual neglect and the poverty, two events that marked Vincent, the mystery of the presence of Christ in the poor became clear to him.

But the Gondi's wanted him back. Vincent went back to Paris. But he would not return to his old position as private tutor. His path was marked out: he would be chaplain on the Gondi's estates.

In 1618, Vincent would undertake an audacious task: aid to the galley slaves. Philippe de Gondi's descriptions tell Vincent of the horrors of the situation. On the galleys as in the filthy dungeons, the prisoners were badly treated. After a distressing visit to the prison at the Conciergerie, Vincent used his influence with Mr de Gondi and persuaded him to undertake a reform and gave Vincent the position of Chaplain General of the Galleys.

During this period, Vincent had two unforgettable encounters: Saint Francis de Sales, whose kind and good nature were like God's smile that brightened his life, and St Jeanne de Chantal, co-founder of the Visitation, of which Vincent would later become a Director in Paris. The missions continued on the Gondi's estates. A society of priests under Vincent's guidance was born. Madame de Gondi collected enough funds to obtain the buildings of the College des Bons Enfants near Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet church in Paris. On the 17th January 1625, the contract of the foundation of the **Congregation of the Mission** was signed by Mr and Mrs Gondi and Vincent.

Having accomplished all that was close to her heart, Mrs Gondi died on the 23rd June, with Vincent at her side. A few months earlier, Vincent had met St Louise... Vincent moved into the College des Bons Enfants in the autumn with his missionaries. As for Mr de Gondi, he became a priest at the Oratory.

Charity everywhere

Vincent was urged by the clergy of Notre Dame to do something about abandoned children in Paris. The survivors, taken to the Couche-Landry house were badly cared for and in addition were victims of unscrupulous bandits who would force them to beg at the Cathedral doors. In 1638, Vincent and Louise started the **Charity for Foundlings**.

The 30 year war devastated the country. The inhabitants were overwhelmed by taxes and reduced to famine. The hospitals were full, with appalling sanitary conditions. Vincent mobilized an army of charity workers for the devastated provinces, sending provisions, clothes, tools and seeds. Civil war then irrupted in Paris. The Daughters of Charity and the Priests of the Mission went to help the people, who were starving and had been decimated by the plague. Distressed at all the misery, Vincent sought the help of the Queen and her minister Mazarin.

Vincent went to the help of refugees in Lorraine, whose aristocratic families were exiled, penniless in Paris; Irish refugees, of which there were many following Cromwell's persecution; Parisians affected by the floods of 1652; slaves sold at the Tunis or Algiers markets.

His missions took shape: the Confraternities of Charity multiplied, the Daughters of Charity were asked to run free schools, Vincent also sent them to help the galley slaves, a hospital was opened in Marseille. They also helped the destitute at the Hospice du Nom de Jésus.

His three foundations were also established outside of France: Poland and Italy and the Priests of the Mission in North Africa, Ireland, Madagascar, Scotland and the Hebrides.

Vincent died on the 27th September, 1660. He had been a refuge for everyone, but especially the poor.

Love is infinitely creative...