

St. Vincent de Paul

BORN 1581; DIED 1660
PRIEST AND FOUNDER
FEAST DAY: SEPTEMBER 27

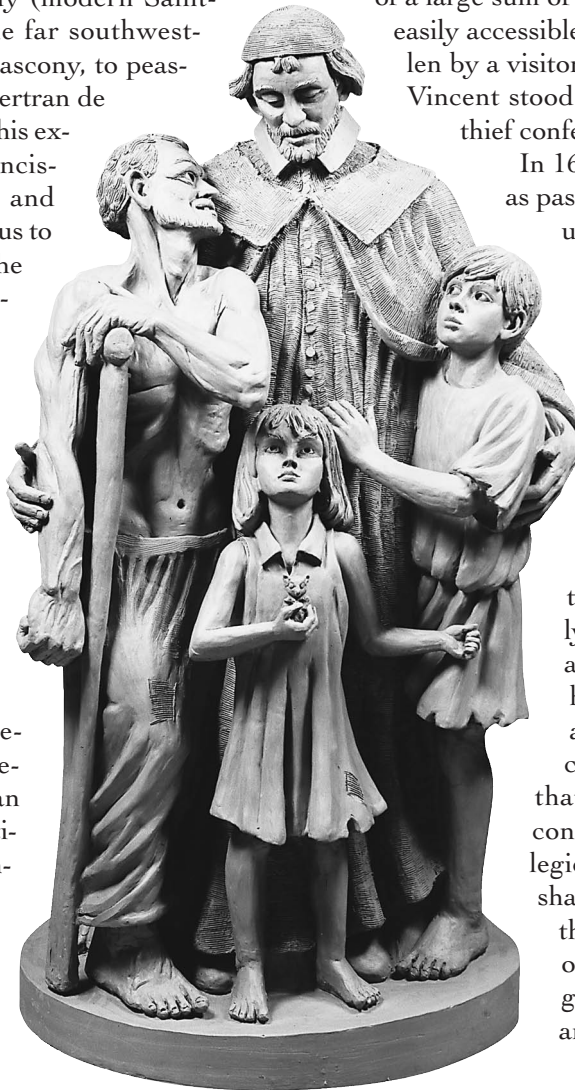
DURING THE PROTESTANT REVOLT, the unity of western Christendom was shattered and enormous wars were fought over much of Europe in the name of religion. St. Vincent de Paul was called by God to serve France in the latter part of this terrible time in Europe.

The third of six children, Vincent was born near the village of Pouy (modern Saint-Vincent-de-Paul) in the far southwestern French region of Gascony, to peasant farmers Jean and Bertran de Paul. His father placed his exceptional son with Franciscans for his education, and Vincent became ambitious to become a priest so that he might move into a higher social class and attain a generous income. He was ordained to the priesthood at the extremely early age of nineteen. He spent five additional years in study and tutoring. While traveling by sea, he was captured by Tunisian pirates. Sold several times during a two-year enslavement, he was able to restore his last master, an apostate, back to Christianity. They then together escaped to France.

Vincent continued his studies in Rome. Having come to the attention of a papal

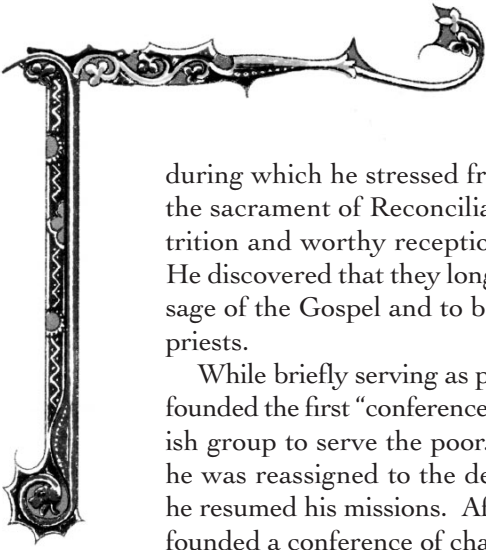
vice-legate in France because of his escape, he was recommended for a diplomatic mission to France in 1609 that led to his becoming chaplain for the former Queen, Marguerite of Valois. At the age of twenty-seven, this son of a poor farmer had become a confessor to royalty. He was an instrument in the conversion of Marguerite to a life of great charity, and while he willingly helped distribute her generous alms, he lived in rented lodgings rather than at court. It was during this period that he was accused of the theft of a large sum of money that had been left easily accessible by his landlord and stolen by a visitor. The accusation against Vincent stood for six months until the thief confessed.

In 1612 Vincent was assigned as pastor of a parish in the suburbs of Paris, but several months later he took over the education of the children of a noble family and the spiritual direction of their mother, Madame de Gondi. The turning point in his life, from a man who had desired to become a priest for unworthy motives to a priest fully dedicated to his calling as a servant, came when he heard the confession of a peasant who was critically ill, and discovered that the peasant's previous confessions had been sacrilegious. Madame de Gondi shared Vincent's horror that this could happen, and he obtained her permission to give missions to the peasants on the family estates,



St. Vincent de Paul, by Timothy Schmalz

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during which he stressed frequent reception of the sacrament of Reconciliation with true contrition and worthy reception of the Eucharist. He discovered that they longed to hear the message of the Gospel and to be cared for by good priests.

While briefly serving as pastor of a parish, he founded the first “conference of charity” — a parish group to serve the poor. Five months later he was reassigned to the de Gondi family, and he resumed his missions. After each mission, he founded a conference of charity, many of which survived for nearly one hundred seventy years until the French Revolution. During the years he served the Gondi family, he focused as well on the convicts and impressed seamen (impression — kidnapping — was a common naval recruitment practice at the time) in galleys in Paris, Marseilles, and Bordeaux, which were commanded by Count de Gondi. He established a hospital for them and did everything possible not only to end their physical suffering but to care for their spiritual needs as well.

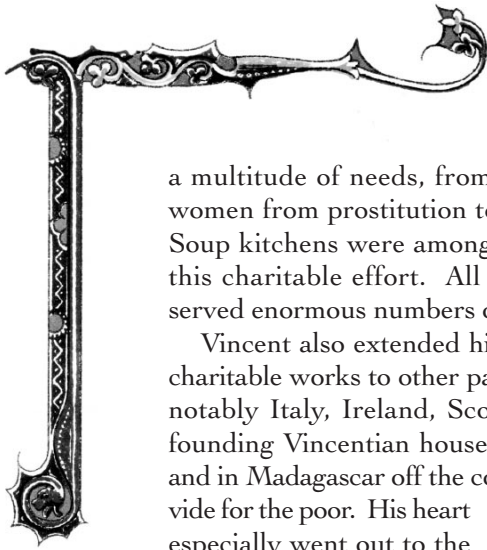
Vincent could see the value of the missions, but the effects could not be maintained without a more permanent means of rural evangelization. Urged on by Madame de Gondi, in 1625 he founded the Congregation of the Mission (CM or Vincentians). Within three years, the work of training seminarians was added. Within ten years, he founded the first of what became, by his death, sixty-two seminaries directed by Vincentians, a third of the total number in France. He held conferences for clergy to correct their theological errors, instruct them in the faith, and stir up in them their zeal for God and love for souls. He also offered free retreats for laymen, and in twenty-five years some twenty thousand men were exposed to the spirit of the Vincentians. These men were a leaven to Christianity throughout France.

In 1629 Vincent began establishing conferences of charity in Paris. Many well-to-do women whose hearts were touched nevertheless avoided a personal commitment to care for the poor, choosing merely to give alms and send their servants to provide what care was needed. He asked young women to offer themselves to this apostolate, and out of this in 1633 grew the



Stained glass window of St. Vincent de Paul

Daughters of Charity (DC), under the direction of St. Louise de Marillac. The Daughters of Charity worked in the hospitals he founded, visited the sick poor at home, and did wartime work as nurses, the first congregation of women to do charitable work outside the walls of a convent. In 1634, at the request of the Archbishop of Paris, he established the Ladies of Charity. They worked in hospitals and prisons but also served as his chief means of raising tremendous amounts of funds for almsgiving. The Ladies of Charity provided the funds, as well, for an orphanage staffed by the Daughters of Charity. Benefactors provided funds for a hospice for old people and a general asylum for the poor in Paris. His influence already immense, Vincent extended his charitable efforts beyond Paris. Through the Ladies of Charity, he provided funds to the parts of France that had suffered from the Thirty Years’ War (the most violent and destructive part of the religious wars that resulted from the Protestant revolt), to meet



a multitude of needs, from rescuing destitute women from prostitution to burying the dead. Soup kitchens were among the innovations of this charitable effort. All of these endeavors served enormous numbers of people.

Vincent also extended his zeal for souls and charitable works to other parts of Europe, most notably Italy, Ireland, Scotland, and Poland, founding Vincentian houses in these countries and in Madagascar off the coast of Africa to provide for the poor. His heart especially went out to the slaves, mostly Christian, of the north African Barbary states, whose misery he had experienced as a young priest. He chiefly focused on missions much like those preached in France, but also over time ransomed over one thousand slaves and offered material assistance of various kinds.

Vincent had become the conscience of all of France. He came to the attention of King Louis XIII, to whom he became counselor and friend. He had access to the highest levels of government and the court, and used his access solely to help the poor and serve the Church.

Consistent with his efforts to reform the priesthood, Vincent fought the rigorist heresy of Jansenism, helping combat its spread by limiting financial support only to orthodox clergy, persuading eighty-five French bishops to request that the Pope condemn its propositions,

and persuading the Queen Regent to do the same, which occurred in 1654. Vincent also had a significant influence on a number of other religious orders. He was spiritual director of the Sisters of the Visitation and their co-founder, St. Jane Frances de Chantal, for many years, and helped in reforming a half-dozen well-known religious orders.

By temperament, Vincent was irritable and quick-tempered. He had to work hard to cooperate with the grace of God, but in so doing became gentle, even-tempered, and serene. His association with those of high station did not rob him of his humility or his conviction that his call was to serve the poor, the unchurched, the ignorant, and the suffering, especially among the peasantry. He devoutly lived the prayer life prescribed by the Church for clergy, but he also taught that interruption of prayer to serve the poor is a service performed for Christ.

The life of this holy priest is a continuing call to charity that is the call of our Lord himself. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, composed of Catholic laymen on every continent of the world, who offer not merely alms but themselves in personal service to the poor, was founded nearly two hundred years after the death of its namesake, yet another legacy of a man whose life gave succor to an entire nation.

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