

Reflection: St. Vincent de Paul – Linda E Hunter

Today is the feast day of St Vincent de Paul. I wonder how much you know about him and his life?

Vincent de Paul was born in 1581 into a peasant family, living in the village of Pouy, in the Southwest region of France. He had three brothers – Jean, Bernard, and Gayon – and two sisters, Marie and Marie-Claudine. Much of his early life was spent trying to better himself and escape his humble roots. His family were keen for him to get on in life, selling a cow to pay for his education, and hoping that a career in the priesthood would better the family fortune.

So, Vincent was sent to a Friary to live with the Franciscans and ordained at the incredibly young age of 19. This was against the regulations established by the Council of Trent which required a minimum of 24 years of age for ordination, so when he was appointed parish priest in Tilh, the appointment was appealed in the Court of Rome. Rather than respond to a lawsuit which he would probably not have won, he resigned from the position and continued his studies.

It is thought, but not confirmed, that he was captured as a slave, living in slavery for a while.

In 1612 he was sent as a parish priest to the Church of Saint-Medard in Clichy. But in less than a year, he was recalled to Paris to serve as a chaplain and tutor to a wealthy family. – the de Gondis. One day he was called to go to the bedside of a dying peasant who wished to confess his sins, which were quite serious. The man had feared receiving confession in the past. Madame de Gondi went with Vincent de Paul and was horrified that the man had feared confessing his sin. She asked how many souls are lost! What shall we do about this?" This last question is now viewed as the essential Vincentian question, and transformed the remainder of Vincent's life.

Madame de Gondi requested Vincent preach a sermon on the subject of confession at the small church in Folleville. For Catholics, the sacrament of confession (the absolving of sin) can mean the difference between heaven and hell. Vincent's sermon, which is sadly lost to time, was a resounding success, and caused such a demand for confession amongst townsfolk that Madame de Gondi had to send for priestly reinforcements.

Months later he abruptly left Paris for the small town of Châtillon-les-Dombes, resigning from his position with the Gondis in the process. He was so moved by the faith of the man who had confessed, that he vowed he would dedicate the rest of his life to helping the poor.

In 1617, he returned to Paris to work with poor families. Of course, to work with the poor, Vincent required money but he was able to call upon his rich friends to help support his causes. Organising wealthy women of Paris to assist with this work, collecting funds for missionary projects, founding hospitals, and gathering relief funds to assist victims of war and slavery.

He became a changed man he looked outward and towards the needs of others. The ability to speak with and preach to those impoverished peasants seemed to have awoken something inside him.

He founded a congregation of mission priests who devoted themselves to the training of parish clergy and to mission work throughout the countryside.

He set up hospitals and orphanages, he reached out to the marginalised and vulnerable. Louise de Marillac, a widow, and he, founded the daughters of Charity, a group of women devoted to serving the poor and the sick.

Vincent encountered Christ in the poor.

He wrote many letters and in one he describes an encounter with Christ through recognising the needs of a neighbour.

“Christ chose to be born in poverty and called his disciples from among the ranks of the poor; he himself became the servant of the poor and so shared their condition that whatever good or harm was done to the poor, he said he would consider done to himself. Since God loves the poor, he also loves the lovers of the poor... We visit them then, we strive to concern ourselves with the weak and needy, we so share their sufferings that with the Apostle Paul we feel we have become all things to all people.

Therefore, we must strive to be deeply involved in the cares and sorrows of our neighbour and pray to God to inspire us with compassion and pity, filling our hearts and keeping them full.

His spirituality was the driving force that enriched and enveloped him. This transformation of his life also extended to the transformation of his personality and character.

In his early years he was easily provoked to rages, but through this work his whole persona changed, he became caring, loving, neighbourly, more pastoral, as God's grace and Holy Spirit began to dwell in him. He was a transformed man.

Such a transformed life speaks to us, too. It calls us to look at ourselves to see the ways in which we, too, have been made 'new' in Christ. To be transformed in Christ, we are to live united with Christ, living dead to sin and raised to new life in Christ.

It is through God's mercy that we are transformed spiritually and by the renewing of our minds we can live transformed lives. Our changed life comes through Christ working in us, through the gospel message, as we are renewed in our minds, and put on the new life in Christ.

May we like St Vincent de Paul look for ways in which our actions can transform not just those around us but ourselves too.