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## The Drum Rolls at Saint-Lazare

### 1636–1639

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*Saint-Lazare in a State of War*

*Vincent's Health*

*The Foundling Hospital*

*First Houses of the Mission*

*Growth of the Daughters of Charity*

In August 1636, the news exploded in the capital like a thunderclap in a serene sky, producing general consternation and panic. The fortress of Corbie, on the Somme near Amiens, had fallen to the Spanish and the road to Paris was open to the enemy! We must place this event into context by recalling the causes of the war which had been tearing at the Holy Roman Empire since 1618. It lasted for thirty years, which gave it its name. Born of the antagonism which set Protestant princes against Catholic imperial authority, it spread all over Europe, with foreign powers intervening in a conflict which, at first, had been a purely German matter. The French policy pursued by Richelieu since 1624 consisted of opposing the ambitious Hapsburgs of Vienna and Madrid by giving secret support to the emperor's enemies. In this vein, Richelieu pushed the king of Sweden, Gustavus Adolphus, to intervene in Germany, where he landed in 1630 and won victory after victory until his death at the battle of Lützen in November 1632. The imperial forces took their revenge by defeating Sweden at Nördlingen in September 1634, thanks to the support of a strong Spanish

army coming from Milan across the Alps. The victorious allied forces then advanced toward the valley of the Rhine.

At this moment, Richelieu judged that he could no longer avoid the overt engagement of France in this war. In 1632, he had ordered the occupation of the Lorraine as a preventive measure, since the duke, Charles IV, was ready to swing his support to the emperor. This was all the more likely because the duke had received on his lands the brother of Louis XIII, Gaston of Orléans, who was fleeing the kingdom after an attempted rebellion. Charles IV had even favored the secret marriage (January 1632) of his sister, Marguerite de Vaudémont to Gaston d'Orléans, a supreme outrage against French royalty.

In March 1635, the Spanish entered the Electorate of Trèves, occupying the city and imprisoning the archbishop, who had placed himself under the protection of the king of France. This had provided Richelieu with the excuse he was waiting for to declare war officially. The war would end in 1648, when France and the emperor signed the Treaty of Westphalia, but it only came to a definitive close in 1660 with the treaty of the Pyrenees signed with Spain. During more than a quarter century, at one location or another along the borders of the kingdom of France, the provinces were ravaged and populations subjected to the demands of the armed forces of the two camps who, according to one chronicler of the time, massacred friends and enemies with equal impartiality. It was in this war-torn country that Vincent de Paul would live and work for the rest of his days.

The taking of Corbie provoked a national tremor. After a moment of despair, Richelieu reacted. He had the king appeal to the people of Paris for an organized defense of the capital. At the city hall, volunteers were enrolled, horses and carriages were requisitioned, and defensive positions were built facing the plain of Saint-Denis. The priory of Saint-Lazare was requisitioned to serve as a drill field where recruits were assembled. In a letter addressed to Antoine Portail, on a mission in the Dordogne, Vincent described the dominant mood in August 1636: "Paris is waiting to be besieged by the Spanish; they have entered Picardy with a powerful army, and the vanguard is as close as forty to forty-eight kilometers from here, so that the inhabitants of the plain are fleeing to Paris, while Paris is so horrified that many are fleeing to other cities. The king is attempting to raise an army in opposition, but his armies are deployed in the far reaches of his kingdom or even outside, and the place where

companies are being gathered and armed is here, where the stable, the woodsheds, the halls, and the cloister are filled with weapons and the courtyards are teeming with military men. The drum is beginning to roll, even though it is only seven o'clock in the morning, and over the past eight days, seventy-two companies have been formed here." Vincent had to take measures to protect those for whom he was responsible. He evacuated them to the provinces "so that if the siege comes, most of them will be spared the risks that go with such an event."<sup>1</sup>

Thereupon, at the end of August, he received instructions from Chancellor Pierre Séguier, ordering him to send twenty of his priests to Senlis, where the royal troops were assembling, to serve as chaplains to the army. If one believes Abelly, Vincent went to Senlis in person to receive the orders of the king directly. Because he did not want to leave his priests without detailed instructions as to the role they would be expected to play, he immediately composed a little rule for them:

The priests of the Mission who are with the army will keep in mind that Our Lord has called them to this holy work:

1. To offer their prayers and sacrifices to God for the happy success of the king's good purposes and for the safety of his army;
2. To help soldiers who are in a state of sin to free themselves and to help those who are in a state of grace to maintain it. And finally, to do everything in their power to see that those who die leave this world in a state of salvation.
3. For this purpose, they will cultivate a particular devotion to the name that God takes in Scripture—Lord God of Hosts—and to the intention of Our Lord when he said *Non veni pacem mittere, sed gladium* (I did not come to bring peace, but the sword), and the purpose of this is to bring us the peace which is the goal of the war.<sup>2</sup>

Faced with a crisis, it was the man of action who emerged. Vincent, like a good patriot, hoped for the success of the king and his army, not fearing to invoke the Lord God of Hosts. When, a few days later, he wrote to Robert de Sergis, whom he had designated to serve as chaplain in a cavalry corps, we see that Vincent was possessed with a holy joy and that he was ready to ride out himself to the vanguard of the cavalry: "So go, *in nomine Domini* (in the name of the Lord), in the same spirit in which Saint Francis Xavier went to the Indies."<sup>3</sup>

The missionary-chaplains returned to Saint-Lazare at the end of November, after the royal army had reconquered the fortress of Corbie and the Spaniards had withdrawn, without even mounting any great battles. But this warlike interlude illuminates another face of Vincent de Paul, quite different from the image of a mild pacifist that many have wished to paint. When the drum rolled in the courtyard of Saint-Lazare, the hot Gascon blood beat in his heart; it would not have been amazing to see him jump on a horse to ride beside the king, *in nomine Domini*.

As often happens, the war brought epidemics with it, and the plague flared up here and there. One case appeared at Saint-Lazare itself, but the contagion did not spread. "All our patients are free of fever, and in the meantime, by the grace of God, no other infection has occurred here," Vincent wrote in 1636. He himself went on a mission toward Orléans, visiting on the way the farm of Fréneville, which had been presented to the Congregation by Madame de Herse. On his return, exhausted from weeks of travel, he made his excuses to Louise de Marillac for the fact that he could not visit her because of a slight indisposition. But as his health did not improve with time, he gave in to the insistence of people around him when they begged him to rest a little. He went to Fréneville to stay until the end of the year: "Our people have pressed me to go to the country because of my insignificant little fever, which doesn't seem like much, since it passed so soon."<sup>4</sup>

Vincent de Paul had a rugged constitution, which he needed considering his way of life and rhythm of work, not to mention the privation, the fasts, and the mortifications he imposed upon himself.<sup>5</sup> He was frequently on the road without a rest, on foot or on horseback, to take part in missions, visit the Charités, or inspect the holdings of the Congregation. We can imagine what his schedule was like by reflecting on this extract from a letter to Louise de Marillac. "I have just arrived and am leaving now for Pontoise, to return tomorrow evening and leave again the next day to go to the region near Dourdan, from where I hope to return by Thursday or Friday of next week."<sup>6</sup>

When he was in residence at Saint-Lazare, it was not to rest. Up at four o'clock in the morning, he was on his knees at prayer in the church for an hour before saying mass and then going about his tasks, various meetings, visits to the sick or prisoners. All of this was done fasting, for the first meal, dinner, was taken at half past ten. That was when he allowed himself an hour of relaxation with his confrères before going

to recite vespers and compline, all on his knees. Immediately after this, there were meetings, either at Saint-Lazare or on the outside, then a common reading of the breviary before the evening meal at six o'clock. After a last visit to the Blessed Sacrament, he withdrew to his room, a little chamber without a fireplace, furnished with a simple wooden table with two chairs and a bed with a coarse straw mat; there was no mattress and no tapestry to cut the cold drafts coming through the poorly jointed walls in the winter. His extensive correspondence kept him awake late, well after the bell rang nine o'clock,<sup>7</sup> the hour of curfew. Often, he was so tired that he fell asleep at the table, while writing a last letter by candlelight.

For some time, Vincent had been touched by the sad lot of children abandoned by their mothers before the door of a house or under the porch of some church. They were picked up by the local policeman and carried to a house in an alley going down toward the Seine, at the port of Saint-Landry. This establishment, called *La Couche*, received about 300 or 400 children a year. According to Vincent himself, no one had ever heard it said for fifty years that a single foundling child had lived. All of them perished, one way or another. It is no wonder, since they were already half dead when they were picked up at dawn and, because there was little money, the care they received at *La Couche* was quite deficient: "We were told that these poor little creatures had little help—one wet nurse for four or five children. They were given laudanum pills to make them sleep, but that's a poison." Moreover, Vincent claimed that they were sold to beggars for 8 sols each, and that these broke their arms and legs to excite pity and make the public give them alms. Then they let the babies die of hunger. What was most painful of all for Vincent was the fact that "many of these children died without having been baptized."<sup>8</sup>

Vincent reflected on this tormenting question for a long time, but he did not want to involve himself lightly: "I see nothing more frequently than the failure of things undertaken in haste." He first mentioned this subject in a letter to Louise de Marillac toward the end of 1637: "I thought of discussing this in detail with the Procurator General and of exploring means of helping these poor creatures at the foundling home."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps he even brought one of the children home himself one day, wrapped in his cape? There is a strong tradition that he did so. What is certain is that he presented the question before the assembly of

the Ladies of Charity of the Hôtel-Dieu. At this meeting, it was decided to confide to Louise de Marillac the task of carrying out a first attempt, in which a few children would be taken in, to see whether they could be fed with cow's milk.

Rather than trying to attend to children from La Couche, Vincent decided with Louise de Marillac that they would open a new establishment. "The attempt which you are proposing, with a wet nurse and a few goats at your place wouldn't help much!"<sup>10</sup> And so instead, they made a modest beginning of the charitable institution known as the Foundling Hospital. In a second stage, the Daughters of Charity were installed together with the wet nurses in a house near the gate of Saint Victor. The number of children rescued grew rapidly. As the work succeeded, the need for finances increased. This would become a great anxiety for Vincent de Paul.

Vincent was asked with increasing frequency to establish houses of the Mission in different dioceses. He did not yet feel ready to cope with all the problems which such foundations would entail, but he did agree to make a first attempt at Toul in 1635, at the request of Bishop Charles de Gournay. This involved taking over a hospital which, until then, had been administered by two religious of the Order of the Holy Spirit, as well as preaching missions in the new diocese and conducting retreats for the priests. But the administration of the hospital took too much time from the missionaries, who were only two in number. They asked to be relieved of these duties so that they could devote themselves to the work of the missions. An agreement to this effect was arrived at with the bishop and the local civil authorities, and it was to be the source of many complaints and lawsuits, reaching as far as Rome.<sup>11</sup> It would require twenty years of proceedings to bring to a definitive close an affair which was essentially a matter of distributing the revenues attached to operation of the hospital. It would end, by royal decision, in a union of the Knights of the Holy Spirit at Toul with the Congregation of the Mission.<sup>12</sup>

This first experience convinced Vincent that before establishing any new project, he should settle all jurisdictional and financial questions beyond the slightest possibility of ambiguity so that the new house could conduct an autonomous existence. He also saw that he would have to have a sufficient number of missionaries to put effective teams into the field. But in 1636, the Congregation counted fewer than fifty priests. Vincent, always prudent, did not wish to throw himself too quickly into

recruitment. Instead he prepared carefully by organizing an internal seminary in 1637, which he gave to one of his first companions, Jean de la Salle, to direct. Vincent sent him to the Jesuits for a stay of a few months so that he could observe their formation of young members. From that time on, the Congregation was to recruit an annual average of fifteen priests and several brothers coadjutors.<sup>13</sup>

Vincent now set about establishing a whole series of foundations: five new houses were created in three years. First at Notre-Dame-de-la-Rose, a pilgrimage site near Agen, he opened a house endowed by the duchess d'Aiguillon. In a contract signed August 18, 1637, she gave a sum of 20,000 livres for the upkeep of four priests charged with preaching missions in the villages and towns of her duchy and with celebrating daily mass for her and her family in her own chapel. The next foundation, a particularly important one, was established in the village of Richelieu, which had been raised up out of nothing by the cardinal. The latter summoned Vincent to his château of Reuil where, on June 4, 1638, he signed a contract in which the Congregation of the Mission engaged to send seven priests to the village and to increase this number to ten over the next two years. These priests were to alternate in preaching missions in his duchy and in the bishoprics of Luçon and Poitiers, while also preparing ordinands and directing spiritual exercises for the clergy of the region. Later, the cardinal took upon himself the lodging and board of this team, assigning for this purpose the revenue of the registry of documents of Loudun, steady at 4,550 livres per year. But he died before signing this contract, and it was contested by his heirs and never honored.

At the head of the team required by Richelieu, Vincent sent a confirmed missionary, Bernard Codoing, to whom he addressed a long letter filled with recommendations and instructions: "Oh, Monsieur, what spiritual need there is in that region, where there are many heretics because, as they say, they have never heard anyone speak about God at the Catholic church there. It is in that region where the heresy appeared and spread, to be most obstinately defended." After having dispensed his encouragement and his blessing, he ended his marching orders for the mission with a crystal-clear formula: "I will expect no other response than your departure."<sup>14</sup> This has the ring of a military command; although he devoted great effort to mastering it, Vincent had an essentially authoritarian character. In this case, he had a reason; he was familiar with Bernard Codoing's tendency to agonize and make excuses, and he plainly intended to be obeyed.

Soon it appeared advisable to relieve this house of Richelieu of double duty and to open a second one only for the diocese of Luçon. Once more, it was Bernard Codoing who was assigned to open this new house, at the end of 1638. But before this, a foundation was established at Troyes. Its benefactors were the local bishop, René de Breslay, and Commander de Sillery, who together assured it an annual income of 3,000 livres. In a contract signed on October 3, the Congregation of the Mission engaged to provide six priests and two brothers to evangelize the diocese and preach missions every five years on the lands of the Commanderie.

Already Vincent was preparing another new foundation, the house at Annecy, which was made possible by the generosity of the same Commander de Sillery, who made a gift in June 1639 of 45,000 livres for this purpose, guaranteed by support from the city of Melun. The contract called for the installation of two priests and one brother to preach missions in Savoy. This team was doubled in size in January 1640, when a complementary gift of 10,000 livres was received.

Gradually, the houses of the Congregation of the Mission were forming a network. In the course of the next twenty years it would come to extend over all the provinces of the kingdom and even beyond its frontiers. Vincent de Paul would devote a large part of his time and energy to encouraging these houses, keeping up a correspondence with their superiors, and visiting when he could.

At the same time, together with Louise de Marillac, Vincent undertook the deployment in the provinces of teams of Daughters of Charity. Their mother house had been installed in May 1636 in a small rented dwelling in the village of La Chapelle, near Saint-Lazare. Soon this was too small, and the women moved in 1641 into two houses in the rue Faubourg-Saint-Denis, facing the church of Saint-Lazare. The houses were bought by the Congregation of the Mission, as the Daughters of Charity, not yet recognized as a company, did not have the necessary official existence.<sup>15</sup> Louise de Marillac received postulants there. They were recruited according to criteria which Vincent later articulated in a letter to one of the superiors of the Mission, Guillaume Delville: "If you find strong, healthy girls, disposed to works of charity, of irreproachable life, and resolved to be humble, to work at cultivating virtue and to serve the poor for the love of God, you may give them hope that they can be received."<sup>16</sup>

The girls made their apprenticeship by visiting the poor, helping in the dispensary, and working in the class for little girls. The mother house also received women of the world who came there to make retreats under the direction of Louise de Marillac and with the counsel of Vincent. He hoped that these retreatants would make concrete resolutions: "It would be good to provide practice in this for the women who come there to make retreats with you. All the rest is nothing but a figment of the spirit which, having developed some facility and even some sweetness in considering virtue, flatters itself with the thought that it is indeed quite virtuous."<sup>17</sup>

The first establishment of the Daughters of Charity was installed at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, where a Charité had just been founded. Vincent had been asked to come and preach a mission there in January 1638 while the court was in residence. It was Nicolas Pavillon, member of the Tuesday Conference, recently named bishop of Alet, who directed this mission. It was a lively success; it seems that on this occasion Louis XIII and Anne of Austria had their first direct contact with Vincent.

The very success of this mission aroused the dissatisfaction of some of the nobles. In fact, the ladies of the court and the maids of honor, carried away by holy zeal, began to dress in humble garments to go and visit the poor and the sick, thus missing the worldly entertainments of the court. Complaints were brought to the king, and the argument was made that visiting the sick might bring contagious vapors into the court to infect the royal family. The queen herself came to the defense of the virtuous ladies of her household. As for Vincent, he was concerned for the virtue of his missionaries. He wrote to one of his confrères: "We had to suffer on this occasion because of the uncovered breasts." But he did not wish any insistence on this point: "In the name of God, Sir, let us be very circumspect in explaining the sixth commandment. We will have to suffer a storm for that one day!"<sup>18</sup>

After the establishment of the first house of the Daughters of Charity, Vincent sent a team to Richelieu. The next year, a team was sent to Angers, where eight Daughters of Charity were to work with the sick in a hospital. Louise de Marillac decided to accompany her daughters on this long voyage. From Richelieu, where he was on a visit, Vincent sent her advice for the best way to make the journey: "If you wish to take the coach to Châteaudun, you will pass through Chartres and can make your devotions there. From Châteaudun you have forty-four kilometers to Orléans and maybe less to Notre-Dame de Cléry,

where the river runs by. As soon as you arrive at Orléans, you will send to the harbor to find a boat."<sup>19</sup> Finally, after fourteen days in a carriage and on a boat, Louise de Marillac, with her troop of girls dressed in gray serge and wearing white head dresses, arrived at Angers. The plague had broken out in the city. Without fear of this epidemic, the team of Daughters of Charity set to work at the hospital.

When Vincent received this news, he wrote immediately to Louise de Marillac: "I beg you above all to take good care of yourself among the great dangers you are encountering in Angers."<sup>20</sup> But a courier brought him the news that she had fallen ill. Then he, who only a few months earlier had been preaching to her in severe terms because she was too anxious about her son, expressed his worries freely and let his tender feelings for her shine through: "I beg you, Mademoiselle, to do everything in your power to recover your health, and to use all means necessary. . . . And when you return, it must be in a litter; we will try to send you one when you are well enough to travel."<sup>21</sup> Here, Vincent was no longer playing the part of a demanding spiritual director who managed his penitent severely. He was rather the attentive friend who is concerned for someone dear to him.

# 13

## Assistance to the Lorraine

### 1638–1640

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*The Saint-Cyran Affair*

*Vincent at Fréneville*

*The Drama of the Lorraine*

*Assistance to Victims of Catastrophe in Lorraine*

In June 1638, Richelieu received Monsieur Vincent at his château of Rueil, where the two signed a charter of foundation for a house of the Congregation of the Mission that would be located on the cardinal's lands. This demonstrated the esteem in which the cardinal held Vincent and the work of evangelization he was carrying out throughout the kingdom. But a short time after this, Richelieu summoned Monsieur Vincent again. This time, he received him coolly and submitted him to a stern interrogation about an affair which, he claimed, was threatening the tranquility of the country and the unity of the Church.

What had taken place? It seems that on May 15 of that year the abbot of Saint-Cyran had been arrested and sequestered in the château of Vincennes and accused of plotting against the cardinal and professing theories contrary to the orthodox religion. Among the documents seized at the home of the abbot was a copy of a long letter that Saint-Cyran had addressed to Vincent de Paul on November 20, 1637.

The Master of Petitions, the lord de Laubardemont,<sup>1</sup> charged with gathering evidence for the abbot's trial, had hoped that this letter could support his accusation of the suspect. But when Vincent was called for a deposition, he refused to speak

before a layman on a matter concerned with religion. It is for this reason that he was twice summoned by the redoubtable cardinal who had tried in vain to obtain inculpatory information about Saint-Cyran. According to a witness of the last meeting, Richelieu “treated him coldly and sent him away with every sign of perplexity.”<sup>2</sup>

Who was this abbot of Saint-Cyran and what was his relationship with Vincent de Paul? His name was Jean Duvergier de Hauranne, and he was born at Bayonne in 1581.<sup>3</sup> He studied theology at the University of Louvain, a Jesuit school, and there he met a young student, Cornelius Jansen,<sup>4</sup> known under the name of Jansenius. They became great friends and when they had completed their studies, they went together to the family estates of Jean Duvergier, near Bayonne. There, for five years, they studied biblical and patristic texts, especially the writings of Saint Augustine. Then Jansenius returned to the Netherlands where he had been ordained and where he taught theology at Louvain. There he dedicated himself to editing a monumental summa of Augustinian thought which was published after his death in 1638. This work, the *Augustinus*, became the fundamental document of Jansenism. As for Jean Duvergier, after staying in the capital for a time, he was ordained in 1618 and soon thereafter was made commendatory abbot of the abbey of Saint-Cyran near Poitiers, a substantial benefice which assured him a great degree of independence. He then settled in Paris for good and in 1622, he was named chaplain to the Queen Mother.

The abbot of Saint-Cyran made the acquaintance of Pierre de Bérulle, and no doubt it is in the circle of Bérulle that Vincent met him. The two men were similar in age and in their southern origin. Their friendship grew rapidly, and they were of service to each other. Vincent, thanks to the influence of the Gondis, managed to get a nephew of Saint-Cyran freed from imprisonment in Spain and Saint-Cyran managed a favorable outcome for a matter of interest to Vincent’s family. They were so close that if we are to believe the deposition made by Saint-Cyran at his trial, they even shared expenses for a time. Saint-Cyran even offered Vincent the priory of Bonneville, which he had held before receiving his abbey, and “which he wanted only the aforementioned Sieur Vincent to have.”<sup>5</sup>

At the beginning of their friendship, Vincent was impressed by Saint-Cyran’s natural assurance and authority. Father Rapin said about him: “One of his main talents was to exercise authority over men’s minds, once they listened to him, and to become their leader.”<sup>6</sup> Saint-

Cyran, who had connections among the great men of the country, helped Vincent many times, especially to remove certain difficulties when he was installing his congregation at the Collège des Bons-Enfants and later, when he was concluding the transfer of the priory of Saint-Lazare. But eventually, their relations became less close. Saint-Cyran wanted to influence the way in which Vincent governed his congregation, a thing which the latter tolerated less and less well. Just as he had retained his freedom in relations with Bérulle, he insisted on remaining free in his dealings with Saint-Cyran. This was so important to Vincent that he soon became troubled with the ideas that his friend proposed to him, such as: "The poor Church has not existed for the last five hundred years. . . . Calvin had the right idea, but his way of expressing himself doomed his position. . . . Who will save us from the Jesuits?"<sup>7</sup>

Saint-Cyran's outrageous declarations, which he did not save for Vincent alone, fanned the flame of a rumor that he had secret plans and a design for conspiracy. Since the death of Bérulle in 1629, he had been seen as the leader of the Party of the Devout. In the realm of politics, he criticized the positions of Richelieu, such as the alliance with the Protestant powers against the hegemony of the Hapsburgs; on the religious front, he denounced the gallican tendencies of the cardinal, which tended to produce a progressive distancing between the Church of France and the papacy.<sup>8</sup>

When in October 1637 Vincent learned that Saint-Cyran was leaving for a rest in Poitou, he decided to visit him, on the pretext of saying good-bye, but with the real purpose of admonishing him about his errors. His brotherly warning had a strong effect on Saint-Cyran, who sent him a long, self-justifying letter from Dissais, where he was staying with the bishop of Poitiers. It was this letter, a copy of which was found at the time of Saint-Cyran's arrest, which caused Vincent to be summoned to the presence of the cardinal.

After his interview with Richelieu, Vincent was required to make a deposition before Jacques Lescot,<sup>9</sup> confessor of the cardinal. Being a prudent man, he composed this deposition carefully; it was recorded over the course of three sessions from March 31 to April 2, 1639. The document shows Vincent's skill; he managed to avoid accusing his friend without lying. Here is an example: "[I am asked] whether I did not hear the Sieur de Saint-Cyran say that God destroyed his Church five or six hundred years ago, using Solomon's phrase *tempus destruendi* (the time of

destruction), and whether corruption has crept in, even into his doctrine. I reply that I heard him say these words only once. And at first this statement caused me pain, but then I thought that he was saying it in the sense (I am told) that Pope Clement VIII used it when he said that he wept because the Church was expanding to the Indies, where it would destroy itself.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, by interjecting the authority of the pope’s words, Vincent neutralized the apparent heterodoxy of Saint-Cyran’s declaration.

When all was said and done, the accusation did not succeed in supporting the charges against Saint-Cyran, who was presumed guilty of having spoken against Catholic doctrine and dogmas confirmed by the Council of Trent. But on Richelieu’s personal order and on purely political grounds, Saint-Cyran remained in prison. He was not released until February 1643, after the cardinal’s death. Sorely tried by his captivity, he died shortly after being set free, in October, without ever seeing Vincent again.

For the first time, Vincent was involved in a political affair. Whether he liked it or not, he was now labeled as belonging to the circle of the Devout because of his relations and friendships with people like the bishop of Poitiers, Augustin Potier, and other members of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament. But in his dealings with Richelieu, he proved his skill and mastery by not allowing the cardinal to overawe him or draw him into territory outside the boundaries of pure Catholic orthodoxy. No matter the outcome of these confrontations, the very fact that anyone made the effort to obtain his testimony proves that, by this time, Monsieur Vincent had acquired fame and authority far outside his priestly and charitable sphere.

At the beginning of the Saint-Cyran affair, Vincent was staying at the farm in Fréneville to nurse his recurrent “feverlet.” In the country, he rediscovered his peasant habits. It was the time for haying, and he sent word to the manager of the farm at Bourget: “Do not cut the hay while the rain lasts, even if the workers say that you should. . . . The master of the meadow opposite the Church of La Chapelle understands very well how to manage. When you hear that he is cutting his fields, you can go ahead and cut ours.”<sup>11</sup> “Our farmer at Gonesse has the wheat field where the prior has his sainfoin planted, behind the barn, harrowed twice at once. It seems to me that the first time the harrow was turned over at one end and the second time he went across the field with the harrow in the normal position.”<sup>12</sup>

It seems that Vincent enjoyed his farms—they reminded him of his youth—but he enjoyed them as a wise manager would. When he had to review a contract for the farm of Fréneville, he specified to a counselor of the Châtelet delegated to take care of the matter: “A price of 1,200 livres, of which we must retain an amount of 50 livres of rent at eight percent on the one hand, and of 10 livres on the other. It would be good to have them specify the number of acres of land involved, supposedly 150, a large portion of which is lying fallow.”<sup>13</sup> He also insisted on being in control of the accounts of all the houses of the Mission: “An accident which affected the Community showed me that I must see all accounts of expenses and receipts.”<sup>14</sup>

In his letters, Vincent moved easily from material questions to the personal problems of his correspondents. Without fail he asked them about their health and urged them to care for themselves in order to remain strong enough to follow their vocation of serving the poor: “In the name of Our Lord, Monsieur, do everything in your power to regain your health and keep it, in order to be able to serve God and the poor for a longer term.”<sup>15</sup> It is not surprising, then, that he liked to give advice about medicines. Had he become so knowledgeable while he was working for his master, the spagiric physician, on the Barbary coast? Often, he would recommend a specific potion: “President Fouquet was cured of the dropsy by using a half glass of chervil juice, with an equal quantity of white wine, well mixed and strained through a cloth, taken on an empty stomach and with no food taken for two hours afterward. The patient should not drink more than four liters at each meal. This is a sovereign and easy remedy.”<sup>16</sup>

As superior of the Congregation, Vincent naturally took the greatest care of the moral health of his missionaries. The virtues he hoped they would acquire are first of all mildness, simplicity, and humility. He had already given instructions to this effect at the creation of his first Charité, and he returned to it constantly in his letters: “I must only beg you to work at surrendering the high esteem in which you have held the renown and brilliance of your virtue and the vain congratulations of the world, which Our Lord rejected so firmly, and which he urges us so frequently to reject as well.”<sup>17</sup> “Everyone says that the missionary spirit is the spirit of humility and simplicity. Hold yourselves to that. The spirit of mildness, simplicity, and humility is the spirit of Our Lord; the spirit of pride will not survive long at the Mission.”<sup>18</sup> “One of the most important acts of charity is to support one’s neighbor, and we must

hold it as an irrefutable maxim that our difficulties with our neighbor lie rather with our own lack of self-control than with anything else.”<sup>19</sup>

Vincent was very well informed of what was going on throughout the kingdom by his missionaries, who worked in every province in collaboration with the members of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament. Through them, he was receiving increasingly disquieting news about the condition of the people of Lorraine. This unfortunate duchy was subject to every trial: bad harvests due to inclement weather from 1628 to 1630, epidemics of the plague starting in 1629, and, as a crowning blow, the coming of armies, both French and foreign, who put the region to fire and the sword. The duchy of Lorraine occupied a critical position at the border between the Holy Roman Empire and the kingdom of France. Some of the possessions of the duke de Lorraine were governed by the emperor, while another portion, the Barrois, was at the orders of the king of France, who had also annexed a century earlier the three episcopal cities of Metz, Toul, and Verdun. In order to survive, Lorraine was constrained to practice a politics of strict neutrality with regard to its two powerful neighbors. But since 1626 the duke's nephew, Charles IV, had been allowing himself to be drawn into anti-French maneuvers. Moreover, he had received on his lands Gaston d'Orléans, who himself was rebelling against his brother, Louis XIII. Charles had even declared himself willing to let his sister, Marguerite de Vaudémont, marry this rebel in a secret wedding. This gave the king of France a good reason to invade Lorraine once more in 1632 and, at the end of 1633, to take possession of Nancy, its capital, while Charles IV placed himself and his army at the service of the emperor.

In May 1635, war was declared between France, the emperor, and Spain. The imperial forces and the Swedish forces under the orders of a formidable commander in chief, Jean de Werth, marched on the territories of Lorraine, while the Spanish invaded the northern reaches of the kingdom of France. From that time on, for many long years, Picardy, Bourgogne, and Lorraine would be ravaged by the movements of friendly and enemy armies. There was nothing but savagery and robbery, villages pillaged and burned, peasants tortured, survivors terrorized. Everywhere people fled to fortified castles or the deepest forest. Farming was abandoned and fields lay fallow. There are even accounts of cannibalism.

Vincent was deeply moved when he read descriptions of these horrendous scenes and heard the stories of general misery. The Company of the Blessed Sacrament started in 1636 to organize aid to the peasants around Nancy, and the missionaries at Toul did the same, but they were helpless before the vast scale of the tragedy. The missionaries asked for help. On his own initiative, Vincent decided to organize help for the suffering people of Lorraine, and on May 10, 1639, he wrote to one of the priests representing him at Rome: "With the help of Our Lord, we have undertaken to bring assistance to the poor people of Lorraine and for that purpose we have sent Messieurs Bécu and Rondet, Brothers Guillard, Aulent, Baptiste, and Bourdet, two each, to the cities of Toul, Metz, Verdun, and Nancy. I hope to supply each group with 2,000 livres a month."<sup>20</sup>

This was the beginning of an extraordinary enterprise of helping the population of an entire province. The work went on for ten years, during which Vincent de Paul, who had received no official charge to do this, succeeded in bringing to Lorraine help amounting to more than 1,500,000 livres and on the order of more than 33,000 meters of various fabrics.<sup>21</sup>

At the beginning, Vincent had absolutely no financial means to set such a project in motion. Once more, he appealed to the generosity of his Ladies of Charity, bringing them together to tell them what he had learned of the tragic situation of the people of Lorraine. In this way, he collected the first funds, but money runs out and good will is soon exhausted. At that point, he went to the highest authorities. Did he go, as in the account of Abelly, to Cardinal Richelieu to implore him to give peace to France? To this, His Eminence is said to have answered, "Alas, Monsieur Vincent, I hope for this peace as much as you do, but peace does not depend on me." No other document gives an account of this interview, but it is certain that Vincent intervened with Louis XIII on this matter, and the king entrusted a significant sum to him. Vincent announced this in a letter written in July 1640, addressed to Bernard Codoing, superior of the house of Annecy: "The king is giving 45,000 livres for this purpose, to be distributed by me according to the orders of the Minister of Justice."<sup>22</sup>

Vincent was not content with just collecting money; he organized payment and distribution of the funds as well. Carrying the money across regions where bands of robbers roamed as well as more or less

regular and disciplined troops was not a trivial matter. The task fell to an astonishing person, Brother Mathieu Regnard.<sup>23</sup> In one decade, he made more than fifty journeys from Paris to Lorraine, each time carrying sums of money from 20,000 to 50,000 livres. He always succeeded in escaping all who attempted to intercept him. What is more, on the way home, he brought with him the largest number possible of people in distressed circumstances. Vincent tells of his exploits in a letter from October 1639: "He brought us one hundred last month, among whom were forty-six girls, young ladies, and others, whom he led and watched over all the way to this city."<sup>24</sup>

With his well-developed sense of organization and efficiency, Vincent wrote a little rule of life for the members of the Congregation whom he sent to Lorraine. In it, he insisted on the spirit of fairness which must govern the distribution of aid. This was assured by consultation with the local clergy, with whom the missionaries drew up a list of the poor in the order of their need. Finally, the missionaries were to send frequent reports about their work so that the generous benefactors could know how their money was being used and be encouraged to continue their munificence.<sup>25</sup>

For Vincent, charity was not a matter of impulse or improvisation. He believed that charity is only effective when it is programmed and controlled. On this subject, he wrote to François de Coudray, superior of the house at Toul, giving him precise and detailed instructions: "You must make the distributions as M. de Villarceaux orders, as for the distributions in other towns, let them follow precisely the order you have been given by the same Sieur de Villarceaux, and let the missionaries obtain receipts for all that they distribute, so that they can make an accounting of it, lest for any reason whatever the funds have been diverted or even a single penny has been applied elsewhere. And you will report to me monthly the sums you have distributed."<sup>26</sup>

But he never believed that this assistance should be exclusively material. Vincent intended to provide assistance for both body and soul to the poor people of the fields gathered in the towns. He developed his idea in this way: "physically, by allocating to them 500 livres for bread every month, which comes to 2,500 livres which we must find monthly, and spiritually, by teaching them all things necessary for salvation and helping them to make a general confession of all their past life."<sup>27</sup>

The reports rendered by the missionaries provide us with living images of the extreme misery of the people of Lorraine. Julien Guérin,

priest of the Mission sent to Saint-Mihiel at the beginning of 1640, wrote to Vincent: "I find so many poor people that I don't see how I can give to all of them. There are more than 300 in the greatest need and 300 more who have reached the limit of endurance. Monsieur, I tell you truly, there are more than 100 who seem to be skeletons covered with skin and so horrifying that if Our Lord did not give me the strength, I would not dare look at them. Their skin is like tanned marble and so drawn that their teeth appear dry and uncovered, with their eyes and faces completely contorted with suffering."<sup>28</sup>

When the survivors arrived in Paris, alone or in groups, from the hell that was Lorraine, they immediately made for Saint-Lazare, for they knew they would find aid and comfort there. Soon it was being said in the capital that Monsieur Vincent must be from Lorraine himself, if he was doing so much good for these refugees. His actions were considered unusual because at this time, Lorraine was not France, and its inhabitants were considered foreigners. In consequence, Vincent's work was considered all the more admirable.

Among these dispossessed, there was an additional hidden misery suffered by aristocrats or other persons of some station. After having exhausted their resources and sold anything of value they had brought with them, they did not dare to go out and beg. Once he knew of this situation, Vincent appealed to a group of gentlemen whom he called together at Saint-Lazare. He understood immediately that to give help in a way that was not wounding to the recipient, he would have to use the intermediary of people who were of the same social class. On this subject, he wrote to the duchess d'Aiguillon, who had just made a gift of 15,000 livres for the people of Lorraine: "Messieurs de Liancourt, de la Ville-aux-Clercs, de Fontenay, and some other people of position assembled here yesterday to start working for the people of position who have fled to this city from Lorraine."<sup>29</sup>

Among these gentlemen, one in particular stood out in the performance of this charity, and this was the baron de Renty.<sup>30</sup> He was a member of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament. The campaign in favor of the aristocrats of Lorraine illustrates the cooperation between the Company of the Blessed Sacrament and the priests of Saint-Lazare, with the initiative coming now from one side and now from the other. Vincent, who was always ready to work as part of a team, usually acted as a catalyst for energetic people of good will. He knew how to find the funds necessary to create living and durable works, rather than flaring

straw fires; this was the only way they could be effective. As part of the effort to bring help to Lorraine, he did not hesitate to make use of public opinion by having the letters of his missionaries, with their vivid descriptions of distress, copied and distributed. Many letters from the magistrates of cities in Lorraine addressed to Vincent from 1640 on express deep gratitude for the help he provided to their people and the prayer that he will continue his support.<sup>31</sup> This support for Lorraine is remarkable for more than the amount of aid distributed and the number of suffering people helped. It was the first attempt at organized assistance for a whole endangered region. Without having received any specific charge, Vincent de Paul assumed the role of a secretary of state for refugees and war victims. Going far beyond the responsibilities expected of him as superior of the Congregation of the Mission, he placed himself on his own initiative, in a national role.

# 14

## The Rule of the Congregation

### 1640–1642

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*Constitution and Rule of the Congregation*

*Assistance to the Galley Slaves*

*Creation of Seminaries*

*Relations of Vincent with the Great*

*The Virtue of Humility*

Faced with an emergency such as the one experienced by the people of Lorraine, Vincent de Paul proved to be a decisive man of action. He did not hesitate to throw himself into an undertaking which, at first sight, was far beyond the means of a congregation of modest size. Under such circumstances, with confidence in Providence, he relied on this formula: “Believe me, three are more than ten, when Our Lord’s hand is in their work.”<sup>1</sup> But as audacious as he was in extreme circumstances, when it came to decisions about the organization and future of his congregation, he was most circumspect.

The Congregation had already been in existence for fifteen years, and in the charter of foundation, it was clearly stated that those who are admitted to the work of charity that is the Congregation of the Mission must have the intention of serving God once they enter and of obeying the Rule on this subject. But this Rule was not yet entirely composed,<sup>2</sup> not to mention being approved by the relevant authorities. This was a cause of concern for Vincent, who in 1635 wrote to a friend: “I fell dangerously ill, which made me think of death. Examining my conscience to see how I might have caused some pain,

I found that there was nothing except the fact that we have not yet constituted our Rule.”<sup>3</sup>

In the matter of composing this Rule, there was one point which troubled Vincent and upon which he questioned himself extensively, and that was the question of vows. He dearly wanted the missionaries to make those vows, but he did not want the community to become a religious order; rather, he wanted its priests to remain among the secular clergy. He explained this point of view in February 1640 to Louis Lebreton, who was representing the Mission in Rome: “I am perplexed by my doubts and have no idea how to resolve them. Either it will be enough for the priests to make a vow of stability, and in the matter of poverty and obedience, to hear a solemn threat of excommunication in the chapter once a year, or it would suffice if the members made a solemn promise once a year to observe the Rule of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and we could determine whether it is the vow of stability which constitutes membership in a religious order.”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, Vincent was hoping to reconcile two apparently contradictory requirements: having the priests make a vow of stability to prevent members of the Congregation from leaving it to enter another, while still being sure that this vow did not make the Mission into a religious order, with the result that it would become directly subordinated to Rome.<sup>5</sup> He even put his problem before Richelieu, and asked for his support with the Holy See. But the cardinal was not on good terms with Pope Urban VIII<sup>6</sup> so he advised Vincent to wait for the election of a new sovereign pontiff to whom he could then present his request. This was communicated in veiled terms to Louis Lebreton in Rome: “The difficulty on this side has been that he who can do everything [Richelieu] did not find it a good idea to inform His Holiness and told me himself, only three days ago, that we should wait for another [pope], who would take care of our problem without urging.” At that point, Vincent tended toward a simple vow of stability in the second year of seminary study with a solemn vow after eight or ten years. There remained the need to find a solution for the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to avoid being classified as a religious order, “although we ought to hope for the spirit of an order.”<sup>7</sup>

While he was still thinking about how to resolve the issue of vows, Vincent was designing ways to consolidate the structure of his congre-

gation, first of all by instituting an annual visitation of the houses by the superior general or his representative. He took the Carthusian Order as an example, pointing out that one of the means they used to keep their primary observance strong was an annual visitation. So he himself visited the house at Richelieu twice, in 1638 and 1639, and the house at Troyes in 1639. He called the first general assembly of the Congregation of the Mission in October 1642. At this meeting, the principal rules were decided upon, and a commission was created to frame the constitution in final form. In this assembly it was also decided to give the superior general some assistants, which Vincent announced in these terms: "so now I am able to die whenever it pleases God no longer to tolerate the abominations of my life."<sup>8</sup>

These long delays in settling upon the definitive organization of the Congregation and in finalizing the Rule are part of the Vincentian method. Vincent explained this himself in a letter addressed to the superior of the house at Annecy, Bernard Codoing, who, in order to hasten the opening of a seminary, made the mistake of taking certain initiatives without reporting to Vincent: "It would even have been useful if you had let me know the actions you wished to take in support of the seminary which you have begun to create. You will tell me that I am too slow, that you sometimes wait for six months for an answer that could have come in one, and that in the meantime, opportunities are lost and everything stands still. To this, Monsieur, I answer that indeed, I am sometimes too slow to reply and to take certain actions, but that I have never yet seen a project spoiled by such delay, where everything is done in its own good time, with all the necessary consideration and precaution. You will therefore please correct your own quickness in resolving problems and taking action, and I will work to correct my lack of speed." Continuing his analysis, Vincent revealed the basis of his thought. He only arrived at a decision after quiet reflection and frequent prayer for inspiration by the Providence of God: "As I review the most important events that have taken place in this community, it seems to me, and this is plainly demonstrable, that if they had been done before they in fact were done, they could not have turned out well. That is why I am particularly devoted to following the providence of God step by step, with adoration. And my only consolation is that seemingly it is only Our Lord who has cared for the interests of this little community unceasingly."<sup>9</sup>

Vincent never forgot his role as royal chaplain to the galleys. He fulfilled his duties by going to inspect the galleys at Marseilles and by organizing and preaching a mission at Bordeaux in 1623 for the galley slaves passing through the port. But at Paris, his title gave him no authority over the convicts waiting for departure. They were under the jurisdiction of the Procurator General who authorized the diocesans to bring the succor of religion to the condemned. Vincent was careful not to infringe on the prerogatives of either the secular or the religious authorities. Yet having determined that the conditions in which the poor unfortunates found themselves were deplorable, he obtained the right in 1632 to transfer the most severely ill to the tower of Saint Bernard on the Quai de la Tournelle, where the conditions of their imprisonment were more humane.

He visited the prisoners as often as his many obligations allowed. Without financial means, he could only give them words of encouragement. But a few years later, at the beginning of the year 1640, he received an inheritance, the equivalent of 6,000 livres of interest, from a former president of the Chamber of Accounts, Claude Cornuel, who specified in his testament that these funds were meant for assistance to the convicts.

Once Vincent had obtained the agreement of the Procurator General, Mathieu Molé, he devoted some of the money to stipends for the priests of the parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, so that they would act as chaplains for the convicts held in the tower of Saint Bernard, and some to the upkeep of three Daughters of Charity who were charged with care of the convicts. They brought the men food, provided them with clean linen, and by their very presence and word gave them moral support. Later, Vincent asked Louise de Marillac, who was at the head of the Charité of Saint-Nicolas, to encourage the ladies to visit the convicts at the same time that the Daughters of Charity came to tend to them, and to bring them a few luxuries and concern themselves with the men's fate. But it was particularly at Marseilles, the home port of the galleys, that Vincent was able to exercise fully the function of Royal Chaplain. Soon, circumstances would permit him to do this work effectively.

Beginning in 1640, Vincent de Paul undertook a new project, the establishment of seminaries. This was a direct outgrowth of a well-established activity of the Congregation of the Mission—the retreats for ordi-

nands. Moreover, if the benefits the missions brought to rural areas were to be lasting, it was necessary to educate good priests to take over parishes in market towns and villages. A friend of Vincent, Adrien Bourdoise, who also preached missions but only in the parishes of the capital, expressed it in this way: "To preach a mission is to give a meal to a starving population, but to create a seminary—that is to provide them with lifelong nourishment."

It is easy to understand the urgent and undeniable need for seminaries from a letter written by a bishop to Vincent. This prelate was doing his best for the good of his diocese, "but with little success, because of the inexplicably large number of ignorant and sinful priests who make up my clergy, who can be corrected neither by words nor by example. It is horrible to think that in my diocese there are almost 7,000 priests who are drunkards or unchaste, who daily mount to the altar though they have not the slightest vocation."<sup>10</sup>

Vincent was approached by a number of bishops: "Our lords the prelates all seem to wish they had seminaries of priests, of young men [not children]," he remarked.<sup>11</sup> He was not the only one to be conscious of this pressing need and to put his energy into fulfilling it. In the years from 1640 to 1642, numerous seminaries were opened throughout the kingdom—in Paris, in the parish of Saint-Nicolas with Adrien Bourdoise, in the parish of Vaugirard with Jean-Jacques Olier, and in the parish of Saint-Magloire with Father Bourgoing, superior of the Oratory, who also founded seminaries at Rouen and Toulouse, while Father Eudes did the same at Caen.<sup>12</sup>

Vincent, for his part, had already organized a little seminary in the Collège des Bons-Enfants, but he was not very satisfied with the results. Children who had no desire to commit themselves to the priesthood came there to take their courses in the humanities. Vincent was convinced of the need to train those who were destined to receive Holy Orders not only through the ordinands' retreats, but through one or two years of education about their duties and functions as priests. In this spirit, he had opened a novitiate in 1637, the resident seminary at Saint-Lazare, where future missionaries were formed. But for the moment, he hesitated to take the initiative in founding seminaries in the provinces.

According to Abelly, it was Cardinal de Richelieu, in the course of conversation about the situation of the Church in France, who encouraged Vincent to open seminaries, allocating to him for this purpose a sum of 1,000 écus. In 1642, with this encouragement and on the strength

of the funding, Vincent inaugurated a first major seminary at the Collège des Bons-Enfants into which he received twelve candidates for the priesthood. The number of students grew rapidly and the space became too small. In order to provide more space, the students in the minor seminary were moved to another building, bearing the name of Saint Charles, on the grounds of Saint-Lazare.

In response to a request from the bishop of Geneva, Juste Guérin, the house at Annecy opened a seminary at about the same time. On this occasion, Vincent insisted on maintaining the proper mission of the seminaries, namely to take those who had already received the minor orders and prepare them for ordination to the priesthood. Their mission was not to play the role of a Catholic secondary school: "I am still of the opinion that it is not expedient to receive students who are not either priests or persons in orders, and that we should not be teaching them the various subjects, but their application, in the way that is appropriate for ordinands."<sup>13</sup>

Soon the bishops Nicolas Pavillon of Alet, Jacques Raoul of Saintes, and Alain de Solminihac of Cahors were asking the Congregation of the Mission to take charge of the seminaries being opened in their dioceses. The movement grew; a dozen other seminaries were founded by the Congregation in Vincent's lifetime.<sup>14</sup> In his correspondence and in his conversations with the priests charged with the direction of the seminaries, he insisted above all on the moral formation of the young seminarians. The directors were to: "take the trouble to educate them in the true spirit of their state in life, which consists particularly in the interior life and the practice of prayer and the virtues; the important thing was not to teach them singing, ceremonials, and a little morality. The principal thing was to form them to a firm piety and devotion."<sup>15</sup>

Vincent gave as an example the method of Monsieur Bourdoise at Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, where the seminarians functioned as curates while going on with their studies, since there was no better way to learn than to see how things are done. Above all, he did not want to turn the seminarians into scholars, but into humble and virtuous men: "Learning is necessary, and woe to those who do not use their time well. But let us fear, oh let us fear, my brothers, for those who have sharp wits indeed have much to fear; *scientia inflat* (learning puffs up the learned) and those who have no learning are even worse off, if they are not willing to humble themselves."<sup>16</sup>

The organization and direction of seminaries by priests of the Congregation of the Mission did not detract from the foundation of new houses. In 1641, at the request of the bishop of Meaux, Vincent opened a house of the Mission at Crécy-en-Brie. Of course, all these foundations could only be realized with the approval of the ecclesiastical authorities and the financial aid of members of the aristocracy and the high bourgeoisie. Vincent knew that he could always count on the support of the archbishop of Paris. This was all the more true when the archbishop chose as coadjutor in 1643 his own nephew, François-Paul de Gondî, the future Cardinal de Retz. This man had been the pupil of Vincent de Paul and always remained on excellent terms with him, despite his outbursts and his tumultuous life. We know that Vincent maintained good relations with the whole Gondî clan, which included the sister of the archbishop, the marquise de Maignelay,<sup>17</sup> who was a benefactress of the Congregation and of the Daughters of Charity.

Moreover, Vincent was often consulted by Cardinal de Richelieu on questions dealing with the condition of the Church. A proof of his good relations with the powerful prime minister is the fact that people did not hesitate to approach Monsieur Vincent when a favor or the good will of His Eminence was desired. In the same way, he was asked to serve as intermediary to the duchess. The duchess d'Aiguillon, niece of the cardinal, was one of the most active Ladies of Charity. Deeply dedicated to all the charitable organizations created by Vincent, she often supported them with her untiring generosity.

In return, Vincent was frequently called as an advisor or comforter by these great ladies. For example, in August 1640, he wrote to Louise de Marillac: "Yesterday I spent the day visiting Madame the duchess d'Aiguillon and Madame du Vigean about the death of the latter's son. Milady's servants came to get me."<sup>18</sup>

Here there is a story that wants to be told. After having presented his condolences and the assurance of his prayers to Madame du Vigean, suffering a great deal from the death of her son, a brave young officer, Vincent retired, escorted by the youngest daughter of the house. This young woman, Marthe by name and nineteen years of age, was in the full bloom of a pampered youth. She was very taken by a young prince, who was also very much in love with her. The prince was Louis de Bourbon, the duke d'Enghien, who used his sword to earn himself the title of Grand Condé. In taking his leave, Vincent said to Marthe:

"Mademoiselle, you are not made for the world."<sup>19</sup> She cried out that she had not the slightest intention of entering the religious life. Vincent left without replying. The next year, the duke d'Enghien, against his own wishes, made a marriage of state with a niece of Richelieu, Claire-Clémence de Maillé-Brézé. A short while later, Marthe du Vigean took the veil in a Carmelite convent and became Sister Marthe of Jesus.

Vincent de Paul's connections were not limited to the great families that revolved around the court. He was also in constant contact with members of the high administration. Thus in a letter of February 1642, addressed to Bernard Codoing, superior at Annecy, who was to travel to Rome, we see Vincent's skillful use of introductions to Cardinal Mazarin, Minister Chavigny, and the duke de Liancourt.<sup>20</sup> "Here is a letter from Monseigneur Cardinal Mazarini, at our recommendation, to Cardinal Antonio, nephew of His Holiness. You did well to warn me not to use His Eminence [Richelieu] for the plans involving the bishop of Geneva; otherwise, I would have written tomorrow to Monsieur de Chavigny, at Lyon, to speak to him about it." Knowing that Richelieu was not received at the court of the Holy See, he planned another intervention, through the good offices of the duke de Liancourt, whose wife was a Lady of Charity. Vincent continues: "Your presence at Rome could be very helpful in interesting the ambassador in this matter. I am having his good friend Monsieur de Liancourt write to him about it, with the best ink that he has."<sup>21</sup>

By this time, Vincent de Paul had acquired the stature of an authority, not only in the clerical world—many are the bishops who were formed at Saint-Lazare—but also in the salons of Paris and the circles close to the government and the court.

As though he were more sharply aware of the danger for himself and his congregation that this growing visibility represented, Vincent put more and more weight on the virtue of humility in his conversations with his missionaries and in his letters to the superiors of the houses of the Mission. Thus, in a letter addressed to Jeanne de Chantal, he made an effort to weaken the opinion that she might have of the Congregation: "I have told you many things about the good points of this little community; I beg you to take this lightly, and not to talk about it to anyone. An excessively high reputation is very harmful. Alas, Reverend Mother, if you knew our ignorance and the small degree of virtue we possess, you would have great pity on us and on the abominations of my soul."<sup>22</sup>

In the same spirit, he made many references to his unworthiness and his low origin: "All I am is a miserable sinner, doing nothing but ill on earth, who should hope that God will snatch him away soon."<sup>23</sup>

Writing to the vicar general of the diocese of Bayonne, who was asking for his advice, he declared himself unworthy to give it: "Because I am a poor digger of the soil and swineherd and what is worse, the most shocking and most contemptible of all persons on the earth, I beg of you to have no regard for what I tell you."<sup>24</sup>

Following the custom of his times, he closed his letters with the formula "your very humble servant" or "your very humble and obedient servant." But from the year 1640 onward, when he entered his sixtieth year, instead of signing his correspondence "Vincent de Paul, priest of the Mission," he used closings such as "unworthy priest of the Mission" or "unworthy superior of the Congregation of the Mission."



# PART THREE

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**Responding to All the Misery  
of This World**



# 15

## The Council of Conscience

### 1643–1645

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*The Death of Louis XIII*

*Member of the Council of Conscience*

*Mazarin's Jealousy*

*New Foundations*

*Marseilles and the Galleys*

*Vincent the Manager*

*The Mission outside the Kingdom of France*

In a spirit of humility and mortification, Vincent de Paul called himself an unworthy priest. This did not prevent him from being summoned, together with others, to the deathbed of the king of France in May 1643. The events had begun their course at the end of 1642. Louis XIII had marched at the head of an army toward the Roussillon to put the Spanish to flight. This campaign ended with the taking of the city of Perpignan on August 29. It was then that a plot was discovered, a plot led by a young favorite of the king, the marquis de Cinq-Mars.<sup>1</sup> The plan was to assassinate Richelieu, then to sign a peace with Spain. Gaston d'Orléans, the king's own brother, as well as numerous other aristocrats, were implicated in this affair, which the cardinal was able to thwart in time. This was Richelieu's last battle. He was already very ill, his body devoured by abscesses, and lying in a litter in great pain he returned from the Midi to Paris, where he died on December 4.

Louis XIII, hardly in better health than his late prime minister, took Richelieu's advice and named Cardinal Mazarin as

his successor in that office. During the months he had left to live, the king several times asked Vincent for advice in finding worthy candidates for bishoprics. "His Majesty has asked me through his confessor to send a list of those who seem to me worthy of this dignity," wrote Vincent in April 1643 to his representative in Rome.<sup>2</sup>

Soon thereafter, the king's health worsened and Queen Anne of Austria suggested to her husband that he should ask Monsieur Vincent to visit him. Vincent came to the king's bedside twice in the first two weeks of June. He told a story about one of these visits in a conference he gave to the Daughters of Charity. "What do you think they feed kings when they are sick? Eggs and bouillon, that's what they give them. God granted me the favor of being present at the death of the late king. And this is what he refused, near to his death, and he refused because he found it unappetizing and because he saw that death was approaching quickly. He did me the honor of having me called, and he said: 'Monsieur Vincent, the physician is urging me to take nourishment, and I have refused, because I have to die in any case. What do you advise?' I said to him: 'Sire, the physicians have advised you to take nourishment because it is their rule always to urge it on the sick. As long as some few breaths of life remain, they hope to find a moment at which they can bring back health. That is why, if it please Your Majesty, you would do well to take what the physician has given you.' This good king then had the grace to call the physician and had the bouillon brought to him."<sup>3</sup>

An astonishing private conversation with this great monarch who was mildly asking the peasant's son for advice. The shadow of death strikes down differences; these two men talked quite simply about earthly food before going on to speak of spiritual things. But given the unhappy state of the king, taking in a bowl of soup could no longer change the ineluctable course of events. On May 15, Vincent was a quiet presence, one of a large group of onlookers, as the king returned his soul to God: "As long as I have been on earth, I have never seen anyone die in a more Christian fashion," Vincent wrote soon after to Bernard Codoing.<sup>4</sup>

Immediately after the death of Louis XIII, Anne of Austria had herself named regent of the kingdom by the parlement. She appeared before this assembly holding her five-year-old son by the hand and thus convinced the body to break the late king's will, in which there was provision for a council of regency. With little knowledge of politics, but with a character ideally suited to authority, Anne found Mazarin to be the ideal prime minister. He relieved her completely of the hard work

of government, leaving her only the privileges of power. In her youth, this beautiful Infanta of Spain had been sprightly and coquettish, and had even been willing in her scatterbrained fashion to take part in intrigues which brought her very close to treason of her adopted country. When she had not yet provided the Crown with an heir twenty years after her marriage, she found herself in a precarious situation; finally, the happy event of the birth of Louis Dieudonné, the future Louis XIV, saved her from repudiation and exile.

During her regency, Anne was haunted by a single imperative, to preserve royal authority and to protect the throne for her son until he was old enough to mount its steps himself. From her Spanish education, she had brought great piety, which was strengthened by the vicissitudes of her life. She went regularly to the Benedictines to pray in their convent at the rue Saint-Jacques, which she transformed into a handsome abbey, the Val-de-Grâce, to thank God for having granted her a descendant.

In confirming Cardinal Mazarin in his role of principal minister, she decided to retain for ecclesiastical affairs an institution created by Richelieu, the Council of Conscience. The presidency was hers, and the members she named were Mazarin, Chancellor Séguier, Bishops Potier and Cospéan, the great confessor of Paris, Jacques Charton, and Monsieur Vincent. The latter announced his election to the council in a letter of June 18, 1643 to Bernard Codoing in Rome "I have never deserved compassion more than now, nor needed prayers more than at present, in my new task. I hope it will not last long."<sup>5</sup> In fact, he was called upon to serve for almost ten years.

What was the function of this Council of Conscience? Its creator, Richelieu, had hoped that this organ of government "would give the king knowledge of the state and the policy of the Church."<sup>6</sup> Under the regency of Anne of Austria, the council concerned itself with all religious matters, the maintenance of religious discipline, repression of sacrilegious acts such as duels, which still constituted a veritable wound in the social fabric, and with resistance to the inroads of the Protestants and the surveillance of the Jansenists. In addition, the council was charged with examining all episcopal and abbatial candidates, whose nomination was the privilege of the Crown, as a result of the concordat signed in 1516.<sup>7</sup> The council also dealt with the collation of ecclesiastical benefices.

This last function was of capital importance, considering the sizable revenues attaching to bishoprics, abbeys, and priories. At that time, the Church was the largest landowner in the kingdom. It is common

knowledge that the collation of benefices had become, after a destructive wrong turn resulting in the commendatory system, a way of rewarding a person or attaching him and his family to the Crown, without giving thought to the religious qualifications of the beneficiary. It is against this abuse that Louis XIII and Richelieu had begun to act, sometimes consulting Monsieur Vincent for the names of priests worthy of receiving the bishop's or the abbot's miter. Anne of Austria was acting in the same spirit by naming the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission to the Council of Conscience.

But Church matters were not limited to the awarding of offices and benefices. The Church of France at this time was carrying the major responsibility for hospitals, schools, and universities in the kingdom, which resulted in the diversity and multiplicity of questions submitted to the council.

At the beginning of her regency, Anne of Austria often consulted Monsieur Vincent, as we see from his correspondence or the texts of his talks. "I am obliged to go out tomorrow to see the queen at the Val-de-Grâce, after dinner,"<sup>8</sup> he wrote to Louise de Marillac, and to the Daughters of Charity, "I have just been to see the queen, who spoke of you."<sup>9</sup>

Anne of Austria was interested in the work of the Mission and showed her interest generously. She was deeply moved by an ordinands' retreat at the Collège des Bons-Enfants, and for many years she supported the retreats with donations. In 1644, she supported the work of helping the aristocrats of Lorraine who had fled to the capital. "The queen has put 2,000 livres at our disposal for the noblemen of Lorraine,"<sup>10</sup> Vincent reported to Antoine Portail.

At the Council of Conscience, Monsieur Vincent enjoyed unchallenged authority. Whenever the matter before the body was one of nominations to Church office, Anne of Austria regularly agreed with his choice. The secretary of state, Michel Le Tellier, described this in a letter dated July 1645: "She considers herself obligated to follow the advice of the said Vincent, and she does it with such consistency that if Milord the Cardinal were to propose a different person for a given benefice, whom this Sieur Vincent did not consider competent, she would hold absolutely to what the latter had decided and neither the recommendation of His Excellency [Mazarin] or anything else could move her from her prejudice in favor of Sieur Vincent."<sup>11</sup>

We find confirmation of this opinion from the pen of Mazarin himself, who wrote to the same correspondent: "As for the bishopric of Soissons, Monsieur Le Tellier has told you of it at length, and everything he told you was the truth, when he said that in this matter, Monsieur Vincent has more credit with the queen than I."<sup>12</sup> But the cardinal was not of a mind to tolerate such a situation. He showed himself to be very jealous of anyone who tried to come between him and Anne of Austria. In his personal notebooks, which he kept in Italian, we see his feelings about Monsieur Vincent. He suspects the priest of belonging to the Party of the Devout and of being hostile to himself. In June 1643, Mazarin wrote: "Monsieur Vincent wishes advancement for Father Gondi,"<sup>13</sup> and three months later, "Father Gondi has spoken to my detriment, as have Father Lambert and Monsieur Vincent." Always suspicious, he wrote a little later, "Monsieur Vincent, in with the Maignelay crowd, is the channel that brings everything to the ears of Her Majesty." In the first months of 1644, fearing that a cabal was being established against him, Mazarin noted once more: "Two persons have come to inform me that the monasteries, brothers, priests, pious men and women are taking up all the queen's time under the pretext of supporting her piety, so that she no longer has time for affairs of state and I can no longer speak with her. They hope to reach their ends by having Maignelay strike the last blow when everything is ready, together with that woman Dans, as well as the prioress of the Val-de-Grâce and Father Vincent."<sup>14</sup>

In such a climate, possibilities of friction between the cardinal and Vincent were never lacking. At a council in February 1644, Mazarin asked for a benefice to be attributed to a son of Monsieur de la Rochefoucauld. Vincent spoke against this and had the benefice given to Monsieur Olier, pastor of Saint-Sulpice.<sup>15</sup> The cardinal took his revenge by delaying the meetings of these councils. He wrote in his journal: "Don't hold the Council of Conscience for some time." Thus, the rumor soon ran that Monsieur Vincent would shortly fall into disgrace. His representative at Rome became agitated when this word made its way to the Holy See. In January 1645, Vincent reassured him: "It is true that it looked as though I would no longer be tolerated in that office, but because of my sins, I'll stay in this post and feel the enmity some other way."<sup>16</sup>

Contrary to what Mazarin thought and even feared, Vincent was quite decided to attend exclusively to his religious duties for the time being. In February 1644, he wrote to the superior of the house at Sedan, who

was posted in the heart of Huguenot territory and had to understand the conflicting politics of both Catholic and Protestant: "It is not advantageous for us to be involved in secular matters, no matter how much they may affect spiritual matters." He applied this maxim to his own position in the Council of Conscience and continued: "In the work which it has pleased the queen to assign to me on a council concerned with ecclesiastical questions, I only intervene in matters dealing with the religious state and with the poor, no matter how pious or charitable other questions raised to me may seem."<sup>17</sup>

We have no archives of the Council of Conscience, but in Vincent's correspondence we find many allusions to his statements within this noble court. For instance, in February 1645, he wrote to the archbishop of Toulouse requesting information about Jean de la Valette, commendatory abbot of Beaulieu, who was insisting strongly that he should have the bishopric upon the death of his brother, the bishop of Vabres, because this office had been in his family for more than a century. Vincent wished to know "whether he is capable and pious and whether he has the qualities proper to this dignity, and especially, whether he is an ordained priest." He added, "He says that he is, but some people who have discussed the matter with me and who know him are aware of nothing of the sort."<sup>18</sup>

That same year in June, Vincent sent a letter in the name of the Council on Ecclesiastical Affairs to the count of Brienne, demanding that "certain scandalous behavior" being practiced on the feast of Corpus Christi at Aix-en-Provence be abolished.<sup>19</sup> The next month, he felt obliged to refuse the attribution of an abbey to a minor child of Monsieur de Chavigny, Secretary of State. He told this to one of his missionaries, grateful that God had given him the strength to hold firm. Then, realizing that he had perhaps been rather indiscreet, he caught himself with this endearing formula: "Let this be told to the ear of your heart. I don't know why I let myself reveal so much to you."<sup>20</sup>

Active participation in the Council of Conscience burdened Vincent with extra work, in particular a large flow of correspondence, and so he resigned himself to making one of the brothers, Bertrand Ducournau,<sup>21</sup> his secretary. This man, also born in the Landes, had some experience of business, and beautiful handwriting as well. Vincent could be very satisfied with his choice; with complete devotion, Brother Ducournau rendered great service both to his superior general and to the entire Congregation.

As though he did not already have enough work, Vincent was obliged to accept, in 1643, the vicariate general of several abbeys: Saint-Ouen in Rouen, Marmoutiers in Brittany, and Saint-Martin-des-Champs in Paris. These abbeys had been attributed to Amador de Vignerod, grand-nephew of Cardinal de Richelieu. His aunt and governess, the duchess d'Aiguillon, had asked Vincent to accept the supervision of these foundations, whose abbot, in 1643, was only eleven years old. When Amador reached his majority in 1652 and found that he had no vocation for the Church, he made the abbeys over to his younger brother, Emmanuel, so that this vicariate general remained Vincent's burden for the rest of his life.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of all his responsibilities, Vincent never neglected the Congregation of the Mission, which remained at the center of his thoughts. The period from 1643 to 1645 was a time of expansion for the Congregation of the Mission, both within and outside the frontiers of the kingdom. First, in 1643, a house was opened in Marseilles to care for the galley slaves, funded by the generosity of the duchess d'Aiguillon, and then a house was established at Cahors with the active support of the local bishop, Alain de Solminihac. The next year, the Congregation founded a house at Sedan, in a region of heretics, a foundation financed by the royal exchequer.<sup>23</sup> Another house was opened at Montmirail in Champagne, on Gondi lands, thanks to a donation made by the duke de Retz, and a third house was installed at Saintes, at the request and with the help of the local bishop, Jacques Raoul. Finally, in 1645, a house was founded at Le Mans, at the request of its bishop, Emmanuel de la Ferté, and the bishop of Saint-Malo asked Monsieur Vincent to place some of his missionaries in the abbey of Saint-Méen, in the heart of his diocese.

Although all these foundations were based on donations which permitted them to exist autonomously, without appealing either to the mother house or the parishes in which missions were preached, the large number of new foundations posed some financial problems for the Congregation, for the chief necessity was to educate priests and brothers who could be sent to the new houses while continuing to carry out existing duties, such as courses for ordinands, retreats, and seminaries, not to mention continuation of aid for Lorraine. Thus Vincent devoted a good portion of his time and energy to financial questions.

A first difficulty arose immediately after the death of Cardinal de Richelieu. This prelate had allocated to the Congregation the proceeds

of the Office of Records at Loudun, and this was duly inscribed in the charter of foundation of the Congregation's house at Richelieu. But a short while before his death, the cardinal had ceded his rights over the Office of Records in order to reconvert this capital into a land fund. He had not had the time to establish the document regularizing this change to the benefit of the Congregation. Thus everything depended on the good will of his heirs, especially the duchess d'Aiguillon, who was both executrix and principal heir of her uncle's estate. But there were also other relatives who were to receive significant portions of his estate, in particular Armand de Vignerod, who was the next duke de Richelieu, and another grand-nephew, Armand de Maillé,<sup>24</sup> whose sister, Claire-Clémence, had married the duke d'Enghien. Since this sister had not been included in the cardinal's testament, the prince de Condé, her father-in-law, attacked the document in the courts. A long lawsuit followed that finally brought a considerable sum to the Condé family. But the Congregation, in its turn, did not suffer, thanks to the generosity of the duchess d'Aiguillon.

Another difficulty arose with the house at Crécy, which counted eight priests and two religious brothers. The house had been founded in 1641 at the request of the king, who for this purpose gave the Congregation a château and 8,000 livres of land rents, computed on the revenues of five farms and the rights of the salt depot at Lagny-sur-Marne. The charter of foundation stipulated that the Congregation was to distribute alms in the region to an amount of 4,000 livres annually, and conduct missions and courses for ordinands at the request of the bishop of Meaux. But the finances of the kingdom were at a low ebb, and the king's promises were no longer honored after 1642. Therefore, Vincent was obliged to reduce the number of missionaries at Crécy to three priests. Other sources of revenue declined at this time as well. Vincent wrote to his representative in Rome: "The king will be taking, this year and in the first quarter of next year, our land rents from Agen, those from Ponts-de-Cé, to an amount of more than 20,000 livres, and we do not know *quid futurum sit* (what will happen) in the years to come. Blessed be God!"<sup>25</sup>

Fortunately, the duchess d'Aiguillon continued to support the Congregation generously. This made it possible for Vincent to consider opening a house in Rome. Until then, he had had only one priest in that city, whose task it was to advance the interest of the Congregation of the Mission at the Holy See. In 1643, he was able to write to Bernard

Codoing: "I have sent you an order for the purchase of the house and for the new foundation to the amount of 5,000 livres of fees from the coaches of Rouen, executed by Madame la duchesse."<sup>26</sup>

Of all the foundations, the house at Marseilles had particular importance in Vincent's eyes. This city was the home port of the galleys for which, as royal chaplain, he had the moral responsibility. In 1643, a concatenation of favorable circumstances allowed him to carry out the original plans, long delayed by a lack of money and men. A new bishop, Jean-Baptiste Gault, priest of the Oratory, had been made cardinal of Marseilles. His consecration at Paris provided the opportunity for the duchess d'Aiguillon and Vincent to meet and devise a plan of action for the care of the poor convicts. The first step would be to organize a great mission to be preached in March and April on board the galleys, which were in dock at this time of year. With about 260 oarsmen in each ship, for a fleet counting at least twenty galleys, a large team of missionaries would have to be mobilized. Since Vincent could only provide five, an appeal was sent out to members of the congregation founded by Monseigneur d'Authier and to Jesuits and Oratorians. The mission would be brought to a close in May, when the galleys set out for Catalonia. It seems that this mission, strengthened by the presence of the bishop himself, had a profound effect on the galley slaves. A chronicler has written, probably with some exaggeration, "The galleys were so changed that people compared them to cloisters."

With the momentum of this success, the foundation of a house of the Mission at Marseilles was assured. The duchess d'Aiguillon signed an agreement with Vincent on July 25 that she would provide 14,000 livres for the upkeep of four priests who would devote themselves to preaching missions on the galleys. Further, the superior of the house would receive authority from Vincent, the royal chaplain, to exercise control over the chaplains assigned to each galley and to monitor the living conditions of the convicts. A royal edict of June 1644 made this delegation of authority official.

It only remained to resume the construction of a hospital at Marseilles which would care for convicts when they were sick, a project which had been begun by Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi and Vincent in 1618 and then abandoned for lack of funds. Thanks to the action of a member of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament and a friend of Vincent, Gaspard de Simiane, and to the energy of Monseigneur Gault,

the hospital was completed in two years. Once more, it was the duchess d'Aiguillon who made it possible to bring this enterprise to a successful end.

Knowing his attachment to the cause of the galley slaves, the families of these miserable men turned to Monsieur Vincent to bring them a little comfort. Thus we see, in the letters sent every week to the superior at Marseilles, notes asking that he transmit a few livres or even a few sols to a certain convict on such and such a galley, humble witness to the charitable acts of a man taken up with so many other requests and burdened with a multitude of concerns.

As an experienced manager, Vincent de Paul kept a careful eye on the flow of the various revenues of the Congregation. At the end of 1642, he noticed that the royalties for the coaches of Soissons were not coming in regularly, although they were being requested daily. Therefore, he decided to relinquish them: "We will try to sell the coaches of Soissons, which provide 2,500 livres of royalties, but they are decreasing, and the operator is asking us for a rebate because of the demands made on him by the messengers."<sup>27</sup> He would continue to be troubled by these coaches, for the duke de Bellegarde, having returned from exile, demanded that all the coaches be restored to him since they had been his before his disgrace. It was necessary for Vincent to ask for the queen-regent's intervention on this matter. Moreover, in February 1644, he learned that the lessor of these coaches of Soissons had just declared bankruptcy. Thereupon new taxes were created: "The king has recently created another tax on your coaches of Rouen, and we are trying to strike down your liability for them," wrote Vincent to the superior of the Mission's house in Rome, to whom the revenues from the coaches of Rouen had been allocated. A few months later, he was able to reassure Bernard Codoing: "I have been able to obtain the king's order that your coaches cannot be removed from you without appropriate reimbursement, nor surcharged without the recommendations which you have sent us."<sup>28</sup> One can only imagine all the steps taken, the visits made, and the requests sent out by Vincent in order to obtain this result!

The military campaigns under way against Spain and the Empire were becoming more and more costly. The royal finances were not in the most brilliant condition and every means of refilling the royal coffers was acceptable, such as discreetly selling little bits of the royal domains. Consequently, in April 1645, two leaseholds were sold, those of the

mills of Gonesse and of Bourget. But these rents had been assigned to the priory of Saint-Lazare since the twelfth century for the care of lepers and now, for the work of the Mission. Vincent de Paul managed these funds as though he owned them, but in fact, they belonged to the Crown. He was obliged to address a request, executed before a notary and dated June 19, 1645, in order to express his opposition to the sale of these leases. A reading of the documents shows another diversion of royal largesse. Louis XIII had allocated an income of 4,000 livres, based on the income of seigniorial rights of the estate of Gonesse, for the benefit of the work of the Foundling Hospital and the Daughters of Charity. The instrument of allocation was dated July 1642. But in April 1643, the king placed the rights over this estate under adjudication. The buyer, the marshal d'Estrées, did not consider himself bound by the prior allocation of income from these lands. Once more, Vincent had to fight in order to win back a small proportion of this income over the course of years.<sup>29</sup>

In brief, the growing number of foundations and undertakings initiated by Vincent de Paul caused him endless concerns and upsets. This was exacerbated by the fact that at the level of the State itself, finances were becoming tighter and tighter; agitation and disturbances in various provinces, such as Normandy, Limousin, and Périgord, foretold a crisis. Most often, this took the form of popular revolt against excessive fiscal pressure while the country was going through a period of bad harvests. The aid expected in the countryside from the royal coffers was increasingly parsimonious and the great benefactors of the Congregation of the Mission were becoming less generous.

Yet it was during this period, 1643 to 1645, that Vincent de Paul threw himself into enterprises outside the boundaries of the kingdom. For a man inspired by a grand passion and upheld by profound faith, difficulties are not obstacles but spurs that goad him on to surpass himself.

The first of Vincent's enterprises had to do with providing aid to Christian slaves being held along the Barbary Coast. Was this Vincent's idea or that of Louis XIII, shortly before his death? The king knew about the miserable state of the prisoners, entombed in the prisons of Algiers and Tunis or bought by the Turks to work under atrocious conditions. The king had signed a treaty with the Grand Sultan to put an end to piracy in the Mediterranean, but the potentates ruling in Algiers and Tunis did not respect the promises made at Constantinople. Did

Vincent discuss this matter with the king, since he understood it better than anyone? In the testament of Louis XIII, among the bequests made in favor of the Congregation, there is a separate one for the ransom of captives in Barbary.

No doubt other religious orders were already working to ransom Christian slaves, like the Order of the Redemption or the Order of Mercy, founded in the thirteenth century, and the Order of the Maturins, also called Trinitarians, who were founded at about the same time. But the task was so great that there was ample room for many workers. In January 1643, Vincent brought up the possibility in one of his letters that “our little community could make a kind of mission among these poor slaves from time to time, and perhaps the pretext for a first attempt could be the ransom of a small number of them.”<sup>30</sup>

This idea came to fruition in July, the charter of foundation of the house at Marseilles stipulating that the four priests stationed there will have a double role: on the one hand, that of devoting time to the convicts by preaching missions on board the galleys or caring for those in the hospital and on the other, that of sending “when it is judged appropriate, priests of the Congregation of the Mission to the Barbary Coast to console and instruct poor, captive Christians.”<sup>31</sup> Of course, it was necessary to find a way for the priests to gain entrance to Barbary over the objections of the Turks. To circumvent this obstacle, they made use of the clause in the treaty which specified that the king of France could be represented in Tunis and Algiers by a consul who was authorized to have a chaplain in his entourage. In this way, the first missionary, Julien Guérin, went to join the consul who had been posted to Tunis in November 1645.

Soon after this, without considering the immediate implications of her action, the duchess d’Aiguillon bought the offices of the consulates of Tunis and Algiers in order to put them into the hands of the Congregation of the Mission. This direction undertaken by the Mission in Barbary would bring Vincent de Paul and his missionaries a weighty harvest of pain and suffering.

At the same time that the project for intervention in Barbary was taking form, another possibility was opening up for Vincent de Paul: to install the mission in Babylon! The Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith suggested using his missionaries in these distant lands and giving the episcopal see of Babylon to a member of the community. In the letter he wrote to Bernard Codoing, one can sense that Vincent was

originally attracted to this idea, but then he writes, "There is much to be said for and against such a plan." Wisely, he reserved his answer "while waiting till it please His divine goodness to make his will in this matter more clearly known."<sup>32</sup>

One year later, in August 1644, Vincent recalled this project of going to Babylon, which had not moved forward, but which was now being talked of in connection with the East Indies. He wrote to a correspondent: "Your last letter speaks of the matter of Babylon and that of the East Indies. It is, after all, difficult to get money into these countries. It goes from Lisbon to Goa and from there to Ispahan." Most of all, the incumbent of the title, the bishop of Babylon, would want a pension in return for giving up his office. Vincent was not discouraged, but he found the matter sufficiently complex to require further thought.<sup>33</sup> This was all the more important as at the same time, there was thought of opening a house of the Congregation so as to preach missions in Catalonia which, at that time, was under the control of France. Vincent was hesitant about this suggestion; he would not have minded letting the matter go by default as the question of means and funds for such a foundation was troubling.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to these possible projects, which came to nothing, two others were realized in 1645. At the request of Cardinal Durazzo, archbishop of Genoa, who had appreciated the work of Bernard Codoing and his missionaries based in Rome in various parts of his diocese, Vincent sent a mission, preparatory to the foundation of an establishment of the Congregation in Genoa.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, Cardinal Barberini, wrote in February 1645 to beg Vincent to send his missionaries to Ireland: "The cardinals who are part of this Congregation have charged me with imploring you to send some of your workers to Ireland to teach the ceremonies and sacred rituals of the liturgy to the clergy, which lives in the deepest ignorance."<sup>36</sup> Soon some missionaries left for Ireland, where they struggled with enormous difficulties.

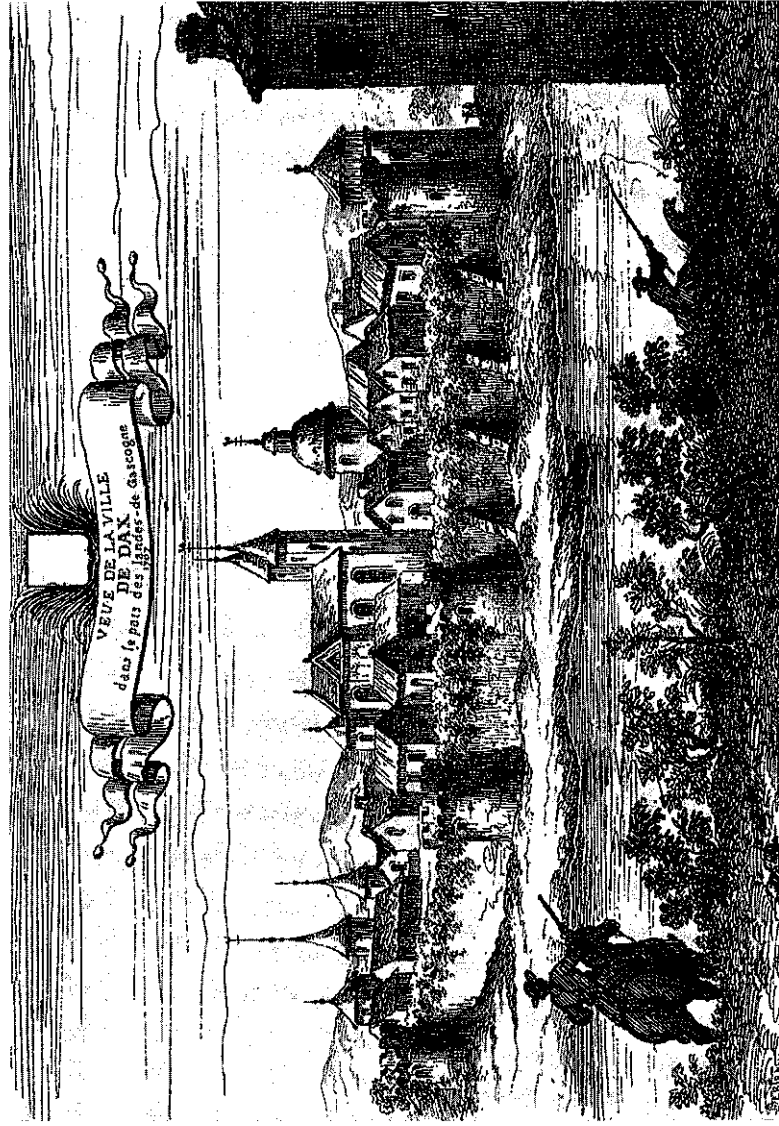
All of this seems very far from the initial vocation of the Congregation of the Mission, which was to evangelize the rural poor in France. Could it be that Vincent had allowed himself to be drawn beyond the frontiers of the kingdom because he did not want to ignore the cries for help of the unfortunate slaves in Barbary or of the Irish Catholics oppressed by the Protestant authorities? Or was he responding to an irresistible call

because he felt that it was his congregation's vocation to confront all the material and spiritual misery of the whole world?

But Vincent continued to move forward only to the extent that the needs he saw could be supported by the means at his disposal. It seems that for a long time, he was torn between the desire to respond to every appeal of the poor, who lived without a knowledge of God, wherever they might be, and his economic prudence which kept him from throwing himself into distant ventures. He wrote to Bernard Codoing, who was always ready to undertake new projects: "The works of God are not accomplished in this way; they carry themselves out, and those works which God does not support soon die. Let us move slowly toward our ambitions."<sup>37</sup>

Vincent had to pray a good deal until he was sure that he was doing the will of God by engaging in the work of foreign missions. He also meditated deeply on the situation of the Catholic Church and arrived at the somber conclusion that the Church was preparing its own downfall in Europe, so that it was necessary to move it elsewhere. The analysis he made in August 1645 is significant: "I admit to you that I have much affection and even devotion to the spread of the Church into pagan countries because I fear that God is gradually doing away with it here and that one hundred years from now, there will not be much left of it because of our depravity, the new opinions growing up around us, and because of the general state of things. Over the past hundred years, because of two new heresies, the Church has lost most of the Empire and the kingdoms of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. It has lost Scotland, England, Ireland, Bohemia, and Hungary, so that there remain only Italy, France, Spain, and Poland, with France and Poland producing many a heresy themselves. Now these losses of the Church over the last hundred years make us fear, in our present miseries, that in another hundred years, we will lose the Church in Europe entirely. In light of these fears, they are blessed who will work together to extend the Church to other regions."<sup>38</sup>

Firmly grounded in these thoughts, Vincent did not hesitate to send his missionaries out onto all the highroads of the earth.



Dax, where Vincent attended college. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Used with permission.



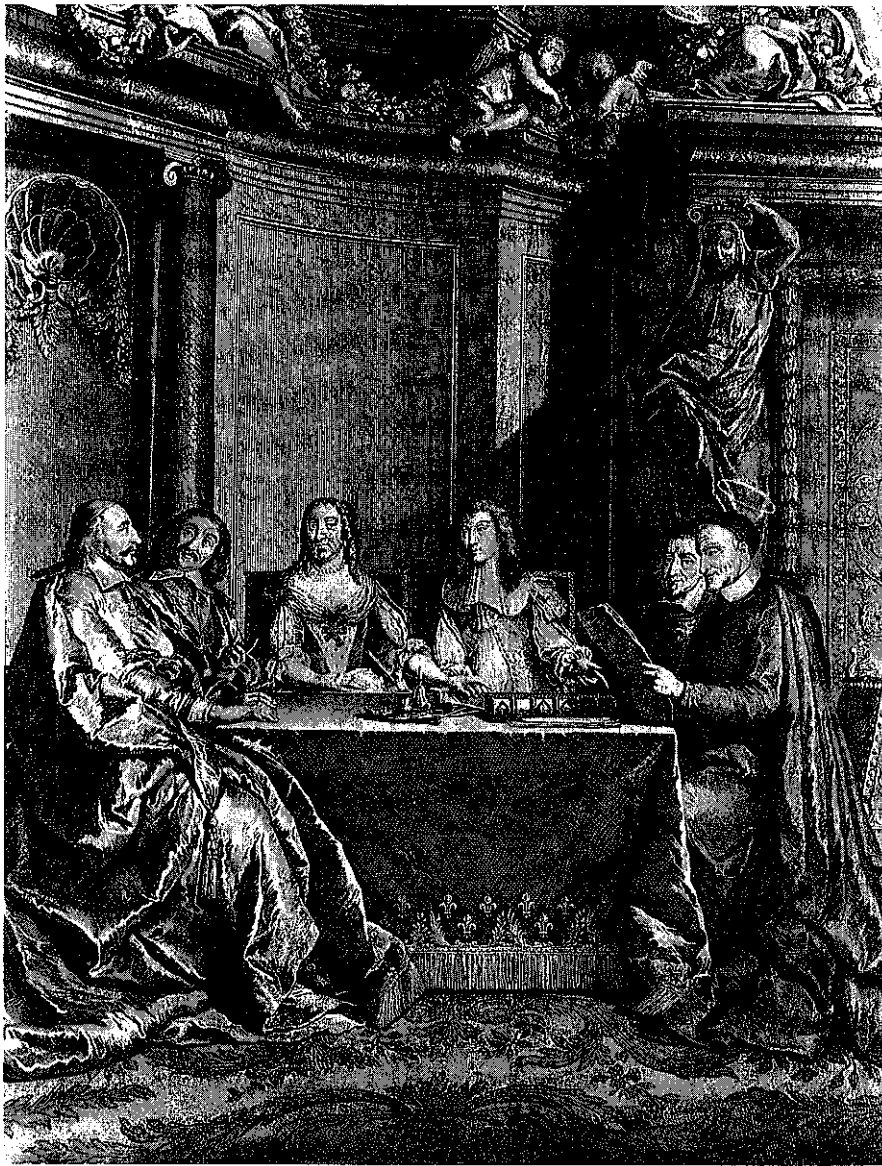
Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi  
(1581–1662),  
Marquis de Belle-Isle,  
engraved by Claude Duflos  
(1665–1727). Vincent became  
tutor to Gondi's children in  
1613. Bibliothèque Nationale,  
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Art Library (GIR207035).  
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Françoise-Marguerite de Silly  
(1584–1626) engraved  
by Claude Duflos (1665–1727).

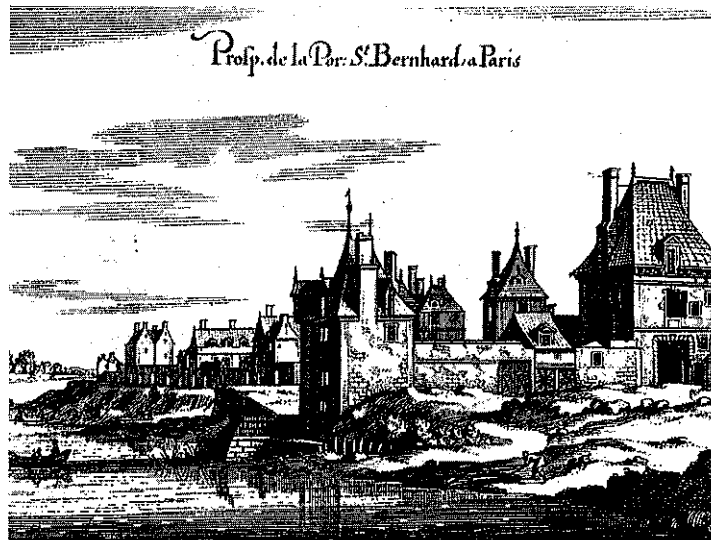
She urged Vincent to visit  
“the poor people of the  
country.” Bibliothèque  
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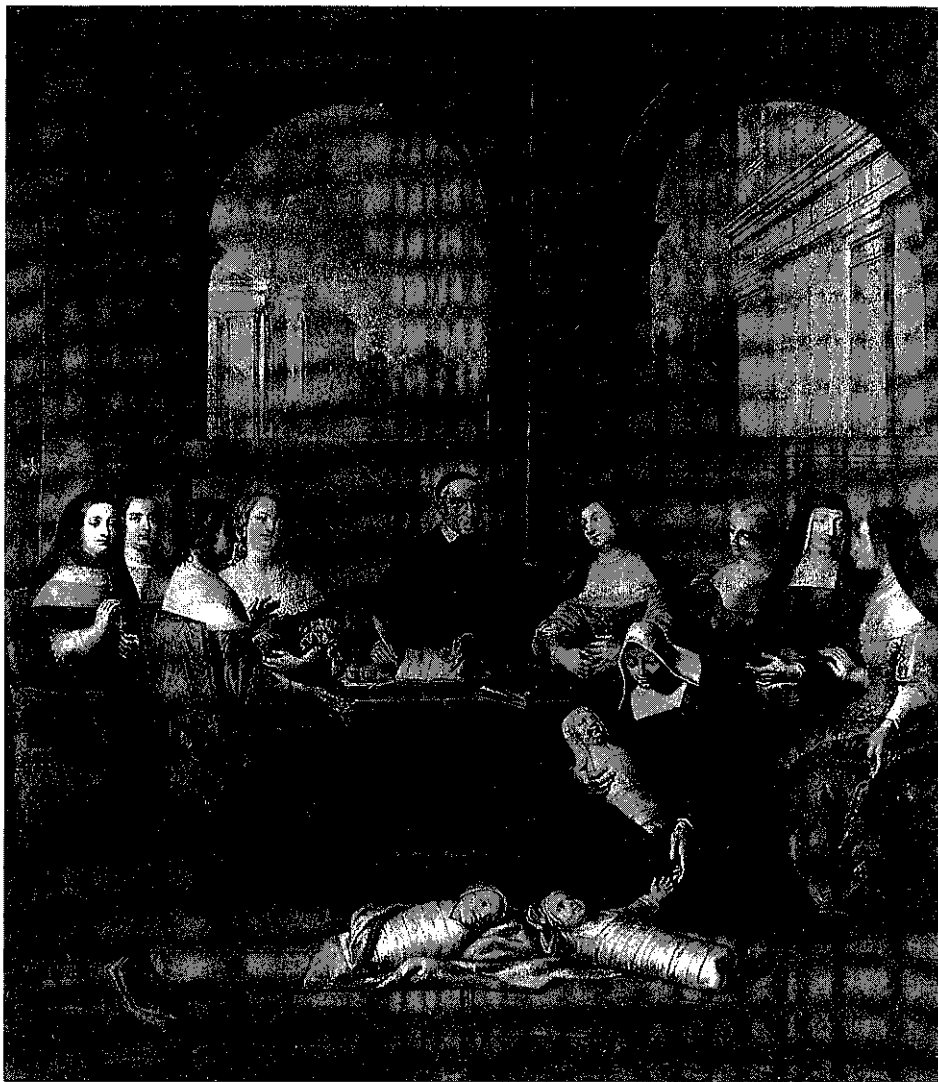
St. Vincent de Paul (1581–1660) and Cardinal Jules Mazarin (1602–61) at the Council of Conscience of Louis XIV (1638–1715), engraved by Gerard Scotin (1643–1715), ca. 1660. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris/Giraudon-Bridgeman Art Library (GIR207037). Used with permission.



Saint Bernard's gate, Paris, engraved by Matthäus Merian (1593-1650).  
Annexed to the prison hospital for convicts in 1632. Bibliothèque Nationale,  
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Portrait of Louise de Marillac  
(1591-1660), Vincent's  
collaborator and the foundress  
of the Daughters of Charity,  
engraved by Gaspard Duchange  
(1662-1757). Bibliothèque  
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St. Vincent de Paul and the Sisters of Charity, ca. 1729 (oil on canvas), attributed to Jean André, known as Frère André (1662–1753). Musée de l'Assistance Publique, Hôpitaux de Paris/Giraudon-Bridgeman Art Library (GIR71548). Used with permission.



The hospital for convicts in Marseilles, begun by Vincent and completed in 1645, seventeenth-century engraving. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Used with permission.

# 16

## Jansenism Comes into Being

### 1645-1648

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*Daughters of Charity and the Foundling Hospital*

*The Affair of Saint-Méen*

*The Congregation Grows*

*New Houses Abroad*

*Vincent's Opposition to Jansenism*

Once appointed to the Council of Conscience, Monsieur Vincent had become an official personage. He was summoned to the court, whether it was sitting at the Louvre or at Saint-Germain, to participate in meetings presided over by Anne of Austria or Mazarin. There he rubbed shoulders with princes, ministers of state, and great prelates, but this changed neither his attitude nor his clothes. He appeared everywhere in a simple cassock and his accustomed heavy shoes. It is reported that when Mazarin addressed a sarcastic remark to him about his clothing, he answered quite simply that his cassock might be worn, but it was neither soiled nor torn. There is also a story that one day, at the Louvre, the prince de Condé, glowing from his first victories, wanted to seat Vincent at his side. The latter refused this honor with humility, claiming that he was the son of a poor villager. Condé, first prince of the blood but also exquisitely educated, replied "*Moribus et vita nobilitatur homo*" (A man is ennobled by his character and his way of life).

Vincent's modest and reserved bearing did not prevent him from asserting his opinions and defending them vigorously; he was perfectly able to oppose a cardinal or some lord in the

matter of conferring benefices or nominating bishops. The story goes that a great lady of the court applied to the queen for a bishopric for her son. The queen asked Vincent whether he would approve such a nomination. When he replied that the son in question was not worthy of the position, the queen left it to him to inform the duchess of her refusal. The duchess showered Vincent with insults and in a rage, she threw a footstool at his head and wounded him. Vincent withdrew without a word, bowing respectfully and covering his bleeding face with a handkerchief. The brother who accompanied him was indignant and wanted to intervene somehow, but Vincent calmed him down, saying, "Isn't it admirable to see the extent of a mother's love for her son!"<sup>1</sup>

One might think that what with his official responsibilities, the foundation of new houses of the Mission, and his plans for establishing missions in far-off countries, Vincent would have been a little less concerned with his first projects, particularly the Daughters of Charity.<sup>2</sup> But this was not the case. He gave strength and focus to this work by approaching the archbishop of Paris in August 1645 to request authorization to raise this company of girls and widows to the status of a confraternity. He reminded the archbishop that Confraternities of Charity had been established wherever the Congregation had preached a mission, and explained how these confraternities had given rise to the idea of founding the Daughters of Charity: "But because the ladies who make up this confraternity are, for the most part, so highly placed in society that they cannot perform lowly functions, such as carrying food around the town, bloodletting, giving baths, bandaging wounds, making beds, and sitting at deathbeds of people who are alone, they have taken from the fields a few good girls to whom God has given the desire to help the poor sick."<sup>3</sup>

Vincent thought in detail about their tasks. In each parish of the capital, there were two or three girls to care for the sick and instruct poor little girls. Three of these young women assisted the Ladies of Charity at the Hôtel-Dieu, ten or twelve worked with the Foundling Hospital, two or three cared for the convicts in Paris, and finally, others had been sent to the hospitals of the provinces such as those at Angers, Richelieu, or Sedan. Louise de Marillac (Mademoiselle Le Gras), who directed this confraternity, put up about thirty of the girls in her house to train them before sending them out to these different positions. Since money was needed to provide them with their necessities, the Daughters of Charity, in addition to helping the poor, worked to earn

a little money to supplement the alms and donations from the queen and the duchess d'Aiguillon.

Vincent was in almost daily contact with Louise de Marillac, either in person or by letter. Thus he was very knowledgeable about problems in connection with the Daughters of Charity. He took the time to visit and speak to them regularly about their vocation, their Rule of life, or the virtues they ought to cultivate. The texts of these conversations, most of which have been collected and transcribed, reflect the mood of simplicity and good fellowship that suffused the meetings.<sup>4</sup> Vincent held a friendly dialogue on an equal footing with these sturdy country girls. We can see him clearly, sitting among them, chatting with them with a mischievous smile, exclaiming at their quick answers, accompanying his words with telling gestures. He might just be coming from the court, or from his desk, where he had been writing in all solemnity to some Roman prelate, and with a glee that showed through all his words, he sought out these fine girls who reminded him of his youth, his life on a small farm, his love for the poor people, and his tender care for little children.

Vincent had a particular affection for his work with the foundling children; he never failed to visit them when he had a free moment. After small beginnings, this work had developed rapidly. The number of children brought in between 1638 and 1644 rose to 1,200, with all the problems of staffing, lodging, and financing which this entailed.<sup>5</sup> Around 1644, the annual cost of sustaining this enterprise is estimated to have been as high as 40,000 livres, covered in part by gifts from the king and the queen, the proceeds of fund drives, and the contributions of the Ladies of Charity.<sup>6</sup> As for the problem of lodgings, it was temporarily solved by the construction in 1645 of thirteen little houses close to the enclosure of Saint-Lazare, which were rented to the Ladies of Charity for the Foundling Hospital.<sup>7</sup> But soon this proved to be insufficient. The number of children grew without ceasing, the space became too tight and funds were exhausted.

The situation became critical in the course of the year 1647, so that the Ladies of Charity who were in charge of the work began to think about abandoning the project. Vincent then came to them and implored them, in pathetic terms, to persevere in their task: "Courage, Mesdames, compassion and charity led you to adopt these little creatures as your children, you have been their mothers by grace, ever since their mothers by nature abandoned them. Now see whether you really want to abandon them as well. Stop for a moment being their mothers

and take the role of their judges: their life and their death is in your hands. It is time to pronounce the verdict and to know whether you no longer wish to have mercy on them.”<sup>8</sup>

Once more, the Foundling Hospital was saved. It was decided to move the children to the château of Bicêtre, near the capital, a large building which the queen put at the disposal of Monsieur Vincent. This solution, which had already been under consideration for some time, had been rejected by Louise de Marillac, who feared the isolation of the place and its distance from the city.<sup>9</sup> Her fears turned out to be justified; after many changes of fortune and adventures, it became necessary two years later to bring the children back to Paris.

All this time, Vincent de Paul was also providing for the establishment of new houses of the Congregation. Sometimes he encountered unexpected opposition. This was the case for Saint-Méen in Brittany. The bishop of Saint-Malo, Achille de Harley de Sancy, was commendatory abbot of the ancient Benedictine abbey of Saint-Méen, situated in the heart of his diocese. By this time, the buildings of the abbey sheltered only two old monks who were happy enough to accept a small pension in return for moving to a house provided for them near the abbey. The bishop then decided to open a seminary at Saint-Méen and asked Monsieur Vincent to take charge of it. A contract was signed on July 14, 1645, by which the Congregation of the Mission engaged to send five priests, three of whom would conduct the seminary while the other two would preach missions in the diocese.

As soon as they arrived in August, the missionaries began to restore the buildings, which were more or less dilapidated, using for this purpose the gift of 7,000 livres given by a pious parishioner. But the Benedictines of the province became agitated when they learned that their old abbey, the most famous one in Brittany, had been abstracted from them by the will of a bishop, a simple commendatory abbot. It was their opinion that this decision had been made in flagrant violation of the letters patent of Louis XIII who, in November 1640, had declared that no new order or company was supposed or allowed to establish itself in any location of the province without the consent of the Estates, verified and registered by the parlement. The bishop, for his part, was firmly decided to install his seminary at Saint-Méen. His initiative was approved by a diocesan synod and with the letters of renunciation of the two Benedictine monks, he traveled to Paris to have his

decision ratified. He deposited the letters patent of secularization of the abbey at the parlement of Brittany to be registered there. But this assembly, jealous of its prerogatives, refused to acknowledge the royal letters and forbade the bishop to secularize the abbey of Saint-Méen, asking the Benedictines to resume their authority over it. The bishop was not impressed. He obtained new letters patent from Paris, approved by the Grand Council. On their side, the Benedictines, judging that this royal decision violated the rights of the parlement of Brittany and the laws of the Church, refused to obey. One year after their installation, the missionaries were ordered by a decision of the parlement of July 17, 1646, to leave the abbey. This was the beginning of a bitter, furious war between the forces of the Benedictines and those marshaled by the bishop in order to keep the Mission in place.

On July 20 at six o'clock in the morning, an officer of the parlement of Brittany came to the door of the abbey, escorted by ten Benedictine monks who had come to occupy the buildings. They found the door closed and barricaded. After three days of parleys, the officer managed to break in and install the monks in the premises of the convent. The missionaries with their students were forced to crowd into the abbot's quarters. For two weeks, the two camps lived under the same roof, with the young seminarians taking advantage of the disturbance to play bad tricks on the monks. The Benedictines, outnumbered, once more appealed to the parlement, which again gave the order for the Mission to leave the abbey. At the same time, the vicar general of Saint-Malo, delegated on the spot by the bishop, threatened to excommunicate the Benedictines. This moral condemnation proving insufficient, the bishop approached the king's lieutenant general in Brittany, marshal de la Meilleraye, with the news that royal authority was at an impasse and asked him to intervene. Thus, on August 20, a troop of twenty mounted soldiers arrived at Saint-Méen and forced its way, swords drawn, into the church where the monks were just singing Prime. When the sanctuary was empty, the troops withdrew. The next day, the parlement decreed that the vicar general was to be arrested and the missionaries as well. The forces sent to take them into custody found the abbey empty. The single priest who had been left behind to guard the house was seized and thrown into prison with his legs in irons. But the Benedictines had still not won the war, for the bishop, showing his great pugnacity, obtained a royal decree in his own favor on September 7. A representative of the bishop presented himself at Saint-Méen with the

royal decision, enjoining the Benedictines to evacuate. He was escorted by forty soldiers who promptly showed the monks the door. The Benedictines never came back.

Vincent was naturally crushed when he heard all this. On September 1, he wrote a long letter to the unfortunate superior of the house of Saint-Méen, whose behavior had been less than heroic as he fled alone, on horseback, for fear that he might be arrested by the parlement's bullies. To tell the truth, Vincent was torn by contradictory impulses: his gratitude to the bishop, who had offered him the abbey, his reactions to the unfavorable decisions of the parlement of Brittany, the favorable decisions of the king on the other hand, and to crown all this, the teachings of the Gospel. He was forced to have recourse to all the devices of rhetoric and casuistry in trying to untangle this bundle of knots. "Saint Paul and Our Lord advised us to lose everything rather than to go to the courts. But each one of them ended up there and each one lost the trial and lost his life with it. It is true that the maxim of the Company is to accept losing everything rather than fighting for it in the courts, but that only counts when the decision is up to us."<sup>10</sup> As an eminent member of a council related to ecclesiastical matters, Vincent was most chagrined to have been involved against his will in a matter which set a bishop against a religious order!

Other problems confronted the superior of the Congregation of the Mission, and we can find traces of them in his correspondence. For instance, the superior of the house in Sedan, Guillaume Gallais, found it difficult to distance himself from secular affairs. It is true that he had been stationed at the very heart of a Huguenot region, which made his task difficult, to say the least. Vincent was obliged to rein in his ardor, writing to him: "It is not expedient, sir, that we should interfere in secular matters, no matter what their connection to spiritual things, because no one can serve two masters, God and the world, the spiritual and the temporal, and Our Lord has said so."

Vincent felt that the Huguenots would not be converted if the missionaries fed controversies, but only if they demonstrated living witness to the spirit of the Gospel: "Oh, Sir, what great missionaries you and I would be if we knew how to inspire souls with the spirit of the Gospel that can make them pleasing to Jesus Christ! I promise you that this is the most effective way to make Catholics holy and to convert heretics."<sup>11</sup>

To monitor the operation of his houses, Vincent sent his faithful collaborator, Antoine Portail, and stayed in close contact with him by letters in which he expressed himself freely. We see from them that his spirit of charity never dulled his lucidity. The evaluations he made of his missionaries were incisive: "This one is governed by black bile and always stubborn; the other one is pituitous and unpredictable."<sup>12</sup>

The Congregation of the Mission was developing. In 1647, it comprised about twenty houses and the number of seminaries was growing. The major seminary at the Collège des Bons-Enfants now had a student body of sixty and the minor seminary, at Saint-Charles, had about forty students. The faculty at the seminary of Cahors consisted of thirty priests; at Annecy and at Le Mans, there were eight each, and from twelve to fifteen at Saint-Méen.<sup>13</sup> One of the main difficulties with which Vincent de Paul had to contend was finding superiors capable of directing all these houses and seminaries. In particular, he was not able to find a competent superior for the house at Marseilles, which was very complex to govern because of the extraordinary diversity of its work—the hospital, missions to the countryside and on the galleys, matters concerning the Barbary coast, and later, the opening of a seminary. Vincent sent Antoine Portail to inspect the situation, warning him that he would find only a few workers, without a good superior, whereas this house required the leadership of an energetic personality. Vincent went over all the possible candidates for the position and sketched vivid and penetrating portraits, like this one: "We had thought of Monsieur Cuissot, who is vigilant about all the external things, but has no gift for matters of the soul, although he is completely dedicated to God." At length, Vincent urged Father Portail to leave the current superior, Jean Chrétien, in place, in spite of his weaknesses: "You will treat him as gently as is proper, so as not to discourage him."<sup>14</sup>

Vincent never lost sight of material questions and did not find it beneath his dignity to spend a great deal of time over minute details of management of the Congregation's holdings. For instance, in going over the accounts of the house at Le Mans with a fine-tooth comb, he found an expense he considered unacceptable and wrote: "Monsieur Aubert is wrong to ask for two pistoles for the farmer he has engaged to work in the gardens; Monsieur Gallais assures me that they have already been paid out."<sup>15</sup> He lodged a complaint with the magistrates of Paris because a neighbor of the estate of Saint-Lazare "extended his boundaries from the Saint-Maur Road by four rods at the top of the

road, near the end, and by four rods two feet at the bottom. By this means, he has appropriated from the lands of the venerable priests of the Congregation of the Mission a piece with an area of ninety-three and one half rods.”<sup>16</sup> Monsieur Vincent may have disliked court cases, but if he had to, he was quite ready to defend the community’s estate.

At the request of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, Vincent de Paul formed a team to carry a mission to Ireland. Five priests and two brothers set sail from Saint-Nazaire in the year 1646 and, after a stormy crossing, arrived in port safely. Some of the team were sent to the diocese of Limerick in the west and the others to the diocese of Cashel in the south of Ireland. The letters written in 1648 by the bishops of these two dioceses bear witness to the success of the first missions the priests undertook, but soon they were obliged to interrupt their work because of persecution. Cromwell’s troops inflicted bloodthirsty reprisal on the Catholic population. Some of the missionaries returned to France and the others withdrew to the city of Limerick. This city was besieged and sacked at the end of 1651. Two missionaries were able to escape in disguise and only a single one managed to remain in the city by living in hiding. So ended the six-year attempt to implant the order in Hibernia. Vincent de Paul, not at all discouraged by this apparent check, drew the following lesson from it: “It is enough for God to know the good which has been done here. Let us place our trust in the martyrs: their blood will be the seed of new Christians!”<sup>17</sup>

Sending missionaries to Barbary would also be a lasting source of inextricable problems and of human dramas. A first priest, Julien Guérin, accompanied by a brother, left for Tunis in November 1645, with the official title of chaplain to the consul of France. At first, he did his work discreetly, but soon he was authorized to care for the galley slaves openly. He wrote an account of their hard lives: “We expect a large number of patients when the galleys return. These poor people suffer great misery when they are at sea, but those who remain behind are not better off. They work at sawing marble every day, exposed to the heat of the sun, which is like a fiery furnace. . . . Some others are not so badly treated, because they are confined to their owners’ houses where they do whatever work is demanded, both night and day.”<sup>18</sup> Reading these lines, Vincent must have remembered, in haunting fashion, his years as a slave in the same lands. Would he perhaps allude to those memories when he was en-

couraging his missionaries? As far as we know, he did not breathe a word, maintaining a silence that may seem strange.

Julien Guérin did all he could to free the slaves whose condition was particularly terrible. For instance, he ransomed a French woman who was tyrannized by her master for a sum of 300 écus, a young boy who was on the brink of renouncing his faith for a sum of 150 écus, and for 250, a young Sicilian woman whose husband "had become a Turk."<sup>19</sup> After the end of 1647, Father Guérin had the help of a young priest, Jean Le Vacher, sent as a reinforcement. But the plague broke out in Tunis in the next year, and Julien Guérin and the consul both died. Thus Jean Le Vacher remained alone, fulfilling the functions both of a consul and of a missionary priest.

In the meantime, on her own initiative, the duchess d'Aiguillon acquired the right to assign the consulates of Algiers and of Tunis, and offered them to the Congregation of the Mission. The purpose of doing this was to avoid conflicts between consuls and missionaries, always a possibility, and to provide resources to the missionaries, who would be able to levy duties on incoming and outgoing merchandise. By accepting this office, Vincent de Paul subjected his missionaries to unpleasant consequences they had not anticipated. Since they were representatives not only of any French citizens, but of all foreigners not represented by a consulate there, the consuls had to deal with any possible commercial disputes with the Turkish merchants. The disputes would be many and the debts to be assumed were heavy.

In 1646, to occupy the consulate in Algiers, Vincent sent a missionary, Boniface Nouelly, and Brother Jean Barreau, a former lawyer in the parlement. The latter, as consul, immediately committed an indiscretion by standing as security to the Turkish authority for a monk of the Order of Mercy, imprisoned for debts he had contracted while trying to ransom slaves. The sum involved was significant—40,000 livres; Vincent tried to raise this sum but did not fail to reprimand Jean Barreau: "I have written to the consul to tell him of our difficulty in gathering money. He will be paid once we raise money for the slaves in Paris. I beg the said Monsieur Barreau never again to promise anything, not even to act as intermediary in the ransom of a slave. Let him simply carry out the duties of his office."<sup>20</sup>

At this point, a new pasha was named at Algiers, and he promptly had Barreau imprisoned because he had still not been able to satisfy his

debt. When he left prison in July 1647, it was to be present at the death of his colleague Nouelly and of the two missionaries who had been sent as reinforcements; an epidemic of the plague had ravaged Algiers. Jean Barreau, alone again, had to confront the hostility of Turks who did not want him there. In spite of the strict orders that Vincent de Paul had once more sent him, he went into debt again, driven, as always, by his generous impulse of pity for the unfortunate slaves. He was to suffer bad treatment and even torture many times. All Vincent could do was to preach at him in letters and do what he could to scrape together the sums that would release Barreau from the Turkish prison.

In spite of all the disappointments growing out of his hopes for Hibernia and the Barbary coast, Vincent went peaceably about his other far-flung projects. For instance, he had not abandoned the hope of the bishopric of Babylon. In March 1647, he wrote to Monseigneur Ingoli, secretary of the Propagation of the Faith, to say that he was ready to appoint one of his closest collaborators, Lambert aux Couteaux: "Truly, the loss of this man will be like tearing out one of my eyes and cutting off my own arm."<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, Vincent was committed to this project, and he wrote about it to his representative in Rome: "This work seems to me to be a vital act for the glory of God . . . I feel an inner drive to do it."<sup>22</sup> But he discovered that the superior of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, Authier de Sisgau, the same man who had wanted to join his order to the Mission, wanted to be named to this office. Knowing this, Vincent de Paul withdrew. But still, he was haunted by the thought of these far-off countries remaining unevangelized. The next year, he sent a petition to the Propagation of the Faith, asking for his congregation to be chosen to preach missions in Arabia. "Since the three parts of Arabia, known as Arabia Felix (Fortunate Arabia), Arabia Petraea (Stony Arabia), and Arabia Deserta (Desert Arabia), have not yet been confided to a specific religious order or secular priest to be evangelized and brought into the Christian fold, Vincent de Paul, superior of the Congregation of the Mission, offers to send several of his priests there."<sup>23</sup>

He proposed to install the seat of this mission at the entrance to a port in the region of Arabia Felix where English and Dutch vessels landed. If we can believe a letter which he sent in October 1648 to one of his priests, the proposal was approved in Rome, since there he lists the different missions that had been entrusted to his Company: "Add

the assignment of Barbary, Persia, and Arabia Felix, where the Propaganda is sending us, as well as that of Madagascar.”<sup>24</sup>

But it seems that after all, this project never materialized, since Vincent does not mention it again. In contrast, the mission to Madagascar was already under way. On March 22, 1648, Vincent wrote to Charles Nacquart, just then stationed at Richelieu, to let him know that he had been chosen to direct this expedition, adding that they were to take ship in less than a month at La Rochelle.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the nuncio, who had designated the Congregation to go and serve God on the Island of Saint-Laurent, otherwise known as Madagascar, had written rather precipitously. He had wanted to comply with a request of the East India Company, which was asking for priests for a planned voyage to this distant island, without consulting the Holy See. He did not know that the Propaganda had already chosen the Discalced Carmelites to evangelize the island of Saint-Laurent. The situation was only clarified two years later by a new decree from the Propagation of the Faith, dated December 1650, when the missionaries had already been on the island for a long time.

Vincent de Paul, who was accustomed to weighing all sides of a project before making a decision, seems to have made up his mind in this particular case in an extraordinary rush. His decision can be explained on the basis of the nuncio’s authority, but the fact remains that this enterprise was undertaken in haste and would bring much pain and require much sacrifice from Vincent and his congregation.

Vincent’s ardent embrace of the foreign missions is his response to what he saw as ever-advancing heresy in Europe, with resulting compromise of the Church. Therefore, while setting his sights for Babylon, Arabia Felix, or Madagascar, he joined the fight against the new ideas which were gaining ground in France. It was not Protestantism that he was fighting against, although that was well established in many of the provinces, but Jansenism.

The struggle had begun with the appearance in 1640 of the posthumous summa of Jansenius, entitled *Augustinus*. The book aroused passionate discussions of themes such as liberty, grace, and predestination. Whereas Jansenius had intended to put forward ideas which agreed with the teaching of Saint Augustine, the Jesuits found Calvinist tendencies in his work. The ensuing debates cast such confusion into the

Church that in 1642, the pope was forced to intervene and demonstrate the doctrinal errors in the *Augustinus* in his bull *In Eminenti*.

The next year saw the appearance of a work entitled *De la fréquente communion* (On the frequent reception of Holy Communion), under the name of a reputable theologian and convinced Jansenist, Antoine Arnauld.<sup>26</sup> This thinker's main point was a more intense interior life for Christians. Because of its high literary quality and elevated thought, the book enjoyed a lively success and wide distribution. But some readers put unbalanced weight on one of its recommendations, namely, to allow a waiting period of contrition to intervene between the confessing of sins and the granting of absolution. The consequence of this would be to prevent the faithful from approaching the communion table for a period of time, and in fact, during this period, the number of communicants in the churches decreased. Anne of Austria, who had a particular devotion to this sacrament, was especially out of charity with the Jansenists.

At first, Vincent de Paul declared himself in opposition to the new ideas. Having learned that he was being accused of a certain lukewarm attitude to the battle against the Jansenists, he wrote to Bernard Codoing in Rome, in March 1644: "I will say nothing of the accusations they are making against us on that point, except that, by the mercy of God, our company resists all the new opinions and that I am doing all I can against them, and especially those which go against the authority of the Father of all Christians."<sup>27</sup>

We have proof of his anti-Jansenist attitude even from Mazarin, who sent him a line to congratulate him on the "care which [he] took to cut through the intrigue of the Jansenists."<sup>28</sup> But Jansenism was gaining ground in France. Therefore, Vincent took the time to compose a study on an essential point at the center of the debates, the subject of grace. The Jansenists professed a narrow conception of predestination: for them, God only wished to save a small number of elect, to whom he gave effective grace. Vincent defended the traditional position: "What does this difference consist of? The age-old opinion of the Church is that God gives all men, the faithful and the unfaithful, sufficient grace for salvation. And those who hold the new opinions state that there is no sufficient grace given to all the people, that there is only effective grace, which is given only to a few people, and that those to whom it is given cannot resist it."<sup>29</sup> There follows a learned exposition of ten pages, written in his hand. This text proves abundantly that Vincent

was not a “modest fourth-year student” as he liked to call himself in a spirit of humility.

Vincent saw that his new representative at Rome, Jean Dehorgny, was not quite immune to some of the theses developed by the Jansenists. Therefore he addressed a long letter to him on June 25, 1648, in which he took the trouble to give the reasons on which he based his outright opposition to the new ideas. In particular he was motivated by “the knowledge I have of the author’s [Saint-Cyran’s] intentions concerning these new ideas, of destroying the present state of the Church. He told me one day that God’s plan was to ruin the existing Church and that those who were trying to save it were acting against the divine plan. When I told him that this was the standard argument of heretics like Calvin, he answered that Calvin had not been wrong in everything he tried to do, but that he had only failed to defend himself well.”<sup>30</sup>

It must be noted that Vincent had not gone this far when he made his deposition for the trial of Saint-Cyran. Out of friendship, he had devised formulations that were less compromising for the accused. In 1639, the declarations of Saint-Cyran were made in private, whereas after his death, his opinions had entered the public arena and Arnauld had used them to stir up a polemic. At that point, Vincent felt obligated to take part in the debate officially and fight against the ideas of a man who had once been his friend. Replying to the letter of his superior, Jean Dehorgny emphasized the fact that some people had profited from reading the work of the Jansenist Arnauld on the subject of frequent communion. Vincent immediately replied, demolishing, point by point, the arguments of Arnauld, which he said led to an illogical attitude: “Only Monsieur Arnauld could do this! Here he puts the requirements for the right state of mind to receive communion so high that even Saint Paul would hesitate to approach the communion rail, and then he boasts that he celebrates mass every day.”<sup>31</sup>

In the course of these disputes about Jansenism, Vincent revealed a hidden side of his personality: the confirmed theologian who does not hesitate to cross swords in masterly fashion on arduous topics.

# 17

## The Beginnings of the Fronde

### 1648-1649

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*Birth of the Fronde*

*Intervention at Saint-Germain*

*Travel in the Provinces*

*Rescue at Orsigny*

*Stay at Saint-Méen*

*Return to Saint-Lazare*

Vincent de Paul was well aware of the worsening political situation in the kingdom. His contacts at court and the reports from his missionaries and the Daughters of Charity kept him well informed of events in the capital and in the provinces. Therefore, he was not surprised by the events of the year 1648, which marked the beginning of a long time of troubles, a stretch of five years known as the Fronde.

The causes of the Fronde are many, and they are complex. The Party of the Devout had been experiencing a renewal of energy ever since the death of Richelieu, closely followed by the death of Louis XIII, had set political prisoners free and brought back important figures from exile. The Party of the Devout was opposed to the war declared in 1635 with Catholic kings pitted against a coalition in which France made common cause with Lutheran Sweden and Calvinist Holland. This alliance was an object of scandal for the Company of the Blessed Sacrament, which was engaged in underground activities now difficult to identify. What is more, this long drawn-out war was putting an ever heavier financial load on the people of France.

Public expenditures which had amounted to 40 million livres a year before the conflict rose to an annual average of 120 million livres.<sup>1</sup> Highly inequitable taxes weighed heavily on the poor and there were uprisings in the provinces whenever there were bad harvests or more new taxes. The insurgents did not blame their misfortune on the king; they directed their rage against tax collectors and customs officials of all kinds, as well as against the Ministry of Finance.

But there was one figure who drew all the dissatisfaction and vindictiveness of the people upon himself like a lightning rod, and that was the man whom Anne of Austria had chosen to succeed Richelieu as her prime minister—Cardinal Mazarin. His Italian origin, a number of awkward incidents, and especially the thwarted ambitions of all those who thought they were better qualified to govern than he were all elements in the formation of an ill-assorted, unstable coalition of malcontents. At first, this was known as the Cabal of Important People, gathered around the flamboyant and presumptuous duke de Beaufort, illegitimate grandson of Henry IV. He had dreams of doing away with Mazarin in cold blood, but the plot was uncovered and Beaufort was imprisoned in September 1643. Next came the battle of the parlement of Paris, defending the privileges of the capital city, which was free of feudal taxation, against the schemes of the comptroller general of finance, Particelli d'Émery. At a loss for ways to fill the state coffers emptied by wars, this royal official was attempting to levy new taxes on the population of Paris. The reaction was one of growing discontent and an increasingly energetic resistance to the fiscal authorities. Delays in repayment of the bonds on the Hôtel de Ville, which were government loans secured by the municipality of Paris, affected large segments of the city's population—burghers, merchants, tradesmen, and even domestic servants. The financial troubles were exacerbated by bad harvests in the northern part of the kingdom. Starting in 1646, the price of bread in Paris doubled. The malnourished inhabitants were vulnerable to disease, and bands of vagabonds appeared on the outskirts of the city.<sup>2</sup>

The beginning of the conflict between the parlement and the king can be dated precisely to January 15, 1648. In the course of a solemn session of the parlement, the advocate general, Omar Talon, addressed the regent in these terms: "Madam, reflect a while, deep within your heart, upon this public misery. Add to this thought, Madame, the calamity of the provinces where hopes of peace, the honor of battles won, the glories

of provinces conquered, cannot nourish those who are without bread, who cannot number palm fronds and laurels among the ordinary fruits of the earth.”<sup>3</sup>

In the months that followed this first skirmish, a covert quarrel was taking place over the registration by the parlement of several edicts having to do with finances, such as the renewal of the “paulette.”<sup>4</sup> Mazarin, who was unfamiliar with French parliamentary traditions, allowed matters to become acrimonious and then seemed ready to make concessions, dismissing his controller general of finances and recommending to the regent that she accept the proposals of the parlement, convened in general session. But a few weeks later, on August 26, after a *Te Deum* was sung at Notre-Dame in honor of Condé’s victory over the Spaniards at Lens, Mazarin ordered the arrest of those members of the parlement who were considered leading opponents of royal power. The powder keg was ignited and without delay, barricades were thrown up in the streets of the capital. For the sake of civil order, the regent gave in and had the members set free. She then withdrew, together with her children, to the château of Rueil, a property left by Richelieu to his niece the duchess d’Aiguillon. Negotiations with representatives of the parlement were begun, and they ended with another curtailment of royal power. An observer with insight into events noted in his journal at the end of October: “The High Council lost the battle against the parlement on the day of the barricades and ever since then, the parlement commands and the High Council obeys.”<sup>5</sup>

In this turmoil, the signing of the treaty of Westphalia,<sup>6</sup> a diplomatic victory for Mazarin that brought an end to the Thirty Years’ War with the Empire, passed without notice. In Paris, it only meant a continuation of the war with Spain, and Mazarin was blamed for this, as it was suspected that he was interested in having it go on. But Mazarin did not consider himself beaten. Once more he persuaded the regent to leave Paris so that he could lay siege to the capital and checkmate the intransigents. In the night of January 5–6, 1649, the royal family and some courtiers quietly left the Louvre and made for Saint-Germain-en-Laye where they would pitch camp. So ended the first act of a civil war which set the royal government against the parlement, which had the support of the people of Paris.

The troops commanded by the prince de Condé and by Gaston d’Orléans under the orders of the regent now ringed the capital and block-

aded it, while the militia raised by the parlement closed the city gates so that no one could leave. In spite of this, delegates of the parlement made their way to Saint-Germain to attempt negotiations, but the regent refused to receive them and they returned to Paris, enraged. On January 8, the parlement issued a decree declaring Mazarin the “author of all present disorder” and “enemy of the king and the state,” and ordered him to leave the city within the week.

The struggle had begun with the parlement on one side and the court on the other, but now it took on a new dimension, for in the Fronde certain great lords ranged themselves with the parlement. This was a curious assortment of personalities with a variety of ambitions: the young prince de Conti, brother of the prince de Condé; his brother-in-law, the duke de Longueville, governor of Normandy, with his wife, the beautiful Anne-Geneviève, who brought along in her wake her lover, the prince de Marillac, future duke de la Rochefoucauld; the duke de Bouillon, older brother of Turenne, who wanted to regain his principality of Sedan; the duke de Beaufort, escaped from his prison at Vincennes; the duke d’Elbeuf, governor of Picardy, descendant of the Guise family and eternal enemy of royal power.

Another personality was to play a primary role in the Fronde, Vincent de Paul’s former pupil, Jean-François Paul de Gondi, the future Cardinal de Retz. He would have liked to wear a sword and be active in politics, but his family had made him enter the Church without the slightest vocation in order to replace an older brother who had died in an accident. He said about himself that he was the least churchly soul in the world. He attacked his studies head on, earning a doctorate in theology, and led a life that was not only worldly but gallant, with numerous official mistresses. In June 1643, he was named coadjutor of his uncle, archbishop of Paris, and received Holy Orders after a short retreat at Saint-Lazare, from which he emerged with remarkable resolutions: “After days of reflection, I decided to do evil on purpose, which is incomparably the greatest evil in the sight of God, but the wisest thing in the eyes of the world. I resolved to fulfill all the duties of my profession with exactitude, and to be just as good a man for the salvation of others as I would be an evil man for myself.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, he took pride in administering his diocese well, in presiding at all liturgies, and in preaching regularly. In this way, he gained the respect of the clergy of Paris and would not lose it, in spite of all his rages. He reported in his memoirs that Monsieur Vincent had judged him with benevolence,

saying “that I was not sufficiently pious but that I was not too far distant from the Kingdom of God.” Tormented by the demon of politics and by his ambition for a cardinal’s hat, he took a position hostile to Mazarin and found it quite natural to join the Fronde.

The siege of the capital was organized. The royal troops camped on the outskirts began to lay waste the countryside, and the feeding of the people of Paris became increasingly difficult. At this point, Vincent de Paul decided to go to Saint-Germain to try to make the court listen to words of peace before the situation worsened yet again. This course of action seems surprising, since it is contrary to everything that Vincent had affirmed up to that point, repeating tirelessly to his missionaries that they should on no account involve themselves in worldly matters. He himself had respected this rule completely, and nothing in his correspondence indicates a single intervention on his part outside of his own religious domain, with the single exception of his approach to Richelieu to beg him to give peace to France.

But in a letter addressed to Louise de Marillac in September 1648, he made discreet allusion to the days of the August uprising in the capital, with their spirit of popular emotion. He added these prophetic lines: “For the rest, be assured that there is nothing which I felt I should say and then did not, by the grace of God; I have spoken on all subjects. The bad thing is that God did not bless my words, even though I do not believe what is being said about the person you heard me speak of.”<sup>8</sup> Was Vincent referring to a first attempt at mediation with the regent or Mazarin, an attempt that came to nothing? Monsieur Coste, a learned analyst of Vincent’s correspondence, is not sure how to read this passage. It is his hypothesis that the members of the Fronde had started the rumor that Anne of Austria was married to Mazarin and that Monsieur Vincent had blessed this union in secret. Brother Robineau had questioned his superior about this directly and the answer he got was “That’s as false as the devil!”

In any case, on January 14, only a week after the court had installed itself at Saint-Germain, Vincent set out to appear there. Had he been requested by some member of the Fronde to carry a message to the queen? Did he think it his duty, as a member of the Council of Conscience, to warn the queen and Mazarin of the tragic consequences that could arise from their intransigence? Or was he so moved by the misery of the people and the risk of famine in the capital that he took the initi-

ative, after long meditation and prayer? Monsieur Coste states, "He resolved to make use of the power he had over the heart of the queen."<sup>9</sup>

Thanks to the narrative of Brother Ducournau, who accompanied Vincent on this expedition, we know all the incidents of the journey, which was to last longer than expected. Vincent had not wished to report to the Parisian authorities that he was leaving, but only sent a note to President Molé<sup>10</sup> to keep him informed; Saint-Lazare was outside the walls of the capital and so he would not have needed a pass to travel. Having left by horseback at dawn, he wisely took the road through Clichy-la-Garenne, where he was known. The village had been pillaged the day before by marauders and guards with pikes and muskets were stationed at the crossroads. Vincent and his companion ran the risk of a bad end by being there, but one of the guards recognized his former pastor. After this first alarm, they arrived at Neuilly where they were to cross the Seine. The river was in flood and the bridge was partly inundated. They were afraid that they would be carried away with their horses by the violent current; nevertheless they set foot on the bridge, and arrived on the other side safe but drenched. Toward ten in the morning, they arrived at Saint-Germain in this sorry condition.

Vincent was brought to the queen for a long conversation, whose contents we do not know. According to the account of Brother Ducournau, he told her that it was not just to have one million innocent people die to punish twenty or thirty guilty ones, and he painted a vivid picture of the disasters which would be unleashed on her people. It seems that contrary to his habitual calm, Vincent let himself be carried away by his own discourse and that he spoke with so much force that a moment later, he was surprised and even pained at what he had done. Finally, he tried to convince the queen to separate herself for the time being from Mazarin, an action which he considered indispensable for the restoration of civil peace. Then the queen told him to go to the cardinal and tell him the same things. That is what he did, and supposedly, after he let Vincent speak, Mazarin said that he would take his advice if the Secretary of State, Michel Le Tellier, agreed.<sup>11</sup> This was a skillful way to elude the question, since Le Tellier could not seek the eviction of the cardinal, who was his protector and direct patron. Mazarin would never forgive Vincent de Paul for speaking against him. Not being able to make Anne of Austria forget the priest, Mazarin maneuvered to keep him as far away from the court as possible, and finally to exclude him from the Council of Conscience altogether.

Vincent announced the failure of his mission in a letter which he wrote from Villepreux a little later to Antoine Portail: "I left Paris on the 14th of this month to go to Saint-Germain, in order to be of some slight use to God there, but my sins made me unworthy to succeed."<sup>12</sup>

He was no longer able to return to Saint-Lazare, since his visit to the queen could have been misinterpreted by the frondeurs in the capital. He therefore decided to undertake a large-scale tour of his provincial houses, a thing he had never yet had the leisure to do. His plan was to start in the west, go to Brittany, and then travel south, all the way to Marseilles. After a stop of three days at Saint-Germain, he set out, provided with a passport and protected by an escort, for the countryside was overrun by armed bands. His first stop was at Villepreux, where he went to greet his former master, now Father de Gondi, priest of the Oratory. For Vincent, this was a kind of pilgrimage, since he had traveled to this village many times in the days when he used to accompany Madame de Gondi to her estates. One of his first confraternities had been founded here, immediately after the Charité of the Dombes.

It was not in Vincent's nature to give himself over to nostalgia. His face was turned to the future, for he still had so much to do. At this moment, he was concerned with the fate of his houses during dangerous, troubled times. He knew that he could no longer count on the revenues from the coach service or the farms. Therefore he gave precise and realistic instructions to superiors of the houses to use restraint as an effective tool for surviving this period. In the same letter to Antoine Portail, he prescribed drastic measures: "First of all, you must show no hesitation in sending away all the seminarians who are not paying enough for room and board. Secondly, tell the bishop of Marseilles what is going on, so as to motivate him to help you. And in the third place, try to find some masses to say."

In Villepreux, as he was preparing to set out for Le Mans, Vincent learned that the large farm at Orsigny, which produced the majority of the food for Saint-Lazare, was in danger of being pillaged. Immediately he sent orders to the brothers in charge of the farm to have them lead their flocks to Fréneville (near Étampes) where they could shelter in safety. He himself rode out on horseback in that direction. But it was winter, and cold weather moved in, covering the countryside with a heavy layer of snow. Vincent was snowbound at the farm in Fréneville for almost a month. He survived thanks to the devotion of two Daughters of Charity who were working in a neighboring village and who sent him

gray bread and apples that the good people had given them. We can imagine him, enveloped in his heavy cape, stirring up the coals in the fireplace of the common room before taking up his pen again to encourage all his people and keep them strong amid their trials.

When he learned that the house of the generous donor of the farm, Jacques Norais, had been looted, Vincent wrote to console him, exhorting him to accept this misfortune in a spirit of submission to the divine will: "It is true that what seems to be a loss, according to the flesh, is a great advantage according to the spirit and a great reason to give thanks to God."<sup>13</sup> At the same time, he gave much thought to what might be going on at the Hôtel-Dieu and the Foundling Hospital. He wrote to the Ladies of Charity, who were in charge of these institutions, to encourage them to be steadfast, for the trouble of their days disquieted the soul and cooled off charity. He found vibrant words in which to address them: "Truly it seems that our own miseries excuse us from caring for the misfortunes of the people, and that we would have a good excuse, as the world counts it, for withdrawing from this service. But truly, Mesdames, I do not know how that would sound to God, who might say to us what Saint Paul said to the Corinthians in a similar situation: 'Have you resisted to the very blood? Or at least, have you sold a portion of the jewels you own?'"<sup>14</sup>

Then the message came that military people had passed very close to Fréneville and that they had stolen the horses from a farm. Then, in spite of the snow and the cold, Vincent decided on February 23 to lead his animals further along, to get them to safety. His purpose was to lead his flock of 240 sheep all the way to Richelieu, fifteen kilometers away. At the age of almost seventy, Vincent found himself playing shepherd, driving the bleating flock forward. In the event, the bad weather forced him to leave his sheep with a woman of his acquaintance, in a walled village near Étampes.<sup>15</sup> As for him, he continued to travel by way of Orléans all the way to Le Mans, where he arrived on March 4, "in spite of hardships of the weather and the road."<sup>16</sup> He left the horses from his two farms there in safety. For a period of ten days, he rested and visited the Daughters of Charity of Le Mans and his house there.

While on his travels, Vincent learned that the priory of Saint-Lazare had been occupied and plundered. There, 600 soldiers had bivouacked, sacking buildings, burning doors and windows, seizing the reserves of wheat, and setting stored firewood aflame. When this became known,

the parlement gave the order to move these troops on and sent a squad to mount guard. But the damages were not repaired. Monsieur Lambert, in charge of the house, scrambled to do what he could to maintain some kind of care for the people who came to the doors of Saint-Lazare every day, giving them four Paris measures of wheat at the least. Vincent received the news of all these humiliations and losses with great serenity. Blessed be God, he repeated to all those who brought him bad news. But his resignation was not the same thing as passivity; he never failed to encourage his superiors to take the necessary measures to survive this agitated period in the best way possible, and at the same time, he invited them to join him in accepting the trials that heaven sent them.

Vincent continued his travels from Le Mans toward Angers. Crossing a little river, near Durtal, his horse slipped on the stony bottom and fell down in the water. Vincent was pinned under his mount. Help came promptly to free him from this disagreeable position, and he was taken, soaked from head to foot, to a nearby cottage, where everyone hastened to get him dry and warm again. He referred to this misadventure in a letter which he addressed two weeks later to Louise de Marillac, in which he confessed that his "health had worsened during the night, and that I have taken a fever, after falling into the water, with the horse on top of me, in such a way that I could never have gotten out if help hadn't come."<sup>17</sup>

On his arrival in Angers, around March 20, he visited the little group of Daughters of Charity working at the Hôtel-Dieu of that city. He talked at length with each of them and wrote to Louise de Marillac how exemplary their conduct was. "It fills my heart with comfort." Next he headed for Rennes, on the way to Saint-Méen in the diocese of Saint-Malo. His travels were studded with other incidents: his horse took fright crossing a narrow bridge, almost throwing him into a pond, then a gentleman he met in an inn, taking him for an adherent of Mazarin, threatened to blow his brains out with a pistol. Finally he arrived at Saint-Méen at the beginning of Easter week, safe and sound.

Vincent was most interested in seeing this old abbey that had caused him so much worry and inconvenience. Dominating the cluster of buildings was an imposing tower, decorated with four little turrets and surmounted by a graceful belfry. The twelfth-century church had a broad transept, filled with light that fell through handsome stained glass windows. Beside it was a chapter room, decorated with frescos from the thirteenth century. The buildings of the abbey were spacious and ma-

jestic; at the time of Vincent's visit, they housed the diocesan seminary. The whole establishment had such a noble appearance that it was no wonder the Benedictines were sorry to lose such a monument, a place of pilgrimage known all over Brittany.

Since Easter always attracted a great crowd of people to Saint-Méen, Vincent did not rest while he was there; besides visiting the local house of the Congregation of the Mission and the seminary, he preached and heard confessions: "My visit here is so busy that I cannot write you in my own hand," he declared to Louise de Marillac. He presided over the official installation of four Daughters of Charity, three of whom would work at the hospital and one who would be director of a school for the daughters of the poor. He also toured all the Confraternities of Charity that had been founded in the neighboring villages.<sup>18</sup>

Although he had only planned to spend a week at Saint-Méen, Vincent found himself marooned there by terrible weather. He wrote to Louise de Marillac: "Here, I am besieged by bad weather and flooding." A simple Breton drizzle would certainly not have been able to stop him; this must have been something like a late winter storm. But the delay allowed him to rest a little after his long journeys on horseback, and to tend to his health a little: "I took this opportunity to be purged and bled."<sup>19</sup>

Finally, on April 17, Vincent had to continue on his way to Nantes. There, they were waiting for him impatiently, for relations between the Daughters of Charity and the administration of the hospital where they worked were very tense. The bishop had been called upon to bring order into this conflict and had threatened to send the girls away. As soon as Vincent arrived, he looked into the matter, called upon the bishop, lectured the girls, who had not been without fault, and managed to spread peace among all concerned. In a long letter to Louise de Marillac, he suggested certain changes and asked her to send two competent, hard-working girls to reinforce the little community of Nantes.

On April 29, Vincent left for Luçon, from where he was supposed to go back north to Richelieu. This was to be the last leg of his trip, for in the meantime he had received orders from the regent to return to Paris. He regretfully reported his change of plans to Antoine Portail, who was expecting him in Marseilles. "The Lord knows how much I desire to visit the houses down there, and he knows how deep my regret is at having to obey the queen's repeated command to return to Paris. But I do not see how I could be doing the will of God by not obeying,

especially when I have always taught that one must obey princes, even the evil ones, as Scripture tells us.”<sup>20</sup>

The matter at hand was the fact that a conference had been held at Rueil in early March 1649, in which the participants were delegates of the parlement on one side and the duke de Orléans, the prince de Condé, Cardinal Mazarin, and Chancellor Pierre Séguier on the other. An accord had been concluded on March 8, submitted to the parlement for approval, and officially promulgated on April 1. This was the end of the first stage of the Fronde, and the siege of Paris was raised. Vincent de Paul had been informed of the favorable outcome of the negotiations on March 2 in a letter from the duchess d’Aiguillon, who advised him to interrupt his visitations and return to Paris. But he had turned a deaf ear and continued his travels to houses of the Congregation of the Mission.

In any case, the court had not yet returned to the capital for the Spaniards were threatening the northern frontiers of the kingdom. In order to be able to follow the operations more closely, the regent and Mazarin had traveled to Compiègne, and so Vincent had not rushed to obey the queen’s command to return. Indeed, while he was still at Richelieu, he had written to ask whether he might be allowed to continue his trip, not all the way to Marseilles but only as far as Cahors, “to visit the house of Notre-Dame de la Rose and three or four other houses of the Congregation in that area.”<sup>21</sup> But Vincent was beginning to feel the accumulated fatigue of his four months of strenuous travel. He had just begun his sixty-ninth year and at that age, recovery is not as swift, even when a person is fortunate enough to be in hearty good health. At Richelieu, he suffered again from his “feverlet” and he had to admit that he was in no condition to continue traveling on horseback.

The duchess d’Aiguillon, having received a discreet warning of Vincent’s condition, sent him a brother infirmarian and the carriage that she had long been offering and he had been refusing. Once he had recovered from his fever and concluded his visits to his missionaries and the Daughters of Charity at Richelieu, he grumbled his way into the carriage and rode back to Paris. On June 13, he arrived at Saint-Lazare, after an absence of five months.

# Father of the Country

1649-1651

18

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*Secular Management and Spiritual Direction*

*Vicar General of Montiers-Saint-Jean*

*Missions Abroad*

*The Foundling Hospital at Risk*

*Disaster Aid to Picardy and Champagne*

Once back at Saint-Lazare, Vincent saw that the political climate in the capital was detestable and that the population of Paris was still deeply traumatized by the first stage of the Fronde, which had just ended. Even though distribution of food became more normal after the siege of the city was lifted, there was a sense of unease abroad. The court had not yet returned to the city. The Spanish threat still lurked in the wings and at the beginning of June, the regent and Mazarin decided to move from Compiègne to Amiens, so as to be closer to the armies campaigning in the north. Finally, believing that the danger had been averted, they decided to return, although they knew the capital was still a little feverish because of the activities of the Fronde. On August 18, 1649, the court made a triumphal entry into a city rejoicing at the return of its king.

But the calm did not last long. In January 1650 the prince de Condé, his brother Conti, and his brother-in-law Longueville were arrested and the fires of civil war blazed again. Fighting broke out first in the provinces, especially in the southwest, with the revolt of Bordeaux, incited by the young wife of the prince de Condé.<sup>1</sup> To put down this insurrection, the court set

out again with an army, which entered the rebel city in September. This was the beginning of a second wave of the Fronde, known as the Fronde of the princes. It was to end, after many outbursts, in February 1651, with the liberation of Condé and the departure into exile of Mazarin. In the course of this extremely complex period, alliances were made and broken among three groups: the party of the princes, the party of the parlement, and the party of the court. The reactions of two individuals who played principal roles—Gaston d'Orléans, uncle of the young king, and the bishop coadjutor of Paris, the future Cardinal de Retz, were unpredictable. All this time, war with Spain continued and in their turn, the northern provinces of the kingdom, Picardy and Champagne, suffered the coming and going of armies, both of the enemy and of friends.

Vincent held himself distant from all plots and their participants. He avoided the court, knowing that his presence was not particularly wished for. Since his fruitless attempt at mediation at the outbreak of the Fronde, he knew that Mazarin was anything but fond of him. His relations with the cardinal remained unbroken, however, as we can see from a letter the cardinal wrote to Vincent on October 13, 1649, in a very courteous tone: "I am much obliged to you for your good advice and for everything you wrote me in your letter of the fourth of this month. I received your thoughts with the confidence and esteem they deserve."<sup>2</sup>

This façade of courtesy tells us nothing about the deep feelings Mazarin harbored for this Monsieur Vincent whom he mistrusted even more because he knew that Anne of Austria confided in him entirely. Vincent, a few months later, wrote to one of his correspondents that he hardly ever went to court anymore "where I only go if I am called, something which rarely happens."<sup>3</sup> Officially, he was still a member of the Council of Conscience, even though this group met only rarely now. Yet, because of this position, he was still receiving many requests concerning ecclesiastical appointments.

For instance, Alain de Solminihac, bishop of Cahors, wrote to him in May 1650: "I beg of you so to influence the queen, when the bishopric of Toul becomes vacant, that she will provide it with a worthy prelate, for it is in very poor state." In this same letter, he adds these few lines, which tell us a great deal about the behavior of certain provinces of the Church at that time: "I must tell you that my heart bleeds with sorrow at the reproaches flung at me concerning a young prelate in a neighboring see, because of the life that he leads. Recently he

rented a house outside his capital city for 600 écus, so that he can keep a pack of hunting dogs and some racing dogs as well. In fact, the sum total of his activity has been the hunt, where he rides out in short garments, with a gun to his shoulder. You were absolutely right to oppose his promotion; would God that we had followed your advice.”<sup>4</sup>

When Vincent returned in June 1649, his first task was to restore order in the priory of Saint-Lazare, that had been devastated by soldiers during the first Fronde. All the reserves had been looted, including the store of heating wood. The winters of 1649 and 1650 were ferocious; the atmosphere of the priory in those days was memorialized by the poet Chapelle,<sup>5</sup> incarcerated at Saint-Lazare at the request of his family. Five lines from his long poem about the austerity of his prison life, written to a friend, describe the dark and the cold:

Smoke there is none, that I can see,  
In this dread and mortal place,  
No light of fire shines on my face  
Save from the incense burnt for Thee  
When we, O God, pray for Thy grace.

Once more, Vincent took over the management of his congregation, since all the member houses had suffered during this troubled period and their revenues had been reduced more or less drastically. He was not able to help the superiors of these houses, so he encouraged them to devise their own solutions. For instance, he wrote to Guillaume Delattre at Agen: “I think it was your ability to save that allowed you to survive. I realize that you have little coming in, that the students’ fees are only a tiny help, and that with this year’s high prices, you will have a hard time managing. But I also know that if you understood how impossible it is for us to come to your assistance, you would have pity on us, and it would not occur to you to ask.”<sup>6</sup>

Writing to the superior of the house at Luçon, he advised that a certain purchase should be abandoned, reminding him that it is more important to attend first to the affairs of Jesus Christ: “I beg you to change your mind about this project, which could be more of a burden than an advantage. In the name of God, let us be more eager to spread the kingdom of Jesus Christ than to expand the inventory of our possessions. Let us be concerned for our task and He will be concerned for us.”<sup>7</sup>

Although it was important to be prudent during this period of famine, there was a great danger of falling into the opposite vice and becoming miserly. Vincent was concerned that an excess of economy should not result in starving the family. He reproached the house at Le Mans with this kind of stinginess: "I have heard from one of our houses that the poor food provided there is harmful both to bodies and to souls" and he made it clear that it is wrong to "sell the best wine and then serve the worst stuff, or to expose the community to miserly treatment."<sup>8</sup>

In his role as manager, Vincent studied all the contracts involving the Congregation. For the year 1650, we have no fewer than twenty notarized documents, signed in the hand of "Vincent de Paul, superior general of the Congregation of Priests of the Mission." These are contracts for the rental of houses, tenancy fees for farms or lands, and various other agreements.<sup>9</sup> No file was signed without careful study. For instance, he wrote to the superior of the house at Richelieu: "I have received the copy of the rental agreement for Bois-Bouchard, and I must say that I cannot understand how it was drawn up. That house, with all its dependencies, is estimated to have a revenue of 1,000 or 1,100 livres, and you have simply set a tenant fee of 195 livres."<sup>10</sup>

In addition to this, he dissuaded the superior at Le Mans from engaging in a legal case in defense of the interests of his house when they were threatened: "Peace is worth more than everything they are trying to take away from you. Let us rather suffer these losses than cause scandal. God will take our case in hand, if we follow the words of Our Savior."<sup>11</sup>

Although Vincent devoted himself attentively to solving problems of management and finance, he was first and foremost the superior general and the spiritual director of his congregation. His chief concern was to explicate the rules of life of the Congregation in meetings and assemblies, and to see to it that they were observed. This was his motive for establishing the principle of discipline. He wrote to a superior: "You must realize that you are doing God's will when you fulfill the orders given to you, and you must convince yourself that to follow one's own will is to move away from the Divine will."<sup>12</sup>

He taught that this discipline was to be applied by observing the Rule, beginning with timely rising in the morning, namely at 4:00 a.m. This point appeared so important to him that he composed a letter for all superiors of the Congregation, dedicated to the question of arising in the morning. "The first advantage which comes from arising at the

moment when the waking bell is sounded is that one is obeying the Rule, and thus, the will of God.” Then he illustrated his point with examples from everyday life: “A merchant gets up early in the morning to get rich; thieves do the same and spend their nights lying in wait for passersby. Shall we be less diligent for the good than they are for ill?”<sup>13</sup>

Much as he insisted on the principles of discipline and respect of the hierarchy, both necessary to assure a well-functioning community, he moderated his statements in letters addressed to certain people: “Those who lead houses of the community should not consider anyone as an inferior, but rather as a brother. Thus, it is necessary to treat one’s confrères with humility, mildness, support, and love.” Humbly, he added: “It is not that I abide by all this myself, but whenever I depart from it, I count myself a sinner.”<sup>14</sup>

Practice of the virtues of humility, mildness, and charity was the path he advocated over and over again when he wrote to his missionaries: “I pray that God will see fit to teach all the missionaries to deal mildly, humbly, and lovingly with their neighbors, in public and in private, even with sinners and the hard of heart, without ever uttering strong words, reproaches, or words of disrespect against anyone.”<sup>15</sup>

Vincent was filled with understanding and compassion for his priests. When one of them confessed that he was locked in painful struggles with temptation, he wrote: “I am not astonished by the fact that you have been tempted, for that is the lot of those who wish to serve God. This is how it was with Our Lord Himself, so who can hope to be exempt? Courage, Monsieur, be truly faithful and His divine goodness will bring you strength.”<sup>16</sup>

To another of his priests, who complained that he could not study, Vincent gave this advice, in the name of truthfulness. He enjoined the priest to abandon his studies because “I know that you have sufficient knowledge already and because usually, those who know the most are not those who bear the most fruit.” He encouraged the man to learn in the school of Christ: “Don’t worry about it. As long as you make satisfactory progress in the school of Our Lord, He will refine your knowledge far better than any book; He will give you the gift of His spirit and with His light you will enlighten the souls held in darkness by vice and ignorance.”<sup>17</sup>

All this time, Vincent maintained his efforts against Jansenism. In June 1648 he gathered a few learned theologians at Saint-Lazare in an attempt

to establish a plan of action against the “new ideas.”<sup>18</sup> After this meeting, on July 1, 1648 one of the theologians submitted the five propositions of the *Augustinus* to the faculty of theology for critical examination, but the doctors of the Sorbonne did not wish to have anything to do with them. In May 1650, on the occasion of a general assembly of the clergy of France being held in Paris, a group of anti-Jansenist clergy including Vincent de Paul proposed the idea of presenting a petition to the pope, signed by all the bishops. It was Isaac Habert, former theology student at Paris and bishop of Vabres, who composed the text, which was distributed in all the dioceses of the country.<sup>19</sup> By January 1652, the signatures of forty bishops had already been collected, but this represented a scant third of the prelates.

At this point, Vincent involved himself in the campaign personally. He sent a circular letter to the bishops who had not yet signed the petition.<sup>20</sup> Alain de Solminihac, bishop of Cahors, was a vigorous ally, who took upon himself the task of convincing the bishops of his region. But even so, Vincent encountered resistance and this was painful, because it came from men he knew and respected: Étienne Caulet, bishop of Pamiers, and Nicolas Pavillon, bishop of Alet. These prelates believed that in the prevailing climate, this petition would only emphasize the division within the Church rather than calming passions. Vincent wrote them a long letter in June 1651 to tell them that it was vain to wait hopefully for an area of common ground and that heresies should be nipped in the bud.<sup>21</sup>

At the end of 1651, signatures had been obtained from ninety of the 120 bishops of France. But on their side, the Jansenists had not been idle either. They had managed to get twelve bishops to address another petition to the pope, begging him not to make a pronouncement before the Church in France had conducted a detailed examination of the much-contested five propositions. Thenceforth, the battle would unfold in Rome, where the two camps sent delegates to plead their causes.

Apparently this theological dispute did not destroy Vincent's good relations with his former student, Nicolas Pavillon. In 1650, Pavillon sent Vincent two young men, the Chandenier brothers, to be educated. These were the great-nephews of Cardinal de la Rochefoucauld, who doubtless, before his death in 1645, had asked Vincent to watch over them. They were received at Saint-Lazare and participated in the Tuesday Conferencess. The older, Louis de Chandenier, an ordained priest, was abbot of Tournus; the second, Claude, was a deacon and the

grand vicar of the abbey of Moutiers-Saint-Jean, of which he would be named abbot in 1655. During the two years that the Chandenier brothers passed with the bishop of Alet, Vincent accepted the vicariate general of this Burgundian abbey. It should be noted that at this time, he was fulfilling the same functions for the abbeys of Saint-Ouen, Marmoutiers, and Saint-Martin-des-Champs, commendatory abbeys in the possession of the Vignerods, nephews of the late Cardinal de Richelieu.

The abbey of Moutiers-Saint-Jean, about twelve kilometers southwest of Montbard, is the oldest abbey in Burgundy. Founded by a hermit, Saint Jean de Réôme, in the year 430, it reached the high point of its development in the thirteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Then, like so many other religious foundations, it entered a period of decline as a result of the Hundred Years' War and the War of Religion. Its condition was made even worse by the fact that since the sixteenth century, it had been held by commendatory privilege. In the seventeenth century, the abbey still had a sizable endowment, with a domain consisting of fifteen parishes. Thus, the abbey with its holdings was profitable enough to interest Cardinal de Richelieu, who had himself named abbot in 1629, bringing the total of his benefices to seventeen. Cardinal de la Rochefoucauld accepted the charge of the benefice in 1631 and hoped that his great-nephew, Claude de Chandenier might inherit it when he came of age.

Vincent took over the additional burden of acting as vicar general of this abbey out of friendship for the Chandenier family, but one wonders whether he ever had the time and the opportunity to travel all the way to Moutiers-Saint-Jean. Local tradition states that he visited the abbey and its dependent parishes, but there is no documentary proof that he did so. There is also not a single document nominating a pastor that bears Vincent's signature.<sup>23</sup>

Because of his position in the Church of France and his relations with the great families of the kingdom, Vincent de Paul was obliged to take on responsibilities which he would gladly have passed by, but his thoughts and attention ranged far beyond the regions where his congregation had already established itself. In Italy, after having founded a house in Rome, the missionaries were sought out by Cardinal Durazzo at Genoa. This prelate was an enthusiastic supporter of their work and even placed them in charge of a seminary. Their official establishment in Genoa was ratified by the local senate in 1649 and, by the next year,

the house had eight priests who carried out their mission successfully in the surrounding regions.

In contrast, the news from Madagascar was much more troubling. In October 1650, Vincent received a packet of letters from Charles Nacquart.<sup>24</sup> The first of these, dated May 1649, gave an account of their long and difficult crossing, a sea voyage of six months to the port of Fort-Dauphin, where his companion died as soon as they arrived. There followed an account of the difficulties which Nacquart encountered in his relations with the governor and the colonists. Of the latter, he said that they lived a dissolute life and that they treated the native people with harshness and violence. But he also noted that his own work with the native people was effective. By the time his letters arrived in France, Charles Nacquart had already died of an illness, a fact that Vincent only learned much later. But in any case, he was resolved to continue the work of evangelization in Madagascar. He asked for authorization from the Propagation of the Faith to send seven other missionaries to the island. For various reason, the departure of the ship which was to take the priests there was delayed; it did not appear until 1654. This was only the beginning of the trials and the tragedies which were to challenge this mission to Madagascar.

After the failed attempt to implant a mission in Ireland, Vincent did not abandon the idea of laboring in this region. In April 1650, he wrote a letter of encouragement to one of the two missionaries who had survived in hiding, at Limerick.<sup>25</sup> Then the Propagation of the Faith asked him to send missionaries to the Hebrides Islands and to Scotland.<sup>26</sup> Vincent chose two priests of Irish origin and they set out in 1651. Living in Ireland under miserable conditions, among a population bowed low under poverty, at the mercy of a harsh climate, the priests moved from one island to another, constantly the target of official hostility from local authorities.

Vincent was always prompt to give an affirmative answer to requests from far away, and so he was pleased to receive a call from the queen of Poland, Louise-Marie de Gonzague,<sup>27</sup> a French princess who had been one of the first Ladies of Charity. Vincent was aware of the pitiable situation in the kingdom of Poland and knew all of the risks threatening a mission in a country troubled by internal strife and aggression on its borders, but he nevertheless agreed to send a team to Warsaw. As leader, he chose one of his best priests, Lambert aux Couteaux, who set out in September 1651 with four missionaries. Vincent wrote to the queen: "They

do not know the language of the country, but since they speak Latin, they can begin by educating young priests.”<sup>28</sup> It was his judgment that within one year, the missionaries would be able to educate and form twelve local priests, who could then accompany them on missions. He also announced to the queen that a team of Daughters of Charity was prepared to travel to Warsaw as well. And so began the mission to Poland, which was to gain Vincent much notice.

In addition to concerns directly related to the Congregation of the Mission, Vincent de Paul had to consider other questions as well. Upon his return to Paris in June 1649, Louise de Marillac asked him for help with the Foundling Hospital. The children, at least those who were already weaned, had been moved to the château of Bicêtre, where they would have more space and breathe better air than in the capital. But the move did not have the expected good results.

“Fifty-two children have died at Bicêtre since our arrival, and there are fifteen or sixteen who appear to be near death,” wrote Louise de Marillac, soon after their arrival. At the same time, the financial situation was becoming critical. Louise de Marillac had sent a first appeal to Vincent at Fréneville, where he was immobilized by storms. Vincent’s response was to implore the Ladies of Charity not to abandon the children to a tragic fate. But in the meantime, the situation had grown worse, armed bands swarmed around the outskirts of Paris, and Bicêtre was not a safe place. It was decided to bring the children back to the city. Louise de Marillac no longer knew how to meet the needs of the Foundling Hospital, and she declared as much to Vincent: “The more I think of what we owe, the more I fear that we will not be able to help ourselves. The wet nurses are beginning to threaten us and to bring the children back, and our debts are growing so fast that soon there will be no hope of repaying them.”<sup>29</sup> At this time, she probably had several hundred children in her charge; we do not have exact numbers.

Vincent seems to have remained calm in the face of this crisis. He replied to Louise de Marillac; “The work with the children is in the hands of Our Lord.”<sup>30</sup> But he did not throw up his hands. Once more he assembled the Ladies of Charity and confronted them with their moral responsibility. According to notes taken at the time, he is supposed to have addressed them in these terms: “What will these little creatures say! Alas, my dear mothers, you are abandoning us! Our own mothers have failed us, true enough, but they are bad women. But that

good women like you should leave us too, that's the same as saying that the Good Lord has abandoned us, and that He is not our God any longer." And when these ladies replied that they had no more money to give, he cried out: "Alas, how many precious little things do you have in your homes, things that serve no purpose whatever! Oh Madame, how far we are from the piety of the Children of Israel, whose women gave their jewels to make a golden calf!"<sup>31</sup>

Once more Monsieur Vincent managed to move his hearers with his eloquence. The Ladies of Charity were persuaded to make one more effort. Gifts poured in and it became possible to repay the debts and meet the needs of every day. Once more, the Foundling Hospital was saved.

For a decade, from 1639 to 1649, Vincent de Paul organized drives for aid to the war victims of Lorraine. Just when a certain quiet was beginning to descend on the province, other regions came to know the horrors and devastation caused by the passage of armies. At the beginning of June 1650, Spanish troops under the leadership of Archduke Leopold, governor of the Low Countries, supported by the troops of Turenne, made their way into the kingdom of France. The fortifications of Hirson and Catelet fell, and Guise was under siege. A French army under the command of marshal du Plessis-Praslin advanced and penetrated the siege of Guise. But in August, a new offensive broke out, the Spanish troops crossed the Aisne and marched on Paris. Their goal was to free the prince of Condé who was being held captive in the château of Vincennes. On July 27, a vanguard led by Turenne was at La Ferté-Milon and at Dammartin, one day's march from the capital. The Spanish were not eager to venture so far forward and decided to stay where they were, obliging their ally of the moment, Turenne, to fall back to the Meuse. The Spanish army was escorted by a corps of mercenaries, recruited after the Peace of Westphalia from Germany, Sweden and Poland. This corps, commanded by the Swiss baron d'Erlach and then by a German roughneck called de Rose, was accustomed to living off the land, devastating everything in its passage.

The comings and goings of these troops, both French and foreign, through the provinces of Picardy and Champagne, all the way to the Île-de-France reduced these unfortunate countrysides to desolation in a period of only a few months. Vincent received information from the missionaries, who had witnessed the siege of Guise and the roads clot-

ted with soldiers, civilians wounded or ill dying in the ditches, and villages empty of all life. He immediately sent two priests to help, with a small store of food and money, but they were soon overcome by the vastness of the need, which they reported to him.

Then, with his organizer's mind and the experience gained from helping in Lorraine, Vincent quickly set up intervention teams which he deployed to the points of gravest suffering. By the end of December 1650, he was able to write: "We have sent seven priests and six brothers to help the poor people of Picardy and Champagne in their extreme physical and spiritual need, just as we did once before in Lorraine."<sup>32</sup> By twos and threes, the missionaries were directed to the dioceses of Laon, Noyon, Soissons, Châlons, and Reims. Their orders were to work with the local authorities; they were to help the parish clergy, not take their place. One brother, Jean Parré,<sup>33</sup> particularly active and effective, provided Vincent with information, just as Brother Mathieu Regnard had done from Lorraine. Sometimes, there were urgent situations to be dealt with. This was the case when Turenne's army, which had been driven from the field near Cambrai, left 1,500 dead behind. The unburied bodies were a likely focus of an epidemic. When Vincent was warned of this, he asked one of his teams to go there at once to bury the dead. Edme Deschamps, priest of the Mission, reported the following: "Today we followed to the letter the precepts of Jesus Christ in the Gospel, to love one's enemies and to treat them with kindness, since we buried those who had ravaged the goods and caused the ruin of our poor countrymen, as well as beating them and treating them with contumely."<sup>34</sup>

At the same time, Vincent was mobilizing women of good will in the capital. At the forefront were the wives of President de Lamoignon and President de Herse, Madame de Miramion, and Madame Fouquet, mother of the Procurator General, Nicolas Fouquet. These women represented the circles of the parlement, the high court, and Port-Royal. The members of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament also took part in this great charitable movement. One of them, Charles Maignart de Bernières, resigned his position as Master of Petitions to devote himself entirely to helping the people of the devastated provinces. He conceived the idea of printing a publication, *Les Relations*,<sup>35</sup> to bring before the public the letters written to Monsieur Vincent by his missionaries, in which they told of their work and described what they found. For example, in January 1651, the following extract appeared: "We have just visited thirty-five villages of the deanery of Guise, where we found almost

600 people in such agonies of starvation that they threw themselves upon the cadavers of dogs and horses after the wolves had had their fill of them. In the village of Guise alone, there are more than 500 sick, huddled in cellars and caverns more suited for animals than people.”<sup>36</sup>

Some 4,000 copies of the collection of letters were widely distributed in Paris and other cities. In this new and effective way, a veritable public opinion campaign was launched that yielded 80,000 livres, collected in the capital between September 1650 and March 1651. These subsidies were sent to Picardy and Champagne, where they made it possible to feed 10,000 people—the sick, widows and orphans—and to pass out clothing and blankets to those who had lost everything. There was even enough for seeds and tools so that the healthy could return to work, for Vincent de Paul was convinced that charity should be intelligent and positive. It was not right, he believed, to encourage people to rely on assistance and to be satisfied with idleness: “As soon as a person is strong enough to work, we buy him some tools appropriate for his profession, and that is all one gives him.”<sup>37</sup>

Vincent de Paul was not content to organize fund drives and the distribution of aid. He wanted to be on the spot in order to take part in projects and evaluate their usefulness. In the archives of Noyon and Chauny, there are testimonials to his travels through the region. Deeply moved by all the misery he saw, Vincent went to the court to speak to Anne of Austria directly about everything he had seen and experienced himself. His descriptions were so gripping that the regent decided at once to sign an ordinance entrusting him with an official mission to protect and console the people of Picardy and Champagne. “Her Majesty being well aware of the fact that most of the inhabitants of villages in Picardy and Champagne have been reduced to beggary and misery because of the looting and hostilities of the enemies and the billeting and passage of all the armies, and knowing that several churches have been sacked and stripped of their ornaments, and because in the hopes of feeding the poor and repairing the churches, several persons of her stately city of Paris are giving abundant alms which are most effectively applied by the priests of the Mission of Monsieur Vincent. . . . Her Majesty orders all civilian and military authorities to comply with the requests of those same priests of the Mission, so that they may be fully at liberty to practice their charity where it seems appropriate to them.”<sup>38</sup>

This remarkable ordinance, signed on February 14, 1651, invested Vincent de Paul with the office of a secretary of state to the war-torn provinces. He was indeed generally thought of in this way, and people turned to him for help. The aldermen of Rethel wrote to him in May 1651 to request his help, describing in pathetic tones the sufferings of their people: "There is no way to tell this story, there is no pen, however richly gifted it might be, which can impart full knowledge of the pitiable state to which the cruelty and ungoverned disorder of the soldiers have reduced this unfortunate land."<sup>39</sup>

Vincent's concern and effective response did not go unseen. One by one, those responsible for large groups of people praised and thanked him. Perhaps the most beautiful epithet came to Vincent from the lieutenant general of Saint-Quentin. Thanking Monsieur Vincent for the help he had sent both to the inhabitants of his city and those who were in exile, he called him "a father of the country."<sup>40</sup>

# 19

## Face to Face with Misery

### 1651–1652

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*Vincent's Health*

*The Fronde Flares up Again*

*Appeal to Anne of Austria*

*Misery in the Île-de-France*

*Letter to Mazarin*

*The End of the Fronde*

After the prince de Condé was freed in January 1651 and Mazarin had gone voluntarily into exile, calm appeared to return to the kingdom, even though intrigue was rife among the different clans circling the throne. The regent, Anne of Austria, managed to preserve a fragile equilibrium until September 7, the day on which the young king officially attained his majority and she symbolically returned to him the power to govern the monarchy. In fact, Anne of Austria continued to preside over the council of government, following the instructions which Mazarin regularly sent her from his exile.

The calm was brief; the civil war soon regained momentum. The prince de Condé left for Guyenne, whose governance he had been given to replace his lost power over Burgundy. The revolution in his favor sparked up at Bordeaux, while his partisans, in alliance with Spain, threatened the frontiers of the kingdom in the regions of Stenay and Champagne.

The young king and his court left the capital at the end of September and journeyed to Poitiers to conduct operations

against Condé. The two opposing armies, the king's and Condé's, both pillaged the region around Bordeaux from one end to the other.

During 1651, Vincent de Paul remained prudently quiet in his priory of Saint-Lazare. He certainly had sufficient work, what with organizing aid missions to the devastated provinces. He also had to concern himself with how his houses kept body and soul together as the turmoil of war threatened survival and morale. His work was made more difficult by the fact that he had passed the milestone of his seventieth year in April, and his health was very poor. He had been suffering from pains in his legs for many years, and walking was increasingly difficult. It was not just that his legs no longer obeyed him; they were covered with open sores and infected ulcerations, and there were episodes of fever which sometimes lasted for two weeks at a time. He talked about his poor health contemptuously, dismissing the "feverlets," but these attacks were intense and trying enough to make all activity impossible. At the end of August 1651, he was bedridden at Saint-Lazare, and he admitted in a letter addressed to a Daughter of Charity: "I have been sick for two weeks."<sup>1</sup> Two weeks later, he was still so weak that he could not write to Louise de Marillac in his own hand.

But he had advice for this lady when she was distraught about the state of her son's health. Along with his wishes for the young man's recovery, Vincent encouraged her to follow the doctor's orders, even if she didn't have much confidence in medicine: "I wish the same for you as I wished yesterday . . . namely that you find yourself able to obey the physician. One might say that doctors kill more patients than they cure, since God wishes to be recognized as the sovereign physician of our souls and our bodies as well, particularly for those people who use no remedies. And yet, when one is sick, one must submit to the physician and obey him."<sup>2</sup>

It is hard to say whether Vincent himself was as submissive as he wanted others to be, for the results obtained by his physicians are hardly conclusive. More and more frequently as he grew older, he would write that he was suffering from a bout of fever. The little bit of clinical information we have from his letters makes it difficult to attempt a diagnosis now. However, one hypothesis, which would take into account both his recurrent fever and the pain and weakness in his legs, is that he suffered all his life from severe episodes of malaria. In fact, this disease can attack the arterial system, causing disturbances and pain in the lower extremities.<sup>3</sup> It might be that he was infected with the malaria parasite

as a boy when he pastured his flock in the marshes, or he could have contracted the disease on the Barbary Coast or later in the Dombes. In any case, purges and bleedings, the only remedies practiced at the time, could do nothing for malaria and its complications except weaken the patient.

Since he was staying close to home because of his unpredictable health, Vincent had the opportunity to see that life at Saint-Lazare was becoming more and more active. In September 1651, the retreat for ordinands brought in ninety clerks and thirty-five priests. This created problems of provisioning and Vincent admitted that he was in great difficulty because funds were scarce. He spoke of this to his faithful Lambert aux Couteaux, who at that time was stationed in Warsaw: "Our poverty is growing, along with the rise in public misery. At one blow, the troubles have snatched away from us 22,000 or 23,000 livres of income, since we are no longer receiving customs duties and the barges are no longer plying the rivers." Fortunately, this experienced manager had not put all his eggs in one basket, so he was receiving food directly from his farms: "One possible source of bread for next year is the farm at Rougemont, which we are working with our own hands, and the farm at Orsigny, if God will protect them from damage and looting."<sup>4</sup>

In these unfavorable times, it was inadvisable to incur useless expenses, as he firmly reminded the superior of the house at Méen: "Do not spend any extraordinary sums over 6 écus without the orders of the superior general." He reprimanded the superior of Le Mans, who complained that he could not manage all his responsibilities but at the same time took on new projects: "It seems that your workers are almost always complaining, accusing, changing places, prettying things up, spending a great deal of money day by day for wages and supplies. May God give us the grace to use our small means well and to turn holy poverty to our benefit!"<sup>5</sup>

Vincent himself set the tone for this poverty. One of his nephews came to visit him, at the end of a long journey of 600 kilometers, to ask for his advice, but no longer had the money to return home. Vincent consulted with Monsieur Duval to see whether the money could be made available from the funds of the Congregation. The response was that he would have to obtain the consent of the community. Finally, it became necessary for Vincent to ask for alms for his nephew; in this way, he obtained 6 écus with which the young man could get home.<sup>6</sup>

The news which Vincent received from those houses more directly affected by ongoing military operations moved him to write letters of encouragement. For instance, there was the house at Saintes. The town was held by the party of Condé and consequently in danger from the impending arrival of the royal army. The governor of Saintes ordered certain quarters of the town destroyed in order to make the defense of the fortress more efficient. The superior of the house was considering a withdrawal of his people, but Vincent ordered him to remain in place, no matter what: "You must hold firm, Monsieur. It would be very wrong to leave, causing great scandal to the town and to the Congregation. Do not fear. The storm will be followed by tranquility, and perhaps even very soon. In all the time that war has raged in Lorraine, in Flanders, and on our borders, religious houses have remained strong. Our houses at Agen and La Rose are in the same danger as you, and the situation at Cahors is almost as bad."<sup>7</sup>

Early in 1652, the storm Vincent was talking about traveled north from Guyenne toward the Île-de-France. The chaos of the Fronde would reach its climax in the capital city, and this would bring the superior of the Congregation of the Mission out of his retreat.

In the first days of January, Mazarin returned from his exile at the head of an army he had raised in Germany. He joined the royal family at Poitiers and traveled with them up toward Saint-Germain. At the same time, Condé returned to the capital after many ups and downs, having fought the royal forces along the Loire; once in Paris, he struck an alliance with Gaston d'Orléans. To complicate the situation further, the duke de Lorraine arrived with an army of mercenaries and camped on the Marne, near Lagny, waiting to sell his services to the highest bidder.

The countryside of the Île-de-France was sacked by all the armies concerned—the royal army, the troops of Condé, and the troops of Lorraine. As a result, the capital was without food and the suffering of the people became more intense as refugees poured in, fleeing from villages ruined by armed bands. On July 2, a bloody battle pitted the forces of Condé against the king's men led by Turenne. The battle raged right beneath the city walls, near the Porte Saint-Antoine, not far from the enclosure of Saint-Lazare. Vincent de Paul wrote about it in a letter addressed to his house at Genoa: "Only three or four nights ago, we had a whole army around our walls. But since it was being pursued by the king's army, it moved away in the morning at great speed, and the

rear guard was attacked behind the Saint-Charles seminary, which was in great danger of being pillaged.”<sup>8</sup>

Finally, Condé’s army, badly trounced, took refuge behind the walls of the capital, which they were able to enter thanks to the daring intervention of La Grande Mademoiselle.<sup>9</sup> But two days later, a popular uprising outside the Hôtel de Ville, where an assembly of notables was gathered, degenerated into a slaughter for which neither party took responsibility. To all intents and purposes, the city was in a state of insurrection.

In this atmosphere of acute crisis, Monsieur Vincent made a surprising decision. Once more violating his own rule never to interfere in political matters, he took it upon himself to attempt a role as mediator. Was he asked to do this? It is more likely that he acted on his own initiative, for he was moved by the suffering of the people and feared that the situation might worsen until it was beyond control. First he visited Gaston d’Orléans and the prince de Condé, whose troops were occupying the capital. They received him “graciously” and seemed to approve of his intention to approach the court.

Vincent had not seen the queen for six or seven months.<sup>10</sup> He had no idea how he would be received at Saint-Denis, where the court was making a stop on its way to Pontoise. We only know about his interview through a letter he wrote to Mazarin the next day: “I most humbly beg Your Eminence to pardon me for leaving yesterday evening without having had the honor to receive his orders; I was forced to do this because I was not well.” Could this have been a diplomatic illness to avoid a contentious meeting with the cardinal? Vincent continues: “Yesterday I spoke to the queen about the separate respectful and gracious meetings I had the honor to have with the two of them [Gaston d’Orléans and Condé]. I told her Royal Highness that if the king were re-established in his authority and a decree of vindication were proclaimed, Your Eminence would give the desired satisfaction.”<sup>11</sup>

In other words, Vincent, in agreement with the princes, was suggesting that Cardinal Mazarin should once more distance himself from the court (give the desired satisfaction), which would allow the young king to assert his own authority and re-establish the peace. In return, the parlement of Paris, which had promulgated an edict branding the cardinal a disturber of the public peace and condemned him to be driven out of the kingdom, would rescind its decision (proclaim a decree of vindication).

Further on in the letter, Vincent stated that he was waiting for a message from Gaston d'Orléans approving this first start at negotiations before going to visit the cardinal: "Tomorrow morning, I hope to be able to bring the answer to Your Eminence, with God's help." Did Gaston d'Orléans change his position in the meantime, as was his habit? It seems that Vincent's efforts ended there.

For a better understanding of Monsieur Vincent's apparently remarkable intervention in a matter of politics, one must imagine the situation in the capital and its surroundings. At the beginning of 1652, there were armies camped all around Paris. Villagers abandoned their houses and their goods to find shelter in the city from the extortion of the soldiery. This influx of homeless people was accompanied by the usual epidemic of violence, looting, and sacrilegious despoiling of churches. In May, Vincent wrote to one of his missionaries: "Here, life is more troubled than ever. Paris is swarming with the poor, since the armies have forced the pitiable country folk to come here for refuge. Every day, we try to gather them in and help them; we have rented a few houses in the outlying districts where we take some of them out of harm's way, particularly the poor girls. But we have not given up helping the two frontier regions, Champagne and Picardy, and we still have ten or twelve people there."<sup>12</sup>

Soup kitchens were organized in all the parishes: 900 people were helped in the parish of Saint-Hippolyte, 600 at Saint-Laurent, and 300 at Saint-Martin. Poor parishes like Saint-Médard were hard put to help the many who were assigned to them. At Saint-Lazare, "every day, we give soup to 14,000 or 15,000, who would have died of hunger without this help."<sup>13</sup>

Charitable work like this was done collaboratively by all the religious congregations and the members of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament. The Daughters of Charity were active as well, as Vincent wrote: "The poor Daughters of Charity are doing more than we are as far as the corporal works of mercy are concerned. Every day, at Mademoiselle Le Gras' house, they make and distribute soup for 13,000 of the genteel poor, and in the Faubourg Saint-Denis, for 800 refugees, while in the parish of Saint-Paul alone, four or five of these young women make soup for 5,000 poor people over and above the sixty to eighty sick people for whom they are caring."<sup>14</sup>

In July, the situation grew even worse as the army of Condé, beaten beneath the walls of the capital, entered the city to take refuge. In the

meantime Étampes, which had been occupied by the troops of Condé and besieged by the royal forces, found itself in a horrendous state once the siege was lifted. When he was informed of this, Vincent sent priests of the Mission and some Daughters of Charity. They found the population in a state of shock and so weakened that the dead were simply left indoors or in the streets, without burial. Everywhere there were animal carcasses in a state of decomposition, so that the air was filled with the stench, and plague was widespread. The missionaries went to work courageously, burying the dead with the help of any healthy men they could find.

At Palaiseau, the situation was just as bad. The priests of the Mission who were on the scene asked Saint-Lazare for help. Vincent, who was not able to send any, appealed to the duchess d'Aiguillon: "Disease continues at Palaiseau. The first victims who survived now require treatment as convalescents, and those who were healthy are now ill. The soldiers have cut down all the wheat, and there is nothing to harvest. The disease is so virulent that our first four priests have fallen victim to it. Oh! Madame, what a harvest there is to be made here for heaven, in this time when such great misery looms at our gates!"<sup>15</sup>

This is the atmosphere in which Vincent decided that he must go to Anne of Austria, not only to ask her to send away Cardinal Mazarin as a step toward restoring civil peace, but also to beg her to give orders that the villagers must be allowed to harvest their fields without being stopped by the soldiers. In spite of the promises he received, the soldiers continued to confiscate the wheat on the plain of Saint-Denis, as he was able to see for himself, and also between Chapelle and Villette, two villages about a kilometer from Paris. Vincent complained of this in a letter he wrote to the queen soon after his audience with her.<sup>16</sup>

The civil war, aggravated by the consequences of the war against Spain, continued to rage through the provinces of the kingdom, drawing misery and destruction in its wake. In despair, after the failure of his attempt at mediation, Vincent made an astonishing resolve a few months later. On August 16, he wrote to the supreme authority, Pope Innocent X. The man who signs his letter "Most unworthy superior of the Congregation of the Mission" does not hesitate to address the Most Holy Father to beg for his intervention in the interest of peace, when "the royal house is divided by dissent, the people are shattered into factions, cities and persons are tormented by civil war, villages, towns, and cities

are toppled, ruined, burned, and the people are almost without sacraments, mass, or any other spiritual comfort.”

Vincent added that the apostolic nuncio had attempted to intervene, but that up to that time, the effort had been without result. There was no one left but him, the pastor of the universal church, who could calm the quarrels and bring back peace.<sup>17</sup>

By a curious coincidence, three days after he had signed this letter which could not possibly have arrived at its destination yet, Vincent learned that Mazarin had decided to withdraw from the court. On August 18, the cardinal left for the château of Bouillon, in the diocese of Liège. Now the members of the Fronde had obtained what they demanded, and there was no further impediment to the return of the king to his capital. But he seemed in no hurry to leave Compiègne where he was staying with the court.

Cardinal de Retz, at the head of a delegation of the clergy of Paris, escorted by twenty gentlemen, arrived at Compiègne on September 9 to ask the king to return to his waiting city. But the delegation was given a cool reception. Everyone knew that even though he had withdrawn, Mazarin had not stopped advising the young king and Anne of Austria for a moment, and that no decisions were made without his backing.

Then Vincent took the initiative once more, again stepping out of his habitual pattern. Not only did he decide to break his own rule, never to interfere in public affairs, but he chose to do it for a second time in a few months. On September 1, two days after the deputation of clergy from Paris had failed in its approach to the court, Vincent wrote directly to Mazarin, the man who, officially, had been exiled and removed from power.

One might think that when Monsieur Vincent went to see Anne of Austria to present her with a request to send the cardinal away, he did it as a member of the Council of Conscience and that this step was justified in light of his position and his responsibility as a member of this august body. But in addressing Mazarin, and ascribing to him *de facto* an authority which was no longer vested in him, Vincent was placing himself in an ambiguous position. In his long letter to the cardinal, he gives him, in plain language, some firmly stated advice: “I believe that Your Eminence will be performing an act worthy of his goodness by advising the king and the queen to return and take possession of their city and of the hearts of Paris.” After having exhorted him not to stand in the way of the peace process that was already in motion, he even took

him to task: "If it is true what people are saying, that Your Eminence has given an order for the king not to listen to milords the princes, and not to give them passports that allow them to present themselves to Their Majesties, and that no deputations or representatives of theirs should be heard, and if to this end Your Eminence has placed strangers close to the king and the queen, attendants who close all avenues of access for anyone who wishes to speak to Their Majesties, it is much to be feared, my lord, that the hatred of the people will turn to rage."<sup>18</sup>

It was in vain that Vincent added that he had spoken to no one of this letter, and that he was acting in his own name alone; he could be certain that his position would produce agitation, for the political situation was complex. The various sectors of the Fronde were still active, and the royal troops and those of Condé faced each other in battle order a few kilometers from the capital. Moreover, the duke de Lorraine had reappeared on the banks of the Marne at the end of August, his army stronger by 3,000 men led by the duke of Würtemberg. Discreet negotiations were being conducted between the princes and the court, the princes and Mazarin, the court and the duke de Lorraine, with the latter hoping to be paid well by all sides. In this explosive crisis, an attempt like Vincent's to intervene with the man who continued to hold the reins of power in the hope of convincing him that he should give them up was dangerous, to say the least.

Certainly Mazarin was not pleased to have Monsieur Vincent preach him a sermon. The most immediate result was the decision, made and communicated to Vincent, to remove him from the Council of Conscience. News of this move spread rapidly and on October 20, Alain de Solminihac, bishop of Cahors, wrote to Vincent: "I am sure that it is no great personal loss to you to be delivered from that burdensome position, but the Church is losing a great deal; it would be most desirable to have you still in office."<sup>19</sup>

Barely a month after Vincent sent his letter to Mazarin, the deadlocked situation suddenly began to flow again. The duke de Lorraine, undoubtedly well rewarded for it, folded up his tents and moved away with his mercenaries. The prince de Condé left the capital on October 13, plunging himself and his army into the rebellion. The Fronde fell apart and collapsed like a house of cards. On October 21, the young Louis XIV made a triumphal entry into his stately city of Paris.

Vincent, at peace once more, announced this news to the superior at Genoa, Étienne Blatiron: "I invite you to thank God for bringing the king and the queen back to Paris. Joy is so great on all sides that you cannot imagine it. We now have great hope for a complete end to internal disruptions in the kingdom."<sup>20</sup>

But the end of internal warfare did not repair damage already done and did not suppress, as though with a magic wand, the misery caused by this long period of troubles. A rapid survey initiated by the archbishop of Paris provided a list of the most urgent needs of the poor around the capital. To organize the centralization of the aid effort Christophe du Plessis, baron of Montbard, a director of the Hôtel-Dieu of Paris, set up general storehouses for all gifts of food, clothing, bedding, and tools gathered throughout the capital. One storage facility was located on the Île Saint-Louis, where boats could load these goods and move them to the eastern portion of the city. Another warehouse was opened near the Burgundy gate, where the wagons left for the north of Paris. These supplies were gathered in drives organized in the parishes; money was raised by the Ladies of Charity. The missionaries took part in distributing this aid in the most hard-hit villages as well as organizing centers where the sick could be cared for. All the religious orders contributed to this great impulse of mutual aid and charity. Different areas were allocated to each order: the reformed Franciscans were assigned to Juvisy and Saint-Denis, the Jesuits to Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, the Discalced Carmelites to Tournan, the reformed Dominicans to Gonesse, the Capuchins to Corbeil, and the priests of the Mission devoted themselves to Étampes, Palaiseau, and Lagny.<sup>21</sup>

Vincent de Paul had the experience and the talent to organize and coordinate this great communal impulse of charity. Once more, he functioned as a catalyst for cooperation among all people of good will.

# 20

## The Desolation Ravaging the Church 1653–1655

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*A Sketch Plan for a General Hospital*  
*Success and Failure in Rome*  
*"To End My Days in the Countryside"*  
*Sobering News from Distant Missions*  
*Reforming the Priestly Estate*

With the Fronde out of the way and the court once more installed in the capital, the times ahead would be calmer, although the war against Spain continued. The Spanish had received reinforcements of some magnitude in the person of a great captain, the prince de Condé, and the troops of both camps were crisscrossing and devastating the northern provinces of the kingdom, Champagne, Picardy, and the Ardennes. As for the provinces of the Midi, they were slowly recovering from the calamities wrought by the Fronde of Bordeaux.

Although Monsieur Vincent was no longer a member of the council on Church affairs, he was still receiving requests to speak at court in favor of charitable works or in support of petitions. For example, the bishop of Dax, Jacques Desclaux, wrote to him to complain about the harm suffered by the churches of his diocese and to let him know that he was coming to the capital to plead his case and obtain relief from the taxes established by the central power. Vincent tried to dissuade him from this move by reminding him discreetly of his

pastoral duty: "Wherever the armies have passed, they have committed sacrilege, theft, and the kind of impiety that your diocese has suffered. And this is true not only in Guyenne and Périgord but also in Saintonge, Poitou, Bourgogne, Champagne, Picardy, and many other places, even close to Paris." He encouraged the prelate to give up his plan and remain among his flock and his clergy, "who will be full of joy at being able to experience your presence there, where it does so much good."<sup>1</sup>

Monsieur Vincent was always the one to be called upon in matters of urgency, when help had to be found. He was on the road at the beginning of January 1653, traveling to give a little conference for the Daughters of Charity, when "the duchess d'Aiguillon and the wife of President de Herse sent someone looking for me there, so that I could consult with them about ways of helping the poor of Champagne that the armies were reducing to a pitiable state." Vincent, who reports this event among many others, asked himself what else he could possibly do to comply with this latest request: "We are already spending large amounts for assistance to this diocese, which requires 6,000 or 7,000 livres a week for its support."<sup>2</sup>

But Providence acts unexpectedly. One day, a rich burgher gave Vincent a considerable sum of money, 100,000 livres, to use for a work of charity of his choice. After long consideration, Vincent decided to create a hospice which would be a house of retirement for poor tradesmen. In this institution, he applied ideas which were dear to his heart: first of all, he wanted to create an establishment on a human scale where the residents would feel free. Next, he did not consider it sufficient to offer shelter and food to these needy people. Rather, he wanted to give them the opportunity to be useful, since idleness is the mother of all vices. He ordered tools so that even in retirement, they could work at their own crafts according to any small energy and desire for work they might have. This hostel, which was called Hospital of the Holy Name of Jesus, was set up in two houses he bought in the faubourg Saint-Laurent. The Sisters of Charity cared for the little community, made up of twenty men and as many women, and a priest of the Mission was in charge of their spiritual welfare.

This foundation was met with enthusiasm by the Ladies of Charity, who immediately wanted to create a general hospital on the same principles where the beggars of the city could be given a place to live. This was, in fact, an idea in wide circulation at the time; some cities had already opened a general hospital, but without much success, so charitable

associations and public authorities were planning ways to do this work more effectively. At first, Vincent tried to moderate the enthusiasm of these pious ladies, not wishing to embrace hastily an enterprise whose implications he had not yet studied. What is more, he had no intention of engaging his overburdened Congregation in this additional work. But finally, he was forced to yield to the pressing demands of the Ladies. From Anne of Austria, he obtained the vast enclosure of the Salpêtrière, a former arsenal, near the Seine and facing the new arsenal.

Vincent hoped for a modest start, taking in a maximum of 100 poor beggars before creating an institution on a larger scale. But even so, the project was met with opposition in high places. Once more, Vincent had to ask the duchess d'Aiguillon to try to break the deadlock, so that the work of restoring the Salpêtrière could continue.<sup>3</sup> In spite of the support lent by this powerful lady and the efforts of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament, which showed a lively interest in the project, the work would not be finished until four years later, in 1657. In the meantime, the plans for the institution were modified, and the guidelines for the general hospital which finally emerged did not please Monsieur Vincent at all.

A year earlier, three doctors of the Sorbonne had been sent to the Holy See to defend, against the delegates of the Jansenists, the petition of the bishops of the Church in France, requesting condemnation of the five propositions taken from the *Augustinus* of Jansenius. Vincent kept himself informed of the proceedings, but he was well aware of the dignified pace at which work was done in Rome. It was not until the beginning of January 1653 that a first debate took place in the presence of the pope. After several sessions, the Holy Father pronounced his judgment and published a bull, *Cum occasione*, dated May 31, condemning the indicted propositions of Jansenius. Vincent, who had played an active role in this affair, was delighted. On July 5, he wrote to Alain de Solminihac: "I am sending you news which you will find most agreeable, namely, the condemnation of the Jansenists." Vincent hoped that they would submit to the judgment: "One hopes that they will be able to swallow the pill and that they will not say that even though the opinions of Jansenius have been condemned, their own have not."<sup>4</sup> Contrary to his hopes, however, the papal bull did not bring peace to agitated souls. Indeed, the quarrel of Jansenism degenerated into open warfare. With a heavy heart, Vincent realized that he would yet be involved.

Throughout the ups and downs of his agitated life, and in spite of the many concerns which preoccupied him, Vincent never lost sight of his objectives. What seemed to him of greatest importance in assuring the permanence of his major accomplishment was to give a complete and inviolable Rule to his Congregation. He had already composed draft texts, which had been discussed and revised in assembly, but some matters remained to be clarified. The question that preoccupied him above the rest was the matter of vows, and he gave it a great deal of thought.

Vincent hoped that the missionaries would take the three usual vows—poverty, chastity and obedience—and add to them a special vow of stability. This would avoid the situation where members left the Congregation after completing their studies to join other religious companies. Yet he did not want the Mission to become a religious order. Rather, he insisted that the missionaries remain secular priests instead of becoming order religious.

Was it possible to resolve this paradox, to take vows and still remain secular? There was the additional problem of having this Rule approved both by the archbishop of Paris, who was the authority over the Congregation, and by Rome, the authority over all. The agreement of the archbishop was not difficult to obtain, given the privileged relationship between him and Monsieur Vincent, but the Holy See would be more difficult to convince.

Vincent had already sent several representatives to Rome, and they had had more or less success. After a general assembly of the Congregation held at Saint-Lazare in July 1651, in the course of which the question of vows had been debated, a petition was carried to the pope by a special messenger, Thomas Berthe.<sup>5</sup> It was his assignment to obtain the pope's approval for the Rule of the Congregation of the Mission in the form containing the four vows. Vincent kept close track of Berthe's negotiations. In a letter written to his emissary in April 1653, he set out his thoughts about the vow of stability. "The tasks we do are so varied, so arduous, and spread over such long periods that those who take them on might drift away, become discouraged, or get embroiled in skirmishes; it is difficult to persevere if there is no tie that holds them to the Congregation. And it could go with us as with some other congregations, where the members have no obligation to obedience, and moved around as they pleased." Knowing well that Rome was not at all favorable to the creation of new religious orders, he added: "You can make assurances that ours are simple vows, not the solemn vows of a religious

order. We have no intention of separating ourselves from the clergy or of becoming order religious.”<sup>6</sup>

Negotiations seemed to be going well, when an unexpected event brought them to an abrupt halt. At the beginning of February 1655, Vincent received a letter from Berthe, announcing that he had just received “a written command in which His Majesty orders us to leave Rome and to return to France at once.”<sup>7</sup> What had taken place?

To understand these events, we must look back three years. In February 1652, Jean-François Paul de Gondi, coadjutor of the archbishop of Paris, his uncle, succeeded by a number of intrigues in obtaining the cardinal’s hat, which he wore under the name of Cardinal de Retz. But because he was an active member of the Fronde, Cardinal Mazarin had him imprisoned a few months later, on December 19, in the château of Vincennes. Meanwhile, his uncle, the archbishop, died in March 1654. Even from the depths of his prison, Cardinal de Retz was able to take possession, by proxy, of the archbishopric of Paris, thus unleashing the fury of Mazarin and the court. In revenge, he was moved to another prison, the château of Nantes, from which he escaped that August. Hurtling in and out of a thousand adventures, pursued by Mazarin’s henchmen, he crossed Spain and arrived in Rome, where he was received in fatherly fashion by Pope Innocent X. This pontiff detested Mazarin and was not sorry to annoy him by showing his friendship for de Retz.

It was at the request of the pope himself that the superior of the Mission at Rome gave hospitality to the illustrious fugitive. In any case, would Vincent not have opened his house freely to receive his former pupil, the son of his benefactor and cofounder of the Congregation? This is why the royal thunder fell upon that unfortunate Thomas Berthe, who had no voice in these events, but was commanded to close his house and leave Rome.

However, it seems that the royal rage and Mazarin’s bad temper soon abated. Shortly after this drama, the cardinal summoned Monsieur Vincent, who gave the following account to a friend: “The thing settled itself quite well, thanks be to God. It pleased the goodness of His Majesty to allow us to send back [to Rome] Monsieur Jolly [to replace Berthe].”<sup>8</sup>

The task now was to resume the interrupted negotiation concerning vows for members of the Congregation. Pope Innocent X having died in January 1655, Alexander VII ascended to the throne of Saint

Peter in the month of April. In a brief *ex commissa*, dated September 22, 1655, he confirmed and approved the usage which had already been established in the Congregation of the Mission of making simple vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and stability. He declared that the missionaries were members of the secular clergy and specified that they were subject to the authority of the bishops for all functions they carried out in the dioceses, such as seminaries, retreats for ordinands, and missions.<sup>9</sup>

Vincent had succeeded in having things the way he wanted them, and he did not hide his satisfaction when he wrote to Edme Jolly, who had served well in conducting the last stages of the negotiations. He gave thanks to God for permitting this happy conclusion: "May His divine goodness be forever glorified through this, may it reward you for the pains you took to bring about these results and reveal to you my gratitude."<sup>10</sup>

Vincent found it intolerable to remain riveted to his work table at Saint-Lazare or restricted to the capital by his numerous responsibilities while all the members of the Congregation traveled hither and yon on missions. He wanted to be out in the field himself. In May 1653, he wrote to the duchess d'Aiguillon to make his excuses for missing the coming assembly of the Ladies of Charity because he was taking part in a mission to be preached at Sevran (sixteen kilometers north of the capital): "It seems to me that I would be offending God if I were not to do everything in my power for the poor people of the fields."<sup>11</sup> The duchess was concerned for Monsieur Vincent's health and sent a word of reproach to Portail: "I cannot get over my astonishment that Monsieur Portail and the other good gentlemen of Saint-Lazare permit Monsieur Vincent to go and work in the country, in this heat, and at his age."<sup>12</sup>

But it was not easy to counsel Vincent to moderation, for he would do nothing but his own will. For him, going to the aid of the rural poor was the one true reason for being alive. He was nostalgic for the days when he was able to devote all his time to preaching missions, as he told a priest of the Congregation in a moving letter that expressed his joy at the success of a recent mission. He wrote: "Indeed, Monsieur, I cannot help but tell you quite simply that your news gives me an intense new desire to go out, in spite of my little weaknesses, and sleep under some bush, as I spend the rest of my days working in a village. I feel that I would be deeply happy if it pleased God to grant me this favor."<sup>13</sup>

Vincent did not receive this blessing. As soon as he returned to Saint-Lazare, he was assailed with many worries, and the problems in need of solution kept him at his desk. "The difficulties are pulling me this way and that," he admitted in a letter to the superior of the house at Warsaw.<sup>14</sup> Much bad news was flowing in from Poland, Madagascar, and the Barbary Coast.

Poland was sorely tried, first by an epidemic of the plague, then by internal unrest and invasions from abroad. The plague appeared in Warsaw at the end of 1652. Lambert aux Couteaux, dear to Vincent's heart, had taken no thought for himself as he nursed the sick, buried the dead, and succored the abandoned. He was stricken with the plague himself and died in January 1653. At the urgent request of the queen, Vincent sent another priest, Charles Ozenne, to take charge of the Mission in Poland. This priest set out from Dieppe with a group of Daughters of the Visitation in August 1653. Their ship was attacked by Corsairs and taken to Dover, where all on board were held in captivity. After fighting for authorization to send sisters to Poland, Vincent now had to struggle to liberate them and to organize resumption of Ozenne's voyage to Warsaw.

The next year, an uprising of Cossacks, who had joined ranks with the Muscovites, threatened the unity of the Polish kingdom, but King Jan-Casimir succeeded in driving them out of Smolensk at the beginning of 1655. Then, in their turn, the Swedes caused a disturbance in Poland. Vincent was concerned about the fate of his missionaries and of the Daughters of Charity, surrounded by Protestant invaders. He approached the French ambassador to Sweden to ask him "to make representations to the king of Sweden requesting protection for the religious of Sainte-Marie, the Daughters of Charity, and even for the priests of the Mission in Warsaw, if necessary."<sup>15</sup> Swedish forces entered Warsaw at the beginning of September, and the king and queen withdrew to Krakow and even further, to Silesia.

At the end of 1655, four priests of the Mission returned to France while two others remained in Warsaw, where they lived in peace, even though the city was controlled by Sweden. Their superior, Charles Ozenne, accompanied the royal family to their retreat. What was to become of the Mission in Poland? "Pray for them," advised Vincent, who was not discouraged, placing his confidence in the unfathomable will of God. "God has His reasons for allowing events to proceed in this way."<sup>16</sup>

The news from Madagascar was even sadder. Vincent had received no mail from the island since the October 1650 letter from Monsieur Nacquart, announcing the death of Monsieur Gondrée and calling for help. He had been trying to obtain authorization to send a team of missionaries to Madagascar as reinforcement. But unfortunate events followed one another and it was not until March 1654 that two priests and a brother were able to embark at Saint-Nazaire. For Vincent, this was the beginning of yet another long wait for news; there would be five months of sailing and as many for letters to return if, in fact, a ship was ready to sail. The first letters arrived at Saint-Lazare in the middle of 1655. They informed Vincent that the missionaries had found a Christian community that had suffered a good deal. Monsieur Nacquart had been dead for four years, and everything had to be started from the ground up. What is more, there was only one survivor of this reinforcement team, Monsieur Bourdaise, the writer the letters. This was the man who had almost been sent home from Saint-Lazare because he was not making decent progress in his studies!<sup>17</sup> Vincent immediately began a search for a ship that was sailing and managed to send out three new missionaries from the port of La Rochelle at the end of October 1655.

The fate of the consuls in Algeria and Tunisia also weighed on Monsieur Vincent's mind. He knew the difficulties they were doubtless encountering and the misery of the slaves they were at pains to comfort. The office of consul at Tunis had been held since July 1653 by a young lawyer of the parlement of Paris, Martin Husson, who worked very well with the missionary Jean Le Vacher. As they were setting sail, Vincent had given them sage advice: "They will submit to the laws of the country, and outside of the country's religion, they will never dispute anything, never speak a word of contempt."<sup>18</sup> But in spite of their efforts to avoid confrontations with the local authorities, their life was made impossible by the ill will of the dey of Tunis, who took every opportunity to frustrate them. In the end, the dey demanded that Martin Husson leave the country in April 1657.

The consulship of Algiers had been granted some years earlier to a clerk of the Mission, Jean Barreau, who regularly suffered bad treatment and even imprisonment at the hands of the Turkish authorities. In vain, Vincent commanded Jean Barreau not to incur financial obligations beyond what was reasonable, for it was the man's inclination to give in to his compassion for the miserable slaves and go deep into debt to ransom them. This consul had as second in command a priest of the

Mission, Philippe Le Vacher, to whom Vincent had also made numerous impassioned recommendations. He had exhorted him not to try to convert Turks or renegades.<sup>19</sup> One can only be surprised at this advice, when one remembers that, if we can believe it, Vincent had himself been an important actor in the conversion of a renegade in Tunisia.

The inextricable complications with which the consuls struggled, drawn as they were into cases at law and commercial litigation, all far removed from their apostolic vocation, led Vincent to think that “it would be best to assign these two consulates to persons who could turn them to their profit; this would not prevent the priests from doing what they can to help the poor slaves.”<sup>20</sup> In the meanwhile, as though he were connected to the Barbary Coast by an unbreakable tie, Vincent maintained the presence of the Mission there, in spite of the most terrible contempt exhibited by the local authorities.

The question arises whether Vincent was beaten down by the cumulative weight of so much bad news and the apparent failure of his distant projects. Without a doubt, he suffered from this and sometimes, he even allowed a complaint to cross his lips. Yet he was ready to send out his missionaries wherever there was new land to cultivate and evangelize, because he was motivated by a faith that could withstand any test.

Thus, when the marquis Pianezzo, leader of the Council of Savoy, requested that he found a house of the Congregation at Turin, he hastened to write to his representative at Genoa, Étienne Blatiron, asking him to go and negotiate this new implantation.<sup>21</sup> The work was quickly done, and the four first missionaries were sent to Turin in October 1655.

Vincent learned directly from the Jesuit priest Alexandre de Rhodes, just returned from a long stay in Tonkin, that missions in that country and in Cochinchina produced astonishing results but that the men and the means to direct them were lacking. The very thought of all these souls to bring into the fold filled him with enthusiasm and in July 1653, he signed, together with several prelates, petitions addressed to Rome to suggest that “two or three bishops be sent to this nascent Church” so that an indigenous clergy could be raised up.<sup>22</sup>

Shortly thereafter, he received from the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith a proposal that he did not find troubling: “Rome is demanding from me seven or eight priests to be sent to Sweden and Denmark, where the word is that they would have great success, and that no one would hinder them as long as they did not practice our re-

ligion in public.” In other words, it was a matter of introducing priests into Protestant countries, after all the disasters suffered in similar undertakings in Scotland and Ireland. But Vincent did not raise a single objection, “I am waiting for the final order to send some priests, either from inside or outside the Congregation of the Mission.”<sup>23</sup> But soon Sweden entered into a war against Poland and there would be no more talk of sending missionaries.

Over and above his great need for action, what were the deep motives which pushed Vincent to leap ever forward into adventures in distant lands? He revealed them in a conversation with members of the Congregation in September 1655, when he painted his dark vision of the state of the Church. “This desolation ravishing the Church, this deplorable undermining it has suffered in so many places, so that it has been almost entirely ruined in Asia and Africa, and even in large parts of Europe, such as Sweden, Denmark, England, Scotland, Ireland, Holland and other provinces of the Netherlands, as well as a large part of Germany! And how many heretics we see in France! Or consider Poland, which is already infested with heresy and is now in danger of being totally lost to religion with the invasion of the king of Sweden.”

Who was responsible for this wretched situation? Vincent affirmed that it was bad priests: “The Church is ruined in many places by the evil life the priests lead, for it is they who confound and ruin it. It is only too true that the depravity of the priesthood is the principal cause of the ruin of the Church of God.” Therefore, in the first place, one must think of reforming the priesthood. In this spirit Vincent wished to send good priests throughout the world to try to change the downhill course on which the Church was engaged, particularly in Europe. Vincent was convinced that it was the vocation of the Congregation of the Mission to re-establish the priesthood in its original purity: “It is on us that God has bestowed the great grace of letting us contribute to restoration of the priestly estate. To do this task, He called on us, not on the doctors or the many communities of religious, full of knowledge and holiness, but on this worthless, poor, and miserable community, the least of all and the most unworthy.”

Vincent continued by recalling that Christ had chosen as his first apostles “fishermen, craftsmen, poor people of those days” and that in the same way, the Mission is composed of “weak people, poor workers and peasants.” Perhaps he was carried away by his oratorical momentum when he went as far as to exclaim “What did God find in us to suit

us for such a great work? By his pure will, He turned to poor miserable idiots to try once more to mend the fissures in His Son's kingdom and the priestly estate."<sup>24</sup>

In this declaration, Vincent gave witness both to his profound humility and his unbelievable ambition to be chosen by God to re-establish His Son's kingdom. This ambition can only be conceived of if it is founded on unshakable faith, which transcends the strength of those who possess it, and makes them able to move mountains.