Vincent de Paul

the Trailblazer

BERNARD PUJO

Translated by Gertrud Graubart Champe

University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana

Manufactured in the United States of America

Paperback edition published in 2004.

Translated by Gertrud Graubart Champe from *Vincent de Paul, le précurseur,* by Bernard Pujo, published by Albin Michel, Paris, France.

The publisher is grateful to THE FRENCH MINISTRY OF CULTURE—CENTRE NATIONAL DE LIVRE for support of the costs of translation.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Pujo, Bernard.
[Vincent de Paul, le précurseur. English]
Vincent de Paul, the trailblazer / Bernard Pujo ; translated by Gertrud Graubart Champe.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-268-04361-2 (cloth : alk. paper)
ISBN 0-268-03884-8 (paper : alk. paper)
1. Vincent de Paul, Saint, 1581–1660. 2. Christian saints—France—Biography. I. Title.
BX4700.V6 P7413 2003
271'.7702—dc21

2003012368

∞ *This book is printed on acid-free paper.*

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Translator's Note

Vincent de Paul le précurseur by Bernard Pujo opens a bright window into the turbulent world of a great saint in a great century. Unlike preceding biographies of Vincent, this one presents politics, war, and one man's personality as essential elements in the construction of a vast and lasting network of charitable works. There is very little of the usual hagiographic style in this account. Instead, the reader is invited to see in action the heroic virtue that makes a saint, and see it in the midst of life. To insert the details into his portrait, Pujo uses rich and varied language, often quoted directly in the French of the seventeenth century, tantalizing in its slight difference. Terms from farming, law, finance, medicine, the life of the court, and always, the life of the Church lead the translator a merry chase. Indeed, the very difficulty encountered in finding English words for some of these concepts underlines the distance at which we now live from Vincent's world; probably the reader will recognize the tension of some of these problems immediately. Titles of government offices and branches of government are given as they appear in English-language histories of the period. Ecclesiastical terms are based on the Catholic Encyclopedia of 1912. The names of most individuals are spelled in their respective languages of origin. As for weights, measures, and sums of money, the translation uses the author's information: distances originally given in leagues are converted to kilometers at the rate of four kilometers to a league. The arpent, a measure of area which varied from province to province, is calculated as one-half hectare, or five thousand square meters. Ancient units for the measure of large volumes, such as amounts of grain, are elusive

because dictionaries generally define them in terms of other ancient measures and these also vary from province to province; Mr. Pujo has nothing to say about them. Finally, there is the matter of money. The units which appear in the translation are the livre and the écu, which is equal to three livres. An estimate made in 1990 by the historian Pierre Goubert puts the livre at around 200 contemporary French francs.

Two works have been particularly helpful in making this translation: *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: Rules, Conferences, and Writings,* edited by Frances Ryan, D. C., and John E. Rybolt, C.M. (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1995), and Pierre Coste, C.M., *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul,* translated by Joseph Leonard, C.M. (New York: New City Press, 1987).

Bernard Pujo's book leaves no avoidable large gap in the account of Vincent's life but it cannot be all-encompassing. Fortunately, the author provides the interested reader with many signposts for further study of the saint's life and his times. He provides excellent documentation of his work with the Archives of the Congregation of the Mission, and the generous biographical notes are as attractive as clues in a treasure hunt.

The present translation has profited significantly from the work of its first reader, Paula von Haimberger Arno. Her eagle eye for accuracy and fine ear for language have made her an ideal and valued collaborator.

Prologue

On August 26, 1660, King Louis XIV and his young wife, Marie Thérèse, made their ceremonial entry into the stately city of Paris. The exceptional pomp of the occasion celebrated a high moment in the history of France; a war which had lasted a quarter-century had ended the year before with the signing of the Peace of the Pyrenees. It seemed the beginning of an era of peace for Europe and an age of prosperity for a France ruled by a young king, admired all over the world for his imposing bearing and personal strength.

This emblematic entry into the capital city marked the beginning of the new time. Early in the morning, the royal couple was received at a square outside the city walls, near Saint Antoine.[1] On a stand surmounted by a dais draped in blue taffeta dotted with fleurs-de-lis, Louis XIV seated himself on a throne covered with gold brocade. His clothing was of silver and of crimson silk, and the bouquet of plumes in his hat was held in place with a diamond brooch. At his side was the queen, robed in a gown streaming with gold, silver, pearls, and gems.

Before them paraded the delegations of the courts and the civil bureaucracy, the clergy of the capital's thirty-nine parishes with their banners and crosses, the university's faculties of medicine, theology, and canon law, gowns adorned with ermine, then the six bodies of merchants, the corporations, and the syndics with their insignia. They were followed by the members of the four sovereign courts, the court of the mint, the court of taxes, the treasury and the tribunals. . . . A flight of doves was released and the royal retinue began its majestic progress, not to reach the Louvre until several hours later. At the head

of the cortège came the seventy-two mules, in opulent harness, of His Eminence, Cardinal Mazarin. They were followed by his sedan chair and his carriage. Then came the equerries of Monsieur, of the queen, and of the king. Behind them paraded the light horse cavalry, the hundred Swiss who made up the royal guard, the heralds at arms, the musketeers of His Eminence, and those of the king.

Finally Louis XIV appeared, shining with youth and grace. He was only twenty-one years old. He rode a prancing bay, with a saddle cloth embroidered with silver and harness studded with gems. His brother, Monsieur, and the princes of the royal family formed his escort. Among them, there stood out an elegant horseman with an eagle's profile, wavy tresses falling to his shoulders—the Grand Condé. After years of rebellion, he had submitted and resumed his place as the first prince of the blood. The queen, ensconced in a carriage drawn by six splendid horses, was surrounded by a cavalcade of princes and young lords who almost outshone her in elegance.[2]

The cortège made its way through the faubourg Saint-Antoine. From the balcony of the Hôtel de Beauvais, two people gazed down upon the procession. There was Anne of Austria, majestic and still beautiful, no longer regent now, but Queen Mother. She had passionately desired the Spanish marriage for her son, whom she had guided step by step to this day. Now he rode alone, impatient to rule in his own right.

Beside Anne stood the man who had been her counselor for seventeen years, her strength, and her chief minister, Jules Mazarin. Exhausted by the disease that was devouring him, the cardinal had not been able to take part in this triumph, which was largely his own. The two watchers, high up on their balcony, observed the celebration with satisfaction and with nostalgia. It was indeed their reward, but it marked the beginning of their eclipse.

The cries and acclamation of the crowd, solidly massed along the route of the procession, the tolling of all the bells of the capital city, the canons of the Bastille—all these sounds were carried on the wind to the priory of Saint Lazare, not so far from the parade as the crow flies. In a little bare-walled room with uneven floor boards and scanty furnishings, a feeble old priest heard the echoes of the people's joy. It was not hard for him to imagine what it all looked like or to conjure up the principals. He had been in the presence of all of them, and most of them, he had known.

On visits to the royal palace of the Château St. Germain, he had seen the young king clutching his mother's skirts; now he reveled in triumphal entry into his capital. And he remembered the young monarch's father, the pious King Louis XIII, whose long, painful death he had witnessed. As for Mazarin, he had confronted him many a time at sessions of the Council for Religious Affairs, until the cardinal banned him from these proceedings so that he could act with a freer hand. Dressed in his modest black cassock, he had rubbed shoulders with the princes and military leaders who formed the procession, covered with jewelry and lace, whenever he went about his business at the court.

But the old priest knew all about the other side of the coin. In contrast to this flaunted luxury, these riches on display, this festival splendor, there was the misery of the people, this very people now joyfully hailing the return of its king. He had seen all too much, from the provinces to the very gates of the capital, of the ravages wrought by the campaigning armies: the famine, the sinister advance of the plague, fire, pillage, murder, rape. Against the advancing wave of physical and spiritual misery, he had tried to raise a fragile barricade with a tiny band of missionaries. He took the Daughters of Charity, with their unflagging devotion, and also laymen of good will, and sent them out along the roads of the kingdom giving them this charge: "Let us love God, my brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the work of our hands and the sweat of our brows."[3] Now he had reached the end of his own strength. In his eightieth year, he knew that he had but a few days to live. What a road Vincent had traveled since his days as a young shepherd in the Landes, tending his father's sheep!

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PART ONE

In Search of a Substantial Benefice

1 A Little Shepherd of the Landes 1581–1596

Vincent, Shepherd of the Landes
The de Paul Family
Daily Life at Pouy
The Horse Farm at Orthevielle
Student at the Secondary School in Dax
Reception of Minor Orders

Early every morning, Vincent dressed in his ragged old clothes. They were patched, patched again, and re-sewn by his mother because before Vincent, they had served his two older brothers. Ripped by thorns, stained with the mud of paths and swamps though they might be, there was still some wear in them. Over these clothes, he added a long cape when the weather cooled down or the sea wind warned of rain. The downpours which come without warning to drop torrents of water on the Landes soak the sandy, yet impermeable soil and disappear as suddenly as they come. Woe to the careless fellow taken by surprise out in the fields without a tree for protection if he cannot wrap himself in a heavy cape and shelter under a wide-brimmed hat.

Then Vincent would sling over his shoulder the strap of an ancient leather pouch, hard with age but still solid, into which his mother, Bertrande, slipped a bite to eat—a hunk of bread and maybe a piece of bacon. Proudly he would take up the long staff which was the sign of the shepherd's charge. He used it expertly along the way to test the resistance of the spongy ground or he managed the flock with it, moving the slow animals along

or bringing the frisky ones back into line. Perhaps, in the way of some shepherds, he also had a horn slung around his neck to round up strays or scare away the occasional wild animal or roaming dog with an eye on his beasts.

Equipped and armed, Vincent led his flock. Depending on the season and the circumstances, it might consist of cows, sheep, or sows with their piglets. Later, he would write, "I am the son of a plowman; I have herded swine and cows." Vincent was indeed born the son of a peasant, Jean de Paul, on March 28, 1581.[1] But his father was not a simple hired hand working for the benefit of a master. He owned a little property with its own dwelling called Ranquines. In the dialect of the Landes, the name means "gimpy"; in fact, Jean Paul limped, whether the result of an accident or of an illness we do not know. Ranquines stood in the parish of Pouy, a village lying about four kilometers north of Dax.

There had long been a de Paul family in this area of the Landes on the banks of the Adour river. Documents dating from the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries already attest to this patronymic in the Dax region. It might originate in the Latin *palus,* swamp, which is also found in the Spanish *pául,* pronounced "paoul." In fact, in a document executed in 1615 when he became canon of Écouis, Vincent's surname was spelled de Paoul.[2]

As spellings were not yet standardized in the seventeenth century, one finds the name spelled indiscriminately as "de Paul" and "Depaul." The particle added to the patronymic does not necessarily denote nobility.[3] More often, it indicates residence in a particular place or dwelling. Now, there is a brook near the village of Pouy called the Paul,[4] and in the village of Buglose, a little over four kilometers from Pouy, there is a house called the house of Paul. Thus, nothing permits us to say that Vincent's father was anything more than a man farming his own land, well thought of in his parish, but with no claim to a title of nobility. Vincent himself always signed his name "Vincent Depaul."

On the other hand, his mother, Bertrande de Moras, belonged to a family of the bourgeoisie or maybe even of the local petty nobility. According to tradition, since there are no documents, she was born in the village of Pouy itself, in a house on the country estate of a family belonging to the nobility of the robe. [These are the nobles who achieved their rank by service in the government and the courts—*Trans.*] Living in Dax, she spent her summer vacations in the country there. Bertrande's brother, Jean de Moras, was a lawyer at the superior court of Dax.

He married a certain Jeanne de Saint-Martin, related to a Monsieur de Comet.[5] This man soon became young Vincent's patron.

Depending on the weather and the season, the young shepherd led his flock to different grazing spots his older brothers probably showed him. The best one was a long, wide strip of land called Les Barthes (the Basins), along the Adour, which flooded when the water was high but gave good pasturage the rest of the year. The village of Pouy, clustered around its church and its cemetery, stands on a slight rise of land, safe from floods. Because of its relative elevation some thirty or forty feet higher than the Barthes, its name could come from the Latin word *podium*. The de Paul family's house, Ranquines, a bit outside the village, stood in the midst of a grove of trees—a sure sign that it was old.[6] Beyond the house, there are the moors, marshy in spots, where the grazing is good.

The village of Pouy included an old, cultivated oak forest. Access and use were strictly controlled for it is a long, hard project to grow trees on the moors. The soil is sandy with an impermeable clay stratum called alios running from two to six feet under the ground. This kind of terrain favors the formation of swamps while preventing trees from sending their roots down toward nourishment. Under these conditions, a forest is a treasure that merits jealous protection by the community.

Village communes like Pouy enjoyed a certain degree of independence. They were organized around their own hierarchy based on a class of small landowners called *capcazaliers*. Vincent's father was of this class, one of whose privileges was the use of the forest. The *capcazaliers* were allowed to gather fallen wood there and, with special permission, to fell trees for firewood. Wood could also be taken for house repairs and, every fifteen years, for the repair of the boats which were essential for crossing the Adour.

Finally, and this affected the young shepherd in particular, every *capcazalier* maintaining a kettle and a hearth had the right to raise up to thirty swine and to take them to the forest between September and Christmas to feed on acorns. Suckling pigs could be in the forest as early as July.[7] Vincent, charged with herding the pigs, must have spent many long days in these woods, deep and dark to a child's eyes.

When Vincent came home in the evening, after stabling the animals, he would find his family gathered in the common room of Ranquines. This space was in the center of the building with the parents' room on the south side and two more rooms, one for the girls and the

other for the boys. On the north side was a stable for two oxen, with the grandparents' room on one side and a workshop on the other. An opening in the wall of the common room was used to feed the animals and keep watch over them. Like all the Landais houses of the time, this one had half-timbered walls filled in with rye straw overlaid with clay. The floors were of beaten earth, but there was a ceiling below the thatched roof, which showed that this was a master's house and not a laborer's. The windows were covered by wooden shutters at night or against the cold. The hearth in the common room served both to heat the house and to cook the food.

The head of the family presided at the large table and the children took their places around it. There were four boys—Jean, Bernard, Vincent, the third son, and Dominique, nicknamed Gayon—and two girls. One was the Marie who was to marry Jean de Paillole; the other, also Marie, was to marry Grégoire de Lartigue. The mother was busy at the fire. The great, steaming bowls she brought to the table were eagerly scraped clean to feed hearty young appetites. In later years, Vincent remembered these family meals: "Where I come from, people live on a small grain called millet, served boiled in a pot. When it is time to eat, it is poured into a bowl and the household gathers around to make a meal."[8]

On this poor soil, the principal crops were indeed rye and millet. The basic food was millet gruel, made savory with vegetables, celeriac, cabbage, beans, and peas. The bread dipped into the soup in thick chunks was chiefly made of rye, which kept better than bread made of wheat. The drink was water from the well, sweetened for the grown-ups with a little wine or cider. Later, Vincent would suggest this to one of his priests on a mission to Dax: "Cider is fairly common in those parts; it might do you better than wine."[9] Did he remember the wine of his country as not very good?

Vincent never said whether the millet gruel was eaten from bowls of wood or of clay. The spoons could have been made of wood as well. Forks were not found on country tables. As for the chicken in the pot, dear to good King Henry, that was only for feast days, days when work clothes were set aside, replaced by Sunday clothes fit for mass at the parish church or to carry the newborn to the baptistry.

At the de Paul house, there was no lingering at the table because work always called. Vincent painted this little scene of country life, and particularly the girls' life. "They would come back to the house from

their work to eat a bite, bone weary and splashed with mud. Hardly had they gotten there when, if the weather was good enough to work, or if their mother and father told them to, they would go back, with no mind for the mud or their tiredness."[10]

Sometimes a diversion entered this hard-working, monotonous life. Vincent would visit his mother's family at Orthevielle, a village twenty-four kilometers to the south of Dax. Just across the Adour begins the region called Chalosse, where the land is no longer flat like the Landes, and the sedimentary soil bears a rich cover of vegetation. The road runs south through forested valleys to Peyrehorade at the confluence of two streams, the Gave de Pau and the Gave d'Oloron. In the leafy forests, oaks grow together with beech and chestnut; rich meadows nestle in the little valleys. At Peyrehorade, a noble castle with four tall corner turrets looks down on the flowing streams. Vincent must have stared wide-eyed at this exuberant landscape, so different from home. The horse farm at Peyroux,[11] home of the Moras family at Orthevielle, was a large stone building by the side of the road, about two kilometers outside the village, in the midst of farm land. It belonged to Jacques de Moras, either a brother or a cousin of Bertrande. According to tradition, Vincent's grandmother lived there and it was she whom Vincent came to visit. He made himself useful by taking animals to pasture, sheep or goats or cows. At Orthevielle, on a little hill overlooking the flood basins of the streams at the confluence, stands a fortified church and a fort grandiosely called the Castle of Montgaillard. In those days, it was flanked by four towers. From this height, Vincent gazed over a panorama which, on clear days, stretches as far as the foothills of the Pyrenees.

Many years later, when the bishop of Saint-Pons, Persin de Montgaillard, spoke with great satisfaction about his family castle, Vincent shot back with a wicked twinkle, "I know it well. In my youth, I was a shepherd, and that's where I led my beasts."[12] In fact, the bishop's castle was a different Montgaillard, near Montauban.

Visits to Peyroux were rare. But a stretch that Vincent probably knew well, a good hour's walk from home, was the road to the priory of Poymartet (or Pouymartet). The prior there, called Étienne de Paul, was a close relative, maybe even a brother or cousin, of Vincent's father. The priory stood on one of the routes to Compostella. The days of the great pilgrimages were over, but some pilgrims still came from all the countries of Europe, passing through Vézelay, Le Puy, or Arles. They

made for Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port to cross the Pyrenees at the pass of Roncevaux. Poymartet was one in the chain of hostels and inns established to shelter the pilgrims.

The priory had been devastated and put to the torch in 1569 by the Huguenot bands of the count of Montgomery,[13] who was moving toward the Béarn. Traces of this dark period were doubtless still to be seen on the buildings. For young Vincent, it was a first contact with the realities of a cruel and blood-stained world. At the same time, the pilgrims showed him that human beings could be moved by a faith strong enough to make them face the risks and trials of a long road dotted with hardship and suffering.

For his part, Vincent's father lost no opportunity of comparing his life as a farmer struggling from morning to night to carve out a decent, modest existence for his family to the life that Étienne de Paul was leading. The prior was able to live at his ease, thanks to the income attached to the priory,[14] and could even come to the aid of his family. The need for aid arose because the fields of Ranquines would never suffice to support all four sons once they were grown. Thus, it seemed wise to encourage some of them to look in other directions. Since of the four, Vincent seemed the most talented, it would surely be this boy whom they would encourage to undertake studies that would qualify him for the priesthood.

Doubtless the prior encouraged his relative in this decision, since he too recognized Vincent's abilities. Monsieur de Comet was in agreement with this step as well. His position as judge at Dax gave him many opportunities to visit an estate he owned near Pouy, at Préchacq. From there, he visited the de Pauls, where Vincent's lively mind made its impression on him. It was decided to have the boy study and aim for a career in the Church. At first, this course of action would require financial sacrifice, but it was considered a good investment. Once in possession of the right kind of benefice, which Monsieur de Comet's connections would surely obtain for him, Vincent would become, like the prior of Poymartet, a support for his family. It is quite conceivable that the thoughts of Vincent's family ran in this direction.

In any event, to reach the ecclesiastical state in life, Vincent would have to attend a preparatory school and, before that, to acquire some basic learning and a little Latin. We do not know whether his parents were literate, and he never talked about his own primary education. No doubt he had had lessons with the pastor at Pouy or the prior at

Poymartet. He would have to be quick to learn what he needed in order to enter school.

Vincent never gave a precise date for his departure from Pouy. In a talk he gave some fifty years later, he had this to say: "As the son of a poor farmer, and having lived in the country until I was fifteen . . ."[15] If we take him at his word, he would have left the village in 1596. We know with certainty that he entered the University of Toulouse in 1597; his diploma for the degree of bachelor of theology, granted in 1604, states that the required studies were completed in seven years. Even if we take it that when he gave his age, Vincent meant to say "in my fifteenth year," and not "when I had turned fifteen," which was customary, he would have spent only two short years in school at Dax. This seems rather unlikely. Rather, one might speculate that Vincent, calling to mind his "country life up to the age of fifteen," was including in that phrase his stay at Dax, close to the village where he was born. His reference point would have been the departure for Toulouse, the big city. This is the date that really marks the end of his youth and life with his family.

According to this hypothesis, Vincent would have been sent to Dax at the age of eleven or twelve and would have spent four years at school there. Perhaps this is what he was alluding to when he humbly excused himself for his ignorance, saying that he was nothing more than a "fourth-year pupil."[16] Whatever the length of his stay in Dax, two or more probably four years, one thing is certain—he worked well and achieved brilliant results. Upon hearing of his performance as a student, Monsieur de Comet invited the youth to come live in his house as tutor to his own children, while continuing his work at school. Of course the de Paul family was pleased to accept Monsieur de Comet's offer, since the cost of keeping Vincent at Dax was a heavy financial burden. His room and board with the Franciscans (*Cordeliers*),[17] whose house shared a party wall with the school, had cost about 60 livres during his first year at school.

We can imagine young Vincent's delight when he crossed the bridge over the Adour and discovered the walled town of Dax and admired the traces of the Roman days—the grand pool where a warm spring never stops running, the gothic cathedral with its storied portal, the liveliness of the streets, the shopkeepers' displays. For the little shepherd accustomed to long solitude out on the empty moor, it was a world of marvels. He must have felt important in his own right just walking down the street, and probably his father walking beside him in a farmer's

smock embarrassed him. Later, he would remember, "When I was a little boy and my father took me to town with him, I was ashamed to walk with him and acknowledge him as my father, because he was poorly dressed and limped a little."[18]

Soon he was ready to deny his peasant origins, eager to melt into the urban surroundings which were home to most of his fellow students and to enter the bourgeois society of the Comet family. And so, when his father came to Dax to take care of some business and called at the school to see his son, Vincent refused to go and greet him: "I remember that once, at the school where I was studying, they came to tell me that my father, who was a poor peasant, was asking for me. I refused to go and speak to him, and that was a great sin."[19]

These are the only two memories that Vincent spoke of, toward the end of his life. They must have tormented his heart with piercing remorse toward a father who had given up so much so that his son could succeed.

Vincent was a brilliant student and his agreeable demeanor in a leading family of Dax convinced church authorities to confer minor orders upon him late in 1596. He was only fifteen and a half years old.[20]

The ceremony in which he received the first four orders could not have taken place in Dax, since the episcopal throne of this diocese was empty at the time. Vincent must have gone to the collegiate church of Bidache, where Monseigneur Salvat Diharse, bishop of Tarbes, officiated. This prelate, native of the city of Bardos very close to Bidache, was commendatory abbot of the abbey of Arthous, four kilometers to the north. No doubt the Moras family, living in Orthevielle near Bidache, was acquainted with the Diharse family. Thus, Vincent did not feel out of place at this church.

On the way there, he must have admired the proud silhouette of Bidache Castle, property of the count de Gramont, prince of Bidache and viceroy of Navarre. He had no idea that one day, at court, he would meet this great man's son, himself a marshal of France.[21]

Coming out of the collegiate church and walking away a few steps, Vincent would have had a vista extending as far as the first peaks of the Pyrenees. Probably the bishop advised him to stop on his way back for a prayer at the abbey of Arthous, where he was still abbot. This monastery, founded in the twelfth century, is nestled in the hollow of a little valley.[22] Its church is in pure Romanesque style and has a remarkable apse. The

place is an ideal spot for withdrawal and prayer. Did Vincent feel this? He never spoke about it, nor about his journey to Bidache. Now duly tonsured and entered into orders, Vincent was ready to begin studying for the priesthood at the University of Toulouse. The first page of his life's story had been turned.

The time of Vincent's youth is shrouded in the mists that hang over the ponds and marshes of the Landes, blurring the outlines of the landscape. His first biographer, Louis Abelly,[23] knowing that he was writing a saint's life, has illuminated these childhood years with many edifying anecdotes. Although he was able to speak to people who had known young Vincent and to members of his family, we need not take everything he wrote as historical truth. As to Vincent himself, he remained remarkably discreet on the subject of his early years, as well as about the rest of his life. Out of purposeful humility and a desire to point out his simple origins, he reported nothing about this period except his lack of charity toward his father at Dax and his role as a swineherd. But we must realize that this excessive humility caused him to alter the shape of reality; the de Paul family belonged to a relatively comfortable peasant class and counted among the notables.

How should we portray this young man from the Landes who, at an age of less than sixteen, was about to plunge into the student life of Toulouse? Raised in a large family, he had received a solid moral grounding based on the traditional virtues of work, mutual assistance, and obedience to parents. These parents were Catholics, like all French country people of the time, living their faith and seeing the hand of God in everything. This is the spirit in which they raised their children, but nothing points to the possibility that they were particularly devout. Their wish to see Vincent become a priest seems to have arisen from purely worldly motives.

Outdoor life and long marches with his animals had made Vincent hale and hearty, with a loving sense of nature and detailed knowledge of the countryside, its work and its inhabitants. His intellectual gifts and his ability to adapt were accompanied by a friendly disposition and an ease with people that made him most likable. He was a young Gascon with the sparkling wit, quick tongue, and vivid gestures this origin implies. Urged toward the priesthood, he accepted his parents' will without having a vocation. He was impatient for success, both to honor the trust and hope others had invested in his abilities and, perhaps, to satisfy his own personal ambition.

2 An Impatient Student 1597–1665

Wars of Religion
The University of Toulouse
The Parish of Tilh
Major Orders
An Early Ordination
Pilgrimage to Rome
Financial Difficulties

While Vincent was pasturing his flock in the Landes and learning the rules of grammar and Latin declensions and conjugations at the secondary school in Dax, the situation throughout the kingdom of France was lamentable. The country was still suffering the last of the calamitous thirty-year period when Catholics and Protestants had stood opposed, weapons in hand. It had begun on the first day of March 1562, with the massacre of Protestants at Vassy after the failure of talks between Queen Catherine de Medici and Chancellor Michel de l'Hospital in search of common ground for the two parties. This final attempt was brought down by the intransigence of both sides—the Catholic side with Cardinal de Tournon and Father Lainez, the General of the Jesuits, and the Calvinist side with Théodore de Bèze. After that failure, the situation had deteriorated steadily, culminating on August 24, 1572, the dark day of the St. Bartholomew massacre.[1] Hostilities had never really ceased; periods of relative calm alternated with new explosions of murderous violence. The civil war, with its procession of atrocities,

split France into two irreconcilable parties and foreign interventions were growing in number.

A weak and effeminate king, Henry III, accused of favoring the Protestants, was opposed by a League of Catholic ultras led by Henry de Guise, who did not hide his ambition to mount to the throne. In an access of energy, the king, who felt threatened, had de Guise assassinated in December 1588, at the Château of Blois. Eight months later, it was the king's turn to fall, under the knife of a young monk who was a creature of the League. Since the king had died without an heir, it was a distant cousin, the king of Navarre, who succeeded him under the name of Henry IV. This choice was not one that brought peace, for Henry of Navarre was a Protestant. Before he could ascend to the throne, he had to fight the troops of the League. But this had not enabled him to enter the capital city; to win this prize, he brought himself to make a solemn abjuration of the reformed religion. On July 25, 1593, Henry IV was crowned in the cathedral of Chartres and eight months later, he was able to make his entry into Paris. He still had to pacify the provinces, force the Spaniards who had come to the aid of the League out of the kingdom, and finally, find a way for Catholics and Protestants to live together in peace. This he accomplished by promulgating the Edict of Nantes, signed in April 1598.

For the country folk, who in this period constituted eighty percent of the population of France, these domestic struggles translated into towns pillaged and put to the torch, fallow fields gone to brambles, and famine marching hand in hand with pestilence. The peasant families tried to take cover from armed bands inside city walls, but there they were at the mercy of the soldiery, whether Protestant or Catholic. Both camps, always short of funds to pay their troops, maintained extreme pressure on the regions they controlled.

The region of the Landes, although it was relatively isolated and offered only meager resources, was not spared, for the neighboring county of Béarn had become a bastion of Protestantism under the rule of Jeanne d'Albret.[2] When she joined the Calvinist party at La Rochelle in 1568, the regent, Catherine de Medici, immediately decreed the confiscation of all her estates and sent the viscount de Terride to take possession of the Béarn and reestablish the Catholic religion. Jeanne d'Albret, with the help and support of the English, put into the field an army of 3,000 men under the command of Montgomery that descended like a torrent on the Béarn, the Bigorre, and Navarre as well as on regions

bordering the Landes, such as Marsan, Gabardan, and Tursan.[3] Catholic villages and towns were sacked, churches and monasteries destroyed. It was at this point that the priory of Poymartet and the abbey of Arthous were partially ruined. Terror rained down on all that region for three years. Orthez was taken by storm in August 1569 and all its population put to the sword. The chronicler reports that Catholic blood streamed in the streets and flowed into the Gave.

The reaction of the Catholics was just as brutal. Blaise de Monluc,[4] the king's lieutenant general in Gascony, was charged with restoring order. He meted out prompt justice in order to reclaim localities taken by the Protestants. His path was lined with Huguenots hanging from the trees. With Mont-de-Marsan retaken in September 1569, Monluc turned his soldiers loose to massacre the Protestants and devastate the city. But the city of Dax was saved by its walls and the vigilance of the city militia; it repelled Huguenot attacks, especially those that came in August 1570.

For young Vincent, these were more or less historical events, even though traces of these battles were still quite visible and the massacre and devastation were vivid in memory. And yet, in a family totally given to working the soil, talk about the troubles that plagued the kingdom must have been limited. When he was with Monsieur de Comet, Vincent, confined to his position of tutor to the children, had little occasion to be particularly aware of political problems. In any case, all through his life he never made allusion to this dark time; as for so many other topics, he would keep his thoughts and opinions to himself.

After 1570, the region of the Landes may have been calmer but, in contrast, the city of Toulouse where Vincent arrived early in 1597 was directly involved in the events that shook the kingdom after the assassination of Henry III. Toulouse was ardently on the side of the League, even going so far as to assassinate the president of its parliament, who was considered too favorable to the royal cause. A League army, under the command of the duke of Joyeuse,[5] held Languedoc with the help of Spanish reinforcements and refused passage to the royal troops. But the army of the League was beaten in October 1592 and Joyeuse capitulated to Henry IV, who brought him into his own party by creating him a marshal of France. [The title of marshal of France in the sixteenth century indicated that the holder was a royal functionary and second in authority to the commander in chief of the army—*Trans.*] Meanwhile, Toulouse remained sympathetic to the League; its parlia-

ment only entered the Edict of Nantes into the books after two years of discussion, in April 1600.

Thus, it was an unquiet city where young Vincent arrived to matriculate in the university. The University of Toulouse took in students from all the provinces of the kingdom and foreign countries as well. They came to attend courses in theology and law and for this purpose, joined colleges conducted by various religious orders, with the Jesuit college having the highest reputation. For less prosperous students, there were foundations that distributed scholarships, but it does not seem that Vincent was able to profit from this. Therefore, in order to defray the costs of his studies, his father made the considerable sacrifice of selling a pair of oxen (which shows, in passing, that the de Paul family was not as poor as Vincent made it seem). Provided with this nest egg, Vincent was able to manage the first registration fees and the first stage of his studies. After this, he had to find other resources for a stay that was meant to last for seven years.

At Toulouse, students grouped themselves according to their home provinces. Often these groups faced off in quarrels that degenerated into real armed combat, so that the university authorities had to intervene harshly and bring in public officers of the peace, for the violent confrontations sometimes became deadly. The students from Burgundy and Lorraine seemed to be the rowdiest and most insolent and the promulgation of the Edict of Nantes in 1598 gave rise to new student turmoil.

It is very likely that Vincent held himself aloof from these disorders; he was much too concerned to complete his studies of theology. According to Abelly, he did take the time for a stay at the University of Saragossa: "During this time, he traveled to Spain and stayed at Saragossa, to study there as well."[6] Numerous authors question this supposed time in Spain. It is true that we have nothing to document Abelly's statement, because he had access to texts that have since disappeared, but Vincent's letters and lectures contain certain allusions that may point to a stay there.[7] At this time, the Pyrenees did not constitute a cultural barrier and contacts and exchanges between the province of Aragon and the southern regions of the kingdom were more usual, so a student could pursue his university studies while moving between Toulouse and Saragossa. However, if Abelly is to be believed, Vincent did not stay at Saragossa long, because he was discouraged by the theological disputes taking place at the Spanish university.[8]

Something else may also have moved Vincent to shorten his stay: the report that his father had died toward the end of 1598. In his testament, Jean de Paul divided his goods among his children and then asked explicitly "that his son Vincent be helped and supported in his studies to the extent that the inheritance permitted."[9] At this point, not wanting to be a burden to his family, which was already hard pressed, Vincent began to look for work that would allow him to continue his studies. He took on the management of a little boarding school at Buzet-sur-Tarn, about thirty kilometers northeast of Toulouse, where well-to-do families of the region placed their children. Later, he seems to have succeeded in moving the school to Toulouse, which made it easier for him to carry on his studies while still remaining in charge of this establishment. Abelly, from whom we have this information, cites a letter Vincent wrote his mother on this subject. Unfortunately, the letter has not been preserved. His need to run a boarding school or to take a post as tutor in a local noble family, obtained through the recommendation of the Comet family, makes it clear that Vincent's situation was precarious and explains his eagerness to attain priesthood in order to acquire reliable means, which is to say, a good benefice.

Now it happened that a fine parish became vacant, the parish of Tilh in Chalosse. This is a large market town in a prosperous region, about twenty kilometers from Dax on the road to Orthez. This was an ideal situation for Vincent; he would be provided with a good benefice and live close to his family. Monsieur de Comet, who watched over Vincent and was aware of his financial problems, especially after the death of his father, did what was necessary to have the parish of Tilh awarded to him. It is true that Vincent had not yet been ordained, but at this time it was possible to award parishes to laymen. Until such time as Vincent was ordained, the parish would be administered by a curate. The only evidence concerning this matter is Abelly's text that states, "The chancellors of the diocese of d'Acqs, the episcopal see being vacant, no sooner heard that he was a priest than they awarded him the parish of Tilh, upon the appeal of Monsieur de Comet."[10]

The clause, "the episcopal see being vacant" dates the document to which Abelly refers. In fact, the episcopal see at Dax had been vacant since the death of its last incumbent, Gilles de Noailles,[11] in 1597. His successor, Jean-Jacques Dusault,[12] did not accede to the position until

October or November 1598. From this it can be deduced that Vincent received the parish before this latter date. Consequently, there is a contradiction in Abelly's statements: at this time, Vincent was not yet a priest. This confusion in chronology is perhaps neither completely accidental nor innocent, just as Vincent's birth date was changed to make him five years older. There is a tendency to erase anything in his biography which could seem shocking, such as the awarding of a parish to a young man who was not yet ordained.

Clearly, it was advisable for Vincent to become a priest as soon as possible so that he could take full possession of his benefice. At the end of his second year of theology, in September 1598, he obtained dimissorial letters for the reception of the sub-diaconate, the first of the major orders. This document, signed by Guillaume de Massiot, vicar general of Dax, confirms that the episcopal see is vacant and specifies that "our beloved Vincent De Paul" is recognized as "capable, satisfactory, of legal age and of sufficient means (*bene intitulato*)." But at this time, Vincent was only in his eighteenth year! It seems that eyes are to be shut to this bending of canon law regarding age, but in fact, the decrees of the Council of Trent[13] have not yet been received into the Church of France. As for the formula *bene intitulato,*[14] it refers to the ecclesiastical regulation that restricts orders to persons offering a financial or legal guarantee. Such a guarantee could be based on one's patrimony or on an ecclesiastical assignment already received. Since Vincent had no significant inheritance at his disposal, it must be the parish of Tilh that entitles him to receive the dimissorial letters for the sub-diaconate.

Vincent lost no time; the vicar general of Dax signed the letters on September 10. The first major order of the sub-diaconate was conferred on him on September 19 by the bishop of Tarbes, Salvat Diharse. It was normal for Vincent to approach him once more, the episcopal see of Dax still being unoccupied, when only two months later, on December 19, he was ordained a deacon in the cathedral of Tarbes.[15]

Tarbes, the capital of the Bigorre, had remained faithful to the Catholic religion despite its proximity to the Béarn, which had gone over to Protestantism. The city had been pillaged and set aflame in 1569 by the count of Montgomery. By the time Vincent was living there, traces of the violence were no doubt still visible. But the cathedral, a fine Romanesque building in the austere style characteristic of the Cistercian Rule, had been restored. It was here that Vincent received the two major orders that consecrated and definitively engaged him in the

priestly estate. And yet, he would never allude to this visit in Tarbes, which represented an important moment for him.

No doubt he found it just one stepping stone. His energy and his thoughts were focused on his university work as well as on the management of his boarding school. There was no losing sight of his objective: to be elevated to the priesthood as promptly as possible. Was it Monsieur de Comet who actively looked after his interests in Dax? In any case, on September 13, 1599, only nine months after being ordained to the diaconate, he received dimissory letters for the priesthood,[16] being only in his nineteenth year.

This time, the document was signed by the vicar general of Dax, acting in the name of the new bishop, Jean-Jacques Dusault. The bishop, duly consecrated in Paris, entered into possession of his see at the beginning of the year 1600, and in June he convoked a synod. One would suppose that Vincent could be ordained in regular fashion in the cathedral of Dax. But nothing of the sort! On September 23, 1600, Vincent de Paul was ordained at Château-l'Évêque by the bishop of Périgueux.

Once in possession of his dimissorial letters for the priesthood, Vincent would normally address his bishop, Monseigneur Dusault, to request ordination. But this prelate, who had just been installed at Dax, was struggling with inextricable complications. Immediately upon his arrival, he had convoked a synod to undertake the reform of his diocese in accordance with the decrees of the Council of Trent. The assembly convened on April 18, 1600, and the decisions taken were immediately made public. They concerned the clergy in particular: priests who were not living in their parishes were obliged to return to them within the month under pain of sanction. This tends to confirm the hypothesis that the parish of Tilh was awarded to Vincent before Monseigneur Dusault was enthroned. This prelate would not have approved his nomination as long as Vincent was not ordained and was kept far from his parish by the obligations of study.

The canons of the cathedral chapter of Dax had refused to approve the decisions of the synod or to participate in liturgies celebrated by the bishop. Because of this, he was unable to officiate pontifically. One recalcitrant canon had even been arrested by the police, which had sparked an uprising in the city. A trial was held before the parliament at Bordeaux, which found in favor of the bishop. But the chapter per-

sisted in refusing to provide him with the documents of the diocese. The matter dragged on until the beginning of 1604, when Rome imposed a compromise.

Under these circumstances, there was no question of going forward with solemn ceremonies at Dax. Thus, Vincent was obliged to turn to another prelate, something he was authorized to do according to the very terms of his dimissory letters: "so that you may receive and be competent to receive, at a time determined by canon law, the sacred priestly orders from whichever lord archbishop, bishop or ecclesiastical pontiff you may choose. . . ."

Why did Vincent not approach the bishop who had conferred upon him the orders of sub-deacon and deacon? There exists no document that could help us answer this question. We only know that His Grace, Monseigneur Salvat Diharse did not die until three years later, in 1603. Vincent could also have gone to the bishop of Toulouse, since he lived in that city, but he preferred to ask the bishop of Périgueux to ordain him to the priesthood. To explain this rather surprising choice, some have suggested that Vincent had among his students at Buzet a close relative of this prelate, who might readily have offered to ordain the zealous young teacher, of whom he had heard much good. In fact, we do not know what induced Vincent to make the long journey from Toulouse, a distance of about 200 kilometers through territory that was not very safe. A peasant revolt of the so-called Croquants had erupted not long before, brought on by excessive taxes imposed on a region already impoverished by raging armed battles. In September 1600, when Vincent ventured there, the region had still not been pacified.

The bishop of Périgueux, François de Bourdeilles,[17] was himself in an awkward situation. He had not been able to take possession of his episcopal see because the city of Périgueux had been ravaged and occupied by the Protestants. The cathedral of Saint-Étienne was half in ruins and the episcopal palace had been completely destroyed. The prelate had settled at Château-l'Évêque, twelve kilometers north of Périgueux, on the very estate where his predecessor had been taken and killed by the Huguenots. Outside the fortifications stood a chapel and it was in this sanctuary serving as a cathedral that the bishop officiated. In this place, on September 23, 1600, Vincent was elevated to the sacred order of the priesthood in a general ordination performed by the trembling hands of François de Bourdeilles. The bishop died one month after the ceremony, at the age of eighty-four.

Here was Vincent in his twentieth year, definitively committed to the priesthood. Was he equal to all its grandeur and difficulty? Fifty years later, Vincent, who was so discreet about his personal feelings, was to admit: "As for me, if I had known what it was all about when I was rash enough to enter it, as I have come to know since, I would rather have worked the soil than engage in such a fearsome state in life."[18]

A first disappointment awaited the man whom we may now call Monsieur Vincent. He learned that there was another applicant for the parish of Tilh, a certain S. Soubé,[19] who had supposedly applied for it at the Roman court, and who had been named to the position in his place. Vincent's candidacy had only local support from some notables at Dax, so he did not measure up to his competitor who had a more powerful protector. Presenting an application in Rome doubtless took some time, which explains why the decision only became known two years later.

Did Vincent give in willingly or, inflamed with the ardor of youth, did he decide to go and press his case in Rome? There are no traces of any action he might have undertaken at the pontifical court; all we know is that he set out for the Eternal City, probably in October 1600, before the resumption of classes at Toulouse. This jubilee year was being celebrated in Rome, with many pilgrims traveling to obtain the indulgences attached to this event. Doubtless, Vincent joined forces with them, no matter what his real reason was for making the journey.

Vincent's emotion on his first visit to Rome is expressed in this letter addressed thirty years later to one of his priests going there on a mission: "O Father, how fortunate you are to walk on soil trodden by so many great and holy people! That thought touched me so much when I was in Rome thirty years ago, that although I was weighted down with sins, I could not help but be repeatedly moved to tears, as I remember it."[20]

Tradition has it that while he was in Rome, Vincent visited the brothers who maintained the Hospital of the Holy Spirit, dedicating themselves to the care of the poor and the dying. They were members of the order founded by Camillus de Lellis,[21] who declared his mission in these words: "The poor are our lords and masters" and "prayer which hinders charity is good for nothing." It is tempting to declare a relationship between these thoughts and those that Vincent de Paul was to express later when he had advanced along the way of charity and service to the poor, but there is nothing to show any contact whatsoever between this young pilgrim during his first stay in Rome and the dis-

ciples of Camillus de Lellis. On the other hand, he had the opportunity to see the pope, Clement VIII, in the course of various ceremonies. He was deeply impressed by this pontiff, about whom he would later say, "he was a very holy man, so holy that even the heretics called Pope Clement a saint."[22]

The stay in Rome must have been fairly short. Vincent had to continue his studies at Toulouse in order to obtain a university degree, which would allow him to aspire to a more prestigious and more remunerative position than a simple country parish. Once more he took up his theology courses, taught by the Dominicans, whose beautiful church stood at the very center of the university. On October 12, 1604, after seven years of study, he received the baccalaureate degree in theology. His diploma is duly signed by Father Esprit Jarran, Master of Theology at the University of Toulouse. It specifies that this degree gives him the right to explicate and teach publicly "Book Two of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard."[23]

Would Vincent de Paul, ordained priest and bachelor of theology, place himself at the disposal of the bishop of Dax, his canonical superior? At this time, he was only twenty-three years old, but entitled to hope for something better than a modest parish in the country. His ambition pushed him to look farther afield. Vincent's diploma allowed him to apply for a position as a "sententiary bachelor," assistant to a master, who commented freely before students on this famous second book of the *Sentences*. Without doubt he accepted such a position and took up his duties around November 1604.[24] When he later called himself ignorant, "a poor secondary-school student," he did not boast of his two university degrees and a start toward a professorate, moved by the "holy ploy of humility," in the pious report of his biographer Abelly.

In spite of his qualifications, Vincent was beset with financial difficulties. Had he contracted loans to create and build up his boarding school, or for some completely different reason? He never offered any further details other than to mention in a letter written at this time that he was in debt: "The need I had for money to take care of debts which I had incurred."[25] At that point, there seemed to be an opportunity for him to get that good benefice he had been hoping for ever since setting out on the path toward the priesthood. Toward the middle of June he embarked on a mysterious trip to Bordeaux, saying that he was "on the track of a project my foolhardiness forbids me to mention."

Once more we are reduced to hypothesizing. The most likely supposition on the basis of data collected by Abelly is that he went to present himself to the duke of Épernon,[26] at his residence in Cadillac, a few kilometers from Bordeaux. This personage had enjoyed a dazzling career, thanks to the good graces of Henry III, one of whose favorites he was. Vincent might have been recommended to this duke, since he had had one of his nephews as a student in his school at Toulouse. Did he hope that this might lead to the offer of a good abbey or a rich parish? It seems that all these illusions went up in smoke and that Vincent returned from his costly mission, his hands empty and his purse flat after the expenses of the long journey.

It was at this moment that a marvelous gift seemed to fall at his feet from a clear blue sky. Upon his return from the unfortunate escapade in Bordeaux, he learned that a good old woman of Toulouse had made a will in his favor. Would this be the end of his money troubles? Far from it; it was to be the beginning of a roguish adventure.

3 Odyssey on the Barbary Coast 1605–1607

Letter to Monsieur de Comet
Expedition to Marseilles
Captured by Corsairs
Sold into Slavery
Four Masters in Barbary
Astonishing Escape
A Tale Cast into Doubt

Vincent was now twenty-four years old. Gone was the little shepherd watching his animals in the Landes, the secondary student just beginning to discover the world and his own gifts, the theology student at university, impatient for ordination. Monsieur Vincent, bachelor of theology, responsible for courses at the university, director of a respected boarding school, could well be satisfied with his situation, at least on the level of worldly success. In fact, this is what he wrote in 1607 to Monsieur de Comet, who had been watching over him attentively since childhood. "Two years ago, judging by the apparently favorable progress of my affairs, one would have thought that fortune, without my deserving it, had no goal but to make me more envied than imitated."[1]

Nevertheless, Vincent was struggling with financial difficulties and foresaw that he would even have to incur new expenses if he were to pursue the mysterious project which began with a journey to Bordeaux. In other words, Vincent was not satisfied with what he had already achieved. He aspired to a

more lucrative position, one that could provide a stable, substantial income without taking him far away from his family. At this time, there was no lack of priories, abbeys, and canonries to be generously distributed to those who knew how to please or flatter the powerful. Still, one needed to make oneself known, be seen in places where the great ones gathered, present oneself in a favorable light. For this, a well-filled purse was essential. And here came this good old woman of Toulouse who named him in her will. Who was she? Vincent did not think it necessary to name her. It could have been, for instance, his landlady, who must have liked this amiable, studious young priest. Here we already see Vincent's gift of awakening friendly feelings in those around him, especially the honorable friendship of the female sex, in this case, a good old woman. But to enter into possession of this providential legacy, which turned out to have been embezzled by some rascally character, Vincent had to go to Castres. He did not hesitate for a moment to make this trip of about sixty kilometers, which could be covered in five or six hours with a good horse. He thought he would have the matter settled in two days. Instead, he disappeared without a word for two years!

The mystery of those two years of silent absence would later be cleared up by letters that Vincent wrote from Avignon in July 1607. They were addressed, respectively, to a notary in Dax, Monsieur Arnaudin, to his mother at Pouy, and to Monsieur de Comet. The last, a long missive, has been saved, thanks to a remarkable concatenation of circumstances.[2] This letter has been duly authenticated as coming from the hand of Vincent. What did it say?

Vincent tells how, returning from Bordeaux, he learned of the inheritance from his benefactress and what it comprised—"some furniture and some tracts of land," estimated by the bipartisan chamber of magistrates of Castres[3] to be worth 300 or 400 écus. He was informed that these goods had been embezzled by a merchant of shady repute, and that he ought to go to Castres to get to the bottom of the matter. And that is what he did, only to discover that the fine gentleman had left the region to hide out in Marseilles where he was going about his business with ample means at his disposal. The prosecutor in charge of the case advised Vincent to go to Marseilles, where he could force the scoundrel to disgorge his ill-gotten gains.

From the very beginning, the plot thickened. The journey changed from a simple outing on a horse to a long and costly voyage with a trial

before the tribunals of Marseilles, with all the dangers this entailed. But that did not deter Vincent, who was young and enterprising. He felt that he was in the right and determined to defend himself. He needed money to travel about 300 kilometers as well as money to live on in Marseilles and to pay for the costs of a trial. He had no cash, but never mind—he would sell his rented horse, with the intention of reimbursing the owner as soon as he returned. But with this transaction, he made himself guilty of a crime which, in those days, was severely punished with imprisonment or even forced labor in the galleys.

Once he arrived in Marseilles, he would have to lay hands on his quarry and have him put under lock and key. This did not trouble Vincent, for he was sure of his rights, thanks to the advice of the prosecutor at Castres. "So I took this advice, caught my man at Marseilles, had him put in prison, and settled for 300 écus that he forked over in cash." The matter was briskly settled and Vincent was able to rejoice: the gold coins ringing in his purse made up a considerable sum, more than enough to repay his debts with plenty left over to provide a good nest egg for future projects.[4]

So ended the first act of his odyssey, which can hardly be called exemplary. For Vincent, the end had justified the means, and he was not too remorseful about it. At most, he regretted the fact that his misfortune kept him from repaying the livery stable as soon as he would have liked, as he wrote to Monsieur de Comet. He wrote that he would never have failed to do this "if God had granted me as happy an outcome to the affair as the matter promised."

The second act of Vincent's odyssey was played out at sea. Having shared his room at an inn at Marseilles with an apparently respectable man, he let himself be persuaded to embark on a ship leaving for Narbonne, since this was more economical and more comfortable than traveling overland. He would then have only a short coach trip back to Toulouse. The season was fine for sailing along the coast, "the wind was favorable for us to arrive in Narbonne by daylight, a trip of 200 kilometers." At this point, everything fell into ruin. In those days, there was a great fair at Beaucaire, beginning on July 22. The Turkish corsairs knew this and "they coasted along the Gulf of the Lion to seize vessels hailing from Beaucaire." Three Turkish brigantines waylaid Vincent's ship. The captain, wishing to defend himself, ordered the crew to fire on the aggressors. Enraged by their losses, the Turks "attacked

so forcefully that two or three of our men were killed and all the rest wounded. Even I received an arrow wound that will serve me as a reminder for the rest of my life. We had no choice but to surrender to these felons worse than tigers, who in their first burst of rage hacked our captain into a hundred thousand pieces."

After being hastily bandaged, Vincent was chained up at the bottom of the hold. The corsairs held their course for seven or eight days, "perpetrating a thousand larcenies" before reaching their home port of Tunis, a "lair and a den of thieves." Brought to land together with his companions in misfortune, Vincent was sold into slavery. It was "testified that we had been captured from a Spanish ship because without this perjury, we would have been freed by the consul whom the king maintains abroad to ensure free commerce to the French." In fact, a treaty to this effect had been signed between Henry IV and the Grand Sultan at Constantinople, but local rulers at Tunis and Algiers did not honor it. As Vincent rightly reported, they acted "without the consent of the Grand Turk."[5]

Now began the third act of the Barbary adventure. Vincent's captivity lasted for about two years, during which he passed successively into the hands of four different masters. His description of the slave market is sharply precise and vivid: "After they had stripped us quite naked, they tossed each one of us a pair of breeches, a linen tunic, and a bonnet, then marched us through the city of Tunis. . . . After they had led us around the city five or six times with chains around our necks, they brought us back to the ships so the merchants could come to see who was a good eater and who wasn't, and that our wounds were not fatal. Then they took us back to the square, where the merchants came to check us over, as though they were buying a horse or a cow. They made us open our mouths to show our teeth, poked our ribs, and probed our wounds. They had us walk, trot, and run, lift heavy loads, and fight each other to check our strength. These things and a thousand other brutal tests they visited upon us."

First Vincent was sold to a fisherman who got rid of him after only a month or two because he was a useless slave who found nothing so impossible to bear as the sea. No doubt, Vincent suffered from seasickness.

His second master was a very curious person, "an old spagiric[6] physician, sovereign extractor of quintessences." This scholar had labored long to find the philosopher's stone. Not having found it, he

practiced transmutations of metals, producing alloys of gold and silver while working with quicksilver in order to fix it as fine silver. He charged Vincent with tending the fire in ten or twelve furnaces "in which, God be thanked, I did not have more pain than pleasure." This master was, in fact, very humane and accommodating.

"He loved me well," affirmed Vincent, "and took great pleasure in lecturing me on alchemy and its laws, to which he tried with all his might to attract me, promising me abundant wealth and all his knowledge." Their conversations were particularly about medicine. This is how Vincent learned a way to treat stones. He would have liked to give the benefit of this knowledge to the brother of Monsieur de Comet, who died from complications of this disturbance.[7]

Vincent implied that he was not unhappy with his benevolent master. The man hoped that in this curious and open-minded young slave, he had found a disciple. Of course, Vincent would have had to accept Islam. Did he have to fight the temptation to yield to the intense persuasion of this master whose learning he admired, for whose goodness he was thankful? He states that never, throughout his whole captivity, did he suffer from despair or discouragement. "God always kept alive in me the belief that I would be delivered through the fervent prayers I offered Him."

For eleven months, Vincent remained in the possession of this master, from September 1605 to August 1606. But the renown of the scholar-alchemist was such that the Grand Sultan, Ahmed I, ordered him to be brought to Constantinople. With a heavy heart, the old man set out on this long trip and "he died of regret on the way."

Then began a new period in Vincent's captivity. He was left to the nephew of the spagiric physician. In the meantime, a mission dispatched by the king of France had arrived in Tunis: Monsieur de Brêves,[8] the king's ambassador to Turkey, was carrying letters patent from the Grand Turk, permitting him to reclaim Christian slaves. Vincent must have rejoiced that freedom had come, but when his new master learned of this, he acted quickly: he re-sold his slave to a farmer in a distant region where there was no hope the ambassador could find him.

This fourth master was a renegade from Nice in Savoy. He had obtained a property which he managed as a tenant farmer of the Grand Turk. In his letter, Vincent described this property as a 'temat', really known as a 'timar',[9] that is, a concession made by the sultan in favor of a

soldier who has served well, on condition that this soldier hold himself ready to be recalled in time of need. The land was situated "in the mountains, where the countryside is extremely hot and arid." This seems to correspond to the little mountain chain of Cap Bon, northeast of Tunis.

The renegade lived peaceably in the Muslim fashion with his three wives. The arrival of Vincent at his temat set off a chain of reactions. He was assigned to work in the fields under a burning sun. There he was visited by two of his master's wives who were curious to catch a glimpse of this young slave who sang while he dug ditches. They began to speak to each other, and this is how Vincent learned that one of the renegade's wives was Greek-Christian but schismatic.

He recounted that she "had some cultivation, and a liking for me." But it was the other wife who played the decisive role. Although she was a natural Turk, she was greatly interested in Vincent and urged him to speak about his country and his religion. "To satisfy her curiosity about our way of life, she came every day to visit me in the fields where I was digging." She asked him to sing and Vincent, who had a warm Gascon voice, probably mimed expressively as he sang his hymns. The Muslim woman fell under his charms. This reminded Vincent of the psalm *Super flumina Babylonis,* the plaint of the children of Israel captive in Babylon, *Quomodo cantabimus in terra aliena* (How shall we sing in a strange land?).[10] The emotion called forth by this association, he reports, "brought tears to my eyes."

If Vincent is to be believed, the woman was so captivated that she went to her husband and said that he had been wrong to abandon his religion, telling him of the marvels she had glimpsed while listening to the slave sing of the glory of his God. The renegade, shaken in his turn by her vivid testimony, or perhaps suddenly touched by divine grace, called his slave before him the next day to announce his decision: "It wants but for the right moment and soon we will make a run for France." In the event, preparations for the escape were long and this soon became a matter of ten months.

Given the fact that Vincent was bought by the renegade in August 1606, and that the little company finally fled at the end of June 1607, it seems that the Turkish woman acted quite swiftly to influence her husband. The effect of Vincent's words and songs must have been immediate and stunning. As for the delay of ten months, it was required not only by the detailed but discreet preparations, but also by a wait for favorable weather to sail on the Mediterranean in a little skiff. Without a

doubt, during these months which seemed so long to him, Vincent was very well treated, both by the women whom he had charmed and by his master, who had become an accomplice in his escape.

The fourth and last act of this Barbary odyssey is retold all too briefly in Vincent's letter: "We escaped in a little skiff and arrived, on June 28, at Aigues-Mortes." Did the two men set out on this adventure alone? Were there other passengers and pilots? What happened to the renegade's wives? Vincent did not find it useful to share these details. The crossing from Cap Bon to Aigues-Mortes, with favorable wind and weather, must have taken a good two weeks, though. Did Vincent languish for all those days in the bottom of the boat, wracked by seasickness? We do not know, for his account is brief indeed. By the time he wrote, he was on dry land and free, and that is what interested him.

The tale of Vincent de Paul's captivity seems to have presented no difficulties for Vincent's first biographers. For instance Abelly, the first among them, was more interested in highlighting Vincent's virtue than in writing with historical rigor. So he did not hesitate to censor certain passages of this letter, particularly those dealing with alchemy, a practice held in low esteem by the Church of his day.

It was Pierre Grandchamp, in a study published in 1928,[11] who first cast doubt on that famous letter. His position was adopted and elaborated by the writer Antoine Redier in his book *La vraie vie de St. Vincent de Paul* (The true life of St. Vincent de Paul). More recently, André Dodin, official historian of the Congregation of the Mission, did not hesitate to write that "numerous difficulties prevent even the least prejudiced minds from taking the captivity in Tunis as a historic fact."[12]

The questions raised by Grandchamps and taken up again by Dodin do not seem insurmountable. Without long examination of what Vincent might have meant by one word or another, one must concede that certain points remain obscure. This is particularly true of passages dealing with the conversion of the renegade and the flight of the master with his slave. Was it Vincent's religious songs alone that moved the Muslim woman so deeply that, in her turn, she easily convinced her lord and master to change his life? Writing about this, Coste does not hesitate to say: "Vincent de Paul was twenty-six years old. He enjoyed the double charms of youth and intelligence. Two of his master's wives felt irresistibly attracted to him."[13] He goes no further, but he implies that

one might wander down this trail. Many stories told by former captives or by travelers recount idylls with Muslim women, without going as far as the novels of Cervantes. But might we not also think that the renegade was firmly convinced by his conversations with Vincent, who surely did not hide the fact that he was a priest? Vincent disposes of this dangerous escape in a single short sentence, whereas he took the time for intensely evocative descriptions of other incidents in his captivity. Perhaps he wished to obscure this episode so that he would not have to explain any help or collusion which made his escape possible, such as the bribe his master may have paid so that they could stow away on a ship that had put into a Tunisian port.

Shadow veils this period; as long as he lived, Vincent remained wordless about his captivity in Barbary. This strange silence about such an important passage in his life is an endless, intriguing mystery. To try to understand it, we must consider it in the light of the deep transformation his personality underwent in the course of the years. This is a matter to which we will return,[14] but we can already stress the fact that after this time, Vincent always refrained from talking about himself and that it was very rare for him to reminisce.

In spite of unclear moments, much evidence can be advanced for the truthfulness of Vincent's narrative. He not only wrote this letter to Monsieur de Comet, he sent numerous letters to his family—from Avignon in 1607, from Rome in 1608, and from Paris in 1610—in which he alluded to his captivity.[15] So the hypothesis of a purely imagined story, invented to camouflage a long adventure, hardly rings true. In addition, there are few indeed who have hazarded a credible guess as to what else Vincent might have been doing during the two years he was missing.[16]

The story itself is full of details which Vincent could neither have invented nor picked up in the dives of Marseilles, where some people claim he squandered the precious coins left to him by the "good old woman." In particular, how could he have learned the exact date of Monsieur de Brêve's mission to Tunisia, which corresponds exactly to the time when he was passed from his second master to his third?

When all the contradictory arguments are added up, one may well claim to be confused. It remains likely that Vincent was captured by corsairs, sold into slavery, and held in captivity for two years. Did those two years unfold in exactly the way he described? If some doubts remain, it is not so much because of what he said as because of what he omitted. To illuminate the shadowy corners, some new document would

be required, and finding such a thing grows less and less likely with the passing of the years.

Throughout this odyssey, Vincent appears as an enterprising young man unburdened by scruples. In his misfortune, his lucky star delivered him into the hands of benevolent masters, and being in their good graces made his captivity much more bearable. Already then, he had the gift of winning other people's good will, and he would keep this gift all his life. His charm, no doubt, was a subtle mix—a mischievous glance, sparkling wit, the good cheer of a Gascon, and a wellspring of optimism that survived even the hardest luck. His faith sustained him, he wrote in a letter: "God always enkindled in me a belief in deliverance, through the ceaseless prayers I raised to him and the Holy Virgin Mary, by whose sole intercession I firmly believe I was rescued."

4 A Roman Sojourn 1607–1608

With the Vice-Legate in Avignon
Settling in at Rome
The Hope of a Comfortable Haven
Initiation into Roman Life

When they were unable to board a ship at Aigues-Mortes on June 28, 1607, Vincent and his companion in flight soon set out by road to Avignon. We know this from the letter which Vincent wrote in this city on July 24. The renegade had taken a little Barbary ape with him, which he turned to his former slave's profit. This made it possible for them to rent a mount or a horse-drawn barge; their weakened state after a difficult crossing would have made it impossible for them to cover the distance of a good sixty kilometers on foot.

Once arrived in the pontifical city, they attempted to present themselves at the palace of the vice-legate, His Excellency, Bishop Montorio.[1] To convince this great prelate to receive two fugitives lacking both official documents and recommendations, probably dressed in less than splendid style, Vincent once more had to call on his finesse and eloquence. Before he could even be admitted to the presence of this high dignitary of the Church, he probably obtained the help of some priest or monk met in the town to persuade the guards all the way from the door of the palace through a series of chamberlains charged with escorting away importunate visitors. We see from his letter that Vincent succeeded in breaching all barriers and convincing Monseigneur

Montorio himself: "the vice-legate received the renegade publicly with tears in his eyes and a sob in his throat, in the Church of St. Peter."

Unfortunately, this solemn ceremony of abjuration is not recorded in the archives at Avignon; at least, it cannot be found in what remains of them. But it is inconceivable that Vincent's story could be a fabrication. Bishop Montorio was a well-known person of some importance; a public ceremony over which he presided could not pass unnoticed. So at the time, it would have been easy enough to verify Vincent's declarations. Vincent adds that the vice-legate promised "the penitent to obtain entry for him to the austere convent of the *Fate ben fratelli,* where he vowed [to go]." Did the renegade really enter this convent in Rome, maintained by the brothers of St. John of God, or did he vanish along the road to make his way to his native Savoy? There is nothing in writing to answer this question and Vincent never spoke about it again.

As for Vincent, in a few weeks he had won the favor of the prelate. The latter, who was ending a three-year mission to Avignon, was only awaiting the arrival of his successor before leaving for Rome. He suggested that Vincent should come along with him and even proposed to have him supplied with some advantageous benefice. Why this sudden infatuation with young Vincent, who had arrived at the palace in tatters and told such an extraordinary tale? No doubt Monseigneur Montorio was delighted to crown the end of his mission with the ceremonious recantation of a renegade, even though such events were relatively frequent.[2] The reason for his enthusiasm was quite different, and Vincent confessed it ingenuously: "He does me the honor of being exceedingly fond of me and catering to me for the sake of an alchemical secret I have taught him."

Vincent continued to be favored by unbelievable luck. After succeeding in his remarkable flight, instead of ending his days in slavery, here he met a prelate who, by happy chance, was much taken by alchemy.[3] The secrets confided to Vincent by the old spagiric physician were of more importance to Montorio than "*se io li avesse datto un monte di oro,* for he has been working on this all the days of his life, and there is no other contentment for him." Playful, humorous Vincent could not help but act like a true Gascon and play with words, drawing a parallel between the name of his new benefactor, Montorio, and "*monte di oro*": "if I had given him a mountain of gold."

He already saw himself in possession of the benefice that this powerful prince of the Church would obtain for him without fail. But to

support his claim of who he was, Vincent had to produce his letter of ordination and his bachelor's diploma in theology. He asked Monsieur de Comet to send him these documents directly to Rome, where he would soon be heading. As a sign of his gratitude and perhaps as proof of the truthfulness of his tale, Vincent enclosed with his letter one "of the two stones of Turkey which nature has carved into the shape of a diamond." Of course, this is not irrefutable proof of his time in Barbary.

He ended his long letter by expressing regret for the scandal he had caused by leaving without settling his debts. He would now be able to satisfy them, thanks to the money he had received from the renegade, but he did not think it wise to strip himself of these funds before he returned from Rome. In a lovely flight of optimism, he concluded: "I imagine that all this scandal will turn out to be for the best."

Reading this letter which tells us so much, one is struck by its spirited joy and optimism. At first, one may be tempted to call Vincent's story unlikely, but a more attentive re-reading gradually overcomes the reflex of incredulity elicited by a chain of episodes from which the hero emerges, miraculously free and almost entirely unscathed. Eventually, the account comes to seem quite factual. If the author of this letter had invented the whole thing, he would have to be considered an extraordinarily gifted storyteller, with an imagination that was never at a loss.

In fact, the story continues in another letter, again addressed to Monsieur de Comet and dated from Rome on February 28, 1608.[4] Vincent stayed in the palace of the vice-legate at Avignon for three months. In October of the same year, the new vice-legate, Monseigneur Joseph Ferreri, archbishop of Urbino, arrived and Montorio left for the Eternal City by carriage, taking along his young protégé as promised. Vincent reports that "it is in this city of Rome that I continue my studies, supported by Monseigneur the vice-legate."

The prelate's infatuation continues as Vincent is still showing him "very wonderful things, curiosities which I learned during my servitude with that old Turk . . . among which is the beginning, but not the total perfection of the mirror of Archimedes, an artificial device to make a skull speak . . . and a thousand other geometrical things that I learned from him, of which my lord is so jealous that he does not even want me to speak with anyone, for fear that I might instruct him. For he desires to be renowned as the only one who knows these things."

It should be noted that in this letter, Vincent no longer uses the term "alchemy." Is it Rome that has made him more prudent, since he

saw that the topic had a bad reputation there? Rather, he speaks of magical tricks, like the mirror of Archimedes, which ignites objects at a distance or of the skull the old man manipulated, making a credulous audience believe that this was Mohammed's form of expression.

A curious prelate indeed, this Monseigneur Montorio, who would use such artifices to shine at the pontifical court, showing them from time to time to His Holiness and the cardinals, and holding Vincent under strict surveillance so that he would not reveal his secrets to anyone else. But Vincent did not chafe at the whims of his protector; he was too pleased with the renewed assurances concerning his future: "This earnest affection and benevolence causes him to promise me the means of obtaining a comfortable haven, providing me for this purpose with some substantial benefice in France."

After all his trials and adventures, Vincent had not budged from the goal he had been pursuing since entering the priesthood: to obtain a benefice of substance, which would shelter him from want and allow him to contribute to his family. There were still well-defined steps to be carried out; the Roman administration was punctilious and formalistic. The letters of ordination requested from Monsieur de Comet did in fact arrive in Rome, but they were judged to be invalid for they were not marked with the seal of the bishop of Dax. Vincent asked for the documents to be sent to him again, duly certified, as well as a recommendation stating that "I was always known for living as an honorable man, together with all the other necessary little rituals."

At the end of this letter, Vincent alludes discreetly to his debts, for he certainly intended to satisfy "what I owe at Toulouse, for I am resolved to clear my accounts, since it has pleased God to provide me with sufficient means to do so." He entrusted this missive to a venerable old priest, who was on the point of leaving for the Béarn. For this reason, he hastened to conclude it in spontaneous fashion: "in haste I end this carelessly scribbled letter," and promised to come back as soon as possible.

This second letter of Vincent's, like the first, has been preserved by fortunate circumstance. This one completes and confirms what Vincent had written six months earlier from Avignon, and yet, it does not agree completely with the first one. Not only are the references to alchemy obscured, but his judgment of the spagirist physician has clearly developed. In the first letter, Vincent presented him as quite humane and accommodating. He sold mercury, which he transmuted to give to the poor. But in the second letter, this same man is called miserable,

one who tried to seduce the people into believing that he knew the will of his god Mohammed by revelation. How can we explain this change of tone, except by concluding that Vincent, sensitive to the atmosphere of Rome, had learned to guard his pen.

Vincent was to spend a whole year in Rome, waiting for the documents that he had requested from Dax, validated with all the necessary attestations and signatures. When they arrived, Monseigneur Montorio would have to be willing, armed with these extracts from the register of ecclesiastical documents[5] that proved that Vincent had indeed been ordained, to take the steps necessary for obtaining that much-desired benefice. In the meantime, the vice-legate was steadfast in his paternal care for his protégé. Vincent confirms it in his second letter: "I continue my studies, supported by Monsieur the vice-legate . . . who does me the honor of giving me his friendship and desiring my advancement."

No details are given about his studies; it is likely that they involved theology and that he was polishing his command of Italian. What is more, Vincent probably took this occasion to discover the remnants of ancient Rome, the sacred places of Christianity, as well as the monuments of more recent times. The Basilica of St. Peter had not yet been completed, after a century of construction under a parade of different architects, but Michelangelo's admirable dome was already partly there. We can imagine this young priest in his modest cassock down to the ground, threading his way through the mazes of the pope's city, his eyes alert and his ears attentive. He encounters cardinals coming from their palaces surrounded by their watchful courtiers, members of the pontifical household, chamberlains of the cape and sword, noble guards or militiamen in their shimmering uniforms.

In this year of 1608, several religious orders were convening their chapters general. Halls and chapels were filled with Capuchins and Minorites in their homespun habits, Dominicans in their white robes and black cloaks. Among the latter was Father Coeffeteau,[6] who held an important position in the chapter of his order. He was soon to return to Paris, where he was superior of the convent of Saint-Jacques and chaplain to Queen Marguerite of Valois. No doubt Vincent seized the opportunity to greet this important person and make himself known.

Above all, Vincent was learning to know the usage and customs of the Holy See and the motivating forces behind its administration. He studied the calculated languors and subtleties of the Romans, and this

understanding would be of great use to him later. Of course, he attended the great ceremonies, probably glimpsing from far away Pope Paul V[7] as he blessed the crowd and officiated at ceremonies with pomp and solemnity. Probably too, during this second stay in Rome, he visited the hospital maintained by the Congregation of the Servants of the Poor Sick (Camillians) for later, his work would show the mark of their methods and spirit.

Nor did he neglect to pay his respects at the embassy of the king of France. In particular, he became acquainted with Étienne Gueffier, a secretary who, by 1632, would be chargé d'affaires and with whom he stayed in contact.[8] Above all, he learned in July that a new ambassador had just arrived in Rome, François Savary, lord de Brêves, the same man who had attempted to free French slaves in Tunisia. Surely Vincent made every effort to be presented to him, so that he could tell the tale of his Barbary adventure.

During the autumn of 1608, Vincent left Rome. He did not head for Dax, his home diocese, nor even to Pouy to greet his family from whom he had been absent so long. He chose the road to Paris. This change of destination is yet another puzzle and there is not a single document to shed light on it. We can only make surmises.

Vincent's protector in Rome, Monseigneur Montorio, having delivered a report of his mission as vice-legate should normally have returned to his episcopal see at Nicastro. It is likely that after he gave his protégé some letters of recommendation to help him obtain the promised benefice, he suggested it was time for the young man to return to France.

Tradition has it that Vincent was charged with carrying a confidential message of the highest importance to Henry IV. Unfortunately, Abelly, who seems to have originated this legend, says that it was the Cardinal d'Ossat who entrusted the mission to Vincent, but this cardinal had already been dead for several years. Someone else could have given Vincent a message that could not be committed to paper, for the king or someone near to him. In any case, a search in the diplomatic archives for the traces of such a mission has been fruitless. It remains possible that the ambassador, Monsieur de Brêves, charged Vincent with carrying an envelope to Paris and that over the course of years, this matter has accumulated importance, finally becoming a secret mission to the king. In any case, bearing a message he was to deliver, Vincent arrived in the capital city during the last days of 1608.

5 Shaped by Bérulle 1609–1613

Arrival in Paris
Chaplain to Queen Marguerite of Valois
Abbot of Saint-Léonard-de-Chaume
Meeting with Pierre de Bérulle
The Theologian's Crisis
Lawsuits surrounding the Abbey
Pastor of Clichy-la-Garenne

Vincent arrived in Paris at the end of 1608. Eager to fulfill the mysterious mission with which he seems to have been charged, he had not stopped in the Landes of his birth. Or perhaps he did not want to come home before having achieved the benefice for which he had been working for so long, the phantom that had led him into so many adventures. His first years in the capital city are shadowy, for we have no documents on which to base a chronology; the events of those times sometimes appear to overlap and contradict each other.

We find Vincent neither at court nor in a princely dwelling, but modestly settled in a room he shares with a compatriot passing through the capital, Bertrand Dulou,[1] a judge from the city of Sore. The rented room was located in the faubourg Saint-Germain, where all the Gascons gathered. This might indicate that the letters of recommendation that Vincent supposedly received before leaving the pontifical city had not had much effect so far.

Not far from where he lived, Vincent could see the barges on the Seine, and on the other bank, the Louvre and the palace of the Tuileries. Walking toward the river brought him to the Quai Malaquais, bordering on the estate of Queen Marguerite de Valois,[2] where the gardens sloped down to the water.

In the same neighborhood stood the Hôpital de la Charité, established by Maria de Medici. The management of this hospital had been entrusted to the Brothers of St. John of God, who also conducted a charity hospital in Rome.[3] Vincent might have met some brothers there whom he had known while he was in Rome; pious tradition has it that he volunteered there to care for the poor and sick and to comfort them. This would have taught him useful lessons for the development of his own charitable works.

In the first months of his time in Paris, Vincent had a very disagreeable experience. Stricken by fever, he was immobilized in the room he was still sharing with his compatriot, the judge from Sore. The apothecary's clerk who was bringing some medicine took advantage of the fact that the feverish Vincent was huddled in his bed and rummaged in his cupboard under the pretext of looking for a cup. There he found a purse holding 400 shiny écus, which he was quick to put in his breeches. When the judge returned, he saw that he had been robbed. Stormily he accused Vincent of the theft in public and even had an ecclesiastical bulletin, a *monitoire,* published about the crime.[4] Rather than defending himself and throwing suspicion on the clerk, Vincent chose to be silent and bear the unjust accusation without flinching. A few months later, the thief was discovered in the act of stealing again and admitted to making off with the judge's purse. When the judge had returned to his home, he wrote to Vincent to ask his forgiveness for having vilified him. So goes the story told by Vincent[5] without identifying a hero, but everything points to the fact that he was the victim, wrongly accused, who bore this humiliation without complaint. If the story is true, this would be the first hint of a new behavior, this willingness to practice the Gospel's counsel that one should bear injustice without a murmur.

Naturally, Vincent had to move because of this affair. Did he stay briefly with Jean Duvergier of Hauranne,[6] another compatriot, or did he settle in immediately at the Sign of St. Nicholas at the corner of rue de Seine and rue Mazarine? This is the address he would give for all his official documents between 1610 and 1612.

Vincent actively sought work, unwilling to be like the many young Gascons who came to Paris to find their fortunes and gallivant around, hoping to attract the attention of some aristocrat or profit from the gullibility of a burgher. What is more, his nest egg—a gift from his former owner, the renegade, and travel money from the vice-legate to make up for not getting Vincent a benefice—was surely dwindling fast. But Vincent had an innate gift for striking up relationships that usually turned into friendships. That is how he made the acquaintance of Charles du Fresne,[7] secretary to Queen Marguerite of Valois, who brought him into the ranks of the queen's chaplains. Very probably, Vincent also made use of the recommendation of Father Coeffeteau, whom he had met in Rome, and above all, the recommendation of his bishop in Dax. In fact, Jean-Jacques Dusault was not only on good terms with Henry of Navarre, who had become King Henry IV, but he was first chaplain of Queen Marguerite of Valois. This prelate was well acquainted with Vincent's situation. In fact, the year before, he had signed the document forwarded to Rome certifying and authenticating the letters of ordination of "Master Vincent de Paul, priest of our diocese."[8] Thus, after several difficult months, Vincent was supplied with employment and a title: counselor and chaplain of Queen Marguerite.

An astonishing personality, this dispossessed queen was now no longer the scandalous princess who loved ostentatious luxury. Suffering and the years had marked her face and her figure, but she retained her haughty air, conscious of her rank as daughter of France and heiress of Valois. In 1609, she was fifty-six years old. Without relinquishing the pleasures of the flesh—she still displayed her titled lover—she was moving toward piety and devotion as she grew older. She went to mass every day and regularly had alms dispensed to the poor. For this task, she had ten chaplains at her disposal; we have a roster of their names for the period from 1608 to 1611.[9] Together with Father Coeffeteau, there are Monseigneur Cospéan, bishop of Aire, and Father Suarez, a Cordelier who would become bishop of Séez. Vincent is not listed in this document, but in all official documents published in May 1610 and October 1611, he is listed as "counselor and chaplain of Queen Margaret, duchess of Valois."[10] Thus it is possible that while functioning as almoner, which is to say a distributor of alms, he also played the role of counselor and was listed under this office on another list. Indeed we know very little of how Vincent served Queen Marguerite and how long he remained in her service. Nor do we have a portrait of him from this period.

Weaving together the words of his contemporaries, one can try to sketch the appearance of this twenty-eight-year-old priest. Of average height and sturdy build, he carries a strong head on solid shoulders, nose long, ears large, and the wide open nostrils of a man accustomed to breathing in the smells of nature. His chin is prominent and willful; behind luxuriant eyebrows, his eyes sparkle, alert and mischievous; his face gives the impression of a cheerful nature, immediately likable. He probably speaks with a Gascon accent, rolling the consonants as the Adour rolls the pebbles in its stream. Broad gestures underscore his points.

And so the young Gascon walked through Paris, eagerly discovering its noise and energy. No doubt, he was attracted by the Sorbonne, and maybe he attended courses there. It would only be known later, when his diploma was found in his room, that he was licensed in civil and canon law.[11] The distribution of alms left him sufficient time to pursue this kind of study, since he learned quickly, motivated by the will to advance. He also had enough time to visit the countless churches, chapels, and religious establishments that dot all the neighborhoods of the capital city. He made his way to the newly opened Place Royale, he admired the gardens of the Tuileries, designed in the Italian fashion, luxuriant and full of perfumes. He observed the great gallery under construction between the Palace of the Tuileries and the Louvre. After two years of slavery and hardship, how he must have savored his new-found liberty in a world that opened itself to his insatiable curiosity!

But he did not lose sight of his true ambition, to obtain a good benefice and return to his native region. That is what he wrote to his mother on February 10, 1610: "I regret that I still have to remain in this city in order to reclaim the possibility of advancement, which my disasters snatched away from me, for I would rather come and carry out my duties to you. But I have so much hope that God will graciously bless my efforts and that he will give me the means of fashioning a haven where I can spend the rest of my days near you."

This letter makes no mention of apostolic service or renunciation of the goods of this world. Vincent is preoccupied with the state of the family's affairs and, in spite of his own misfortunes, he encourages one of his nephews to follow his example: "I would also like it if my brother sent one of my nephews to study. My troubles, and the small contribution I have been able to make so far, take away his taste for that. But let him keep in mind that present misfortune means future good fortune."[12]

At the moment when Vincent wrote this letter to his mother, he was entering discussions with a great prelate, the archbishop of Aix, Paul Hurault de l'Hôpital, who was of a mind to cede him the abbey of Saint-Léonard-de-Chaume.[13] This Cistercian house was a commendatory abbey. By royal letters patent, it had been made over to an alderman of La Rochelle, Gabriel de Lamet, a Protestant. The archbishop of Aix had only acquired it the year before, in 1609. Soon he realized that he had struck a poor bargain and so he was eager to sell it again.

Vincent, for his part, no doubt believed that he was being offered the much-desired benefice with an honorific title that could rescue him from obscurity. In fact, he was entering a complex operation from which he would derive, as the months and years went by, little but disquiet and disillusion. We do not know how he was put in touch with this archbishop, perhaps through Jean de la Tanne, Master of the Mint of the city of Paris, or perhaps thanks to another connection, a certain Arnault Doziet, a merchant living on the rue Seine, near Vincent. Both of them are mentioned in official documents dated May 14 and May 17, 1610.[14]

In the first document, the archbishop has leased to Arnault Doziet "all the temporal revenue of the aforementioned abbey [Saint-Léonard-de-Chaume], its lands and buildings, right of overlordship, high justice, middle and low justice, taxes, rents, and profits of the land," in return for a sum of 3,600 livres a year. Vincent was listed as guarantor and security, as though he were the principal lessee.

Three days later, the archbishop relinquished his abbey in favor of Vincent, thus granting to him all the fruits, rights, and revenue of the aforementioned abbey in return for a pension of 1,200 livres per year. This second document provides that Vincent is considered to hold the lease of the temporal revenue made to Arnault Doziet. In spite of this rather complex procedure, the matter seems to have been well settled. Vincent, a commendatory abbot, was to receive the amount of the lease negotiated by the archbishop simply in exchange for an annuity. But what was to follow would not be quite so simple.

The deed of transfer was signed on May 17 and the royal letters patent granting the abbey to Vincent was signed on June 10, not by King Henry but by Louis! For while Vincent had been busy with this amazing negotiation, a drama had shaken the kingdom of France. On May 14, 1610, Henry IV was assassinated by a madman, Ravaillac. The king had been preparing to leave at the head of his army for yet another war in the Spanish Netherlands on the pretext of the badly jumbled

succession to the duchy of Clèves. Add to that the torments of a last passion Henry suffered for the beautiful Charlotte de Montmorency. The king had married her to his nephew, Henry de Bourbon, prince de Condé, who enraged his uncle by taking his young wife away to Brussels to protect her from the advances of her royal admirer. As a matter of precaution, Henry had his wife, Maria de Medici, crowned on May 13 in the basilica of St. Denis before he went on campaign. The whole court was present, even Queen Marguerite of Valois. She was escorted by some gentlemen of her household but it is not likely that Vincent was part of this company as his position was still too humble. Surely he was present at the ceremony in some obscure spot and saw the nine-year-old Dauphin Louis in the procession with his mother. Vincent could not have suspected that thirty years later, he would be at the deathbed of this little dauphin, who became Louis XIII.

For the moment, Vincent was full of joy at possessing his abbey, but he would have to wait until his nomination as abbot of Saint-Léonard-de-Chaume was confirmed in Rome by a papal bull. This document was signed in September by Pope Paul V and immediately transmitted to the interested party by the bishop of Dax, Jean-Jacques Dusault. Now Vincent was able to take official possession of his benefice. He knew that the convent had been uninhabited for some time but he could not have imagined the desolation which greeted him on Saturday, October 16. The document which records the taking of possession of the abbey by the "respectable and sober person, Messire Vincent de Paul" speaks volumes in its bureaucratic terseness: "After opening the doors, inspection tour among the spaces and ruins of the church . . . where there is not a single altar and only a few scraps of walls, inspection tour among the ruins of the buildings and cloisters that used to be there . . . inspection tour of the ruined buildings surrounding the aforementioned ruined and fallen church, with only fragments of foundation and a few remnants of walls."[15]

Not only were the buildings in this deplorable state, but some of the lands of the abbey, which were meant to provide its revenues, had been embezzled. The archbishop of Aix had in fact alluded in his document of resignation to the various lawsuits then in progress concerning Saint-Léonard-de-Chaume, but Vincent had not realized how debt-ridden the domain really was. He began to understand that he had been duped. Yet, confident in his star, he must have hoped that he could improve his situation. On October 28, before a notary, he signed a proxy

empowering a certain Pierre Gaigneur to conduct the affairs of the abbey during his absence,[16] and returned to the capital.

During this same year of 1610, Vincent met a person who would have a decisive influence on the further course of his life. This was Pierre de Bérulle.[17] He was a man of aristocratic birth who, from his earliest youth, had been destined for the priesthood. Ordained in 1599, he was named chaplain to the king. Very soon, he distinguished himself by his knowledge of theology and his talent for debate, achieving much talked-about conversions of great persons of the court. Cardinal du Perron,[18] himself renowned for eloquence, said, "If it's a matter of convicting heretics, bring them to me; if they are to be converted, present them before Monsieur de Sales; but if they are to be both convicted and converted, they must be brought to Monsieur de Bérulle."

Pierre de Bérulle was associated with his cousin, Madame Acarie,[19] in establishing the reformed Carmelites in France. To advance this purpose, he organized a mission to Spain, to the court of King Philip III, who in 1604 authorized six Spanish nuns to found a house in Paris. On his own initiative, he made himself Perpetual Visitator of the Carmels in France, which led to quarrels with Madame Acarie and the Carmelites, for under his suave exterior, Bérulle was an authoritarian, as one can judge from events. He was unshakable in his opinions, with a clear-cut will to rule. But it must be said that he was inspired by an elevated vision of the mission of a priest, obligated to live by Christ's example.

Vincent was intensely affected by this man who was not his senior by much but who exercised decisive power over him. On the surface, they had nothing in common: on the one hand, an aristocratic intellectual of serious and stern demeanor; on the other, a pragmatic peasant, a mischievous, cheerful Gascon. This was not a friendship that was formed; Vincent was not attracted, but subjugated. Bérulle dictated and Vincent conformed. Speaking of Bérulle later, he stressed his learning and saintliness: "He attained a holiness and a learnedness so firm as to be hardly equaled."[20]

Thanks to Bérulle, Vincent was brought into the circle of mystics and reformers among whom shone minds like the learned Father Duval,[21] doctor of the Sorbonne and royal professor of theology, or the Jesuit Father Coton,[22] the king's confessor.

In this young priest so eager for titles and benefices, Bérulle was able to detect an exceptional nature and a vocation to sainthood. He was to help him discover himself. Vincent, who up to that time had been centered on himself, seeking material success within the framework of his priestly estate, discovered in Bérulle's company a completely different vision of the Church and a conception of the priesthood as a high calling. In one leap, Vincent's gaze was raised from the contemplation of temporal goods to consideration of spiritual things, as though a gust of wind had torn a window through the fog. But it is not so easy to slip the moorings of the temporal; for years, Vincent would still be caught between his desire for comfort and his aspiration to the spiritual life. To this struggle was added an interior crisis that shook him grievously.

Among the courtiers of Queen Marguerite of Valois, Vincent made the acquaintance of a celebrated doctor who had become renowned as a theologian in the battle against heretics. The queen had attached him to herself for his piety and learning. Was it the lack of useful occupation or some harmful atmosphere that pervaded the court of this princess? The learned doctor was shaken with violent temptations against faith. He revealed his trouble to Vincent, who reported,[23] as a witness, the terrible struggle this unfortunate man underwent before being delivered from his pitiable state shortly before he died, at peace and reconciled with God. What Vincent did not recount but is recorded in the biography by Abelly, who transcribed the testimony of a person most worthy of belief, is the manner in which the theologian was delivered from his temptations and despair. Vincent, who witnessed with great distress the physical and mental illness of this man tortured by the evil spirit, was inspired to pray that God would deliver the sufferer and impose upon him, Vincent, the poor man's pain. The theologian departed this life in peace but Vincent, in his turn, experienced the horrors of doubt and temptation. From that time on, he was to walk through a long period of darkness, which would not leave him for many years.

The many problems which had to be resolved in order to restore the abbey of Saint-Léonard-de-Chaume and its dependencies brought Vincent to the region of La Rochelle repeatedly. He alluded to these journeys indirectly in his Conversations.[24] The chief reason for his numerous trips was the many lawsuits concerning the abbey. In the year 1611

alone, there were no fewer than five verdicts pronounced by the courts of the city and government of La Rochelle.[25]

Most of these suits were brought by Brother André de la Serre, who held the title of prior of the abbey of Saint-Léonard-de-Chaume against "Messire Vincent de Paul of the said abbey." But Vincent, for his part, counterattacked and haled the so-called prior before the court. All these suits arose from the interpretation of the original lease signed in May 1610 with Vincent as guarantor. Specifically, this document stipulates that the renter, the holder of the lease, commits to establishing in the abbey two religious of the Cistercian Order, who will be named by the abbot of the place and confirmed by the abbot of Cîteaux, one of which brothers will be the prior of the cloister. Who had named this André de la Serre, whom Vincent seems to reject? Does this prior have any rightful claim to one third of the abbey's revenues, an amount mentioned in the verdict pronounced on March 17, 1611? We are lacking the information which could clarify the matter. One thing is certain—Vincent had walked into a wasps' nest and would have the greatest difficulty escaping.[26] In May 1611, Vincent was even pursued by Monseigneur Hurault de l'Hôpital who, not satisfied with having transferred this questionable business to him, now demanded, through notaries, the arrears of his pension.[27]

We must try to understand the spirit of the times. Although this abbey turned out to create more annoyance than revenue, it nevertheless gave Vincent considerable status in his society. Vincent was no longer the modest priest who had arrived in the capital sixteen months before with a skimpy little bundle of possessions: he had a fine title and this made him a person of esteem. Thus, when Jean de la Tanne, the Master of the Mint and friend of Vincent, wanted to make a discreet transfer of 15,000 livres to the hospital of La Charité, he chose as intermediary "Messire Vincent de Paul, commendatory abbot of the abbey of Saint-Léonard."[28]

In the course of the year 1611, while engaged with these troubles, Vincent was an increasingly frequent member of the group surrounding Pierre de Bérulle. This man believed that the necessary renewal of the Church required not only reform but a much holier clergy. This point of view caused him to dream of founding a congregation that would restore and elevate the very idea of the priesthood: "The priestly estate requires two things of itself. First is a great perfection and even holiness, and second, a personal connection to Jesus Christ."[29]

At this time, Bérulle was even in the process of forming the first nucleus of what was to become the Congregation of the Oratory. In November 1611, he gathered a little team of five priests whom he settled in a house in the rue Saint-Jacques (where the Val-de-Grâce now stands). He did not invite Vincent to join them, thinking that he was meant for a different vocation, but among his first companions was François de Bourgoing, pastor of the parish at Clichy-la-Garenne at the gates of the capital. Bérulle asked him to resign his position there in favor of Vincent. It is conceivable that Vincent, without giving up his function as a chaplain to Queen Marguerite of Valois, spent a few months at this newly founded oratory in order to prepare himself for his new responsibilities. The document establishing him in the office of pastor of Clichy-la-Garenne is dated May 2, 1612.[30]

So here was Vincent de Paul, at the age of thirty-one, placed at the head of a parish. At that time, Clichy-la-Garenne had about 600 inhabitants, peasants and market gardeners, people of humble circumstance who somehow reminded Vincent of his native village. They sold their poultry, dairy products, and vegetables at the markets of Paris, just as the farmers of Pouy brought their produce to the fairs held at Dax. The parish lay spread out beneath the walls of the capital, with the Seine as its northern boundary, the parish of St. Ouen to the east, of Villiers to the west, and of Madeleine and Saint Roch to the south.[31]

At first, Vincent was uneasy conducting the liturgies and intoning the chants. In the more than ten years since he had been ordained, how often had he had occasion to celebrate in public? Later, he would recall these first ceremonies: "To my own embarrassment, I will say that once I found myself in my own parish, I had no idea of how to proceed; I heard these country folk intoning the psalms and I admired them, for they did not spoil a single note. At that moment, I said to myself, 'You, their spiritual father, don't even know how to do that.' It gave me great pain."[32] But very soon he overcame his first shyness and found himself making contact with these good people. He zealously fulfilled a pastor's duties, preaching, teaching the catechism, hearing confessions, and visiting his parishioners. He occupied himself with the sick and the poor and tried to bring peace to family quarrels.

The little church of Clichy, dedicated to Saints Sauveur and Médard, was not in very good condition, with aged baptismal fonts, pews, and vestments. Vincent, together with his curate, Égide Beaufils, went straight

to work to restore the sanctuary and its furniture. But the day-to-day resources of the parish were meager and so Vincent had to press not only his richest parishioners but also his connections in Paris for contributions.

The lord of Clichy, who owned a country house there, was Alexandre Hennequin. Vincent was of an age with him and rapidly began an acquaintance that soon became a friendship.[33] The lord of Clichy had not only honorific rights there, attached to his title, such as a choir stall, burial, and liturgical honors, but also duties, like the maintenance or restoration of that same choir. There is no doubt that Vincent reminded him of this.

Alexandre Hennequin did much more than provide financial aid; he brought Vincent together with a family that was to play an important role in his life. The young lord had been orphaned early and was brought up by his uncle and tutor, Michel de Marillac. It was in this family circle that Vincent might have made the acquaintance of Louise de Marillac, who with her cousin, Isabelle du Fay, would become a tireless benefactress of Vincent's charitable works.

This young and enterprising parish priest, who was not afraid to work hard, either in the church or in the rectory's kitchen garden, attracted the young people of the parish. Beyond catechism classes, he started a sketch of a school. One of his first students was a young man called Antoine Portail who in a few years was to become a very close collaborator.

After so many adventures, wish-dreams, and bitter disappointments, could it be that Vincent had finally arrived at a peaceful harbor? It seems believable when one hears him declare: "I was a parish priest out in the fields. My people were so good and so obedient to my requests that when I told them they ought to come to confession on the first Sunday of the month, that is what they did. They came and they made their confession, and I saw these souls prosper, day by day. I found this so comforting that I said to myself: My God, you are fortunate to have such good people! And I added 'I think that not even the pope is as fortunate as a parish priest in the midst of a congregation of such good heart.'"[34]

Vincent painted this idyllic picture forty years after the fact. Did some memory make his recollections more beautiful or was he really perfectly happy and fulfilled as a country priest? But if he was, then why, after little more than a year, did he accept a new task that would keep him far away from his parish in Clichy-la-Garenne?

6 Tutor in the House of Gondi 1613–1616

Departure from Clichy
History of the Gondi Family
Early Days with the Gondis
Vincent's Black Moods
The Canonry of Écouis
Sojourn at Joigny

"I believe that not even the pope is as fortunate as a priest in the midst of a congregation of good heart," said Vincent. And yet, after only sixteen months of ministry, while still retaining title to the parish of Clichy, he entered the great household of the Gondis. There is no document to reveal the motive for this move, only the statement of Abelly that "It was about the year 1613 when Reverend Father de Bérulle convinced Vincent to accept the position of tutor to the children of Messire Emmanuel de Gondi."[1]

At first sight, it seems surprising that Bérulle should have encouraged this move. Was it not he who had drawn Vincent away from the court of Queen Marguerite of Valois?[2] Had he not been the one who chose to place Vincent in a parish, to make him recognize his true vocation? It is not surprising that Bérulle, very much an insider with the high aristocracy, knew that the Gondis were seeking a teacher for their children; perhaps he had even been charged with finding one. But there is a big difference between this and deciding to remove Vincent from a parish he had just taken on. One can imagine that

Bérulle might have alluded to this position in Vincent's presence in order to test the firmness of his resolve to lead the life of a shepherd of souls when he had a free choice.

Thanks to Bérulle, Vincent had certainly come to recognize the nobility of his priestly estate and been filled with enthusiasm at the prospect this revealed to him—to model his life in the image of Christ. But there is a long road from becoming aware to becoming converted. At this moment, Vincent was perhaps not yet ready to change his life so profoundly.

He had been sincerely happy to bear the responsibility of a parish; it answered his need for action. But it probably did not take him long to become very familiar with every facet of this work. Vincent was not without ambition. If he already felt called upon to accomplish great things, the horizon of Clichy could have seemed very confining, and he must have felt capable, as he would all his life, of attending to more than one task at a time.

Vincent had a particular gift for making connections with people. He was already good at it as a child, then in Dax, in Toulouse, and Avignon, and Rome. Wherever he went, he acquired friends. He certainly managed to be appreciated in Paris by the rich and powerful who were to be seen in the palace of Queen Marguerite of Valois and by the intellectual elite that included Bérulle. Even in the country parish of Clichy-la-Garenne, he managed to become close to people of consequence. Later, Vincent would place this exceptional gift at the service of Charity but for the moment—why hide it?—he used his gifts for his own advancement.

It may very well be that it was he who suggested himself for the position in the Gondi household: in any case, wasn't he particularly well suited to carry out the function of tutor, having exercised it successfully at Dax and Toulouse, with his university degrees and good reputation? In any case, whether by the wish of Bérulle or by Vincent's initiative, the decision was made and he was chosen. There was already a curate in place at the parish in Clichy, but Vincent retained the title of pastor, visiting and participating as much as possible in the religious life of the community.

The Gondis belonged to an old Florentine family which had experienced varied fortunes. An Antoine de Gondi had emigrated to Lyon at the beginning of the sixteenth century, where he directed a bank. His wife, Marie-Christine de Pierre-Vive, had given him ten children. She had been singled out by Catherine de Medici when she was traveling to Lyon in 1530 to marry the dauphin, the future Henry II. Catherine took the Gondi household with her and she made their fortune.

Antoine de Gondi was named master of the palace to the dauphin and his wife was made governess to the Children of France. Their own children later received highest offices in the State and the Church. Their firstborn son, Albert, favorite of Charles IX, acquired titles and wealth: marquis de Belle-Isle, marshal of France, General of the Galleys, governor of Provence and, by his marriage, duke de Retz. Later, he linked his fortune to Henry IV, who appreciated his wit and courage in any difficulty. Aside from these qualities, Albert de Gondi had not one scruple and no moral sense. His model was Machiavelli. Certain of his character traits reappeared later in his grandson, the future Cardinal de Retz, conspirator and memoirist.

Antoine de Gondi's second son, Pierre, was destined for the Church. He was bishop of Langres, then bishop of Paris, before being elevated to the cardinalate. Pierre was an excellent prelate who tried to put his bishopric in order and played an important part in improving the relations of Henry IV with the Holy See.[3] He resigned his episcopal function in 1596 in favor of his nephew, Henri de Gondi. Thus the bishopric of Paris was occupied by four Gondis of three generations in uninterrupted succession. The office had become a veritable family prerogative, like the office of General of the Galleys, which was held successively by four members of the family.

Albert de Gondi, like his father, had ten children. His firstborn, Charles, inherited the supervision of the galleys, the titles of marquis de Belle Isle and duke de Retz. His second son, Henri, who succeeded his uncle as bishop of Paris, devoted his energies to maintaining discipline in his diocese and favored the foundation or strengthening of religious institutions. When he received the cardinal's hat, he took the title of Cardinal de Retz. At his death in 1622, his younger brother, Jean François, doffed the habit of a Capuchin friar to succeed him in the bishopric, which had been transformed into the archbishopric of Paris.

Between these two brothers came Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi, whose household Vincent entered in 1613 as tutor. At this time, Philippe-Emmanuel was thirty-one years old; in the words of his son, he was "the handsomest, most skillful, and most valorous man in the kingdom." In those days, he was taken up with the pleasures and intrigues of the court. Upon the death of his older brother, Charles, he acceded very early to the position of General of the Galleys and lieutenant general of the king (on the Eastern Seas). He distinguished himself at the head of a fleet of galleys, winning a victory against the pirates of the Barbary

coast. In 1604, he married Françoise-Marguerite de Silly, a sweet and virtuous young woman who gave him two sons. When Vincent became their tutor, one was seven and the other was two years old. A third son was born on September 20, 1613. He was baptized Jean-François Paul and would become the famous churchman and writer, the Cardinal de Retz.

When Vincent first took up his duties, he had only one pupil, Pierre de Gondi. This boy had inherited from his grandfather a difficult and unbending character. Early on, he would prove his rare bravery when he distinguished himself at the siege of La Rochelle. He was also destined to plot, first against Richelieu and then against Mazarin in the days of the Fronde. In accordance with the family tradition, Philippe-Emmanuel's second son was destined for the Church. Unfortunately, this young Henri died at the age of eleven, after a horseback riding accident. So it was the third son who was groomed for the Church, even though, by his own admission, he had "perhaps the least ecclesiastically minded spirit in the universe."[4] This would not prevent him from becoming a cardinal, but it would happen through intrigue rather than through piety.

Vincent's assignment was to teach the children the first elements of classical studies before they entered secondary school at around twelve years of age and the basic lessons of Christian doctrine, which was of even greater importance to their pious mother. Thus Pierre de Gondi, the oldest son, was only under Vincent's influence for a few years, after which he went off to school. Subsequently he entered the Royal Academy, where young noblemen under the direction of Antoine de Pluvinel, the famous riding master, were trained for a military career. His behavior when he reached young manhood was hardly edifying; Pierre's morals did no honor to his former teacher. We cannot judge of Vincent's effect on the second son, Henri, who died so long before his time. It is the third son who remained under Vincent's influence the longest, before entering the Collège de Clermont at the age of twelve. At this school, he made himself famous with his flashes of rage and his lack of discipline. His tutor had not succeeded in reining in his impetuous temperament. The excesses of his former student, well after he had received holy orders, no doubt caused some regret to Vincent, who always kept a certain doting fondness for the young man. In his memoirs, Cardinal de Retz only alluded to Vincent in a single passage, where he tells of a retreat he made at Saint-Lazare before ordination: "Monsieur Vincent,

who applied this passage of the Gospel to me: that I was lacking in piety, but that I was not too far removed from the kingdom of God."[5]

In addition to his function as tutor, Vincent was charged with the religious instruction of all the domestics of the household. Later, he would add another function, when he accompanied the family to their estates. Although we have very little information about Vincent's life with the Gondis, it stands to reason that as he began his work for them, his role was quite humble and his demeanor modest and discrete. During this period, he was still immersed in the black moods which had begun when he was trying to bring comfort to the theologian at the court of Queen Marguerite of Valois. Perhaps he found a certain serenity during his time at Clichy-la-Garenne, through the active life which was so necessary for him. But now, he had to struggle with the mood once more, and with the extremes of his disposition. Abelly writes of his bilious and melancholic temperament, of which he caught a glimpse in private and which was supposedly even remarked upon by Madame de Gondi. Vincent is supposed to have said at the time: "I used to address myself to God, and beg Him to transform this dry and unwelcoming disposition and give me a mild and benign spirit, and by the grace of Our Lord, with the little bit of care I gave to repressing the turbulence of my nature, I lost a bit of my black mood."[6]

Later, in a conference to his missionaries, Vincent spoke about the work of a chaplain in a great family. Surely it was his experience in the household of the Gondis that inspired these reflections. He said that in order to fulfill this office well, one must be "a man of prayer" and that great piety was worth more than great knowledge. He told a story which revealed that, once, he managed to break through his reserve enough to speak to his lord and master quite firmly: "There was once a chaplain who knew on good authority that his master was planning to fight a duel. After celebrating holy mass, when everyone had left, he threw himself before his master, who was kneeling there and said to him: 'Sir, permit me in all humility to address a word to you. I know that you intend to fight a duel and I say to you, in the service of my God, whom I have just shown to you and whom you have just now adored, that if you do not abandon this evil plan, he will impose his judgment upon you and your posterity.' Having said this, the chaplain withdrew."[7]

The context of this is, as Abelly tells us, that the General of the Galleys, Philippe-Emmanuel, wanted to avenge one of his close relatives

killed by a gentleman of the court. Shaken by Vincent's admonition, he abandoned his plan to duel and retired to one of his estates in great displeasure. A little later, he learned that the murderer had been exiled by the king, and this appeased him.

Was it perhaps in consequence of this episode that Vincent's status seems to have changed somewhat? To his limited role of tutor and chaplain to the domestic staff, he now added the office of personal chaplain to the Gondis. At the same time the General of the Galleys expressed his esteem and gratitude to Vincent by causing the parish of Gamaches[8] to be assigned to him as a prebend in February 1614. This was a supplement to his salary as tutor.

Philippe-Emmanuel's wife, in her turn, observed Vincent's work with her children and was well disposed toward this discreet and attentive priest. Françoise-Marguerite de Silly was a scrupulous and anxious soul. She asked Vincent to become her spiritual director, and when he hesitated to accept this office, which would plainly be difficult, she asked Pierre de Bérulle to intervene on her behalf. Vincent had to yield, while still trying to preserve some distance from his penitent who soon proved to be quite demanding. She wanted to have him in her presence at all times, so that she could speak to him of her problems of conscience and ask for his advice. Vincent tried discreetly to suggest that she might visit the sick and help the poverty-stricken people who lived on her estates and she turned to this work with ardent enthusiasm, drawing Vincent along in her wake.

In Paris, the Gondis first lived in one mansion in the rue des Petits Champs, and then moved to another in the rue Pavée. They lived in great style, even if it meant going into debt[9] or asking for the financial help of their oldest brother, the cardinal, who enjoyed a very comfortable income. When not in Paris, the Gondis would often spend time in one of their châteaux in the provinces—at Montmirail, Folleville, Villepreux, or Joigny.

Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi, in addition to his title of marquis of the Îles-d'Or (Îles d'Hyères) and his position of General of the Galleys of France, was baron of Plessis-Écouis in Normandy. What is more, he owned large estates in Champagne, as baron de Montmirail and Dampierre, and in the Île-de-France, where he was baron of Villepreux, west of Versailles. From his uncle, Cardinal Pierre de Gondi, he had received the county of Joigny. As for his wife, Françoise-Marguerite de Silly, she

had inherited from her mother estates in Picardy, which made her lady of Folleville, Paillart, Sérévilliers, and Cannes, south of Amiens. Through her father, she was lady of Commercy and sovereign of Enville in Lorraine.

As Vincent accompanied Madame de Gondi on her charitable visits around the estates, he became aware of the deep misery reigning in these countrysides. In addition to being afflicted by poverty, families were badly lacking in religious care because the local clergy were not equal to their task. With the agreement, and sometimes even at the request of Philippe-Emmanuel and his wife, Vincent tried to supplement the insufficient work of the village clergy, catechizing, hearing confessions, and preaching.

In a homily on the subject of the catechism, the text of which has been preserved, he opened with these words: "I do not stand up in the pulpit to preach to you in the usual way . . . but because the count has requested it, since he knows that the Lord has not established the aristocrat only to collect rents from his subjects but also to administer justice to his people, uphold religion, and show them how to love, serve, and honor God."[10] In his pastoral work, Vincent found new balance, and in the years 1614 and 1615, he emerged from his somber period of doubt and darkness. The Gondis showed him their satisfaction and esteem in various ways. In particular, on May 27, 1615, Philippe Emmanuel assigned to him the office of treasurer and canon of the collegiate church of Écouis, of which he was the collator.[11]

This nomination elicited some agitation, for Vincent had only been at Écouis once, in September 1615, to pronounce the oath of fidelity before the general chapter and to invite the company to dine on the next day. No doubt he took the time to admire the lofty nave of the church and the handsome disposition of the square, with a dozen little canon's houses planted in their little gardens. After this, Vincent went away and never again set foot in Écouis. A co-patron of the church, Pierre de Roucherolles, assembled the chapter a few months later to remark on the absence of several members, including the treasurer, and to summon them for an explanation. In the absence of the General of the Galleys, his wife had to muster her eloquence in a letter declaring that Monsieur Vincent de Paul was obliged, by the duties of his position, to remain with her. We have no indication of how long Vincent retained the prebend after this incident.

Having tried for so long to obtain a substantial benefice, Vincent could now count himself satisfied. By the age of thirty-five, he had

accumulated a good number of titles, with the accompanying income. He kept the parish of Clichy-la-Garenne at the same time as the parish of Gamaches. He was still commendatory abbot of Saint-Léonard-de-Chaume and he enjoyed the position of treasurer and canon of the collegiate church of Écouis. Moreover, he held an honorable and no doubt well-paid position in a household of some stature.

After so many travels and shifts, with his goal finally attained, Vincent began to realize the emptiness of everything that he had wished so ardently to grasp: material ease, important titles, the company of the powerful. It was his work with the rural poor that brought him a sense of his own accomplishment. After a long passage through a tunnel, he caught sight of a glow that promised light and certainty.

In February 1616, after the death of Cardinal Pierre de Gondi, Philippe-Emmanuel took full possession of the title of count of Joigny. Accompanied by Vincent, his family spent most of that year there. Joigny is remarkably situated on an eminence overlooking the valley of the Yonne. The walled city was built around the peak on which a fortress had been erected in the tenth century. A modern dwelling was begun on these foundations around the year 1570, but Cardinal de Gondi had not had time to complete the work. Only one pavilion with a beautiful Renaissance façade was inhabitable. Facing this, on the site of a former monastery, rose a church which had been built in the sixteenth century. Its interior architecture was particularly fine, with nave vaulting decorated with coffers of exceptional richness. Floods of light poured through the windows. A frieze of mythical beasts decorated the transition between the gothic portion of the church and the portion in Renaissance style.

If tradition is to be believed, Vincent lived in a house below the château. He came up to celebrate the office in this beautiful Church of Saint-Jean before going to spend time with his pupils or to advise the new chatelaine. She was truly in need of his counsel for her husband was kept in Provence by his duties as General of the Galleys. It was she who must contend with the problems of administering the county of Joigny, construction work on the château, and the conduct of numerous court trials. These trials dealt mainly with seigniorial rights attached to lands in the neighboring village of Villecien. The lord of Villecien was none other than Alexandre Hennequin, whom Vincent had known well at Clichy. One can well imagine that the official reconciliation

signed in September 1617 between the count of Joigny and the lord of Villecien owed much to the intervention of Monsieur Vincent.[12]

All this time Vincent, in collaboration with the local clergy of the county, was going from village to village to preach and hear confessions. Parishioners were more willing to speak with him than with their own pastors and as a result, he was forced to ask the vicar general of the diocese of Sens, which included the county of Joigny, for authorization to receive general confessions.[13]

But he himself was not secure from temptation, in particular, those of the flesh. It was probably during this stay at Joigny that he made a retreat at the Carthusian monastery of Valprofonde, near the city of the same name. He alluded to this discreetly in a letter written later to one of his missionaries. The monk who directed his retreat called to mind the case "of a holy bishop, suffering from these [temptations] when baptizing women" and the way in which he succeeded in resisting. Vincent would add in this letter that "this example destroyed a similar temptation which I suffered in carrying out the work of my vocation."[14]

Toward the end of the year 1616, on October 29 to be exact, Vincent made an important decision: he signed an instrument of resignation from the abbey of Saint-Léonard-de-Chaume.[15] Truly it seems that this abbey had brought him more financial and legal troubles than financial gain. In making this resignation, did he understand that now, with his debts paid, he could divest himself of a responsibility that had little to do with his other work and duties? Or was it not rather the first sign of a profound change of course that Vincent had chosen to impose on his whole life?

7 A Decisive Year 1617

Assassination of Concini
First Sermon of the Mission
Sudden Departure of Vincent
Pastor of Châtillon-les-Dombes
First Confraternity of Charity
Return to the Gondis

When Henry IV died, his son Louis was only nine years old and would not be declared of age until October 1614, another four years. Consequently, by decision of the parlement of Paris, the regency of the kingdom was conferred on his widow, Maria de Medici. The regent, influenced by her court, particularly her foster sister Leonora Dori, called la Galigaï, and Leonora's husband, the Florentine gentleman Concino Concini, immediately dismissed the ministers of the dead king, including the faithful Sully. The royal treasury was devastated by this Italian group, led by Concini, who had himself named marquis d'Ancre and marshal of France.

The powerful of the kingdom did not delay in rebelling under the leadership of the prince de Condé,[1] the de Guise family, and the de Bouillon family. To appease them, the regent called a session of the Estates General, which seemed a simple expedient to her. This assembly would permit the young bishop of the little diocese of Luçon to make himself known and noticed. He would soon become Cardinal de Richelieu. The coming of age of the king a few days before the opening of the

Estates General did not change the form of government, which was still in the hands of the regent's favorites. A new rebellion of the aristocracy forced Maria de Medici to retreat and in 1616, she named one of them, the prince de Condé, chief of the Council. Then, a few months later, she had him arrested and imprisoned, and Concini once more took the reins of power.

At this point, a conspiracy was formed to assure that the young king could truly occupy his throne. On April 24, 1617, Concini was assassinated as he was entering the Louvre. The affairs of state were entrusted to Charles d'Albert,[2] the organizer of the coup and friend and counselor of the king. Maria de Medici was exiled and sent to live in the château of Blois. All in all, the year 1617 was a period of trouble and change for the kingdom of France.

In the first days of the same year, the family of the General of the Galleys was in residence at the château of Folleville[3] in Picardy. One day, word came to Monsieur Vincent that a man was dying in the village of Gannes, twelve kilometers from the château, on an estate belonging to Madame de Gondi. He was a peasant, generally believed to be a good man, asking for the help of a priest so that he could unburden his conscience of serious faults he had never dared confess to the village priest. Vincent went to the man immediately and heard his confession. The dying man was greatly comforted and appeased. To Madame de Gondi, who came to visit him, he declared that he would have been damned if he had not been able to make this general confession and even admitted his past faults to her publicly.

Madame de Gondi, sincerely moved, said to Vincent: "Ah, Monsieur, what is this? What have we just heard? Very probably the same story is true for most of these poor people. If this man, who was generally supposed to be a good man, was in a state of mortal sin, how will it be for others, who lead much worse lives?" And so she asked Vincent to preach on January 25 in the church at Folleville, to exhort the inhabitants to make a general confession. This was done, and the results were staggering: "These good people were so touched by God that they all came to make their general confession."

The preacher was overcome by his own success: "The crush of people was so great that I could not manage it, even with another priest helping me. Therefore, Madame was so kind as to send to the reverend Jesuit fathers of Amiens to come and help. She wrote about the need to

the Reverend Father Rector and he came himself. However, he could not find the time to stay long and so he sent as replacement for himself Reverend Father Fourché, of his company, who helped us to hear confessions, preach, and catechize." It was not sufficient for the priests to sit in the confessional; they had to assemble the parishioners and prepare them to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist. Telling this story to his missionaries years later, Vincent ended by saying, "So here was the first sermon of the Mission and the success that God granted it."[4]

Vincent had already had numerous opportunities to preach, either at the request of Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi on his own estates or at the request of his wife on hers. But these earlier sermons had not had the same kind of success. As far as we can judge from surviving texts, a sermon on communion and another on catechesis,[5] these were rather classic homilies with biblical references and Latin quotations, which were in danger of passing over the heads of his hearers. Probably he tried to give his sermons life by using concrete examples, but they remained speeches which the villagers would listen to in resigned silence.

The innovative element in the Folleville sermon came from the fact that Vincent was freed from the seal of the confessional because Madame de Gondi had heard the avowals of the peasant, the admissions of a reputedly good man. Mounting to the pulpit at the request of his lady, Vincent spoke with an open heart, evoking this example of a man known to all in order to urge his audience to unburden their hearts of the weight of past faults. Still profoundly moved himself, he spoke to these countrymen like a man of the country; son of a peasant, he spoke to them in their language. The effect was extraordinary! On this occasion, Vincent experienced the feeling of working as a team with the priests sent from Amiens as reinforcements. This cooperation became a principle of action for him that he never gave up.

On the crest of this first success, he went with the other priests to preach in surrounding villages belonging to Madame, with similar happy results. Everywhere he went he found signs of the mediocrity, not to say the ignorance, of the rural clergy. In fact, Madame de Gondi had already told him that very often, in the parishes lying in her domains, the priests to whom she made her confession did not know the sacramental formula for absolution and contented themselves with mumbling a few unintelligible words. She had taken to writing the words of this sacrament on a piece of paper which she handed to the celebrant.

If the truth be told, the villagers hardly offered any consideration to their priests, who for their part proved incapable of instructing them and who sometimes were even the subject of scandal because of their own behavior, surrendering to drink or living in concubinage. The people were unwilling to make their confession to these men, and so remained in a permanent state of sin. From that time on, Vincent was tormented by the idea of so many souls who were risking their eternal salvation all for the lack of good pastors to guide their way.

It was during these weeks of preaching on the lands of Madame de Gondi that everything he had dimly discovered and felt over the past years came together. Vincent realized that his vocation was to bring a knowledge of God to unfortunate rural folk and that he had a powerful instrument—an extraordinary gift of words.

It was painful for Vincent, after these intensely experienced weeks, to return to the Paris mansion of the Gondis. The magnificent surroundings of a house devoted to show, worldliness, and parties were stifling for Vincent now. No doubt he carried out his teaching duties conscientiously, but they were too bland to satisfy his need for action. He supervised the studies of two children, aged six and four. Pierre, the older, was probably already enrolled in a school in preparation for entrance into the Royal Academy, where he would receive a military education with the other young noblemen of his generation.

Vincent's only other role was to act as spiritual director to Madame de Gondi, and here he succeeded only too well; she could no longer do without him. He was required to be with her at all hours, to reassure her anxious soul and to give some direction to her piety which tended strongly toward mysticism. After the intense and striking events they had experienced together at Gannes and Folleville, Madame de Gondi was more attached than ever to Vincent, who seemed the only one who could guide her vulnerable soul to salvation.

The General of the Galleys, when he was not at court, was often away from home, detained by duties that kept him in Provence for long periods. This left Vincent alone with Madame de Gondi, Françoise-Marguerite, a beautiful woman as young as he was. We know how strongly he attracted women, and for his part, he was not blind to their charms. It is possible that his retreat at Valprofonde was not enough to deliver him altogether from the torments of the flesh? Or was Vincent

totally worn down by the endless pangs of conscience brought to him by his penitent, a woman torn by excessive scruples?

No doubt Vincent discussed this situation with Pierre de Bérulle. His adviser, superior of the Oratory, did not suggest that Vincent should join his congregation, for this was clearly not his vocation. But Bérulle had recently been approached by the archbishop of Lyon who was asking for an Oratorian priest to become pastor at Châtillon-les-Dombes in the Bresse region. He suggested this post to Vincent who accepted it immediately. On the pretext of a little trip, he left Paris at the end of July and was officially installed as pastor of Châtillon on August 1, 1617.[6]

This was strange behavior indeed, both for Pierre de Bérulle and for Vincent de Paul. Here Bérulle had recommended Vincent to the Gondis and now he was helping the young priest to escape his duty to the family without even asking their advice or even warning them. As for Vincent, who would later say "[my] rule of conduct was to see Monsieur le Général in God and God in him, and so to obey him, just as [I] obeyed his late lady wife as I would obey the Virgin,"[7] he fled their house without a word of explanation or excuse, deceiving them even about the reason for his absence. What is more, he was still in charge of the parish of Clichy-la-Garenne, where he was regularly attending to his duties. He could have contented himself with returning to his parish, with a request that his teaching duties be reassigned, but he probably feared that he would still be too close to the Gondis, and that they might insist he return. He had a need to mark a voluntary and final break with his former masters by removing himself to the outermost region of the kingdom. Vincent never explained the true cause of this surprising decision.

All of this was taking place at the very moment when the peace of the capital city was troubled by a palace revolution. The regent's favorite, Concini, had been assassinated on April 24. His wife, la Galigaï, was tried and executed on July 8. To what extent were the Gondis, Florentines like Maria de Medici, affected by all the disquiet brought about by this coup d'état? It seems they were clever enough to weather all the resulting tumults and upsets which affected the courtiers. They kept their places and their offices whether ecclesiastical, in the diocese of Paris, or governmental, like the position of General of the Galleys. Since Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi was in Provence at this time, there is no need to think that the impetus for Vincent's sudden and unexplained departure came from him. We will see what outbursts his disappearance caused.

From the post chaise which took him through Beaune and Mâcon, across the Bresse to his new parish, Vincent discovered the region of Dombes with its ponds, reminiscent of his native Landes. Then he entered a small city, nestled in the hollow of a charming valley, on whose slopes lay forests and fields and vineyards. On a rise stood a fortress, Castellum-Dunbarum, the château of the Dombes. The city was enclosed within ramparts dating to the time when it marked the boundary between Savoy and Burgundy. In the meantime, the county of Bresse had been ceded by the duke of Savoy[8] to the king of France in 1602. The region continued to be under Protestant influence since the marshal de Lesdiguières,[9] one of the chiefs of the Huguenot party, possessed the domain of Pont-de-Veysle, less than sixteen kilometers from Châtillon-les-Dombes, still a center of the reformed religion.

The town of Châtillon had about 2,000 inhabitants, a high proportion of whom had been won over to Protestantism. As for the parish, it had belonged for the last forty years to beneficiaries, the canons of the Church of Saint-Jean at Lyon, who only came there to draw their annual revenue, amounting to 500 livres. The titular pastor of Châtillon, Jean Lourdelot, had resigned his function in April.[10] The instrument of nomination, executed by the archbishop of Lyon, Denis de Marquemont, in favor of "Vincent de Paul, priest, bachelor of theology, of the diocese of d'Ascqs" is dated July 29.[11] In virtue of this, Vincent took "possession and enjoyment of the churches of Saint-Martin of Buenens and of Saint-André, of the above named town of Châtillon." On August 1, Vincent, following the traditional rites, "after opening the great door of the Church of Buenens, sprinkling it with holy water and ringing thrice on its bell, made his prayer at the high altar." He then took part in the same ceremony in the Church of Saint-André.[12]

This ceremony took place in the presence of two curates attached to the parish, Monsieur Souvageon and Monsieur Hugues Rey. Vincent did not find a decadent local clergy here or a desolate parish with an abandoned sanctuary, as most of his biographers have claimed.[13] A report of the pastoral visit of Monseigneur de Marquemont in 1614 bears witness to the healthy condition of the Church of Saint-André in which he distributed communion to 900 communicants and celebrated the sacrament of Confirmation for about three hours. The next year, in 1615, two new chapels were added to this church[14] and a mission preached by an Oratorian father was a robust success.

The rectory, which was reported in good condition in the documentation of the bishop's visit, must have been in the course of rehabilitation, for Vincent was lodging with a leading citizen of the area, Sieur Beynier, whose house stood near the church. Shortly after Vincent's installation in the parish, the curate Souvageon retired and was replaced by a local priest, Louis Girard, doctor of theology, well known for his learning and virtue.[15]

Vincent, supported by his two curates and a few associated priests living at Châtillon, went to work at once. As a team[16] and forming a little family, they gave the example of an ordered life, rising early, regularly attending the Divine Office, visiting the poor and the sick. They spent many an hour in the confessional and their parishioners, attracted by their good reputation, came in growing numbers.

Since the reformed religion was dominant in those parts, Vincent did not seek to attack it in theological controversies. He was satisfied to live by the teaching of the Gospel and the example that shone forth from him soon bore fruit. Among the conversions he achieved, one was heard of throughout the region, namely that of the count of Rougemont, a Savoyard nobleman who had withdrawn to Bugey when the Bresse was ceded to France. Curious about the new pastor of Châtillon, of whom he had heard much talk, he paid him a visit. From the first conversation, he was shaken and soon decided to make Vincent his spiritual director. But the count was to find it most difficult to renounce the practice of dueling. Later, Vincent would tell the story of how his penitent finally decided to fight no more:

> I knew a gentleman of Bresse who had been a mercenary soldier. . . . It is hard to believe his tale of how many people he fought, wounded, and killed. Finally, God touched him to such effect that he looked into his own soul and realized how miserable his state was. He resolved to amend his life. One day, on a journey, he asked himself whether he had remained attached to anything in spite of the fact that he thought he had renounced everything. He went over his business affairs, his possessions, his alliances, his reputation. . . . Around and around went his thoughts, until they fell upon his sword. Why are you carrying this, he asked himself. But how can I live without it? What? Do without this cherished sword which has served me well in so many encounters and, next to God, saved me from so many dangers? If I were ever attacked again, I would be lost with-

> out it. But I have it. I could fall into some quarrel and not be strong enough to leave it in its scabbard. And what an offense to God that would be. Just then, he found himself near a great boulder. He got down from his horse, took this precious sword and beat with it on the rock, striking this way and that and this! and that! Finally he managed to break it into pieces and went on his way.[17]

This story, naive and unpolished, but lively and colorful, is a good example of the style Vincent would use when speaking to his missionaries or his Daughters of Charity.

The outstanding event of Vincent de Paul's brief stay at Châtillon-les-Dombes was the foundation of the first Confraternity of Charity. This is how he described the order of events thirty years later: "One Sunday, as I was vesting for mass, a messenger came to tell me that in an isolated house about a kilometer from there, everyone was sick, leaving no one strong enough to care for the others, and that all of them were in indescribable need. This touched me deeply."

At the announcements after the sermon, Vincent put out an appeal for help for this family in such vivid terms that the parishioners were also greatly moved. When he came back there in the afternoon, he met many people who were also on the way to that family or who were already coming back from there. "As it was summertime the heat was great, and these good ladies were stopping along the wayside to rest and refresh themselves. Finally . . . there were so many that it looked like a procession." After he had comforted the family himself and brought them communion, he gathered a few people of good will to explore ways to continue offering this kind of help. "I suggested to all these good people whom charity had inspired to visit the sick family that they could tax themselves one day each, to put something into the stew pot, not only for the one family but for those who would follow."[18]

No sooner said than done. On August 23, less than a month after his arrival, Vincent assembled the first eight ladies and presented a draft charter to them. The members of the group would obligate themselves to helping the needy, each on her own day, both in body and in spirit and to cultivating humility, simplicity, and charity in themselves, with great attention. After a three-month trial, Vincent drew up a more detailed rule for this confraternity, whose members would be "servants of the poor or of charity."[19] On December 8, he solemnly placed this rule

in the chapel of the old hospice of Châtillon. The document would serve as model for all the charitable groups which soon sprang up throughout the kingdom of France. Thus, Vincent's first foundation was based on the efforts of the laity, women in particular, working cooperatively with the clergy in a task that was both material and spiritual.

Vincent had left Paris without telling anyone but Pierre de Bérulle. Once arrived in Châtillon, he wrote to the General of the Galleys, who was then on a mission in Provence, to excuse himself for having abandoned his post. His pretext was "that he had none of the qualities required of a tutor to a family of such high nobility."[20] But he had been doing this work for four years without suffering from such scruples.

Immediately, the general informed his wife, who was shattered by the news. She sent Vincent a letter expressing her profound disturbance: "The anguish I feel about this is unbearable." She declared that she could not manage without his help and that her husband's need was as great. "Do not reject the good you can do for our spiritual welfare, for one day, it will allow us to work for the salvation of many others." She ended her letter by appealing to his pity: "Remember the anxiety you saw in me in my recent illness, when we were in a village; I am about to fall into a worse state and the very fear of this causes me so much pain that I do not know whether, without the great help I had before, I will survive."[21]

Vincent was not deaf to this heartbreaking appeal but he resisted, sending Madame de Gondi words of encouragement and an "invitation to submit to God's pleasure."[22] At this point, the Gondis called on everyone who might be able to influence Vincent—the bishop of Paris and Charles du Fresne, his close friend. They even had the children write letters. Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi, in a voice more measured than his wife's, also appealed to him: "I beg you only to consider that it seems as though God wanted the father and the sons to become good people through your intervention."[23] And so Vincent agreed to come to Paris in December to reconsider the situation. Back in the capital on December 23, he met Pierre de Bérulle, who convinced him to re-enter the Gondi household.

While in Châtillon the parishioners were desolate at the sudden departure of their pastor, the Gondis could not hide their satisfaction with this outcome. They did understand, however, that they could no longer confine Vincent to the role of tutor and the family's spiritual adviser. He made them understand the enormous task remaining to be accomplished among poor rural people. In consequence, Madame de Gondi gave him

the opportunity to expand his ministry to all the people living on the family's lands in Picardy, Champagne, and Burgundy. All in all, there were about 8,000 souls to evangelize. Vincent accepted this proposal. He immediately submitted his official resignation from the parish of Châtillon on January 31, 1628, to be replaced by his vicar, Louis Girard, a man well prepared to continue the work they had begun together. Vincent retained the title of tutor to the children, but received help in carrying out the work. He now had complete freedom of movement to organize missions and establish charitable groups on the Gondi lands. Vincent would devote himself entirely to this work for seven long years.

The year 1617 was truly a decisive one for Vincent de Paul; a radical transformation took place within him. The ambitious young priest, looking everywhere for benefices and considerations, became a new man who had found his way, inspired by a different, higher ambition. No doubt this was not a sudden transformation but the result of long periods of seeking, groping, and dissatisfaction. But the year 1617 showed him much that brought him back to the path he had chosen. He was constantly confronted with misery, both physical and spiritual. This brought him an interior illumination, an understanding that his personal vocation was to place himself at the service of the poor and the sick where they were most abandoned, in the countryside. He was pierced with a conviction that would be the foundation of his future work—that help for the least favored of society should be both material and spiritual. Christ's message was a signpost to the road he must follow. It is true that he had a long way to go before he could cast off the old man, but now he knew where the road was.

PART TWO

To Serve the Rural Poor

8 The First Missions 1618–1624

Organization of a Mission
Vincent on the Highways and Byways
Meeting with Francis de Sales
Royal Chaplain of the Galleys
The Beggars of Mâcon
Return to Pouy

From the beginning of his apostolate, Vincent de Paul was a man of action, an organizer and manager. He did not throw himself into a venture in haphazard fashion. Rather, he decided on a program, defined a method, and made sure of acquiring the wherewithal for the project. Working with Madame de Gondi, he settled on the places and dates for the first missions. They decided to start with the parishes of Villepreux near Versailles, Joigny in Burgundy, and Montmirail in Champagne before moving on to villages in Picardy: Folleville, Paillart, and Sérévillers. Then he set forth his method: he would settle into a parish for several weeks, preaching, catechizing, and confessing. On the momentum of this mission, he would be able to found a Charité to give material and spiritual support to the work he had begun. As for the resources, the primary one was a team of priests who would work together during the mission. Vincent called on his connections, on those of the Gondis, and on religious of various orders who were won over by his enthusiasm and his ability to convince.

Money was indispensable for the workers could not live at the expense of the parishes where the missions would be preached. On the contrary, Vincent's workers were the ones who had to come to the aid of the worst misery and bring medicines to comfort the sick. Missions had to be repeated periodically in each parish, but so that the good effects did not die out in the meantime, like a fire made only of straw, a Charité had to be established at the end of each mission to keep the flame burning in people's hearts. Good organizer that he was, Vincent found it necessary to give these Charités a rule to ensure the permanence of the work done so far. His model was the Rule he had drafted for the Charité of Châtillon.

In his Rule, Vincent did not hesitate to go into detail such as the manner in which the servants of the poor should work with the sick. "The lady who is on duty will bring the dinner and carry it to the sick. In approaching them, she will greet them cheerfully and with kindness. She will place the tray comfortably on the bed, cover it with a napkin, set a dish to drink the soup from, a spoon, and some bread, help the patient wash his hands and say grace. She will dip the stew into a bowl and place the meat on a plate, and then she will kindly encourage the patient to eat for the love of Jesus and His holy Mother. She will do all this as though she were caring for her own son, or rather for God, who takes for Himself every good thing she does for the poor." But Vincent went further with his recommendations, specifying the order in which the sick should be served: "One must remember to serve first those who have someone with them and finish with those who are alone, so that one can spend a longer time with them." Finally, he warns that all these material attentions are not an end in themselves: "Since the purpose of this institute is not only to give material sustenance but also spiritual aid, these servants of the poor will take care to lead them by the hand to God."[1] This Rule, which Vincent wrote out in one sitting, is remarkable for its precision and for the fact that it was the fruit of long reflection. He was inspired above all by a great flow of love for the poor, following the very words of Christ: "For what you have done to the least of these, you have done to me."

At the beginning of February 1618, Vincent established himself in the large village of Villepreux with his little band consisting of a doctor of theology, Jean Coqueret, and two counselor-clerks in the parlement of Paris, Berger and Gontière. On a cart drawn by a mule or an ass, they brought some scant furnishings and their own bits and pieces—

whatever they needed to live independently in an empty house which had been placed at their disposal. At first the villagers watched them with curiosity and a little fear, these strangers the pastor had told them about without himself understanding why they had come to the parish. What they saw was the newcomers going up and down the streets, to the most out of the way places, to announce the meetings at which they would preach.

The missionaries began by teaching the children the catechism and hymns to sing at services. The villagers overcame their mistrust and crept forward timidly. Soon they were filling the church. The atmosphere warmed gradually; people moved from being spectators to being participants. At the end of the mission, three weeks later, everyone thronged to the confessionals to prepare for the closing ceremonies where they would approach the Communion table. In the afternoon of February 23, Vincent gathered in a chapel the women and girls who had declared themselves willing to constitute the Charité of Villepreux. Once more, he explained to them at length what it was they were promising to do: they were putting themselves at the service of the poor, and through the poor, at the service of Christ. In language full of images, emphasized by gestures that underlined the most important part of his talk, he captivated them and found words that moved and shook them. He radiated so much warmth and conviction that they all volunteered for this battle against misery that he was proposing.

After Villepreux, Vincent left to hold a mission at Joigny and in the surroundings of this city, especially at Villecien and Paroy-sur-Tholon.[2] With the urging of Madame de Gondi, the ladies of Joigny rallied to the number of forty under the banner of the Confraternity of Charity, which was founded on September 6.[3] To finance this Charité, Madame de Gondi, in her position as the countess of Joigny, offered the proceeds of the tolls levied on the sailors who passed under the bridge of the city on Sundays and feast days. At Villecien, Vincent found himself among acquaintances since the lord of the region was Nicolas Hennequin du Fay, whom he must have met at the house of his cousin, Alexandre Hennequin, while he was pastor of Clichy-la-Garenne. In particular, he renewed his acquaintance with Mademoiselle du Fay, who was to become one of the great benefactors of his work.

Without time for a rest, in this same year of 1618, Vincent and his team went to Montmirail in Champagne, where they immediately began a mission. A Charité was founded there on October 6. It would work

not only with the poor sick but also with prisoners. At the same time that the constitution of the Confraternity of Charity was established, his financing was put on a firm footing by the bishop of Soissons, who was the diocesan for Montmirail and the neighboring parishes. He authorized "the persons of the aforementioned association to seek funds on Sundays and holidays in the parishes of Montmirail and other localities in dependency on the said lady countess."[4]

It is remarkable that in the beginning these charitable confraternities or associations were exclusively the work of women. The only authorized masculine presence was that of a procurator, whose duty it was to control financial affairs. As Vincent said, "it was not appropriate for women to have the sole disposal of these matters."[5]

Vincent was a precursor. At a time when women were restricted to the role of mistress of the house and mother, carefully kept away from any external responsibility, when they had to be satisfied with being docile companions of their men, their lords and masters, at a time when even the Church only tolerated them in strict monastic cloisters, Vincent assigned an outstanding role to them—to represent this Church, and beyond that, all of society, in the presence of the unfortunate and excluded.

It was with women that Vincent de Paul accomplished the essential aspects of his works of charity; it was largely thanks to them that he would find the financial means to succeed in his labors. His first collaborator was Madame de Gondi, who supplied the necessary funds to launch his first missions and the support for his early Charités.

At the end of 1618, Vincent de Paul experienced an encounter which would mark his character and spirituality profoundly. Without a doubt, Pierre de Bérulle had played a decisive role in the direction the young priest took when he was freshly arrived in Paris, in quest of a good position in life. In those days, Vincent needed a master who would show him the way to go and who made him aware of the nobility and the demands of the priestly calling. But Bérulle was too much an intellectual and an authoritarian figure to be Vincent's sole confidant forever. Although Bérulle was a man of action, both in the Church and in politics, his thoughts moved increasingly toward the elaboration of a theology permeated with mysticism. With Jesus Christ at the center of the universe, his spirituality revolved entirely about the Incarnation, thus becoming a "theology of contemplation."[6] At the same time Vincent,

profoundly affected by his experience in Folleville and Châtillon and moved by his discovery of human misery, was turning in another direction, toward a spirituality of action.

Vincent made himself independent and found his own road, but he remained personally attached to Bérulle. For instance, it was at the home of Bérulle that he first came into the presence of that man of God, Francis de Sales.[7] This bishop of Geneva was in France in the company of the cardinal of Savoy, who had come to negotiate the marriage of the prince of Piedmont, Victor-Amadeo, to the sister of Louis XIII, Christine de France. The delegation remained in the capital for an entire year to finalize the delicate arrangements of which such a royal union is made. Francis de Sales was not only a great prelate and doctor of the Church but enjoyed a reputation as a preacher who could convert Calvinists and a writer of widely known works such as his *Introduction to the Devout Life,* published in 1608, and his *Treatise on the Love of God,* newly published in 1616. At the age of fifty-five, he was at the peak of his career; his fame and his influence drew everyone who was anyone in the capital city.

The presence in Paris of the diplomatic delegation provided a good pretext for banquets and receptions at court and in the mansions of the great. It is probable that Vincent was present at some of these festivities in the wake of the Gondis and of Bérulle. He had already read and absorbed the writings of Francis de Sales. Certainly he was eager to make his acquaintance and to be able to speak with him. But what a gulf lay between this great prince of the Church, descended from an ancient noble family of Savoy, and the little priest from a peasant family of the Landes! One can imagine the richly decorated salons with their press of high dignitaries and noble ladies, and Francis de Sales observing the crowd, catching the glance of the young priest in his simple cassock. That glance must have been so full of magnetism that the bishop was moved to ask someone who this was, and then to ask to speak with him. From their first conversation, a spark flew between these two souls so different and with so much in common.

At a time when brutality and ignorance reigned and pitiless religious wars still raged, Francis de Sales preached mercy and brotherly charity. In the Calvinist territory of Geneva, he was notable for his mildness and humility. An aura of peace and interior joy surrounded him. As for Vincent, he had already come a long way, taming the demons of doubt of his early days in Paris and mastering the temptations of the

flesh. He still had to conquer the Gascon temper that carried him away or burrowed deep in his periods of black depression and mastered him completely. Francis de Sales helped him discover the secret of joy and serenity, fruits of the imitation of Christ, won by practicing goodness and humility.

Testifying ten years later at the beatification process of Francis de Sales, Vincent declared: "I was often honored by close association with him. . . . I came to see in him the man who best bodied forth for me the Son of God on earth . . . his sweetness and goodness poured out upon all those fortunate enough to be in his company, and I was one of them."[8]

At another time, Vincent recounted the lesson in humility that Francis de Sales taught him. Francis had been invited to preach in the Church of the Oratory on St. Martin's Day. The court was invited to hear this sermon and the crowd was so thick that the bishop of Geneva was obliged to climb a ladder and mount to the pulpit through a window.

"Everyone," writes Vincent, "was expecting an oration, a full display of the genius by which he regularly ravished his hearers. But with the intention of presenting himself humbly before all those illustrious figures he restricted himself to a flat recital of the life of St. Martin. And he heard someone among those present exclaim: 'Just look at this lout, this mountain man. See his coarse preaching style. We really needed him to come all this way to tell us what he's telling us and to try our patience.'"[9] We can be sure that this example of humility had a striking effect on Vincent who, ever afterward, never refused an opportunity to make himself small.

How many conversations did Vincent have with Francis de Sales, either in a small group or alone with him, while the bishop remained in the capital in the year from October 1618 to October 1619? We do not know exactly; their meetings could not have been frequent since neither man had much leisure. But it is certain that these encounters had a decisive effect on Vincent's life. He had already met many prelates cloaked in their dignity or learned theologians barricaded behind their science, but here for the first time he was face to face with the very image of what he called the Son of God on earth. He would be marked forever by the virtue of Francis de Sales, his mild nature, his goodness, and his humble demeanor, and strive with all his might to conform to this model. His life was influenced by members of the bishop's circle as well; during their meetings, Vincent had the opportunity to make the

acquaintance of others admitted to the intimate company of Francis de Sales, and who would become his own close companions, such as Madame de Lamoignon, Louise de Marillac, and Jeanne de Chantal.[10]

Jeanne de Chantal was the widow of the baron de Chantal. She had chosen Francis de Sales as her spiritual director, and he had decided to found with her the Order of the Visitandines. The first house of this order was opened in 1610 at Annecy. During his visit to Paris, the bishop of Geneva invited her to found a house of her order there, which she did in April 1619. The first house was a modest one in the faubourg Saint-Jacques but later, it was moved to the right bank, in the Petit-Bourbon palace.

Francis de Sales explained to Vincent that his first intention had been to found a congregation of contemplative nuns who would, however, live in the world and visit the poor and the sick. Because of their mission, they were placed under the patronage of the Visitation.[11] The opposition of the archbishop of Lyon had forced him to modify his plan and found an order of cloistered nuns, but he remained convinced of the relevance of his first instinct, and he was sure that one day his idea would be revived. Thus Vincent was confirmed in his intention, still unarticulated, to found a congregation of Sisters of Charity, following the spirit of the Confraternity of Charity.

A superior had to be designated to supervise the new house of the Visitandines in Paris. According to their rule, the bishop of the diocese was to fulfill this function, and he was permitted to delegate the duties to one of his priests. The first priest designated was not Vincent de Paul as is so often written, but Charles de la Saussaye,[12] pastor of the Church of Saint-Jacques in Paris. He died in 1621, shortly after having been appointed. There were only too many possible successors for Francis de Sales to propose to the bishop of Paris from among distinguished clergymen or eminent religious whom he had met during his stay in Paris. With the agreement of Jeanne de Chantal, it was Vincent de Paul who was presented for the bishop's approval and confirmed in this position at the beginning of 1622. This was an irrefutable proof of the esteem in which Francis de Sales held the modest priest. He had been able to discern, behind the still rustic exterior of a peasant of the Landes, exceptional qualities of mind and heart.

While Vincent was dividing his time between missions on the estates of the Gondis and his visits to Paris, during which he conversed with

Francis de Sales, a royal edict was published which opened for him a new arena of charitable work. By a decision of the king dated February 8, 1619, he was officially given the office of royal chaplain of the galleys. "Because his lordship, count of Joigny, General of the Galleys of France, has represented to His Majesty that it is necessary for the good and comfort of the convicts who are now and will in the future be in the galleys, to designate a priest of known probity and qualification and charge him with the post of royal chaplain . . . His Majesty has awarded this office to Monsieur Vincent de Paul, priest, bachelor of theology."[13]

As a result of his position in the service of the General of the Galleys, Vincent had been able to visit the convicts. They were held in hideous prisons, particularly the Conciergerie, squatting in their chains. He was deeply shaken by the way in which these men, condemned to forced labor, were packed into cold, damp holes, without light or air, subject to the whims of jailers who treated them like cattle. The sight of them must have brought back stinging memories, which he never allowed himself to mention, of his own captivity on the Barbary Coast. The unfortunate slave laborer was chained by a ring riveted around his neck to posts fixed in the ground. He could neither sit nor stand. A priest passing among these men provoked only scatological outcries and hate-filled glares. Vincent went about among these beings, men almost naked, hunched in rotting, verminous straw, surrounded by a pestilential stench, and he gained direct knowledge of their bodily misery and moral despair. Moved by this experience, he decided to speak of the matter to the General of the Galleys, requesting the authorization to try to improve the lot of those whose health was most in danger. These were moved into a rented house near the Church of Saint-Roche, which was transformed into the Saint-Roche prison.[14] But money was needed for this work. Vincent spoke of it to Cardinal de Retz, whom he saw regularly at the Gondi palace, in the hope of interesting him in this charitable effort. In a pastoral letter dated June 1618, the cardinal enjoined his clergy to commend the lot of these pitiful creatures to their parishioners. Soon the donations began to arrive and visits were organized in which devout women came and cared for the ill. Vincent himself, with the help of his faithful Antoine Portail, brought them spiritual comfort.

Vincent's work was reported to the king; it inspired creation of the office of royal chaplain, the holder of which had authority over all the chaplains assigned to the galleys. As soon as he was confirmed in this new position, Vincent went to Marseilles, where he saw equally lamen-

table conditions on board the ships. He took the liberty of reproaching the guards and the officers on board for this situation. Forgetting for a moment all the exhortations to mildness he had received from Francis de Sales, he emitted what can only be called a bellow. He called for the construction of a hospital where the galley slaves could be tended, a project slow to be accomplished because of the lack of funds.[15]

The title of royal chaplain did not distract Vincent from what always remained the center of his concern, his mission to the rural poor. In September and October 1620, he was at Folleville again, then at Paillart and Sérévillers, two large neighboring villages on Gondi lands in Picardy. In those places, he founded separate Charités for men and women.[16]

In the same year, while he was conducting a mission at Montmirail, he had dealings with a so-called heretic. Later, Vincent told his missionaries about the objections this Huguenot made to attempts at converting him. "You told me that the Church of Rome is a conduit for the Holy Spirit, but that is what I cannot believe, because on the one hand, we see the Catholics in the countryside abandoned to vicious and ignorant leaders, and on the other, we see the cities full of priests and monks who are doing nothing. There are perhaps ten thousand of them in Paris while they abandon these poor people in the fields to the horrifying ignorance in which they are damned." Vincent tried to answer him, but the heretic was not convinced. Struck by his own failure, Vincent came back the next year with a team of clergy, friends of his from Paris, to preach another mission at Montmirail and neighboring villages. Out of curiosity, this same heretic came to hear the preaching and teaching. Touched by the zeal of these missionaries, he sought out Vincent to tell him that he was convinced now, and ready to allow himself to be converted, which, in fact he did.[17]

Vincent was not required to limit his charitable work to the missions preached on the Gondi domains, since in February 1621, the superior general of the Order of Friars Minim granted him letters of association in sign of his gratitude for services rendered to his order.[18]

In the course of his missionary work in the spring of 1621, Vincent returned to Joigny, where he established a Charité made up of men, women, and girls, in which the men cared for the healthy as well as the disabled and the women worked only with the sick. This was the first experiment with a mixed Charité. Vincent was careful to point out that "Our Lord is glorified no less by the ministry of women than by the

ministry of men." The Rule of this Charité, published on May 8, 1621, provides for everything in detail, and in particular for finances: "The expenses of this work of mercy will be supported by 500 royal livres, which Monseigneur the duke de Joigny will provide every year, by eighty measures of wheat which Monseigneur the prior of Joigny will also provide every year, and by whatever reserve there is from the Hôtel-Dieu of that city."[19] Vincent never founded a new Charité without assuring that it would have the means to survive.

At the beginning of September, Vincent found himself near his old parish of Châtillon-les-Dombes, which he perhaps went to visit. He took this opportunity, according to his usual habit, to found Charités in neighboring villages, particularly at Trévoud on the Saône. At Mâcon, he was struck by the large number of beggars loitering in the streets and under the porches of churches. He heard that a good canon, Nicolas Chandon by name, dean of the cathedral there, had founded a charitable institution ten years earlier, l'Aumône, intended to give comfort to the poor and the sick. But this drew all the vagabonds of the region, the beggars and the penniless, who came there and harassed the passers-by.

After informing himself and talking things over with Canon Chandon, Vincent, who had been planning to stop at Mâcon for a few days in any case, offered some solutions to the problem of the beggars. The first reaction was unbelieving mockery: "When I established the Charité of Mâcon everyone laughed at me and pointed a finger," he wrote later to Louise de Marillac.[20] But Vincent was undeterred. He managed to persuade a large enough group of people so that an extraordinary meeting of the city council was called on September 16. The minutes of the meeting show that "a cleric, the priest of Monsieur the General of the Galleys, wanted to found a charitable organization to see to the comforting and feeding of the poor." On the next day, September 17, the assembly met again and gave official approval to a Christian Charité conducted according to the rules proposed by Vincent. First of all, this crowd of poor people, numbering as many as 300, had to be counted. Then an endowment had to be raised, which would make it possible to provide them with regular help. The money would come from the clergy and the well-to-do inhabitants and from the income from certain fines as well as from collections taken up every Sunday.

Then Vincent established a rule which was to be strictly maintained. Every Sunday after mass, the people would give to the poor bread and money in proportion to the extent of their misery and the

number of children they had, on condition that for the rest of the week they would not beg, under pain of losing their alms. But Vincent did not want to be taken in by professional beggars and so he went on to specify that so as not to encourage laziness among the healthy poor, they would be given only the necessary supplement to their modest wage. The measure was effective; the village was cleansed of the beggars who had been harassing passers-by. When he left Mâcon, at the end of three weeks, having established a Charité composed of men and women both, he had to do so secretly, to avoid the honors prepared for him by the aldermen of the city and the acclaim of the populace.[21]

Faced with a specific problem, Vincent had immediately devised an appropriate solution in collaboration with Canon Chandon and the local authorities. Whereas at his arrival he had figured as an unknown, spoken of as the self-styled chaplain of Monsieur the General of the Galleys, he now enjoyed the support of all. This was a convincing demonstration of his charisma and his talent as an organizer.

In the years after 1617, the situation in France changed considerably. Young King Louis XIII, free of the guardianship of Concini, took as counselor his friend Charles d'Albert, and soon raised him to the rank of duke de Luynes. But the Queen Mother, Maria de Medici, in her fury at having been displaced from power, set out to whip up a rebellion of the nobles. She escaped from house arrest at Blois and mounted a campaign against the royal army. Her troops were defeated in a brief encounter at the Ponts-de-Cé. Finally, the skillful intervention of the bishop of Luçon, the future Cardinal de Richelieu, brought about a reconciliation between Louis XIII and his mother in March 1619.

But then the king was obliged to march with his army to the city of Pau to subdue the people of the Béarn, who had risen up in protest against a royal decision ordering the restitution of the property of clergy in this province, the oldest Huguenot domain.[22] The entry of the king into the capital of the Béarn and the re-establishment of Catholic worship, decreed in 1620, unleashed the Protestant party, which called a general assembly of Huguenots at La Rochelle. The religious wars were blazing again.

Louis XIII ordered the dissolution of the Assembly of La Rochelle, but the Protestants refused to obey this royal injunction. This was the beginning of a seven-year siege of the Protestant stronghold by land and by sea until its surrender in 1628. As part of the operation,

Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi brought ten of his ships to Bordeaux in June 1622 to take part in an attack mounted by the duke de Guise, commandant of the royal fleet. In October, Gondi took part in battles in which the fleet of La Rochelle was partially destroyed. An armistice was signed that held for three years.

The galleys spent the winter at Tonnay-Charente near Rochefort and in the estuary of the Gironde, off Bordeaux, before returning to their home port at Marseilles. On this occasion, Vincent, in his role of royal chaplain, visited the galleys and preached a mission to the men, probably in the first months of 1623.[23] Since he was near the Landes, where he was born, he went to visit his family, whom he had not seen for twenty years.

During a conference he gave to his missionaries many years later, Vincent recalled this visit to his birthplace. He had hesitated to make the journey and before leaving Paris, he had asked two of his friends for advice: "Gentlemen, my work is about to take me near the place where I was born; I don't know whether it would be a good idea to stop by home." When they encouraged him, he decided to continue from Bordeaux to Pouy, where he was put up by a relative who was pastor of the village. He had a reunion with his brothers and sisters, met his nephews, and visited the scenes of his childhood with much emotion. People made much of him; his success and his titles impressed the family. No doubt, they expected to profit from them. But at the same time, these eight or ten days spent at Pouy were a trial for him, torn as he was between the joy of seeing his people and his duty to "dampen their desire to benefit from my prosperity, to the point of telling them not to expect anything and that even if I had chests full of gold and silver, I would give then nothing, because a priest, if he has anything, owes it to God and the poor." Vincent admitted that the departure was painful for him: "The day I left, I was so sad to be leaving my family that I cried the whole way."[24] This wish to sever all the ties that still bound him to his family and to material things marks a new stage in Vincent's inner journey. Until that moment, he had been collecting various offices and benefices without ever relinquishing one, it seems, except for that unfortunate abbey of Saint-Léonard-de-Chaume, which had brought him much turmoil. In addition to his duties for the Gondis and his recent appointment as royal chaplain of the galleys, he had kept the parish of Clichy-la-Garenne. Did he still hold the parish of Gamaches and the canonry of Écouis? Without documents, we cannot say. The revenues from these benefices had allowed him to help

his family which was only fair, since they had made serious sacrifices so that he could maintain his studies.[25]

But in February 1624, in apparent contradiction of his resolve to distance himself from the goods of this world, Vincent accepted the benefice of the priory of Saint-Nicolas-de-Grosse-Sauve. The notarized document by which he gave authority to a certain Monsieur Pierre Mauferet to take possession "of the aforementioned priory, just as the aforementioned owner would do if he were present there in person," specifies that it was a matter of a decision of His Holiness, and that this priory, of the Order of St. Augustine, was located in the diocese of Langres.[26] Unfortunately for Vincent, Rome did not know that this priory had already been granted in June 1623 to the Congregation of the Oratory by the bishop of Langres, Monseigneur Sébastien Zamet. The situation was complicated by the fact that the decision of the bishop of Langres was in its turn contested by the canons of Saint-Mamès, who considered themselves solely empowered to collate this benefice. The matter was brought to court, and Vincent found himself indirectly involved in a trial which was to last for three years. In the end, the Oratorians, supported by Zamet, won the case. No doubt Vincent would have been happy to avoid a conflict of interests with Pierre de Bérulle, since his relations with his former confessor seemed to be crumbling. As for the loss of this benefice, it no longer seems important when we learn that one month later, on March 1, 1624, Vincent would receive responsibility for a secondary school with its buildings and grounds, the first stage in the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission.

9 Foundation of the Congregation of the Mission 1624–1632

The Collège des Bons-Enfants
Foundation of the Mission
Recognition of the Congregation by Rome
Louise de Marillac
The Party of the Devout

At the beginning of the year 1624, Vincent de Paul did not suspect that he was very close to achieving what he had not dared to wish for, the foundation of his own congregation. For the moment, he was engaged in careful self-questioning about what he ought to do. He was suspicious of the enthusiastic outbursts characteristic of his Gascon temperament and wanted to be sure that the path he chose obeyed the will of God. We know what the state of his soul was at the time from a letter written many years later to one of his missionaries,: "Keep in mind that you and I are subject to a thousand impulses of nature, and remember what I told you about my state of mind when I was beginning to plan the Mission. I was continually preoccupied with it, until I began to suspect that the whole thing was coming from my nature or a troublesome spirit. So I made a retreat at Soissons, in the hope that it would please God to cleanse my spirit of the pleasure and eagerness this project stirred up in me."[1]

It was becoming more and more difficult for Vincent to find priests who were willing to go to the countryside with him on his missions. On the other hand, Madame de Gondi was enthusiastic about what Vincent was achieving by preaching on her lands and wanted him to do this at regular intervals. She asked him to find a congregation which would be willing to take over the work. But the orders he approached, especially the Oratorians and the Jesuits, gave no reply. Since they were already conducting missions in their own styles, they had no desire to collaborate with Vincent. It was at this moment that the Gondis, after consulting the archbishop of Paris, suggested to Vincent that he should found his own, whose work would be to preach missions in the countryside. They were anticipating his fondest wish. In order to reach a final decision, he made a retreat at Soissons.

After the retreat, Vincent was assured that he was conforming to the divine will, and matters fell into place very quickly. Madame de Gondi, already ill and moved by her sense that she would die soon, hoped intensely that the work of foundation would be accomplished swiftly. The first need was for a house that could shelter the members of the new congregation. The Collège des Bons-Enfants[2] near the gate of Saint Victor was all but empty. It came under the authority of the archbishop of Paris, who agreed to put it at Vincent's disposal. The principal of this establishment, Louis de Guyart, a doctor of theology, willingly gave up his position in exchange for the payment of an annual rent of 200 livres. The letters naming Vincent de Paul principal of the Collège des Bons-Enfants were signed on March 1, 1624, and Antoine de Portail, Vincent's faithful helper, immediately took possession of the buildings and grounds.

The documents drawn up on this occasion specify that Vincent was not only a bachelor of theology but also licentiate in canon law.[3] When had he earned this title? Perhaps during his first years in the capital his duties as chaplain of Queen Marguerite of Valois left him time to attend courses at the university. Or perhaps he had only received it the year before, judging by the fact that he never used this title before March 1624.

One year later, on April 15, 1625, the Gondis signed the charter of foundation of the Congregation of the Mission[4] at their palace in the rue Pavée, parish of Saint-Sauveur. The provisions of this instrument make it clear that the main activity of the Mission would be to bring spiritual comfort to "the neglected, abandoned rural poor." To remedy

their misery was the purpose of founding "the pious association of a few priests . . . who were willing to renounce all benefices, high offices, and dignities of the Church . . . in order to apply themselves entirely and vigorously to the salvation of the poor, at the pleasure of the bishops, each in his own diocese, going from village to village and living from their common fund, and bringing this help as well to those condemned to forced labor." To this end, the Gondis deeded the sum of 45,000 livres to Vincent de Paul, who was to choose six priests to work under his direction. The document lists details of administration of the funds, the interval and duration of the missions, and a concrete definition of what the Congregation of the Mission would be. Vincent's style is recognizable in this document, and so is his careful attention to proper organization and implementation.

Only two months after this contract was signed, on June 23, Françoise-Marguerite de Silly, wife of Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi, departed this life. She died in peaceful satisfaction, having played her part in the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission. As he had promised, Vincent was with her until she died. But she wanted more; as one of her last wishes, she expressed the hope that Vincent would remain in her family. But this was hardly possible for the responsible superior of a community in the process of being formed. The General of the Galleys understood this and gave Vincent his freedom, so that he could take up residence at the Collège des Bons-Enfants.[5]

Philippe-Emmanuel, suffering profoundly at the loss of his wife, resigned from his duties in favor of his oldest son, Pierre de Gondi, who was already his second in commanding the galleys. The youngest son, Jean-François Paul, about twelve years old at the time, was placed in the Jesuit school at Clermont, where he was a brilliant student although prideful and dissipated in behavior. Once free of all ties, Philippe-Emmanuel decided to withdraw from the world. He asked for admission into the Congregation of the Mission, but Vincent wisely suggested the Oratory, which the widower entered in April 1627.[6]

Vincent de Paul was forty-four years old when he founded the Congregation of the Mission. We do not have a portrait of him at the time, but Abelly, who already knew him then, gives a vivid idea of his appearance. He describes Vincent as being "of medium size, well proportioned, with a broad, rather large head that was well made and proportioned to the rest of his body. His forehead was broad and majestic, his face neither too full nor too thin. His glance was mild, his vision

penetrating, his hearing sensitive. His deportment was grave and his gravity was kindly." Abelly goes on to say that "his countenance was simple and naïve."[7] This adjective must be taken in its old sense, still current in the seventeenth century, to mean natural, without artifice, spontaneous. And we have reason to believe that the affable impression Vincent made was accompanied by a discreet charm, to which most women were particularly responsive.

The beginnings of the congregation were very modest. The buildings of the Collège des Bons-Enfants, which dated from the thirteenth century, were in very bad condition in spite of recent repairs. They stood near the ancient fortifications of Philippe-Auguste, next to the gate of Saint-Victor. Of the three groups of buildings arranged around a little interior courtyard, one was unoccupied because it stood on the brink of ruin. One of Vincent's first actions as principal of the college was to inform the provost of the merchants of Paris that "the buildings of the said college are as good as ruins, because of their great age" and to ask him for the help of two master masons so that they could determine which work should be done most urgently.[8]

When Vincent went out on a mission with his companions, he left the empty college in the care of neighbors: "Monsieur Portail and I took with us a good priest to whom we gave 50 écus a year. The three of us set out together to preach and conduct missions from village to village. When we left, we would give the key to one of the neighbors or we might ask them to sleep in the house overnight."[9]

On April 24, 1626, the archbishop of Paris, Jean-François de Gondi, gave official approval to the work undertaken by "our very dear brother Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi . . . and by our dear sister, Dame Françoise-Marguerite de Silly . . . and a few priests who devote themselves to catechizing, preaching, and hearing general confessions for the poor people of the fields." These few priests only numbered four when they signed an instrument of association on September 4, in the presence of notaries and recorders of the king at the Châtelet of Paris.[10] On the same day, Vincent deeded to his family all of his earthly goods, which derived from the inheritance from his father, and he made official the gifts he had given earlier to his brothers and sisters.[11] He relinquished the parish of Clichy-la-Garenne at the same time.[12] As for his other benefices, it is probable that he no longer held them at this time, but the relevant documents have disappeared. Having cut all the ties that still held him, Vincent, freed of his last worldly attachments, was

ready to dedicate himself to his work, body and soul. And this is what he would do for the thirty-four years of life that remained to him.

First, he had to wage a long battle to achieve recognition for his congregation. It was not so difficult to obtain approval for the creation of the Mission from the archbishop of Paris, who was a Gondi. The next year, in March 1627, he even received letters patent, signed by Louis XIII, approving the Congregation of the Mission and authorizing its members to live "in such places of our kingdom as they wish, where I authorize them to receive all gifts and alms."[13] Thus Vincent was able to draw up immediately an act of association between the Collège des Bons-Enfants, which he had held in his own name up to then, and the Congregation of the Mission, which now became its owner.

There remained the task of obtaining from the Holy See official recognition of the congregation, and this seemed to be a simple formality, considering the royal approbation which had already been granted. In June 1628, Louis XIII sent a letter to Pope Urban VIII, asking him to raise the Mission to the status of a congregation, so that it could grow and survive into the future. At the same time, the king wrote to his ambassador in Rome, Monsieur de Béthune, requesting him to perform "all the actions necessary to bring the matter to a satisfactory conclusion as a thing which concerns the glory and service of God and the consolation of my poor subjects."[14]

Vincent had neglected nothing which could contribute to the success of his request, which he addressed to the pope in June 1628,[15] and the Gondis had exerted all their influence in his behalf. But the decision of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, which arrived two months later on August 22, was negative.

At Rome it was felt that an increase in the number of congregations would weaken the resources of the secular clergy by monopolizing benefices, and that these congregations would more or less escape the authority of the pope. Why found a new congregation whose sole purpose it was to preach missions, since this would be self-limiting: if the missions were successful, the need for this congregation would disappear of itself. Therefore, the Holy See only agreed to the formation of a society of twenty to twenty-five priests which would be neither a congregation nor a confraternity. This society would limit its missionary work to the territory of France, under the authority of diocesan bishops.[16]

Other hostile reactions to this project of Vincent de Paul would surface, some discreetly and others quite openly. Pierre de Bérulle, for instance, who had been made cardinal in 1627, did not see this undertaking of his former pupil with a favorable eye. The Oratory had added to its goals the project of preaching missions throughout the kingdom, and twenty houses of this congregation had already been founded in France. Bérulle felt that Vincent's project duplicated his own missionary work. In November, he sent a letter to his representative in Rome, Father Bertin, expressing his hostility to the plan which was still being supported in Rome in spite of the negative decision of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith: "The designs which you attribute to those who favor this matter of the missions seem so indirect that they must be viewed with suspicion. We will be obliged to depart from the restraint and simplicity which I consider appropriate in conducting the Lord's business, if everyone acts in this way." He asked Father Bertin to urge the ambassador of France to make this point at the Holy See.[17] However, it came to pass that the cardinal died in October 1629, and his successor, Father Bourgoing, did not pursue this campaign against the Mission.

Another source of opposition, this one quite open, appeared shortly thereafter, and this came from the spokesman of a council of priests of the capital. In the name of the priests of the city and suburbs of Paris he spoke against the letters patent by which the king had approved the Mission. This attitude was essentially motivated by considerations of material interest: "For although all such congregations are initially, and at their first foundation, very pure and based on exceptional piety, it happens that in the course of the years, ambition and greed change them entirely. Then, when there are then many of them, either in the little towns or in the villages, they will want to share the income of the parishes and they will say that since they serve at the same church, they should be compensated from its revenues."[18]

Vincent had foreseen clearly that such reactions could arise among the secular clergy. Therefore he had inserted into the contract of foundation a clause that the missionaries were to renounce all benefices and offices and that in the course of their missions, they were to accept "no recompense of any kind or manner whatever." The action of the priests of Paris had no effect on the parlement which, in its session of April 4, 1631, entered into the record the letters patent of the king, in favor of the priests of the Mission.

The opposition of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith did not discourage Vincent. His stay in Rome in the household of Monseigneur Montorio had acquainted him with the mysterious ways of the Holy See. He knew he had to be patient and skillful in manipulating the influence of various cardinals; sometimes, he understood, one even had to wait for a new holder of the office. In May 1631, he sent to Rome one of his first missionaries, François de Coudray, to advance the cause. In a letter, Vincent instructed him once more in the strategy to follow: "You should make it clear that the poor are going to their own damnation because they do not know the things that are necessary to salvation and because they do not make their confessions. If His Holiness knew of this great need, he would not rest until he had done everything possible to make order of this situation." Vincent added to this letter a memorandum which had been approved by Monsieur Duval, doctor of the Sorbonne, who had become his spiritual director on the death of Bérulle. Advised not to change a single word, Vincent exclaimed in his direct way: "So much for words, it is the substance that must remain unchanged."[19] Finally, thanks to the persistent work of François du Coudray, Pope Urban VIII announced official recognition of the Congregation of the Mission by signing the bull *Salvatori Nostri* on January 12, 1633.

For many years, this recognition of the Congregation by Rome had occupied the thoughts of the man whom from now on most people would call Monsieur Vincent. He nevertheless continued to preach actively and to recruit new members. In the course of the first six years, when the priests numbered only seven, they took 140 missions to the villages. By 1631, the Congregation had twenty-six members, fourteen of whom were priests.[20]

As he continued to direct many missions himself, Vincent came to understand the serious problem of insufficient preparation of the clergy. In country parishes, he often encountered priests who had received no instruction and who were incapable of exercising valid ministry, not to mention those who were leading a life unworthy of their priestly estate, living in concubinage, surrendering to drink, slumbering in laziness. It is true that the Council of Trent in the previous century had mandated the opening of seminaries, but this directive had not yet been fully carried out by the Church in France. Bérulle's Oratory had opened a seminary in Paris in 1612, and others in Rouen and elsewhere.

In 1620, Monsieur Bourdoise,[21] pastor of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, had organized a seminary in his parish, before attempting to extend his efforts to the provinces. But attempts of this kind were still limited, and they were directed toward the formation of urban clergy. Many dioceses had opened seminaries, but without notable success. They recruited boys at the age of twelve for a course of study that led to the priesthood at the age of twenty-four, but candidates rejected this long preparation and dropped out along the way.

Vincent discussed the matter with the bishop of Beauvais, Augustin Potier,[22] himself concerned with the formation of clergy for his own diocese. They came to the idea of organizing retreats of two or three weeks for the ordinands, and Vincent found himself at Beauvais in September 1628 for the opening of the first retreat of this kind. From the tone of a letter he sent from this village to François du Coudray, at the head of the Collège des Bons-Enfants during Vincent's absence, we see how happy Vincent was now that he had found his way and walked along it full of joy: "How does the Company fare? Is everyone in good humor? Are they all of good cheer?" The letter ends on a friendly note: "Farewell, my dear young Father."[23]

When Vincent returned from preaching a retreat or working at a mission, he found a climate of inner peace in his house. Having relinquished any work in the cities by the articles of foundation, he lived a retired life in Paris with his companions. He described it in these terms in a letter: "In Paris, we live a life that is almost as solitary as the life of a Carthusian, since we do not catechize or preach or hear confessions in the city. Almost no one has any business with us, nor do we have business with anyone. This solitude makes us long for the work of the villages, and that work makes us long for solitude."[24]

The calm and solitude would not last. The archbishop of Paris, Monseigneur de Gondi, was interested in the retreats organized for ordinands in Beauvais. He declared that all those who were preparing to receive the sacrament of Holy Orders in his diocese would first have to make a retreat with Monsieur Vincent. Thus, beginning in 1632, the Collège des Bons-Enfants would receive from sixty to eighty retreatants before every ordination—a heavy responsibility for the young congregation.

Just as death was coming to Madame de Gondi—the woman who had brought Vincent so much anxiety with her everlasting worries and her ungovernable need to be reassured by her confessor, but who, on

the other hand, had supported him so generously in his work of the missions—another tormented soul took her place in Vincent's life: Louise de Marillac.[25] She belonged to a great family which had supplied the State with diplomats and financiers. But her illegitimate birth—she was the natural daughter of Louis de Marillac, who had recognized her—marked her profoundly. At the death of her father, she was only thirteen years old and had been more or less rejected by the Marillac family. She would have liked to enter a convent of Capuchin nuns, an order which had just established a house in Paris, where women led an ascetic life of ardent piety, but she was advised against choosing this path, which people felt was too harsh for her weak constitution. She was guided toward a marriage of reason, and so she married a junior official of the royal court, Antoine Le Gras, a respectable member of the petty nobility. After a long illness, he left her a widow at the age of thirty-four with sparse means and a son, Michel, who would be a torment to her for the rest of her life.

Her spiritual director, Jean-Pierre Camus,[26] friend of Francis de Sales, led her with mildness and kindliness, helping her to overcome a serious attack of neurasthenia during the last illness of her husband. When he was named bishop of Belley, Camus left the capital and advised Louise to place herself in the care of Monsieur Vincent. She had already met him at the home of the Hennequin family at Clichy-la-Garenne and in the company of Bérulle. Her first reaction, when Camus spoke to her of Vincent, was not favorable. She even wrote that she felt reluctant to accept, agreeing only because she believed it was the will of God.[27] Thus, in 1625, Vincent became the spiritual director of Louise de Marillac.

She moved into modest lodgings in the quarter of Saint-Victor, near the Collège des Bons-Enfants. We see in her correspondence how Vincent led her by degrees to detach herself from extreme preoccupation with her son and to cure herself of her persistent mournfulness. He wrote to her: "Make sure to stay glad of heart, ready to want everything that God wants."

He worked to show her that she would find balance and interior peace by joining him in serving the poor. He knew the role he would assign to her: to take charge of all the confraternities created in the wake of the missions. These Charités had to be visited, invigorated, and sometimes reformed. After four years of training, he sent her out for a first inspection trip to Montmirail, where he was himself planning to preach a mission in May 1629. He encouraged her in these terms:

"Then go, Mademoiselle, go in the name of Our Lord. I pray His divine goodness will accompany you, that it will be your solace and your path, your shade against the heat of the sun, your shelter from rain and cold, a soft couch when you are tired, your strength in hard work, and that finally, it will bring you back to us in perfect health and filled with good works."[28] And so the fragile, anxious Louise, escorted by her maidservants, would set out in a coach to Montmirail, to Villepreux or to Verneuil, with a little bit of baggage and a huge cargo of linens, medicines, and little luxuries, to bring some help to the sick and the penniless. Once settled in the village inn, she would gather the members of the local Charité, ask about their problems, urge them forward, and tell them what they should do next.

Upon her return, she would give Vincent an account of her work, and he would encourage her, and console her if necessary, for she was not always well received. The local authorities, both civil and religious, sometimes wondered what this lady from Paris might be doing there or who had sent her. At those times, Vincent had to reassure her. For instance, once when she was making visits in Champagne, she was summoned by the bishop of Châlons. What was she to do? Vincent answered: "It seems to me that you would be well advised to pay him a call and to tell him quite simply and in good faith why Reverend Father de Gondi has asked you kindly to go to Champagne and what you are doing there. Offer to curtail your activities in any way the bishop pleases to request, and to give up the whole mission if that is what he wishes. This is the spirit of God."[29]

Founding the Congregation of the Mission and recruiting, conducting missions in the countryside, retreats for ordinands, spiritual direction for the Visitandine sisters—Vincent took care of all these things head on. He had hardly any leisure, and no desire to engage in political matters which were very complex at this time.

Just as Vincent de Paul was going forth prudently with measured steps toward a destiny of which he had only a cloudy view at this time, so another man of the Church, Armand du Plessis,[30] walked with decisive steps toward the goal he had chosen for himself, that of achieving power. He had been destined for a military career, but when his older brother decided to retire to a Carthusian monastery, he was called upon to take the episcopal see of Luçon. He was only twenty years old when he received the mitre. This zealous young prelate became the delegate of

the clergy to the Estates General in 1614. Rewarded with distinctions by Maria de Medici, he was seated in the Council in 1616, with the title of Secretary of State. In the next year, he served the Queen Mother in her exile while working to reconcile her to her son. This effort succeeded in March 1619, at Angoulême. His skill and subtlety helped him to blaze a path to power in a particularly troubled period of French history. He received the cardinal's hat from Louis XIII in 1622 and was admitted to his council two years later. It was thought that he would defend the Queen Mother's interests there, but very soon, he chose the side of the king who named him chief of the council in August 1624. For almost twenty years, Cardinal de Richelieu, with the complete confidence of his sovereign, would play the part of an all-powerful prime minister.

But at the beginning of his ministry, he still had to manage the Queen Mother, Maria de Medici. She was surrounded by a party of Catholics, more or less the heirs of the League, who were called the Party of the Devout. They favored a policy, both internal and external, which would hew to the line of the teachings and interests of the Church as well as the recommendations of Rome. This would be expressed by fighting against the Protestant "heresy" and by seeking alliances with the Catholic powers, namely the Hapsburgs, whether in the Spanish or the Austrian line.

Among these Devout the Marillac[31] family stood out, as well as Pierre de Bérulle. The party was supported by the Jesuits and by individuals who would soon found the Company of the Blessed Sacrament. Other Catholics, who called themselves "the good Frenchmen" while still being loyal to the Holy See, were inspired by gallican theories. The interests of the State, embodied by a king who enjoyed the power of Divine Right, should be the supreme law. This moved them to take up the fight against the Hapsburg drive to dominate and if necessary, to contract alliances with Protestant powers.

In the meantime, the struggle against the Huguenots soon became a priority, for in July 1627, an English fleet led by the duke of Buckingham landed a force of 8,000 men on the Isle of Ré. They were to come to the aid of the French Protestants who were still besieged at La Rochelle. The English attack failed and the troops returned to their ships without having been able to lift the siege. On the contrary, with Richelieu taking matters in hand, La Rochelle was forced to surrender in October 1628, after a heroic resistance. There remained the task of overpowering centers of Huguenot rebellion in the south, kept alive by the duke of Rohan.

In the king's council, the two parties quarreled on this subject. The Queen Mother, upheld by the Devout, pushed for a campaign against the Protestants, whereas Richelieu wanted first to intervene in Italy, where the succession of the duchy of Mantua[32] was at stake. But in taking this position, the cardinal was acting against Spanish interests, secretly being defended by Maria de Medici. When Richelieu's position won the day in the council, Louis XIII set out with his minister for a lightning campaign in Italy.

The Queen Mother now swore that she would eliminate Richelieu and replace him with the councilor Michel de Marillac. It was on November 11, 1630, a day known as the Day of the Dupes that Maria de Medici, believing that she had convinced her son to disgrace Richelieu, found herself placed under house arrest, from which she would flee into permanent exile. Michel de Marillac was eliminated from the council and retired to his estates where he died of grief two years later. As for his younger brother, the marshal de Marillac, he was arrested in Italy where he was in command of the army. After a prejudiced trial on a charge of extortion, he was sentenced to death and beheaded in May 1632.

These blows to the Marillac clan brought sorrow to Louise. In a letter, Vincent attempted to bring some peace to her soul, inviting her to surrender her grief: "What does it matter to us how our dear ones go to the Lord, provided that they reach Heaven. And making a good death in this way is one of the most assured paths to eternal life. So let us not repine, but let us accept and adore the will of God."[33]

During this whole period, Vincent de Paul kept himself aloof from the tumultuous politics around him. He knew many eminent members of the circle of the Devout and spent time in their company, but there is nothing to show that he attended their meetings, much less took part in their efforts. His horizon was limited to his charitable works, and his energy was concentrated on establishing them firmly. Nothing was allowed to endanger this undertaking.

10

The Priory of Saint-Lazare 1632–1633

An Unexpected Gift
Act of Union with the Mission
The Tuesday Conferences
Beginning of the Daughters of Charity
Vincent's Recommendations for a Mission

Toward the end of the year 1630, Vincent de Paul received a visit which left him, by his own admission, most troubled and perplexed: "I was confounded, like a man surprised by the noise of a canon shot off nearby unexpectedly; he is stunned by the thunderclap."[1]

What was the cause of his astonishment? The pastor of the parish of Saint-Laurent, Guillaume de Lestocq, came to Vincent to introduce Adrien Le Bon,[2] superior of the priory of Saint-Lazare. This man proposed that he would resign his office in favor of Vincent. In other words, he was offering to install the Mission, which was beginning to be seriously cramped at the Collège des Bons-Enfants, in the vast buildings of Saint-Lazare and, what is more, to make the Congregation the beneficiary of a priory endowed with substantial revenues. After he recovered from his surprise, Vincent's first reaction was to turn away this offer, which seemed to him disproportionate to the size of the little congregation that was just coming into being. Moreover, he was aware of the problems facing the prior of Saint-Lazare, and it terrified him to think that he might become encumbered with such entanglements.

The priory of Saint-Lazare, founded in the twelfth century, originally had the mission of sheltering and caring for the lepers of the capital city. These were most often burghers or artisan bakers. In fact, it was believed in those days that bakers were more exposed than others to infection with this terrible disease. Even in the seventeenth century, the bakers of Paris kept alive a tradition of making offerings to the infirmary at Saint-Lazare. In the Middle Ages, this priory had become one of the largest ecclesiastical seigniories of the Île-de-France.[3] When they took the throne, kings came here to receive the oath of loyalty of all the orders of the city. In the same way, at their death, their coffins were carried to Saint-Lazare before being placed in the care of the monks of the abbey of Saint-Denis. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the bishop of Paris transferred the administration of this priory of the Knights of Saint-Lazare to the canons of Saint-Victor, with the warning that it was in his power to revoke this donation.

The enclosure of Saint-Lazare,[4] situated outside the walls of Paris, was extensive, on the order of ninety-two acres. The land grew wheat, barley, and alfalfa. The buildings standing on it included lodgings for the canons, the church and its cloister, an infirmary, the prison of the seigniory, a house of detention for the mentally disturbed, and, in another part of the estate, a series of little houses meant for the lepers. In addition, there were the usual dependencies—stables, barns, cellars, and various storage buildings. The prior also owned other real estate in the capital city and neighboring parishes and had the use of revenues from the levy of various taxes, in particular from the Fair of Saint-Laurent, held near the estate. These revenues may have been sizable, but the restoration of the buildings would be a matter of great expense for upkeep of the priory had long been neglected. Very few lepers were still being brought to Saint-Lazare. As for other inmates, they were limited to three or four mental patients and a few young ne'er-do-wells, detained at the request of their families.

The monks of Saint-Victor numbered ten at this time; they were in constant conflict with their prior. For this reason, he was driven by exhaustion and discouragement to offer the priory to Vincent de Paul, who was known for his good works. In spite of the rejection he received, Adrien Le Bon remained determined and came back to speak with Vincent again, after leaving him six months to think the matter over. Once more, Vincent hesitated because of the modest size of his group and his dislike of stir and gossip. He also feared the reaction of the parish priests

of Paris and of other convents of canons gathered in the Congregation of France under the energetic staff of Father Faure.[5] Adrien Le Bon then called on André Duval to intervene; he was a great friend of Vincent, who always followed his advice. This wise doctor felt that Le Bon's proposal would be beneficial for the Congregation, and Vincent finally gave in. All that remained was to establish the terms of the contract, and this was not easy. A long letter from Vincent to Guillaume de Lestocq lists the many difficulties that had to be overcome. In particular, there was the question of how the canons of Saint-Victor and the priests of the Mission would live together, given that their work and their respective ways of life differed so much. What material considerations should be offered to Adrien Le Bon and his confrères?[6]

The contract of merger between the priory of Saint-Lazare and the Congregation of the Mission was finally signed before a notary on January 7, 1632, and approved on the next day by the archbishop of Paris. This dignitary specified that he would retain jurisdiction over matters both spiritual and temporal, concerning the priory and the priests of the Mission. There were to be at least twelve of these priests, eight of whom would be permanently assigned to preaching missions without charge in the diocese of Paris and they would be required to give fifteen days a year to the preparation of clerics of the diocese for ordination.[7] Had Vincent finally reached a safe harbor after two years of difficult negotiation?

Letters patent of the king to confirm this union of two religious institutions were signed on January 22, 1632, but the parlement blocked their registration for the religious of Saint-Victor as well as the priests of the city, suburbs, and outlying districts of Paris were expressing objections. In particular, the religious of Saint-Victor presented one request after another for the annulment of the union, even though the priory of Saint-Lazare had not been a dependency of their abbey since 1625. After having hesitated for so long, and spent so much time seeking advice, Vincent suffered a moment of discouragement. He confided to a friend: "You know that the religious of Saint-Victor are contesting our possession of Saint-Lazare. You cannot imagine the expressions of submission that I have offered them, in the spirit of the Gospel, even though there was no reason to do so, according to the assurances of Monsieur Duval and everyone who knows how matters stand. It will all turn out as Our Lord wishes."[8]

Help came in the person of Vincent's compatriot, Jean Duvergier de Hauranne, abbot of Saint-Cyran. The two had met in 1609, during

Vincent's first months in the capital. They may even have shared living quarters for a while, and, as time went on, they were helpful to each other. Vincent had asked help of Madame de Gondi, sister-in-law of Monsieur de Fargis, ambassador of France to Madrid, to obtain the release of Saint-Cyran's nephew, imprisoned in Spain. Saint-Cyran had provided support for some relatives of Vincent when they were involved in an unpleasant situation. Now Saint-Cyran used some of his most important connections, particularly with the advocate general, Bignon, who was in charge of the case of Saint-Lazare. He convinced Bignon to argue vigorously in favor of the Congregation of the Mission, thus ending the case put forward by the religious of Saint-Victor.[9]

Finally, on September 7, 1632, the parlement ordered the registration of the king's letters patent. But the difficulties had not yet come to an end. In giving his approval, the archbishop of Paris had stipulated that he reserved to himself the right of visitation, in matters both spiritual and temporal. Vincent did not hesitate to request that he relinquish this requirement. "I begged him insistently to give us a dispensation from this provision. When he refused, I told him that we would rather withdraw, and we would have done so without fail if he had persisted in his demands."[10] Thus after having wavered endlessly before accepting Saint-Lazare, after having been obliged to fight to keep it, he was ready to abandon it rather than to cede even the slightest bit of his autonomy!

In signing the document of merger between Saint-Lazare and the Mission, Vincent was taking on heavy financial responsibilities. He declared himself ready to disburse annuities of 2,100 livres to the prior and 500 livres to each of the ten canons, not to mention paying for the upkeep of eight of his own priests who were to do their missionary work exclusively in the diocese of Paris. Moreover, there were urgent repairs and improvements to be undertaken in the buildings of the priory. But as would happen again so many times, Providence brought a generous donor, Nicolas Viviers, counselor of the king and master of accounts, who turned over to Vincent a sum of 10,000 livres for a foundation that would supply missions in the parliamentary domains of Toulouse, Bordeaux, and Provence.[11]

Installation of the Mission at Saint-Lazare represented a decisive step for the young congregation because it would allow expansion of all the activities developed there. The whole affair revealed much about Vincent's character. His slow progress toward any decision was part of his peasant side—to weigh the pros and the cons in deliberate fashion,

to talk things over for a sense of acting correctly. His hesitation was also a reaction of modesty and humility; this gift was too handsome for his insignificant company. But once the decision was made, he was inflexible. If a trial was necessary, like it or not, he was prepared to engage. He was also immovable on the principle of authority for his congregation—he was the superior and he had no intention of ceding even a bit of his power. Vincent was willing to defend this principle before the archbishop of Paris and later, before the Holy See.

Saint-Lazare filled up rapidly. The first guests came to the retreats for ordinands of the diocese of Paris in six annual groups of about sixty each. In a letter to a friend, Vincent described the program for these retreats: "His Grace the archbishop . . . has ordered that from now on, those of his diocese who have this desire [to be ordained] will withdraw for ten days before the conferral of each order, to make a spiritual retreat with the priests of the Mission, practice meditation, which is so necessary for priests, make a general confession of all their past lives, review moral theology, particularly as it concerns the use of the sacraments, learn how to conduct liturgies well, and finally, to learn about all the other things necessary for priests."[12]

All these people were housed and fed at no charge, and this significant expense would only grow as retreats began to be offered to ordinands from the provinces and laymen. The number of visitors at Saint-Lazare at any given time was somewhere between sixty and one hundred. Vincent was able to enroll the generosity of the Ladies of Charity in this work. Thus, the wife of President de Herse[13] pledged 1,000 livres for each ordination for a period of five years. Her donation was an example for the marquise de Maignelay, sister of Jean-François de Gondi, archbishop of Paris, who would finance almost all of Vincent's undertakings.

Suitable priests had to be found to preach all these retreats. With his ability to engage people, Vincent was able to bring the city's most talented preachers to Saint-Lazare. This was the venue of the first preaching of Nicolas Pavillon, and Françoise-Étienne de Caulet,[14] both future bishops, and later of Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, to mention only the best known.

Vincent gave thought to ways in which one could preserve for priests the good spiritual disposition which they had achieved during their ordination retreats. For this purpose, he adopted the suggestion of one of them to bring former retreatants together once a week. This

was the beginning of the Tuesday Conferences,[15] attended in Vincent's lifetime by more than 250 priests from several dioceses. He found it important to preside at these meetings himself, preserving an informal atmosphere and allowing each member to express himself freely on the topic suggested the week before. The focus of these topics was the life of Jesus Christ, symbol of the priesthood, and love of the poor. For nearly thirty years, despite his many responsibilities, Vincent disciplined himself to sit quietly in the midst of this circle of priests. With his simple, image-filled speech, he meditated aloud on the vocation of the priest and on his model, Jesus Christ. Of all the good works created by Vincent, the Tuesday Conferences was perhaps the most illumined by his own personality.

The participants in these conferences soon organized themselves into an informal group for whom Vincent proposed a rule of common life that they followed while doing their own work in parishes or the diocese.[16] Word of this company of priests attracted the most distinguished churchmen—doctors of the Sorbonne, superiors of congregations, directors of seminaries. The group became a nursery for prelates: about twenty of its members became bishops or archbishops, and it must be said that Vincent, in spite of his humility, was not indifferent to these promotions as they occurred. In 1637 he wrote with open satisfaction to one of his correspondents: "The assembly of reverend priests of this diocese continues to fare better and better. Just now, three bishops have been chosen from it."[17]

Organizing retreats for ordinands and leading the Tuesday Conferences did not distract Vincent from his work of the Confraternities of Charity. These kept increasing in number as they were established in each parish where a mission was preached. Louise de Marillac made her regular visiting tours to nurture the enthusiasm of the members. In 1632, she was at Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, Launois, Herblay and the next year at Verneuil, Pont-Saint-Maxence, Gournay, Neufville-le-Roy. Vincent kept up a regular correspondence with her, now encouraging, now gently reprimanding when she gave in to her crises of scrupulosity: "I cannot help but tell you that tomorrow I will really reproach you for giving in to these vain and frivolous anxieties. Oh, prepare yourself to be well admonished!"[18] In these letters, he also kept her up to date about daily life at Saint-Lazare: "I am buried over my head in multitudes of retreatants, a bishop-elect, a first president, two doctors, a professor of theology, and

Monsieur Pavillon." Then he asks her to go to Villeneuve-sur-Yonne where the Charité is in need of some prodding. In this letter, he gives thought to the details of the journey, whether it should be in a carriage with Madame Goussault and Mademoiselle Poulaillon or on a river barge as far as Joigny. He suggests where she can get lodging, and tells her that she must visit the pastor of the place and catechize the little girls: "This will make it easier for you to win their mothers for God."[19] Now it is not the spiritual director speaking, with his occasionally demanding voice, but an attentive friend who watches affectionately over this fragile woman whom he is sending out on dangerous roads.

Vincent realized that the design of the Charités was self-limiting: good will finally tires. Married women are kept at home by the demands of the household. As for the noble ladies who could not go out and besmirch their gowns in the hovels where most of the sick and poor were housed, they delegated to their servants the task of carrying the kettle to the needy. Moreover, there was a need for persons able to provide schooling for the country girls and these were hard to find among the Ladies of Charity. As for the attempt to create Charités made up of men and women together, it had not been successful, and Vincent finally abandoned this model, coming to the conclusion that men and women working together would never agree on matters of administration.

Directly in contact with all these problems, Louise de Marillac had the idea of being helped by true servants, whom she would organize into a sort of company. Vincent, for his part, thought this over with his customary prudence and circumspection. He tempered Louise's zeal, because it had a tendency to make her act too soon: "One should not overstep the limits of Providence," he liked to say. Around that time, in 1629 or 1630, a girl of praiseworthy devoutness came to them, Marguerite Naseau. As a simple cowherd in Suresnes, she had taught herself to read and had started, all on her own, to teach the other girls in her village. She came and put herself at the disposal of Vincent, who sent her to Villepreux, where she met other girls of good will. She came back to the Charité of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet when an epidemic of the plague swept through the capital. She died in March 1633 while caring for a woman stricken with the plague, with whom she shared her bed. Marguerite Naseau provided Vincent with the very embodiment of what he had been looking for without being able to describe it. She was to be the first Daughter of Charity.[20] In November 1633, Louise de Marillac, having finally obtained Vincent's consent, welcomed four or five

girls to her lodgings near Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. They would be the first core group of the Congregation of the Daughters of Charity. At first, Vincent considered them to be only helpers for the Ladies of Charity; until 1647, when he speaks of the Sisters, it is the Ladies of Charity that he means. The others were simply "the girls." Later, he would call them "my sisters," gradually recognizing their autonomy.

In the midst of his many projects, the rural missions remained for Vincent the heart and the essential center of his labors and his apostolate. He found it important to take part in the work himself as often as possible. Once, when he was on a missionary journey, his horse stumbled and fell. He was pinned under his mount, but escaped without too much injury. He made light of the incident when he recounted it to Louise de Marillac: "The horse collapsed and then fell on me. It was most dangerous, but Our Lord protected me most directly. Not a trace of the accident remains with me, except a little sprained ligament in my foot, which does not even hurt now." As was the practice of the day, doctors hastened to purge him: "I will be purged tomorrow and the next day. I'll be able to travel by carriage as far as four kilometers from here."[21]

When he did not go along on a mission because he was detained by some rather extraordinary difficulty at home, he wrote at length to the person conducting it. This happened once when Antoine Portail was at Montmirail planning to travel with his team to Joigny, a distance of about 100 kilometers as the crow flies. Vincent wanted to advise him about how the journey should be made: "If you go on foot and take only one horse, I ask for two things—make your days short, and let those who are tired take turns riding the horse." This was an important mission, with a team of ten priests. Vincent specified the assignments which should go to each one: "Monsieur Pavillon will preach, and Messieurs Renar, Roche, Grenu, and Sergis will do as follows: the first will intone the Credo; the second, God's commandments; the third, the Lord's Prayer and the Ave Maria; and the fourth will administer the sacraments; and as for the shorter catechism, Messieurs Roche and Sergis will be glad they have done it when they teach the longer catechism. As for you, Sir, you will be in charge of the company."[22] Vincent sounds like a captain giving his officers their orders for a maneuver!

In this letter, Vincent also advised Portail to see to it that the Rule was observed, the hours of rising and retiring, prayer, the Office, as well as entering and leaving the church in the proper order. He commented

on his exhortation, saying: "Seldom if ever do the members of the courts fail to rise and retire, leave and return to the Palace at the same hour; most craftsmen do the same; it is only we of the clergy who are so fond of our comfort that we only act as our inclinations lead us. For the love of God, Sir, let us work to denude ourselves of this pitiful sensuality which makes us prisoners of its behest."

He then warned Portail of the difficulties inherent in this mission to a region he knew well: "Tell our priests that of all the missions we have preached, there has not been one more difficult or more important than Joigny, both because of the people who live there and because of the power the Evil One has there in some things."

Adding some specifics to his thoughts, Vincent warns his missionaries against two particular faults that were noticed during the last mission in this region, intemperance and self-involvement. With regard to intemperance, the explanation might be that Joigny is a region of vineyards, where parishioners often offered wine to the missionaries who were not very accustomed to this drink. As to exaggerated love of oneself, Vincent was alluding to the enormous vanity visible in the priests while they were preaching, the pleasure they took in beautiful flights of oratory and the sound of their own voices. Vincent often returned to this topic in letters to his missionaries, giving as a curative example the very simple manner in which Jesus preached: "Although he was the uncreated wisdom of the Eternal Father, he wanted to couch his teachings in a style that was brief, close to the people, and even more humble than that of his apostles."

At the end of this long instruction to Antoine Portail, after calling to mind the faults into which he feared the members of his company might fall, he humbly admitted his own faults: "And because, miserable that I am, I have reason to fear that I myself am the cause of all these faults, since they are all to be found in me, their teacher, and thus spread from me throughout our community, pray to God that he will forgive me." Authority and humility are the two qualities that radiate from this letter which shows Vincent just as he would be throughout his life, in his role as superior of the Congregation of the Mission.

11

Superior of the Mission
1633–1635

Vincent's Connections
His Talents as a Manager
The Charité of the Hôtel-Dieu
The Visitation and Jeanne de Chantal
Pursuit of Missions

By this time, Vincent de Paul was in his fifties, an advanced age for his times. All those who had molded him and left a mark on his character were gone: his parents, Judge de Comet, the papal nuncio Montorio, Pierre de Bérulle, Francis de Sales, Madame de Gondi. He himself had changed a great deal; indeed, he was no longer the same person. How far away now the young cleric, ambitiously running after a prosperous benefice, the slave initiated into the secrets of alchemy, the tutor in the household of the Gondis casting about for his true vocation. Now he was Monsieur Vincent, superior of the Congregation of the Mission in his priory of Saint-Lazare, director of the convents of the Visitation, and royal almoner of the galleys. He had not only found his true path; he had left anonymity behind. He had become a well-known personality, in the humblest corners and the most exalted circles close to the throne. Who had not heard of this smiling, modest priest in his simple cassock, or even met him? Vincent had the reputation of doing wonders wherever he went, and in his wake he brought together people of good will, drawn into action by his example, working to comfort the miserable who suffered in body and soul.

In this first half of the seventeenth century, new religious congregations flourished and charitable institutions sprang up in great numbers. Vincent made himself a part of this general movement, this current of the Counter-Reformation that was enlivening the Catholic Church, but he held a particular place because of his personal radiance and the diversity of the efforts on which he put his mark. Departing from his initial calling of evangelizing the countryside and consoling poor people in distress, he expanded his focus to the formation of priests so that they would be worthy of their role in life. He founded Charités that would extend the beneficial effects of missions in the parishes, and this was the most characteristic of his works. At the same time, he expanded his sphere of influence. Starting on the estates and lands of the Gondis, then working in the diocese of Paris, he was soon sending his missionaries into all the provinces, before propelling them out beyond the boundaries of the kingdom. As he brought aid to the crying misery of the rural areas, he discovered more, to which he also bent his efforts: convicts sentenced to hard labor, delinquent girls, abandoned children. He did not overextend himself, but he found an appropriate response for each case. In order to be effective, he needed the right resources, and in most cases, this meant money. Vincent had a remarkable tool for raising funds—his outstanding ability to create friendships with all the great families who exercised various kinds of power in the kingdom.

From the time of his youth, Vincent had developed this innate gift of being able to arouse the sympathy of those he encountered on his way. That is how he won the protection and support of Judge de Comet and his descendants, the Saint-Martin family, with whom he remained in regular contact. In the same way, he succeeded in winning over his masters in North Africa and the papal nuncio Montorio in Avignon. As a penniless young priest with no resources but the support of his bishop at Dax, he was able to gather acquaintances who would find him a way into the household of Queen Marguerite of Valois and an introduction to Pierre de Bérulle. Named pastor of Clichy-la-Garenne, he immediately cultivated the company of the local aristocrats, the Hennequins, themselves connected to the powerful family of Marillac. Once having obtained his position in the Gondi household, he lived closely with a clan that held, from uncle to nephew, the bishopric of Paris and had entrée to the court. Presented to Francis de Sales, he soon received the office of superior of the house of the Visitation, newly established in

the capital. Because of this, he would be in contact with all the noble families whose daughters were entering this convent, particularly the Fouquet family, five of whose daughters had taken the veil there. Vincent was known to Cardinal de la Rochefoucauld,[1] who entrusted him with delicate tasks such as the judgment of the guérinets.[2] The cardinal particularly wished Vincent to educate and watch over his two nephews, Louis and Claude de Chandenier.[3] They would become faithful disciples and friends of Vincent.

As for Richelieu, his relationship with Vincent seems to have been marked with a certain coldness at first. It is true that the cardinal was well aware of everything the superior of the Congregation of the Mission was doing and did not hesitate to ask him for a list of members of the Tuesday Conferences who seemed worthy to become bishops. However, because Vincent belonged to the circle of the Gondis and the Marillacs, the cardinal had a tendency to mistrust him. Later, he was to support the Mission actively, and his own niece, the marquise de Combalet, future duchess d'Aiguillon,[4] was one of Vincent's most generous and loyal benefactresses.

In this circle of acquaintances whom Vincent skillfully involved in his work, a special place must go to the Company of the Blessed Sacrament. This association was founded in 1630 by a great lord, Henri de Lévis, the duke de Ventadour,[5] who wished to bring together priests and laymen to promote the glory of God by every means possible. This company was surrounded by mystery from the time of its creation since its statutes obligated all members to secrecy. Soon the elite of the Catholic world were numbered in its membership. Among laymen, it included the count d'Argenson, the duke de Liancourt, the first president of Lamoignon, and the marshals de Schomberg and de la Meilleraye. Among the prelates were François Fouquet, bishop of Bayonne, Alain de Solminihac, bishop of Cahors, Antoine Godeau, bishop of Grasse and Vence, and Augustin Potier, bishop of Beauvais. Many friends of Vincent were members, such as Father de Condren, superior of the Oratory, Monsieur Olier, pastor of Saint-Sulpice, François de Perrochel, future bishop of Boulogne, Louis de Chandenier, abbot of Tournus, Louis Abelly, future bishop of Rodez, and Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, to mention only the most famous.

The Company of the Blessed Sacrament wove a network which gradually covered the whole kingdom. It gave its attention to all works of charity and apostolate—visiting prisoners, aiding provinces devastated

by war, evangelization of remote areas, and defending the integrity of the Catholic faith. Vincent joined the Company of the Blessed Sacrament in 1633 or 1634. His work and that of the Company were often related or connected, even though in certain cases he did not approve of the group's positions, particularly in their battle against adherents of the reformed religion. But he found in the Company men who would support him effectively in certain of his undertakings, and in many cases, the Company was a platform for the diffusion of his ideas.[6]

For a long time, Vincent de Paul had sought worldly goods, both for himself and so that he could contribute to his family. Once he became superior of the Mission, having made a vow of poverty and renounced all his possessions, he continued his incessant search for money, but now it was for the sake of his good works. He knew how to appeal to the generosity of his many acquaintances, but he was also an excellent manager. With the age-old instinct of a peasant, he gave priority to the possession of land and buildings, but like a knowing financier, he diversified the sources of his revenues, cultivating income from direct and indirect duties or from transport companies.

At the outset, the assets of the Congregation consisted of the endowment provided by the Gondis, to the amount of 45,000 livres and an annual income of 12,000 livres derived from taxes on salt. This was augmented by the donation of the Collège des Bons-Enfants. But from 1632 on, the major portion of the Congregation's wealth derived from the priory of Saint-Lazare, with all the possessions and rights attached to this seigniory. These assets included the enclosure of forty hectares at the gates of the capital, several farms in the Île-de-France, lands and numerous houses in the working-class suburbs and Paris itself. As a seigniory, Saint-Lazare held the privilege of levying various duties and taxes, including the considerable taxes on the Fair of Saint Laurent.

Some of the rents for farms were paid in currency, some in kind. For example, the farm of Gonesse was rented for 100 royal livres and in addition was expected to yield six measures of wheat a year, six capons, and a fattened pig.[7] The rental of the different houses and palaces regularly brought in around 10,000 royal livres.[8]

Vincent was not content to collect these revenues; he watched over them attentively, requiring an account of the farming operations and giving detailed instruction concerning choice of plantings or haying times. He seized every opportunity to increase the size of the domains, by pur-

chase or exchange of parcels of land. The same degree of attention was given to following the revenues from duties and taxes. He was particularly interested in the operation of coaches and river barges, keeping track of fluctuations in income so that he could make the appropriate business decisions. All in all, he knew how to invest income in such a way that the Congregation could live on income and preserve capital.

In order to manage all this property, which increased over the course of years, Vincent often had to consult with financiers and lawyers. His signature is found at the foot of innumerable notarized documents. He took great care that everything should be done according to the law and good procedures. He knew from experience that hastily concluded contracts usually ended in a trial at law; Saint-Léonard and Grosse-Sauve had taught him a lesson. To protect the Congregation's assets, he sometimes even had to do battle against the royal power. The king was always short of money, and now and then, he wanted to sell certain domains, dependencies of Saint-Lazare, over which the Crown believed it had rights.[9] Vincent also spent time trying to make portions of the estates pay for themselves. He tried to make the many seminarians and retreatants pay for their room and board to the extent their means allowed, and he did the same with the mental patients and the prisoners housed by the priory.[10] Thanks to his careful management, Vincent was able to make his congregation live and grow, and it became possible to maintain Saint-Lazare and the Collège des Bons-Enfants, with their endless procession of missionaries, religious and lay retreatants, ordinands and seminarians. It also became possible to distribute abundant alms on a regular schedule to all the suffering people who knocked on the doors of the priory.

Vincent de Paul had enough responsibilities to prevent him from seeking others, but it was difficult for him to refuse to give advice or help. That is how the creation of the Charité of the Hôtel-Dieu came about. This hospital was administered by the canons of Notre-Dame and the Augustinian sisters cared for the sick. Ladies came to visit and bring small luxuries to supplement the ordinary fare of the hospital and to offer words of comfort. Not surprisingly, there was friction between the sisters, exhausted with their labors, and these ladies, who sometimes exceeded their role. The growing number of patients, which had required the opening of an annex in 1618, the hospital of Saint Louis, overburdened the sisters in spite of the increase in their ranks to one hundred professed members who were assisted by fifty novices (white sisters). The joint action of one sister, Geneviève Bouquet[11] and a lady

visitor, Madame Goussault, bore fruit in the reform of both the Augustinian sisters and the visitors. At this point, Madame Goussault asked Vincent for the formation of a Charité of the Hôtel-Dieu. He was hesitant to become involved in the work of a hospital, which was quite different from his original vocation, assistance to rural people. But Vincent knew Geneviève Bouquet, whom he had probably met at the court of Queen Marguerite of Valois, and Madame Goussault, for her part, was persistent. She returned to the attack several times, even enlisting the intervention of the bishop of Paris in favor of her plan.

Vincent had to capitulate and at the beginning of 1634, he attended a meeting at the home of Madame Goussault, who had called together several pious ladies of the high society of Paris. This was the beginning of the Charité of the Hôtel-Dieu, which would soon have one hundred members. Its field of action would reach beyond the Hôtel-Dieu to take on the work of the Foundling Hospital and the bringing of aid to provinces devastated by war. Vincent, who had been hesitant at the beginning, was soon very happy with this foundation. In July 1634, he wrote to François du Coudray, his representative in Rome: "We established it [the Charité] in several parishes of this city, and not long ago, we established one consisting of 100 or 120 ladies of quality, who visit every day and who, in groups of four, help 800 or 900 people a day, the poor or sick people, and bring them jellies, consommés, soups, preserves, and all kinds of other delicacies, in addition to the usual nourishment which the house furnishes to them, so that these poor people may come to a state of mind in which they are ready to make a general confession of their past lives. In this way, those who are about to die leave this world in a good state and those who will be cured resolve never to offend God again."[12]

In 1630, one of the ladies of this Charité of the Hôtel-Dieu, the good Mademoiselle Poulaillon, separately founded a society for the protection of young girls in danger of being lost, in the words of Monsieur Vincent himself. Being the spiritual director of the foundress of this work, he agreed to be its superior and write a rule for it. A few years later, he was able to bring it about that these Daughters of Providence received letters patent and the approval of the archbishop of Paris, as well as the old hospital of La Santé to house their boarders.[13]

Yet another charitable institution requested the support and advice of Vincent. Their work had begun modestly in 1618 when a gentleman, Robert de Montry, and a Capuchin friar, Brother Athanasius, brother of

President Molé, undertook to help delinquent girls to change their lives and redeem themselves. The marquise de Maignelay lent her financial support, which made it possible to acquire a house in the rue des Fontaines, called La Madeleine. Girls living a disordered life were received there as students. The king endowed this establishment, which then became known as the Monastery of Sainte-Marie-Madeleine and whose boarders became known as the Madelonettes.[14]

While charitable institutions were growing in number the times also gave rise to several new religious orders. In 1632, in Avignon, the Congregation of Missionary Priests of the Most Blessed Sacrament was founded. This congregation adopted the vocation of preaching missions and opening seminaries. Its founder, Christophe d'Authier, wrote to Vincent de Paul to suggest that their two communities might unite. In a letter which Vincent wrote to François du Coudray in January 1634, we can see his hesitation about this plan. "I praise God that he has pleased to raise up in our times so many good and holy souls to help the poor. As for union, it is desirable, but such unions require oneness of faith, means, and spirit. Although we have the same purpose, there are many things that keep us apart. All the orders of the Church have the same faith, which is charity, but because they do not have the same means, they are not always in agreement. In a single order, there is the same faith, the same means, and the same spirit, but even there, there are many occasions for disorder."[15] Vincent was clear-headed and sensible. He knew from experience how difficult such a union would be. His entry into Saint-Lazare, for instance, was not without numerous tensions with the former occupants and even with the prior, Adrien Le Bon, who had been so much in favor of the move. Vincent did what he could to temper the enthusiasm of his young confrère who would try many times to change his mind, but to no avail.

Although he was more and more taken up with the many works which called for his attention, Vincent never neglected his earliest obligations. In 1622, he had been named superior of the first convent of the Visitation founded in Paris. Since then, he had presided every month over the chapter of the monastery and performed the canonical visitation once a year, in which he received all the nuns and listened to them with attention and kindness. On the occasion of various ceremonies, such as the annual renewal of vows, he delivered carefully prepared homilies.[16] The sisters of the Visitation became so numerous that soon it was necessary

to increase the size of the monastery by acquiring the Cossé palace, which was connected to the first building by its gardens. Then a second house was opened in 1626 at rue du Faubourg-Saint-Jacques; Vincent was in charge of this house as well. Directing these convents was very time consuming and had little to do with his original vocation. He took the opportunity to point this out on various occasions, while insisting that he knew he was morally obligated to fulfill this duty: "It is true," he said during a conference, "that blessed Francis de Sales charged me with the direction of the house of the Visitation in this city, in spite of my unworthiness, and that blessed Mother de Chantal urged me to accept the charge."[17] He would try to be quit of this duty, but without success, and so he retained it until his death.

The relations between Jeanne de Chantal and Vincent de Paul were marked by a mixture of confidence and reserve. At the death of Francis de Sales, she asked Vincent to become her spiritual director. He was deeply impressed by his penitent and his approach to her was filled with respect. As a result, his letters took a less natural tone, very different from his usual style, as though he were trying to put himself in the place of Francis de Sales and imitate his turn of phrase: "Now, my dear Mother, would you permit me to ask you whether your unparalleled goodness will once more permit me the good fortune to enjoy the place which it has reserved for me in its dear and kind heart?"[18]

Jeanne de Chantal, for her part, told him with simplicity of her moral suffering and of the problems she experienced in directing her house. She asked him for advice, but still retained her freedom of thought and of action. Thus, when Vincent suggested to her that she should open her houses to visits from authorized priests for the purpose of maintaining a certain uniformity in her order and of avoiding possible deviations from it, she did not hesitate to express her disagreement. It was her opinion that the provision in the founders' Rule which placed each house under the authority of the local diocesan bishop was quite sufficient. She wrote to Vincent: "Our dear sister, the superior of the house in the faubourg Saint-Jacques, has informed me of the opinion that you have been pleased to give us. . . . It is good and sound, and yet, I have not been able to agree to it in my heart."[19]

Vincent remained attached to his idea of this practice of visits, which was the custom in most religious orders. Therefore, he permitted himself to repeat his suggestion a little later, but Jeanne de Chantal rejected it yet again. Vincent gave in: "I can assure you, most amiable and

very dear Mother, that we did not have the least thought in the world that would be contradictory to your ideas, I repeat, not the least."[20]

What a difference in tone when Vincent addressed another of his penitents, Louise de Marillac, to whom his attachment was equally strong. In writing to her, he is simple and direct: "You think about yourself too much. You should go through life at ease and simply." He did not even hesitate to write severely and almost roughly when Louise de Marillac sighed about her son and his future: "I have never seen a woman like you, nor one who is so quick to take things as a proof of her own sinfulness. You say that the choice made by your son is a proof of the judgment of God on you. You are quite wrong to entertain thoughts like these, and even more in the wrong to speak them aloud. . . . In the name of God, Mademoiselle, correct yourself of this fault."[21]

Burdened by numerous activities, spiritual direction, and the cares of administration, Vincent de Paul nevertheless remained faithful to his essential calling of organizing missions for the rural poor. The priests of the Congregation were increasingly in demand in other dioceses. For example, in 1634 they went to labor in the diocese of Bordeaux. Vincent himself traveled to Normandy in November, to Neufchâtel-en-Braye, to found a Charité there.[22] From 1635 on, thanks to a foundation created by a disciple and benefactor, Commander de Sillery,[23] a mission was preached at Brie-Comte-Robert. Antoine Portail, who was assigned to direct the mission, wrote to Vincent that he did not feel equal to his missionary companion in the art of preaching. Vincent replied in encouraging fashion and urged him to preach in a spirit of humility and compassion: "One does not believe a man because he is learned but because he seems to be a good man and because we love him. No one will ever believe in us if we do not bear witness to love and compassion to those of whom we hope to make believers. . . . If you preach in this way, God will bless your labors. If not, you will produce fanfares and noise but bear no fruit."[24]

In August of the same year, Antoine Portail found himself in the Cévennes mountains, where he spent several months in missionary work. Vincent gave him news of the Congregation, which was burdened with requests it could not fulfill in spite of the new recruits flowing into Saint-Lazare: "Monseigneur de Mende has expressed a great deal of satisfaction with your work. Monseigneur de Viviers came to us with the same report. Only God is able to be everywhere."[25]

Once more it was necessary to find the money to pay for all these missions. Vincent insisted that each mission should have its own financing. Thus, in July 1635, he accepted from the good wife of President de Herse a donation of two farms near Étampes, Mespuits and Fréneville. This gift was in harmony with a promise to preach, in perpetuity, a mission on the estates of this lady every five years. Another team of missionaries set out in May 1635, led by Jean-Jacques Olier, to Saint-Ilpize, near Brioude in the Auvergne. After an eleven-day march, the team arrived at its destination. Vincent received an enthusiastic report from Olier: "At first, people came in numbers as great as we could wish. That is, there were as many as we could hear in the confessional. But toward the end, the people were experiencing such intense emotions and the crowd was so great that sometimes we needed twelve or thirteen priests to respond fittingly to their ardor. We saw them from dawn until the heat of noon, which was extraordinary, and all the way to the last sermon, staying there without food or drink."[26]

From letters like this, we obtain a living picture of these missions—the reserved beginning, with a little suspicion on the part of the population and the local clergy, and then the contact established through the children and their catechism lessons. This caused the adults to be less timid, and the ceremonies and preaching were a distraction for the country folk who so seldom saw anything new. Finally, souls were touched and people were moved to make their confessions. The mission ended with communion. People came from neighboring villages, there was a feast-day mood, and if it was God's will, the action of grace was felt by all.[27]