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## Vincentian Discernment

BY

HUGH O'DONNELL, C.M.

I started my relationship with the Daughters of Charity in 1970 when Sister Mary Rose McPhee and Father Arthur Trapp invited four or five Vincentians each to prepare a talk and then go on the circuit. One of the most unexpected gifts that has come to me as a Vincentian has been to discover the double family and, as the gospel says, to have a hundred or many hundred sisters. It has been a great grace for me. I am glad to be back on the circuit.<sup>1</sup>

The Holy Spirit has a lot to do with this day, so let us begin with the "Veni Sancte Spiritus"—meditatively in chant as it is done at Taizé. (The presence of the Spirit was felt from the beginning.)

Let us reflect on this paragraph from Abelly's biography of Vincent. It is taken from a translation of Abelly's life of Vincent, 1664, which has been recently published by the Vincentian Studies Institute.

Among the multitude of thoughts and inclinations that incessantly arise within us, many appear to be good, but do not come from God and are not pleasing to him. How, then, should one discern these? We must look at them carefully, have recourse to *God in prayer*, and ask for his light. We must reflect on the motives, purposes, and means, to see if all of these are in keeping with his good pleasure. We must talk over our ideas with prudent persons, and take the advice of those placed over us. These persons are the depositories of the treasures of the wisdom and grace of God. In doing what they suggest, we are carrying out the will of God.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>These reflections were first presented to the Daughters of Charity of the West Central Province on three successive Saturdays: in Fort Worth, Texas on 7 March 1992; in New Orleans, Louisiana on 14 March 1992 and in Saint Louis, Missouri on 21 March 1992. They were subsequently presented at the Vincentian Week in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 19-23 October 1992, which was planned and celebrated together by the Daughters of Charity and the priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Mission. These reflections are equally relevant to both the Daughters of Charity and the Vincentians.

<sup>2</sup>Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission* (Divided into Three Books), trans. William Quinn, F.S.C., ed. John E. Rybolt, C.M., notes by Edward Udovic, C.M., and John E. Rybolt, C.M., intro. Stafford Poole, C.M. (New Rochelle, NY: 1993), 3:46; *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, C.M., 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), 12:436, n. 4.

This is a wonderful summary of Vincent's way of discernment. First, he started out with openness to the will of God. Then, he weighed the reasons. And thirdly, he trusted himself to a person who had some sense about the matter. He had a great sense of trust that the Lord mediates his will through other people, superiors and others in whom we can have great confidence. This last point seems particularly characteristic of Vincent and Louise.

Our theme for the day is *discernment*. It is one of the most needed gifts for the present as well as for the future. Times have changed a great deal since I took vows. I took vows in a very stable society, a stable Catholic society, a stable American society. In those days, everything supported you and me and carried us along. It was hard to get into trouble. Now society works in another direction. There are many ways in which society does not support the decisions and the commitments we have made. Beyond that, however, a tremendous change has occurred in our world in the past thirty to forty years. Change has become our way of life. We have gone from a world that was stable and predictable to a world of continuing change. You can see right away the context for discernment.

Before, everything was predictable in a certain way, we do this week what we did last week. I know I would never last in a Trappist monastery, I would last the first week, but on the next Monday, I would say "Now, what do I do?" and they'd say, "What did you do last Monday?" and I would say "Well, I had better leave." I do not think I could take the routine. That is how our lives were, weren't they? They had a great deal of predictability to them, but now they do not. The shifts in society economically, politically, socially, and in every way have been immense. Let me suggest just one such change. Our generation, it seems, is the first generation in the history of humanity in which to be single is socially acceptable. In all tribal cultures and historical societies to be single is undesirable and often a cause for derision or pity. When I was a boy, if someone was single, we thought that he/she had failed in love. It was generally unacceptable, except that the Church had always provided religious life as a way for people with a single vocation. Now, we have finally come in the last twenty to twenty-five years to a new and different way of seeing things. Being single is a widespread and socially acceptable phenomenon, at least in the West. I think it is the first time in any society that this has been the case. This is just one instance of how radically the world in which we have lived since the end of the Second

Vatican Council has changed and is changing.

Let me, parenthetically and in passing, speak of our response to this new situation. It concerns the new opportunity for the value of celibacy. This gift of celibacy that we have been carrying, half knowing what it was but not knowing what it was, has fresh meaning. We are beginning to see that there is a new world of meaning for celibacy, not only as a religious phenomenon but precisely as a secular phenomenon. There is a new world and context in which the values embodied in celibacy are life-giving exactly in the world as such and not only in religious life. This new world is not only one of adversity but also of opportunity and of blessing for the gospel.

Secondly, let us look at humanity's changing consciousness. If we ask ourselves what are the roots of our contemporary situation, we might say the roots go back to Vietnam, or we might say the roots go back to the Second World War or at least it is a twentieth century phenomenon, or we might say the roots go back to the Enlightenment; we might even want to say the roots go back to the Reformation. Maybe the roots are even deeper.

In the Church, this is certainly true. Karl Rahner, for example, when he gave the graduation address at Weston in Boston in 1980, reflected on the question: "What was the theological significance of the Second Vatican Council?" He said that it was the first council "of a World Church." It was not the first council of a Church existing throughout the world, for that has been the case for a while now, but it was the first council of a Church in which people from around the world spoke in their own name. The Chinese hierarchy was established as Chinese only in 1922; the first African bishops were appointed in 1926. Church is becoming indigenous everywhere. The leadership in the Church is indigenous—coming from its own soil rather than being imported or transplanted from Europe and maybe North America to other places.

It is a new world. Human consciousness itself is being transformed. Authority is less and less the means of transmitting values, while personal authenticity and integrity are more and more the effective means of transmitting values. The old values are still important, very important in fact, but the way of transmitting them is less centered on "Listen to me because I have the authority" and far more centered on "Listen to me because I am an authentic witness of the gospel."

Yes, there is a new consciousness developing. It is not just about

change and loss, it is about grace. The Lord is in the midst of all of this. Person is far more central. The value and importance of each person as a unique, unrepeatable expression of who God is, is key. We are beginning to find new friends across boundaries that formerly separated us, as our affirmation of the human person and human authenticity comes into focus.

When God spoke your life into the world, he spoke once and forever, never to be repeated. God has said something special in each of you and in each person you serve and in each person who comes into your life. He has said a word that can never be said again because he has said it uniquely in you and uniquely in me. We begin to see that each person is unique and of immense value and importance. I am not talking here about "individuals." Thomas Merton in that classic chapter, "Christianity and Totalitarianism" in *Disputed Questions*, made clear the difference between an individual and a person. "Individuals are faceless units within mass societies. They are units of consumption or production escaping freedom and renouncing personal responsibility. A person, by contrast, is made for love and communion in freedom, responsibly standing on his/her own two feet, who tries to realize his/her own fallibility and struggles to decide in his/her own conscience what is the will of God."<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, there is a new mode of relationships developing. The great prophet of what is happening was John XXIII. On 11 October 1962, in the homily with which he opened the Second Vatican Council, John XXIII said, as he set the revised agenda for the Council, "Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relationships." His reference to Divine Providence has a special resonance in Vincentian ears.

Providence is leading us to a new order of human relationships. He clarified his meaning by adding: a new order of human relationships in which violence is factored out, not in. It makes an essential difference whether or not violence or the threat of violence is in the background when we relate to other people. John XXIII says my relationship to you must be a gospel relationship in which the threat or use of violence is not a background factor, but rather a relationship based in reverence, respect, and regard, in listening and challenging, in all those things that go into human relationships, in love. Perhaps our own experience can testify to John XXIII's vision and we can say

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<sup>3</sup>*Disputed Questions*, (New York: 1960), 136.

Divine Providence has been leading us to a new order of human relationships. There is joy and peace in knowing Divine Providence is at the heart of the new order—the dying and rising—we have been experiencing.

This, then, is the new world in which discernment is coming to center stage. Things are not predictable, not routine. We are called to pay attention to our unfolding history in a new way.

I have great admiration for what you have done as a province. It is truly a prophetic thing, the choice you have made. You have chosen to become discerning communities in the next three to five years.

This is a radical choice. It is on the cutting edge, and it is a choice that our side of the Vincentian family has not come to in a concrete way at the present moment. We have all been involved in planning over the past two decades and articulated and pursued many goals, strategic and otherwise. But I have seldom been struck so much as I have by your goal for becoming discerning communities in the next three to five years. It is operationally possible. It is concrete, specific, mainstream, cutting edge, full of promise.

We know that the real master of discernment is Ignatius. We have all, including Vincent and Louise, learned from him and his sons, the Jesuits. Yet, Vincent and Louise, in their time, incarnated discernment in a truly unique way. We are beginning to discover how to describe it to ourselves. We have probably always felt their gifts, but now we are able to find the words for it.

Discernment, then, what is it? Two key components are (1) to be led by the Spirit (2) in freedom. Our freedom is engaged in discernment. It is the Spirit who addresses our freedom. The Spirit calls us, invites us in our freedom to go in a certain direction, to act in a certain way, to be in a certain way. It is the dynamic: the action of the Spirit touching the freedom of the children of God.

It is a choice, not between good and evil, but between two or more goods. In a course on discernment at Saint Thomas Seminary, students were asked, "What have you learned so far?" One student said that in learning that discernment is not a choice between good and evil but a choice among goods, he found himself far more challenged than when he was choosing between good and evil. It is true. It is a greater challenge for us to acknowledge that discernment is the choice among several goods.

One of the things that has changed in our society is young people have a great many more options today. When I was growing up, there

were not so many options. A person could do what his or her mother and father did, could enter religious life, and a few went to the university. The options were limited. Discernment today has to do with facing an increased number of good options. It is good news but difficult and challenging news.

Secondly, it is not just about figuring out what people in general need to do, but discernment involves listening to the way the Holy Spirit is present to me as a person, or to our local community, or, if you are thinking provincially, to our province. It is just the exact opposite of mass production. The key to mass production is interchangeable parts. You can buy the same muffler in California, Florida, or Taiwan. But that is exactly what discernment is not. God speaks to us, not just as instances of human nature, but to each of us as persons who have a name, an unrepeatable name. So God speaks to us as unique persons and as persons in communion with one another, either in our local communities or in the larger communities of the province or in the communion of communities we know as the Church. Discernment is a choice addressed to me or to us. It is existential, historical, personal. This word is addressed to me, and to you, and to us in communion with each other. At the heart of discernment is not conscience's discrimination between good and evil, nor theology's identification of what is common to everyone, but exactly the inspiration of the Spirit present to the person as a person who is unique and in communion at this moment in his/her history.

From another point of view discernment is about the answer to two questions. The first is: what are the *yeses* and what are the *nos* in my life? Discernment is about the next yes or no. I know a great deal about myself if I know what I say "Yes" to and what I say "no" to. For example, the basic scriptural invitation which comes from one of the prophets is "choose life." It is not, "I like life, or wouldn't life be good?" but, it is *choose life*. We say "yes" to life and "no" to everything that is harmful to life. Discernment then is about what we say "yes" to, what we say "no" to in the present and near future.

The second concrete question is: where does my body, time, money belong? The things we have at our disposal—our bodies, our person, our time, our money—where do they belong? We have a lot of options. These are the concrete choices we must make.

Discernment has three different faces. The first is the one we know best of all. It is the vocational face. When we hear someone is discerning, we imagine he or she is seeking the answer to a life question, such

as: am I called to the community, will I get married, shall I marry this person, is the Lord calling me to be single? The vocational issues come to mind. Or we may think of direction changing decisions, such as a change in career. We are beginning to find out that in religious life we might have not just one apostolic career but two or three or even many in a lifetime. In general, we assume discernment refers to major turning points in a person's life. It includes mid-life decisions. We have learned much more about this in the last twenty to thirty years. The true self is emerging in mid-life which involves a number of decisions. What is clearer to me today is that not only do we receive a first call, but, somewhere in mid-life, we receive a second call. We need to listen to that second call, as it were to a second vocation. It is like a vocation within a vocation.

These vocational or life direction decisions involve a "yes." The *quality* of that "yes" means everything. As I think about my own life, the most difficult times have been when my heart has been divided, when it is been half here and half there. The best times of my life have been when I've been able to say "yes" unconditionally in a single direction, when I've said "yes"- "yes" without all the "yes, buts." When my "yes" has been single-minded and unconditional, I can suffer a great deal, I have been able to put up with a lot, I have seen things in perspective. When my heart was divided, however, and my "yes" was conditional, it was very hard because my energies, at their root, were divided. This is especially true for people like ourselves for whom spiritual integrity is at the heart of our lives. To be divided in the area of our commitment is very painful.

The quality of our "yes" is important not only to our lives but also to the decision making process. The more we can say "yes" to our vocation, our mission, our community, the more power there is in our lives, the power of the Holy Spirit.

On the subject of first call and second call, Jean Vanier has said the first call is to generosity and the second call is to love. The generosity of the first half of our lives is a participation in the generosity of God. It is a great gift. But we may let that generosity fill our lives to such an extent that we do not have to deal with the brokenness, the darkness, the limitations and the sin in our lives. So, there is nothing wrong with generosity, except when I am consumed with generosity there are some unanswered questions waiting for the day when I run out of energy. On that day, some of the harder questions will come up to me for purification. Then I will begin to see that while there was really a



great deal of God in my generosity there was also quite a bit of myself. That is a painful day but a good day, because, if I have the patience and the courage to stay with it, the Lord purifies my spirit. Love becomes more and more central. The journey then is a journey from a generosity, which has a lot of love in it, to love itself. Love becomes increasingly the center of our lives. Generosity is a great gift; love is a greater gift. The transition happens when the Spirit purifies our hearts and leads us in the way of love.

Another pattern is also evident in the journey: it is from action to presence. This pattern has special importance in an apostolic community, because at some point there comes a diminishment of our energies. If our total identity as apostolic persons is linked up with our activity and our achievements, when our energies diminish we begin to think we are running out of love for God. Actually, what is happening is that our way of loving God is being transformed from activity to presence. The greatest of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit is presence. Father Richard McCullen, the former superior general of the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity, has said, "A saint is someone who has time." That is true, isn't it? If someone has time for us, if I have time for you or you have time for me, that is a great gift. Someone who has time is someone who is able to be present. This shift to presence is accompanied by intensified apostolic prayer. The heart of the apostle grows in us and we come to carry the world of our brothers and sisters—their joys, their sorrows, their brokenness, their hope—in hearts full of God's compassion.

There is a movement here. As we listen in discernment, we are listening within a certain flow from action to presence. It does not speak against action nor does it say action does not continue, but there is movement to the center that is of great importance at the core of which is a listening heart.

Discernment has the image of being heady, of figuring things out. Discernment is essentially of the heart. It is about being present to what is going on in such a way that we can hear. It flows from a listening heart.

If the first face of discernment has to do with the paths we take, the second has to do with everyday life—living a life of daily discernment. We have sometimes called this "living in the presence of God." The Quakers would call it "being present to the Presence." We should be present to other people. It is even more profound if we seek to be present to the Presence in everyone and every event and everything.

This is at the heart and soul of Vincent and Louise. What they say is "God is here!" Be present to the Presence--living with a listening heart, a daily attentiveness to the Lord's Presence, a daily discerning, a daily decisioning.

Perhaps, the messianic promise found in Jeremiah/Ezekiel, which always seems to fire our hearts and imaginations, speaks to this same point. The prophet says, "I will take away their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh."<sup>4</sup> We have been given through the Spirit of the Messiah truly human hearts filled with the Holy Spirit. It is with these hearts we attend to the presence of God day by day and hour by hour in our lives. It is with hearts of flesh, full of God's own incarnate compassion, that we listen attentively to the personal Presence in whom we are immersed. Vie Thorgren has called this "living with a discerning heart."

Finally, the third face of discernment has to do with making choices in social areas, in our outreach to our brothers and sisters. Sometimes we get stuck, because the problems are so great. One tendency consequently is to say to ourselves, "Whatever I can do is only a drop in the ocean," and then decide to mind our own business and go our own way. Another temptation is to take upon ourselves the entire social agenda and burn out in a year or two or three. How do we live between those two options? The Quakers, and especially Thomas Kelly who wrote a book called *A Testament of Devotion*, are very helpful in this question. The Quakers have a thing called "concerns." God is concerned with all of creation, God is concerned with all our brothers and sisters, God is concerned with all those who are in need, but God knows that you and I cannot do it all. So, in the midst of His concern for all of us, He gives each of us a "concern"—a specific concern—like children or the homeless. Maybe God gives a person two or three "concerns." Anyway in the midst of this very large agenda, God speaks a personal word to each of us calling us to respond to some brothers and sisters here and now in this place and in this time.

The insight that within the universal concern that God has for all creation, he addresses a specific concern to you and me, is helpful and freeing. I find it is truly liberating. It allows us not to cop out and not to burn out, but to live in the peace of God as we give ourselves wholeheartedly in communion with God's concern for all. It calls us

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<sup>4</sup>Ezekiel 36:26.

to listen to what God is calling us to in the midst of this large social agenda. Among the many concerns of the kingdom and of humanity, we are called to attend to what one, two or three concerns God gives to me, to us, to live now! So that is the third face of discernment.

One of the most encouraging and exciting developments in the Vincentian tradition is the fact that Vincent and Louise are now being listened to from a lay perspective. In the past year, Vie Thorgren gave a very beautiful talk on Louise at the Symposium "Legacy of Charity," just published in the recent issue of *Vincentian Heritage*.<sup>5</sup> In the year she spent preparing the talk, a couple of things came to the surface about Louise. Perhaps you have known them for a long time, but I am learning them. We use them in the course we teach together on discernment.

The first point concerns Louise and the hidden life of Jesus at Nazareth. The course begins with Jesus's hidden life at Nazareth, which was so close to the heart of Louise and at the center of her spiritual life. We came to understand discernment must start from that invisible daily place manifest in the hiddenness of Nazareth. Discernment is not about negotiating a good deal with God. It is about listening to what God is calling us to do. And one of the best places from which to listen is not the public arena but that secret place called Nazareth, whether it is the physical Nazareth where Jesus spent most of his life or the interior Nazareth we each carry within us. Louise is very strong about Nazareth and from some of the letters we see that she taught Vincent about Nazareth.

One of the great influences on the contemporary spiritual life of the Church is Charles de Foucauld. The heart and soul of his spirituality is Nazareth. He himself spent several years in Nazareth itself, washing dishes for a sisters' community and spending the rest of his time in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. The spirituality of the Little Sisters of Jesus and the Little Brothers of Jesus is to live the mystery of Nazareth in interior silence, humble presence, and hiddenness in God. It is this spirituality of the mystery of Nazareth which is the heart of their presence among the poorest of the poor as coworkers and fellow human beings, Brothers and Sisters of Jesus.

There is a wonderful letter on this theme which Louise wrote to Anne Hardemont.

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<sup>5</sup>Vie Thorgren, "'God is my God': The Generative Integrity of Louise de Marillac," *Vincentian Heritage* 12, no. 2 (1991):201-18.

I praise God with all my heart for the disposition in which you tell me you now are. Nevertheless, I share the pain you are experiencing because you feel that you are doing nothing. Be thoroughly consoled, my dear Sister, by the thought that you are imitating the state in which the Son of God found Himself when, after leaving the temple where He had been working for the glory of God, He went with the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph to obey them. He thereby accomplished the will of God by toiling for many years at the humble tasks of a carpenter's shop. Yet He had come upon earth to labor for the salvation of the entire human race. We do not know, my dear Sister, why Divine Providence has put you aside, leaving you hidden in the Son of God. Nevertheless, by working unostentatiously and quietly in the service of the poor, you are most certainly fulfilling the designs of Divine Providence. If you reflect upon this, my dear Sister, as I am sure you do, you will find profound peace and you will wait lovingly and confidently until God wants something else of you. In this way, you will be practicing holy indifference.<sup>6</sup>

Louise recognizes that Anne feels like she is doing nothing, so she invites her to do what she does in a spirit of quiet peace and attentiveness to what God might be asking of her next. There is a wonderful power here! The interior Nazareth in each of our hearts is the place best suited for listening to what the Lord is saying in our lives.

A second way in which Louise has revealed the heart of discernment to us is through her devotion to the thirst of Jesus. The mystery of the thirst of Jesus reveals the longing and desire which make discernment dynamic. The thirst of Jesus is not primarily a physical thirst but a thirst for communion with his Father and the Spirit and a thirst to share the fruits of the cross with all his brothers and sisters.

Two of the most powerful things then that we can have going for us in our lives are spiritual participation in the mystery of Nazareth and free communion in the mystery of the thirst of Jesus to share the goods of the kingdom with humanity.

Monika Hellwig in 1976 wrote *The Eucharist and the Hungers of the World* in preparation for the Eucharistic Congress during our bicentennial year. In it, she said, that in America hunger and thirst are unacceptable. If you are hungry or thirsty, have a coke, a pizza, a candy bar. But in the spiritual life to hunger and thirst is the heart of our lives—it is our energy, our power. When we allow ourselves to hunger and thirst in the spiritual order, we let ourselves live in long-

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<sup>6</sup>Louise de Marillac to Anne Hardemont, 20 December 1659, in *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac: Correspondence and Thoughts*, ed. and trans. Louise Sullivan, D.C. (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 660.

ing for the kingdom and for communion with the Absolute Mystery, whom alone our hearts are made for. Physical hunger and thirst, for example, in fasting can contribute to living in the desire of our hearts. If we are looking at ourselves as discerners, we need to be at home in Nazareth longing for the coming of the kingdom and the good of our sisters and brothers. A brief story. When I taught at Notre Dame in the seventies, a young priest—a searcher —was in my class. One morning I read something from the closing pages of Thomas Merton's book *Contemplative Prayer*. He was scheduled to finish the program that day. He had asked me earlier if I had read the book *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*. I had not. After class, he came up to me and gave me the book and said, "Thanks for the class," and left. When I got to my room, I opened the book and it was inscribed. He wrote, "I learned this morning in listening to Merton that contemplation is the home of the pilgrim." I have always remembered those words. Home is not necessarily a place. The home of the pilgrim is within us. It is that Nazareth place, that quiet place. When Nazareth, when contemplation, is the place where we dwell, we can go every place. There is a translation of the meaning of spiritual place being developed in our time for us. A person in Al-Anon had this wonderful insight, which she shared with me. "The Twelve Step Program is the monastery of the world." The translation is from place to way of being in the world.

That is what Louise is telling us. If our way of being is to be interiorly at home in Nazareth and if our way of being is to long for the Kingdom, then discernment has a center and is easy. When we are not in that place and we trying to discern, discernment is difficult. Nazareth is the right place from which to see. A person can best see the valley from the top of the mountain.

The next two sections are about Vincent, the one is taken from a text of Abelly and the other from Dodin. The way of Vincent according to Abelly is a process; the way of Vincent according to Dodin adds content to process.

In the passage from Abelly which we cited at the beginning of the talk this morning the cornerstone of Vincent's discernment is precisely *indifference*, or to put it another way, the willingness to do whatever God wants.

On one occasion Vincent wrote to Louise, "I hate uncertainty as much as you do, but what is really important to us is to govern our lives not by our hatred of uncertainty but by indifference, by which we are open to what God wants. Let us then try to grow in indifference."

In the planning session for these days which I see as having been extremely important for the preparation for these talks, the formation committee and I talked about "indifference" as a poor word in English. It has negative connotations. It has overtones of not caring, of capitulation, of being a door mat, of being passive and depersonalized. So, we were looking for a different vocabulary to express what Vincent meant by "indifference." The French have a great word for it *disponibilité* but we do not have an English word to correspond to it. Another expression they have is "à votre service," that is, "I am at your service." This expression also does not work very well in English. What is meant is "I am your servant," "I am your disciple," "I am your daughter, or your son." That is the positive content of "indifference." Positively it means "readiness"—to be ready, but not just to be ready. There is an adjective that goes with it—"unrestricted readiness"—to be really ready to do what God calls us to do. Bernard Lonergan's expression, when he talks about the love of God, is "unconditional willingness." It is to be open in an unrestricted way to the fullness of God's presence, not just to one part of it. We can see that such an attitude is at the heart of our lives. We came to in our preparatory session that once we say "unrestricted readiness," we are no longer talking simply about a technique or a process, but we are talking about our deepest way of being. "Unrestricted readiness" is not only a corner stone of discernment, it is at the heart of our being. Our vocation, our way, is to be people of unrestricted readiness. We are servants and disciples. We are ready. "Be it done to me according to your will."

A story that Sister Germaine Price told me some years ago comes to mind. In Burundi, there was a little girl who wanted to go home with the sisters, but they told her she could not. She said, however, "I'll be ready in a second." She ran to the house where she had one little dress, she got it, came back and said, "I'm ready, I'm ready!"

There is a point of view that wants us to believe that unrestricted readiness is depersonalizing. It is true, of course, that it would be against our personhood, if God were arbitrary. But our unrestricted readiness is not toward an arbitrary God. Vincent and Louise have given us the gift of knowing, we are unrestrictedly ready in relationship to the *Divine Goodness*. It is amazing that twenty years after the death of Vincent, some of his friends and acquaintances, namely Louis XIV and others, built Versailles, which was a tribute to the world of Enlightenment in which God did not have a place. Enlightenment is

about the omnipotence of the human person. Eventually in spite of unlimited self-confidence and humanity's best efforts, the world is still full of misery. Who is to blame? This is not Vincent's world, nor is it Vincent's God. The God of Vincent and Louise is the God of Divine Goodness.

When Saint Louise went on her first mission, Saint Vincent wrote to her, "Go, therefore, Mademoiselle, in the name of our Lord. I pray that his divine goodness may accompany you, be your consolation along the way, the shade against the heat and the sun, your shelter against the rain and the cold, your soft bed in your weariness, your strength in your toils, and finally that he may bring you back in perfect health and filled with good works."<sup>7</sup>

The subject of the sentence is "Divine Goodness." We are unrestrictedly ready in the face of our God of Divine Goodness. That is Vincent's and Louise's North Star, and ours, too—Divine Goodness. We must believe that God loves all people more than we do. If that is true, it is not a big sacrifice to be unrestrictedly ready, to be most willing instruments and channels of his love.

Concretely we need to believe that God can get us to where there is life for ourselves and for others better than we can. For example, consultation and dialogue are good and necessary. Dialogue certainly is of the essence of the future. But there are two things that consultation and dialogue cannot fathom: (1) which persons will be there when we get there, for we do not know whom the Lord intends to put into our lives; and (2) what events will occur when we get there. So, even as we participate in a discernment process, the most important things are still hidden from us—the persons and the events. Eventually, we come to believe that God can get us to a place of life for ourselves and others better than we can. I say this with the firm conviction that the process of consultation and dialogue is valuable and necessary. But the future is hidden from us in terms of persons and events. Our experience tells us the most unexpected people come into our lives and they turn out often to be the best blessings.

After "indifference" or "unrestricted readiness," the second step is what we usually mean when we talk about discernment. It is to

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<sup>7</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, 6 May 1629, in *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents. I Correspondence*, vol. 1 (1607-1639), newly translated, edited, and annotated from the 1920 edition of Pierre Coste, C.M., ed. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., trans. Helen Marie Law, D.C., John Marie Poole, D.C., James R. King, C.M., Francis Germovnik, C.M., annotated John W. Carven, C.M., (Brooklyn: 1985), 64-65.

weigh the evidence, the pros and cons, with a listening heart. Abelly, in the passage we read at the beginning, summarizes the elements. We need to reflect on the motives, purposes and means and think about the outcomes and consequences. These deliberations involve questions of information, insight, facts, and values. We sift the internal and external evidence.

The third step is to seek counsel from a wise woman or a wise man. This is characteristically Vincentian. In the presence of a trusted confidant, listen for God's word. What I am saying differs somewhat from the text you have. In the Abelly text before you, it says "consult wise persons," in the plural. What I have found is that it is all right if I consult one or two, but personally if I consult seven or eight people I am lost. It would be rare if they agreed. Then, I have to choose among the wisdom people! I am really at sea and I cannot get back to that place where I can consult anyone. One wise woman or wise man in whom I have trust is one of the greatest treasures.

For Vincent, it is Father André Duval. When Vincent founded the Congregation, he went to Duval and presented his dilemma to him. It went something like this: "In 1617, Madame de Gondi set aside 45,000 livres and asked me to find a congregation to preach missions on her estates for the salvation of the souls of the people living there. I've tried for seven or eight years without success. Madame de Gondi is not well and she wants this done before she dies, but no one will accept the responsibility. I have to tell you one more thing. In the meantime, Father Portail and I and a few others have done it. And I have to tell you still one more thing, God has been blessing our work a great deal. "

When Vincent finished presenting his quandary to Duval, Duval said to him, "The Scriptures tell us that those who hear the word of God and do not heed it will receive many stripes." Vincent rose from the conversation, stopped looking for another congregation to do the work and founded the Congregation of the Mission.

To the process of unrestricted readiness, deliberation and wise counsel, André Dodin adds the content of Vincent's discernment. This is the final consideration in Vincentian discernment.

On sabbatical in 1987-88, I was looking for Vincent's spirituality and was shocked to read in Dodin that people who are looking for Vincent's spirituality are arrogant! Vincent, he says, does not have a spirituality but a *spiritual way*. It has three points: experience, faith, action. The cornerstone for Vincent is experience. Mother Suzanne



Guillemain said it more powerfully perhaps than Vincent when she said, "Les événements, c'est Dieu." "Events, that's God!" Sister Beatrice Brown helped me with that last week, when she said, "What if nothing is happening in my life?" Perhaps, "Les événements" means "circumstances." "Circumstances, that's God!" That is really helpful. Circumstances! Events, circumstances in my life—that's God. That is how radical Vincent and Louise are. God is here! The God whom we worship is present in history and in relationships. That is why the poor are our masters, God is here. The sacrament of discernment for Vincent is God's presence in the poor. For Vincent, experience and action have primacy. Actions flowing from love create the theater for Vincent's reflections. It is typically this way with us too. It is our experience that we reflect upon. We live into the future and then think about it. It is certain that the cornerstone for Vincent is experience. He brings experience into dialogue with the gospel, with the attitudes and actions of Jesus and with the mystery of the poor. Step two in discernment then is a dialogue between experienced events and the gospel.

The third and final step for Vincent is prudence, which means to act from wisdom. Our use of the word "prudence" often connotes caution rather than practical wisdom. So, we perhaps are better off to call this step practical wisdom, or, to make Vincent's meaning explicit, practical divine wisdom. For Vincent, a practical action is one that flows from God's wisdom and love. Secondly, an action is good when it embraces the extremes. This came to me as a great surprise. For Vincent, the extremes give power. My tendency is to let all the extremes go and find a middle way—but it is in holding them together that there is energy. You can feel the energy and the power. Love God and love your neighbor. Let your love be effective and affective. It is not enough to love God if my neighbor does not love God. It is not enough that my love is affective, it must also be effective. Holding the two in relationship establishes the dynamic field of energy in which the Holy Spirit is infinitely creative. Vincent is not someone to choose the middle road. This is not a middle ground: it is exactly the opposite. Energy is created by embracing both extremes. We can ask ourselves are you for the rich or for the poor? Is there a way Vincent was for the rich *and* the poor? It is communion Vincent sought. And we seek the transforming communion of the rich with the poor.

Continuing in this line for a moment, what is the one word we can use to characterize the meaning of Catholic? I would suggest it is the word *and*! The great Catholic word is *and*. Catholic means to

include rather than exclude someone or something. The great Catholic way is solitude *and* communion, person *and* community, community *and* mission. And is the great life-giving word for Vincent as he embraces the extremes. Be wise as serpents and simple as doves.

The third and final guideline of Vincent's practical wisdom was that we must always be firm regarding the goal but gentle and flexible regarding the means. We need to know where we are going but we do not have to get there like a tank. We just need to get there as we can get there. All of this is embraced by the Spirit and the mystery of charity.

The long and short of these reflections is that discernment is a great gift, especially in our time.