

Vincent de Paul: Patron and Client.

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To understand M. Vincent de Paul as evangeliser and worker for the poor we must understand the socio-political world in which he lived. He was a worker of political charity, both liberated by and constrained by the French political world of his time. His life and work supports the hypothesis that the Vincentian charism is revolutionary in its aims, but that its methods work within the existing social structures, aiming to transform them in the service of the poor. Two elements of Vincent's society delineate the world in which he lived. They are the fundamentally hierarchical nature of the culture, and the patronage system which provided that culture with an operating system to replace the almost defunct feudalism.

A fundamentally hierarchical society:

As with most hierarchical societies, birth was the prime social locator in Vincent's world. How an individual fitted into society was determined by who their parents were. No matter what an individual's achievements were, that person was branded permanently by their birth status. The branding worked in both directions. Noble families which had been discredited or lost lands and funds were still able to trade on their status for at least a couple of generations. Peasants who had managed to lift themselves by talent and luck into the higher reaches of society were a curiosity and could be subject to overt and covert hostility, criticism and discrimination. When Cardinal Mazarin¹ mocked Vincent for his shabby dress at court² he was doing several things at once. He was scoring points against a sometime opponent in the unending political games in pursuit of dominance. He was 'keeping in his place' someone who represented a consistent political vision which Mazarin only occasionally shared. But the underlying reality was that Vincent was a peasant – once a peasant always a peasant – and therefore a legitimate target. And of course Vincent not only admitted, but actively volunteered his peasant status.³

¹ For relations between Vincent and Cardinal Mazarin see Jose Maria Roman St Vincent de Paul: a biography London 1999 PP. 537-540.

² Ibid. P540.

³ Roman Op.cit. PP. 542-543 where to the Prince de Conde Vincent claims status as "son of a poor swineherd", a lower status than his father actually occupied as a tenant farmer.

Part of the reason a peasant was a target was that society understood the social order as divinely ordained. The perception was that each person was placed by God in the place which would serve them best in their quest for Heaven. So each person had to work towards their salvation in the context in which God had placed them⁴.

The Church had the mission of converting the world so that it became the echo of Heaven, and each individual in their particular niche in their own times had the responsibility of both obeying their rulers and of acting on their own initiative to fulfil their part in the conversion of the world. While much of the “task orientation” of this worldview was restricted to the fervent and to professional church personnel, the broad vision of the world, its peoples and its structures, had been in place for a thousand years since Augustine⁵. It was bred into the bone of the society in which Vincent was born.

The Patronage System:

The Church operated within that politico-social structure⁶ which was both feudal and Christian. Bishops swore allegiance to kings and in turn had both ecclesiastical and secular vassals who swore to them. At the same time the Church’s feudal structure ran in parallel to the civil structure, and in this, its own sphere, that particular structure applied to spiritual as well as material elements. The Investiture crisis⁷ of the eleventh century had clarified both what was owed to Caesar and what was due to God – although there always existed the potential for flare-ups in clashes of competing interests. But broadly speaking the political pattern within the church and between church and secular society had been set by the end of that century.

But Vincent de Paul lived centuries later, in the middle of the transition period during which a dying feudalism was gradually displaced by the early modern state. France was the pioneering state within which that

⁴ The best understanding of the social Ordo - Georges Duby’s classic The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined Chicago 1980, especially PP.66-75

⁵ Augustine’s theology of the Ordo at different levels in City of God XIX, 13, on P870 in London Penguin 2003.

⁶ Fichtenau op.cit. PP. 181-244.

⁷ Uta-Renate Blumenthal The Investiture Controversy: Church and monarchy from the ninth to the twelfth century Philadelphia 1988, esp. PP. 106-134.

transformation first occurred. And the socio-political tool by which that transition was managed was the patron-client relationship⁸. That patronage system is both a survival of, and a successor to, the feudal system. Within the feudal system every lord was also a vassal – at least in theory. Except at the very lowest level, every vassal had vassals. This was the case in theory very clearly – and in practice not quite as systematically, but still clearly⁹. And of course the rights and duties were very clearly spelled out for all participants. As the balance shifted towards the centre and the king acquired more power, different mechanisms were required for the exercise of those powers. This was not new in Vincent's century. However the bureaucratisation necessary for the development of the early modern state had not yet evolved to the point that it could carry the load. So an interim management system was needed.

The patronage system filled that need. It is not an exaggeration to say that patrons and their clients ran all levels of French society. As the ancestors of the kings had had vassals to carry out their commands, so seventeenth century kings had clients who met their needs. The royal family had families of clients, as well as individual clients, who served in return for protection and advancement. Some such relationships lasted for generations as vassalage had done. In other cases a talented individual would be “adopted” as a client; that service might last a lifetime, but it might only last a short time.

Higher level clients of course became patrons to clients of their own, extending power and protection over their clients in return for service¹⁰. The client would serve, possibly not knowing whether it was the aims of his patron he was working towards, or the interests of his patron's patron. A successful client, who might have begun in quite a lowly position, performing lowly tasks for the patron, might move up the ladder, acquiring position, wealth, gifts, power, and serving the patron in ever more significant ways. The rewards which the client received were also the tools by which that client could work for the patron's aims at a higher level. And of course if the client was unsuccessful, either his tasks for the patron were reduced to a level at which he could succeed (and his position with it) or he could be

⁸ A clear and specific example of the workings of that relationship is to be found in Davis S. Lux Patronage and Royal Science in Seventeenth Century France Ithaca 1989 PP.9-22.

⁹ Robert Bartlett The Making of Europe: Conquest, colonisation and cultural change 950-1350 London 1994 PP. 45-47 and 50-55.

¹⁰ A good analysis of the workings of political clientism is Sharon Kettering “Patronage and Politics during the Fronde” in French Historical Studies 14, No. 3 1986 PP.409-441.

discarded in a way that the vassal could not have been. Clientage was a much less formal (and much less clear) status than vassalage had been. The obligations of the client were unwritten, and varied all the time.

Of course the evolution of the patronage system throughout this period was rapid. The efforts of the crown, especially during the reign of Louis XIV, and those of a particularly able court, headed by Cardinal Mazarin, ensured that constant variations on the basic method appeared. Gradually the basics of a bureaucracy emerged, and as this happened, the need for clientage lessened in proportion.¹¹

Vincent de Paul's involvement in the patronage system as patron did not include kinship elements. He seems never to have promoted the interests of his family in this way. For all the hopes his family had in his early career, his convictions did not allow him to be of assistance to them by the time his career had developed to the point that he could have been of benefit to them. As client he was often the beneficiary of kin relationships among his various patrons – the de Gondis for example¹². Detailed examination of the relationship between clientage and kinship still needs research recognition.

Another aspect of the system which needs to be noted in terms of Vincent's involvement, and in particular because of the spread of his activities across the nation and beyond in the second half of his life, is the role of clientage in bridging the local and the national¹³, both economically and politically. Families and individuals who were quite powerful in their own provinces could still be lacking in influence at court. Indeed, regional nobility who were quite dominant in their own region could be lacking in influence at the more stratified levels of royal government. Securing such influence could be done in either direction. A regional noble could acquire a client in the royal administration who could act as his or her information conduit and who could exert influence on their behalf. Alternatively he or she could acquire a patron either in the person of the king, a member of the royal family, or one of the royal ministers. For someone in the further reaches of the kingdom to create the right connection could be difficult, so the role of broker became

¹¹ Sharon Kettering "Patronage and Politics during the Fronde" P.437 of Patronage. Note in the same place Lawrence Stone's assertion that a similar process was occurring in England at the same time.

¹² Note that Vincent's tense relationship with Cardinal Mazarin arose from Mazarin's conflicts and rivalries with the faction which numbered the de Gondis among its adherents.

¹³ The activities of the Comte d'Alais in acting through letters to secure aid for his clients and friends (note the imprecise terminology - "friend" and "client" both use "ami") who lacked influence at court – P.140 in Sharon Kettering "Friendship and Clientage in Early Modern France" in Patronage.

important.¹⁴ The broker's task was twofold. He or she¹⁵ conveyed information both up and down the patronage ladder, and often more importantly, made recommendations both as to policy and personnel. A client who could recommend a policy action which turned out to be successful gained significantly both in influence, and often in the form of gifts and promotions. A client who recommended a candidate suitable for a particular post, and whose candidate did in fact work successfully, not only gained added influence with the patron. He or she also succeeded by having a protégé of theirs given the post. That new client of their shared patron owed a debt to the broker, a debt which the broker could reclaim in either information or other services at a later date. However the skill which in the modern world would be called "networking" was closely related to the skills needed by the successful broker in the clientage system.

Among the other roles played by the Council of Conscience was one of brokerage. The selection of candidates for the episcopacy was one of the tasks they undertook which had greatest impact on the life of the realm. The Council was advisory to the Queen, and it dealt with religious issues of general importance to her and to the realm, such as the prevention of duelling. However the appointment of Bishops and Abbots and Abbesses was one of its most politically and religiously fraught responsibilities. Although Mazarin was the President of the Council and several Bishops were among its members, Vincent appears to have been its most influential member because of the regard the Queen had for him, her confessor. Vincent's aim on the Council was to further the reform of the Church and the quality of its leadership. His was the innovation of criteria according to which appointments could be made, such as the rule that a candidate for the episcopacy had to have been a priest for at least a year.¹⁶ It was not only Vincent's spiritual stance which made him the Council's most respected member. His connections around the kingdom, and the reports of his confreres who were involved in different Provinces with parish missions meant that he had knowledge, good and bad, of candidates from around the kingdom, rather than only those candidates whose families had court connections. His work on the Council also serves as an interesting example

¹⁴ Sharon Kettering "The Historical Development of Political Clientelism" VII, 425-426 in Kettering Patronage.

¹⁵ And wives, mothers and sisters often acted as sponsors and brokers – and not only within the family. See Sharon Kettering "The Patronage Power of Early Modern French Noblewomen" V, 817-841 in Kettering Patronage.

¹⁶ Roman op.cit. P.544.

of the way in which the clientage system was gradually being transformed into a semi-permanent bureaucracy. The establishment of general criteria for appointment and the enforcement of those criteria are indicators of the growing professionalism of the government of the kingdom, and therefore of the passing of the client system.

Vincent's involvement in the household of Queen Anne of Austria brought him into close contact with the household of a female member of the royal family, just as his long involvement with the de Gondi family meant long involvement in the household of one of the great families. She had patronage to bestow. It also ensured that in key positions she had supporters who were her servants and her clients rather than those of the Cardinal or the King.

Patronage in Vincent's life:

It is particularly notable that clergy often began their careers in the households of noble women. Richelieu himself began his rise to power and prominence when he was appointed as grand almoner in the household of Anne of Austria¹⁷. It took some time and considerable manoeuvring before he was able to parlay that appointment into one in the household of Marie de Medici, a position which placed him closer to the centres of power. Vincent de Paul began as one of the secretaries in the household of Marguerite de Valois, first wife of Henri IV.¹⁸ While Marguerite was no longer Queen, she was still a powerful figure in French social and political life, and Vincent's success in securing a position in her court was his first successful move onto the national stage. He secured the position through a broker, although there are disputes over who the broker was, either M. Antoine de Clerc de la Foret or, according to Abelly, M. Charles du Fresne, the Queen's secretary.¹⁹ This was a major step towards a significant career, or should have been. How long he remained in the post is unknown.

In the meantime Vincent had endured the crisis of faith which transformed his life, and had adopted Cardinal Pierre de Berulle as his guide and patron. De Berulle was certainly one of the most significant spiritual figures of the French church; it can be argued that he was the father of the French school of spirituality through his writings, his introduction of the reformed

¹⁷ Elizabeth Marvick The young Richelieu 173-175

¹⁸ Sharon Kettering "The patronage power of early modern French Noblewomen" Op.cit. P.830

¹⁹ Roman Op. cit. P94.

Carmelites into France, the group of reform-minded clergy whom he gathered around himself, and his founding in Paris of the Oratory, a French version of Philip Neri's Italian Oratory.²⁰ A combination of de Berulle's spiritual guidance and the struggle for faith Vincent endured in these same years changed the course of his life.

It was through his patron, the Cardinal, that Vincent became Parish Priest of the parish of Clichy-la-Garenne, a prosperous country town in which he exercised pastoral ministry for the first time. And yet, barely a year later, again at the prompting of his patron, Vincent left the parish and became tutor to the children of Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi²¹, Marquis of the Golden Isles, Count de Joigny, Baron de Montmirail, and General of the Galleys, and his wife Françoise Marguerite de Silly. For the rest of his life he remained a client of the de Gondi family. In the early years de Berulle continued to have influence on him, but quite quickly Vincent began to influence Mme de Gondi, and shortly thereafter her husband as well. Benefices were bestowed on him²² – rewards for the successful client whose work is acknowledged by the patron. But by this time Vincent was a changed man. So much so that by the time he had his revelation at Folleville in 1617 his personal ambitions had been transformed into ambition for the Gospel. And of course it was not only Vincent who was stunned by the ignorance of people who risked damnation by not confessing their sins. Mme de Gondi was even more powerfully struck. So the famous mission sermon of January 25 1617, from which date Vincent insisted the mission had begun, and in which he discovered his life goal of preaching the gospel to the rural poor, began the process out of which eight years later the Congregation of the Mission was founded. But this work of foundation was itself a work of his patrons. The founders of the Congregation legally were Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi and Mme Françoise Marguerite. The inspirations for the foundation were Mme de Gondi and Vincent. The contract and the funding, and the early opportunities were all provided by the de Gondis. While Vincent was director of the Congregation for life, he was still both tutor to the de Gondi children and chaplain to the de Gondi family. This is a clear example of the way in which Vincent was to use the patronage system for the rest of his life. As the needs of the poor called him, so he would enlist his own patrons and other, auxiliary patrons in the service

²⁰ Roman *Op.cit.* PP 96-98.

²¹ Pujol *Op. cit.* PP 47-50.

²² The parish of Gamaches in Rouen, and a canonry of Ecouis.

of those poor. The Duchess d'Aiguillon²³, the niece of Cardinal Richelieu, became a long-term secondary patron for the work of the Mission. Her funds and support were always available and frequently called upon as the work of the Mission spread through France in the 1630s and 1640s. Of course the roles of benefactor and patron overlapped anyway. From all the evidence it appears that the Duchess' beneficence was aimed more at her eternal salvation than on any of the more normal patronal intentions.

The de Gondi family²⁴ themselves represent the effective use of the patronage system. Italian in origin, Philippe Emmanuel's first French ancestor, his great-grandfather Antoine (Antonio), who had begun life as a Florentine banker, secured the family fortunes when he was appointed Steward to the young Dauphin Henry III early in the sixteenth century. In doing so he became a client of Queen Catherine de Medici. His wife reinforced the relationship by becoming the royal governess. The careers of two of their sons indicate the skill with which their parents had served their patron, and the continuing development of the family through the next few generations indicates that the talents and judgement were inherited in the family.²⁵

Antoine's eldest grandson Albert became Marquis, General of the Galleys and Marshall of France, and later in his life Duke de Retz. At different times he was Governor of three different Provinces²⁶. In a step towards the promotion of the family which is too symmetrical to be other than deliberate, Antoine's second grandson Pierre became Bishop of Langres, and later Bishop of Paris. Sufficiently involved in royal politics to become a confidant of Henri IV, he was entrusted with the King's negotiations with Pope Clement VIII to secure pardon for his sin of heresy. Later he negotiated Henri's annulment of his marriage to Marguerite de Valois. From this success he became Cardinal de Retz.

Albert had ten children. In a further upwardly mobile career his son Charles, the second Duke de Retz, married a member of the royal family, Marguerite d'Orleans. Philippe Emmanuel inherited the secondary titles of Marquis of

²³ Roman *Op.cit.* PP.292-294.

²⁴ Roman *Op. cit.* PP 107-109.

²⁵ For an excellent, and complete, five generation family tree of the de Gondi family see the endpapers of J.H.M. Salmon *Cardinal de Retz: the anatomy of a conspirator* London 1969.

²⁶ Provence, Metz and Nantes.

the Golden Isles and Count de Joigny, as well as the military career and Generalate of the Galleys.

Two of Albert's and Catherine's five daughters became nuns of Poissy Abbey. A third, Charlotte, Marquise de Maignelay, became a member of that band of noble benefactresses who sustained the charitable works of the church in Paris.

The ecclesiastical side of the family "business" was continued by Albert's other two sons. Henri became Coadjutor Bishop to his uncle Pierre in 1596, succeeded him, and later became the first Cardinal de Retz. His younger brother Jean Francois became a Capuchin and succeeded Henri as Bishop of Paris in 1623. He became the first Archbishop of Paris when the see was promoted to Metropolitan status. By the higher standards of the reformers of the church, Jean Francois was not a very good bishop. His private life was dissolute, and his interest in ministering to his Archdiocese was minimal.²⁷

By the time Vincent became a client of the General of the Galleys the de Gondi family ranked among the Grand Seigneurs of the kingdom. Even though Philippe Emmanuel joined de Berulle's Oratory in 1627 after the death of his wife, he continued to exert influence on behalf of the family, on behalf of his client Vincent de Paul, and on behalf of the Oratory of his Superior the Cardinal.

From Vincent's point of view, even after the death of Mme de Gondi and the retirement of Philippe Emmanuel, as a client of the family he could still exert influence. Of particular importance in terms of the development of the Congregation of the Mission, the Ladies of Charity and the Daughters of Charity was the influence he could exert within the Archdiocese of Paris. A stream of approvals for the different Rules and other legal documents were readily available from Jean Francois, and then from Jean-Francois Paul, the second Cardinal de Retz and Coadjutor Archbishop of Paris from 1643. Vincent had been tutor to him as to Philippe Emmanuel's other sons. Jean-Francois Paul was one of Vincent's major failures. His ambition, his political manoeuvrings and his series of sexual liaisons made him a prince-bishop in the old style rather than in the reformed style of the Council of Trent. Nevertheless, his family relationship with Vincent and Vincent's interest in him and efforts on his behalf ensured that the Archbishop

²⁷ Salmon *Op. cit.* P.57.

continued to reward Vincent by fulfilling his various needs for his apostolic foundations.

Vincent's apostolate to the galley slaves was one of the noblest and most frustrating of his many apostolic initiatives. It was also one in which the workings of clientism are more readily visible. Vincent himself was appointed Chaplain Royal to the Galleys in 1619 and he remained in the position for the rest of his life. The appointment was made directly by the General of the Galleys, who was of course Vincent's patron. The galleys were one of the principal arms of French military influence in the Mediterranean, and as the century wore on and conflicts with Spain and problems caused to Mediterranean trade by corsairs from North Africa grew, the importance of the galleys grew too. Under Richelieu the fleet was expanded.

The rowers of the galleys were criminals who were sentenced to a term at the oar. As the needs of the fleet grew, sentences were lengthened, and applied to more classes of crime to ensure that the fleet had sufficient oarsmen. The conditions were so severe that service on the galleys was very often equivalent to a death sentence.

In his customary manner Vincent initially moved slowly and gradually until he had appraised the extent of the problem and devised his own solution. Before 1639 his efforts were fragmented and were aimed at the improvement of the worst of the situations facing the prisoners²⁸ so that his efforts simply added to the list of workers on behalf of the convicted.

Then in 1639 a large bequest (6000 livres) from the estate of M. Corneul, President of the Ministry of Finance, and intended for the alleviation of the conditions of the galley slaves, provided both initial resource and impetus for a major assault on the whole problem. First the Daughters of Charity were sent in to look after the material welfare of the convicts, and a dangerous and difficult work it was. Then a major mission for all the galleys at once was launched in Marseilles. Five Vincentians led by Vincent's faithful collaborator M. Francois du Coudray were assisted by Jesuits and Oratorians and the bishop and clergy of the diocese. But these were exercises in crisis management. The next stage, following Vincent's usual pattern, was to permanently improve the situation. So two construction

²⁸ The Missioners conducted missions for the prisoners in Paris before they were sent south to the galleys, he attempted several negotiations to secure visits by different charitable groups, and twice he secured better quarters in Paris for those awaiting transfer to Marseilles.

projects occupied the first half of the 1640s – the construction of a hospital for the convicts in Marseilles, and the establishment of a house of the Mission to provide permanent spiritual care for the galley slaves, including quinquennial missions. The position of Chaplain Royal, with the right of appointment of chaplains for the galleys, was vested in perpetuity in the Superior of the Congregation of the Mission, and delegated by Vincent to the priest in charge of the house in Marseilles.²⁹ The work continued to be difficult and dangerous. Daughters of Charity and Vincentians and some of the clergy who assisted in the initial mission (including the Bishop of Marseilles) died of various plagues and diseases caught from the convicts, and they were hindered by both the military needs of the fleet and the endemic corruption which paralysed so much action.

So much for the problem. How did the patronage system bear upon it? Vincent's initial appointment was an act of direct patronage by Philippe Emmanuel, General of the Galleys. The continuing work of providing actual chaplains was a work of patronage also – Vincent as patron appointed clergy clients of his to the posts. Some were Vincentians, some were local parish clergy. A significant variation in the usual operation of the system occurred after the retirement of Philippe Emmanuel when the de Gondis lost the position of General of the Galleys to the opposing faction led by Cardinal Richelieu, who bestowed it upon his nephew the Duke de Richelieu. In the normal course of events the Chaplaincy Royal would have changed hands also, to a client of the Duke. But by this time Vincent had achieved sufficient status that he could claim connections on all sides of the political and patronal struggle. In the reconstruction of the facilities for the galley slaves and their care Vincent acted as co-ordinator, and enlisted the services of patrons from all sides of the aristocratic scene. Thus the queen supplied funds as did the Duchess d'Aiguillon, and, probably through her agency, the Cardinal himself. With the crown, the King's chief minister, the Cardinal's party, and the opposition represented by Vincent himself and supported by Cardinal de Retz who had not yet begun to lose power, Vincent had enlisted all the major players in support of the great work. It is understandable that it took so long. More noticeable is that such a major change to the established methods of operation would have been impossible without such an alliance. Both the inefficiency of the patronal system and its narrowness of focus are very clear. But it was necessary to work within it. Each galley was captained by an officer who was both a servant of the crown and a client of one of the

²⁹ Roman *Op. cit.* PP. 497-502.

major players, most often Cardinal Richelieu, the port authorities were clients of either the de Gondis or the Duke of Richelieu, and the city authorities had their own allegiances. So Vincent once again took the prevailing model and reshaped it into a form which could achieve his hopes for it on behalf of the Gospel.

In a life as long as Vincent de Paul's and with as many activities and involvements as he initiated and sustained, there are many examples of his *modus operandi* for examination. In all cases though, understanding is hindered by approaching the study as though Vincent acted as an independent agent answerable only to King and Archbishop. Neither the genesis of his works nor the implementation was ever solely his, and the networking he did as part of the patronal system was what enabled him to be so successful over so many years in so many projects. His involvements in the wars of the Fronde, and especially in the provision of relief for the refugees, as well as his involvements over many years with the Ladies of Charity overflow with examples of the working of patrons and clients in those changing years of French national development.