Leonard von Matt and Louis Cognet

ST VINCENT DE PAUL

Translated from the French by
Emma Craufurd

CHICAGO
HENRY REGNERY COMPANY
1960

I

THE LANDES

THE Landes! Today these words suggest immense forests of montonous grandeur, endless tracts of pine-trees, their sides slashed by deep cuts, slowly exuding resin for the tappers. But we must remember that it was not until the systematic plantations of the nineteenth century that this country took on its present character. At the time of Henry IV the Landes were nothing but a vast stretch of sand and marsh-land, edged along the sea by dunes which were slowly and relentlessly swallowing up the villages. On this desolate and barren plain the vegetation consisted of practically nothing but furze, broom, heather and bracken or, in the damper places, of rushes and sedge. The villages were few, and the farms scattered over the thankless soil were poor. They were low buildings built of brick or *pisé* and usually covered with thatch. They were often quite spacious, divided into several rooms by partitions of clay mixed with straw. Furniture was scarce and very primitive. The centre of the house was the kitchen, with its large chimney-piece where the housewives busied themselves and the saucepan hung cooking over the fire.

The way of life was frugal and rudimentary. The inhabitants of the Landes clung to their traditions, cultivating their land by century-old methods, dating back to the time of Roman Gaul. Surrounding each farm they usually had a circle of oaks, which gave shade and supplied a little leaf-mould to fertilize the soil. But their harvests were seldom abundant. Boiled millet constituted the basis of their diet, with a little wheat or rye and a few vegetables. Their chief source of wealth lay in the breeding of livestock—cows and oxen which were harnessed to a yoke of very ancient pattern for ploughing, horses, sheep and pigs, and innumerable flocks of geese. They were a hard-working people, a little backward, perhaps, but very hospitable. Moreover, the inhabitants of the Landes had always remained ardently loyal to the Catholic faith in spite of the existence of many centres of Calvinism throughout the south-west of France.

The village which had the honour to be the birthplace of Vincent de Paul has now taken the name of this, the most illustrious of its children. At the end of the sixteenth century it was called Pouy. Situated about four miles from Dax, not far from the river Adour, it is at the extreme limit of the Landes and quite near to the Chalosse country with its richer soil. It was only a few houses grouped round an ancient church. The De Paul family did not live in the

village itself, but their farm was in a nearby hamlet and was known as the Maison de Ranquine. In spite of the plate affixed to it, the Maison de Ranquine which pilgrims visit now is not the birthplace of our saint, for it was only built at the end of the seventeenth century. The house where Vincent was born was already crumbling away in 1682 and by 1700 it had entirely disappeared. A chapel now occupies the site. Quite close to it there still stands a very old oak tree under whose branches Vincent de Paul must have sheltered, and this is the only witness which remains of his childhood days.

II

A SHEPHERD IN THE LANDES

"I AM only a swineherd and the son of a poor villager", Vincent de Paul used often to say. And in order that the preposition "de" should not mislead anyone as to the nobility of his descent, he insisted on being called Monsieur Vincent and signed his name Depaul, in one word. We find in him the robust temperament, the solid realism and the shrewd, sometimes sly common-sense characteristic of old peasant stock. He was, in fact, born of modest labourers, Jean de Paul and Bertrande de Moras, who owned their house and a few fields of which the produce enabled them to bring up six children, four boys and two girls. Vincent, the third of the series, was born on 24th April 1581 and was baptized almost immediately in the little parish church of Pouy, which unfortunately has been rebuilt since that time. It must be owned that we know practically nothing of his family or his early years, except for what Abelly, his first biographer, has to tell us. "From his childhood Vincent was brought up like the others to work, and specially to watch his father's flocks." We can easily picture the little shepherd dressed in a sheepskin and mounted on those tall stilts which the herdsmen of the Landes habitually used at that period. Over the poor pastures of sand and marshes which surrounded the village he led the animals from his father's farm: cows, sheep and pigs. It is probable that he often went off for the day and took his flocks as far afield as the borders of the relatively fertile Chalosse country. Perhaps his father, like many of his compatriots, bred horses, and in that case young Vincent would have to take them to the neighbouring ponds for water. He shared in the other farm work as also in the frugal life of the family. "In the country from which I come", he said later on, "people live on a small grain called millet which is boiled in a saucepan. At mealtime this is poured into a bowl and everyone in the household comes round to take his share of refreshment, and then goes off to work."

We gather from the evidence of his contemporaries (recalled after a fairly long interval) that already at this early age Vincent showed signs of his ardent love for the poor. If, on his way back from the mill where he took the family's store of corn to be ground, he chanced to meet some needy folk, he would open his sack and give them handfuls of flour, "at which his father, who was a good man, does not seem to have shown displeasure". On another occasion, when he was twelve years old, a specially pitiful beggar came to ask alms of

him, "whereupon he was so moved with compassion that he gave him the whole of his little treasure, amounting to thirty sous, which he had amassed through hard work and which he valued greatly at that age and in a country where money was extremely scarce".

Such was the childhood of Vincent de Paul. He came of a simple, hard-working but not needy family and he had early contact with the real difficulties of existence and the life of common folk. Indubitably he owes to his origin among people of the soil a sense of social conditions and their problems which a more aristocratic birth would have failed to give him.

III

A SCHOOLBOY AT DAX

IT is probable that from childhood Vincent showed signs of more than average intelligence. Very early, his father decided, in spite of his somewhat precarious material situation, to send him to study for the priesthood. No doubt human calculations played a great part in these paternal plans. It was to be expected that this gifted child would make a brilliant career for himself among the clergy, that rich livings would be granted to him and that he would thus be able to support his parents and brothers. Was not his cousin Stephen de Paul, who had become Prior of Poymartet, already helping his family in this way? Hence came the idea of sending Vincent to Dax as a boarder with the Franciscans, who took pupils for the very modest sum (even at that period) of sixty pounds a year. This must have been in 1595, for Vincent himself used to say that he had "lived in the country until he was fifteen years old". Very likely he had already begun to study on his own, but we do not know how.

The friars had a large monastery at Dax, built with its back resting against the ramparts to the east of the town. The college was their nearest neighbour and the two buildings communicated by a private door. The teaching which Vincent received there was probably none too brilliant, for this college had been dragging on in a moribund condition for many long years and had difficulty in securing masters of any value. We know nothing of the boy's stay there with the exception of an anecdote which he has himself recorded for us. It is, moreover, very significant and shows that the future saint was at that time capable of certain movements of pride: "I remember", he writes, "that at the college where I studied, they came to tell me that my father, who was a poor peasant, was asking to see me. I refused to go and speak with him, whereby I committed a great sin." And he also owned that while still quite young he had sometimes been ashamed of the poverty of his family. "I recall that as a small boy, when my father took me with him to the town, I was ashamed to be seen with him and to acknowledge that he was my father, because he was badly dressed and had rather a limp."

Dates concerning Vincent's youth are very uncertain, but from various indications we gather that he can scarcely have stayed more than two years at Dax. He completed the classes of the fifth and fourth standards* but he never

* French education is graded throughout the schools in standards, starting with the sixth and going up to the first.

pursued his classical studies any further, which explains why later on he was to describe himself as "a schoolboy of the fourth standard". He found his first patron in the person of Monsieur de Comet, a barrister of the court of justice at Dax and judge of Pouy, to whom he had been recommended by the Father Guardian of the Franciscans. In spite of his youth, Vincent filled the post of tutor in the Comet family while continuing his own studies. Monsieur de Comet, for his part, warmly encouraged him to embrace the calling of a priest. The young man accordingly fell in with the views of his family. As the bishopric of Dax was vacant at the time, he applied to Salvat Diharse, Bishop of Tarbes, and on 20th December 1596, in the Collegiate Church of Bidache, he was given the tonsure and received minor orders.

IV

A STUDENT AT TOULOUSE

THERE is no doubt that from now Vincent had quite decided to press on with his career, and to be appointed as soon as possible to some rich living which would set him free from all pecuniary anxiety. But it was practically impossible to obtain such a prize without a university degree. He had, therefore, to pursue his studies in some faculty of theology. The nearest was Toulouse. Jean de Paul did not shrink from any sacrifice to make the future of his son secure: he sold a yoke of oxen and handed Vincent the proceeds. Provided with this sum, Vincent went off to join the rather turbulent crowd of students at Toulouse. His departure possibly took place in the autumn of 1597, and it was the last time that he received financial help from his father, for the latter died shortly afterwards, at the beginning of 1598. Without him the problem of material subsistence became even more arduous for the young theologian.

The University of Toulouse, which was founded in 1230 when the Albigensian tragedy was at its height, had been through many vicissitudes, but it was still flourishing in the latter part of the sixteenth century. Vincent must have followed the normal course of theological studies, concerned largely with the commentaries of the Master of the Sentences (Peter Lombard) and of St Thomas Aquinas. He does not seem to have had any particularly notable professors. According to Abelly, he left Toulouse for a short period and tried to continue his studies at the university of Saragossa, but this seems very improbable, for it is hard to explain how he could have made such a journey at a time when he was struggling with an almost total lack of funds. He does, however, seem to have had one or two opportunities to travel. We are quite sure, for example, that he made a short stay in Rome, probably in about 1601, when, as he liked to recall in after years, he saw Pope Clement VIII with his own eyes.

We do not know how Vincent de Paul managed to live during his first years in Toulouse. Although his father's will expressly stated that the family was to enable him to finish his ecclesiastical studies, he would certainly not have wished to be a burden on them. His name is not to be found in the registers of any of the numerous colleges which at that time provided shelter for the majority of students in the ancient city of Languedoc. He must therefore have already found a way of providing for his needs. Perhaps he gave lessons, for

a little later we find him asking the educational authorities to provide him with his keep. In any case his university course, like his cl? al studies, was never completed. On 12th October 1604 he received the diploma of a Bachelor of Theology, *baccalaureus sententiarius*, which gave him the right to explain the "Master of the Sentences", Peter Lombard. Normally he should have gone on from there to prepare his licentiate and Doctorate, but he did not have time. He was already caught up in the realities of a life which had other adventures in store.

V

THE PRIESTHOOD

IT was while he was studying at Toulouse that Vincent de Paul became a priest. The circumstances connected with his ordination are particularly characteristic of the customs of the time and do not, we must admit, show them at their best. Indeed, at this date the decrees of the Council of Trent remained a dead letter in France, or almost so, and practically no attempt was made to struggle against the numerous abuses of every kind which brought the clergy into disrepute. The conditions under which Holy Orders were conferred were especially deplorable. "He is made a priest who wants to be, as under Jeroboam", Pascal was to write fifty years later—but how much more true it was at the beginning of the seventeenth century! No seminary existed in any diocese to give the young clerics the slightest ecclesiastical training. In principle, the bishop was supposed to make sure that the candidates whom they admitted to Holy Orders should be spiritually, morally and intellectually worthy of their calling. In practice, they ordained indifferently whoever presented himself with papers which appeared to be in order, testimonials and dimissory letters. The situation was aggravated by the fact that numerous bishops, whose situation was more or less regular and who had no strictly defined dioceses, were travelling about the country administering ordination. In such a state of anarchy, little notice was taken of the most elementary regulations of canon law. In particular, the prelates did not as a rule care what age the candidates happened to be, and they were often scandalously young. To be sure the Council of Trent had insisted upon the observance of the ancient law which required that subdeacons should be twenty-two, deacons twenty-three and priests at least twenty-five, but it was in vain. In France priests of less than twenty-four were legion, and Vincent de Paul was to be one of them.

At the time when Vincent was beginning his theological studies, the diocese of Dax was vacant. The bishop named by the king in 1585 was a certain Gilles de Noailles, suspected in Rome of having Calvinistic sympathies, who never succeeded in obtaining his bulls and had just renounced his claim to the office. It was therefore the Vicar-General of the Chapter who gave the young clerk dimissory letters which would enable him to receive the first two major orders. Vincent applied to the Bishop of Tarbes, Salvat Diharse, who had already conferred minor orders upon him. He was thus ordained subdeacon on 19th

September 1598, and deacon on the following 19th December, in the Cathedral of Tarbes. Then, as early as 13th September 1599, Vincent procured from the newly-named Bishop of Dax, Jean-Jacques du Sault, further dimissory letters with a view to the priesthood. These letters, like the former ones, had a clause of a style very common at the time, which attributed to him the legitimate age for ordination. He did not, however, hurry to make use of them. It was not until 23rd September 1600 that the very aged Bishop of Périgueux, François de Bourdeille, in his private chapel of Château-l'Evèque, placed his hands on this very young man of scarcely nineteen and a half who bore the name of Vincent de Paul. How could he guess that he had just given to the Church of France one of her holiest priests? But why had Vincent been so long in presenting himself for ordination? Why had he chosen this sick and nearly blind old bishop? We do not know. It has been suggested that he thought it would make it easier to conceal his real age, but what he was doing was so generally accepted that it seems very unlikely that he should have calculated in this way.

However much this premature ordination was authorized by the customs of the period, it was none the less irregular and, even from the theoretical point of view, entailed a censure for which Vincent must have sought absolution during his visit to the Vice-Legate Montorio. In order to cover up this fact which was so unfavourable to their hero, the saint's first biographers did not hesitate to make him five years older, and that is why until quite recently the date of his birth was thought to be 1576. Vincent de Paul never spoke of this period of his life and, in his last years, even his most intimate companions did not know where or when he had become a priest. But we must see more than a simple formula of humility on his part in the following sentences: "If I were not a priest now, I never would be!" Or again when speaking of the ecclesiastical state: "As for me, if, before I was rash enough to enter this state, I had known what I know now about all it meant, I should have chosen to plough the land rather than engage myself in so redoubtable a calling".

The fact remains, and we must not be afraid of admitting it frankly: St Vincent de Paul was not always saintly. There is a conversion in his life, and this conversion comes after his ordination to the priesthood. At the time when he was made a priest he was still the slave of human ambition, and for a long time to come we shall see him eager in the pursuit of position and benefices. And yet, if we could read his heart, we might perhaps find him already torn in two directions. The voice of the world was tempting him with flattering offers, but from afar the voice of God was already inviting this too young priest to embrace a life of the most exacting holiness. If at first he chose the easy career of the good things and honours of this world, perhaps he did not do so without

fear, reserves and remorse. It is in this light that we must interpret the feelings with which he said his first Mass. "He was heard to remark", writes Abelly, "that he had such a lively apprehension of the majesty of this all divine act, that he trembled and that, not having the courage to celebrate it publicly, he chose a quiet isolated chapel where he was assisted only by a priest and a server."

Shortly before his ordination, Vincent de Paul agreed, as a means of earning his living, to run a little boarding-school at Buzet, a village about eighteen miles from Toulouse. His pupils, whose homes were in this town or its neighbourhood, came from the nobility or the upper middle class, and it is probable that the young professor made useful contacts among their families. As soon as he had become a priest Vincent returned to Buzet, and it was in this district that he found a lonely chapel in the middle of the woods where he said his first Mass; it may have been Notre Dame de Grâce which is still standing, or Notre Dame de Remoulle which unfortunately was destroyed after the Revolution. Saint Vincent de Paul's school seems to have prospered, and he was able to come with his pupils to settle in Toulouse, where he was better placed for continuing his own studies. But he has himself owned that this did not prevent him from contracting many serious debts, and in any case the school only provided a temporary solution for Vincent's problems. Unfortunately, his career proper opened with a disappointment. Through the intervention of Monsieur de Comet, the new Bishop of Dax appointed the young priest to be Curé of Tilh, an excellent parish situated in the southern part of the Chalosse. But here Vincent met with a rival named Saint-Soubé who claimed, on his side, that he had been appointed to the same parish by the Court of Rome. In order to defend his case Vincent would have had to engage in a lawsuit which, in view of his own somewhat irregular canonical situation, was very undesirable. Finally he decided to renounce his claim and to remain at Toulouse. According to Abelly, "from that time on, he was encouraged to hope for a bishopric through the influence of the Duke of Epernon, two of whose near relations he had educated". That, however, seems very unlikely, since bishoprics were the almost exclusive prerogative of the aristocracy, or at least of those of high rank. All the same Vincent did not abandon his designs and tenaciously sought a way of advancement. At the beginning of the year 1605, while he was still living at Toulouse, he was called away to Bordeaux on some urgent and mysterious business. It was doubtless connected with his plans for the future, though we have no indication as to its nature. The events which followed turned out to be as romantic as they were unexpected.

VI

THE TUNISIAN ADVENTURE

IT is certain that Vincent was in a particularly difficult situation at the beginning of 1605 when he went to Bordeaux. The mysterious business which took him there entailed heavy expenses when he was already crippled with debts. Upon his return to Toulouse, however, fortune seems to have smiled upon him for once: a good-hearted old lady died leaving him all she possessed. In reality this legacy consisted mainly of credit which had to be recovered from "a villainous rogue". Vincent immediately took action and went to the abode (we do not know where it was) of this "gallant". But the fellow had already made off and was living in Marseilles. It was absolutely imperative to see him if the business was to be settled. In his urgent haste, Vincent was none too scrupulous about the methods he chose: "Having no money with which to expedite this matter, I sold the horse which I had hired at Toulouse, intending to pay for it on my return; but misfortune caused this to be as late as my dishonour is great at having left my affairs in such confusion". According to Vincent's account everything was settled while he was at Marseilles, and he succeeded in extracting three hundred crowns from his debtor. This must have been in July 1605. After that, Vincent's family and friends seem to have lost sight of him for some two years. They doubtless imagined that he had chosen to disappear because he was unable to pay his debts; and afterwards Vincent rightly thought that they had been "scandalized at him because of his creditors".

On 24th July 1607 Vincent de Paul reappeared, writing a long letter to his patron, Monsieur de Comet, from Avignon. This letter contained not only an account of the events just mentioned, but another more extraordinary one which explained his silence. Vincent told how, towards the end of July 1605, he had intended to come back by sea from Marseilles to Narbonne, how his boat had been attacked by three Turkish brigantines, how he and his companions had been taken prisoner, carried off to Tunis and there sold in the market as slaves. "Their manner of selling us was that after stripping us quite naked, they dealt out to each of us a pair of breeches, a linen jacket, with a cap, and led us through the streets of Tunis whither they had come on purpose to sell us. Having taken us through the city five or six times with a chain on our necks, they brought us back to the boat so that the merchants might come to see which of us could eat well and which could not, and to show them that our

wounds were not mortal; this done, they took us back to the market-place where the merchants came to examine us just as they would do if a horse or ox were for sale, making us open our mouths so that they could look at our teeth, feeling our ribs, probing our wounds and making us walk, trot and run, then making us carry burdens, testing our strength in wrestling, and a thousand other brutalities besides."

So it came about that Vincent was sold. It was a fisherman who bought him first, but there was "nothing more repugnant to him than the sea"; the fisherman sold him again to a "spagiric doctor, past-master in extracting quintessences, a very human man and easy to get on with". The old sage took a liking to Vincent and initiated him into his alchemic secrets. It must be admitted that he had some very strange ones. It was all well and good for his remedy against gravel stones which "daily works miracles". If he had not yet found the philosophers' stone which he had been seeking for fifty years, he knew how to bring about the transmutation of metals. "I have often seen him", writes Vincent, "melt together equal quantities of gold and silver, put laminae of these, then a layer of certain powders, then more laminae and then more powders in a crucible or goldsmith's melting-pot. He would keep it in the fire for twenty-four hours, then open the container to find the silver had become gold. Still more often I have seen him congeal or set quick-silver, so that it became fine silver which he sold for the poor." And what are we to think of those other still more extraordinary inventions about which Vincent writes in a second letter to Monsieur de Comet: "The beginning, not the total perfection of Archimedes' mirror; an artificial spring to make a death's head speak, by which this wretched man used to delude the people, telling them that his God Mahomet communicated his will to him through this head".

Vincent says that he entered the service of his old alchemist in September 1605. On the death of his master, in the autumn of 1606, he passed into the hands of the nephew, who sold him with all speed, "because he had heard that Monsieur de Brèves, the king's ambassador in Turkey, was coming with valid and express patents from the Sultan, to rescue the Christian slaves". It is, however, a curious fact that the journey of Monsieur de Brèves was already a thing of the past, since it took place from 17th June to 24th August 1606. Vincent's new master was a renegade who had originally come from Nice. He was rich and possessed three wives. One of them, "a Turkish woman, of course", became friendly with Vincent whom "she came to visit every day in the fields"—a rather surprising fact in view of the Mohammedan customs. One day she asked him to sing some of the Church's songs, which he did. "She did not fail", writes Vincent, "to tell her husband in the evening that he

had been wrong to forsake his religion, which she judged to be a very good one from what I had told her about our God and from some hymns of praise which I had sung her." The renegade immediately communed with himself, was converted, and the very next day told Vincent of his intention to escape with him. They had to wait a long time, however, before they could carry out their plan. Vincent, who is obviously confused about dates, says they waited ten months. As a matter of fact, if we are to believe his account, it was in June 1607 that the two fugitives left Tunisia in a "little skiff", a very frail little vessel for a long voyage of some fifteen hundred miles. On 28th June they reached Aiguesmortes and from there were able to go to Avignon. "The Vice-Legate", Vincent continues, "received the renegade publicly, with tears in his eyes and a sob in his throat, in the Church of St Peter." It is strange, however, that the registers of St Peter of Avignon, when examined in the eighteenth century, were found to have no trace of this solemn abjuration by a renegade Mussulman.

What are we to think of this romantic episode which recalls so strikingly certain celebrated passages of Cervantes' Don Quixote? In years to come Vincent, who for that matter spoke readily enough about his past, kept as complete a silence concerning this affair as concerning the date of his ordination. Two years before his death, in 1658, none of those familiar with him had the slightest idea of the adventure. It was then that a descendant of Monsieur de Comet found the two letters we have just quoted among his family papers. When Vincent heard of it, he did everything he possibly could to recover them, with the obvious intention of destroying them, as he had already destroyed the copies of them which had been sent him, but he never managed to get them back in spite of all his entreaties. Thus, very much against his wishes, this extraordinary story was revealed—a story in which present-day specialists have shown there to be so many highly improbable factors that it is doubtful whether it can be accepted as historical. The whole business is very perplexing. In 1607 Vincent de Paul, a needy young priest in search of benefices and crippled with debt, was still very far from the paths of sanctity. At that period Barbary had a special fascination for the adventurous, and Vincent's subsequent missionary preoccupations showed how much the idea of these distant countries haunted him. When he wrote his letter to Monsieur de Comet, how far was he drawing on his brilliant meridional imagination? Great acumen would be required to answer that question.

VII

A STAY IN ROME

WHATEVER the actual facts may have been, this at least is clear: Vincent disappeared for two years without paying his debts, and when, according to his own account, he returned to France on 28th June 1607 he showed no special eagerness to settle them.

In a letter to Monsieur de Comet a month later, he flattered himself that fortune was once more smiling upon him. It was not to his piety that he owed this happy turn of events, but to alchemy. He was still at Avignon where the Vice-Legate, Pietro Francesco Montorio, had taken a liking to him: "He does me the honour to show me great affection and to make much of me on account of some alchemic secrets I have taught him, and this, he says, means more to him than if '*io li avesse datto un monte di ore*' (I had given him a gold watch)". Just then the prelate was on the point of returning to Rome and he was to take with him his new friend, promising that he would "see that he was appointed to a good living". Indeed, Vincent's main reason for writing to Monsieur de Comet was to ask him to send his papers, ordination letters and university certificates which were necessary for the success of his plans. He admitted that he already had a little money at his disposal but that he preferred to take it with him to Rome, "in case of any accidents which might happen to him through lack of funds". His creditors could surely go on waiting a little longer.

On 28th February 1608 there was another letter from Vincent to Monsieur de Comet—from Rome this time—again asking for his ordination papers. He is still enjoying "the table and good favour of Monseigneur", to whom he shows "very many curious things", learnt, he says, while he was a slave. Montorio is jealous to guard these secrets exclusively for himself. "He does not even want me to accost people", writes Vincent, "for the fear he has that I should teach them anything, wishing that he alone should have the reputation of knowing these things, which he is pleased to show sometimes to His Holiness and the Cardinals." Apart from this Vincent was pursuing his studies, but we know nothing further about this second visit to Rome, of which he does not ever seem to have spoken in after life.

He was still cherishing the same human ambitions, hoping to draw every possible advantage from Montorio's friendship, and not hiding this fact from

himself: "This friendliness and benevolence on his part promise me, as he himself has promised, the means of preparing an honourable retirement, and with a view to this, providing me with some suitable living in France". Sad to say these brilliant hopes ended in disappointment so total that Vincent was to refer to it later on as his " disasters", though the circumstances of this setback are veiled in mystery. At all events he returned to France towards the end of 1608, scarcely any better off than at his departure, and the diplomatic mission on which, according to some biographers, he was sent to Henry IV is no more than a legend. Nevertheless, he did not lose heart. There was still another theatre where he could try out his fortune. Instead of returning to the Landes, he went to settle in Paris.

VIII

DISCOVERY OF PARIS

WHEN Vincent de Paul arrived in Paris, the reign of Henry IV was nearing its end. The last years of this king, who was afterwards to be known as Good King Henry, are not, as a matter of fact, particularly glorious. He was fifty-four and was on the threshold of old age, yet he showed little sign of amending his life. His confessor, the celebrated Jesuit Father Coton, must have needed a great deal of patience. The King divided his time between his wife, the "*grosse banquière*", dull-witted, with too much of the Rubens model about her, and his numerous mistresses, of whom the scandalous chronicle already listed fifty names. The final blaze of this tardy love was indeed the cause of the dramatic sequence of events about which Vincent must certainly have heard in the course of general conversation. The young priest had only been in Paris a very short time when, on 16th January 1609, the King saw a ballet at the Louvre in which a nymph bearing the name of Charlotte de Montmorency was dancing. She was fifteen and was soon to be married to the Prince of Condé. What followed is well known: the assiduous attentions of the King, the flight of Condé who carried his young wife off to the Spanish territory of the Low Countries, the desperate efforts of Henry IV to bring about the return of his well-beloved. Irritated by the obstacles in his way and blinded by rage and vexation, the old King shrank from nothing in order to satisfy his senile passion. The situation became more and more complicated until, towards the end of 1609, he was openly preparing to make war on Spain. These belligerent plans directed against a great Catholic country were, from the first, extremely unpopular in France, where the old spirit of the League was still very much alive. It is, moreover, possible that clever conspirators were utilizing the general unrest for their own ends. But in any case the fermentation of public opinion is enough to account for the gesture of a half-mad fanatic. On 14th May Henry IV was stabbed by Ravaillac, and Vincent had to share in the immense sorrow which descended upon the people of France.

In an instant everything was forgotten: the new taxes, the war which had been so much decried. The people only remembered that Henry of Bourbon had given France civil and religious peace and had restored her prosperity. Inwardly Henry IV had doubtless been as indifferent in religious matters as he was lax in his morals, yet he had had the wisdom to see that only a Catholic

King could bring unity to the country. Besides which, he had realized, a century and a half in advance of his time, that the problem of the relations between Catholics and Protestants could only be solved through mutual tolerance. The general mentality of the people was not ready for this, however. Though the Edict of Nantes of 1598 gave Calvinism a legal status, it did not satisfy the Reformers, and it deeply irritated the Catholics, who saw it as the official recognition of heresy. Nevertheless the personal influence of the King had succeeded little by little in calming men's minds.

On the other hand the morals of the country left much to be desired. The example of the King authorized the most glaring scandals, and the Court, the aristocracy and the middle classes were living, only too often, a life of untroubled licentiousness. Religion was too much entangled with politics, and brilliant but regrettable examples from the League served to perpetuate the confusion between the two realms, even while they bore witness to the power which the Catholic Church still held. To be sure the wars of religion had impoverished it: numerous buildings had been destroyed and much ecclesiastical property ravaged. But gradually the Church in France was repairing the damage and restoring her enormous patrimony, which undoubtedly constituted a third of the nation's wealth. The system of commendam, established by the Concordat of 1516, made the King master of these immense riches, and Henry IV used the abbeys and bishops' palaces to provide for his servants, his favourites and even his mistresses: Sully, although a Protestant, had four abbeys all to himself.

Under such conditions the state of the clergy had fallen incredibly low. The religious orders—monks and nuns—literally fleeced by the commendam which barely provided for their needs, were degenerating both materially and morally. The majority had, indeed, entered without a vocation, the monasteries serving mainly as a means of ridding their families of superfluous children who could not be satisfactorily started in life. As for the secular clergy, there was a great gulf separating the rich and worldly churchmen in high positions from the lowly clerics who were struggling in poverty and want. The bishops belonged almost exclusively to the aristocracy or the prosperous middle class. They were courtiers, diplomats, men of letters or of war, and the majority of them had never so much as set foot in their dioceses. Meanwhile the poor clergy, recruited at random and all too often illicitly ordained, with no training whatever, were for the most part sunk in ignorance and vice. Some priests could scarcely read, a great many did not understand Latin. Drunkenness was widespread and a good many of the country priests practised sorcery. Needless to say, the hunt for livings and prebends was going on everywhere, and in order to obtain them many underhand methods were unhesitatingly employed.

When Vincent came to Paris he had not yet begun to grieve over this lamentable decadence. Indeed, he intended to take every opportunity that the Church, seen from this temporal point of view, had to offer. He found lodgings in the Rue de Seine (belonging to the parish of Saint Germain), "in the house where the picture of St Nicholas hangs as a sign". Probably for reasons of economy, he shared his apartment with a fellow countryman, Bertrand Dulou, Judge of Sore in the Landes. To start with, he seems to have hung about rather dejectedly. On 17th February 1610, in a letter to his mother, he deplored his successive failures, "his misfortunes and the little help he had been able to give his home". But at this date he already saw a new hope dawning: "I trust so much in the grace of God, that he will bless my labour and will give me the means of finding a suitable place of retirement, in order to spend the rest of my days near to you."

As a matter of fact, Vincent de Paul had an illustrious neighbour in the Rue de Seine—Margaret of Valois, the sister of Charles IX and the first wife of Henry IV. After some eventful and scandalous adventures, she had accepted the dissolution of her marriage in 1599. In 1605 she had returned to live in Paris, where she had a sumptuous house built for herself in the Rue de Seine. Vincent had contact with some of her household, particularly with one of her secretaries, Charles du Fresne, quite a well-known writer. Through this man's intervention Vincent was added to the number of Queen Margaret's chaplains in March or April 1610, but we do not know precisely what material advantages were attached to this office. A little later Vincent finally started on the way of ecclesiastical advancement by one of those transactions which were so frequent at the time. On 17th May 1610 Paul Hurault de l'Hospital, Archbishop of Aix, made over to him, in exchange for a rent of 1200 livres, the Cistercian Abbey Saint-Léonard-de-Chaumes, at that time in the diocese of Saintes. It is to be wondered how far this operation would be of advantage to Vincent. The theoretical revenue of the abbey, though no doubt less than its real revenue, was only 1,100 livres. The buildings were in ruins and the temporalities involved in some complicated legalities for which Vincent had to assume responsibility. Nevertheless he made the journey to La Rochelle to take personal possession of his benefice on 16th October 1610. He soon wearied of it, however, and on 29th October 1616 he, in his turn, resigned the Abbey of St Léonard.

Of his services to Margaret of Valois we know very little. The Queen was fifty-seven; she had been a beauty and had not lost her wit and culture. Among those who surrounded her, Vincent came to know the best society of Paris, and was to form valuable contacts. But his interior life was already developing; he was soon to find his true vocation.

IX

PARISH PRIEST OF CLICHY

DARK as is the picture of French Catholicism at the beginning of the seventeenth century, it is yet possible to trace the precursory signs of a religious spring-tide. In spite of the decadence which prevailed almost everywhere, many of the faithful were living up to their religion. The clergy in general may well have been corrupt, but there were still some holy priests. Diverse religious congregations were carrying on an intense spiritual apostolate. Some, such as the Jesuits and the Capuchins, were of relatively recent foundation, but old orders, such as the Carthusians, had still kept their ancient fervour. A lively curiosity concerning the more spectacular aspects of mysticism had developed during the last years of the sixteenth century, and a number of ecstatics had been appearing up and down the country, surrounded by groups of disciples. On the other hand, cases of diabolical possession were becoming more and more frequent and arousing a no less passionate interest. Thus, for many souls, Christian piety was still a living reality.

In Parisian Society the best elements of Catholicism were grouped around a mystic of distinguished rank: the celebrated Madame Acarie. This group soon formed themselves into what has become known as the *milieu dévot* (pious set). In this set we meet with great names and very holy persons, many of whom we shall find later on among the friends of Vincent de Paul—as, for example, the Marquise de Maignelay, sister of the Gondis, the future Keeper of the Seals, Michel de Marillad, Pierre de Bérulle, the future Cardinal and founder of the Oratory. All this circle practised a very high and somewhat abstract spirituality, obviously influenced by the great German and Flemish mystics, who were very much read in France at this time. With an admirable devotion, they busied themselves with pious or charitable works, with monastic reform and religious foundations. In 1604, Bérulle and his devout colleagues succeeded in introducing into France the Carmelites, reformed in Spain by St Teresa.

There is every reason to think that in the course of the year 1610 Vincent de Paul became very intimately associated with Bérulle and through him with all the *milieu dévot*. Surely this must be seen as a symptom of his spiritual evolution. Little by little, Vincent was to renounce his worldly ambitions and to give himself entirely to the service of God. An act of heroic patience, which should be placed towards the end of 1610, seems to have been the final shock by which

his conversion was consummated. We know that Vincent was living with the Judge of Sore, Bertrand Dulou. One fine morning, a young apothecary, coming to the house to attend Vincent who was ill, stole the Judge's purse containing four hundred crowns. The Judge accused Vincent of taking it, spoke of it here and there, and even went so far as to abuse him in front of Bérulle. Vincent suffered in silence and made no attempt to defend himself. It was only after six months had elapsed that the truth became known through the culprit's own avowal, and that the Judge wrote to ask Vincent's pardon. More than forty-five years later, the Superior of Saint-Lazare still spoke with emotion (though without naming himself) of this incident which had opened to him the way to the heights of sanctity.

The heroic virtue of which Vincent gave proof on this occasion certainly won for him the esteem of Bérulle and of many of those who surrounded him. This is apparent from the fact that on 19th October 1611 Vincent acted as intermediary for the transfer of a sum of 15,000 livres to the hospital of La Charité. But at the same period Bérulle showed his attachment to him in a still clearer manner. The future Cardinal was about to make one of the most important decisions of his life. On 11th November 1611 he was to found the Oratory of France. One wonders why Vincent did not think of joining this new congregation, with which he long maintained the most excellent relations. According to tradition he had already found his own vocation, which lay in caring for the poor and for the simple country people, and this differed considerably from the more intellectual aims of the Oratory.

Among Bérulle's first companions one of the most outstanding was François Bourgoing, Curé of Clichy. In order to devote his life entirely to the newly formed Oratory, Bourgoing had to leave his parish. On Bérulle's advice, he accordingly resigned the living in favour of Vincent de Paul on 13th October 1611. After Vincent had put everything in order, both with Rome and with the civil authorities, he was inducted, with the usual formalities, on 2nd May 1612, and the parish bells rang out to salute the new Curé. Clichy at the beginning of the seventeenth century was in the country. Its six hundred parishioners were for the most part humble peasant folk. Thus it was in a rural setting that Vincent was truly to inaugurate his priestly ministry.

Vincent de Paul was an excellent parish priest. To start with, he had to undertake the restoration of the church which was almost in ruins. The work, which started as soon as he arrived, went on until 1630, and the faithful contributed to the best of their ability. The church rebuilt under the direction of Vincent de Paul is still standing and his memory lives there. The parish for which he was responsible naturally became the field for some of his first

foundations. He installed a clerical school there, modelled on the one started at Saint-Nicolas du Chardonnet by his friend Nicolas Bourdoise, the founder of parochial seminaries in France. A dozen children were trained in this school with a view to the priesthood. Then, in order to encourage devotion to our Lady among his parishioners, he established a confraternity of the Rosary. Later, in 1623, it was the turn of one of his first confraternities of Charity.

Naturally Vincent put his whole heart into the formation of his parishioners. It seems that he rapidly obtained an excellent attendance at the services: "It was with admiration", he afterwards recorded, " that I heard these peasants intoning the psalms, not missing a single note." He did his best with the catechism, and scattered generous gifts of charity around him. His flock repaid him with an affection and obedience which Vincent recalled later with tenderness. "I was a priest of the fields. I had such good people, and so obedient in doing what I asked, that when I told them that they should come to confession on the first Sunday of the month, they did not fail to do so. They used to come and confess their sins and I saw day by day the profit these souls were making."

X

TUTOR TO THE GONDI FAMILY

FOND as Vincent was of his parishioners at Clichy, he can scarcely have remained in residence among them for much more than a year. It was probably in the autumn of 1613 that he ceased to live in the parish and entered the service of the Gondis as tutor. This he did upon the advice of Bérulle, who was very intimate with the family. At first he continued to be responsible for the church of Clichy where he had placed a curate in charge, and it was not until 1626 that he finally surrendered the living. We might feel surprise that Vincent should have renounced his parochial work in order to confine his ministrations to this limited and aristocratic sphere. But, in fact, his stay with the Gondis was to provide him with invaluable contacts, to open all doors to him and to give his apostolate possibilities exceeding all hopes.

The Gondi family was of Florentine origin. The branch which settled in France at the beginning of the sixteenth century had greatly benefited from the favours of Queen Catherine de Medici and were in a most enviable position. It was to the royal patronage that the Gondis owed their accession to the episcopal see of Paris, which had become a sort of hereditary fief for them—from 1568 to 1662 four Gondis in succession held this office. The member of the family whose service Vincent entered was Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi, Count of Joigny, Marquis of the Îles d'Or, Baron of Montmirail, Dampierre and Villepreux, General of the Galleys, Lieutenant-General of the King in the Seas of the Levant. He was a nobleman of great elegance and charm, "the most handsome and skilful of men and one of the most valiant in the kingdom". At the time when Vincent first knew him, his perfect integrity and fundamental virtue naturally did not prevent him from still being very worldly. As for his wife, whose maiden name was Françoise-Marguerite de Silly, she was beautiful and virtuous, although she has sometimes been credited with a brief love affair with Marshal de Bassompierre.

So it came about that Vincent joined the household of the Gondis, who were then living in Paris in the parish of St Eustache. Both husband and wife seem rapidly to have granted him a friendship full of veneration, and his influence on them was deep. It proved specially decisive in the case of the General of the Galleys. He was still, of course, to commit many faults, of which the most serious was probably forcing his younger son, the future Cardinal de

Retz, to take Holy Orders solely in the family interests and without any vocation. Yet Vincent led him little by little to give up duels, to shoulder his responsibilities and finally to practise a life of genuine piety, to such purpose that when he became a widower in 1625, Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi renounced all his titles and became a priest of the Oratory. As for Madame de Gondi, who was very pious but highly strung, impressionable and inclined to have scruples, she had an attachment for Vincent, her director, which he sometimes found a little embarrassing. On the day after the saint's death, the former General of the Galleys, who had by then become Father de Gondi, summed up his memories thus: "Among all the virtues of the dear departed, those I admired most were his humility, his charity and his great prudence in all circumstances. Not once did I notice or hear that he failed in any of these virtues, although he lived for ten or twelve years in my house. I never knew of the slightest fault in him; that is why I have always held him to be a saint."

XI

THE LIVING OF CHÂTILLON-LES-DOMBES

WE regret that Vincent de Paul did not keep a spiritual diary. It would no doubt have told us a great deal about his interior development during these years and would give us the key to events of which the meaning remains obscure. It seems clear, at any rate, that Vincent experienced at the Gondis', especially at the beginning of his tutorship, a kind of dissatisfaction which soon came to a head in a compelling need to get away. The reasons for this were probably complex. The very confidence which the Gondi parents had in him made his position more delicate from certain aspects, for he had to act as counsellor in many difficult cases. The pupils to whom he had to devote himself were not of the most restful, and the violent instincts of their ancestry lived on in them with particular intensity. To start with, he was principally concerned with the eldest, Pierre, born in 1602 and later to become the Duke of Retz. A little later he had to begin the education of the younger brother Henry, born about 1610. Destined for an ecclesiastical career in which he was to succeed his uncle as Bishop of Paris, Henry was unfortunately killed by a fall from his horse in 1622. It was then that Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi decided to make his third son take Holy Orders. This was Jean-François Paul, who was to have so eventful a career and to be accorded such brilliant literary honours after his death. We wonder whether the future Cardinal de Retz, who was born in 1613, at the time of Vincent's arrival in the Gondi household, ever had the same tutor as his brothers. In view of his youth this seems doubtful, but tradition has it that it was Vincent de Paul who taught him the first rudiments of Latin. The adventures of this character who claimed to have "the least ecclesiastic soul that ever existed in the universe", would seem to suggest that Vincent's influence on him was practically nil. But we should perhaps attribute to the distant memory of a saint the Cardinal's pious end.

Vincent's dissatisfaction had, however, other and deeper causes. Naturally rather inclined to solitude, fond of retirement and silence, conscious also of the gaps in his early education, he must have felt somewhat ill at ease in the brilliant and aristocratic worldliness of the Gondi environment. "He lived in this great house as in a Carthusian monastery, far from human intercourse; he retired into his room as into a cell and its solitude pleased him so much

that he never left it except for reasons of charity or necessity." At the suggestion, no doubt, of Monsieur de Gondi, he accepted the office of Canon and treasurer of the Chapter of Ecouis in the diocese of Rouen, but the impossibility of his living there raised a number of difficulties, and he preferred to renounce his prebend. A little while after this he became seriously ill and this trial must have increased his longing for retirement. Gradually a plan was forming in his mind. He wanted to escape in order to "employ himself in some distant province with the instruction and care of the poor country folk". He spoke about it to Bérulle, who did not try to deter him but offered him the living of Châtillon-les-Dombes in the diocese of Lyons. He knew, as a matter of fact, from the Oratorians at Lyons, that they were looking for a devoted priest capable of raising up this neglected parish. Vincent de Paul accepted the offer and, without telling anyone of his plans, he left the house of Gondi towards the middle of 1617. He stopped at Lyons to put everything concerning his new appointment in order. He was nominated to the living of Châtillon on 29th July, and took formal possession of it on 1st August.

The little town of Châtillon is situated in the fertile valley of the Chalaronne; but round it stretch the monotonous expanses of the Dombes, with their great meres and pastures, which must have reminded Vincent of the Landes of his childhood. The parish had two churches, Saint-Martin de Buenans and Saint-André de Châtillon, and there was also a fairly large Protestant community in existence. The situation as a whole was not brilliant; churches falling into ruins, presbyteries in disrepair, in short, an utterly neglected parish. For the past forty years the priests responsible for it had not lived there, as they had benefices in Lyons, and the churches were supplied by chaplains. "There was only an association of six old priests who lived there in great debauchery. No monk or nun was to be found in this town which had nearly two thousand inhabitants. Most of these old priests kept a number of girls and women in their houses to the great scandal of everyone; and, indeed, there were a quantity of other abuses as well."

Vincent de Paul courageously embarked upon the task of material and moral restoration. He had the presbytery of Châtillon repaired and, until it was habitable, he lodged in the house of a person of some standing who was a friend of the Lyons Oratorians. This young Huguenot nobleman of somewhat lax morals, who bore the name of Jean Beynier, was rather a surprising case. A little later, under Vincent's influence he was to be converted to Catholicism and to give an example of deeply Christian life. It seems that after a while Vincent went to live in the presbytery of Buenans, then, finally, to that of Châtillon. Finding his task to be beyond the strength of one man, he sent to

Lyons for a good priest, Louis Girard, who became his curate and in favour of whom he subsequently resigned his living.

Fifty years later, the inhabitants of Châtillon still remembered Vincent with veneration, saying "that there was enough cause to canonize him from what they knew he had done in Châtillon". They described him as "very modest and recollected in the church and elsewhere, extremely liberal towards the poor, not insisting upon his rights, giving proof of a deep humility and extraordinary prudence and charity". Under his impulse the churches and altars were restored to a fitting condition, the morals of the local clergy were reformed, the most crying scandals disappeared. "He put a stop to confessions made out loud and in common, the payment which was exacted for confessions, a debauch known as *Le Royaume* (the Kingdom) which took place in the belfry, and several abuses and scandals." Vincent even learnt the dialect of Bresse in order to have closer contact with his flock.

It was at Châtillon that Vincent inaugurated a foundation which was subsequently to have world-wide success: it was that of the Confraternities of Charity. He liked, in after life, to recall the fortuitous circumstances which gave birth to this foundation:—"One Sunday, as I was vesting for Holy Mass, someone came to tell me that in a house standing apart from the others at a distance of a quarter of a league from there, everybody was so ill that there was not a single person who could help the others; and they were all in indescribable need. My heart was greatly touched at the thought of them. I did not fail to speak of them with affection in my sermon, and God, moving the hearts of my hearers, brought it about that they were all filled with compassion for these poor sufferers." The unfortunate family was helped and this was the occasion which led Vincent to group together a few charitable people who devoted themselves to the care of the sick in their homes, "tending their bodies by taking them food and medicine, and their souls by preparing those who were sinking for a good death and those who could be cured for a good life". Shortly afterwards Vincent drew up for the new Confraternity a rule which he was careful to submit to the Archbishop of Lyons for his approval. Thus the association was canonically established on 8th December 1617. The text of this rule, from which Vincent borrowed the essentials for other foundations, is striking in its natural and supernatural balance, its practical realism which provides for every detail, and its anxiety that help should be given to the poor with a smile—"gaily and charitably". There we recognize the mark of the saint.

XII

THE FIRST COUNTRY MISSIONS

IT seems that Vincent's apostolic efforts were repaid with many successes. Conversions took place at Châtillon in high society, as also among the peasants. One of the most remarkable was that of Count de Rougemont, a swashbuckling squire of whom Vincent by word and example made a veritable saint. But this ministry, fruitful as it was, lasted for only a few months. As it happened, Monsieur and Madame de Gondi had not been very much upset by the departure of Vincent who, they supposed, had only gone on a temporary journey; but when a letter arrived from their tutor telling them that he intended leaving them for good, they were horrified. Gondi was in Provence at the time on business concerned with his office as General of the Galleys, and it was he who had to let his wife know the distressing news. The grief of Madame de Gondi was particularly acute. We know that she was so much attached to her director that she found it hard to be deprived of his presence. She was not a woman to resign herself without a struggle, however. She accordingly moved heaven and earth to bring about Vincent's return. Letters of supplication went off to Châtillon, which Vincent de Paul resisted for a time. Then Madame de Gondi understood that she would get nowhere unless she could enlist the help of Bérulle. The Superior of the Oratorians was very kind and open to influence and she won him over without much trouble.

One day in the autumn Vincent saw his friend Charles du Fresne arriving at Châtillon. Du Fresne, like himself, had entered the service of the Gondis and was employed as their secretary. "A gentleman coming, it is believed, from Monsieur de Bérulle and the General of the Galleys gave him several letters. Among them there was one from Monsieur de Bérulle which in truth caused many movements in his soul; but after he had conferred with him (the messenger) and remained in front of the Blessed Sacrament, he subsequently departed for Lyons to settle this important business." No doubt he went to consult the Oratorians of Lyons, with whom he was always on very good terms. He returned home during the first days of December and from that time he had made up his mind to leave Châtillon and go back to Paris. "Shortly afterwards, he distributed his clothes and even his linen to the poor of this parish, which he left for Paris, after telling the people in an exhortation that when Providence brought him to Châtillon he did not think he would be leaving them, but that,

Providence having disposed otherwise, they must conform to his will as he did himself." He went away amidst the tears of his parishioners. On 23rd December 1617 he went to see Bérulle who advised him once again to enter the Gondi household. This Vincent did, returning on Christmas Eve; but it seems as though he had been a little shocked at the apparent inconstancy of Bérulle; from this time his relations with the founder of the Oratory became more and more distant.

The Gondis were delighted at Vincent's return and offered him their estates as a field of vast possibilities for the rural apostolate to which he was so irresistibly drawn. It seems probable that an assistant was provided to deputize for him as tutor, so that he should have greater freedom for the country missions to which, even before his departure to Châtillon, he had begun to devote himself. Vincent knew from long experience into what a state of material and moral poverty many of the smaller parishes had sunk. Numerous churches had been destroyed during the wars of religion and among those that remained a large proportion were falling into ruins for lack of repairs. They were only too often served by ignorant priests of doubtful morals and no education. Madame de Gondi had had personal experience of this. She noticed that the country priests to whom she went for confession did not even know the formula for absolution, and was obliged to take it to them in writing as a precaution. It goes without saying that a large number of the parish priests had given up preaching and never taught the catechism. Some exacted money for administering the sacraments. The reform of the clergy was a long business and it was not until later that Vincent was able to devote himself to it. For the moment he did what he could to cope with the situation by organizing missions to reawaken the fervour of the inhabitants of these neglected parishes.

Before his departure to Châtillon, Vincent had had an opportunity to inaugurate this kind of apostolate. Some time towards the beginning of January 1617 he had been present at the death of a peasant of Gannes, a little village in the diocese of Amiens not far from the Gondis' castle at Folleville. The dying man had made a general confession and so found peace for his lamentably disordered conscience. On learning what had happened, Madame de Gondi realized that the state of that poor man must be shared by many of her peasants. At her request Vincent accordingly began a regular mission at Folleville on 25th January. The Jesuits from Amiens came to help him with it and it ended up with a great number of general confessions. Madame de Gondi was so well satisfied that she tried to make these missions to the villages on her estate a permanent institution, through the settlement of a sum of money specially allocated to them. The plan never materialized, however.

On his return from Châtillon, Vincent was more eager than ever to consecrate his life to the evangelization of the peasants. During the first weeks of 1618 a mission was organized in Villepreux. At the beginning of the following autumn it was the turn of Joigny, then in October and November of Montmirail, where Vincent returned in 1620. For the rest, it is quite certain that we do not know all that his apostolic zeal enabled him to accomplish during those years of intense activity. We only know that it was not confined to the limits of the Gondi estates, but overflowed into many other dioceses, such as Beauvais, Soissons, Sens and Chartres.

Vincent used more or less the same methods everywhere. As he could not accomplish the task alone, he took with him helpers who were usually secular priests. Among those whose names have come down to us, many were highly qualified men of great piety and learning who ever remained among Vincent's loyal friends. In each case the preaching was organized from a centre, but the missionaries gladly radiated into the churches and chapels of the neighbourhood. The principal objective was to give the country people a working knowledge of the truths of Christianity and to teach them to make a general confession which would put their consciences right. Before closing the mission Vincent used to organize a Confraternity of Charity on the model of the one at Châtillon. He gave it a rule and had the officials elected. At first the Confraternities were made up of women; then, at Folleville, in 1620, Vincent instituted his first Confraternity of Charity for men, which was succeeded by others. There were even some attempts to form mixed Confraternities, but Vincent eventually gave them up. Besides these activities he arranged discussions here and there with Protestants, of whom several were converted.

XIII

CHAPLAIN ROYAL TO THE GALLEYS

IT must be admitted that the galleys are among the black spots of the old order. The use of galleys—long, narrow, low-built boats, propelled by sails and oars—goes back to the ages of antiquity, but it was only under Charles IV that the French navy began to possess any. From the sixteenth century, as it was difficult to get voluntary, paid oarsmen, it became customary in the penal system of France to send convicts to the royal galleys. Generally this punishment was reserved for relatively serious crimes, but certain tribunals had an unfortunate tendency to abuse it, especially when a number of instructions recommended them to supply the navy with as many oarsmen as possible. Besides the convicts, Moslem prisoners, captured in the course of operations in the Mediterranean, were employed in this way. At the end of the sixteenth century the galleys formed an autonomous organization, independent of the rest of the fleet and commanded by a general of their own. This General of the Galleys had under his orders about six thousand prisoners, divided between twenty vessels. Each boat had from twenty-five to thirty benches (*bancs de vogue*), with five or six rowers apiece, the total forming the *chiourme* or gang of the galley. The rest of the ship's company was made up of sailors and soldiers. The galley-slaves were practically naked, they were dirty and covered with vermin, and were ill-protected from bad weather by a canvas awning. They were chained two by two to the same ball and were also chained to their benches. The food was wretched and the overseers in charge of the gangs were free with the whip. To add to all this, the convicts were seldom set free when they had done their time. In this matter there was so little order that the clerks who entered their names in the registers did not trouble to note down the length of their sentences. We can imagine the despair of these poor people, who might well have envied the life of a beast of burden.

The office of General of the Galleys had been held by the Gondis since 1598. Vincent must therefore have had frequent occasion to grieve over the sad fate of the galley-slaves. It seems that in the spring of 1618, shortly after his return from Châtillon, he was required to accompany the General to Marseilles, which was then the headquarters of the galleys, and he was able to see with his own eyes the state of material and moral abandonment in which the poor wretches were languishing. It was certainly on his advice that Gondi started to have a

little hospital built at Marseilles for sick galley-slaves. Unfortunately the work had to stop for lack of funds, and was only completed in about 1645, thanks to the generosity of Richelieu's niece, the Duchesse d'Aiguillon. On his return to Paris, about Easter 1618, Vincent took up the cause of the convicts who were waiting in the prisons of the capital, and specially in the Conciergerie, for the departure of the *chaîne*. This was the name given to the convoy which each year, in March or April, took off to Marseilles those who were condemned to the galleys. They passed the months of waiting in evil-smelling dungeons, damp and unventilated. Here they were chained to the walls and never allowed to go out. Before all else, Vincent strove to improve their living conditions. He obtained permission from the Attorney General for them to be moved to a house rented in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré near the church of Saint-Roch, where they were treated more humanely. At the same time Vincent was busy collecting alms to provide some relief for these prisoners. By a pastoral letter of 1st June 1618, the Bishop of Paris, Henry de Gondi, Cardinal de Retz, recommended this new work to the charity of the faithful. Whenever he had the chance, Vincent did his utmost to visit the prisoners and to bring them consolation. He placed two chaplains in the house of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré. They said Mass there, preached and administered the sacraments. When in 1625 he instituted the Congregation of the Mission, he explicitly stated in the contract of its foundation that its members should "give spiritual assistance to the poor convicts, so that they should profit from their corporal suffering". It seems, however, that the absorbing occupations of the missioners prevented them from looking after the convicts as much as Vincent could have wished. He had therefore, as we shall see, to approach various charitable organizations for the help he needed.

As early as February 1619, at Gondi's request, Vincent was appointed Chaplain Royal to the Galleys with a salary of six hundred livres a year. This new office, created specially for him, gave him authority over all the other chaplains to the galleys, and enabled him to take effective action to stop numerous abuses. He immediately set to work to organize missions, as far as possible in the actual boats. In October 1622, the galleys under Gondi's orders took a very active part in the operations against the Protestant fleet off La Rochelle. Afterwards they wintered in the port of Tonnay-Charente, and in the spring of 1623 they came to Bordeaux. Vincent went there to conduct a general mission to the galley-slaves. This mission was a very great success and was even marked by the conversion of a Turkish prisoner. Vincent took the opportunity offered by this stay in the South to pay his family at Pouy a short visit, probably his last.

The prison in the parish of Saint-Roch in Paris was certainly an advance,

but it was not altogether satisfactory. The convicts were overcrowded, and they were never allowed to go out for exercise in the courtyard. Towards 1630 the celebrated Company of the Blessed Sacrament arose. It was a sort of secret society bound together in piety and charity, and Vincent de Paul played a great part in it. This Company took a keen interest in the galley-slaves. The Parisian branch was in close touch with that of Marseilles, to which it forwarded the documents necessary for the liberation of the convicts when they had completed their sentences. In Paris the Company made it its business to improve the lot of the prisoners, by obtaining permission for them to go out sometimes into the fresh air. A little later Vincent succeeded in getting the prison for those who were waiting moved to a huge square tower, part of the ancient ramparts of Paris. This tower was in the Quai de la Tournelle, between the Porte Saint-Bernard and the Seine, and it was in the parish of Saint-Nicolas du Chardonnet. The chaplaincy, which at the beginning had not been very securely provided for, was confided in 1634 to the care of the parish priest of Saint-Nicolas, Georges Froger, a member of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament and a friend of Vincent. Vincent himself made it his business to collect the alms which were so much needed by the poor prisoners, for whom the authorities provided nothing but a bare ration of bread and water. He interested the Ladies of Charity, who came to visit them and brought them some relief. Then, in 1640, he sent the Sisters of Charity who were to organize a regular service of material and moral help for the convicts. He drew up a special rule for their guidance. In these surroundings, where there was unfortunately a good deal of corruption, their work was difficult and required heroic patience and selflessness as well as uncommon prudence. At the same time Vincent kept in close touch with Marseilles. There the Company of the Blessed Sacrament and the saintly Bishop Jean-Baptiste Gault did everything possible to improve the condition of the galley-slaves, with the help of some priests of the Mission whom he sent them. In addition to all this, Vincent had the constant preoccupation of finding chaplains for the galleys, helping them in their training, and arranging that their salaries should be paid them regularly, which was not always easy.

Such was the inexhaustible charity of Vincent de Paul with regard to the galley-slaves. We must, of course, set aside among pious legends the anecdote which represents him as taking the place of a condemned man. Yet this story, which has so gripped popular imagination, has value as a symbol. It shows how much the contemporaries of Vincent were impressed by his intense solicitude for those who at that time were regarded as the dregs of humanity, and how vividly the memory of his generosity lived on.

XX

SAINT-LAZARE

WE know very little about the time Vincent de Paul spent at the Bons-Enfants. He must have had repairs done to the buildings which were in a very bad state. But, whatever happened, it seemed likely that the further development of the Congregation of the Mission would be fraught with difficulties. To start with, the premises of the college were rather cramped and could not shelter a large community. At the same time the income from the capital given by the Gondis was not enough to provide for more than some six missioners. No doubt Vincent realized that his foundation was going to exceed these somewhat narrow limits, but he does not seem to have worried about it, putting his trust in Providence—and Providence did not fail him.

One day—probably towards the end of 1630—Vincent had a visit from the parish priest of Saint-Laurent, Nicolas de Lestocq, who brought with him Adrien Le Bon, Prior of Saint-Lazare, Canon Regular of St Augustine. He was a person of some note, for the old leper hospital of Saint-Lazare represented one of the most important houses of the Paris region. Situated to the north of the city, on the royal road to Saint-Denis, this hospital for the sick, which since 1514 had been confided to the Canons of St Augustine, occupied a vast enclosure. In addition, it possessed very numerous properties in the villages of L'Île de France and quite important groups of dwellings in Paris itself; finally it received an income from the Saint-Laurent Fair which at that period was held in the neighbourhood during the whole of the month of August. But, at the date of which we are writing, lepers happily had become very scarce, and the establishment only sheltered two or three during the whole of the seventeenth century. Thus the foundation had ceased to have any object. A dozen canons lived there who, in accordance with the customs of the time, did not hesitate to allow themselves certain relaxations with regard to the demands of religious life. Adrien Le Bon had been prior since 1611. He was undoubtedly a priest of deep and sincere piety, but his temper was somewhat uncertain and touchy. Relations were bad between him and his community; there had been various disagreeable incidents and, in 1630, they had had to resort to arbitration in order, at all costs, to settle their quarrels. While he was still trying to find a more lasting solution, Adrien Le Bon heard about

the Company of Missioners founded by Monsieur Vincent, and he thought that the funds of Saint-Lazare, originally intended to relieve bodily leprosy, could not be better employed for the future than in healing the sickness of souls. He was, accordingly, planning to leave his benefice to the new Congregation. With this in view he had persuaded the Curé of Saint-Laurent, in whose parish Saint-Lazare was situated, to accompany him, and he had come to see Vincent de Paul to make his offer.

The latter was very hesitant at first. It was not only that the importance of such an establishment conflicted with his taste for poverty, but he had every reason to fear that the acquisition of this rich priory by the Mission, while it was still feeling its way, might give rise to countless difficulties. However, in the course of the year 1631, Adrien Le Bon repeatedly returned to the charge, and, little by little, the objections were overcome. André Duval was consulted, he advised acceptance and Vincent de Paul gave in. On 7th January 1632 the contract was signed which made over to the Priests of the Mission the property of Saint-Lazare and all the goods, lands and houses which went with it, in exchange for an annuity to be paid to the Prior and Canons, who would continue to live there until their death. In spite of some difficulties with the Abbé of Saint-Victor who claimed the right to dispose of this priory, which had formerly belonged to the *Congrégation des Victorins*, dissolved in 1625, the legal formalities were completed in comparative calm.

Early in 1632, Vincent de Paul was installed in the dwelling which was to be his centre until the time of his death, and the mother-house of his Congregation, whose members were soon to be given the name of Lazarists. Naturally he had many problems to solve. Living with the Canons raised more than one delicate question; tactful manoeuvring was necessary in order to keep on good terms with the Prior, who died in 1651 leaving all he possessed to the Mission. The fees for the acquisition of the priory were very high and the buildings were in urgent need of costly repairs. Nevertheless if everything is taken into consideration, it is indisputable that Adrien Le Bon had put into Vincent's hands a marvellous means of apostolic work: Saint-Lazare was going to become one of the centres of spiritual life in France. It would not be many years before, grouped round the mother-house of the Mission on this vast domain, there would be a seminary, a centre for retreats for priests, ordinands and laymen, and a centre for ecclesiastical conferences; at the same time there would still be, as in the past, a leper-hospital, fortunately seldom in use, a lunatic asylum, and a prison, where criminals of good family were usually sent. In 1641 Louise de Marillac and her Sisters of Charity came too to settle in the Faubourg Saint-Denis in a house which Vincent hired and later

bought for them. It was just opposite Saint-Lazare, thus saving their founder much time and endless troublesome journeys.

In spite of their great diversity, Vincent extended his indefatigable care and attention to all these organizations. In 1638 he had considerable repairs carried out in the main building, which bordered the Faubourg Saint-Denis. For the rest, the bad state of the old structures necessitated heavy expenses, about which Vincent sometimes complained bitterly: "We nearly always need masons", he wrote, "and they cost us more than the interest on the money which would be required to build everything new". On the other hand, the income from the Saint-Lazare estate was far from regular; being largely agricultural, it fell very low in bad years. Nevertheless, without ever making any concessions to luxury, Vincent managed to put up the necessary buildings. In 1645 he had the whole property enclosed by a wall. In the same year, to the north of the enclosure near the Rue de Saint-Denis, he built the seminary of Saint-Charles which was to receive young aspirants for the priesthood. A little later, it became a vast house for ordination candidates. In 1659, Vincent bought a house near the stables, where he installed the lunatics whose presence might inconvenience the community. He superintended the cultivation of the grounds, and had orchards of fruit trees planted. In his wise material administration, which was unpretentious yet sound, the virtues of his old peasant stock were apparent. The solution of these financial problems was of the very greatest importance for Vincent, since the development and expansion of a great number of good works depended on it. It was through the intelligent and prudent utilization of the resources offered by Saint-Lazare that, from 1632 onwards, the charity of St Vincent de Paul was able to spread its influence still further.