Sources for Understanding Vincent de Paul
This paper offers an introduction to the present situation of Vincentian studies. For this purpose, the material is divided into the following sections: (I) Texts and translations of Vincent's writings, (II) Biographies of Vincent de Paul; (III) Contemporary witnesses to Vincent de Paul; (IV) Studies about Vincent de Paul; and (V) a supplement on the iconography of Vincent de Paul. Since the sources on St. Vincent are so vast in several languages, this material is presented principally for English speakers or readers. It began as an oral presentation for participants in CIF, the Centre International de Formation: St. Vincent de Paul, in Paris. It has been often revised and updated.

Much of the material discussed in this paper, in the original French and other languages, is available on-line, at DePaul University’s site, Via Sapientiae. Go to http://via.library.depaul.edu/ and click on Vincentian Heritage Collections.

I. Texts and Translations of Vincent's writings

TEXTS

Many congregations have writings of their founders, but few have the quantity and variety that Vincentians have. Despite this advantage, it took some time for our confreres to treat these writings with the respect which they are receiving today. A great number were lost, of course, during the French revolution. Letters sent by Vincent to others must have been burned or otherwise destroyed, and those received by him, together with some originals, must have been destroyed in the famous sack of Saint Lazare on 13 July 1789. The superiors general caused another loss. For example, in years past, they regularly presented original letters of the founder to various provinces or other noteworthy persons on some special occasion. This resulted in the dispersion of many of his writings, and, unfortunately, we also have lost many of those letters in that they were destroyed through natural causes (fire and water damage in particular), or through human causes (forgetfulness or lack of attention.) However, it was only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that what remains of these letters have been published, in whole or in part. In the beginning, Vincent’s biographers made use of such letters as they had, and they published whatever they deemed appropriate for their biographies. Other writers referred to other letters, but often did not identify them carefully as to date or recipient. His correspondence was regarded as a source for spiritual nourishment—which, of course, is true—but the letters were not treated historically. That is, they were presented largely outside or apart from their historical context. The authors ignored these crucial historical questions: when were they written, why were they written, to whom were they written, where were they written, what were the circumstances in which they were written?

This situation began to be remedied for us with two major editions of Vincent's letters: those of Pémartin and Coste. Although the Pémartin edition has been superseded by Coste’s, many of our houses still have the earlier publication on their bookshelves, and so I will give a brief idea of its contents. The editor originally published four volumes of letters (1880), then one...
volume of conferences to the confreres (1881) and two volumes of conferences to the Daughters (1881). In 1888, a new volume appeared containing letters and conferences which came to light after his publication. In addition, Pémartin added other documents, such as particular rules. A new edition of Abelly in three volumes, with notes (probably by Pémartin) followed in 1891, together with a volume of tables (1891). This makes an edition of 12 volumes, which a later edition complicated by presenting the volumes out of chronological order, starting with the life of Saint Vincent (volumes 1-3), the letters (volumes 4-7), the conferences (volumes 8-10), the supplement and the tables (volumes 11-12).

Jean-Baptiste Pémartin was the first to try a serious publication of letters. He published 2041 numbered letters in four large volumes. Although Pémartin, like others of his time, did not hesitate to "perfect" the letters, by filling in missing words or phrases, for example, his work set the style for the future. He was following previous work begun in 1844 under the generalate of Father Jean-Baptiste Etienne. Pémartin's and subsequent editions were defective, as mentioned above.

The standard edition, the one which must be cited in any scholarly work, is that of Pierre Coste. Coste, however, regarded it at least at the beginning, as a second edition of Pémartin, which he (Coste) began when the Pémartin edition ran out (1911; see note in Annales 76 (1911) 5.) Coste was a compatriot of the founder, in that he came from the Landes of Gascony, in the south of France. After various assignments, he trained himself in Vincentian history, and became the secretary general of the Congregation. This gave him unparalleled access to historical sources. His responsibility also enabled him to build on the detailed archival work carried on by many careful scholars before him, much of whose work is still to be found in our archives. He published two major works: the earlier (1925) is his 14 volumes of Saint Vincent's writings; the later (1932) is his three-volume life.

Coste's edition of the writings has the important subtitle: Letters, Conferences, Documents. These are divided into eight volumes of letters, four volumes of conferences (of which two are for the Daughters of Charity and two for the confreres), one volume of documents, and one massive volume of indices. To these should be added what has been called "Volume XV." This is a number of Mission et Charité, published by André Dodin, January-June 1970 (#19-20). In it, Father Dodin gathered together letters and documents which had come to light after Coste's work was completed, but which had, for the most part, already been published in the Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission.

Some preliminary remarks should be made about Coste's value. While we have to acknowledge the huge breadth of his undertaking, there are some defects. First, Coste (following Pémartin) did not follow the exact old-fashioned spelling of the originals. He modernized the spelling, but kept the seventeenth-century terms. Second, on occasion Coste did not publish the entire letter since he concluded that its contents might have scandalized readers in his day. (The English edition, however, has regularly published the entire letter.)

A. Letters

I turn now to a discussion of Coste's first eight volumes, the letters. How many letters are
we talking about? Some have calculated that the founder must have written about 30,000. This is not an unreasonable total, since it can be calculated as about 1000 per year over a thirty year period (1630-1660). Besides, the total output of Antoine Fiat, which we have, is well more than 100,000 in approximately the same period.

Of the 3323 letters numbered in Coste's edition, plus the 144 in *Mission et Charité*, and 31 in Georges Baldacchino’s recent publication1 (a total of 3498 whole or fragmentary letters), 650 were sent to Monsieur Vincent. When these are subtracted, we have a total of only 2848. The total of his datable letters is 2610. In rough terms, this is a little less than 10% of the supposed total of 30,000.

His letters can be divided in several ways. First, the original ones are divided according to their origin into: (1) autographed (also called holograph), that is, letters entirely written by him; (2) signed (also called autographed), which were written by someone else (a secretary) and only signed by him; (3) a combination of the two: that is, he signed letters written by others but added some corrections or sections of his own. How did he write his letters? He dictated the majority of his letters to a secretary, and his secretary would then either write the letter word for word, or would, very likely, write the letter in general terms. Since we have drafts of some letters, we know that they underwent revisions, which either he or a secretary made. Before 1645, he sometimes used Father Antoine Portail as his secretary, but, as his work increased, the founder began to use Brothers Bertrand Ducournau, and later Louis Robineau and Pierre Cholier. Occasionally Vincent wrote back to someone—Louise de Marillac in particular—on the same paper she had sent him. When he made changes—crossing out, adding text—Coste noted these in his edition.

Vincent's letters can also be divided by topic. The principal ones are (1) autobiographical: there are a few very early letters, such as the first one, written to his mother; 2) letters of spiritual direction, principally those given to Louise de Marillac; (3) about the poor, describing their miseries and their needs; (4) about politics, particularly ecclesiastical politics, such as the appointment of bishops, and relations with government officials; (5) theological, especially about Jansenism; (6) about Vincentian or Daughter of Charity houses and works, as well as about the Sisters of the Visitation or other communities. Lastly, (7) others are very short notes, about matters of daily life, much like our telephone conversations or internet messages. Many of these went to the mother house of the Daughters of Charity, located just across the street from the original Saint Lazare.

The majority of his letters were written from Friday through Sunday. He seems to have written almost nothing on Thursdays, leading to the conviction that Thursday was his weekly day of rest.

His surviving letters can be divided by their present location, answering the question of where these letters are kept. The mother house in Paris has several collections, now kept by the provincial. Other large collections exist in Turin and Krakow. Many others are in private hands or in public collections of autographs. The details are explained in the introductions to Coste's edition. Are these letters originals or copies? The large collections (Paris, Turin, Krakow) and those in private collections are mainly originals. There are also two volumes in our archives.
(called *registres* in French) which contain early copies of letters. There are also copies, either of entire letters or of partial ones, found in Abelly and in Collet, Vincent's two earliest major biographers. Both of these authors also had access to letters that have now disappeared. Collet, in particular, thought that some 6000 or 7000 letters were still available. Some copies were made for various community houses after the death of the founder, and exist still in manuscripts found today in Avignon, Lyons and Marseilles. For the sake of completeness, the surviving letters are divided roughly in half as to original letters and copies of letters.

A question that is of more concern to French speakers is that of Coste’s modernizing of the spelling of the original texts. It would seem better to have Vincent’s actual text with its original spelling. However, for some readers this might be difficult to understand. In addition, some of the letters that we have are copies that were already modernized before Coste’s work began. His concept was to make the texts readable and usable for the ordinary confrere and Daughter of Charity. In addition, some original letters had notes (words or figures) on the back, sometimes with other identification marks. These have not been published.

**B. Conferences**

The second major part of the Coste edition, volumes 9 through 12, contains the conferences. Volumes 9 and 10 contain those conferences given to the Congregation of the Mission.

We must begin by asking: what kinds of assemblies go by the name conferences?

First come the formal talks to the Community. These were held every Friday, except for feast days. Dodin calculates that Vincent must have given about 1000 of these between 1625 and 1660, if you add up all the available Fridays. We have the text of only 31. The texts we have are summaries, and can be read in about 30 minutes, about half the time scheduled for the conferences. These texts seem to be mainly his own words, almost always without comments from the confreres in attendance—unlike the situation of the texts of Vincent's conferences to the Daughters of Charity. The term "conference" (*entretien*), of course, implies a give and take, statements and responses.

Second come the repetitions of prayer. It should help to realize that the French term "repetition" is used now, and was used even in the late 17th century, to refer to a student reciting lessons in class. Saint Vincent seems to have used this term to refer also to the same sort of recitation of what was learned, so to speak, during one's prayers. These exercises were held two or three times a week, that is, usually Wednesdays and Sundays as well as on feast days. Dodin again calculated that Vincent must have presided at about 2000 of these. We have the text for 52 of them. They lasted 10 to 15 minutes, and involved both the priests and brothers speaking and Vincent responding.

Third come the texts of advice given at Chapter. Chapter of faults was held weekly, on Fridays after the morning meditation, but we do not know if Vincent said something each time. The format for his response was fairly informal, judging from the few remains we have. We have the text of only four of these.
Fourth comes a mixed group of addresses to groups or individuals. Of these we have the text of one to missionaries at their departure; we have two conversations with individuals, written down later from their recollections; and we have one series of remarks to a person on his deathbed.

Fifth is two sets of notes taken from advice he gave at retreats (1632, 1635.)

In all, 144 of these are dated; and there are another 97, mostly fragmentary. The total number of extant conferences, whole or partial, is 241.

To these, Dodin has added "Paroles" (Words), taken chiefly from Abelly. These are sayings attributed to the founder. Some of them, like his comments on living like Carthusians at home and missionaries elsewhere, are quite well known. In addition, the same editor published the "Avis et Maximes" (Words of advice and conduct), taken from a contemporary manuscript, but whose author is unknown.

Dodin omitted those which had already appeared in Abelly, and so he presented us with a list of 58 (out of 106).

Where did the texts of these conference texts come from? Unfortunately, we do not know very well. Before 1655, we are completely uninformed. Beginning in that year, however, when Vincent was about 75 years old, Brother Bertrand Ducournau, like Pierre Coste, a compatriot of the founder, began to gather them. Brother Ducournau was a trained secretary and very devoted to the founder. He wrote out his reasons for taking down the founder's words, and other confreres, the assistants to the superior general, agreed with him. It should be noted, of course, that Saint Vincent would not have favored this decision. As a result, the confreres were obliged to commit to memory what he said and how he said it. Often we encounter remarks about his gestures, almost like stage directions. Although Ducournau was very responsible in this task, most of his original work is lost. There exists only one conference in his beautiful penmanship: 30 May 1659, but many copies exist, and these seem to be faithful. Abelly, as usual, had access to a larger number of conferences than exist today. Those which he quoted, and which also we have in nearly contemporary copies, show how much Abelly "improved" on Vincent's texts—both the letters and the conferences. This is so much the case that we can wonder whether there were alternate versions even in his day. In fact, it appears that there are some extracts of conferences in Abelly which were overlooked by Pémartin, Coste and Dodin. These are yet to be studied.

It is unclear how the actual transcription of the conferences took place. Since it was already late in the evening when the conference was over, after 9:00, and silence was to be kept in the house at that time, it is unlikely that the confreres met to share their recollections. This work must have followed some preliminary editing done by individuals. The final texts show some differences of approach, particularly when the saint’s actions are noted (raising his hands, talking with someone privately, kneeling.)

Coste was asked to continue the work of Pémartin, since his volumes were becoming
hard to find. For this second edition, Coste continued the style begun by his predecessor. He also found it necessary to correct the manuscripts which came down to him. Coste's reasoning was that the conferences which he published were intended for public reading within the Community, and so should be made easy to read. A few old manuscript notes which they had were often incomplete or unclear, and as a result, Coste, and Pémartin before him, took on the responsibility of finishing Vincent's or the copyists' work. Much more work could be done on this edition. This is particularly important since Coste omitted some sections from the texts of the conferences that he deemed to be too delicate to appear in print. One dealt with the issue of alcoholism among the confreres and how Vincent handled it.

The second set of conferences, Coste's volumes 11 and 12, are those given to the Daughters of Charity. These are of several types. First are the conferences themselves. It is hard to know how often Vincent, their ecclesiastical superior, addressed the sisters who lived in the central house in Paris or who came to Paris from other houses or suburban towns for the event. At the end of his life, some conferences were held twice monthly. It is known that he was not always able to attend, and that he sent a substitute. In any case, we have a total of 120 in the edition of Coste. Of these, the majority are strictly conferences. During them, we also have words from Louise de Marillac and many other sisters, who were asked to share their thoughts and questions. For this reason, these texts have added value to the sisters.

Second are instructions. These were conferences which seem to have been written out and sent to sisters in the provinces. There are nine of these.

Third are conferences on a departed sister. There are five of these, plus two on Louise.

At this point, it would be good to mention conferences given to the Sisters of the Visitation. It is certain that there were accounts of conferences given by Vincent, who was the ecclesiastical superior of the Visitation Sisters in Paris for most of his life. Although they were known to exist before the French Revolution, it is uncertain whether they still exist. If they do, they have not been made public. In Abelly (Book 2, Chapter 7) there is a summary of various things which the Sisters remembered about their superior Vincent, and which Abelly included.

Where are the old texts of the conferences? Those given to the confreres appear in two large manuscript volumes, now kept in the CM archives in Paris. The conferences to the Daughters of Charity are to be found in large volumes currently in the archives of the Daughters of Charity in Paris. Problems arise in that these volumes are not always alike; there are different contents and different versions of the conferences. Coste has done some initial work on these, but more could be done by comparing all the existing copies.

In the case of the manuscripts of the conferences given to the Daughters, we are in a much better condition. The reason is that Louise de Marillac and other sisters decided, years before the confreres did, to write down his conferences given to her Daughters. She or the some of other sisters simply made notes in ink on folded pages as he talked. They were then filled out after the event. We have 54 of these original notes, of which 20 are in Louise's own handwriting. The others have been lost, and so we rely on the copies mentioned above.
C. Documents

Just what belongs in a volume on documents is unclear, since letters are documents in the strict sense. Coste decided basically to publish writings which are neither letters nor conferences—this is a negative definition—leaving this volume open-ended as to contents. Coste's preference was toward writings of a spiritual nature. He has divided them as follows:

1. Concerning Saint Vincent
2. Concerning the Congregation of the Mission
3. Concerning the Confraternities of Charity
4. Concerning the Daughters of Charity
5. Concerning the Ladies of Charity.

There are many other documents which could be included: Rules and Constitutions in particular, of both the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity. These have been partly included in the different translations (Spanish, English, Italian). Missing are the rules of the novitiate and the rules of office. Also there are documents about foundation of houses, and other legal and financial matters, and documents about the Tuesday Conferences. These already exist, and would be interesting for researchers if they were published in original languages and in translations. More on this topic is mentioned below.

One very interesting document is the Primitive Common Rules of the Congregation. These were published in *Vincentiana* 52:3 (May-June 2008) 205-30. They show Vincent at work in the development of his ideas. To this should be added a study by Bernard Koch on the development of the Common Rules.

The documents, of course, are not kept in one convenient place. Many of the fundamental texts were seized by the French government in 1792, at the time of the Revolution. Many others, such as the original vow book and the documents submitted concerning the acceptance of vows in the Congregation, were removed by the confreres between the sack of St. Lazare in 1789 and their expulsion from the property in 1792.

Since then, the surviving documents have been kept—carefully—in the French National Archives, and in certain departmental archives.

TRANSLATIONS

Fortunately, there are translations of Coste's work available in three languages: Italian, Spanish and English. The Italian translation was the first to appear, being done in the 1930s and 1940s. Although the translation is good, the Italian confreres have begun a new translation, bringing the materials up to date in terms of new discoveries and more accurate notes. Each volume has an extensive introduction to the contents of that volume.

The Spanish translation came next, dating from the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. (There was, however, a translation of the conferences done in the 1920s in Paris, but it was never widely used since the work was not well done.) In general, the work is a good translation, but some observations should be made. First, the numbers used for the letters in the Spanish
translation do not correspond with those in Coste. Second, the arrangement used for the conferences follows that done by Dodin in his edition of the conferences published in 1960. Third, the letters discovered later and published in what Dodin called Volume XV (in Mission et Charité) also do not correspond in terms of their enumeration. To solve all of these confusions, the editors prepared a table in the back of the edition to facilitate comparison between the French and the Spanish, and they also included both enumerations at the head of each item. Fourth, several documents were added to the volume of documents which Coste's edition did not include. Fifth, the index has been improved with the addition of materials taken from a study by Father François Garnier (1910-1988, a member of the Paris province), ("Enchiridion Spirituale Sancti Vincentii a Paulo," Vincentiana 23:3 [1979]), a biblical index, and other corrections and additions. Coste's own index concentrated on names of persons and places, and omitted much of a spiritual or ascetical nature. Garnier's index improved this. Also, a handy edition of the conferences to the confreres has been published, along the line of Dodin's publication.

The English edition followed, a joint effort of Daughters of Charity and Vincentians, chiefly from the United States. This is an excellent work, probably the best of the translations, since it approaches the status of an entirely new edition. This edition, begun in 1985, now lacks only Volume Fourteen, to be followed perhaps by a supplement. For those interested in its development, the history of the English translation and its methodology is explained in Volume One. The enumeration of the letters follows the French edition of Coste. Also, the notes written by Coste have been thoroughly revised and updated, and a brief index concludes each volume. One item would have improved the edition, but would have delayed it for years: namely, the comparison of all letters with the original manuscripts. That is, scholars might have checked Coste's edition and made corrections as necessary before going ahead with publication. Father Georges Baldacchino has done some of this work in Paris.

One problem became evident during the English translation: namely that Pierre Coste omitted certain delicate items that he felt were not proper for spiritual reading, especially by the Daughters of Charity. Where discovered, these gaps have been filled in the English translation, followed by the Italian version.

Other languages have partial translations, particularly Polish. Much could be done to make the writings of the founder more available.

There are two ways in which this has already been begun. First, there are computerized editions. The most complete one was done under the guidance of Father Claude Lautissier of the entire corpus of Coste, plus many other works, such as the two early biographies (Abelly and Collet), and the writings of Saint Louise. This has been also done in Spanish, under the leadership of Father José María Román in Madrid. These two are, undoubtedly, just the beginning of computerization. DePaul University is in the process of placing these items on a web site making the texts and translations available to all.

The other way in which texts have been made available is through microfilm. The archives of the mother house in Paris has microfilmed its original documents on Saint Vincent, as well as some other documents (chiefly writings of John Gabriel Perboyre). Father Georges Baldacchino has been engaged in collecting photographs or photocopies of all known originals.
or copies. These will also be placed on the DePaul University website.

How to interpret these writings? There are many cautions to make, to keep from being too much of a Vincentian literalist. Monsieur Vincent lived for such a long time and faced so many issues that one can find almost anything in his writings, which could be taken to support nearly any point of view. Also, many texts have been attributed to him which are not his. Some charming phrases, attributed to him, come from the script of the film *Monsieur Vincent*, so it is necessary to be careful. Therefore:

1. Ask *when* he wrote the text. The vast majority of the letters come from the last years of his life. The last seven years account for about 50% of what remains of his letters. As an old man, he was thinking of a future without him, evaluating the past, putting things into perspective and into relationship with each other. He might not have been that introspective in his earlier life. Certainly, his conferences mainly date from the last years of his life when he was anxious to hand on the tradition. (I have some pages which may help in understanding these observations.)

   You might also want to know on what day of the week he was writing. You will be able to find this out through a calendar that I have prepared and which is available on the internet.

2. Ask *to whom* he was writing. The recipient makes a difference, and his letters take on a different character depending on whether he was writing to a confrere in trouble, to a superior, to Louise de Marillac, to a bishop or others.

3. Ask *why* he was writing. What were the concrete circumstances: war, peace, ecclesiastical problems, finances? What was the purpose of the text: to console, to press a point, to convince, to scold?

4. Ask *who* wrote the text. That is, did he write the letter himself, or did one of his secretaries? In other words, were the letters autograph/holograph or dictated? One can draw certain erroneous conclusions about the founder's style which are based on the words of a secretary, who imitated his style, rather than on his own words. Even more important, if Abelly alone published them, be careful, since Abelly often "corrected" Vincent's thinking or his French. A concrete example is news he gives about the death of a confrere. This information is virtually the same from letter to letter, and we can conclude from this that he probably told his secretary to insert here the regular information about the death of the confrere in question.

   As to the conferences to the confreres, he never reviewed the text, did not speak from notes that we have, and the confreres wrote them out after the event. For the conferences given to the sisters, he sometimes reviewed the text of conferences to be sent outside of Paris. For the others, the sisters copied down his remarks during the conference itself. Since we have these original transcriptions, it is clear that the copyists did not use shorthand. Obviously, they had no recording devices, or other modern means of handling the text.

5. Examine the *presuppositions*: philosophical and theological, as well as cultural. For example, Vincent had a very exalted view of royal authority, particularly of the king's relationship with God. Also he often spoke of influencing God in some way of "drawing down graces" on our
works, a perspective that seems foreign to us today.

These are the same means that one can employ to interpret any classical text, even the Bible. A convenient standpoint is to put ourselves in relatively the same state Vincent was in: that is, to look at the issues he was facing. What were his principles? How did he solve his problems? What tools did he use? We cannot, of course, put ourselves back into seventeenth-century France nor re-live his life, but we can, with these means, approach better his frame of mind in writing and speaking.

II. Biographies of Vincent de Paul

In this section, we discuss the following questions: How many biographies of Vincent de Paul are there? Which are the main ones? Also, why they are important, and what were the authors' perspectives, purposes and values in writing them.

First, how many biographies are there? Hundreds! These include both biographies in original languages and translations, and then studies, both important and unimportant, as well as brief articles and lives of the saints.

Second, which are the main biographies and why are they important? I am not noting here the mention made of Vincent de Paul during his life, nevertheless comments which occur in contemporary letters or documents show the reverence in which he was held. Because one of these was in English, however, I would like to mention the work called Pietas Parisiensis or a Short Description of the Pietie and Charitie Commonly Exercised in Paris... by Miles Pinkney, who wrote under the pseudonym of Thomas Carre, (Paris: Vincent du Moutier, 1666.) Pp. 252. This was reprinted and abridged in Pietas Romana et Parisiensis. (Oxford, 1687.) Pp. 179. [See T(homas) D(avitt), "An Account of St Vincent's Work Written in English in 1666." Colloque No. 13 (Spring 1986) 74-77.] Pinkney devoted about half of his little book to Vincent de Paul. Even though it was published after Vincent's death, as well as after his funeral oration and Abelly's biography, it nonetheless reflects a unique perspective on the founder.

The first book is by Henri Cauchon de Maupas du Tour, (1600-1680), bishop of Le Puy and later of Evreux. His was not strictly a biography, but it was the first attempt to put down in writing, systematically, the main points of Vincent's life. The bishop delivered this memorial funeral oration on 23 November 1660 at the church of Saint Germain l'Auxerrois, located in front of the Louvre. This service was sponsored by the members of the Tuesday Conferences. His funeral oration is not widely known, and copies are difficult to locate. Its purpose was to honor Vincent's memory, i.e., not to be critical, and its format was a public oral presentation, a formal literary oration. Despite these shortcomings, it contains much of what later entered into the standard presentation of Vincent de Paul, with echoes of the Vincentian myth. It has been translated into English and annotated, and will eventually be published in the United States.

The second is by Louis Abelly (1604-1691), Vincent's first main biographer. Its author became the bishop of Rodez. He had been previously associated with Saint Vincent as a member, and perhaps one of the founders, of the Tuesday Conferences. Abelly was a theologian and spiritual author; he wrote some forty books during his life, but the most famous of these was his
life of Vincent. His outlook was that Vincent was the model priest, a saint from his childhood. His purpose was Vincent's ultimate canonization, and, Abelly's book had been sponsored by the Congregation of the Mission for this purpose. Abelly had written other biographies, and his method here was, as before, to gather original documents where possible. He also used the living recollections of Brother Bertrand Ducournau, and the recollections of many others, both oral and written. There was a team designated to help him in his research. He and the members wrote around widely to ask for input, some of which he cites directly. It appears that the team gathered the materials and aided him in arranging it. He then wrote the introductory materials for each of the chapters and linked the accounts together.

He became bishop of Rodez in 1664, the year that this biography was printed. The title page mentions his office. His diocese was a poor place in the south central part of France, and he retired from it after only two years (1664-1666) on account of poor health, probably an attack of partial paralysis. André Dodin, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Abelly and published a portion of it as La légende et l'histoire. De Monsieur Depaul à saint Vincent de Paul (Paris: O.E.I.L., 1985) believed that Abelly was out of his element there among the poor mountain people, and there may be some truth to that. Whether that was why he left his diocese is unknown, particularly since Abelly knew of Vincent's insistence on the discipline of the Council of Trent which demanded that bishops remain in their dioceses. Abelly spent his last 24 years living at Saint Lazare. On his death, he left a country residence to the Vincentian students there for their vacations, and he left the rest of his estate to the Congregation. He was buried at the chapel of the old Saint Lazare.

His work came out in three volumes, one each on Vincent's life, works and virtues, but it never appears to have been bound that way. Since it was too long for some readers and physically too heavy to carry around, Abelly came out with a second and shorter edition in 1667 for which some material was added, but much was eliminated. Many other editions followed, which, generally, abbreviated and "corrected" the work. An excellent edition is that done as part of Pémartin's work in 1891. Several translations have been made, mostly recently excellent English (1993) and Spanish (1994) translations. These translations are valuable since the Abelly biography is so fundamental. It was the first and nearly contemporary biography and was based on first-hand witnesses. Can we rely on it? As usual, we can answer: Yes, but …. No one, really, accused Abelly of not telling the truth, and his work has been much imitated, even by Coste who cites it liberally, even without acknowledging it. However, on one point there was some major difference of opinion: Jansenism. Abelly was a vigorous anti-Jansenist, and Jansenists fought against Abelly's depiction of them and Vincent's influence on the course of the Jansenist movement. This led to publications by Martin Barcos, a cousin of the Abbé of Saint-Cyran, and subsequent replies by Abelly. This has led some to deny that Abelly was the author, and to propose that a Father François Fournier wrote it instead. Coste has replied effectively to this and today there is no doubt that Abelly made use of such materials as others gave him and organized it himself. Despite this, occasionally the old arguments are occasionally revisited.

What criticism can be made of Abelly? One problem comes in the organization of the work itself. Abelly goes over the same material three times (for the three parts of the work.) Second, he has "corrected" Saint Vincent, that is, improving his style and smoothing out problems. We know that this happened since we occasionally have the original letters that Abelly published in his own version. Third, Abelly overlooked certain movements or events, since he
was too close to the situation to see how they would develop in the future. For example, Louise de Marillac scarcely plays any part in the book. Fourth, Abelly approached history, as noted above, "synchronically" rather than "diachronically," to use the formal terms. That is, he neglected to perceive how Vincent changed and how his ideas and approaches developed from his early to his later life. Fifth, he did not treat much of Vincent's character, psychologically speaking. Hints of his style, humor and indecision come through, however. Despite all this, for Coste, Abelly's is "the most devout and exact" biography.

If you read it, and you should, you will find the style repetitive and somewhat predictable. Abelly includes long quotes from Vincent's conferences and letters, and cites at length what others have to say about him. Normally, Abelly opens a chapter on his works, for example, with an introductory section which tells a little about the work, but a lot about Abelly's own skill at relating Vincent to the teachings of the Gospels or the Fathers of the Church. Then follows a fairly straightforward treatment of the work. Many have found the work boring and difficult, but it is better than that, particularly if account is taken of the style of the seventeenth century. There is much in Abelly that occurs nowhere else, not even in Coste.

Abelly became the basis for other biographies. The earliest was in Italian, published in Rome, 1677 under the name of Domenico Acami. He was an Oratorian who apparently never published anything else. This leads us to conclude that, because of Vincentian timidity about book publishing, his name was used but another (probably René Simon) did the main work. This biography is also important in that it contains a résumé of the virtues of Almeras (pp. 352-70) and other early Vincentians; it also contains a letter from the duchess of Aiguillon to Saint Vincent, 5 January 1642, published nowhere else. Acami's work was translated into Spanish, published in 1701, the work of an Augustinian, Juan del Santísimo Sacramento. This was the first Spanish biography of Vincent de Paul, and it would be translated into Portuguese, as the first biography of the saint in that language. This was followed about 1710 by another translation into German.

Pierre Collet (1693-1770) wrote the next main biography. The author was a famous and prolific writer of the day, a Vincentian priest, a theologian, but not a historian. In his outlook, Vincent de Paul was the "Great Man", who went about doing good tirelessly. This colored the purpose of the biography, and kept Collet from seeing the "normal" man underneath all the greatness. The principal reason for this purpose was to combat a resurgent Jansenism and to mark Vincent's canonization, which was connected with the anti-Jansenist campaign. There was a ferocious attempt on the part of the Jansenists either to stave off Vincent's canonization, or to push for the canonization of one of their own, the deacon Matthew Pâris. It is interesting to note, as well, that in the museum located at Port-Royal-des-Champs, the former Jansenist headquarters, Saint Vincent is not mentioned once among those who combated Jansenism. One recent scholar has been investigating the illustrations of the lives of our founder and the deacon Pâris. She concludes that the program of paintings and other illustrations undertaken by both sides had, in addition to its spiritual purpose, the polemical one as well, of advancing or preventing Vincent's canonization.

Collet's method was to supplement Abelly with documentation which Abelly did not know about or use. He organized the work chronologically, but this was often a forced
chronology, since Vincent's life was so rich and varied. He published the work anonymously at Nancy, in Lorraine, to avoid problems with Jansenists in Paris; the date was eleven years after the canonization, in 1748, and it came out in two volumes. There is no English translation of original work, but translations exist of various abridged editions. This probably made Collet more read, at least in the 18th and 19th centuries, than Abelly. In the opinion of Pierre Coste, Collet "deserves a place of honor."

The next major author was Michel Ulysse Maynard (1814-1893). He wrote numerous biographies, was a historian, writer, and a diocesan priest. The occasion of the publication was the 200th anniversary of the saint's death (1660). Jean-Baptiste Etienne, the superior general, sponsored the work, and put the archives of Saint Lazare at the disposition of the famous author. Maynard's method was to place Vincent in the context of his time, an original approach typical of his century. The work was published in Paris, in 4 volumes, in 1860. It appeared in various revised abbreviated editions and translations. Maynard also published a smaller book on the virtues and spiritual doctrine of Saint Vincent, 1864. Because this work was shorter, it was often translated, and much read in novitiates and scholasticates of the Congregation.

Is Maynard worth reading? It is a somewhat romantic biography, rhetorical in its style. He was able to add many new items unknown to Abelly or Collet, and his work is well annotated. Nevertheless, he was not overly critical of some points (such as making Vincent the author of all works of charity of his time—which simply was not true); he changed some dates without reason, and he accepted certain anecdotes as authentic (such as Vincent's nighttime rambles on snowy Paris streets looking for abandoned babies). In his dry way, Coste classifies Maynard as "the longest" biography.

I add a fourth biography, that of Arthur Loth. This writer was well known in his time, the late nineteenth century, and his purpose can be gathered from the full title: Saint Vincent de Paul et sa mission sociale ["and His Social Mission"]. It came out in Paris in 1880. It was generally published in a lavish edition, full of magnificent illustrations, many of which he got from the Annales of the Congregation of the Mission. I have rarely ever seen a copy which has been read, since the book was so physically heavy and unwieldy. We might call it a "coffee-table book", or a book just for show, something which made a good present for confirmation, graduation or ordination. It was translated into Spanish (1887). Coste noted that it was "the most splendidly illustrated."

The fifth major biography was that by Pierre Coste (1873-1935). Unlike Abelly, Maynard and Loth, he was a Vincentian, and—as mentioned above—came from the Landes as did Vincent de Paul. Pierre Coste was trained in history and, especially in archival research methods, although he was mostly self-taught. He was the archivist in Paris from 1909 on. His method was to supplement and follow Abelly, although his work was much more than a simple revision of updating of the first biographer. After the publication of his massive 14 volumes of the correspondence, conferences, documents, he published his life of Vincent de Paul in 3 volumes (Paris, 1932). His purpose was to give a professional history, that is, a critical history based on documents, while avoiding panegyrics. His outlook can be gleaned from the subtitle of the work: "The Great Saint of the Great Century." Translations have appeared in English and many other languages. According to Mezzadri, one of the problems of Coste's work is that there
is too much detail, too much of the great saint, and too little of the great century. What is needed is more context, relations with other people. Others have determined that Coste was too much the archivist and too little the historian, and that the consequently he felt it necessary to include everything. The criticism is understandable, but despite these remarks, his work stands as the work to surpass, that is, as the great modern work in the field.

The sixth was written by Jean Calvet (1874-1965). The author was a diocesan priest, a profound scholar of the spirituality of the 17th century, and commonly called Monsignor Calvet, although he was not a bishop. His basic outlook was that Vincent de Paul was a man of genius in reforming the Church. Calvet arranged his work chronologically. Monsignor Calvet portrayed Vincent "diachronically," that is, as a man of his time who was gradually converted to the faith, and not as a saint from childhood. In Calvet's view, the spirituality of Saint Vincent was eclectic, not systematic. He saw in his subject more a spiritual way than a fully developed spiritual doctrine. Translations exist in English, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Portuguese and perhaps other languages. There are some problems in that Calvet was at time not too careful with some aspects of dates and events. Nevertheless, Calvet is one of the best for someone beginning a study of the life of Vincent de Paul.

The seventh is the work of André Dodin (1911-1996). Dodin was a Vincentian historian, who emphasized the spirituality of his time. He has written extensively, especially on matters of Vincentian interest. His work Saint Vincent de Paul and Charity (Paris, 1960), written for the tercentenary of the saint's death (1660), is not strictly a biography. Rather, it is a series of brief essays on aspects of Vincent's life and influence. Among many things, an important contribution made by this book is his presentation of abundant illustrations—not just copies of paintings, but of drawings, engravings, etc., which illuminate his context. Dodin's work is well known since there are many translations: Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and English (1993). There are probably others as well. This masterful synthesis places Vincent in the context of spirituality.

The eighth is by José María Román Fuentes (1928-2002), a member of the province of Madrid. Unlike many other biographers of Saint Vincent, Román received his training as a Church historian. His outlook is modern, that is, he has written a critical modern biography for Spanish readers, placing Vincent in the context of the time. Román also corrects and adds to Coste. He presents useful and original information on the finances of the founder, who was at the center of a large web of charitable organizations. The author's plan is largely chronological. It was published in Madrid (1982), and has been translated into Italian, Polish, and English. Román has been criticized for his some of his views about the issue of Vincent's supposed captivity in North Africa, and about not coming to terms with certain other perspectives, such as the legal aspects of Vincent's work.

The ninth author is Luigi Mezzadri, (b. 1937), a member of the Roman province. Like Román, Mezzadri was trained as a Church historian, and has written extensively. His work on Vincent de Paul amounts to two small biographies (1985, 1989), as well as other studies. These biographies are excellent modern summaries which take into account new discoveries and outlooks. Mezzadri has located Vincent in his culture, and shows him developing in his holiness. Translations exist in French, Spanish (Vida breve de Vicente de Paul, Salamanca, 1990) and English and several other languages. These two works were not intended to be a fundamental
biography, but they deserve reading.

The tenth author is Bernard Pujo, a French historian and author of numerous biographies. His biography *Vincent de Paul, le précurseur*, Paris 1998 (translated into English, 2003; German, 2008) is probably the best of the modern intermediate biographies. It is in one volume and takes into account recent studies and analyses of Vincent de Paul and his time. It is highly recommended.

**III. Contemporary witnesses to Vincent de Paul**

Besides Vincent's own writings, and biographies of him, there are also other materials which will help us to know about Saint Vincent. These are of several types.

(a) *Contemporary accounts*: These are mainly remarks and observations made about him and his work. These have been collected in the Paris archives, but have never been published. They confirm, however, Vincent's importance in the France of his day.

(b) *Letters among confreres or to Daughters of Charity*: Only some of these have been published, a few in Coste itself. For example, several of these letters exist among the papers in Turin and Krakow. Only some of them, however, deal with Vincent. A few others could be added, between confreres and Daughters of Charity. The Turin materials have been copied and are available on line in the original language, generally French.

(c) *Letters by confreres to Louise de Marillac*: These have been published in their French original by Sister Elisabeth Charpy, and have been translated into English, as part of the correspondence of Louise de Marillac. Other translations may exist as well.

(d) *Beatification and canonization materials*: These have been published in their original languages, but are not widely available, since they were published only as part of the official ecclesiastical process. They often contain interesting insights and observations, but make very dull reading given their official form. The General Curia is planning to prepare a digital copy of these materials. The difficulty will be to assemble them all, since the materials were printed individually and were never systematically bound in standard volumes.

(e) *Notes and Remarks made by Brother Robineau*: Louis Robineau was Vincent's secretary for many years, and he gathered his thoughts in little notebooks or files. Dodin published these in French (1992). Perhaps because they were just recently published, they have not been widely studied, or translated. However, his text was quite deficient and Father Baldacchino has prepared a corrected version that hopefully will someday be translated into English and other languages.

(f) *Visual documents*: There seem to exist at least two small contemporary paintings of Vincent as part of larger paintings of the Lord of Charity. These canvases of the Lord of Charity, which apparently began under the inspiration of Louise de Marillac, often depict the Lord standing on a globe or clouds, arms outstretched downward in a gesture we know from the Miraculous Medal and our own Community seal. Since Vincent did not sit for paintings, I believe that Louise de Marillac, herself an amateur painter, wanted to conserve his image. Consequently, as she had these paintings prepared, she made sure that his likeness would be added as representing one of the spiritual works of mercy. Besides the common paintings we already know, there are others, including at least one other, a miniature, done from life. Others seem to have been made from sketches, but finished after his death. A plaster statue said to have been made from his death mask is in the mother house in Paris, but it is hard to believe that it represents Vincent at his death.
IV. Studies about Vincent de Paul

(a) Bibliographies: Raymond Chalumeau, former archivist of the mother house, published an extensive bibliography on Saint Vincent, principally in French, in Vincentiana. Since his death, the French confreres have also published an extensive listing of library holdings in France, which also serves as a bibliography. Similarly, Román also published a list of the holdings of the Vincentian library in the central house in Madrid. This covers books only, but has sections on Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, the Congregation of the Mission, and related fields. For English, there are listings in Vincentian Heritage. The difference with this listing is that it contains books as well as articles and theses on Vincent de Paul. That work continues and appears on the VSI website. (For this bibliography, which contains publications only in English, see VH 12:1 [1991] 51-78; with supplements to follow.)

(b) Historical Background: There are numerous studies of 17th century France, of Church and religious life in that century, schools of thought, theological issues, spirituality, political and social issues. In French thinking it was the Great Century, and was extremely rich culturally, intellectually and religiously. As a result of the richness of the period, there are more sources, especially in French, of course, than could be enumerated here. An encyclopedic source is the Dictionnaire du grand siècle (Paris, 1990). For popular life, the series in French on "Daily Life in /of..." is also recommended. There is at least one of these in English: Pierre Goubert: The French Peasantry in the Seventeenth Century (1986, 1988).

(c) Language: The French language of the time has changed somewhat from then to now. Dictionaries and grammars can be of some help. Sister Elisabeth Charpy, DC, has included a brief glossary of terms in her edition of "Documents" of the Daughters of Charity (Paris, 1989).

(d) Studies by the hundreds have been published on Vincent de Paul. An excellent introduction to the entire field has been offered by Luigi Mezzadri, La sete e la sorgente. (Rome, 1992-1993), 2 vols. In volume two, Mezzadri presents three studies on the spirituality of Saint Vincent, which he has translated into Italian from their original French.

(e) To have access to his spirituality, see the little index by Gamier mentioned above. For a more detailed study on his spirituality: see Dodin's Saint Vincent de Paul and Charity along with many other studies by him and others. A very accessible one is Hugh O'Donnell’s study in the Paulist Press volume on Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, published in 1995 [Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: rules, conferences. and writings, edited by Frances Ryan and John E. Rybolt; Mahwah, New Jersey, 1995.] One study which should not be overlooked was written in Italian, and published anonymously. However, it is known that the author was the late Carlo Riccardi, a priest of the Roman province. Perfezione evangélica. Tutto il pensiero del santo esposto con le sue parole. Rome, 1964, 1967, 1983 (three editions, each one with some corrections and adjustments.) Riccardi has laid out Saint Vincent's thought according to his (Riccardi's) own systematizing. This is both the book's strength and its weakness. It is strong in that you can find Vincent's thinking on a set of topics, but it is weak in that the arrangement was imposed by Riccardi, not by Vincent. The same Father Riccardi has done a similar study on Saint Louise, and published, in 1992, a Breviario Vincenziano, whose subtitle is instructive: "One page a day
from the correspondence of Saint Vincent de Paul." He divides his work into small sections around a consistent theme.

For adaptations to modern life, see Father Robert Maloney's work, which is already well known. The Way of Vincent de Paul. A Contemporary Spirituality in the Service of the Poor, New York, 1992 (El camino de Vicente de Paul: una espiritualidad para estos tiempos al servicio de los pobres, Salamanca, 1993); and He Hears the Cry of the Poor. On the Spirituality of Vincent de Paul, New York, 1995. Other similar works by him are Seasons in Spirituality. Reflections on Vincentian Spirituality in Today's World, Hyde Park, NY, 1998 (Espiritualidad para diversos tiempos: reflexiones sobre la espiritualidad Viceneciana en el mundo de hoy, Salamanca, 1998). Go!: on the missionary spirituality of St. Vincent de Paul, Salamanca, (2000?). Various ones of these books have also been translated into Italian and French.

V. Iconography of Vincent de Paul

Several authors have studied aspects of the visual representation of Vincent de Paul, such as Dodin, mentioned above. A careful collection of Vincent images has been made and is available on-line: http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/. This collection, which can be downloaded for use, is divided according to the media employed: portraits of Vincent de Paul, paintings featuring him, statues and sculpture, stained glass windows, drawings and engravings, holy cards (or pious images), a large selection of miscellaneous materials: clocks, enamels, medals and medallions, mosaics, porcelain, tile, wood, even postage stamps; black and white book illustrations, and finally a sample of the saint’s signature. There are in excess of 5500 images.

In addition, there are complementary collections of materials about Saint Louise de Marillac and the Daughters of Charity, the saints and blessed of the Vincentian family and individual members of the Congregation of the Mission, such as its bishops; and finally a small collection of photos and other materials on Vincentian places.

Interesting work could be done to draw out the main lines of the development of the depictions of the saint, to help observers appreciate what they are seeing.

This is a huge mass of materials, but I hope that it will help you as you deepen your study of Vincent de Paul.

John E. Rybolt, CM.
Revised, 02/2011

1 Georges Baldacchino, “Correspondance Inédite de Saint Vincent de Paul,” Bulletin des Lazaristes de France/Cahiers Saint Vincent, 210 (May 2010). There are others that have come to light subsequently, and others will undoubtedly continue to be uncovered.

2 Acami’s subtitle: “Raccolta da quella, che già scrisse in Lingua Francese Monsignor Ludovico Abelly Vescovo di Rodez, e publicata nell’Idioma Italiano.” This identifies the source as Abelly.

3 According to Carlo Gastarri, “L’Oratorio romano dal cinquecento al novecento,” Rome, 1963, his name was Domenico Accame; born in Finale in 1640; entered the Oratory in 1663; published in Venice his biography of St. Vincent; died in January 1695.