



# Mister Vincent

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More than 1,500 biographies have been written over the four centuries since Vincent walked the earth—multi-volume works, flawed versions, pious versions and several very good works. My purpose here is to show in a few pages how much Vincent accomplished and how much we can learn from the master to make a difference in this world.

This is not about Vincent’s spirituality, prayer life, theology, history, or lies. Better resources are available on these topics and I recommend several in the list at the end along with a few short works for those who want to read more.

## Why bother about a man who lived 400 years ago?

Whatever can we learn here that matters today? I offer a few reasons to consider.

“Vincent’s greatest achievement—his Opera Omnia—was the remarkable body of works of charity he began and which still flourish as his legacy.”  
(Melito, 41)

- His legacy today is far beyond his life’s work
- His life’s work changed the way the world views the poor
- His organization of service to the poor was the first in the history of the world
- He was an ordinary, human guy—self-centered, pecuniary, ambitious, flawed, and lost—until the tipping point
- He gave everything to the poor and became the richest man he knew
- The world was stacked against him; he changed it
- He was depressed for 3.5 years
- He spent 25 years searching for himself; he found God and the poor

Why are so many people all over the world on fire with the passion to follow in his footsteps 400 years later?

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|---|----------|
| • Members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul | 800,000+ |
| • Members of the Daughters of Charity           | 16,000+  |
| • Members of the Congregation of the Mission    | 3,231+   |
| • Members of the Ladies of Charity (AIC)        | 150,000+ |
| • Vincentian Marian Youth                       | 100,000+ |
| • Staff & Volunteers of Depaul International    | 2,000+   |
| • Organizations in the Vincentian Family        | 40+      |
| • Organizations inspired by Vincent             | 250+     |

## What's in a name?

*Vincent Depaul*

He always signed his name Vincent Depaul. He wanted to be sure no one mistook him for nobility—which one might if he had capitalized it—De Paul. He was called many things by those who revered him—saint, scholar, holy man, apostle of charity, and—at his death—*pere de la patrie*, father of the country. But he preferred to be called simply Monsieur Vincent—Mister Vincent—to reduce the barriers between him and others, especially the poor.

## The World at the Dawn of the Seventeenth Century

Vincent entered the world in 1581. France was at war for one reason or another for his entire life excepting the last few months. The population of Paris was about 200,000 at his birth, and it doubled by the time of Vincent's death in 1660. Three classes of people existed in France during this time: nobility, peasants and clergy. Unless you were born to nobility there was very little chance of bettering your odds of survival than working the fields for the nobles—except through the clergy.

**Birth:** Vincent was born in April, 1581, but his early biographers recorded it as 1576—because they were hiding the fact that he was ordained a priest too young as allowed by law.

In 1600 he was ordained while still in school and in his spare time he ran a boarding school to help pay expenses. He earned a degree in theology in 1604.

After graduation he disappeared for two years, ending up in Rome. At least one person wondered whether he was avoiding paying off his student loans. Finding no path to riches in Rome, he moved to Paris.

In Paris, he became depressed and frustrated all in the chase for cash flow and future revenue streams. When the income started coming his way in 1610 he wrote to his mother that he would soon be able to send her sufficient funds to care for her and the family for years to come and that he would soon be able to retire. He was 29.

### **Vincent's Tipping Point**

Vincent lived his early years trying to get ahead, to make enough money to be comfortable, take care of his family and retire in his late twenties. He nearly made it. But by the time he turned 36 he was hitting his tipping point—about the same age that Jesus found his own mission.



Malcolm Gladwell writes about the tipping point—the time when things come together to tilt the scale of life to something new. For Vincent, the tipping point primarily came from two events in 1617, starting in January at Folleville (it means Crazy Town), when he preached a sermon that had such effect that he had to ask for help from the Jesuits to care for the hordes of people coming to him for general confession.

Vincent found the poor and their great need at Folleville. He also learned that he was a hugely inspirational preacher.

The second event of the tipping point came in August. He had left his employers, the De Gondi family, to become pastor at a church in Chatillon-les-Dombes. There he heard and preached about a family in which all the members were sick and without food, medicine or anyone to care for them. His sermon was overwhelmingly successful and Vincent learned something that set his life work: **there is great charity but it is poorly organized**. He immediately decided to organize it. He created the first formalized system of charity in the parish and had it implemented before Christmas, 1617.

He returned to the De Gondi family to continue his work to the great disappointment of the people of his parish in Chatillon. Madame De Gondi saw his developing love and concern for the poor and suggested that he could return to Chatillon and be happy there working with the poor, or he could turn his attention to all the poor in France by organizing service to them. Vincent jumped at the opportunity. She knew he would. She put up \$2.5 million—a fortune—to get him started. Vincent had discovered the personal mission of Jesus Christ, “I have come to bring good news to the poor.” Vincent made it his own.

At 32 years of age he visited his family for the last time, feeling like a failure and embarrassed that he would not be able to provide funds for them going forward. He signed over all his inheritance to his nieces and nephews. They loved him for his new-found love of the poor. He returned to Paris but he missed his family so much he wept for three months.

In 1625, Vincent founded the Congregation of the Mission. To serve the poor he had to engage the church and parishes. To engage the church he first had to reform the ignorant and corrupt clergy. When he approached the clergy for help he found that they were not literate, chaste or sober. One bishop described his clergy:

“...the large and unaccountable number of ignorant and corrupt priests who make up my clergy and who are unable, either through word or example, to mend their ways. I am horrified when I think that in my diocese there are nearly seven thousand drunken or lewd priests who ascend the altar every day and who have no vocation.” (Paul, 473)

Vincent began in earnest to serve the poor by reforming the clergy.

In 1633 he founded the Daughters of Charity with the immensely-talented Louise de Marillac—a widow who had come to him for counseling. In the same year he took possession of Saint Lazare and launched the greatest spurt of growth modern organizations had seen at the time. Vincent and Louise used their partnership to grow social service exponentially in just a few years. The two of them, incomplete and imperfect on their own, brought out the best in each other in the best meaning of transformational leadership—and changed the world of service. They could not have done it without each other.

## **Bringing It Together**

Vincent institutionalized his charities over the last decades of his life (1635-1660), by managing hands-on whenever possible and managing by memo when not. He wrote over 30,000 letters in his lifetime; more than 11,000 are extant today.

Vincent was a person of great talent, education and passion. McKinsey & Company’s research on great producers found that talented people are scarce. Talent makes a huge difference—is most crucial for a competitive advantage. The best people are much better than the rest. For instance, 16 composers created 50 percent of all classical music listened to today. The other half came from 235 composers. Ten percent of the authors have written 50 percent of the books in the US Library of Congress. The great performers had as many mistakes as others but they produced so much more; therefore they

had more notable successes. Vincent falls into this description too—he lived longer, produced more, made more mistakes and had more successes than his contemporaries.



Mia Hamm, captain of the 1996 Olympics Gold Medal women's soccer team, said it well:

“The most important factors in success were the communication, mutual understanding, respect, and ability to work together that developed during the dozen or so years that the stable core group played together.”

### **Life Lessons from Vincent de Paul**

Vincent spent 25 years finding himself and becoming free of false starts and his own greed.

**Lesson:** It is okay to get a little lost on the way to finding yourself.

Vincent was depressed for 3.5 years. Finding yourself is hard work.

**Lesson:** “When you are going through hell, keep going.”

(Sir Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom during and after World War II)



Vincent spent his life to the age of 36 (1617) looking for himself, for God, and for a steady income so he could retire in style. He found his personal mission to the poor.

**Lesson:** Sometimes what you find is better than what you look for.

Vincent felt he failed his family and was afraid to go home; they received him with great love. He returned to Paris and never went back. He wept for three months.

**Lesson:** Sometimes it is good to go home. Sometimes a good cry helps.

Vincent lived with the nobility (the De Gondis) but ate with the servants.

**Lesson:** Humility and simplicity always work well with people.

Vincent finally found his personal mission in life—bringing good news to the poor, the same mission of Jesus Christ. He found his role model.

**Lesson:** It is good to have a personal life mission. It is even better if it is unselfish and lofty.

Historians describe the climate during Vincent's lifetime as the little ice age. Half the crops failed; starvation was rampant; the number of poor increased exponentially.

**Lesson:** It is okay to have an overwhelming challenge in life. You can make a difference anyway.

France was at war through all of Vincent's life except for the last few months. Beheading for religious dissidents was common. The clergy were incompetent, corrupt or both.

**Lesson:** Don't let the environment get you down; you can make a difference anyway.

In his lifetime (specifically between 1610 and 1660) the population of Paris increased from about 200,000 to over 400,000. The city could not supply sufficient water, food, or sewage removal. Disease increased greatly.

**Lesson:** Sometimes growth makes things worse. Deal with the opportunities anyway.

Vincent used mentors and he chose world-class advisors, Fr. Pierre de Berulle, St. Francis De Sales. Vincent became a mentor of others and brought out the best in them: Jean Jacques Olier, St. Jane De Chantal, and St. Louise de Marillac.

**Lesson:** Mentors make a difference. Get a good one. Be a good one.

In Louise de Marillac Vincent found the perfect partner to build his business model and bring about change that shocked the world. Louise, like Vincent, was imperfect and troubled but together they were inspirational.

**Lesson:** Imperfect people are all we have; accept them where they are and work with them.

A monk offered Vincent a huge property, Saint Lazare, outside Paris city limits. It was 74 acres and took an hour and a half to walk around the perimeter. Vincent refused it because, he said, it was too big, too expensive and would change the Congregation. He was right. The monk wanted to dump the property.

**Lesson:** The first law of economics: there is no free lunch. Be careful of Trojan horses and free lunches. Jim Collins encourages us to have BHAGs—Big Hairy Audacious Goals. Neither the monk nor Vincent saw the opportunity at first.

Only one year later Vincent accepted Saint Lazare and moved in. It was full of mentally ill patients, lepers, errant sons of nobility, priests in trouble and many seriously poor. He was now running a 600+ bed hotel and it flourished from the very beginning.

**Lesson:** Sometimes it takes a while for a good plan to come together. (“God did it.”) Vincent found his Big Hairy Audacious Goal with the help of God.

Vincent was 5 feet, 7 or 8 inches tall.

**Lesson:** Size isn’t everything. It does not take a huge person to make a huge difference.

Vincent balanced and intermingled prayer, reflection and action in his life and work.

**Lesson:** It is easier to live a balanced life if you mix the basics together.

Vincent believed in living life first, writing up the rules later. He wrote the rules for the Congregation of the Mission 33 years after he founded it.

**Lesson:** Live life reflectively and make small changes along the way.

Vincent lived 80 years and died worried that he did not do enough. Life expectancy in Vincent’s time was 35-37 years.

**Lesson:** You may get more time and opportunity to do good than you deserve. It is never too late to start. While reflecting on his life, Oskar Schindler said “I could have done more!” Similarly, on Vincent’s deathbed, when asked what he would have done differently with his life, he said “more.”

“If you’re lucky enough  
to do well,  
it’s your responsibility  
to send the elevator  
back down”



Vincent was a peasant and a lawyer.

**Lesson:** Know your roots, lift up those behind you, educate up.

Vincent had a feisty temper, was a good mimic, could tell a good story, and was charming to women.

**Lesson:** Know your gifts, strengths and limits—then leverage them.

Vincent sold a rented horse for cash and then disappeared for two years telling a grand story to explain his time. He later tried to retrieve what he called “those damned letters” with the grand story—of which he never spoke.

**Lesson:** It is okay if you have things in your past that don’t make sense; do good anyway.

Vincent was drawn to poor country people. At the time 98 percent of the population lived in the countryside, not in cities.

**Lesson:** Go where there is need; don't wait for it to come to you. When opening Saint Lazare for guests he told his staff not to wait for guests to ask for a towel or a bar of soap but rather to provide them with dispatch. (Upon his arrest, police asked the famous bank robber Willie Sutton why he robbed banks. He responded, "That's where the money is.")

Vincent preached a million-dollar sermon that changed his life and the lives of the poor of France. The sermon at Folleville surprised him and gave Vincent his mission in life. Madame De Gondi later bankrolled his mission with a starter gift of \$2.5 million.

**Lesson:** Pay attention to people, then master the written and spoken word to be an effective leader.

In a second famous sermon so many people were motivated to take food and medicines to a poor family they created a veritable parade on the road to their home. Vincent took one look and immediately realized there was great charity but it was poorly organized. His greatest gift to serving the poor was his ability to organize the effort—the first time in the history of the world.

**Lesson:** Pay attention to your experiences; you may find your great contribution.

Vincent was able to convince the government to change how it treated convicts to make their lives more humane.

**Lesson:** Never underestimate your own power and influence to do good.

Vincent was not afraid to change the rules when needed. He was not afraid to walk away from things that did not work.

**Lesson:** Everyone makes mistakes; learn from them and move on.

Before he could get the clergy to help serve the poor he had to reform and educate them.

**Lesson:** The best place to start is from wherever you are. We cannot do it alone; teachers are leaders too.

Vincent wrote to one of his managers that he had heard complaints that he was serving bad food and cheap wine. He told him to serve good food and wine to those doing the work of serving the poor.

**Lesson:** Take care of your people; celebrate small successes.

## Conclusion

Perhaps the greatest lesson is that Vincent was a man of action. Once he decided on a course of action, he demanded what some might call pro-active service. Pujo says of Vincent, “He believed in the virtue of action and he loved to use this succinct motto: *Totum opus nostrum in operatione consistit* (Action is our entire task)” (Pujo, 251).

Who are the greatest names in service to the poor? Mother Teresa? St. Francis of Assisi? Who else? Who organized the workforce to serve the poor? Not Jesus, not Francis, not Mother Teresa in any expansive way. Only Vincent.

Jesus inspired it all: “I have come to bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18).

Francis preached it and lived it. Vincent did all that and added organization. And then he invented continuous quality improvement by direct engagement with the poor and enacted it in his organizations.

“Vincent’s display of charity and compassion went beyond the customary services of feeding and clothing the poor and derelict, attending to the sick or serving refugees from wars and disasters. He was not passive in waiting for the poor to come to him. He was proactive in taking the initiative. There were occasions when he would send members ‘into the hovels and caves of Paris to those in need, especially the sick’” (Melito, 62).

### **What would Vincent do today?**

When Walt Disney died before he could launch construction of Disneyworld, the board of directors of Disney decided to scuttle the project. But Walt’s brother, Roy, came out of retirement and said, “Let’s build it for Walt.” They built it and opened the most successful family entertainment enterprise ever. Then for the next 23 years Disney leaders asked themselves, “What would Walt do?” They eventually lost their way by asking themselves this question repeatedly —which many described as “Management by Séance.”



Today we can easily get lost asking ourselves “What would Vincent do?” or “What would Jesus do?” We will, however, always find our way if we ask the quintessential Vincentian question first offered by Madam De Gondi, “Something must be done; **what must I do?**” Vincent asked the question to the people at Chatillon, and they fed the poor. He described the conditions of the galley slaves to the King of France, the King sent Vincent to make them better.

Knowing that something must be done and being brave enough to ask ourselves, “**What must I do?**” is to know “What would Vincent do?”



## Recommended Readings

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## The Publishers

Depaul International is the parent company of a group of charities based on the values of St. Vincent de Paul working to support homeless and marginalized people around the world. Headquartered in London, in 2015 its subsidiary countries include the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Ukraine, Slovakia and the United States.

<http://www.depaulinternational.org>

Vincent on Leadership: The Hay Project awakens and advances the vision, values and leadership practices of St. Vincent de Paul in people and organizations worldwide. Providing research, training, education, and collaboration in the manner of St. Vincent, the Project ensures the continuance of the legacy of St. Vincent de Paul's organizational genius and leadership skills in the service of others.

<http://www.leadership.depaul.edu>

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- 11b:** Woman's World [Quote]. 02-22-2005 issue.
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