

**THE LIFE OF ST.  
VINCENT DE PAUL**

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The Life of St. Vincent De Paul by Henry Bedford

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**HENRY BEDFORD**

**THE LIFE OF ST.  
VINCENT DE PAUL**



THE  
Life of St. Vincent de Paul.



THE LIFE

OF

ST. VINCENT DE PAUL.

*Given to the  
Sister of the Holy Spirit 1858*



BY

HENRY BEDFORD, M. A.



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1858.

TO  
THE VERY REVEREND THE PRESIDENT,  
THE REVEREND THE DIRECTORS,  
AND  
THE STUDENTS  
OF THE  
FOREIGN MISSIONARY COLLEGE OF ALLHALLOWS,  
DUBLIN,

*This Biography*

OF THE FOUNDER OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE FATHERS OF  
THE MISSION

IS MOST AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED

BY THE AUTHOR.

## PREFACE.

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THEY who know any thing of the saintly character and heroic deeds of Vincent de Paul regard him, and with truth, as the father of the orphan, the friend of the poor man, and the tender nurse of the sick; but only they who have studied his career by the light of the times in which he lived are aware how eminently he was distinguished as a zealous and successful reformer. To him belongs the glory of raising the Church of France from the deep degradation into which it had been her unhappy lot to fall; a degradation which was shared no less by clergy than by people—into which, indeed, the latter could not have fallen but for the worldly habits and shameless vices of their unworthy pastors. “The world is sick enough,” indignantly cries Adrien Bourdoise, who was associated with St. Vincent in the laborious work of reformation; “but the clergy is not less so: frivolity, impurity, immodesty, are every where paramount. . . . The majority of our priests stand with their arms folded; God is forced to raise up laymen — cutlers and haberdashers — to do the work of these lazy ecclesiastics. Seldom now-a-days do we meet with a man who is of good family and at the same time an instructed servant of God. Whence is it that God makes use of such laymen as M. Beaumais the draper, and M. Clement the cutler, as His instruments for the conversion of such numbers of heretics and bad Catholics in Paris, but that He finds not bachelors, licentiates, or doctors, filled with His Spirit, whom He can employ for the purpose? It is the heaviest reproach,



the bitterest affront, He can offer the clergy of an age so devoid of humility. Long live the draper and the cutler! '*Non multi sapientes, non multi potentes, non multi nobiles.*'\*"

The two remarkable men to whom M. Bourdoise here alludes seem to have been raised up in times of great irreligion to render extraordinary services to the Church. Jean Clement had been a Huguenot; after his conversion, he devoted himself to the teaching of Christian doctrine, and with such success that it is calculated in one year he made on an average no less than six converts a day. His practice was to take up a position near the church in which the Jesuit father Veron had just been preaching; there, gathering a crowd of auditors about him, he would explain in a plain and popular way the doctrines of the Church, and enforce the arguments of the learned but somewhat severe controversialist with a sweetness and an unction which few were able to resist. His extraordinary familiarity with the Sacred Scriptures—for it is recorded of him that he knew nearly the whole of the Bible in French by heart—gave him great influence with the Protestants, and especially with their preachers. He would first let them propose their doubts, and would then answer them with a readiness and a completeness truly marvellous in an uneducated man.

Beaumais also had been on the point of renouncing the faith in order to marry a Protestant, when, being unable to silence the reproaches of his conscience, he addressed himself to Jean Clement, who not only convinced him of the fatal character of the errors he was on the point of adopting, but induced him to join with him in teaching and defending the truth. He received by supernatural infusion a right understanding of the sense of the Scriptures and of the doctrines of the faith, and was considered to surpass in disputation the most famous doctors of the University of Paris. By the desire of M. Olier, who was anxious to obtain his co-

\* 1 Cor. i. 26.

operation in reforming his parish, he took up his residence at St. Germain's; but he visited in turn all the towns of France which were most infected with Calvinism, and succeeded in bringing into the Church from four to five thousand heretics.

So secularised had the clergy become, that, in a Catholic country, where no excuse could be offered for such neglect of propriety, few wore any distinctive dress; they went about with moustaches and boots, like mere men of the world; nay, it would appear, in some instances, they did not take the trouble to put on their ecclesiastical attire even when performing some of the sacred offices of their calling. Thus it is related in the life of M. Bourdoise, who on principle always appeared publicly in his cassock, that going one day into the abbey-church of St. Denis, he saw a man seated in the sacristy with a coat and short cloak on, and booted and spurred, who was hearing the confession of a priest vested in alb and stole. He immediately went in search of the prior, and said to him, "My father, come here—come and see a cavalier confessing a priest!" The caustic rebuke had its effect; for the prior instantly gave peremptory orders to the sacristan to allow no such scandals for the future.

What wonder if the people were ignorant and immoral, when their teachers and guides had so little sense of decency or responsibility! A good prelate told Vincent one day that he was labouring to the best of his ability, with the assistance of his grand-vicars, for the improvement of his diocese, but with only poor success, on account of the great numbers of his clergy who were both ignorant and vicious, and on whom neither counsel nor example seemed to have any effect. "I tremble," he said, "when I think that my own diocese abounds in priests who are addicted to intemperance or who live incontinently, but who nevertheless approach the altar every day, although they are thus devoid of all vocation to the ecclesiastical state." Another bishop, writing to him, thus expressed him-

self: "With the exception of the canon theologian of my church, I do not know a single priest among all in my diocese who is competent to undertake any ecclesiastical charge. Judge, then, how great is our need of labourers."

The immediate causes of this deplorable state of things were, 1st, the absence of seminaries for the exclusive education of the clergy; and 2dly, the vicious system of patronage which then prevailed, and which, indeed, in spite of Vincent's reforms, was perpetuated through the influence of the secular power, till it helped to precipitate France into the vortex of the terrible revolution of 1789.

With few exceptions—so few as not to be worthy of being taken into account—there was not a diocese in France, notwithstanding the express injunctions of the Council of Trent, which had its ecclesiastical seminary, or which provided candidates for holy orders with a course of study and discipline preparatory to their entering on the ecclesiastical state. There were, it is true, schools in which dogmatics were taught; but moral theology was almost entirely neglected; and of individual training for all the practical duties of the Christian ministry there was virtually none. The future priests of the Church lived in the world, each following his own bent and inclinations, without restraint of any rule or superintendence of any kind, and without those special and most precious assistances which a community-life affords. There were no regular examinations, or spiritual retreats, or clerical conferences. Young men were admitted to the priesthood, and to the daily service of the altar, without any probation worthy of the name, and unfortified by those divine aids which human weakness requires for the discharge of so high and holy an office. St. Francis de Sales himself had failed in procuring a seminary for his diocese. M. Bourdoise once expressed his astonishment that he had not devoted himself to the formation of ecclesiastics. "I allow," replied the saint, with his charac-