Saint Vincent Strambi, C.P.

1745-1824

By Osmund Thorpe, C.P.
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Among the servants of God whose Canonization gladdened the Church in the Jubilee Year, 1950, was a Passionist Bishop, whose name, although it is as yet little known in Australia, has been almost a household word in Central Italy. The life of this heroic champion of the Faith is full of lessons for us all, but one stands out in bold relief — his unswerving loyalty to the Holy See in time of persecution. In defence of its rights, he suffered six years of exile, and finally gave up his life that a Pope might not die.

Vincent Strambi was born on January 1st, 1745, at Civitavecchia, a historic seaport town fifty miles north-west of Rome. Of four children, he was the youngest and the only one that survived early childhood, and thus he became heir to all the care and attention of undivided affection. His heredity and environment were strongly on the side of sanctity.

Though his parents were considered wealthy in a town that was at the height of its prosperity, they were richer far in holiness of life, in virtue and good works. His father, who was a chemist, was a member of the Holy Name Society and took a very active part in all parochial affairs.

Vincent grew into a tall, comely boy, unspoiled by all the care lavished upon him. Unfortunately, we are told little of his boyhood beyond that he served Mass daily, and when he had grown old enough, taught catechism in the parish church.

The silence of the official Processes of his Beatification and Canonization, leaves us to infer that he was in every way just like any other boy who is blessed with pious parents and a holy home. One trait of his character at this time is, however, mentioned in some detail — perhaps because it is a trait seldom found in thoughtless youth — his extraordinary compassion for the poor. He was again and again known to come home from school without some article of clothing with which he had enriched some passing beggar. Sometimes it was his boots; sometimes his hat or jacket. His parents, being well able to afford these indiscreet acts, encouraged him in every way, and often stimulated his zeal by making him the channel of their charities.

The erection of little altars and the imitation in secret of the ceremonies he had witnessed in church were among the first signs that Vincent gave of a vocation to the priesthood. Strange and inconsistent as it may seem, his parents gave him no encouragement whatever, and were deeply distressed when, at fourteen years of age, he asked them to send him to the preparatory seminary at Montefiascone. He was, of course, their only child and allowance has to be made for their reluctance to hand on to strangers the thriving business they had built up in Civitavecchia. But Christian self-sacrifice won in the end. They consented and later on even allowed him to go to Rome, where he won a lasting reputation for sanctity and learning. As the years rolled by they grew

more and more resigned to his being a secular priest, though from time to time they made serious efforts to influence him to marry.

II.

Vincent was ordained deacon on March 14th, 1767, and was immediately appointed Rector of the Seminary at Bagnorea. It was an unusual honour to bestow on one not yet a priest. He carried out his duties so efficiently and manifested such wisdom that in spite of his being not yet twenty-three years of age he was told to prepare himself for the reception of the priesthood.

The final stage of preparation was a spiritual retreat made at the Passionist Monastery at Vetralla. Divine Providence had so arranged things that Saint Paul of the Cross, the Founder of the Passionists, was visiting the monastery at this particular time. He was a man whose imposing stature and fine appearance exercised a natural sway over all who met him. He had in addition a personality that is best described as lovable. He had a strong character to be sure, but so tempered by imitation of Christ in His Passion that mildness was its predominant feature. Those who knew him intimately used to refer to him as “la mamma della misericordia,” an untranslatable phrase whose sense is nevertheless at once obvious. (The ‘mother’ of mercy.)

It was not the first time Vincent had seen Saint Paul of the Cross, but never before had he come under his direct influence and that of his holy companions. Once again Vincent's mind became occupied with an idea he had more or less definitely discarded, the idea of breaking his remaining ties with the world and entering a Religious Order. Previously he had gone so far as to ask the Capuchins in Civitavecchia to receive him among them, but not wishing to run the risk of offending his parents they refused. He had then turned to the Vincentians or Lazzarists, as they are known in Italy. They, too, made excuses. They pointed out to him that his health would not stand the strain of the religious life. It certainly looked as if Divine Providence was siding with his parents.

When Vincent broached the subject of his being a Passionist to Saint Paul of the Cross he knew at once that his parents' opposition and his own frail appearance still weighed heavily against him. Saint Paul was adamant. Vincent was to think no more about the matter; it was impossible. But this time Vincent did not accept refusal. He argued and pleaded day by day until at length Saint Paul gave way. Well, then, yes, he would admit him. And so everything was arranged. On December 18th, 1767, Vincent left the monastery at Vetralla and on the following day was ordained priest.

No doubt, one of Vincent's first actions was to acquaint Bishop Aluffi of Bagnorea with the decision he had made and to obtain whatever permissions were required. The Bishop was a wise and prudent man. Knowing that Vincent had a talent for public speaking — when he was in Rome studying under Father Luigi Bonglochi, a celebrated professor of sacred eloquence, he had made a name for himself — and that possibly one of his motives in wanting to become a Passionist was to have an opportunity of utilizing this talent for the good of souls, he appointed him to preach a course of Lenten sermons in the country round Vetriolo. The experiment was decisive. Vincent was more than a success; he was spoken of everywhere as a great orator. To be a preacher of missions to the people was clearly his vocation.

However much the Bishop regretted his leaving the diocese, he put no obstacle in his way. There remained only the larger difficulty of his parents' consent.

III.

Great was the consternation when Vincent announced to his parents his intention of becoming a Passionist. The Congregation of the Passion was then in its infancy, and the austerities which marked its inception, and which were later mitigated by the Founder himself, were still in existence. The religious kept a perpetual fast and abstinence, and went barefooted and bareheaded even in the depth of winter.

It was a prospect that made many a stout heart quail. His father, utterly overcome with grief, besought him to have pity on his parents' old age, and not to break their hearts. He told Vincent that a year of such a life meant death. He put him in mind of the evil stories about the Passionists, which the enemies of Saint Paul of the Cross had spread far and wide, and which even good people believed, and almost in despair pleaded that, if he must be a religious, he would join one of the more respectable and time-honoured Orders.

Though Vincent's affection for his loved ones grew deeper at their grief, and at the thought of leaving them forever in this world, he did not falter in his resolution. The words of our Saviour were familiar to him. “He that loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.” “There is no man that has left house or brethren or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for My sake and the Gospel, who shall not receive a hundred times as much now in this time; and in the world to come life everlasting.”

Vincent did not wish, however, to leave home without obtaining his parent's blessing. She who is the dispenser of all vocations, the Immaculate Mother of God, seems to have come to his aid in this difficulty. He was asked to preach in a neighbouring town on the feast of her Seven Sorrows, which was drawing near. Filled with grief at the wound he was inflicting on his unsuspecting parents, he obtained the coveted blessing and bade them goodbye. He preached with great eloquence upon the sorrow of Our Blessed Lady and her Divine Son at their last meeting in their home at Nazareth, and then, without a word to anyone, slipped quietly away and hurried along the dusty roads to tile nearest Passionist monastery. Before the news of his sensational departure was generally known in his native town, he was making, in the solitude of Monte Argentaro, a beautiful island on the Tuscan coast, the spiritual retreat preparatory to his reception of the Passionist habit.

From the moment he entered the novitiate, Vincent set himself heart and soul to become a perfect Passionist. In the work he had already been something more than a novice in sanctity. He had not, like Saint Gabriel of Our Lady of Sorrows (born Francesco Possenti), who came after him, to slough the worldling at the threshold of the religious life. For some unknown reason he did not change his baptismal name for another, as is customary, but merely added Mary. In this we have a shadowy token of the change that took place in his soul. Upon the foundations he had already laid in the world, he began to build a structure of holiness so imposing as bade fair to out-rival that of the holy founder himself. The year of probation passed quickly, and to his intense joy he was professed on September 24th, 1769, taking the usual vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and a fourth proper to the Passionists, to promote with all diligence among the faithful devotion to the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

IV.

When receiving Vincent into the Congregation, Saint Paul is said to have remarked that God intended him to reach great heights of sanctity. Acting upon this knowledge of the future, he brought him to live with him, trained him himself for the work of the missions, and in many ways showed that he regarded him as a jewel that would one day shed lustre on the Passionist

Congregation. With a wisdom that was his ordinary gift he allowed him to see for himself the harvest of souls that was ready for the skilful reaper, and then withdrew him into solitude, where, by prayer and study, he could perfect himself for the great work he had to do. Years afterwards Vincent used to recommend to students for the priesthood the practice of often calling to mind the souls of those who were waiting for their priestly ministrations, and whose eternal salvation depended in a manner upon their knowledge and their skill in the discharge of their duties.

It was Vincent's great privilege to assist Saint Paul of the Cross during his last hours on earth and to be present at his deathbed. So great was the impression made upon him of the sanctity of his friend and spiritual father that he thereupon decided to write his life, and in spite of the haste in which it was written, produced what has always been considered a masterpiece of religious biography. The English translation of this work is perhaps unique in this that it is the life of a saint written by a saint and introduced by one who is likely to be declared a saint, namely, the Venerable Dominic Barberi, C.P., Apostle of England. (He was beatified in 1963)

But Vincent excelled as a missioner. The next twenty-five years might be written as a chronicle of missions and retreats, with every now and then seasons of rest in his monastery to renew his bodily strength and give him an opportunity to fulfil the observances of the religious life. The years of prayer and preparation had not been in vain. His name was known and reverenced throughout the Papal States. His golden voice struck conviction and fear into the hearts of hardened sinners, and, when he was preaching in the public squares, sometimes into the hearts of curious passersby.

The Passion was the secret of his success, as it was the secret of Saint Paul's success and that of every Passionist missioner today. As he stood on the mission platform, clothed in the black habit of mourning, with the sign of the Passion on his breast and sandals on his feet, who could resist the appeal of his voice as he pointed to the crucifix and told that story of the immense love of Christ for mankind?

There was need of great apostles. The dread infidelity that had been eating its way for years into the vitals of European society had not left Italy unscathed. Indifference and disloyalty to the Holy See were rampant. That most forbidding doctrine, Jansenism, though dying fast, was yet seen in its effects — in the neglect of the Sacraments, and in the loss of that child-like confidence in the merits of Jesus Christ and the help of His Holy Mother, which is such a marked characteristic of Italian piety. Already, too, the shadows of the troubled years to come were falling. It has been said that the fidelity of the majority of the people in the Papal States to the Pope during those sad times was not a little owing to the efforts of Vincent. In the months that immediately preceded the invasion of Rome by the French Revolutionary troops, he preached in nearly all the important towns of the Papal States. “The chastisement is at hand,” he used to exclaim, “and there is no longer a Saint Dominic or a Saint Francis to hold back the wrath of God or to stop the floods of His anger.” Even after he was a Bishop he was again and again called upon by the Holy See to preach difficult missions in dioceses that were in need of reform.

The Congregation of the Passion, being not unmindful of his virtues and talents, called him during these years to the highest offices, though these at his own request were usually of a kind that left him free to pursue the work of the missions. As a Superior, he was reverenced by his subjects. Though he never allowed the least infraction of rule or custom to pass unnoticed, his corrections were given in such a spirit of prudence and charity that the delinquents felt that they had well deserved them.

But we look in vain for what may be called the ornaments of sanctity — for great miracles and ecstasies and the wonders we read of in the lives of some saints. There were wonders, indeed — stories of his extraordinary knowledge of the future and in the confessional, of the past; but his holiness was chiefly of the hidden kind, that shone all the more brilliantly after his death for the years it had been obscured.

V.

In 1796 Napoleon invaded Italy, and in 1798 General Berthier entered Rome and proclaimed a Republic. The Holy City became the prey of adventurers and marauders. The religious were driven from their monasteries, and those among them who were known for their special loyalty to the Holy See were exiled. The churches were profaned, and their sacred vessels stolen and, it is said, made to do service at the infamous orgies of the Republicans. The Vicar of Christ, Pope Pius VI, who was, as Vincent said, “The humblest, the kindest and the most loving of men,” was treated with inhuman indignity and, despite his eighty-six years, was compelled to leave Rome and go into exile. During these stormy days Vincent, whose loyalty made him a marked man, had to flee before the conqueror into the Kingdom of Naples. On his way through the towns and villages, he preached to the people and exhorted them to remain faithful to their Pontiff-King.

When Pius VI, worn out by the rigour of his confinement, died at Valence, France, in August, 1799, Rome was still in the hands of the French. As many Cardinals as could hastened secretly from their several places of exile to Venice, and elected Cardinal Chiaramonti, who took the name of Pius VII. (He is now honoured as a ‘Servant of God’.) It is a remarkable fact, and one that testifies to the esteem in which Vincent was held, that at this conclave, he, though but a simple religious, received five votes.

Owing to the successes of the Austrians, the new Pope was able to enter Rome in triumph in 1800, and one of his first acts was to fill the many vacant sees with worthy Bishops. Vincent was given notice of his appointment to the combined dioceses of Macerata and Tolentino. This news surprised and pained him. He hastened to Rome to interest his friends in having his appointment cancelled before it was made public. They all refused to take any step in the matter. Even Cardinal Antonelli, his intimate friend, though touched at his affection, counselled him to accept the episcopate for the glory of God and the welfare of the Church. Not finding in his friend the mediator he hoped for, he determined to take his case to the Pope himself. Pius VII listened kindly to his appeal and then said:

“Father Vincent, know that it was by a divine inspiration that my choice fell on you. No one had pointed you out to me. I desire you to accept.” Then, because the Vicar of Christ had spoken, he accepted and was consecrated in the ‘Basilica of Saints John and Paul’ on July 26th, 1801. Vincent took up his residence at Macerata, a city set on a hill overlooking the smiling Adriatic, and famous in history as the birthplace of Father Matteo Ricci, S.J., astronomer, and founder of the Chinese missions. He governed his diocese for the remainder of the reign of Pius VII — for nearly twenty-two years. In the past he had been accustomed to read frequently and to meditate on the works of Saint John Chrysostom. He now, it is said, modelled his whole life upon the counsels so abundantly found in those works. He was accessible at all times, He was known to interrupt his meals, his prayers, and often his sleep, to give audience to the crowds that came from all parts to lay their troubles before him. Priests, Bishops and even Cardinals from Rome came at times to obtain spiritual direction. But the poor were the chief objects of his solicitude. Towards them he had not lost the compassionate feeling that had made him so self-sacrificing as a boy. “What would be left

for the poor?” he used to answer those who complained of the poverty of his house and the fewness of his personal attendants. Following the advice of Saint Bernard, he made the episcopal residence a school of virtue, where the needy were received with open arms and the rich were shown by example how to be abundantly generous.

Though full of kindness and consideration for others, he treated himself with marked severity. The only privilege he claimed was to be as the least among his priests — to visit the prisons and the hospitals, and to carry the Viaticum to the dying.

The years of his episcopate were very fruitful. He established two seminaries, several monasteries, convents, and orphanages, and left his diocese, despite the years of unprecedented war, famine, plague; and his own exile, better organized and equipped than it had been for over a century.

Though he gave himself up entirely to the interests of his people, he remained throughout a devoted Passionist. He wore the black habit he loved, and together with a lay brother of the Congregation, who had been appointed his personal attendant, fulfilled many of the duties of a Passionist's life, such as rising at midnight to pray, and followed many other acts of observance to which he had been accustomed in the monastery. He was never happier than when he could lay aside for a few days the burdens of his office, and seek in the solitude of the Passionist monastery at Morrovalle a little strength for his wearied soul.

VI.

There are times when God, in His eternal designs, allows the powers of darkness to work through the worst elements in human nature for the destruction of His Church, in order that she may come forth from the struggle renewed, resplendent, and victorious. When Pius VI died in exile, her enemies declared that no Pope would ever again sit on the throne of Saint Peter; but Pius VII entered Rome in triumph.

The opening years of the nineteenth century mark the darkest and the saddest page in the history of the Church in modem times. Napoleon, having been in succession Commander-in-Chief and First Consul, had himself proclaimed Emperor of the French. Flushed with the power he wielded, and with the success of his armies, which were making kings and princes bend to his iron will, he determined to make the Pope the tool of his ambition. At first he thought to win over Pius VII to his ideas by a sham show of zeal for religion. Not succeeding in this, he came to an open rupture with him, for which pretexts were not wanting. In 1805, after receiving, as King of Italy, the Iron Crown of the Lombards, he issued a decree in which he claimed the right to appoint Bishops to the Italian sees.

Later on he commanded the Pope to expel all English citizens from the Papal States, and to close his harbours against British vessels. “You are sovereign of Rome,” said Napoleon, “I am Emperor; my enemies should be your enemies also.” But the Pope firmly refused to enter an alliance that would draw on him — the Father of Christendom — the enmity of all the world.

In 1808 another decree declared that the provinces of Urbino, Ancona, Camerino and Macerata no longer belonged to the Papal States. How this decree affected Vincent we shall see shortly. Finally, in 1809, Rome was again entered by the French troops, and the Vicar of Christ robbed of his temporal sovereignty. Pius VII, who firmly refused to abdicate, was suddenly and rudely forced from his palace on the night of June 6th, thrust into a carriage without an attendant, “without linen,

without his spectacles," and taken by swift stages to Savona. This was but the first of a long series of suffering and humiliations.

The Pope spent the next four years in close captivity. At times, Napoleon, seeing his plans baffled by the spiritual might of one helpless man, and carried away with fury, determined to make him feel the full weight of his anger. His books, papers, and even his writing materials were taken from him, and he was told that any attempt to communicate with anyone would be considered high treason. But the Pope calmly replied: "I shall lay these threats at the foot of the Crucifix, and give my cause, which is His also, into the keeping of God."

The enemies of the Church did not limit their persecution to its visible Head. All Bishops in the provinces annexed to France in 1808 were threatened with exile and the confiscation of their property if they refused to take the oath of allegiance to Napoleon.

In September of that year, the French General, Lamarois, came to Macerata and commanded Vincent to take the oath. He replied with dignity: "How is it possible that you should ask me to take an oath my conscience condemns?" "I will send you into exile if you refuse," said the General. "Well, then, I am ready," answered Vincent, "I would sacrifice everything sooner than disobey the orders of the Vicar of Jesus Christ."

Two days later Vincent was arrested. "Where is your carriage?" demanded the Prefect imperiously. "Do you not know," was the answer, "that all I possess has been given to the poor? I have no carriage. This crucifix is all I need." And, taking it and his breviary, he set out with his gaoler.

All the town seemed to be in the streets, and sobs, we are told, were audible above the cries that called down the anger of God on the wretches that had laid sacrilegious hands on their Bishop.

He was imprisoned at Novara at first, but after some months he was transferred to Milan and given greater liberty.

The fame of his sanctity and learning had preceded him there. The house where he was detained at the pleasure of the Emperor at once became a place of pilgrimage, and was daily filled with people of all ranks who were seeking consolation or advice. Young priests especially made him their friend. He directed their studies, examined their writings, gave them hints and plans for sermons, and solved their difficulties. The one lesson in Sacred Eloquence he never grew tired of repeating to them was: "Be simple in your diction, popular and touching in your delivery, and seek rather the good of souls than the perfect observance of the rules of art."

It is interesting to learn from a witness of this period of Vincent's life, Cardinal Orioli, that an extraordinary light which immediately inspired veneration, seemed always to radiate from his countenance. It helps us to understand how, almost a total stranger, he at once became the idol of the Milanese. The sanctity that was written on his face fascinated them and drew them to him. Though but six of his seventy-nine years were spent at Milan, the reputation he gained became a tradition, and the Milanese of today claim him as their own. "He is ours," said Pope Pius XI (1922-1939), who always spoke of Milan as his own beloved city.

VII.

"Does he think his sentences of excommunication will make the arms fall from the hands of my soldiers?" Whether or no those words were spoken by Napoleon in anger at the opposition of Pius VII to his plans of world domination, the fact is that in the retreat from Moscow in 1812, the arms

did fall from the frozen hands of his soldiers. After a series of defeats he who had held in his power the destinies of Europe, became in his turn an exile and on Saint Helena, a desolate island of the Atlantic, expiated his sacrilegist persecution of the Vicar of Christ.

On March 10th, the day following the defeat of Napoleon at the battle of Laon, Pius VII was set free. On May 24th, he made a solemn entry into Rome, where the people received him with every sign of welcome. Hardly less triumphal was Vincent's progress from Milan to his episcopal city. Everywhere the people were anxious to honour a Bishop who not only had suffered persecution but was remarkable for his great sanctity. He himself was surprised to the point of tears by the exuberance of the welcome prepared for him at Macerata. The hills around were lit up at night by huge bonfires, and in the streets the people sang hymns of thanksgiving.

He began at once to reorganize the two dioceses which during his five years of exile had experienced many trials.

Monasteries and convents had been suppressed; the property of the Church had been confiscated or alienated to civil uses. His own episcopal residence at Macerata had been converted into a barracks and was in a wretched state of disorder.

Faced with such a tremendous task and believing he was too old to cope with it and that a younger man's energy was required, Vincent wrote to Pius VII and sought permission to resign from his See. Pius VII would not hear of it. That was not the first time he had tried to resign. He was but two years a Bishop when overcome by a sense of unworthiness he made a determined bid to be allowed to return to a Passionist monastery. On this occasion his confessor, Father Lambruschini, afterwards Cardinal Secretary of State to Pope Gregory XVI, had been recalled to Rome.

Vincent requested him to use all his knowledge of him, even his confessional knowledge of his sins and frailties, to make the Pope understand how urgent it was that he should be removed from office. Naturally such an action made the Pope only more aware of Vincent's great virtue. But Vincent was not convinced by this refusal that he was the right man in the right place.

Fourteen times in all Vincent tried to resign. Once when wind of what was afoot got about, the clergy and people of Macerata sent a signed petition to the Pope asking him not to allow Vincent to go. And the clergy and the people of Macerata won. However, the Pope was impressed by Vincent's insistence on his incompetence and unworthiness. He solemnly assured him he would be allowed to retire. But when this promise came to be publicly known the people of his diocese got to work again and the Pope changed his mind.

Nevertheless, Vincent did not give up hope. When he was in Rome conducting a Retreat for the Cardinals he seems to have become convinced that he had the Pope's advisers on his side. To make assurance doubly sure he sought the counsel and prayers of that wonderful mother of a large family who had then a great reputation for sanctity and who is now known as Blessed Anna Maria Taigi. She said that on the following day Vincent would be received coldly by the Pope, that his resignation would not be accepted, and that he would be told to return to his diocese immediately. When he got this message Vincent smilingly remarked that this time “la santa cigala” — the saintly chatterbox — was wrong, for everything had been arranged with the Secretary of State and it was as good as done.

But the saintly chatterbox was right. The next day, as Vincent stood in the antechamber at the Quirinal, the Pope entered. Scarcely taking long enough to look at him he said brusquely “We know

why you have come. Everyone is putting forward bad health as an excuse. We suffer just as much as anyone and yet have to bear the whole world's burdens. And whom can we send to replace you? One of the men who sweep the rooms, perhaps? No, go back to your diocese and at once."

After that one would have thought there was nothing Vincent could do but return to Macerata and settle down resignedly to do what little his age and infirmity permitted. But he was not as easily put off as all that. When his great friend, Prince Odescalchi, was made Cardinal, he entertained the hope that his influence with the Pope would be more successful. Once again he was disappointed.

His final approach to Pius VII was made through the famous Cardinal Consalvi, to whom he explained in a letter that it was not so much his advanced age and increasing ill-health that made him desirous of quitting his post, as his uneasiness of conscience at the knowledge of the work that ought to be done and of his own inability to do it. But when this letter reached the Cardinal, the eighty-one-year-old Pope had broken his thigh in a fall in his room, and was on his deathbed. He died in August, 1823.

Leo XII, who succeeded Pius VII, was a warm admirer of Vincent. When he received his request to be allowed to retire from the dioceses of Macerata and Tolentino, he seems to have regarded it as an opportunity to take him to Rome and have him always by his side. This, of course, was not at all what Vincent had been hoping and praying for.

What he wanted was to hide himself in some obscure Passionist monastery and there prepare himself for death.

Instead he was to have apartments at the Quirinal and be almost on every day parade as the Pope's confidant. However, he took this destruction of all his cherished hopes with a surprising calmness. He apparently had some sort of inward assurance that since his death was not far off it did not matter much after all. To a friend who was condoling with him on his disappointment, he said enigmatically: "Oh, it will turn out all right. Saint Sylvester will see to it." And to another friend he said joyfully "You will see I shall be only forty days at the Quirinal and then it will be June 26, the feast day of the martyrs Saints John and Paul!" Subsequent events solved the enigma and explained his joy.

Leo XII was scarcely three months Pope when all the ailments of a shattered constitution assailed Leo with fury, and threatened to cut short a reign that was more than promising great things for the Church. Towards the end of December, 1823, he was considered past all hope of recovery. Vincent visited him one evening during those days and found him so ill that he remained only a short time. On returning to his own apartments, he ordered his evening meal to be prepared a little earlier than usual. He said he would have to rise very hurriedly that night and wished to get some sleep. In fact, at midnight the Pope was taken so bad that it was thought advisable to give him the Last Sacraments. When told how serious his condition was, the Pope asked for Vincent to be called. Vincent then administered Extreme Unction and the Viaticum, Afterwards as he was speaking to the Pope about spiritual things and exhorting him to great confidence in God, his face suddenly took on a particularly joyous aspect. "Holy Father," he said with conviction, "someone is going to offer his life for you, and I shall go now and say Mass for your recovery."

All who assisted at that Mass of Vincent later on testified to the extraordinary fervour with which he said it. When it was over he enquired how the Pope was, and on being told that he was much better, he said in accents of great joy: "Our Lady has accepted the sacrifice and the grace has been granted."

The Pope recovered but Vincent had a stroke on the feast of Saint Sylvester and died on the following day, January 1st, 1824. Cardinal Wiseman, Archbishop of Westminster, in his “Recollections of the Last Four Popes,” tells how everyone believed that Leo XII owed his life to Vincent. “All Rome,” he says, “attributed the unexpected recovery to the prayers of a saintly Bishop, who was sent for at the Pope's request. This was Monsignor Strambi, of the Congregation of the Passion. He came immediately, saw the Pope, and assured him of his recovery, as he had offered up to heaven his own valueless life in exchange for one so precious. It did indeed seem as if he had transfused his own vitality into the Pope's languid frame. He himself died soon after, and the Pontiff rose like one from the tomb.” The circumstances of Vincent's death called wider attention to his great sanctity. His body, extraordinarily flexible and life-like, lay in state in one of the halls of the Quirinal for three days and in the ‘Basilica of Saints John and Paul’ for five days. During that time there was a ceaseless stream of people filing past it, many of whom surreptitiously cut off bits of the Passionist habit in which he was clothed. One of the many important ecclesiastics who came to honour Vincent in death was Abbot Cappellari, who was to become Pope Gregory XVI. Noting the uncorpse-like appearance of the body he tried an experiment. He took Vincent's right hand in his own and with it formed with the greatest of ease the sign of the cross.

Vincent's funeral was attended by all the members of the Papal Court and the Roman nobility as well as by a vast number of priests, religious and people. Having been, as he had prophesied, forty days at the Quirinal, he was laid to rest in the ‘Basilica of Saints John and Paul’ beside Saint Paul of the Cross.

VIII.

In the bulky volumes that have been written on the profane history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we find little or no mention of this hero of sanctity. The scales of value of historians failed to register one who was neither a soldier, nor a savant, nor a scientist. Yet, if the standards of the soul are higher than those of the body; Saint Vincent Strambi accomplished something that weighed down heavily on the scales of Divine value — something that merits an eternal remembrance — he lived a life of virtue and self-denial for God's sake, and he saved innumerable souls.

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