

THE LIFE OF  
ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

1581-1660

BY

F. A. FORBES

**Nihil Obstat**

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*“Blessed is he that understandeth concerning the needy and the poor: the Lord will deliver him in the evil day.”*

*—Psalm 40:2*

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. Wherefore he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, he hath sent me to heal the contrite of heart, to preach deliverance to the captives, and sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of reward.”*

*—Luke 4:18-19*

*“Extend mercy towards others, so that there can be no one in need whom you meet without helping. For what hope is there for us if God should withdraw His mercy from us?”*

*—St. Vincent de Paul*

*“Dearly beloved, let us love one another, for charity is of God. And every one that loveth, is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God: for God is charity.”*

*—1 John 4:7-8*



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## **About the Author**

F. A. Forbes (16 March 1869 – 1936) was the nom de plume of Mother Frances Alice Monica Forbes, RSCJ, a member of the Society of the Sacred Heart from Scotland and a religious author.

She was born in 1869 as Alice Forbes into a Presbyterian family. Her mother died when she was a child. In 1900 she became a Roman Catholic. Only a few months later, she entered the Society of the Sacred Heart, as a 31-year-old postulant.

She wrote numerous books, including brief biographies of Saint Ignatius Loyola, Saint John Bosco, Saint Teresa of Ávila, Saint Columba, Saint Monica, Saint Athanasius, Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Benedict, Saint Hugh of Lincoln, Saint Vincent de Paul, and, most famously, Pope Saint Pius X. She died in 1936.





## Chapter 1

**A PEASANT'S SON**

A monotonous line of sand hills and the sea; a vast barren land stretching away in wave-like undulations far as eye can reach; marsh and heath and sand, sand and heath and marsh; here and there a stretch of scant coarse grass, a mass of waving reeds, a patch of golden-brown fern—the Landes.

It was through this desolate country in France that a little peasant boy whose name was destined to become famous in the annals of his country led his father's sheep, that they might crop the scanty pasture. Vincent was a homely little boy, but he had the soul of a knight-errant, and the grace of God shone from eyes that were never to lose their merry gleam even in extreme old age.

He was intelligent, too, so intelligent that the neighbors said that Jean de Paul was a fool to set such a boy to tend sheep when he had three other sons who would never be good for anything else. There was a family in the neighborhood, they reminded him, who had had a bright boy like Vincent, and had put him to school—with what result? Why, he had taken Orders and got a benefice, and was able to support his parents now that they were getting old, besides helping his brothers to get on in the world. It was well worthwhile pinching a little for such a result as that.

Jean de Paul listened and drank in their arguments. It would be a fine thing to have a son a priest; perhaps, with luck, even a Bishop—the family fortunes would be made forever.

With a good deal of difficulty the necessary money was scraped together, and Vincent was sent to the Franciscans' school at Dax, the nearest town. There the boy made such good use of his time that four years later, when he was only sixteen, he was engaged as tutor to the children of M. de Commet, a lawyer, who had taken a fancy to the clever, hardworking young scholar. At M. de Commet's suggestion, Vincent began to study for the priesthood, while continuing the education of his young charges to the satisfaction of everybody concerned.

Five years later he took minor Orders and, feeling the need of further theological studies, set his heart on a university training and a degree. But life at a university costs money, however thrifty one may be, and although Jean de Paul sold a yoke of oxen to start his son on his career at Toulouse, at the end of a year Vincent was in difficulties. The only chance for a poor student like himself was a tutorship during the summer vacation, and here Vincent was lucky. The nobleman who engaged him was so delighted with the results that, when the vacation was over, he insisted on the young tutor taking his pupils back with him to Toulouse. There, while they attended the college, Vincent continued to direct their studies, with such success that several other noblemen confided their sons to him, and he was soon at the head of a small school.

To carry on such an establishment and to devote oneself to study at the same time was not the easiest of tasks; but Vincent was a hard and conscientious worker, and he seems to have had, even then, a strange gift of influencing others for good. For seven years he continued this double task with thorough success, completed his course of theology, took his degree, and was ordained priest in the opening years of that seventeenth century which was to be so full of consequences both for France and for himself.

Up to this time there had been nothing to distinguish Vincent from any other young student of his day. Those who knew him well respected him and loved him, and that was all. But with the priesthood came a change. From thenceforward he was to strike out a definite line of his own—a line that set him apart from the men of his time and faintly foreshadowed the Vincent of later days.

The first Mass of a newly ordained priest was usually celebrated with a certain amount of pomp and ceremony. If a cleric wanted to obtain a good living it was well to let people know that he was eligible for it; humility was not a fashionable virtue. People were therefore not a little astonished when Vincent, flatly refusing to allow any outsiders to be present, said his first Mass in a lonely little chapel in a wood near Bajet, beloved by him on account of its solitude and silence. There, entirely alone save for the acolyte and server required by the rubrics, and trembling at the thought of his own unworthiness, the newly made priest, celebrating the great Sacrifice for the first time, offered himself for life and death to be the faithful servant of his Lord. So high

were his ideals of what the priestly life should be that in his saintly old age he would often say that, were he not already a priest, he would never dare to become one.

Vincent's old friend and patron, M. de Commet, was eager to do a good turn to the young cleric. He had plenty of influence and succeeded in getting him named to the rectorship of the important parish of Thil, close to the town of Dax. This was a piece of good fortune which many would have envied; but it came to Vincent's ears that there was another claimant, who declared that the benefice had been promised to him in Rome. Rather than contest the matter in the law courts Vincent gave up the rectorship and went back to Toulouse, where he continued to teach and to study.

Some years later he was called suddenly to Bordeaux on business, and while there heard that an old lady of his acquaintance had left him all her property. This was welcome news, for Vincent was sadly in need of money, his journey to Bordeaux having cost more than he was able to pay.

On returning to Toulouse, however, he found that the prospect was not so bright as he had been led to expect. The chief part of his inheritance consisted of a debt of four or five hundred crowns owed to the old lady by a scoundrel who, as soon as he heard of her death, made off to Marseilles, thinking to escape without paying. He was enjoying life and congratulating himself on his cleverness when Vincent, to whom the sum was a little fortune, and who had determined to pursue his debtor, suddenly appeared on the scene. The thief was let off on the payment of three hundred crowns, and Vincent, thinking that he had made not too

had a bargain, was preparing to return to Toulouse by road, the usual mode of traveling in those days, when a friend suggested that to go by sea was not only cheaper, but more agreeable. It was summer weather; the journey could be accomplished in one day; the sea was smooth; everything seemed favorable; the two friends set out together.

A sea voyage in the seventeenth century was by no means like a sea voyage of the present day. There were no steamers, and vessels depended on a favorable wind or on hard rowing. The Mediterranean was infested with Turkish pirates, who robbed and plundered to the very coasts of France and Italy, carrying off the crews of captured vessels to prison or slavery.

The day that the two friends had chosen for their journey was that of the great fair of Beaucaire, which was famous throughout Christendom. Ships were sailing backwards and forwards along the coast with cargoes of rich goods or the money for which they had been sold, and the Turkish pirates were on the lookout.

The boat in which Vincent was sailing was coasting along the Gulf of Lyons when the sailors became aware that they were being pursued by three Turkish brigantines. In vain they crowded on all sail; escape was impossible. After a sharp fight, in which all the men on Vincent's ship were either killed or wounded—Vincent himself receiving an arrow wound the effects of which remained with him for life—the French ship was captured.

But the Turks had not come off unscathed, and so enraged were they at their losses that their first action on boarding

the French vessel was to hack its unfortunate pilot into a thousand pieces. Having thus relieved their feelings, they put their prisoners in chains. But then, fearing lest the prisoners die of loss of blood and so cheat them of the money for which they meant to sell them, they bound up their wounds and went on their way of destruction and pillage. After four or five days of piracy on the high seas, they started, laden with plunder, for the coast of Barbary, noted throughout the world at that time as a stronghold of sea robbers and thieves.

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