

# St. Vincent Pallotti's Vision of the Human Person

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Thank you for this privilege to share with all of you something about St. Vincent.

The various biographies of Pallotti point out his many activities in Rome. He taught the students at the Sapienza, and was later the spiritual director of the seminarians. We find him visiting the imprisoned and the sick in the hospitals, often ministering to those no one else would minister to. For orphaned girls, Pallotti set up a place where they would find a home and love with the Sisters. He spent many hours hearing confessions and preaching retreats and missions. His life was spent in serving people.

It is obvious that the human person is of great value to Pallotti and is a central aspect of his life and works.

His service was not noble humanism on the humanitarian level. To Pallotti, the human person transcends time and space, is a creation of the eternal God and each life's journey is not an aimless joyride, but has a destination: the eternal God. It is unmistakably evident that in Vincent Pallotti's view, God is an integral part, the most essential part of each human person. Therefore, if we want to understand Pallotti's view of the human person, we must attempt to know Pallotti's vision of God. He asks himself: "*My God, who are you and who am I? Who am I before you? What is it you want of me as I am before you?*"<sup>1</sup>

God totally permeates Pallotti's life and affects all his actions; therefore, it is difficult to even attempt to describe adequately the vision and role of God in Pallotti's life.

So, I have chosen to focus on the one central element in his life – the mystery of God.

## Mystery

Mystery, according to the dictionary, is "*something that is not or cannot be known, understood, or explained*", or "*a truth that can be known only through divine revelation, and that cannot be fully understood by men*". It is a truth, which to us is incomprehensible, that we cannot fully grasp or 'put our arms around and hold fast'.

Mystery also has another aspect, which we so often overlook as we focus on the incomprehensible. Mystery indicates the existence and presence of a reality, an immense reality. Actually, this is the primary aspect of a mystery.

Too often today, the tendency is to say 'what *I* cannot comprehend does not exist'. People dismiss or reject the reality aspect of mystery. Yet, for believers, for the faithful, this is a most crucial aspect.

## Pallotti and the Mystery of God

For St. Vincent Pallotti, there is no question that God is mystery.

Pallotti knows that he can never fully understand who God is; he cannot comprehend God in his being and in his actions. But he accepts that God is, and stands before this great mystery in awe, in joy, in adoration, and in willing service. Pallotti is ready to give everything he is and has to this incredible God. To Pallotti, God is the ultimate reality, the greatest possible reality, the infinite reality, the perfect being, the ultimate wisdom, the supreme power, the One from whom everything takes its existence, order and beauty. Pallotti's response is to recognize God as mystery and to accept it wholeheartedly. He says, "*Enlightened by holy faith I believe in the existence of one God, eternal, infinite, immense, incomprehensible, infinitely blessed from all eternity.*"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Pallottine Community Prayer Book*, English Edition 2, p.7

<sup>2</sup> Vincent Pallotti, *God, the Infinite Love*, p. 1

## **God, the Infinite Love**

Pallotti perceives the nature of this infinite reality as an even greater mystery, the mystery of love. He perceives and experiences mystically that the essence of the infinite God is infinite love. The infinite God is infinite love. Pallotti believes that the infinite God offers us, even with our human limitations, his infinite love, offers himself as infinite love. Pallotti always feels challenged to more deeply experience and understand the incomprehensible, infinite love.

Pallotti perceived God as an infinite being, triune in persons. Within this community of the Trinity, love is active; it moves freely between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. By its very nature, love wants to be shared and given. It calls forth communion. It reaches out. It is not a stagnant preserve, not self-centered or passive. In God, Pallotti saw the perfection of love. It is a generous love, always giving all of itself to the other. Love shows outgoing concern for the beloved. Love wants to share its goodness and happiness and make the other happy in return. It is not a self-contained happiness.

God's love is not and cannot be contained only within himself. By its very nature, it wants to give all of itself to others outside of itself. Not just to a few others, but to unlimited others. Infinite love wants to share itself infinitely. To do this, it simply must explode outwards and give life. It must create.

Pallotti saw creation as the extension of God's love. If God gives his totality to everything that he creates, then all of creation reflects God's goodness and love in itself. Creation is a footprint of God's infinite love. His transcendent love is immanent in his creation through his creative power, which is identical with his infinite love. It is the infinite love of God, which gives us the reason for the act of creation and the existence of the universe.

God's love is the loving God who is immanent and present to all at all times, and, in the truest sense, the love of God, the God who is love, is God's free and unearned gift to creation. It was not solicited. It was not bargained for. It was freely given and offered by the infinite God of love. This generous love is unconditional. But, it is not forced on the beloved. It can be accepted or rejected by the beloved without taking anything away from or changing the love that is given. God's love is always the same.

This was the God who existed for Pallotti - God who is infinite love, all-pervasive, totally present to his creation. A loving God who is a personal God. A mysterious God. A mystery.

## **The Mystery of Man**

We said earlier that love wants to be shared and given to the beloved. The universe, creation, returns God's love by being, by carrying out its functions for which it was created, giving glory and honour to God's majesty. The psalmist in psalm 148 and Daniel in chapter 3 implores all of creation to give praise to God, the almighty creator. We have only to look around us to realize God present in all that we see.

But love also wants to be perceived as love, to be accepted, appreciated and cherished as love. Love wants a response; a total response returned freely. Thus, mankind, each and every human being, has been created to be and become a lovable, love-able and loving person, as is the heavenly Father. We have been created in the image and likeness of God – infinite love. Therefore, we are able to respond to this free gift by returning love to the Creator, our beloved. By being created in God's image and likeness, we have been invited into his infinite love, his most intimate being, into his most personal space. We have been invited into his family, the community of the Trinity. God created us so that he can love us, offer his love to us and have it accepted and responded to in kind. Love begets love. It cannot do otherwise.

This love then, is the basis of our identity and our dignity as human beings. The authenticity of the human person is to be and become loving persons. This is what we have been created for. We are not simply functioning, temporary beings. We are anchored to, intimately tied into God's infinite love. We are children of God with all the attributes and characteristics of the whole God. God does not just give us a part of himself. He has no parts – he is the infinite God. He must and wants to give all of himself to us. Therefore, as members of his Triune community/family, we are called to love and in turn to share that love again with others. We are called to be channels of God's love.

St. Vincent saw all people as called to participate in the divine life of God. Love moves back and forth between God and the person, communicating and creating a relationship of love, a union and communion of love, keeping it alive and shared. Pallotti perceived God as immanent in the people he met

and would even kneel before them out of respect for this presence of God. Mystery of God – mystery of man.

### **Mystery of Redemption/Reconciliation**

We have the freedom to accept or reject this magnificent gift. Freedom is an essential element of love. Without freedom there is no love. God values love so highly that he allows us to decide how we will respond to his gift of love. Freedom is part of our identity and dignity.

Too often, as Adam did, we reject God's love, we sin. As human beings, we are lacking God's quality of perfection and we can make mistakes and make wrong choices. Pallotti was acutely aware of his human limitations. As he experienced God's infinite greatness, he realized that his responses were inadequate, that God deserved much better than what he had to offer. He often calls himself nothing and sin in the face of the all-loving God. He often admits before God that he is the greatest sinner and the most unworthy, the one who makes no use of the gifts of God, or is most ungracious in accepting love.

The reality of imperfection is very much a part of our lives too. We often disregard or reject God's love in our actions and in our lives.

This could lead to depression and even despair - to realize that we reject God's gift and break the bond of love we should share with him. But to Pallotti, this was a reason for great hope and thanksgiving because he believed that God has misericordia – has a heart for our miseries. Our sin would be the reason for God to extend to us his infinite love through mercy. *'And, as if enamoured of man, who is so ungrateful and miserable, so quick to forsake and offend God, so quick to plot his own ruin, God promises him a Saviour.'*<sup>3</sup> God would send his only Son to redeem us, to reconcile us again to the Father. *"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die, but may have eternal life."* (Jn. 3,16)

Pallotti calls Jesus 'the first-born brother' because we are adopted children of God. It is through Jesus that we are reconnected to the love of God and are able to share in the inheritance for which God has created us: eternal life in the Trinity.

Through Jesus, God's unconditional love is offered to us as infinite mercy. God continues infinitely to offer us new fullness of life in his love. God unites his divine nature, his infinite love, his Logos, to the human condition and nature in the person of Jesus. Jesus, as representative of all humankind, is able to perfectly receive, perfectly accept, and perfectly respond to God's outpouring love. He is the perfect response of love to God's love. Christ is the one who is able to *"heal the wounded image of God in mankind and endowed it with sanctifying grace."* *"Our wounded image of God has become transformed into the image of God's Son, the Redeemer."*<sup>4</sup> Christ has reconciled us to the Father, reconnected the broken bond between mankind and God.

In his life example, his teachings and his miracles, Jesus models for us what a life lived in true love union with God looks like. It must be a life of being present to God, of prayer, which unites us ever closer to the Father and allows us to discover him more completely; it must be a life of service that looks for the good in and for everyone; it must be a life that is obedient to its true self – love; and it must be a life that gives not just its best but its all.

Pallotti believed if we model ourselves on Jesus, we would always aim to become who we truly are as loving people, we would *"become perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."* (Mt. 5,48) *"To follow our Lord Jesus Christ we need above all his spirit. This means all inner actions of our soul must be similar to those of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we may truly follow Him also in his exterior actions."*<sup>5</sup> *"Jesus sanctifies, improves and enriches, with His infinite merits, all the words, thoughts and deeds of our life, even those which are mediocre, as long as they are done for God and as long as we are in a state of grace"*<sup>6</sup>

Pallotti's life was a constant effort to live in the mystery of the presence of the God who is infinite love so that he would become ever more like God. He believed the Holy Spirit would give him the grace to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 83

<sup>4</sup> Flavian Bonifazi, SAC, *Vincent Pallotti's Legacy*, p. 53 and 54

<sup>5</sup> Josef Danko, SAC, *Hunger and Thirst for God*, p. 42

<sup>6</sup> Vincent Pallotti, *God, the Infinite Love*, p. 99

follow Christ, to be completely converted into love. After all, it is God's love, which gives life, which nourishes our soul.

The ultimate answer of God's love and to his love would be the cross. Jesus dies on the cross to convince us that God's love does not have any limits. But Jesus also gave the perfect human response to God. His death showed humanity's willingness to value God above all else, and offer God the most valuable human quality – life itself.

But life does not end with death, as so many today think. Death is not the reason for which God created us. God created us so that he can love us. Love, in itself, demands eternity. God's love is not a temporary affair. He created us to share forever in his eternal life of infinite love. Jesus' resurrection shows us his victory over death. His ascension to the Father completes the journey we as humans must make. It is here that we receive the fullness of life promised to us. It is here that we experience God's everlasting love and life, and to realize that our destiny is to see God face to face. This is the fulfillment of the promise, the desire of God at the creation of the first person – that we would be with him in love, heaven, paradise, the Trinity. Mystery of mercy.

### **Mystery of the Interaction between God and Man**

Pallotti very much believed and taught that as images of the infinite God of love, we must respond to God in love, but that we must also recognize that love in others and share that love with others. If our own destination is to live in the eternal communion with God who is love, then it is our calling to become channels through which God's love reaches other people. In accepting God's love, we are called to become responsible co-operators in the unfolding of God's creation. This includes the ongoing process of redemption. This continues to be an incarnational process, in which God is united with mankind. Jesus is the active cause of our redemption, in him God's love is united with mankind. Mary is the passive-receptive element that welcomes God's love as a representative of humankind.

After Jesus, Pallotti saw Mary as the perfect model of the person responding to God's love and being a channel of God's love. Mary's close connection to God as the Mother of God's Son and her close connection to us as our mother, given to us by Christ under the cross, makes her the model worthy of emulation. She is the one who can lead us to Christ and help us to become more like him. Mary, throughout her life, remained intimately connected to God and to her Son. In her very unique way, she cooperated in the work of Christ – to bring souls to salvation. She is a sign and example for all in the Church. Although she held no priestly authority or power to preach, she is the Queen of the Apostles. This is very well expressed in the picture of the Cenacle, so dear to Pallotti.

### **New Vision of Church**

Pallotti has given us a new vision of what it means to be Church. It is not only the Pope, bishops and priests who are responsible for spreading the faith, that is, bringing God's love to the people. Every person, created in God's image and likeness, is called to be a member of God's family. The members' positions and roles in the family will vary, but all are equal in dignity. They all are called to take ownership and share responsibility. We are those people. We are the Church. We are called to be the channels through which God's love comes to us and through us to all. The way we do it is through our everyday life, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, in whatever work we are involved, with whatever means are available to us.

The Union of Catholic Apostolate, which Pallotti founded, gives us an answer. All would be included in this Union, because all share in the same dignity as children of God. Each person would contribute in his/her own unique and personal way, each according to his/her own talents and resources. All would work towards the renewal of faith and the rekindling of love for the salvation of souls. It would be in this community of like-minded people that we would receive and offer support so that we may grow and mature into the great vocation entrusted to us by Christ. Here we would be renewed and strengthened so that we are better able to face life's challenges. Mystery of the Church.

## Conclusion

In his weekly general audience of January 13, 2010, Pope Benedict said, *“At the beginning of the new year, we look at the history of Christianity, to see how a history develops and how it can be renewed. In it we can see that it is the saints, guided by the light of God, who are the genuine reformers of the life of the Church and of society. Teachers by their word and witnesses with their example, they know how to promote a stable and profound ecclesial renewal, because they themselves are profoundly renewed, they are in contact with the true novelty: the presence of God in the world. Such a consoling reality -- that in every generation saints are born and bear the creativity of renewal -- constantly accompanies the history of the Church in the midst of the sorrows and the negative aspects of her journey. We also see come forth, century by century, the forces of reform and of renewal, because the novelty of God is inexorable and always gives new strength to go forward.”*

In St. Vincent Pallotti, we have such a person. Central to his life and to his work, to his vision and his foundation was God, the God whom he experienced as Infinite Love. This was the great reality, which permeated everything he did. It was a love he could not comprehend, but which he accepted and prostrated himself before in awe and adoration. The mystery of this Love, of God’s infinite love, the infinitely loving God, was the secret, which motivated his life. His life was a total response to the mystery of God’s infinite love and mercy. This is the legacy, which he leaves for us – to imitate Christ, the Apostle of the Father, in order to rekindle love in all people and lead all to salvation.

Maria Domke has kindly prepared the follow questions to guide a reading and shared study of the text.

### Questions for Personal Reflection and Discussion

1. In a world that is distancing itself ever further from a creating, caring God, even to the point of declaring he is dead or doesn’t exist, what is my image of God? What in my life has shaped that image? What consequences does that image have for my life?
2. As followers of St. Vincent Pallotti, we believe that we are created in the image and likeness of God. How does this affect the identity and image of myself?
3. What is my relationship to the God who is infinite love and mercy? What do I expect? What does God expect?
4. Pallotti tells us, “Jesus is our model. He shows us the way to live.” and “We have the Gospels; that is enough.” How well do I know the Gospels? What am I doing to get to know Jesus better?
5. Pallotti said, “Choose for yourselves the saints as patrons, read their lives, imitate their virtues.” As a Pallottine, as a member of the UAC, how do I emulate the life of St. Vincent?
6. How do I see the role of sacraments in my life and my apostolate?
7. What is my role in the UAC? By what means do I promote the charism of St. Vincent Pallotti?
8. Pallotti has given us a new way to be Church. Why is this so important and needed in our day and age?