

Meeting St. Vincent in Paris

There is only the unexpected moment when the soul, the heart, the world, and the sun are briefly aligned; when what you feel, what I feel, what the world needs, and what life has to offer fills our cup.

Mark Nepo

As you may know, I was the Executive Director of The Seton Cove, an interfaith spirituality center, for over twenty years. The Cove, as most of us called it, was founded by a member of the Daughters of Charity and former healthcare executive, Sr. Mary Rose McPhee. During that time I was honored to be working for an institution, Seton Healthcare, that was started by the Daughters of Charity who were founded by St. Vincent de Paul in France and Elizabeth Ann Seton in the United States. I learned a lot about St. Vincent de Paul while working at the Cove. As many of you know he became well-known for his help to the poor, not just the financially strapped but also the poor in body and spirit. He had great compassion for all those who suffered in any way—orphans, the sick, the poor, the lonely. He was known for his loving kindness.

In order to teach those of us who worked at Seton more about the founders' mission to care for those in need, Seton sponsored annual pilgrimages to France. These were attended by Seton Board members, donors and associates. I was most fortunate in being able to attend many of these pilgrimages as the director of spiritual formation for the pilgrims. It was always amazing to see how thoroughly the spirit and history of St. Vincent permeated Paris. There are monuments and tributes to him throughout the city.

But even though I grew to respect and admire St. Vincent and his charitable works, he still remained, for me, a distant figure from the 17th century. That is, until I met him in Paris two weeks ago. My husband and I were coming to the end of our nine day trip to Paris. We had a wonderful time just being in the City of Light. On this particular day we did not venture out in the morning because of a transit strike that was occurring. But around noon we decided to walk to one of our favorite cafes for lunch. We asked the hotel concierge if it was safe to go out, and she assured us it was.

When we got a few blocks from the cafe, the streets became very crowded with demonstrators and we decided that perhaps this wasn't the best idea. We turned back, but were told by gendarmes that we couldn't go back the way we came. My husband walked ahead of me, trying to find an alternate route. I hurried to keep up with him only to trip and fall literally flat on my face. I felt my front teeth shatter as I hit the concrete. It

all happened so fast that I didn't have time to break my fall with my hands, and my lips were bleeding inside and out.

Needless to say I was stunned. The police helped me up and suggested I go to a pharmacy down the street. As my husband and I stood there trying to gather our wits about us, a young man appeared by our side, and speaking in English, told us that he would accompany us to the pharmacy because he doubted anyone there would speak our language.

He was right. No one spoke English but customers and pharmacists alike were aghast to see my bloodied and bruised face. Yann, as we found out was the name of the man who had accompanied us, prevailed upon the pharmacist to call an ambulance. He then told me, "Don't worry. They are coming. The pharmacist was quite insistent that they get here quickly."

Yann said he would go with us in the ambulance because the medics did not speak English. Thank Heaven, he was there so I could communicate with the medics. They spoke no English and my French was limited to a few stock phrases—primarily, *Je regrette*, *Je ne parle pas francais*. It took two hours to get to the hospital because of the strike and the street closures. Even though my husband and I urged Yann to not miss the law school lecture he was scheduled to present, he assured us that he could adjust the time for his lecture. I told him I felt badly about his being late, but he looked at me with the kindest eyes and said "You could be my Mother. You are the same age as my Mother. I will stay with you until we get to the hospital. There will be someone there who speaks English." Yann continued to cheerfully chat with me the whole way to the hospital. I realize now that his friendly conversation kept me calm and pulled me back from the edge of panic. At the hospital he left us.

Later that evening, after spending the day in the ER where I got three stitches in my cut lip and a scan of my brain that assured the doctors that I didn't have a concussion or cranial bleeding, I texted one of my colleagues at Seton about the experience. He wrote back to me, "I think you met St. Vincent." And surely I had. For what is a saint if not a fellow human being who responds with the utmost kindest to two strangers in need, a fellow who puts aside his own agenda and focuses on healing the pain and fear in front of him. To use Mark Nepo's words, this was indeed an "unexpected moment when the soul, the heart, the world, and the sun are briefly aligned;" For all my trips to Paris and visits to the historical sites associated with St. Vincent, I did not understand what truly made him a saint until I met him in the guise of a kind stranger who came to my aid on a busy street in Paris.

