On a visit to England a few years ago, a friend introduced me to The Eagle and Child pub in Oxford, which is famous for having been the favorite meeting spot of authors C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. As I sat in that bar on a wobbly wooden stool, my mind whirled with the thought of these literary giants chatting over a pint as any friends might. “What are the chances that these two famous writers would have known each other personally?” I asked myself.

I’ve been surprised over and over again by such seemingly improbable personal connections of historical figures, and this month another one strikes me. On January 24th the Church celebrates the memorial of St. Francis de Sales. Francis was the bishop of Geneva, the co-founder of the Sisters of the Visitation, a man of holy life and words—and a friend of St. Vincent de Paul.

Vincent and Francis overlapped in Paris for only about a year from 1618 to 1619, but in that short time they became close friends. The elder Francis had a strong influence on Vincent, both through their personal interactions and through Francis’s writings. Of particular importance for Vincentians is one of the central ideas that Francis passed on to Vincent: the insistence that holiness can be attained in any state of life, not simply religious or ordained life that is set apart from the world. St. Francis de Sales makes his aim clear in the preface to his Introduction to the Devout Life:

> Almost all those who have written concerning the devout life have had chiefly in view persons who have altogether quitted the world; or at any rate they have taught a manner of devotion which would lead to such total retirement. But my object is to teach those who are living in towns, at court, in their own households, and whose calling obliges them to a social life.

Vincent certainly took this message to heart, encouraging even the religious orders he founded to be actively engaged in social ministry; and any conference member who has found God while juggling work, family, and Vincentian life can appreciate Francis’s assertion that lay holiness is possible.

As with my Lewis and Tolkien experience, at first I am left amazed by the coincidence of Vincent’s and Francis’s connection. One might rightly call their meeting an act of Providence, but I wonder if it’s not even more a demonstration of the truth that God created us to grow in holiness together. That is, when like-minded individuals come together, their mutual inspiration leads them to a greatness that they wouldn’t have achieved separately. In the case at hand, Francis was a great mentor who shaped much of Vincent’s spirituality. Vincent, for his part, shaped Francis’s legacy by serving as chaplain to the Visitation Sisters and also guided his friend to sainthood in a very practical way: Vincent provided the pope with a personal testimonial encouraging Francis’s canonization.

The history of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is nothing if not a history of such collaboration and friendship. What would have become of Frederic Ozanam if it weren’t for the support and challenge of his peers in the Conference of History? What would have become of the fledgling Society if it weren’t for the guidance of Emmanuel Bailly or Sr. Rosalie Rendu? And today, what would our conferences become without spiritual friendship among members?
Our fellow conference members don’t have visible halos, they aren’t bishops of European cities, and they most likely haven’t founded any religious orders. But they are a means for us to grow in holiness, and friendship is one of the three essential elements of Vincentian life. We might ask ourselves, do I see other Vincentians primarily as just another set of hands to help get the job done? Or do I approach our shared work and conversation as an opportunity to develop a spiritual friendship with other Vincentians? Am I willing to be vulnerable enough to share some of the struggles and joys of my faith life with them and to listen openly to what they share with me?

May the friendship of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Francis de Sales inspire us to support each other on our spiritual paths.

*Dear God, grant me the desire and energy to enter into deeper relationship with my fellow Vincentians. May our mutual example and true friendship draw us nearer to the Divine Model you have given us in Jesus Christ.*

**Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading:**

- The two writings by St. Francis de Sales that probably most influenced St. Vincent de Paul were *Introduction to the Devout Life* and *Treatise on the Love of God*. Both are spiritual classics that can still be found in print. They are also available in full-text versions online:

- Article on St. Frances de Sales from the Vincentian family website (see especially the sections on his connection with St. Vincent de Paul): [http://famvin.org/wiki/Francis_de_Sales](http://famvin.org/wiki/Francis_de_Sales)
