St. John’s University looks to St. Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), founder of the Congregation of the Mission, for its vision and inspiration. From southern France, Vincent pursued the priesthood as a way to assure a comfortable life. Through a profound conversion experience in his early ministry, Vincent unraveled the central paradox of life: it is in giving that one receives. In a Paris marked by great affluence enjoyed by a few as well as by dire poverty endured by the masses, Vincent discovered that one finds God and oneself in service to others. A man of deep faith, keen intellect, great business acumen and enormous creativity, he was at home in the hovels of the poor and in the palaces of royalty. Respected by the powerful and loved by the poor, Vincent bridged social classes through his works of charity and his advocacy for the disenfranchised.

In collaboration with St. Louise de Marillac (1591-1660), Vincent organized hospitals for the sick poor, founded asylums for the orphaned, opened workshops for the unemployed, championed literacy for the uneducated, advocated for the incarcerated, established local charities, and reformed the education and formation of the clergy throughout France where his community of priests and brothers undertook the spiritual care of the poor, particularly those in rural areas.

In 1870 in the United States, the Bishop of Brooklyn asked the Vincentian community to establish an institution of higher education for the rapidly expanding immigrant community of New York. Denied access to other institutions, the children of immigrants, particularly those from Europe and the British Isles, found financial support and academic challenge, as well as respect and opportunity, in St. John’s College on Lewis Avenue in Brooklyn. While St. John’s University moved from the Brooklyn sites in the mid-twentieth century and now has several campuses where students from many cultures learn and work together, the Vincentians still offer a range of services to the local community in Bedford Stuyvesant, the site of the first St. John’s.

Today, as a Vincentian university, St. John’s extends Vincent’s vision and continues his unflagging efforts for the poor and needy. All at St. John’s are inheritors of Vincent’s legacy and stewards of his mission to respect each person, serve the needy and build human solidarity.