

The Salamanca Vincentian Studies Weeks

*by José Manuel Sánchez Mallo, C.M.
Province of Salamanca*

The Vincentian Weeks began in 1972 and by 1999 the 25th edition was held. This date is important since it manifests a great degree of continuity in the history of this Vincentian event. The history is linked to the house of Salamanca. Perhaps this experience of untold impact in the propagation of Vincentian studies in Spain and throughout the Congregation could only have taken place there. This is so, not only because of the annual event itself, but also because of the publication of a series of volumes that constitute an important array of Vincentian doctrine. We might point out various stages in the history of the Vincentian Weeks.

I. Beginning stage

It all began in early July 1971. During the first Provincial Assembly of the Salamanca Province emphasis was placed on formation and the evolution of Vincentian studies. Some of the priests were quite interested and something had already been done among the students: there had been seminars conducted by certain experts, among them, André Dodin. Now, during that Assembly, the idea of preparing the first Vincentian Week surfaced. The idea was shared with the Visitor, Fr. Miguel Pérez Flores, and with the other members of the community. Everyone thought it was a good idea. So, the preparations for this first encounter, which would prove to be very fruitful, got under way.

The fundamental goal of this first Vincentian Week was the Vincentian formation of the students. Some Daughters of Charity and priests were invited, one from each house of the Salamanca Province. Few showed up. There were about 120 participants in attendance, including students, priests and sisters. The meeting was held in the Throne Room in a very fraternal atmosphere. This event took place on 4-8 April 1972, during Easter Week. It was quite a novelty.

The second Week proved to be much broader and of greater participation. There were about 200 participants between priests and sisters. Perhaps the best description of the week can be found in the introduction to the book: *Vincent de Paul, Evangelizer of the Poor*, which is a collection of the conferences of this event. "During the week of 24-28 April 1973, the 2nd Vincentian Studies Week was held at the 'St. Vincent de Paul' Theologate in Salamanca. Attendance was numerous and of great quality. The organizers never imagined that these workshops would awaken so much interest in the various provinces of sisters and priests in Spain. This simply shows the great anxiety and interest that exists in the renewal and updating of our communities and works."

The title of the volume that contains the conferences of the 3rd Vincentian Week is *Vincent de Paul, Animator of Community Life*. This event was directed by Fr. Enrique Rivas and it was held on 16-20 April 1974. In the introduction, Fr. Rivas states: “The presentations, though different in style and organization, deal with a theme that continues to be of great concern within religious families: the community as encounter and as project. Today, it is a fundamental theme in the theology of the consecrated life. Its comprehension, within the context of a given spirit, is what has led us to ask about the idea of community in the mind of Saint Vincent de Paul.”

The 4th Week was held at the Daughters of Charity Provincial House in León, on 9-13 September 1975. The sisters from the Gijón Province gave us a warm welcome. The theme was *Social Charitable Action*. Clara Delva, international President of AIC was present, and we also received the collaboration of Caritas of Spain. We wanted this Week to be more open and not limited to the double Vincentian Family. So, it was aimed at both Companies, as well as all the associations inspired by the spirit of St. Vincent. Thus, we contacted the Volunteers of Charity as well as the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul. Whereas the Volunteers responded very well, the Conferences did not.

“The large gathering that attended these study days was not limited to the double Vincentian family. There were many Volunteers of Charity who were attracted by our invitation and added their presence. Likewise, though fewer in number, some members of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul also attended.”

The 5th Week wished to develop the motto of the Congregation of the Mission: “*Evangelizare pauperibus, maxime ruriculis.*” It was held in Salamanca on 6-11 September 1976. “Since the time of St. Vincent, the Congregation of the Mission has had as its goal the evangelization of the poor, concretized directly or indirectly, in the rural poor. This evangelization has taken place through a ministry known to all and to which the greater number of Priests of the Mission have dedicated their lives over the past three centuries, namely, the popular missions. For many years, this has been one of the most important ministries of the Congregation in Spain.”

About 250 people attended. There were some organizational problems; the group meetings scheduled for the afternoons were not held. This was due to the specificity of the theme. Therefore, upon evaluating this Week, the idea arose that we should give a new orientation to future meetings.

With this fifth meeting, the first cycle of Vincentian Studies Weeks came to a close. We might call this the initiation phase. These are some of the conclusions from this first cycle:

1. Somewhere along the line, in certain Vincentian circles, especially of priests from a particular province, there arose the false notion that Salamanca was

some sort of center of heterodoxy, of progressive ideas in the negative sense, and of Vincentian deviation. Nothing could be further from the truth. After these studies, many have been convinced that such was not the case.

2. During this phase, the organization depended on a single person. There was no organization committee. Even within the community there was a certain reluctance to collaborate. For this reason, there were various organizational deficiencies.
3. From the beginning, the Vincentian Studies Weeks were a forum to express ideas freely, to share openly among priests and sisters, to gather in an immensely positive atmosphere. We might view these as very normal goals now. However, back then these were real novelties. Thus, the Vincentian Studies Weeks paved the way to free expression of ideas, healthy sharing of experiences, and fraternal encounters.
4. The first three Weeks were scheduled around the Easter season. We soon learned that this time frame was problematic. Many priests and sisters who wished to participate could not because classes began in their schools halfway through the week. So, the date was changed to the first week of September.

II. Consolidation Stage

At a time of doubt and uncertainty, Fr. Flores put me in contact with Sr. Isabel Bello, then the National Secretary of F.E.R.S. We decided on the theme *Saint Vincent and the Sick*.

From the outset, this sister inspired me with her enthusiasm and so we began to work. In order to change the direction of these Weeks, we first contacted the Visitatrixes of the nine Provinces of Spain, because of the involvement that the sisters have with this theme. The various provinces of the Daughters of Charity responded immediately to our call. An inter-provincial team was formed. The work done by this team was extraordinary. This resulted in what we might call "The Vincentian Collaboration Week." It was held in Salamanca, on 17-22 October 1977 and marked an important turning point in terms of organization and dynamics.

The 7th Week took place in Salamanca on 4-9 September 1978. The theme was: "*Vincent de Paul and Catechesis*." As a special facilitator and counselor, we had Mr. Vicente Pedrosa, Episcopal Delegate for teaching and catechesis of the Bilbao diocese. Bishop Estepa also participated.

The dynamics were the same as the previous Week. Since the theme was aimed not only at the sisters, but also and especially at the Priests of the Mission, we asked the respective Visitors to appoint a delegate from each province. This they did.

The novelty during this Week were the “seminars”: rural areas, youth movements, teaching, the aged, parochial work, popular missions, residences, nursery schools, the marginalized and emigrants, public health. It was here that the number of Priests reached its highest level: seventy.

The 8th Week was held in Salamanca on 10-15 September 1979. Its title was *Social Commitment and Evangelization*. The goals were: to gain deeper knowledge of the present social and religious spheres; to discern our role as Vincentians in today’s society; to foment availability in responding to the call of the Church; to offer an occasion to study and reflect on our response to the Gospel in the present socio-political situation, from the standpoint of our Vincentian spirit. Speakers were José María Setién, Bishop of San Sebastian, Ricardo Alberdi and Rafael Belda, among others. There is no publication available on this Week.

The 150th anniversary of the Miraculous Medal apparitions was held in 1980. It was a great opportunity to dedicate a Week to this theme. So, the theme of the 9th Vincentian Week was: *The Miraculous Medal Apparitions*.

The French theologian and scripture scholar, René Laurentin, had done in depth studies of the apparitions from a critical and scientific perspective, and had written a biography of St. Catherine Labouré. I went to Paris and held a long conversation with him. He said he would be more than happy to participate. I recall receiving a great deal of indirect pressure to keep him off the program. Though I could guess the reasons, I never really knew them with certainty. I consulted with the Superior General in Rome, and he told me to ignore the pressures and that he himself thought it would be a good idea to secure the participation of René Laurentin.

In 1981 we celebrated the centenary of the birth of St. Vincent de Paul. In order to celebrate such a happy event in the life of the Vincentian family, we decided to organize an extraordinary Vincentian Studies Week. This 10th Week was held in Salamanca on 24-29 August 1981.

There were interventions by some of the greatest figures in Vincentianism today: André Dodin, Raymond Chalumeau, José María Román, Jaime Corera, José María Ibañez, Benito Martínez, Luigi Mezzadri; specialists in themes dealing with the Daughters of Charity, such as Sr. Pilar Pardiñas and Sr. Carmen Urrizburu; the international president of the A.I.C., Clara Delva, and the National President of the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul, Luis María Chico de Guzmán. This historical and doctrinal collection was preserved in a volume of about 500 pages: *Vincent de Paul, Permanent Inspiration*.

The conclusions from the consolidation phase of the Vincentian Studies Weeks are as follows:

1. On the organizational level, the Vincentian Studies Weeks found a road that greatly enhanced their development and dynamism. There is no doubt that Sr. Isabel Bello, D.C. played a vital role during this phase.
2. The Vincentian Studies Weeks achieved their definite consolidation and acquired international fame, to the point that they were imitated in certain countries with greater or lesser success. Along with CEME Publications, they contributed in making the Salamanca house Spain's most important Vincentian center.
3. In the Vincentian Studies Weeks there are studies, reflections and investigations that are indispensable for any scholar of Vincentian themes. The nine published volumes constitute a first class doctrinal haven.
4. The dates of the Vincentian Studies Weeks have undergone changes in order to adapt to the needs of the attendees. To facilitate attendance, the Week is celebrated during the second half of August.

III. Maturity Phase

Fr. Alberto López was designated by the Visitor to direct the Weeks during the next few years. All the Visitors and Visitatrixes from the provinces of priests and sisters in Spain received a survey on the continuity and possible themes of the Weeks. The eight responses received were highly in favor of their continuing.

In 1983 the Daughters of Charity were celebrating a very important event, the 350th anniversary of the founding of the Company. The theme suggested itself: The Vincentian identity of the Daughters of Charity, in keeping with their origins 350 years ago. The title of the publication for the 11th Week is: *God's Gift of Love to the Church and to the Poor.*

The 12th Week was held at our Salamanca House on 20-25 August 1984. In his introductory letter, Fr. Alberto said: "Given the recent approval of the final redaction of the Constitutions and Statutes of the Company of the Daughters of Charity by the Holy See, the studies and reflections of this week will be centered on these in order to achieve a better and deeper understanding of them and to discover the horizons to which they are pointing in these new times, since, undoubtedly, this event will mark a very important milestone in the history of the Company of the Daughters of Charity."

Upon presenting the 13th Week, its director, Fr. Alberto López, stated that: "As in the previous years, it will be held at this House of the Vincentian Family in Santa Marta de Tormes (Salamanca), on the 19-24 August 1985, International Year of Youth. This international climate moved us, with the consent of the participants from the previous year, to gear our reflections and exchange of experiences towards the vital relationship between *The Vincentian Message and Today's Youth.* Undoubtedly, it is a

topic that, for one reason or another, concerns us all and demands our interest and attention.

The 14th Week was held at our Salamanca house on 18-23 August, 1986. The theme was: *Vincentian Missions and evangelizing the people of today*. It centered on Popular Missions, the primary and most important ministry of the Congregation of the Mission.

The conclusions from this period are as follows:

1. Participation continued to be plentiful, especially from the Daughters of Charity. The priests, though in lesser numbers, continued to participate. It is important to note that at this time, the Portuguese priests begin to participate in the Vincentian Studies Weeks.
2. The organizational model of the previous period is abandoned and emphasis is placed on a single person, the Director of the Week.
3. The topics are centered on essential elements in the life and ministry of the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission.

IV. Thematic Renewal Phase

During this phase, the director is Fr. José María López Maside. The 15th Week was held in Salamanca from 24-29 August 1987 and the theme was: *Vincentian Answers to the New Forms of Poverty*.

“A new civilization,” says the director of the week, “gives rise to new forms of poverty that affect the traditional poor and create new ones. It is not a matter of forgetting the traditional poor, but rather of placing the emphasis on the new ways that poverty presents itself to the world. This new situation demands new answers from society and from the Church. The Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity are called upon by their own charism, to take their place in the forefront of the Church.”

During this week there was a return to the old organizational forms. A delegation from each of the canonical provinces of the Daughters of Charity intervened. We followed the basic plan: conferences, communications and experiences. Special care was given to the liturgy with booklets for lauds, vespers and the Eucharist.

Justice and solidarity with the poor in the Vincentian vocation was the theme of the 16th Week. It was held in Salamanca on 22-27 August 1988. The intention was to respond to the concerns of justice and solidarity as fundamental elements of the Vincentian calling. As in the previous study, the presentations were complemented

with a series of communications and service experiences of the Daughters of Charity. Attention was given to the liturgy and there was a climate of prayer and celebration that greatly enhanced the sense of commitment to justice and solidarity with the poor.

Vincentian Identity in an Unbelieving World was the theme of the 17th Week, celebrated on 21-26 August 1989. “Unbelief is not really a strange phenomenon in our days. On the contrary, it is very common. It has gone from the private spheres to the public domain where it is seen as something so natural. On occasions, some boast of their unbelief while others see it as a sign of being modern.... It has introduced itself into our social fabrics. It is not unlikely that it will also affect our spiritual and communal environment.”

In 1990 there was no study week, for the Daughters of Charity were commemorating the bicentennial of the Company in Spain, and on that occasion there was a national encounter in Barcelona on 26-27 May of that year.

1991 was the 4th centenary of the birth of Saint Louise. The theme suggested itself. “Those in charge of the week, in keeping with the guidelines of the Visitors, saw fit to dedicate this encounter to the fascinating figure of St. Louise.”

The organization of the 18th Week was begun by Fr. José María López Maside. When he stepped down as Visitor, he placed this task in my hands once again, and I received it with great pleasure. The date was changed so that the final day would coincide with St. Louise’s birthday, 12 August 1591. Thus, the week was held in Salamanca on 7-12 August 1991. It brought together the greatest specialists on the life and works of St. Louise.

The theme of a New Evangelization, announced to the entire world by Pope John Paul II, has been studied and continues to be studied by the entire Church. Therefore, we Vincentians, called to evangelize, could not remain on the fringes of this reflexive current in the Church. In this context, the theme of the 19th Week was: *Vincentianism and the New Evangelization*. It was held in Salamanca on 24-28 August 1992.

One of the key Vincentian themes that had never been treated during these study weeks was charity. It had to be studied in depth. So, the 20th Week was dedicated to *Charity, a Vincentian Charism*. It was held in Salamanca on 23-28 August 1993. It was difficult to come up with an adequate development of the theme. After much reflection and consultation with various experts, we decided to follow a rather logical treatment. Beginning with the Old Testament and passing through the New Testament and the Patristics, we arrived at a theology of charity in the Thomistic perspective. Charity is intimately related to justice, it has a political dimension and is the end of all evangelization. And we could not leave out a study of charity in the teachings of St. Vincent de Paul.

I had been asked much earlier to organize a study week on the Foreign Missions. This is a very important topic in St. Vincent's ecclesiological concept as well as in the history of both Companies. The foreign mission is imbedded in the life of the Congregation of the Mission as well as in the Company of the Daughters of Charity from their very origins. So, we chose as theme for the 21st Week *St. Vincent and the Foreign Missions*. It was held in Salamanca on 22-27 August 1994.

The 22nd Week studied a fundamental theme for the Vincentian Family: the Vincentian Spirit. It had as title: *Let Us Rekindle the Vincentian Spirit*, and was held in Salamanca on 21-25 August 1995. The methodology employed was that of conferences, communications and workshops. The conferences and communications were held in the mornings and the workshops in the afternoons.

In 1996 there was no Vincentian Studies Week. The reason was simple: most of the participants in these studies were Daughters of Charity. During the summer of that year, the Daughters held their Provincial Assemblies.

From 30 June to 4 July 1997 the 23rd Week was held. The change of date was due to the fact that the participants in this study were lay teachers from the various high schools run by the Daughters and Priests of the Mission throughout Spain. About 323 teachers attended. The theme was: *Vincentian Charism in Education*. It was one of the most brilliant studies. The book that was published as a result marks a milestone in the history of Vincentian education in our country.

The 24th Week was held in Salamanca on 23-27 August 1998. The theme was: *The Vincentian Family and the Third Millennium. Future Perspectives*. Once the theological and pastoral bases of the Vincentian mission were set, each component of the Vincentian Family reflected on future perspectives for the third millennium. It was a very intense and beautiful week with great participation. The text workshops held in the afternoons greatly enriched our reflections. The published book is also very rich.

In 1999, the theme was *Prayer in the Vincentian Family*. It was held on 23-27 August. There were 320 in attendance. All of the Vincentian movements were represented, although some minimally. In the afternoons there was a new modality: prayer workshops.

V. General Conclusions

1. The Vincentian Studies Weeks are very important events in the life of the double Family in Spain: The Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity. They have contributed, unlike any other initiative, to the investigation and study of key topics dealing with the spirit and charism of St. Vincent and St. Louise, as well as to their propagation and knowledge.

2. The 24 published volumes contain a huge array of Vincentian doctrine, a necessary investigative tool for anyone wishing to know St. Vincent and St. Louise. Thus, in all new studies, there is mention of the works published in these volumes.
3. Most of the greatest Vincentianists of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity have passed through the Vincentian Weeks and have contributed, in one way or another, in making Spain one of the most important Vincentian centers.
4. The Vincenian Weeks are intimately related to the Salamanca house, making it the most important Vincentian center in all of Spain during the last 25 years. The most important Vincentian gatherings have been held here.
5. The Vincentian Weeks have been well attended. During the past years, the Daughters of Charity have had greater participation than the Priests of the Mission. More than 320 people have attended the last 10 Weeks and the total number of participants in the 25 Weeks is 6,250.
6. The Vincentian Weeks gave rise to CEME Publications, the most important publishing house that specializes in Vincentian topics. Though small and humble, it has offered a great service in the propagation of Vincentian studies and of the knowledge, spirit and charism of the Founders.
7. With the exception of the first phase, the house and communities of Salamanca have identified themselves with the Vincentian Weeks, and their members have all collaborated in an invaluable way to the good development of these Weeks.
8. The Visitors and Visitatrixes of Spain have given their support and seen these Weeks as an important source of ongoing formation in Vincentian topics. We thank them for their support, collaboration and participation.
9. We regret that the participation of the missionaries has been low especially in the last few years. The greater attendance has been on the part of the Daughters of Charity. Their participation has maintained and given vigor to this very important experience in the evolution of Vincentian studies in Spain. Lately, the event has been open to Vincentian lay people. I believe that little by little there will be a greater participation on the part of this very important group.

(DENNIS KING, translator)