

Tested by Fire

Brief History of the Provinces of Poland, Hungary and Slovakia.

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A bird's-eye view.

The article written for *Vincentiana*, forming part of a report on the Congregation of the Mission in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, gives only an overall view. We can regard it as a catalogue of events, a listing of the houses and dates, as well as of some names and indications of the confreres' ministry. A chronological and statistical account of the Vincentians' presence in the countries indicated allows bringing together essential information, without running the risk of making an evaluation, something only the Lord of History can do.

I. Poland

The Vincentians arrived in Warsaw in September 1651, in response to the invitation of Marie-Louise de Gonzague, Queen of Poland, a former Lady of Charity at the Hotel-Dieu. St Vincent himself kept a close eye on the confreres' beginnings in Poland. In the last years of his life he wrote 242 letters in connection with the Polish mission. There are 450 of the saint's original letters, addressed to confreres in Poland, in the archives in Krakow. The history of the Congregation of the Mission in Poland may be divided into three stages.

1. From 1651 to 1792

From 1651 to 1792 there was a Province. Its centre was in Warsaw, next door to Holy Cross church. The confreres' main work was preaching missions to the country people. In the 17th and 18th centuries mission in Poland lasted from two to six weeks. As well as preaching the word of God, preparing for general confession and death, the confreres also taught catechism to children and adults, taught chant, and established the Confraternity of Charity. The oldest mission book contains a description of 169 missions given by the confreres of the Warsaw house in the years 1654-1740. Missions were given mainly in central Poland, but also in the east and north. The following confreres were noted missionaries: Guillaume Desdames, Nicolas Duperroy, Paul Godquin; among Polish confreres were Jozef Bojanowski, Jozef Rostkowski, and the future bishop of Poznan, Bartlomiej Tarlo. From the beginning of the 18th century onwards the names of

Polish confreres appear more frequently in the mission book. In the years 1682-1782 the confreres of the Krakow house gave 459 missions, mainly in the south but also in the east and in Silesia. From 1685 Vilnius was the third centre of missionary activity. The *Liber Missionum Domus Vilnensis* tells us that in the years 1686-1763 the confreres gave 240 missions in Lithuania and Bielorrussia.

The second stream of the confreres' work was the formation of the diocesan clergy. In 1676 the Congregation of the Mission was in charge of about 31 seminaries in Western Europe. Among them was the papal seminary in Rome. In France alone the confreres had 13 diocesan seminaries. In 17th century Poland, a country destroyed by wars and epidemics, there was a great need, in poor and abandoned parishes, for a missionary model of a pastor of souls. During visits to Rome or France Polish bishops heard of such priestly formation. Towards the end of the 17th century there were 20 diocesan seminaries in Poland, four of them being run by the confreres. In 1730 the confreres took charge of six seminaries. In 1770 when there were 37 diocesan seminaries in the whole of Poland, the confreres had charge of 19. It should be noted that these were the seminaries of the big dioceses: Warsaw, Plock, Wloclawek, Gniezno, Vilnius, Krakow, Lublin, Przemysl, Lwow. But they were also in the smaller ones: Kraslaw, Brzozow, Krasnystaw, Sambor...

2. From 1792 to 1918

The years 1792-1918 cover the period of the partition of Poland between Prussia, Russia and Austria. At the start there were two Provinces of the Congregation of the Mission, those of Warsaw and Lithuania. There were 17 houses in the Warsaw Province. In 1864 Russia suppressed this Province, revealing in this way its ruthlessness after the national uprising. The province of Lithuania, with its central house in Vilnius, was erected in 1794, with 16 houses. It was suppressed by the Russians in 1842. In 1865 the third Province of the Congregation was founded, with its provincial house in Krakow. In 1918 it included the houses in Poland, four in the United States in Northern America, and seven in Brazil.

In the second period, in spite of limitations imposed by the oppressors, the confreres continued their missionary activity. The most rigid limitations were imposed by the Russian government. The confreres under Austrian domination enjoyed more freedom. Towards the end of the 19th century the confreres took on pastoral ministry among seasonal (April to October) migrant workers in Prussia, Denmark and Holland. Later they began pastoral ministry in a more permanent fashion among immigrants in Brazil, and also in the Eastern States of North America. Towards the end of the 19th century Fr Kazimierz Siemaszko and a group of confreres began teaching religion to neglected children and orphans in

Krakow, and this developed into permanent education for 400 children in three boarding schools.

In the period of national slavery the confreres continued to work (for longer or shorter periods) in the 20 diocesan seminaries, and also in the 7 seminaries of the Congregation. 12 of these seminaries were in the territories of present-day Lithuania, Latvia, Bielorussia and Ukraine. From about the end of the 18th century up to the middle of the 19th, mainly in the areas mentioned, the confreres were in charge of 15 parish and regional schools. In the years 1821-1842, however, they ran 27 parish schools in Russia (even as far over as Saratov). They also had three apostolic schools (Zaslaw, Smilowicze, Krakow), and later two more (Vilnius and Bydgoszcz), schools which were a great source of vocations. Boys from poor families were also educated in these.

3. From 1918 to 1964

In the re-born fatherland the Polish Province, with its headquarters in Krakow, had 18 houses in Poland, 4 in the United States, 7 in Brazil, 3 in France, and one in Romania; these are 1939 figures. The province was made up of 250 priests and brothers, with 130 students, and 28 seminarists in Vilnius. The confreres had kept up the giving of missions and parish retreats. (A retreat is a four to six day series of sermons, especially during Advent and Lent, aimed at deepening faith and preparing for confession). But during this period the emphasis was on the missions *ad gentes* in China, as well as on ministry to emigrants. The apostolic school in Krakow was enlarged, and the care of children from poor families and orphans was expanded. Confreres had taken on pastoral ministry in hospitals and prisons. They also continued ministry to the Daughters of Charity in the three Provinces in Poland: Warsaw, Krakow and Chelmno, as Directors, chaplains and confessors. Confreres were animators of conferences of the Society of St Vincent de Paul and of the Ladies of Charity. In that period the confreres were in charge of only one diocesan seminary, in Katowice, but were spiritual directors in two others. From 1918 to 1939 the confreres were in charge of the hostel for student priests in Warsaw. In 1910 the Congregation's major seminary was changed into the Institute of Philosophy and Theology, in which the students of five to nine other religious communities received their intellectual formation.

At the beginning of the 20th century the spiritual needs of the poor in working-class areas led the confreres to accept the pastoral care of such parishes and to the building of churches: Lwow, Tarnow, Pabianice, Bydgoszcz. 1945 brought the shifting of the Polish border further west. There was a significant exodus of people from eastern territories taken over by the Soviet Union. The confreres wished to help these people who moved from the east to the west, to areas abandoned by the Germans. In these circumstances, responding also to the call from the Polish hierarchy, pastoral ministry in parishes involved about half the confreres of the

Polish Province. The others continued giving missions and retreats, as well as ministering in the two diocesan seminaries and the Theological Institute in Krakow. They also kept up giving retreats in diocesan seminaries and ministering as hospital chaplains. They had always collaborated with the Daughters of Charity all over the country. But it must be recognised that most of the confreres of the province were involved in parish ministry, especially teaching religion to children and young people, both in secondary schools and at university level.

In 1954 the Polish Province had 16 houses in Poland, one in Bielorussia and one in France. In the meantime two Vice-Provinces had been founded, in Brazil and in the United States. There were 203 confreres in Poland, and 110 outside the country. There were 78 students and 43 seminarists in Krakow. 2,100 confreres were buried in Poland, from the middle of the 17th century onwards. After Stalin's death Communist totalitarianism developed a Polish look. Parallel with this, under the protection of Providence, the confreres were able to develop many activities. A paradox and drama of both Polish history and the Polish Province of the Congregation were continuing.

II. Hungary

Towards the end of the 19th century there was a religious renaissance in Hungary. It was inspired by the changes in the Church inspired by Pope Leo XIII. The favourable situation from the political point of view, and also the healthy state of the Church in Hungary, made it possible to carry out papal initiatives: the development of institutions, public education, and pastoral ministry. There was a re-organization of parishes, something which had been neglected for 150 years. Publishing, negligible up till then, began to flourish. Religious and priestly vocations increased. Examples of up to date pastoral ministry were introduced, people became active in public and cultural life. The life of faith and religious practice flourished. Hungarian Catholicism was re-born, intellectually deepened.

The confreres of St Vincent de Paul had their place in this renewal of religious life. Their insertion into the Hungarian Church and society was rather slow. In 1853 the Austrian Province of the Congregation of the Mission was established, in Graz. Hungarians, as citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, entered the internal seminary in Graz. As members of the Austrian Province confreres of Hungarian origin worked either within the Empire or beyond its frontiers, for example in France or even in China.

The first house of the Congregation in Hungary was founded in 1898 in Piliscsaba, in the diocese of Székes-Fehérvár. It was an ex voto foundation of Archduke Jozef Habsburg. According to the wish of the founder the house became a centre for missionary work all over the region north of Lake Balaton. The new community comprised four priests and three brothers. In just the first year of its

existence confreres of the house preached 18 parish missions and 13 parish retreats; eleven priests and a bishop made a retreat in the house. In the first five years the confreres of Piliscsaba gave missions and retreats in all the parishes of Transylvania. This work, together with retreats for priests and ministry to Daughters of Charity, was continued by the confreres right up to the first world war in 1914.

The missionary work of the confreres in Piliscsaba, as well as their influence on the diocesan clergy, led to the foundation of the second house in Hungary. Michal Bundale was responsible for building the new house and church in Gatutca, Budapest. The confreres took up residence there in 1903. Michal Bundale was well thought of as spiritual director of the general seminary in Budapest. At the start three confreres from this house gave parish missions and retreats, then five and by 1911 eight. The house was also open for priests' retreats

In 1904 the Hungarian Province of the Daughters of Charity was founded. Fr Ferdynand Medits was appointed Director. He felt the need for having more confreres in Budapest, as chaplains to the Sisters. He also saw the need for another house, and one was built in 1909 in Nagyboldogaszony-utca. Four priests and four brothers lived there. In 1913 a church beside the house was consecrated. As well as ministry to the Daughters of Charity the confreres gave missions and retreats. Before the first world war an apostolic school for aspirants to the Congregation was built near this house and church. This school also catered for boys from poor families, even though they had no intention of joining the Congregation. For the first seventy years Hungarian confreres had received their spiritual and intellectual formation in Graz. For the most part they came from the diocesan clergy.

During the first world war the Vincentians worked either as military chaplains or as nurses in hospitals. In view of the destruction and impoverishment of the population all over the country the confreres organized Conferences of the Society of St Vincent de Paul and the Ladies of Charity. By the time of the second world war Vincentian societies in Hungary numbered more than a thousand members.

Shortly after the first world war there was an important development in the history of the Vincentians in Hungary. From October 1918 till August 1919 the confreres lived through the communist revolution of Beli Kuhna, and in April 1919 the confiscation of the Congregation's houses. The communist dictatorship did not last long, but contact between the confreres and the central house in Graz was not easy. In 1919 the Vice-Province of Hungary was established, and Fr Francesco Aronfy was appointed Vice-Provincial. He himself, along with his deputy Giorgio Tutz, had been at the Provincial Assembly in Graz in September 1919.

In 1919 the confreres gave missions in all the parishes in Budapest. Two years later they had given 43 missions and 57 retreats in Hungary. In June 1923 the Superior General, François Verdier, made a visitation of the confreres and the Daughters of Charity in Hungary. Three years later, on 19 March 1926, the Hungarian Province of the Vincentians was erected. Fr Francesco Aronfy was appointed Provincial. The new Province consisted of three houses, 27 confreres (priests and brothers), 6 students and 20 seminarists. The apostolic school in Budapest was attended by aspirants to the Congregation as well as poor boys. Development of the Province was slow, but without crisis. In 1934 the confreres in four houses were able to expand every work. By this time the student house was outside Budapest, at Szob near the Czechoslovak border. There were 15 students in it. By 1939 the Hungarian Province had 5 houses, 67 confreres, 26 students and 7 seminarists.

Providence and historical circumstances spared the Hungarian confreres during the second world war. The period after the war was seen as a time of development for the Province. Two new houses had been opened in Transylvania (Oradea in 1940 and Cluj in 1941), a large house had been opened in Csepel near Budapest, mercy ministry and a parish in a working-class area. In the south of the country a new house was opened in Szeged (1946). By 1949 the Province comprised 76 confreres living in 7 houses. But there were only 5 students and 5 seminarists. The confreres continued to develop their ministry in line with the purpose of the Congregation, including clerical formation in seminaries.

By the time the communist authorities in Hungary dealt a mortal blow to religious communities the Hungarian Province had seen a time of great development. There were three periods of internment, imprisonment and scattering of members of religious communities: in December 1949, in mid-June 1950 and mid-July of the same year. 1,000 members of male and 2,500 members of female religious communities were interned in labour camps. This was "Holy Thursday" also for the Hungarian Province of the Congregation. Confreres had to go underground. Some of them found shelter in parishes, taking on jobs as organists, cantors, sacristans, gardeners... Others took on physical or intellectual work in State agencies. The confreres were kept under surveillance by secret agents and were not able to meet each other very often. We do not know how many kept up hope that the Province would rise again, something some of them always had in their heart.

The resurrection took place in 1991. At that time there were 24 priests and 6 brothers, with an average age of 75. The province has once again begun a slow journey towards the future.

III. Slovakia

During a few weeks in the autumn of 1918 the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which since 1526 had included Slovakia, broke up. On 30 October 1918 the National Slovak Council decided on independence and union with the Czechs. In accordance with the Pittsburg Convention Slovakia, inside the state of Czechoslovakia, was supposed to enjoy full autonomy and its own parliament. However, the demand for autonomy was not honoured. This meant the negating of the most important national aspiration and putting the Slovaks in political opposition against the centralist power in Prague. The history of opposition is the main ideological current of historical events after the first world war. It is linked also in a special way to the most recent history of the Catholic Church in Slovakia.

Right then, after the first world war, the Congregation of the Mission was inserted into the history of the people and Church of Slovakia. In 1918 there were 32 houses of the Daughters of Charity in Czechoslovakia which had previously belonged to the Province of Hungary. 298 sisters worked in 7 hospitals, 14 schools and 11 houses of Vincentian charitable work. In 1922 a province of the Daughters of Charity was established in Czechoslovakia, with its provincial house in Trnava. Fr Giuseppe Danielik was appointed Director. This priest had received his spiritual and intellectual formation in Budapest and Graz. He knew well the background of the Austrian and Hungarian confreres. The bishop of the diocese of Trnava had asked for Fr Danielik so that in addition to his ministry to the sisters he would take on the job of spiritual director in the diocesan seminary. The work in the seminary and good contacts with the diocesan clergy provided a good opening for the giving of missions by our confreres. In 1923, responding to a request from Fr Danielik, Fr Giuseppe Haring arrived in Trnava and took on a chaplaincy to the sisters. Both confreres gave the occasional parish mission and retreat. In 1924 the provincial house of the sisters was transferred to Ladce in the north-eastern part of Slovakia. At the same time two confreres arrived in the town. In 1929 an apostolic school was opened in Banska Bystrica. The pupils attended classes in the neighbouring secondary school and received their formation in the hostel, which was under the care of the third confrere Francesco Kuchar, who had come from Austria. That's how the opening was provided for establishing the Vincentian house in Ladce. In 1933 the first pupils of the apostolic school took their school-leaving examination and were accepted into the internal seminary in Graz. By 1935 there were already six confreres in Slovakia. Meanwhile the second house of the Congregation was established in Banska Bystrica. The apostolic school was transferred to Ladce. In the year of Fr Danielik's death (1938) there were ten confreres in Slovakia, including four brothers, and five students studying in the Theology Faculty in Bratislava. As well as their ministry to the Daughters of Charity the confreres ran the apostolic school and gave parish missions and retreats. In 1935 the confreres became involved in the direction of students in the Svoradov Institute, at that time

the largest student house in Bratislava. The students of the Congregation also lodged there.

In 1941 the Vicar General, Edouard Robert, asked the Hungarian Provincial to make a visitation of the Vincentian family in Slovakia. After this visitation the autonomous Vice-Province of Slovakia was erected. During the second world war the Slovak confreres, under the guidance of Fr G Tiso, enjoyed relative peace. At that time the number of confreres increased. The fourth house of the Congregation was erected in 1947, in Belluska Slatina in the north-east. The Vice-Province had its own internal seminary in Ladce. The confreres, as well as ministry to the Daughters of Charity, gave parish missions and retreats, ran the apostolic school and had youth ministry to the students in Bratislava. In 1949, during the first communist crackdown, the confreres were obliged to leave Bratislava.

In February 1949 came the first wave of persecution against the Church. In July of the same year the chargé d'affaires of the Vatican, Genaro Verolino, received an order to leave Czechoslovakia as soon as possible. During the night of 5 April 1950 police raided every house of religious communities of men and the residents were transported to forced labour camps. At that time there were about 1,000 male religious. 11,000 sisters shared the same fate within a short while. Our confreres were among the imprisoned and interned. At that time the Vice-Province had 16 priests and 7 brothers.

In the subsequent period some confreres got out of Slovakia and went for example to Austria where they founded the Salzburg house of the Slovak Vice-Province. Others who fled took on pastoral ministry for their countrymen in France and England. The Vice-Provincial Jan Hutýra spent many years in prison. Others, after being released from internment camps or prison, went underground and continued in pastoral ministry, though in a limited way. They kept in touch with one another as far as possible. However, St Vincent's spirit was always shining. Some, as tourists, made contact with confreres in Poland. From 1972 onwards contacts with Krakow by young Slovak students, who already spiritually belonged to the Congregation of the Mission, were fairly systematic. Through Salzburg and Krakow Slovak confreres made contact with the Superior General, the centre of the Congregation. Letters and documents of General Assemblies passed along this route. When the renewed Slovak Province emerged in 1989 it had 4 houses in Slovakia and one in Salzburg. It had 29 priests, 4 brothers and 12 students. The average age was 51. That is how the second youth of the Congregation of the Mission began in Slovakia.

"Evangelize the poor...". "Go and preach to all people..."

The history of the presence of the Congregation of the Mission in Poland from the mid-17th century, in Hungary and Slovakia from the mid-19th century, is the response to the call of Christ quoted above. The confreres have to respond at a time of simple work, but also in the difficult period of trials and persecutions. This response in the countries mentioned included heroism, but also weakness of individuals or groups. The confreres' mission is obviously included in the overall tempest-filled mission of the Church in East-central Europe. At the same time it brought into this activity the patrimony of St Vincent de Paul.

(Thomas Davitt CM, translator)