

THE VINCENTIAN FAMILY, A CONTINUAL RENEWAL.

by José-María Román, C.M.

The first problem which arises when trying, however briefly, to describe the Vincentian Family, is to set proper limits to the object of this study. What does Vincentian Family mean? Who are its members? These questions can be answered in a broad sense, or in a restricted sense. The Vincentian tree has continued to give birth, down the years, to so great and so varied branches, that it is very difficult to discriminate between them so as to include some and exclude others.

All those institutions which in a direct or indirect way found their inspiration in St. Vincent at the time of fixing their aims and defining their spiritual character; all these can be called branches of the Vincentian Family, in a broad sense. Some examples of this broad sense would be: the Religious of St. Vincent de Paul of John, the Prevost, one of the first members of the Conferences; the Brothers and Sisters of St. Joseph, founded in Mexico by Father Joseph Vilaseca, C.M.; the little Sisters of the Cross, founded by Sister Angela of the Cross, D.C.; also more than fifty Religious Congregations of men and women, during the last two centuries founded under the direct or indirect inspiration of the Saint of Charity. One feels tempted to say that, in this broad sense, the Vincentian Family has no limits.

In the strict sense, the Vincentian Family is confined to those Congregations and Associations which owe their birth to the direct initiative of St. Vincent, or to one of his successors, or which have explicitly declared their wish to regard themselves as spiritual descendants of St. Vincent.

Here we make a distinction between Congregations or Communities on the one hand, and lay Associations on the other. In this sense, the Vincentian Family is comprised of the Congregation of the Mission, the Company of the Daughters of Charity, the Association of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul (today A.I.C.), the Association of the Children of Mary (today Marian Vincentian Youth), the Association of the Miraculous Medal, and another pair of Associations born in the 19th Century, by their title, their origins and the express will of their Founders; The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and the Confraternities.

In this essay, I am going to limit myself to tracing briefly the historical character of the lay Associations which belong to the Vincentian Family in the

strict sense, and to show the Vincentian roots common to all of them, and how that character is the product of a continuous renewal, and which in every age has given rise to the initiative which has made the ancient Vincentian tree to bud forth with new and unexpected vigour.

I. The Origins of the Vincentian Laity

The first important observation which ought to be made about the origins of the Vincentian Family is that initially it was born as a lay association. Actually, the first formally created institution by St. Vincent de Paul was the Confraternities of Charity. This event took place in Chatillon on the 8th of December, 1617. However, eight months previously, the 25th of January of the same year, Vincent had preached, in Folleville, what he called the first sermon of the Mission, and which he always considered as the beginning of the Congregation of the Mission. But, in fact, on that day he did not found anything. He simply discovered his vocation, that is, the way by which, in the future, his Apostolic work had to develop. The formal Foundation of the Congregation would not take place until eight years later, on the 17th of April 1625, by means of a contract signed by him with the de Gondi family. On the contrary, the preparation and establishment of the Confraternities of Charity took place much more speedily. The story is well known, but perhaps it would be good to repeat it so as to understand the essential features which from the beginning formed the spirit of Vincentian Action. Let us retell it in the words of St. Vincent himself:

"When I was living near Lyons, in a small town to which Providence had called me to act as parish priest," he said to the Daughters of Charity one day, "on a certain Sunday just as I was vesting to say Mass, a person came to tell me that, in an isolated house a quarter of a league away, the whole family lay ill, so that not a single one of them could come to the assistance of the others, and they were in such dire straits as cannot be expressed. It moved me to the depths of my heart. I did not fail to speak feelingly about them during the sermon, and God, touching the hearts of those who were listening, caused them all to be moved to compassion for the poor afflicted people.

"After dinner, a meeting was held in the house of a good lady in the town to see what help could be given and every single one of those present was quite prepared to go and see them, to console them by talking to them and to help them to the best of their ability."

"After Vespers, I took a good, honest man, a native of the town, as my companion and we walked along the road together to go and pay them a visit. We passed on the road some women who had gone in front of us, and a little farther on, we met others returning. And as it was Summer and the weather was very hot, these good women were sitting down by the road to rest and refresh themselves. And in fact my Daughters, there were so many of them that you would have said it was a regular procession.

"When I arrived, I visited the sick and went to look for the Blessed Sacrament for those who were in most urgent need, but not in the Parish Church, because it was not a parish, but depended on a Chapter of which I was the Prior. So then after hearing their Confessions and giving them Holy Communion, the question arose as to how we could help them in their need. I suggested to all these dear, good people whose charity had induced them to visit the family, that they should take it in turn, day by day, to cook for them, and not only for them but also for other cases which might arise. That was the first place in which the Charity was established."[fo1]

The facts thus narrated by St. Vincent, according to my calculations, took place on Sunday, 20th of August 1617. Three days later, 23rd August, a certificate of the formation of a confraternity was sealed. More exactly it was *"a Corporation which in time could be raised up as a confraternity, with its own rules, subject to the approval of the Archbishop, to whom it would be submissive totally."*[fo2] After three months, on 24th of November, the new association and its rules were approved by the Archbishop of Lyons and fifteen days later, on the 8th of December 1617, it was formally erected as the First Confraternity of Charity, with the election of its Officers and other matters connected with the Rules.

Let us now see the distinctive features of the first Vincentian foundation which can help us to understand its spirit as it was called in the 17th century, or its style as we might call it today.

Above all, we have to stress the ecclesial character of the association. It was born within the Church, and as a service of the Church. Hence its submission to the authority of the Bishop.

But with no less emphasis we must point out that the association was born or established with a determined lay vocation although, because of the restrictions of the times, it would have as procurator, some pious and devout ecclesiastic, ordinarily the parish priest of the place, but chosen by the members

and replaceable by them; *"They shall elect an ecclesiastic who will be called rector or spiritual father of the said association, to carry out his duties as rector for as long as the members think suitable."*[fo3]

The first association, that of Châtillon, was exclusively made up of virtuous women, both married and single, with the consent of their families; only as regards administrative affairs (another tribute to the customs of the times) it was established that, as it was not deemed proper to administer financial affairs alone, they should elect a good ecclesiastic, or a pious and devout layman as procurator, devoted to the welfare of the poor and not overburdened with temporal matters, who will be considered as a member of the said Confraternity.[fo4] Later, having learned from experience, St. Vincent came to the conclusion that not only were women not inferior to men in administration affairs, but that they far surpassed them; *"The men and women together do not agree on matters of administration; the men want to take charge of everything, and the women will not accept this. The Charities of Joigny and Montmirail were governed on the lines of both sexes, the men took charge of the healthy poor, and the women cared for the sick poor but as they had a common fund, it was necessary to let the men leave. And I can give this testimony in favour of women, that there can be nothing to say against their administration, as they are most careful and reliable."*[fo5]

Later foundations: Montmirail[fo6], Joigny[fo7], Mâcon[fo8], Courboin[fo9], Montreuil[fo10], and many others[fo11] continued this custom of men and women together. They established an order of sharing the works; the men were to care for the healthy poor, while the women took care of the sick. But still it can be said that St. Vincent showed a certain preference for the women, *"since Our Lord did not receive less glory from the ministry of the women than that of the men during his life on earth, and he himself considered the work for the sick to be preferable to that for the healthy. Therefore the servants of the poor should have the same interest in the preservation and increase of the association of women as of the men."*[fo12] With the passage of time the mixed confraternities and those of men only were losing their vigour, and after the death of the founder, they ceased to exist.

Another distinctive feature of the association is the simultaneous preoccupation for both the material and the spiritual welfare of the poor being assisted by it. *"Two ends are set before you; to assist the body and the soul; the body by providing food and care, and the soul by preparing the dying to die well, and those who recover to live a truly Christian life."*[fo13] Both of the above services are to be carried out by the members of the association personally. St. Vincent did not want a mere mercenary service nor an economic collaboration. He set it down in the rule: *"The sisters of the Confraternity, on*

the day agreed, will service the sick poor, bringing the food and drink to them as prepared".[fo14] He insists that the normal way to do this was by the visit to the house of the sick. "These good pious women undertake to visit and serve the sick poor, and do all this on a purely voluntary basis".[fo15]

Another Vincentian preoccupation, which was in stark contrast to the mentality of the times, was the almost universal illiteracy of women. The members of the Association were to undertake the instruction of little girls. In the rules of the Confraternity of Neufchatel we read: "*Besides the exercises already mentioned the officers of the Charity will depute one or two women or young girls of the Confraternity of Mercy to instruct the little girls of the village and the neighbourhood, who will be obliged to teach the poor without recompense except that which they can hope for from the goodness of God, and in case there is no suitable person in the Confraternity, the officers shall make every effort to engage some externs to undertake so important a work for the glory of God and the salvation of souls in the full confidence that they will receive a magnificent recompense in this world and in the next, for the service they will have rendered to God both in the sick poor as in the education of these little girls*".[fo16]

In a similar way, the young poor boys are to be instructed in a trade or craft so that they will be enabled to earn a living. "The directors of the association will set the young poor boys to work in some office as soon as they are old enough for it".[fo17] While being trained they can help to provide funds for the Association and when fully qualified they can set out to earn a living for themselves.[fo18]

Let us also notice that the foundation of the Confraternities obeys the Vincentian conviction that in the Church of that time, apart from individual charitable persons, there was no organisation of charity. The poor "at times had to suffer much more from lack of order and organisation than from lack of charitable persons. But, as it could be feared that after beginning a good work it could collapse in a short time, if for its maintenance there was no union and spiritual bonding, it was determined to unite the Confraternities into a corporation".[fo19] For this purpose the number of members in each Confraternity should not be in excess of twenty members. [fo20]

Likewise a characteristic of this first Vincentian Association was the preoccupation for the spiritual formation of the members. At least once a month they should meet to listen to a "*brief exhortation with a view to the spiritual progress of the whole Company and to the conservation and prosperity of the Confraternity...*". The saint also adds "that it is supremely useful for all communities consecrated to God that they meet from time to time in a

particular place in order to discuss their spiritual progress".[fo21] Do we find in these words the seed of what the Annual Conferences will be in the years ahead?

Finally, it is noteworthy that St. Vincent had a determined interest that the Associations of Charity would depend organically on his main foundation, the Congregation of the Mission. In the Papal Bull of approbation, it is laid down that one of the ministries of the Missioners was the foundation of the Confraternities: "In the places where they carry out the functions of catechesis and preaching, they will take steps to found, with the approval of the Bishop, the Confraternities of Charity as a help for the sick poor[fo22]. And in the Common Rules of the Congregation itself, he lays down the duty on the missionaries "to establish the Confraternities of Charity"[fo23] and to place "the greatest emphasis on founding and visiting the Confraternity of Charity". [fo24]

The Charities spread a lot even during St. Vincent's lifetime. Vincentian documents make reference to about sixty parochial Charities. There were far more than that. A veritable network of Charities covered almost the whole of France. Abelly, the saint's first biographer, says that "*they are now found in so many places that no one knows their number*".[fo25]

We also know that some of them failed to function properly.[fo26] This fact and the increasing spread of the Confraternities obliged St. Vincent to face up the problem of how to coordinate them and watch over the good spirit of each of them. He did not however have the good fortune to set up a centralised organisation, something like what we would call a National Council. He confined himself to sending visitors to the different local Confraternities to oversee their progress. For this work he chose Ladies of the Paris Charities, and in particular his principal collaborator, Louise de Marillac.[fo27]

On the contrary, what he did was to create a higher class of the charity, which would take charge of problems on the wider circuit, in contrast to the merely parish charities. This was the role represented by the Association of the Ladies of Charity of the Hotel Dieu, who little by little, took on the management and the handling of practical details in the running of all the Vincentian enterprises: the galley slaves, the abandoned babies, the North-African captives, the foreign missions, the regions devastated by the wars... This Association and not the Confraternities of Charity, which St. Vincent normally called by the simple name of the Charities, was the Association of the real Ladies of Charity.[fo28]

The Confraternities and the Ladies of Charity were not the only lay enterprises undertaken by St. Vincent. Linked to them must be placed other

associations of a more ephemeral nature; the one made up of a group of the nobility in which were such men as the Duke of Liancourt, the Count of Brienne, the Marquess of Fontenoy, and especially, Baron Gaston de Renty. The object of the association was to assist the nobles of Lorraine ruined by the wars. From it they received, in a discreet manner, from their French colleagues, the help they needed and which their condition prevented them from seeking publicly. Years later he used the same means to assist British and Irish nobles fleeing from the persecutions of Cromwell. [fo29]

From this brief survey of the origins of the lay charitable associations founded by St. Vincent, it is true to say that the diverse branches of the Vincentian Family find their source or roots in the personal activity of the saint. All was prefigured in it. The passage of time will go on giving birth to new types of organisation, to new initiatives, but all of them will receive their life-giving sap from the tree planted by St. Vincent.

We lack sufficient data to follow the evolution of these associations, and in particular, of the Confraternities of Charity, during the century and a half following the death of St Vincent up to the French Revolution. We do know that they continued to be founded systematically in the missions preached by the missionaries of the Vincentians in France and in other European countries like Italy and Poland. It is hard to understand why they were not founded in Spain in spite of the fact that the Congregation of the Mission itself was founded there in 1704.

II. The Rebirth of the Vincentian Laity in the 19th Century

Providential Events

The French Revolution brought about the total suppression of the great system of public assistance invented and set in motion by St. Vincent. Nothing remained in place. The Confraternities, like all the ecclesiastic institutions which did not submit to the schismatic revolutionary purpose, were suppressed and their goods appropriated. When the Restoration came, the splendid flowering of Vincentian Charity was reduced to ashes. But then, it began to produce a rebirth of itself which allows us to describe the history of the Vincentian Family as a continuous renewal. The years between 1830 and 1840 constitute a period which could be described as simply astonishing.

As I understand it, at the base of this rebirth one must acknowledge two events; one planned by men, and the other by Divine Providence.

The one planned by men was the translation of the relics of St. Vincent to the new mother-house of the Congregation of the Mission recently restored, which took place on the 25th of April 1830. The Archbishop of Paris accompanied by a numerous representation of French bishops, the King, Charles X, and the whole Royal Family came to venerate the remains of the humble Founder of the Mission. The Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity interpreted it as the return of the founder to the bosom of his family. With his presence, the restoration of the two communities was finally accomplished. St. Vincent became the fashion, if such an expression is fitting, and the numerous biographies of the saint published during those years, as well as other things, bear witness to this fact.

The providential event was the Apparitions of the Miraculous Medal which took place between July and November of the same year. The Vincentian Family recovered the awareness that their vocation was still alive and cherished by God. Still more they realised that they were specially favoured by the Mother of God and under her special protection.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul. A New Creation.

On the other hand, the Vincentian laity remained defunct. In Italy, a few Confraternities escaped with difficulty the destructive force of the Revolution. However the activity of that lay Vincentian work, in those middle years of the century, was more needed than ever. The various revolutions had created a society in which appeared forms of poverty unknown to any other time. On that account, therefore, the hour of its resurrection was about to arrive also for the Vincentian laity. But, curiously the merit of its revival ought not to be attributed directly to the Congregation of the Mission, but to a group of lay Catholics headed by a young student of the Sorbonne called Frédéric Ozanam (1813-1853), and meeting around a modest Parisian printer called Emanuel Joseph Bailly (1794-1861).

I am not going to enter into the famous dispute about the founder of the Society, which arose at the death of Ozanam. Suffice it to say that both Ozanam and Bailly had honestly recognised the contribution of each, and they both admitted that without the intimate collaboration which they gave to each other, the Society would not have been possible.

What interests me most is to underline the Vincentian source or roots of the inspiration which animated them both. In Bailly, especially, the Vincentian inspiration is clearly visible. This was true, not only because it was he who suggested that St. Vincent was the patron of the Society, but also, and especially, because from the beginning, the Vincentian direction served as a

model for defining the spirit of the Society, the setting out of its ends and the drawing up of the Rules.

This is not surprising. Bailly had been in his youth, together with his brother Ferdinand, a novice of the Congregation of the Mission. Both had been born in the little town of Briar in the Artois, in the bosom of a humble country family, who during the sad days of the Revolution had frequently given shelter and hospitality to the Vicar General of the Vincentians, Fr Hanon, there being no Superior General in those years. The two boys rivaled each other in serving Fr Hanon's Mass, said in secret. In 1817, when the Congregation was scarcely restored, the two boys entered it as novices. Emmanuel withdrew after a few months, but we do not know the reasons. Ferdinand persevered, and in those years of the founding of the Society, was an outstanding member of the Congregation, rector of a seminary in Amiens and with serious probabilities of becoming Superior General, a thing which was about to happen in the General Assembly of 1835. Emmanuel directed himself into other paths but it is true to say that he always remained spiritually faithful to his initial Vincentian vocation. He gave the name of Vincent de Paul to his eldest son, who in course of time was to become the famous Assumptionist, Vincent de Paul Bailly, considered as one of the pioneers of the apostolate of the Press.[fo30]

But really, his father was the true pioneer. As the owner of a student hostel and a printing press, Emmanuel Bailly dedicated himself to a distinguished editorial activity by his untiring Catholic propaganda. He founded the periodical *La Tribune Catholique*, which, by uniting later with *L'Univers Religieux* of Abbé Migne, gave rise to *L'Univers*. This in turn would become, at the end of 1842, under the direction of Louis Veuillot, the great organ of expression for the more militant French Catholicism. The press was not the only apostolic activity of Bailly. Between 1820 and 1830 he encouraged and directed various student associations whose deliberations concerning academic and apologetic matters found an ideal place for expression in the ample pages of his newspaper. It was there that the conferences of literature, of philosophy, and of history originated, during which controversial themes were debated with non-Catholics.

There were other circumstances which influenced the choice of St. Vincent as model, master and patron of the Society. It is well known how from a desire of seeing themselves free from the passion aroused in the historical conferences, there arose in some of the students, but especially in Frédéric Ozanam, the idea of forming an association, or more exactly, a conference, exclusively composed of Catholics and oriented towards the strengthening of their faith by means of the practice of works of charity. In the historical context in which these events took place, the memory of the translation of the

relics of St. Vincent was fresh and recent and so the reference to St. Vincent was unavoidable. As we have seen, devotion to the saint reached, at that time, its highest point of historical importance. It should not surprise us, therefore that the young students led by Ozanam who, by their university condition had a keen awareness of the extreme plight of the poor amidst the prosperous society of that time, saw in St. Vincent the model of Christian action. Ozanam, besides, had more personal motives. As he writes on the occasion of his visit to the Berceau, he had with the patron saint of the Society a debt of gratitude for the many dangers from which he was preserved in his youth.[fo31] In fact, before the end of the year of the foundation of the Conference, on the 12th of April 1834, all the members, already seventy in number, visited the chapel where the relics reposed, and venerated them there. This took place on the eve of the new feast of the Translation of the Relics of St. Vincent. At the end of the Mass, joined together around the shrine which contained the bones of the saint, they recited the prayer of St. Vincent which would later preface their Rules, and devoutly kissed his feet. The anniversary of the Translation of the Relics, (then on the second Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday) and the Feast of St. Vincent (on the 19th July) became in the Rules two of the four days of the year on which the Conferences held an Extraordinary Assembly.[fo32]

The Vincentian inspiration of the Conferences cannot be reduced merely to the invocation of the saint nor even to the intention of imitating his example; it was something much deeper than that. First of all must be noted the determined intent of the founders to lay hold of the Vincentian spirit so that it would impregnate the entire activity of the new association. The *Règlement* of 1835 is the best proof of this. The preliminary considerations, drawn up personally by Bailly, are, in fact, nothing more than an adaptation of the Common Rules written by St Vincent for the Congregation of the Mission, even to the extent of copying down the original literally at times. It begins like this: "*Here at last in writing is the principle of the organization, which we have so much desired*". And the final exhortation: "*Let us love our rules and believe that in faithfully keeping them they will keep us and keep our work*".[fo33] These are not the only ones.

But more important than the letter is the content, This follows with total fidelity the structure and the spirit of the Vincentian Rule.

The first of the ends of the Society is to preserve its members in the practice of the Christian life, just as the first aim of the Congregation of the Mission is the sanctification of its members, and then the works of charity, every kind of works of charity, amongst which the personal visit to the poor holds pride of place. We could ask why this was so. As I understand it, in the eyes of the pioneers of the Society, the personal visit was the bridge for

crossing the gulf which in the middle-class society of the 19th century separated the social classes from one another. Let us not forget that Ozanam, at the time, wrote a clear-sighted analysis of the social problem: "*In our days, the danger resides in the spread of abject poverty among the lower classes; treating of rectifying the ancient social injustices is the same as treating of voluntary self-denial, of renouncing oneself, and of brotherhood. Here we find real Christainism, we recognise the questions which the Gospel had formulated*".[fo34] In that, both he and his companions were splendidly modern. This was also true of their preoccupation with professional formation of children and young boys. Without expressly saying as much to themselves, they were placing St. Vincent at the apex of their charitable work for the poor.

In the format of the Society, there were two classes of member (as in the C.M. priests and brothers). There was an exhortation to the practice of the evangelical virtues, those more suited to those who dedicate themselves to works of charity and apostolate: "*self-denial, Christian prudence, and effective love for the neighbour, zeal for the salvation of souls, gentleness of heart and above all the spirit of fraternity*". All of these coincide almost literally with the enumeration of the Vincentian virtues which compose the spirit of the Mission: simplicity, prudence, humility, gentleness, mortification and zeal for the salvation of souls.

There was also a brief explanation of each one of those virtues based at times on explicit quotations from the saint, as well as the reason for the submission which the members of the Society owed to the ecclesiastical authorities: "*St. Vincent de Paul did not wish his disciples to undertake any good work before obtaining the permission and blessing of the local Parish Priests*".[fo35] Also the rule of avoiding all political discussion: "*St. Vincent de Paul did not wish his priests to discuss those questions which oppose leaders against each other, nor the causes of rivalry which divide the nations*".[fo36]

A further trait was the adoption of one of the most distinctive virtues of Vincentian spirituality, namely collective humility, which urges the members of the Society to love their Association not because of its excellence, or through pride but "as good children who love their mother, though poor and ugly, more than all other mothers however rich and beautiful they may be".[fo37]

One last link of union of the Conferences with the Vincentian tradition was the relationship maintained by the founder members with an outstanding Daughter of Charity, Sister Rosalie Rendu, whom it would be wrong to name as one of the founders of the Society, but neither can it be denied that she had an important influence in its orientation towards the poor and to the work of home-visitation. [fo38]

It has sometimes been said that the Conferences were just a restoration of the original Vincentian work of the Confraternities of Charity. I have many reservations about that. I would almost rather be inclined to say that the Conferences were, in the 19th century, the lay form of the Congregation of the Mission itself. Between the Conferences and the old Charities there exist any notable differences.

The first and perhaps the most important difference is that the Conferences never wished, by the express will of the founders and of Ozanam in the first place, to be a canonical society, that could be absorbed into a confraternity, or any other pious association. When Gregory XVI granted the first indulgences to the Society, referring to it as "canonically erected", it was Ozanam himself who respectfully made it clear to him that the Society of St. Vincent de Paul was not canonically erected and never intended to be such. Neither was it ever admitted, in contrast to the Confraternities of Charity, that it be presided over by an ecclesiastic or that parish priests would decide on what works the Society should undertake or which poor the members should assist. Without doubt, it was influenced by the profound process of secularisation brought about by the French Revolution. Evidently the fact of not being a canonical entity did not prevent it from being religious and, if I may dare to say so, radically Catholic. Neither was recourse had to priests, religious or secular, in search of direction or spiritual advice.

Another important difference was that the Conferences were exclusively masculine. Until quite recently the Manual of the Society made clear that women could not belong to it, neither as active or honorary associates. By the same token the works of the women, even if based on a similar rule to that of the men, cannot be united to those of the Society.[fo39] In fact, the Conferences of women formed a parallel organisation which only in recent years was admitted on the same terms as that of the men.

On that point it is worth mentioning that the societies of women did arise a few years after those of the men, especially in Spain. In 1856, a few years after Masarnau had set up the first Conference in Madrid, a group of women approached an eminent Vincentian professor, Father Gonzalez de Soto[fo40], complaining of the male exclusiveness of the Conferences and asking for their right also to be followers and disciples of St. Vincent. In support of their claim, referring to the Vincentian Charities, they affirmed the fact that "our Sisterhood is the eldest daughter of the whole family of St. Vincent.. ". This was surely the first time that such an expression was used in reference to the spiritual descendants of the saint, comprehending as it did the lay associations. Father Gonzalez welcomed the suggestion of those ladies and that same year he

published a pamphlet called *A Review of the Sisterhoods of Charity and a set of Rules for them*. [fo41] It was a proposal for the restoration of Confraternities which included the primitive Vincentian rules with some slight modifications. The proposals of Father Gonzalez de Soto did not succeed, perhaps because the author felt himself obliged to leave the Congregation, as a consequence of a conflict between the Spanish Vincentians and the then Superior General in Paris. By contrast the Conferences for women were set up almost immediately, and on the 22nd of April 1857, they received the Brief of Pius IX granting them the same indulgences offered years previously to the Conferences of men, and in 1868 they had the rules published which were almost a copy of the rules of the Society. [fo42]

The Restoration of the Charities

The restoration or renovation of the Vincentian Confraternities of Charity: How it happened. In 1839 a French lady, the Countess La Vavasour, during a visit to the Berceau of St. Vincent de Paul, had the idea of re-establishing the ancient Vincentian institution. With this project, she went to the Procurator General, later the Superior General, of the Congregation of the Mission, Father Jean-Baptiste Etienne. He welcomed the idea with enthusiasm. A few months later, in 1840, the first confraternity of the new age was established in Paris. [fo43] Father Etienne gave it the Rules drawn up by St. Vincent for the Confraternity of Chatillon.

It is worth asking why the Congregation of the Mission, directed by Father Etienne, preferred to restore the Confraternities rather than accept for itself, and support with all its power, the Conferences recently established. Were they not, in one way or another, the modern version of the Vincentian institution? Doubtless there were good reasons for this. The Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and many Vincentians considered that they had a duty to restore Vincentian work in its integrity, just as they had restored the Congregation itself. But other motives also must have had an influence, e.g. the initial masculine nature of the Conferences already alluded to, the conflict confronting followers of Bailly during 1836 with the authorities of the Congregation which had to be resolved before the tribunals. [fo44]

A further reason may have been what I called in another place "the Vincentian mimicry" of Father Etienne, who was impelled to repeat somewhat mechanically the deeds and actions of the Founder. The fact is that the Charities did revive under the inappropriate name of "Ladies of Charity", and that the Vincentian family and the Church were enriched by them.

At any rate, with the restoration of the Charities, which spread very rapidly over the whole of France, and later over other countries, the Vincentian Family

gave new proof of its enduring capacity for renewal. In Spain the Confraternities were somewhat late in arriving. They did not exist until the beginning of the 19th century, towards the year 1915. Why? The question is not easy to answer. As a hypothesis I guess that the good relations which, from the beginning, existed between the Conferences and the Congregation of the Mission played a major part. The central house of the Vincentians in Madrid was the place where ordinarily the members of the Conferences, with Masarnau and Lafuente at their head, held their spiritual exercises, and very often those religious acts, organised by the Society, were directed by Vincentians. Perhaps, because of that the Vincentians did not feel the necessity of establishing an institution whose ends seemed to be sufficiently attended to by another already existing.

The Family Grows. The Children of Mary

In those same years, a third association was added to the Conferences and the Confraternities. It was going to constitute a new branch of the luxuriant Vincentian tree. For those who know about and believe in the Apparition and Manifestations of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Catherine Labouré, the heavenly origin of the Association of the Children of Mary offers not the least room for doubt. About this particular event there are two very precise texts from the visionary herself. They are almost identical, and the one appears to be the rough copy of the other, written by Saint Catherine on the 30th of October 1876 at the request of her spiritual director, Father Jules Chevalier, C.M. The second of these documents is as follows: "*One day I said to Father Aladel: The Blessed Virgin wishes you to set up a new society and you will be its founder and director. It is a Confraternity of Children of Mary. The Blessed Virgin will grant you many GRACES. There will be indulgences granted to you*".[fo45]

Docile to the request of Our Lady, those responsible for its fulfilment, and in particular Fr. Aladel, set themselves to the work immediately without thinking about ecclesiastical approval, high or low. In this way they established the first groups of Children of Mary. The first one was formed on the 8th of December 1838 in Beaune, and was formally erected on 2nd of February 1840. Other centres followed in various towns of France: Bordeaux, Dax, St Flour, Paris, and Toulouse. [fo46]

There were twenty centres functioning when the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, Fr. Etienne, saw that the time had arrived for asking the Holy See to erect the Association as a canonical institution. To this end he asked His Holiness, Pope Pius IX, for "*the faculty of establishing in the schools of the Daughters of Charity a pious society of young girls with the title of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, with all the indulgences granted to the*

Congregation of Mary in the colleges of Se Jesuits established in Rome for boys".

The Pope kindly granted the faculty requested, making it clear that the grant was perpetual. The document bears the date of the 20th of June 1847. It is the date of the official birth of the Children of Mary for girls. Three years later the masculine branch of the Children of Mary was established.

Juridically and historically, the Association of the Children of Mary from the beginning was established as a branch of the Vincentian Family. Was it also such from the charismatic point of view? Sometimes the Association of the Children of Mary was classified as a mere pious association. It is an error. Even if it were only considered by its connection with the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission, the new association is spiritually Vincentian. But it is so also because it preserved an intimate relationship with the most essential core of the vocation of St. Vincent. In the roots of the Association - allow me to say - is the interest of the Blessed Virgin in the Christian formation of young girls and boys. But that preoccupation precisely had dictated the Vincentian words of the Rules of the Charities which I have already cited: they will have the grandest recompense in this world and in the other for the service rendered God as much in the sick poor as in the education of these children"[fo49]. Neither must we forget that amongst the works of charity which the members of the Conferences sought to perform, already in the first edition of the Rules: "the instruction of poor children, abandoned or in prison" is mentioned. [fo50]To form children and young persons as Christians, and also create an environment in which that function can be carried out in a harmonious and balanced way, is exactly the true purpose of the Association of the Children of Mary. And that objective is clearly Vincentian. The development of that aim, accommodated to modern times from the idea proposed by St. Vincent, and from him, by the founders of the Conferences, has been the work of the respective Associations. A typical characteristic of the Vincentian Family, namely to be a continuous renewal, is reproduced in the Association of the Children of Mary.

The Association of the Miraculous

The Association of the Miraculous Medal can be considered as a movement derived from the Association of the Children of Mary, and especially from the Apparitions of Our Blessed Lady to St. Catherine Labouré in 1830. It is centred on the Immaculate Conception of Mary and veneration of her medal, which is called "miraculous" by the people in recognition of the many graces obtained by means of it. It extends to families the spirit of St. Vincent - his Charities were established under the patronage of Mary on the

Feast of the Immaculate Conception - and his understanding of the Christian life as one of charitable works for the poor. Arising spontaneously in the second half of the 19th century, the local and diocesan Associations of the Miraculous Medal received Pontifical approbation in 1909 by means of a brief of St. Pius X, Pope.

Vincentian Charity broadens its horizon

In the 19th century the fanning-out of Vincentian lay movements will be further enriched by two other associations: **La Sainte Agonie** (The Holy Agony) and **La Très Sainte Trinité** (The Most Blessed Trinity). There is a tendency to consider these also as mere pious associations. A quick examination of their aims will show that they spring from the inexhaustible source of Vincentian charity which seeks to diversify itself so as to come to grips with needs, or, it would be better to say, with specific forms of poverty. The association of *La Sainte Agonie* aims at helping, consoling, strengthening and converting people at the point of death by the prayer and good example of its members. The association was founded in 1661 by Fr Antoine Nicolle and canonically erected by Pius IX on 14 March 1862.[fo51]

The *Association de la Très Sainte Trinité* was the work of a poor domestic servant, Marie Pellerin, who, around 1854, decided to tell her friends and acquaintances of her worries about the souls in Purgatory, those poor invisible beings who suffer in silence while awaiting their freedom from all misery. Under the direction of the French Priests of the Mission Marie Pellerin obtained from the Holy See in 1856 the brief of Pius IX "Expositum est" by which the work which was just beginning was adopted by the Congregation of the Mission.[fo52]

Because of lack of space I will not speak in detail of the development of each of these Vincentian branches born or re-born in the 19th century. I will limit myself to saying that all had a rapid and widespread expansion which, above all in the case of the Conferences and the confraternities of Charity, could be called lightning-like. All of them also experienced a retrenchment caused by political vicissitudes. But all of them, more or less, kept faithful to their Vincentian vocation, but little by little, as the 20th century advanced, became estranged from the real world in which they should be working.

III. Post-Conciliar Renewal in the 20th Century

As with the Church itself, in the second half of the 20th century, the Vincentian Family also needed a complete reform. It had reached a situation of

actual separation between the ecclesial institutions and the world they were called on to evangelise. That was the conviction which impelled Pope John XXIII to convoke the Second Vatican Council.

From the Council, in theory, the Church emerged entirely renewed. But it was precisely the work of the many organisations of which the Church is constituted, to make that renewal a reality.

The Vincentian Family, and in particular the lay Associations, were no exceptions. They had existed for more than a hundred years without the least alteration in their structures as regards practice and pastoral orientation. They had rendered splendid services and had spread over the entire world. But, after Vatican II they found themselves, if it is not an exaggeration to say, hide-bound in a world which had changed prodigiously in the last hundred years. They needed to be adapted to the new ecclesial situation and to the new role resulting from the technical, social, economic and religious transformation which had taken place in society.

The Council Decree, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, concerning the apostolate of the laity, pointed out the ways in which the necessary adaptation ought to be effected.

The four great lay institutions of the Vincentian Family were prepared for making the necessary changes. Each of these Associations -- the Confraternities, the Conferences, the Children of Mary, and the Association of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal -- sought renewal in conformity with their particular characteristics.

I will begin with the oldest of the Associations, namely the Confraternities of Charity. Perhaps the first sign here was the change of name. In the 19th century it had been revived under the name of "Ladies" of Charity. Now it was changed to Vincentian "Volunteers". This change illustrates what the institution thinks about itself, what it wishes to be, and what it proposes to do. Then followed a long thorough examination of its situation in the Church.

Those deliberations resulted in the decision to end the role exercised, from the beginning, by the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, as Director. In future, the supreme authority in the Association would be discharged by a lay member. The Superior General of the C.M. and previous national and local directors would be merely counsellors or spiritual directors. It was a decided step on the road to the autonomy of the secular lay person. Almost at the same time it was adopted as a member of the worldwide International Association of Charity (A.I.C.). There followed a profound

revision of its rules and statutes which would permit the Association to play a greater role in relief work and assistance on a worldwide basis. As a symbol of its new international status, the Secretariat was transferred from Paris to Brussels.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul followed along similar lines. While they did not consider a change of name necessary, they undertook a complete remodelling of the old Regulation. This, after a trial period of about ten years, was approved in the General Assembly held in Dublin in 1973[fo53]. In it, among other things, the principle of admitting women to full and equal membership was decreed, leaving the way open for the fusion of the male and female branches of the Conferences. It was left to the free will of the different National Councils to accept or reject this fusion. Little by little the change has been effected in almost all countries. Other statutory modifications have democratised and made much more participative the governing or ordinary running of the Society. It is also significant, that while the Society maintains its Catholic character, as it could do no less, it foresees that, in some countries, circumstances could counsel and welcome Christians of other confessions, and even members of other beliefs, depending on whether they adhere to their principles. The ends of the Society are adopting a more flexible formulation. The ancient priority of house visitation is disappearing, while preserving person to person contact. The universality of the vocation of charity is stressed; already present in the original Rules: "No work of Charity is alien to the Society and the extension of its action is to all men and women, without distinction of religious opinions, colour, race, origin or caste. This same Charity is brought to its ultimate consequences by declaring that the Society must work not only to relieve misery, but also to discover and remedy the causes of that situation.

No less has been the change effected in the Children of Mary. Here it began by seeking a new name. After a period of experimentation with different titles, the name "Marian Vincentian" has been adopted, especially in Spain and Spanish American countries. The change of name put an end to the old form of separate Associations for boys and girls. Under the new name they have been fused together very successfully into one single Association for both sexes. But more important than all that has been the enforcement of the charitable-social commitment of the Association. The introduction into the title of the word *Vincentian* obeys exactly the desire to underline this commitment.[nota54]

And the Association of the Miraculous Medal also set out bravely on the road to modernisation, though perhaps somewhat late in comparison with its sister associations. In Spain in particular, with the adopting of new statutes in 1986, the way was opened for an in-depth renewal. On the one hand the

juridical structures were strengthened, and on the other the association's apostolic and social plan was emphasised.[nota55]

Neither the Association of Marian Vincentian Youth nor the Association of the Miraculous Medal have found it necessary to end the role as Directors, assigned by the respective Pontifical decrees of approval, to the priests of the Congregation of the Mission, and in particular to the Superior General.

I would not like to finish without referring to what I consider to be the key to the renewal of the whole Vincentian Family. This is nothing less than the renewal of the members themselves. Without a bold Plan of Formation, both spiritual and intellectual, for the associations, it is impossible to achieve any renewal. And it must be stated that the four great Vincentian lay associations have zealously set about this great work.

The Conferences of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, both at national and international levels, have set in motion ambitious programmes of Formation. In Spain, such a programme has been inserted into "The General Plan of Revitalisation" approved in the National Assembly of 1988[fo56]. It gathers and projects into the future a whole range of Formative plans, especially the new manner in which the Society should confront the challenges of our times. Some of these Plans, like the "Ozanam Study and Formation Centre", have already proved their effectiveness during several years of experimentation.

As regards the new form of the Children of Mary, namely The Marian Vincentian Youth Association, its programme of renewal has been the most radical of all the Associations. Its whole Formation programme is based on the lines and the method of the Catechumenate. Detailed programmes have been prepared for the different age groups of young persons. These catecheses tend as much to the deepening of the Christian life as to the widening and enriching of the religious knowledge itself. The addition of the name Vincentian has had an explosive effect in directing them to the needs of the poor, but also to the work of the missions in foreign countries. (In the short period of its existence it already has more than seventy thousand members and is one of the great examples of the continuous renewal of the Vincentian Family in modern times. Its School of Catechists has appeared as the formidable instrument for carrying out the M.V.Y. programmes. *Floreat*).

The Congresses celebrated by the Miraculous Medal Association[fo57] represent a contribution of great importance for the renewal of the understanding and spread of the ideas which ought to animate the members at the present time.

In conclusion I would like to indicate where the fundamental means is to be found: That means which has made possible the longings for and results of renewal, which has enthused the whole Vincentian Family, including the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission. This means is nothing less than a RE READING of St. Vincent de Paul in the light of Vatican II. St. Vincent has proved to be a very modern saint. His vital commitment to the poor is the commitment of the Church of our day to the poor and the marginalised. All Christians are to live that commitment, and to live it in the manner and by the paths which the society of our time demands. Ours is a society which feels more keenly that the present profound injustice of poverty and marginalisation is the inescapable task of all, but especially of the members of the Vincentian Family. It is a task which for being in harmony with the Church of today, and of being faithful to its Vincentian roots, has to find ways which bring us to combat poverty in its causes, and to combine preoccupation in helping the destitute with that of procuring that they may be the ones to help themselves; that is, to assist them to move on from assistance or hand-outs to participation in improving their own condition.

For having understood the situation in this way is the reason why the Vincentian Family lives an hour of hope, an hour which allows it to be faithful to what it has always been, namely A Family of Continuous Renewal. Perhaps the best expression of this idea has been implanted in the second article of the Manual of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul: "*Faithful to its Founders, the Society has a constant preoccupation of renewing and adapting itself to the changing conditions of the times*".

Seamus O'Neill, C.M.
Translator

- [nota1] SV IX, 243-244
- [nota2] SV XIII, 423
- [nota3] SV XIII, 447
- [nota4] SV XIII, 424
- [nota5] SV IV, 71
- [nota6] SV IV, 71
- [nota7] SV XIII, 446
- [nota8] *ibíd*, 490-502
- [nota9] *ibíd*, 511
- [nota10] *ibíd*, 521
- [nota11] *ibíd*, 504
- [nota12] SV XIII, 455

- [nota13] SV XIV, 126
- [nota14] SV XIII, 421
- [nota15] SV XIII, 500
- [nota16] SV XIII, 422
- [nota17] SV XIII, 447
- [nota18] SV XIII, 500
- [nota19] SV XIII, 423
- [nota20] SV XIII, 424
- [nota21] SV XIII, 430
- [nota22] SV XIII, 260-1
- [nota23] RC I, 2
- [nota24] RC VI, 1
- [nota25] L. Abelly, *La Vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul, Instituteur et premier Supérieur Général de la Congrégation de la Mission. Messire Louis Abelly, Evêque de Rodez.* - Paris : Florentin Lambert, 1664. - 1 v. (XVIII, 260; 480, 274) I. 2, ch. 8, 340
- [nota26] L. de Marillac, *Écrits Spirituels*, 703-704
- [nota27] SV I, 73-74
- [nota28] SV XIII, 761ss.
- [nota29] Abelly, o.c. I. 1, ch. 35, 167-169; I. 2., ch. 11, 387
- [nota30] R. Kokel: *Vincent de Paul Bailly, Un pionnier de la presse catholique.* - Paris : Éditions Bonne Presse, 1957
- [nota31] *Lettres de Frédéric Ozanam. Tome 4e. Les dernières années (1850-1853).* - Édition critique par Christine Franconnet avec la collaboration de Bernard Barbiche, Magali Brémard, - Etienne Diebold, Marie Laporte, Élisabeth Meignien, Didier Ozanam - Paris : Klincksieck, 1992. - 719 ; 26 cm. 446 ss.
- [nota32] *Massiliensis seu Parisiensis. Beatificationis et canonizationis servi Dei Friderici Ozanam, patrisfamilias, primarii fundatoris Societatis conferentiarum s. Vincentii a Paulo, disquisitio de vita et actuositate servi Dei.* - Roma : Tipografia Guerra, 1980. - XLVIII, 1255 ; 32 cm. vid. 177 ss. (D.V.A.)
- [nota33]: Quoted according to the first Spanish edition of the *Réglement*, actually printed by the Bailly printing house in Paris in 1847. This translation antedates the foundation of the Society in Spain.
- [nota34] D.V.A., 837
- [nota35] *Réglement...* ed. cit., 20
- [nota36] Id. 22
- [nota37] Id. 17
- [nota38]: At the time of Sister Rosalie's death a contemporary witness, Léon Aubineau, wrote in *L'Univers*: "She did not merely love the works which she herself had undertaken, she loved all those which could do good, and she helped them all... She was one of the main instruments used by Providence to establish and develop the Conferences of St Vincent de Paul... When the

Society of St Vincent de Paul decided to visit the poor they consulted Sister Rosalie. She indicated to them the first families to be visited, and she advised them to bring their help in the form of bread coupons. That is why the Conferences owe this custom to her, one which they hold so dear. The Sister did still more: for a long time she lent what she had to the Conference... Sister Rosalie loved the Conferences with real tenderness, and naturally she had affection for the children at whose birth she had been present. In the early days of the Society she used to say: 'Ah!, how good these young men are, how good!'. She used to add that she never felt more joyful than when seeing them".

[nota39] Reglamento y manual de la Sociedad de San Vicente de Paúl. - 4 ed. à partir de 1941. - Madrid : Consejo Superior de España, 1963. - 575 ; 14 cm. Vid. 46

[nota40]: For the life of Gonzalez de Soto see the work of B. Paradela: *Un gran pedagogo desconocido. Apuntes biograficos del Julian Gonzalez de Soto*, Madrid, Imprenta de Tajado, 1868.

[nota41] Barcelona : Pablo Riera, 1856, 49

[nota42] Reglamento de la Sociedad de señoras de San Vicente de Paúl. - Madrid: Imprenta de Tejado, 1868. - 96 , 17 cm.

[nota43] [Rosset, Edouard]: Vie de M. Etienne, XIVE. Su Général. - Paris : Gaume, 1881. - VI, 576 ; 21 cm. Vid. 239-249.

[nota44]: The conflict between Bailly and the CM Superior General has not been seriously investigated up to now. The documentation which survives in the archives of the General Curia and the Maison-mère is, however, abundant. Cf as regards what is of interest to us here: *Exposé des faits relatifs au procès intenté à la Congrégation de Saint-Lazare par M. Bailly, exclu de la meme Congrégation* (Archives de Saint-Lazare, dossier Nozo-Bailly).

[nota45] Edition critique de René Laurentin: Catherine Labouré et la Médaille Miraculeuse I, 357.

[nota46] E. Crapez: La Vénérable Catherine Labouré, Paris, Victor Lecoffre-J. Gabalda, 1911, 152-157

[nota47] Bullae, Brevia et Rescripta in gratiam Congregationis Missionis. Litt. introd. E. Boré. - Paris : Georges Camerot, 1876. - XVI, 301 ; 30 cm. 253-254

[nota48] Id. 261

[nota49] SV XIII, 422-423

[nota50] Règlement, art. 2

[nota51]: Nicolle, M: *Petit Manuel de la Sainte-Agonie de N.S.J.C. établie à Valfleury au diocèse de Lyon*, Lyon, Pélagaud, 1864. According to Fr Jacinto Fernandez neither the *Association de la Sainte-Agonie* nor the *Association de la Sainte Trinité* should, according to the 1917 Code of Canon Law, be considered as confraternities or archconfraternities, but as associations. Cf Fernandez, Jacinto: *Asociaciones eclesíasticas instituidas y dirigidas por la Congracion de*

la Mision, Madrid, La Milagrosa, 1962. There are historical and canonical details on each of these associations in that work.

[nota52] *Notice sur l'archiconfrérie de la Sainte Trinité, en faveur des âmes du purgatoire, établie à la Maison-Mère, à Paris*. - París : Georges Chamerot, 1874. - 15; 14 cm.

[nota53] *Reglamento de la Sociedad de San Vicente de Paúl en España...* - Madrid : Ind. gráf. España, 1975. - 63 ; 15 cm.

Nota 54: Cf the many publications of the National Secretariat of JMV on the Formation Plans for the different stages, with the general title: *Un proyecto de catequesis juvenil en línea catecumenal*.

[nota55] *Estatutos de la Asociación de la Medalla Milagrosa*. - Madrid : [s.n.], 1986. - 16 ; 17 cm.

[nota56] *Seglares cara al siglo XXI*. Sociedad de San Vicente de Paúl. Plan general de revitalización. Madrid : La Milagrosa, 1989. 159

[nota57] *II Congreso Mariano Nacional de la Asociación de la Medalla Milagrosa*. Abril 1994. - Madrid : La Milagrosa, 1995. - 247 , 6 h. (de himnos); 24 cm.