

The Way in Which the Brothers CMM Branch of the Vincentian Family is Inspired by, Lives, and Adapts the Vincentian Charism

Brothers CMM

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND BROTHERS CMM

When the Congregation of the Brothers of Our Lady, Mother of Mercy (Brothers CMM) was founded, Saint Vincent became its patron saint and an inspiring example of evangelical service. For more than 170 years the Brothers CMM have been working in several countries in the fields of education, youth work, and in building up the Church community. Their attention is especially focused on the poor and on youth growing up under difficult circumstances.

The Congregation of the Brothers CMM was founded in 1844 in Tilburg, the Netherlands. The founder, Bishop Joannes Zwijsen, was deeply moved by the poverty he encountered in this quickly growing industrial town and in the countryside around it. Many children received hardly any schooling and there were only limited means to help the sick, the elderly, the orphans, and those who were handicapped. To alleviate this situation Zwijsen gathered a group of sisters (1832) and a group of brothers (1844) around him: religious who were eager to dedicate themselves to improve the living conditions in the town and to do this as religious congregations in the Catholic Church.

Zwijsen bestowed on both of his congregations a name related to mercy. They are called Sisters of Our Lady, Mother of Mercy and Brothers of Our Lady, Mother of Mercy. Popularly they are referred to as Sisters of Charity (SCMM) and Brothers of Tilburg (CMM). Zwijsen was very successful in this effort since his congregations attracted many members. Around 1850, there were already nearly 1000 sisters and more than 100 brothers engaged in numerous educational, social, and Church projects. These initiatives were mostly to assist the poor and to support Catholic education, projects which Zwijsen called 'works of charity,' 'works of mercy.' The history of the brothers stretches over a period of 170 years. In total, there have been more than 3800 brothers.

Joannes Zwijsen (1794-1877), son of a miller of Kerkdriel, a village in the center of the Netherlands, was a passionate and idealistic person.

At a time when the Catholic faith was suppressed, he asked to be ordained a priest. Being an enterprising man, he became in time one of the major organizers in the rebuilding of the Dutch Church. And this even more so when he was consecrated a bishop in 1842 and appointed archbishop. He played a pivotal role at the time of the restoration of the Dutch hierarchy in 1853.

He had an extensive personal network, which included a number of ecclesiastical as well as political contacts and many business connections. On top of it he was a close friend of the Dutch Kings William I and William II and had friendly relations with a large number of government ministers. Fully in accordance with the spirit of his time, Zwijsen grew into a 'Prince of the Church,' ruling the Dutch Catholic Church from his residence near Den Bosch. He was an influential bishop, admired all over Europe.

In his 'Tilburg period' (1832-1855), Zwijsen was appalled by the poverty, the illiteracy, and the spiritual negligence of the youth in this up and coming industrial town and took drastic measures: he forbade First Holy Communion to children lacking acceptable schooling. From the point of view of the Church, this may have been a dubious directive, but it surely had a major impact on the local population. What actually happened was that child labour decreased, while school attendance increased. Zwijsen was inspired by a powerful vision to create a better world, a world in which the weak person was not abandoned or neglected, but fully taken into account. In his eyes all people had the responsibility to commit themselves to merciful action. In the needy person they would encounter the person of Christ. That was something in which he fully believed, and with that inspiration Zwijsen knew how to motivate other people to start working. But Zwijsen was not just a visionary. Level-headed and acting efficiently, he built up the required networks and knew how to realize many of his ideals. In his eyes, mercy was also a matter of good organization. Zwijsen had great admiration for Saint Vincent de Paul, whom he took as his role model. He gave his Congregation Mary, under the title 'Mother of Mercy,' as patron saint. As second patron saint he gave Saint Vincent de Paul, whose work for the poor, the ignorant, and the distressed in 17th century France was inspired by merciful love. Zwijsen, like Vincent, *saw* the suffering, *was moved* by it, and *got into action*, having the courage to roll up his sleeves and do the needed work of fighting illiteracy and poverty. One of Zwijsen's beloved expressions was: "*In order to succeed, you just have to start working.*" He was not only a strong-willed bishop, but also a pioneer in the fields of education and social health projects, and a prophet of mercy as well. It is understandable that he was called therefore the 'Vincentius of Tilburg.'

Immediately after the foundation of the Congregation, Zwijsen received invitations to start communities of brothers and schools in

other towns. He could not immediately respond to such requests; there were hardly any brothers and the financial means were scarce. The bishop waited until the Congregation had a few dozen members before he opened a new community in the Belgian city of Maaseik. That was in 1851, barely seven years after the foundation of the Congregation.

Zwijzen and the brothers took on all types of work. At that time they spoke of 'works of charity' and 'works of mercy.' Within the first ten years they started a center for orphans and began teaching children in neglected parts of town; they also initiated a boarding school, a Roman Catholic commercial school, seminary training for the priesthood, a teacher training school, an institute for blind and deaf children, a few Sunday schools, and a number of Catholic organizations for leisure activities. Besides all that, they established, together with the orphans, a printing press, a cobbler's workshop, and a tailoring shop. The printing press was initially intended to provide job training and jobs for the orphans, but over time it became a superb publishing house for school books and religious publications.

All these initiatives were, in a broad sense, considered works of mercy. They were launched in the course of the first ten years, and all were intended to improve the living conditions of large groups of people.

Thus, the brothers did not hesitate to undertake quite different types of work, even though the main emphasis of their mission was indeed on the education and the training of youth. Through the writing and publication of theoretical and practical teaching materials, the Brothers CMM had a great impact on general instruction and religious education in the Netherlands. Particularly impressive was the speed with which the Congregation spread across the Netherlands and Belgium.

MERCY BEYOND ALL BORDERS

The Brothers CMM established foundations also in Dutch-speaking territories overseas, such as in the Dutch Antilles in 1885, in Suriname 1902, and in Indonesia 1923. After World War II still other houses were added in Dutch and Belgian cities, until – as a consequence of missions in new countries and also due to a crisis in religious life – a gradual reduction of the CMM membership and influence came about. Taking everything together, it may be said that, after a few generations, the Brothers CMM managed a large Catholic educational network and also a number of boarding schools with different specializations.

The focus of the brothers was on education as a work of charity. Some initiatives were specifically directed toward the youth of the upper-classes, such as the boarding school Ruwenberg, but the brothers always applied the rule of founder Zwijzen that "the number of

children from poorer families should be at least as large as children from well-to-do families.” Furthermore, they were not merely thinking about the possibility of making ‘poor schools’ possible by having ‘rich schools,’ but they also aimed at a certain balance between different kinds of apostolate. The work of the brothers did not exclude the wealthy parts of the population, “however, the greater part of those benefitting from our initiatives should be the poor,” Zwijsen always said.

After half a century, the Congregation had already more than 500 brothers, living in some 20 communities. And after CMM had been around for a century, that number had almost doubled.

A new wave of international expansion took place during the years after World War II. It was inspired by the mission encyclical *Fidei Donum* (The Gift of the Faith) in 1957, from Pope Pius XII. The Pope asked religious from wealthier countries to cooperate with the mission of the Church in needier countries. The actualization of this commitment started almost immediately. In 1958, the first brothers went to Kenya and Congo, in 1959, to South West Africa (later Namibia) and, in 1960, to Brazil. To support these missions, a house was also opened in California (1963). In order to provide funding for these foundations, CMM had to reduce its share in the educational field in the Netherlands and Belgium, and also in the Dutch Antilles. Priority was given to the education among the very poor; this apostolate was given the biblical motto: ‘*Go and teach*’ (cf. Mt 10:7).

The internationalization of the Brothers CMM was not altogether a success story; the pioneers in the missions had to work very hard to establish schools and brother houses in other countries. Perhaps at the very beginning people underestimated what it meant to transplant religious life to another culture. Gradually the brothers noticed that they could not copy the lifestyle of their native country. The initial novitiates with local young people were a failure. The mission demanded much more preparation than the brothers had expected. A good integration in the local culture required an enormous amount of knowledge of the country, good language skills, and accurate appreciation of the local culture. Thus it took more than a generation before the brothers grasped the ‘style.’ From the years 1980-1990 and onwards, CMM started to grow in countries like Indonesia, Kenya, and Namibia. Around that same period it proved to be necessary to withdraw from Congo and the Dutch Antilles, while the presence in Suriname and California became more and more vulnerable. One of the most important reasons, besides the issue of age, was the lack of vocations in the Netherlands, Belgium, and countries such as Suriname and California. In our formation and training programs nowadays, we pay attention to the process of internationalization. We organize, for example, international meetings, exchange programs, and internships, so that we will

become more familiar with the international dimension, which characterizes our life as Brothers CMM.

At the moment, the Congregation has 300 brothers in nine countries. Besides the Netherlands and Belgium, there are brothers in Indonesia, East Timor, Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia, Brazil, and the Philippines. On account of our presence in nine different countries and on four continents, the brothers do constitute truly an international community. At the same time, it is also true that the situation has been changing quite rapidly over the past two decades. In western countries the number of brothers is decreasing, while there is a slight increase in Indonesia, East Timor, Kenya, and Namibia. This has consequences for our governance, for the communities in which we live, and for the projects in which we are engaged. We also realize that we are few in number and that this has its consequences for governance and the possibilities for our mission.

When we as brothers work on internationalization, we want to see this against the background of our evangelical vocation, which goes beyond all borders. We want to share our passion for Christ and our passion for humanity by working towards a better and more humane world. We form one single international family of brothers and we work together, within the Church community, through the one comprehensive mission of mercy and brotherhood based on Vincentian spirituality.

OUR VINCENTIAN SPIRITUALITY

The spirituality of the Brothers CMM deals with our inspiration, the sources of our motivation, and the ideals from which we live.

When in the western world around the 1970s a severe identity crisis took place in religious life, a serious process of returning to the sources and re-founding started in order to revitalize our Congregation. This process of returning to the sources received strong momentum in the 1980s under the leadership of the then Superior General Brother Wim Verschuren. We were aided in this process by some of our brothers who studied Vincentian Spirituality at Rue de Sèvres in Paris, by the publications of Father Robert Maloney C.M., and at our request by the research into our spiritual roots by the Titus Brandsma Institute of Nijmegen. This search for the roots of the Gospel and the spirit and intentions of our founder, Joannes Zwijsen, turned out to be an arduous, yet fruitful and rewarding exercise. We rediscovered that our founder was part of the Vincentian movement of mercy. The practical way Vincent pursued was appealing to Zwijsen, and he was guided by the Vincentian ideal of lay-religious life. We rediscovered that our spirituality was solidly based on three main pillars: the Gospel of Jesus, the principles of Vincent de Paul, and the directives of Zwijsen. Since

1994, the year of our 150th anniversary, the Congregation has emphatically made the evangelical core value of mercy the central word of its spirituality her own again. With the parable of the Good Samaritan as a starting point, she has formulated mercy as a threefold way of *'seeing,' 'being moved,'* and *'getting into action.'* And flowing from our charism of mercy and brotherhood, our one mission as a Congregation is to make God's mercy visible, audible, and tangible.

Therefore, based on the Gospel and following in the footsteps of Saint Vincent and Joannes Zwijsen, we want to be active in the Church and the world and thus live out our spirituality. This Vincentian spirituality of mercy and brotherhood we consider our charism, our gift to Church and world. In Mary, the mother of Jesus, who also is called Mother of Mercy, we have an inspiring model of simplicity, loving dedication, and trust in God. In brotherhood and in solidarity with others we have an inspiring example in Saint Vincent, who, as 'Father of the Poor,' showed us in his own life how to be mercifully close to the poor. The Vincentian virtues of simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and apostolic zeal are dear to us.

Today the Brothers CMM continue the works of mercy of Jesus and Saint Vincent in their care of and attention for the poor. Over the last two decades they have given vision and form to a number of innovative projects, embedded in our Vincentian spirituality of mercy and brotherhood.

Besides structures that often existed already for a long time with regard to education and schooling, innovative projects originated, because fellow brothers started those projects based on the needs they saw. On account of the fact that they were *being moved* to the core of their being, they could not do anything else but *get into action!*

In the following three paragraphs some concrete examples are given of initiatives to indicate how our branch of the Vincentian Family is active in carrying out the works of mercy for the underprivileged in society. Furthermore, we find it essential that we deepen and share our Vincentian spirituality with others. This requires that we be inspired by the Gospel and our patrons, Mary and Vincent, and radiate the warmth of compassion and wholehearted commitment to the spirit of mercy and brotherhood to others.

I. The Works of Mercy in the Ministry of CMM

A center for spirituality and work 'Zin in Werk' in Vught, the Netherlands.

In the year 2000, an old and abandoned brother house was transformed into a reflection and conference center 'Zin in Werk,' where professionals, educators, managers, and people from business, government, and the health sector come for programs, work at developing

their skills and values for living in the spirit of mercy and brotherhood, in order to find greater meaning and purpose in their work. Next to the center Zin is the Eleousa community. The brothers are active in Zin as a support community by their presence, their witnessing, and their concrete involvement in the activities of the center. One of the activities the Eleousa community sponsors and organizes every year on its own is offering two weeks of recreational summer programs for handicapped and poor families, who otherwise would not be able to have any vacation.

De Vuurhaard (The Fireplace) in Udenhout, the Netherlands, is a community of brothers that for the last 15 years has been a warm and hospitable haven for families of refugees who escaped war, poverty, discrimination, or persecution. The refugees feel welcome and at home. Once a week they cook a meal of their country of origin for an average of 40 invited guests. At those dinners the brothers have an opportunity to make the guests, through formal and informal presentations, aware of the problematic political, economic, and personal situation of the residents.

The Elim community is a small group of brothers in Tilburg, the Netherlands, who, as in the biblical Elim, wants to be an oasis where people can quench their spiritual thirst, rest, and regain their strength for life's journey. The brothers want to really live the spirituality of brotherhood, mercy, and hospitality through a number of activities, such as programs on the Bible, presentations and workshops on liturgy and spirituality, evening meditations, or the viewing and discussion afterwards of an occasional film. Together with the parish, they organize twice a week, in a warm ambiance, an attractive meal for lonely and elderly people.

A Credit Union was established on the island of Nias, west of Sumatra, Indonesia, to improve the living conditions of many farmers on the island. With 20 offices, the economic situation and thereby the standard of living has improved significantly for some 35,000 members. After the tsunami of 2004 and the earthquake of 2005 hit the area, the Credit Union assisted financially in the rebuilding of Nias.

Four informal high schools were designed in Kenya in the 1990s, by the Kenyan brothers for the poor who were unable to attend secondary school. Because of the informal character of these schools, poor students with little financial means could still get a diploma. These projects inspired people from the Netherlands to provide financial support. One of the schools, St. Justino Secondary School in one of the slums in Nairobi, has been able to construct a new building with the support of St. George College, a secondary school in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. Over the years these schools have become mainstream secondary schools, but still with a special focus on the poor child.

The Oyugis Integrated Project was developed by the brothers in the western part of Kenya, near Lake Victoria, where close to 70% of the adult population is affected by HIV/AIDS. It is an anti-AIDS development project that provides medical, educational, and social care as well as agricultural information and guidance in a society that is largely disorganized on account of this disease. Due to the enormous increase of orphaned children over the last number of years the brothers have, after a thorough evaluation of the whole project, decided to concentrate their efforts increasingly more on the education of orphans. In the Netherlands OIP has a support foundation carried on creatively and effectively organized by two associate members of the Brothers CMM.

Father Grol's Welfare Project employs three of our brothers who are active in visiting the 95 prisons in Kenya, trying to make the plight of prisoners more humane by requesting from donors clothing, medicines, and sports equipment. They have been able to initiate educational programs in prisons and, by their perseverance, have been able to receive permission from the prison authorities for inmates to sit for exams, so that after their release they have more opportunities to make a fresh start.

Cidade do Menor, a Children's Village in Coronel Fabriciano, Brazil is managed by the brothers. Wards of the court and street children are being looked after in a family setting.

Prison pastoral ministry. A pastoral center called 'Our Lady of Peace' and a pastoral team have been established by the brothers in São Joaquim de Bicas, Brazil. Detainees in two prisons are visited regularly and assisted in some small ways.

Not all the works of mercy undertaken by the Brothers CMM have been a success story. We sometimes started projects that later failed. There were also projects that only succeeded after many years of trial and error. Usually it is not on account of the financial situation that projects fail. We often experience the inability of fellow brothers, internationally composed or otherwise, to work or live together. Or there are situations in which fellow brothers are unable to create mutual unity and fail to radiate that unity, making a project quite vulnerable. We not only have success stories but we also have our confrontations with failures. Those too belong to our community. Those too are a genuine concern to all of us.

II. Deepening and Sharing our Spirituality

From the start of the Congregation the laity has been actively involved in the work of the Congregation as coworkers. In the last couple of decennia, the conviction has been growing ever more increasingly in the Congregation that it is important to share our spirituality with the laity. That involvement materialized in the acceptance of associate

members, but also in other forms of commitment, such as the Movement of Mercy and the Ambassadors of a Worldwide Brotherhood.

The Movement of Mercy in the Netherlands is an initiative of the Brothers CMM. It originated in 1998 as a result of a national publicity and recruiting campaign. The Movement of Mercy has as its goal to support and inspire people who want to live their lives in a merciful way. Now the movement has grown to about 1200 participants, most of whom live in the Netherlands. There are at the moment 'Circles of Mercy' in six cities in the Netherlands. Twice a year days of inspiration are organized for all the members in the reflection and conference center Zin in Vught. Similar initiatives have been developed by the communities of the brothers in Balige on Sumatra, Indonesia and by the brothers' retreat and reflection center 'Vicente de Paulo' in Igarapè, Brazil.

The Ambassadors of a Worldwide Brotherhood is an international group of young people who are committed to a worldwide movement of mercy and brotherhood. The Congregation founded this youth movement in 2008, in the different countries where the brothers are involved in the works of mercy. Under the CMM flag about one hundred young people from Brazil, Indonesia, East Timor, Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia, and the Netherlands participated in the World Youth Days in Sydney, in Madrid, and in Rio de Janeiro. Each country group is under the leadership of a young brother. The starting point of their foundational program is always: 'Jesus, our compass, our way to compassion.' The purpose of the Ambassadors of a Worldwide Brotherhood is to bring young people together in an international context. The World Youth Days turn out to be an excellent opportunity for young people to get into contact with the World Church and with the Gospel. Since 2008, every two or three years new Ambassadors come together for an international meeting and then join the World Youth Days together. For the Ambassadors, these World Youth Days are not the ultimate goal, but a stepping stone to achieve and expand our movement of mercy and brotherhood worldwide. This is a process that is specifically facilitated by intensive prayer and reflection, sharing and working sessions together in the week before and the week after the World Youth Days. Since the World Youth Days in Sydney 2008, the Ambassadors meet regularly in the various countries for social gatherings, prayer, and reflection periods. They stay in contact with each other via their website: <http://worldwidebrotherhood.com/> and *Facebook*.

Quite a number of initiatives have been taken by the Kenyan Ambassadors in the field of serving the poor. We would like to mention, for example, the agricultural project, the school program project, and the water project they started. And, in 2011, they organized a Christmas food drive for the orphans of the Asante Children's Home in Naivasha and for people who live in the Kibagare and Kangemi slums of Nairobi.

Another illustration on which the Ambassador program has its effect is the Walk with Christ in Windhoek, Namibia that, since 2009, they arrange every year during Lent. Together with the Brothers CMM they also initiated, in 2013, at the time of the World Youth Days in Brazil, the first Catholic National Youth Days in their country. More than 700 youths came together to Windhoek, the capital, for a weekend of prayer, sharing, and celebration.

In Brazil the Ambassadors are known as: Grupo Vocacional Misericórdia (GVM). In 2013, they had the honour of inviting and hosting their Ambassador brothers and sisters from six other countries in their home country for the World Youth Days in Rio de Janeiro.

In 2016, under the leadership of the Brothers CMM, a significant number of Ambassadors of the Worldwide Brotherhood from seven countries will participate again in the World Youth Days, this time in Krakow, Poland.

III. Participation in the Vincentian Family

After the 'rediscovery' of the Vincentian character of our Congregation, fellow brothers have dedicated themselves to the Vincentian Family and they were also there from the start in forging and nurturing those Vincentian Family ties, especially in the Netherlands and in Indonesia.

In the Netherlands, in 1997, at the initiative of the Brothers CMM, together with the Congregation of the Mission of the Netherlands and the Sisters SCMM, the Dutch Vincentian Family was established. Presently 12 congregations are members. An ever larger group comes together yearly for a day of sharing information about the weal and woe of projects for the poor, and to have prayerful reflections. This is done through the telling of real-life stories with Vincentian themes and PowerPoint presentations. Since 1998, under the inspiration of and guidance by the Brothers CMM, the Vincentian Family in the Netherlands has organized 12 two-week Vincentian pilgrimages to France.

In Indonesia the brothers are active in the Vincentian movement (KEVIN). They were at the forefront of promoting the spirituality and activities of the Vincentian Family in Indonesia.

Participation in the CIF program. For a number of years the Brothers CMM have taken part in the ongoing Vincentian Formation (CIF) program in Paris. Yearly one or two brothers attend this intense ongoing formation program which includes topics on the historical background of Saint Vincent, the history of the Congregation of the Mission, Vincentian spirituality, the vows, systemic change, signs of the times, and ongoing renewal.

The 350th Anniversary Celebration. During the 350th anniversary celebration of the deaths of the Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de

Marillac, the Brothers CMM joined the Vincentian Family worldwide in their monthly days of recollection for prayer, reflection, and sharing by using the 12 reflection bulletins of the Vincentian Family Heritage Commission. The materials, available in English and Portuguese, were translated by a small working group of the Brothers CMM into Bahasa Indonesian and Dutch to be of service also to the brothers living in those language areas. They were published on the website of the Brothers CMM as well, so that also in these language areas some justice could be done to these two great prophets of charity.

Participation in the Vincentian Family Executive Committee. In January 2015, Father G. Gregory Gay, Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, decided to expand the Vincentian Family Executive Committee with three more branches of the Vincentian Family to enhance the work of the VFEC and thereby ultimately strengthening the Vincentian Family. The Congregation of the Brothers CMM, which has been actively involved in the Vincentian Family leadership and formation programs, as well as in other collaborative activities with the Vincentian Family since its inception, was asked to serve on the board of the Vincentian Family Executive Committee. Brother Lawrence Obiko, Superior General, was personally asked by Father Gregory Gay and accepted the invitation. Brother Broer Huitema, the former Superior General, was chosen as his assistant.