

Missionary Charism of Vincent De Paul in the Asian Context

By: Armada Riyanto, CM

The celebration of the 400th anniversary of Mission and Charity is an invitation to reflect on the historical journey of fidelity of the Congregation to the charism of Vincent de Paul. This moment of reflection on our history is, first of all, a moment for expressing ceaseless gratitude to God who has guided our confreres to walk across and soar beyond the experience of the ups and downs in the apostolate. It is also a moment for having “personal dialogue” with Vincent himself. In such a dialogue we listen attentively to his encouraging words to move forward faithfully in our missionary call.

Gratitude for Being Sent on Mission

The words of our confreres, Fathers Charles Nacquart and Nicolas Gondrée, who were destined to be the first confreres sent to Madagascar, could represent our being grateful for our missionary vocation. About two months before his passing away, Charles Nacquart wrote a letter to Vincent narrating the actual situation of his apostolate in the remote place. The letter probably was written when he was exhausted from so many labors. Charles seemed to be thankful for the little success of missionary work despite being alone (Nicolas developed a fever and died only six months after his arrival).

You sent me to cast the nets, but only fifty-seven fish have been caught, and they are all small except for three big ones. Yet, there are so many to be caught that I am sure you will put to sea persons who will succeed in filling the nets to the breaking point.

(Letter of Charles Nacquart from Madagascar to Vincent de Paul, 16 February 1650).¹

Eight months before, Charles witnessed the “exemplary” spirit of his confrere, Nicolas Gondrée, who faced agony bravely. What amazed him was that, in spite of his suffering, the young Nicolas would thank Vincent for sending him to that very difficult mission. Charles narrated how Nicolas offered himself to God until his last breath.

On the last of the feast days [Paschal Season], I perceived clearly that he could no longer withstand the violence of such a malignant fever, which for two weeks had almost devoured him, while the heat and severe pain in his head and in all the members of his poor body had exhausted him. Returning from services in church, I asked him, “In the event that God chooses to release you from this exile, what would you want to say to our good father, Monsieur Vincent?” “Tell him I thank him most humbly for having admitted and tolerated me as a Missionary, and especially for sending me to this country, instead of so many others who would have done a much better job than I.” (Letter of Charles Nacquart to Vincent de Paul, 27 May 1649).²

“Tell him I thank him for sending me to mission ...” are the very words of gratitude, coming from a dying confrere, for a beautiful missionary vocation beyond successful stories in that faraway place. Indeed, to Vincent, regardless of little success or even failure, both Charles and Nicolas remained confreres with exemplary zeal for souls. After Father Nacquart’s death, Vincent not only praised him in conferences on different occasions, but also dreamed that the

¹ *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume III, p. 597. Future references to this work will be indicated using the initials CCD, followed by the volume number, then the page number; for example: CCD:III:597.

² CCD:III:439.

Company would go and follow the same path after his missionary example. When reflecting on Nicolas Gondrée, Vincent said that he completed his “offering” to God as missionary in Madagascar at a rather young age, 29 years old! God was satisfied with his good, strong will and called him to himself. Vincent read Charles’ letter with tear-filled eyes. He then replied to the letter saying that he was crying while reading the story of Father Gondrée’s extreme suffering. Vincent esteemed highly the virtue of Nicolas Gondrée and considered him “one of the best subjects in the Company.”³

Vincent regards missionary zeal in the Company as nothing other than humble virtue in response to the “Divine Call.” Undertaking mission is all about rendering “special and divine service” to God in such a way that we need virtue. It is so special that only the saints and the chosen ones could respond to this call, he says to the confreres. *“For behold, by authority of the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith, of which the Holy Father the Pope is head, the Nuncio [Nicolò di Bagno] has chosen the Company to go and serve God on Saint-Laurent Island, also called Madagascar”* (Letter of Vincent to Charles Nacquart, 22 March 1648).⁴ Vincent contends that the call to Madagascar does not only mean a “new type” of mission (its spirit flows and differs from “Folleville”), but also the “greatness” of this call. How great is this call? It is the work of “our Sovereign Creator.” It comes from the highest authority of the Universal Church; consequently, what Charles Nacquart and Nicolas Gondrée would do in Madagascar is to be done in the name of the Universal Church.

O my more than dearest Father, what does your heart say to this news? Does it have the shame and confusion suitable for receiving such a grace from heaven, a vocation as lofty and adorable as that of the greatest Apostles and Saints of the Church of God, and the fulfillment in you, in time, of eternal plans? Humility alone, Monsieur, is capable of bearing this grace, and perfect

³ Cf. *Notices*, vol. III, 43-56.

⁴ CCD:III:278.

abandonment of all that you are and can be, in exuberant trust in your Sovereign Creator, must follow. You will need generosity and sublime courage. You also need faith as great as Abraham's and the charity of Saint Paul. Zeal, patience, deference, poverty, solicitude, discretion, moral integrity, and an ardent desire to be entirely consumed for God are as appropriate for you as for the great Saint Francis Xavier." (Letter of Vincent to Charles Nacquart, 22 March 1648).⁵

In the Asian Context

Saint Francis Xavier was the great missionary of Asia. He travelled to India, Indonesia, Japan, and was about to enter China. By mentioning Francis Xavier in his letter to Charles Nacquart, who was sent to Madagascar, Vincent perhaps was dreaming that he could also send confreres to Asia someday. He never did it. Yet, 39 years after his death, Luigi Appiani and John Muellener travelled to China for first time.⁶ Their coming was the very beginning of the journey of Vincentian missionaries in the land of Asia. The missionary charism of Vincent de Paul began to flourish on the continent of Asia.

The history of the Vincentians in Asia, as the late Paul Henzmann, former Secretary General, was convinced, is still one of the hidden treasures of the Congregation of the Mission to explore. It is true that not only the "ancient" but also the "modern" journey of the Vincentians in Asia is still to be delved into historically. By modern, I mean the period after World War II. They are best known as those apostles rendering services in various fields, particularly in priestly formation, lay education, hospitals or clinics, orphanages, parishes, social-cultural ministries, and other apostolates.

During World War II, Vincentians in China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam suffered a lot, because some

⁵ CCD:III:279..

⁶ Cf. Hugh O'Donnell CM, "The China Mission," in *Vincentiana* (1998), Volume 42, No 6; Robert Maloney CM, "Our Vincentian Mission in China: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow," in *Vincentiana* (2001), Volume 45, No. 1.

parts of East Asia were epicenters of the battlefield. In Indonesia, for instance, it happened that all missionaries were detained in the so-called Japanese “Internir”; some of them were even tortured by the Japanese military; a confrere, Father Gerard van Ravesteyn, died at sea after his naval ship was caught by a Japanese torpedo. Surabaya, a city that became the mission center of the Vincentians in Indonesia, was completely destroyed, including some historic churches. However, in difficult times, confreres showed examples of bravery and courageous perseverance. Their perseverance was indeed heroic witness based on faith in God’s providence.⁷

China has its own moving stories. In the aftermath of the so-called “Red Revolution” in China (1949), Vincentians underwent one of the hardest times of mission in the history of the Congregation. When giving his annual report, the late Superior General, James Richardson, wrote that we cannot write about how many of confreres still remained in China. In the statistics of 1980, explaining about “members definitively incorporated” on 1 January of each year (from 1968 to 1980), he mentioned “Since 1978, the Confreres residing in Continental China have not been included in this statistic (are they all still living, despite their advanced age, etc.?). The fact that they are not included in the number of priests is a partial explanation of the difference in the number of priests in 1977 and 1978.”⁸ With that brief note on China from the Superior General in 1980, we can imagine that the Vincentians (in China) were identified as the unknown or the unknowingly dispersed. What we know surely is that they were persecuted and living suffering itself. But Divine Providence worked in a surprising way. Fourteen years after the note of Father Richardson, there was a glimpse of hope in China.

Father Robert Maloney, former Superior General, made a promising trip to China in 1994 and shared about his travels in a letter

⁷ Cf. Armada Riyanto CM, “Sejarah Gereja Indonesia: Periode Jepang dan Pemulihannya” (History of the Church in Indonesia: Japanese Period and the Restoration), a paper presented at the seminar held in Widya Sasana School of Philosophy and Theology, Malang, Indonesia, 30 October 2015.

⁸ James Richardson, CM, “The State of the Congregation,” *Vincentiana*, No. 3 (1980), 104.

of 28 April 1994. Whereas even God himself might have “difficulty” communicating with Vincentians in China, as Father Maloney said, Sister Emma Lee, DC, could have communication with them. This is the work of Divine Providence. “She knows where almost all the sisters and confreres live. As a result, we were able to speak with more than 100 people during the visit, including 46 Daughters of Charity, 44 of whom renewed their vows in very moving ceremonies. We have now, moreover, identified 15 Vincentians on the Mainland.”⁹ Telling moving stories, Father Maloney mentioned a name of Sister M. “M is 91 years old and joined the Company in 1924! She went to Paris for the seminary and then returned and became the assistant to the novice directress. She was a sister 25 years before the liberation! She then spent 24 years in prison and in labor camps. Afterwards she was put on the probation and had to sweep the streets.”¹⁰

Besides China there are also stories coming from different countries. “It is not only in China,” said Father Maloney, “that I have met heroic men and women [Vincentians] ... In my trip to Vietnam, I spoke with confreres who were in prison for nearly a decade. All of the priests and sisters worked at forced labor in the countryside after the fall of Saigon. For 15 years our confreres were, by and large, restricted to the house. We talked at length about the difficulties of this ‘monastic period,’ when they could perform no public ministries. Yet many confreres and the Daughters have a wonderful way of interpreting these events. They see them as God’s way of placing them side by side with the poor, when perhaps previously they had occupied too prestigious a place in society.”¹¹

After having visited China (2007), Father Gregory Gay wrote, “Our history in China has been long with more than 1000 members in the Congregation of the Mission, 400 of them of Chinese origin. There have been about that many Daughters of Charity, Chinese and foreign, as well. And although it has been interrupted any number of times because of the political situations, the Vincentian presence in

⁹ *Vincentiana*, Volume 38, No. 3, May-June 1994, 105.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

the Church continues to be desired. I hope and pray that many in the Congregation and the entire Vincentian Family nurture the desire to be part of this new and exciting work of evangelization in a fuller way when Divine Providence permits us to do so.”¹²

Similarly, Father Hugh O’Donnell, former Visitor of China Province, remarked, “It has been said that China was never more open to the Gospel than it is today. Many agree that there is a widespread search for meaning going on in the personal lives of many in China. There is disenchantment with the ancient and modern world views available to the people. There is a hunger for the Gospel or for gospel values, which has been demonstrated by the appeal the Gospel has to many university students ... In many ways it is the lay people who are best situated to respond to this hunger. This calls for a formation all its own. Can we prepare ourselves for these challenges?”¹³

Internationality and Interculturality

Two key words proposed in the document of the 2016 General Assembly are “internationality and interculturality.” They are not just terminology, but also and especially “spirit” that has been, is, and will be lived out in the Congregation in modern history. To Vincentians in Asia, internationality and interculturality are character as well as challenge at the same time. Socio-cultural, socio-religious, socio-political, or socio-economical contexts of everyday life in Asia are so vast and diverse that both internationality and interculturality are, thus, matching the Asian atmosphere.

Vincentians have been seeking to pursue and realize international collaboration in missions of different countries such as Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, as well as China and Taiwan. International missions are not only beautiful fruits of generous collaboration, but also and especially the very characteristics of the presence of the Vincentians. By realizing international collaboration, they have been living out intercultural community. Interculturality becomes a “way of life” for Vincentians.

¹² *Vincentiana*, Volume 51, No. 6, November-December 2007, 406.

¹³ *Vincentiana*, Volume 42, No. 6, November-December 1998.

The experience of the Province of China could be an example of the Divine Providence that guides the Congregation to live out internationality and interculturality. In the last two decades, the China Province has welcomed generous missionaries from different provinces, such as the USA, Ireland, Indonesia, the Philippines, Poland, India, Vietnam, and Australia. Hugh O'Donnell, as Visitor, initiated it. Due to a decline of vocations and increasing numbers of elderly confreres, those missionaries from different cultural backgrounds have been working together beautifully to keep the Vincentian charism of mission and charity alive and flourishing in the province. Recently, they have been helping diocesan priests from China to experience international ongoing formation in collaboration with the provinces of the USA, Indonesia, and the Philippines. They also look for vocations on mainland China and Taiwan. In this context, internationality and interculturality are not only characteristic, but also sort of a "driving force" that defines the identity of being Vincentian in Asia and the Company's journey to the future.

Love is inventive and creative and so are the fruits of collaboration in the international missions. Vincentians are working hand-in-hand with other missionaries for the love of the charism in priestly formation, as well as in rendering service to poor people. Similarly, this is what is happening in the international missions in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. "Even if God might have forgotten people in the Solomon Islands, Vincentians should not forget to proclaim the good news to them," the late missionary, Victor Bieler, once challenged us.

The challenges of the Provinces of India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines are typical and plural; and yet, to them formation of candidates and ongoing formation seem to remain the most challenging tasks to accomplish. Formation for mission that includes Vincentian virtues, mastering foreign languages, as well as openness to intercultural or interreligious dialogue is a very delicate duty. The international collaboration of these provinces to pursuing this formation could contribute to guaranteeing a brighter future on the continuous journey of the Congregation.

To Saint Vincent, however, future means Divine Providence. Future belongs to God's generous and loving Providence and not to our human efforts. Divine Providence is his loving plan in accompanying us to realize our humble efforts through history. What we need is unconditional love to accomplish the duties of our missionary call. We are only humble servants, who seek to be faithfully good ones.

Be Like a "Fine Army"

Vincent's missionary charism flows from his own person. He was indeed a simple missionary who rendered faithful service to no other than the Will of God. He called the mission of Madagascar a "*true vocation*" of the little Company. He also hoped that the Company would be like a "fine army," which would never surrender and abandon the battlefield despite the suffering or death of confreres.

To end this reflection on his missionary charism, it would be well to recall Vincent's encouraging words regarding this "true vocation" of a fine army, the Little Company, in the Repetition of Prayer on 30 August 1657:

Someone in the Company may say perhaps that Madagascar should be abandoned; flesh and blood will use that language and say that no more men should be sent there, but I'm certain that the Spirit says otherwise ... dear confreres ... could we possibly be so base and unmanly (cowardly) as to abandon this vineyard of the Lord to which His Divine Majesty has called us merely because four, five, or six men have died? And tell me what a fine army it would be if, because it lost two or three, four, or five thousand men – as they say happened at the latest siege of Normandy – it would abandon everything! What a nice sight an army of runaways and poltroons like that would be! Let's say the same of the Mission; it would be a fine Company of the Mission if, because five or six had died, it were to abandon the Lord's work! What a cowardly Company, attached to flesh and blood! Oh, no! I don't think there's a single member of the Company who has such little courage, or who isn't ready to go to take the place of those who have died. I don't doubt that nature may tremble a little at first, but the spirit, which has the upper hand, says, 'I'm willing; God has given me the desire to go....'¹⁴

¹⁴ CCD:XI:372-374; Conference no. 172.