

# SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW

## Learning and Living Vincentian History

Spotlight on

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In this issue we begin a new feature in *Vincentiana*; namely "Spotlight Interview". Each issue will feature an interview with a person with an interest in "all things Vincentian". Our initial spotlight today is on a confrere whose lifetime of ground-breaking research and writing has firmly established Vincentian studies as an important component of international formation for our charism. Fr. John E. Rybolt, C.M. a confrere from the Province of the West (USA), has devoted much of his life and ministry to researching, writing, and speaking about Vincentian history and spirituality. He entered the Congregation in 1959 and was ordained in 1967. He currently lives at the DePaul University residence for confreres in Chicago, Illinois. While in Rome in Fall 2012 to do research in the archives, Fr. Rybolt agreed to be interviewed.

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**Q. Describe your background (family origins, path to the CM's, education, and ministry).**

I was born and grew up in Los Angeles, California, my family's home. I became familiar with the Vincentians when I entered Queen of Angels, the local diocesan minor seminary where the confreres taught. I completed four years of high school and two years of college there, and then I decided to enter the Vincentian community, so I went to Perryville, Missouri, to enter the novitiate and then to attend the major seminary. I was ordained to the priesthood in 1967 as a member of the Midwest province.

As for my education, besides my degree from the seminary in Perryville, I received a Masters degree from Harvard University in near Eastern languages; a licentiate (STL) from The Catholic University of America; another licentiate from the Biblicum in Rome, and another Master's degree from De Paul University in Chicago. Eventually, I completed a doctorate at St. Louis University with a concentration in Scripture.

In terms of assignments, I have worked mostly in seminary formation and education throughout my priesthood. I worked at Kendrick seminary in St. Louis, Missouri; De Andreis Seminary, in Lemont, Illinois; St. Thomas Seminary in Denver, Colorado; and DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois.

After I left St. Thomas Seminary in Denver, I was asked by Fr. Robert Maloney, then Superior General, to devise an ongoing formation program for confreres. It was to be located in Paris at the Maison Mere. So with the help of a number of confreres, I founded the Center for International Formation (CIF) which serves members of the Congregation the world over. It provides ongoing formation in Vincentian history, spirituality, and missiology. I was there for a decade to refine and expand the CIF program. I currently reside and work at DePaul University.

***Q. What are the major works (books) you've written?***

I have edited and authored several books and numerous articles on Vincentian heritage and history. Included in these are "American Vincentians", "Felix DeAndreis: Letters and writings", "Following in the footsteps of St. Vincent de Paul to France". I've also written a number of articles in various journals over the years on different aspects of Vincentian heritage and history.

***Q. What spurred your interest in Vincentian history? Have you always had an interest in history, and why Vincentian history?***

I consider myself a student of history, as I have always had an interest in things historical. I really can't say when I decided exactly to concentrate on Vincentian history. I recall that when I was stationed at Kendrick Seminary in St. Louis, where Vincentian roots run deeply, I decided that I would research the history of the seminary. As it had not been done before, I did so, and discovered the roots of the seminary were intertwined with the Vincentians in St. Louis. After doing this research, which started out as purely for personal understanding, I was hooked.

While doing that research, I began to work in the provincial archives of the Midwest province, and I saw a great need for organization of the archives. So I began to work unofficially as an archivist, while also continuing with my research. It worked well for the province, as the archives were organized into a usable and up-to-date system. It also spurred me to find new areas for research about the Congregation beyond my province, including the United States, and eventually the international community.

***Q. How do you go about doing research? Did you develop a method or were you taught one?***

I would say that I learned about doing research from various academic degree programs I took at Harvard, Catholic University, the Biblicum in Rome, and St. Louis University. Each program called for research and writing term papers, so I learned to pay attention to details, to investigate, and follow ideas when doing research. What I learned terms of a method was to let my research to take place on a couple of levels, particularly in regard to Vincentian history. Often, I began on an initial level of exploring the topic from an institutional perspective, researching the writings and reports of a Visitor, minutes of a provincial council meeting, or correspondence with the superior general.

But I also learned that it was important to research on another level for the personal aspects of a topic I was investigating. So reading provincial correspondence, letters, reports to Paris, and the like helped me to see what was going on not only on institutional level for a province or an apostolate, but also on a personal level for the confreres who were involved. In doing research, I also learned to keep an eye out for interesting or unusual comments or situations, and see if and how they would recur. For example if the provincial report noted some concern about a house, a work, or a confrere, I would see if this train of thought was repeated, or if it was reported to Paris, where it would often show up in the minutes of the General Counsel.

So if I could call this a method, it would be that my research started at a larger (macro) question or issue and then focused on specifics (micro) issues, especially if something was unclear or there were unusual aspects of it. I would then see how and if it might recur and be articulated through other correspondence. I would also look to see if and how the particular issue or concern played out over a period of time.

My research has also been aided by having access to digitized records of meeting minutes of the General Curia in Paris from 1827 through 1950. While this has helped my research a great deal, I have also had to contend with reading minutes written in longhand until the 1930s,

so some of my work was unfortunately dependent on the penmanship of the secretary of the Curia at that time! My research was also helped much in having access to letters and correspondence of the Superior General and Curia with the various provinces over this time. And again while they were obviously periods in which there was a gap in communications, it was helpful to be able to see how a particular province or provincial and his counsel would present and evaluate a concern and how the Superior General and the Curia of that time would react to it and respond.

***Q. What are you working on right now? How is it going? When will you be finished?***

Right now, I am engrossed in researching and writing a six volume work entitled, "The Vincentians: A General History of the Congregation of the Mission". The first volume has already been published. The second, third, and fourth volumes are finished, but they are currently being edited for style and content. I am currently writing the fifth volume, and simultaneously, I am researching the sixth and final volume. It is my hope that the final two volumes will be finished and ready for publication in a couple of years.

I view this six volume work as what I call an "encyclopedia-type" overview of the Congregation of the Mission. As I had the chance to go through archives in provinces all over the world (especially in Paris and in Rome at the General Curia), I have been able to compile a great deal of information which is enormous assistance to me. It has helped both in outlining and eventually writing and editing these six volumes. This six volume work contains a history of the Congregation through times when there was both stability and growth and great upheaval and disarray (such as during the French Revolution and the time of Napoleon). There were times when written sources were sketchy, erratic and in many cases incomplete. But I was still able to access a number of different sources.

***Q. In your years of doing research for CM history, what have been 2 or 3 of the most startling discoveries you have made?***

What often gets my attention is the interpretation of the structure of rules, regulations, the constitutions and statutes in a given time. What is startling at times from the viewpoint of research are "gaps" in information that occur in the course of discussion of after these rules and regulations. The facts alone as presented can sometimes seem insufficient, requiring further research and an in-depth look at a given situation.

For example, one the records of one province indicated a provincial constantly in and out of his job, often gone for months, and then returning. Upon further research, I discovered the man was being treated for severe epilepsy. Had I not research this more comprehensively, I might have just assumed the explanation for his behavior was due to personal difficulties.

Another discovery that I made through my research was the depth of the extensive level of conflict between the French and Italian provinces of the congregation. In one sense, it was no surprise, given the French foundation of the community, and the instability brought on by the French revolution and the Napoleonic era. What was interesting to me in my research was to see the growth and vibrancy of the Italian provinces, and how their missionary outreach was responsible for the spread of the Congregation to Spain, Portugal, and the United States. To some extent, I knew this from my own cursory reading and research of the history of the Congregation, but the strength and impact of the Italian provinces, and their role as a catalyst for missionary work was something my research brought home to me.

Another surprise that surfaced in my research was the recurring situation of confreres who became involved with a person claiming to be a “seer”. The scenario in which this usually occurred was when a parishioner or someone seeking out the confrere for spiritual advice confided of having a vision, usually associated with Mary. The situation developed into one where the confrere trying to help the person claiming to have had the vision often ended up in conflict with other confreres, the Visitor, and the local Ordinary. In a case I researched, there were over 1000 pages of information and correspondence on this one situation alone! Even after the Visitor and local bishop intervened to settle the situation, the person claiming to have the vision persisted for years. This was quite startling to me because it occurred in several different provinces over the course of a number of years.

***Q. In doing “Vincentian research” what has been most difficult and challenging for you?***

People have been very good about giving me access to information by and large, whether it has been at the Motherhouse in Paris, or the General Curia in Rome. And when I have traveled to various provinces and provincial archives in different parts of the world, I have been given unfettered access to archives and documents related to the history of a province, the minutes of a provincial and his counsel, and other records relating to the works, houses, and personnel of a province.

What is difficult for me is that such information is often not shared on a larger scale. To some extent, I think that this is due to a lack of

trained archivists in various provinces. I understand that with all the personnel challenges a provincial and his counsel face today in trying to staff apostolates, archivists would not be at the top of the list of appointments. But I do wish there was more of a larger scale effort to train archivists for provinces, so that the information they gathered would be more readily available and easier to access. I also believe that this concern not unique to our Congregation, but exists in other religious communities.

***Q. As you know SIEV was established to encourage education, research, and study of our Vincentian heritage and history by providing symposiums. Yet interest & attendance by confreres has been small. Why is this so, and what would you do increase confrere interest?***

I can't really speak to the situation of this SIEV. I am not really familiar with the workings of the commission, and so I do not want to judge them for their work. I was a presenter at the June 2012 symposium at All Hallows College in Dublin, and I was disappointed by the low number of confreres who attended. In terms of increasing the interest of confreres, I believe it has to be championed by the Visitors, and they should keep an eye out for confreres with a talent and ability for research on Vincentian history, spirituality, and missiology. The other thing that I hope will raise the interest of the confreres is the six-volume work I previously mentioned. My hope is that "The Vincentians: A General History of the Congregation" will spur interest, dialogue, and further research among the confreres.

***Q. What would you say to encourage young confreres to take on the task of research and writing Vincentian history?***

I think it is always challenging for young confrere to do research and writing above and beyond what his seminary, academic, or apostolic requirements demand. I think one area we could encourage young confreres to take on the task of researching and writing about Vincentian history spirituality and missiology would be to arrange it so it could be part of an academic program. I know we have had discussions of this sort at DePaul University in Chicago, in trying to come up with a type of degree program whereby the confrere could work towards an academic degree or certificate program for his research efforts. A great challenge here is always the language and education level. To do in-depth research of the Congregation involves the need for a reading proficiency in French and other languages. That being said, I still want to encourage confreres to take an interest in researching, learning, sharing in, and writing about all things Vincentian.

**Q. *In researching and writing so extensively on the past, has your work given you any clues about the directions the Congregation should pursue today, or the challenges it faces in the future?***

In terms of challenges the Congregation faced in the past, and still must deal with today and in the future, there are three themes I see in all my research: "Men, money and mission". As I have researched and read about various provinces in different areas and eras of the Congregation, it seems that the availability of personnel, financial resources for the province, and establishing and stabilizing works are three common, recurring elements in the history of the Congregation of the Mission. And they must all be in relative harmony and good working order for a province and the world-wide Congregation to move forward.

I call this the proverbial three-legged stool; you need all three legs of the stool to stand properly and be of maximum use. If any one of the three legs (men, money, and mission) is missing, then the stool is of no use. I think it's an apt analogy for the Congregation then as well as now. In my research, time and again provinces often experience difficulty in one or more of these issues, and how they respond to these challenges often determines whether the province and in fact the Congregation as a whole is able to move forward.

Another recurring theme my research has shown me is that problems occurring in the administration of a province are best faced head-on, because when they are not, the consequence is greater and the outcome is often considerably worse than it would have been had the problem been faced and dealt with at its start. I guess what I'm saying is in researching the Congregation it appears those in times when there is denial of a problem or delay in dealing with it, the situation only deteriorates further. Avoidance and denial of a problem are not a pliable strategy.

Two other implications I can draw out from my research:

1. The future of the Congregation of the Mission is and will be predominantly non-European, as we are seeing now in the growth of provinces in the developing nations.
2. They will be in need for provinces and regions to create and maintain resources. I know that confreres are our greatest resource, and they will continue to be; but I think it will be important for provinces and for the Congregation as a whole to develop a plan for adequate financial resources in order to continue the mission and care for our members. Both were concerns very near and dear to the heart of St. Vincent de Paul as is frequently seen in his letters and correspondence. So that will be our challenge as well.