

# SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW

## An Interview with Fr. Tomaz Mavric, C.M.

Visitor, Vice-Province of Saints Cyril & Methodius



John T. Maher, C.M.,  
with Tomaz Mavric, C.M.

### ***Editor's note***

VINCENTIANA welcomes Fr. Tomaz Mavric, C.M., Visitor of the Vice-Province of Saints Cyril and Methodius. Born in Argentina of Slovenian parents who emigrated when Slovenia (then part of Yugoslavia) fell under communist rule after World War II, Fr. Tomaz has served in ordained ministry outside his native land as a missionary in Canada and Russia. He was named Visitor of the Vice-Province of in 2009, and reappointed in 2012. He spoke with us recently.

### ***Tell about your background; family life, schooling, and how you came to the Congregation.***

I was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1959, and am one of five children. My parents moved there from Slovenia due to the Communist repression of religious and civil rights when Tito took over after World War II. After leaving Slovenia, they lived in a refugee camp in Austria before Argentina granted asylum to Slovenians. Although I grew up in Argentina and learned Spanish in school, we had a strong community of Slovenians who kept our ethnic heritage alive. There was an area

just outside Buenos Aires called 'Slovenian Village'. There, the confreres had a parish and a boarding school that I attended, which is how I came to the Congregation.

After I graduated, I decided to enter the Congregation as a member of the Slovenian Province. I did my formation in Ljubljana, where I studied philosophy and theology, and made novitiate in Belgrade. I was ordained in 1983 in Ljubljana. My parents attended, and since I hadn't seen them in several years, it was a truly joyous occasion. It was the first time they returned to their native land in three decades. My mother with my youngest brother came to visit me once before a few years before ordination. It was a very poignant time for all of us.

### *Where have you served in your ministry as a Vincentian?*

I requested to go to the missions, specifically Madagascar. I was first assigned to our Slovenian parish in Toronto, Ontario Canada, a place (like Argentina), that welcomed a sizable number of Slovenian immigrants. Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal is a large, active parish. I threw myself into the sacramental life of the parish, and did ministry with the young people. It was a great pastoral and community experience. I served at Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal for ten years, from 1984-1994.

In 1994, I was sent to Slovenia where I served for three years. The country was quite different- Tito, the communist dictator, was dead. The "Yugoslavia" of the past now gave way to independent nation states, and Slovenia was the first to declare its independence. So, it was a time of great upheaval with new-found freedoms not seen for generations. While it was exciting, there was much instability in the region, as ancient religious and ethnic rivalries were rekindled. I served in a parish, and did youth ministry and vocation promotion.

In 1997, I got my "missionary wish". Then Superior General, Fr. Robert Maloney asked for volunteers to go to an international mission starting in Russia in Niznij Tagil, a remote area in the Ural Mountains. This area had held numerous prison camps (or 'gulags'). Most of the people interred were sent there by Stalin. They were classified as lifelong 'enemies of the state' although they had done nothing illegal.

I arrived with a confrere from Poland. I didn't speak Polish, nor did he speak Slovenian. But somehow, we managed to communicate and learned to live together as brothers and co-workers. Our parish was a tiny church. It was a new experience: For example most of the people, because of their isolation from the other parts of the world did not hear about Vatican II and the changes it brought to the Church and world. They had been in a 'survival mode' for so long that they relied on the religious faith and devotions of their youth, which was heroic.

It was so deeply moving to hear of how they had survived for so long as a community, meeting for prayer in small groups in houses, parks, and cemeteries. One elderly woman (her name is Lydia and she is still alive today!) went often to a very long journey by train to meet secretly with a priest who would supply her with consecrated hosts she would take back for communion prayer services. She was (and still is) a wonderful inspiration to me!

Over time, we were able to grow as a parish community, overcoming a great deal of fear and reticence from the people. They were clearly affected by all they had endured. Also, the Catholic Church was viewed suspiciously by the regional government and the local people. Our parish church was a pre-fabricated building made in Germany and sent via large trucks. The drivers who delivered it said that while traveling in Russia, some criminals stopped them with the intent to steal it until they found out it was for a church. They decided it would be bad luck to do so, and let the drivers through! The Church was assembled quickly and it was dedicated on May 13, the feast of Our Lady of Fatima, which became the name of the parish.

In 2001, I left our mission in Russia and went to Ireland to do some human development coursework, which was a wonderful person experience. In 2002 I accompanied our Novices from then already the Vice-Province who joined the Novitiate of the Slovakian Province in Banska Bistrica, Slovakia. In 2003 I had a knee replacement surgery, so I returned to Slovenia.

In 2004, I was assigned to our house in Kiev, which we call "God's gift" because of Divine Providence (which guided Fr. Paul Roche, Visitor, to find generous donors to purchase land and build a provincial house). In 2009, I became Visitor, and was reelected Visitor in 2012.

***What challenges do you face as the Visitor of the Vice-Province of Sts. Cyril & Methodius?***

Well, the challenges are many, but I have great confidence in our confreres.

The Divine Providence, Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal and St. Vincent walk before us. I would say that my first and greatest wish is for us to learn to know Jesus and St. Vincent more intensely, and in their works to emulate Vincent as a true 'mystic of charity'. (Fr. Hugh O'Donnell used this term at our yearly Vice-Provincial retreat that he led, and said it was coined by an Italian confrere).

In my first term, I set some goals like strengthen our presence in ministries in place; to insure that each local community has direct contact with the poor; to help our confreres spread our charism to this part of the world; to organize and "grow" the presence of the Vin-

centian Family here, to insure the stability and growth of our formation system so we can attract 'native' vocations. However, we live in an area where Catholics are a very small percentage, and civic and religious realities make it challenging for parochial and pastoral ministry. But, like our men, I believe we have a great contribution to make as Vincentians.

In my second term as Visitor (which started last year), we are considering to keep strengthening the present ministries among others The Vincentian Harbour Project, ministry to the Catholic foreigner students, Parish mission team and develop some new projects. We are thinking to develop a Vincentian Spirituality Center in the city of Sniatyn where the grave of Blessed S. Marta Wiecka, DC is, to provide programs for pilgrims, our apostolates, the Vincentian family. I would also like to see at one point even many years down the road to strengthen our presence in Russia, as we call it a "mission within a mission". Of course, doing that involves dealing with complicated civic and religious factors beyond our control, but I still say, let's try it and see! I also would like to 'grow' our Vincentian Family roots to build community, engage in on-going formation, and deepen the bonds of faith and service. Presently we have ten branches of the Vincentian Family within the borders of the Vice-Province (which include the Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia).

One branch that is fast growing is the Association of the Miraculous Medal. Here in the Ukraine, we have over 2,500 registered members. Through Mary's intercession, we are gathering young people, families, and new members of the Church into the Association, which, as you know, promotes devotional and service opportunities to the poor in line with our Vincentian charism. Many of our people in the AMM personally attest to the power of the Miraculous Medal in their lives. I see only good things for the growth of the AMM in the Vice-Province, and I believe Mary's intercession will be essential for future ministries, especially in Russia.

Last but not least, we need to be open to 'new ways' of reaching out and serving the poor.

### *Is there any one great challenge for the future that concerns you?*

Well, of course one ongoing challenge is an operational one that every Visitor has to deal with: finances! As a young vice-province with small numbers of Catholics, many of whom live in poverty, our resources are slim. So we must depend on financial assistance from the Curia, other provinces, donations, and grants. That is why developing the "Patrimony Fund" is essential for our future. We must have a stable financial base to fund existing works, undertake new ministries, and provide for the formation of our seminarians. We cannot live "hand

to mouth' financially each year if we want to stabilize and also grow in the future.

So we are always looking for new ways to raise funds, including going to foundations to get grants through V.S.O., etc.

***In terms of confreres, what is the makeup of the Vice-Province today?***

We are currently twenty-four confreres, where almost half of whom are native to the Ukraine, home of most of our works. Many of our vocations come from the Eastern part of Ukraine known as "Transcarpatia". It borders with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and has been under the domination of empires and nations, including Austria-Hungary and the Soviet Union. In that part of Ukraine we have a community house, mission (in Perechyn) with six parishes.

Currently, we have six young men in formation: three who were recently ordained to the diaconate, two in the novitiate, and one in theological studies. The average age of the confreres here is 44, which is great for us, as it provides vitality to build up the presence of the Church and the Congregation in this part of the world. Most of our men are in pastoral and parochial ministry, but we have confreres primarily involved in other ministries, such as formation, parish mission teams, teaching in the seminary, and direct service to the poor. It is essential we provide excellent initial and ongoing formation so as to constantly guard the depth of our spiritual life, so that we can continue to grow in our Vincentian vocation.

***How would you describe the state of the Church in the Ukraine?***

Well, historically the Catholic population of the Ukraine has never been big in number, where the Orthodox Church is the majority. This factor, along with the Stalin era, Soviet occupation of the Ukraine intensified the reality of the Church as a small minority.

Although the Church here is small, the Diocesan Clergy, Men and Women Congregations, Laity are trying to create vibrant, welcoming communities in parishes as well as in other areas of ministry and service.

In terms of the external factors of life and ministry here, we find that while it varies from place to place, overall, we have more freedom of movement in the Ukraine than is true in other places.

***Lastly, where would you like to see the Vice-Province be five years from now?***

Well, of course, five years will be past my time as Visitor. The Divine Providence will guide us. I believe that the intercession of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal and St. Vincent will do great things for our Vice-

Province and the Vincentian Family. I would like see the numbers of vocations not to stop but even increase. I would like for us to keep looking for new signs of the times, engaging in the 'New Evangelization' and expanding our works for and with the poor. I would like for us, individually and as a Vice-Province, to search for answers what does it mean to be "mystics of charity" and walk towards the goal.