

FEATURE:

“New Missions” of the C.M.

New Dawn in the East: The Vice-Province of SS. Cyril and Methodius

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Vice-Visitor of SS. Cyril and Methodius

Unless you are very close friend, being asked to look through the Family Photo Album can be rather tedious! With this in mind, I have tried to reflect on what might be of interest to all readers — not just those who know the Vice-Province directly.

1. Origins

The birth of the Vice-Province on 1 January 2001 was a little untypical of how vice-provinces generally start. It was not a case of a mission from a mother province gradually developing and becoming strong enough to stand alone. Instead it was the bringing together of five separate missions. These missions were quite distant from one another in three different countries of the former USSR; they worked separately under the guidance of their home provinces. The Polish Province was responsible for two of them, Slovakia for a third, and the remaining two were International Missions directly under the Superior General. There was very considerable energy and enthusiasm in each of these missions and remarkable progress had been made before there was any plan to merge them together.

Belarus. The present Vincentian mission in Belarus, which was resumed in 1990, is in fact a continuation of a much longer presence, which actually survived through the communist era in the

remarkable person of Fr. Michal Woroniecki. Fr. Michal was arrested in Lyskovo (Belarus) in 1949 and spent seven years in exile in Kazakhstan. On being set free he returned to nearby Ruzhany, and spent the next 34 years labouring alone in a very large area of Western Belarus. His final years were spent as Spiritual Director of the seminary in Grodno. At present five Polish confreres work in this region not far from the Polish border, in an area which was part of Poland up to the end of World War II. Four of these confreres work in separate but neighbouring parishes, while the fifth works in the Diocesan Seminary in Grodno.

Ukraine. By the time the new Vice-Province began in 2001, Ukraine was already home to three separate Vincentian Missions. 1) Slovakian confreres were working in the Zakarpatye region of Western Ukraine, directly across the border from Slovakia. They made their centre at **Perečín**, and took responsibility for a number of parishes in the neighbourhood. The area has a very large Greek Catholic community, and a much smaller Orthodox presence. Vocations were attracted and our first two Ukrainian confreres were ordained for the Slovakian Province in June 2000. 2) In the southwestern Ukrainian region of Bukovina (on the border with Romania) the Polish Province had a mission dating back to 1992. It centres in the town of **Storozyniec**, but covers a very wide area with a total of 15 churches and Mass centres. The area is poor and has a variety of nationalities and religions living there: Ukrainian, Polish, Hungarian, Romanian and a small German community. The people give allegiance to Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches, and a number of sects have recently been established. As in most of the areas where we work, there was a thriving Jewish community here up to World War II, but no more! Here too vocations to the Congregation have resulted from the tireless work of the confreres and Daughters of Charity. The first of these was ordained in May 2001. 3) The third Vincentian Mission in Ukraine to be incorporated into the new Vice-Province was the International Mission in the city of **Kharkiv**. This was started in 1995 and combined Slovakian and Polish confreres. Kharkiv is a city in eastern Ukraine, and was capital of the country during the Soviet era. The people of Kharkiv are mainly Russian speaking, and the city has a Russian feel to it. Catholics are a very small proportion of the population. Vincentian life here revolves around a very fine Social/Pastoral Centre and Parish Church, which were built directly by the confreres, who began with nothing other than an abandoned orphanage in 1995.

Russian Federation. The final mission which was incorporated into the new Vice-Province in 2001 was the International Mission in the remote Ural Region of Russia. It is more than 1,600 kilometres east of Moscow, and is in Asia rather than Europe. The community

there has combined Slovenian and Polish confreres since it began in 1997. The centre of this mission is Nižnj Tagiž, an industrial city of over 450,000 inhabitants. One of the main centres of the armament industry of the Soviet Union, it is only in recent years that it is gradually finding a new purpose in life. The Catholic population here, and in the other centres which the confreres care for in this region, are mainly of German or Polish origin and many are the children of those who were exiled by Stalin to exploit the mineral resources of that inhospitable region.

2. Works of the Vice-Province

We are mainly engaged in parishes. This has been the request of the various bishops. In each of these areas, while the number of church-going Catholics is relatively small, there are any amount of social problems, and a real absence of welfare support. Poverty abounds in both cities and rural areas; broken homes are almost the rule; alcoholism and, increasingly, drug abuse wreak havoc in people's lives; unemployment gives rise to despair. There is a great need for the hope that the Gospel can bring. We are trying to respond to these needs as a Vincentian Family. In practically all the missions of the Vice-Province, the confreres work with the Daughters of Charity from Poland and Slovakia. They bring their gentleness and compassion to many a desperate life. The AIC is alive and active in a couple of the missions, and hopefully will gradually begin in each place. The support and encouragement we are receiving from the international leadership is greatly appreciated. The Vincentian Marian Youth has begun in the past year, and each area has groups of youth looking for the sort of Christian formation and involvement that JMV offers. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is the longest established of the lay Vincentian groups and is already making a very worthwhile contribution in the struggle against poverty, especially in Kharkiv.

At the first Assembly of the Vice-Province, held in September 2003, we adopted as a norm for the Vice-Province that each Vincentian community must establish and run a project of direct service of the poor. This is virtually the case already, and some of the missions have more than one such programme.

3. Membership of the Vice-Province

The membership of the Vice-Province is gradually changing from being a group of foreign missionaries to a community of confreres born and reared here. Five Ukrainian confreres have already been ordained priests in the Congregation and this year we will hopefully have two more deacons. In addition we have a further eight students

(one of whom is Belarussian), studying philosophy and theology in the diocesan seminary near Kiev.

I can imagine that it was the fact of these vocations, which convinced those responsible to decide to start a new Vice-Province. Other indicators might be less encouraging. Catholics are a small minority in virtually all the places we work and financial support is minimal — and there is little realistic hope of much improvement in the immediate future. Also it is difficult to develop a sense of unity in a huge region where we are separated into different countries with very different legal, political, economic and social conditions. Language differences too are very real. We have adopted Russian as our official language, even though it is the first language of just two of our 33 members. To move from one house to another of the Vice-Province frequently involves getting a visa, and generally requires a new language — our ministry is in Polish, Ukrainian, Slovakian, Russian, Belarussian, German and, if we had it, Hungarian and Romanian, and hopefully soon also Lithuanian. In Vilnius, Lithuania, we hope eventually to regain the beautiful Gothic Church and large former seminary of the Polish Province.

In this widespread Vice-Province I travel a lot by train, and on average spend four or five days a month looking out train windows, as the snowy landscapes gradually give way to mile after mile of corn and sunflower under bright blue skies, as winter changes to summer.

The city of Kiev is the centre of the Vice-Province. Presently we are engaged in building a house for our students, and appropriately it is very close to the central railway station. At least for the present the new house will also be the home of our Internal Seminary, in addition to being the beginning of a city parish and a base for our direct work with the poor.

4. Sons of St. Vincent de Paul in the former USSR

Ours is far from being the most difficult mission of the Congregation, not the poorest, nor the most remote. Yet it does have some distinguishing marks. I pick out just two: *i*) We work in a land with a marvellous Christian tradition dating back more than 1,000 years. However this tradition is suspicious and at times even hostile to our Roman Catholicism. The Orthodox Church has produced a host of great saints and has passed on the salvation of Christ to succeeding generations. How should we respond? *ii*) We are working among a people whose political and social framework is only gradually readjusting after 70 years of atheistic communism.

Both these factors colour much of our life and work, and any plans we might have for the future must take them into account.

i) *Evangelising in an Orthodox world*

It is now almost 1,000 years since the tragic and scandalous division of Christianity between East and West. Each has developed its traditions separately from the other, and with the passing of time the differences have become more and more pronounced. Suspicion and fear have grown, and both sides are cut off from the life and energy of the other. We need each other. The Holy Father constantly uses the image of the Christian Church as a body with two healthy lungs, rather than someone puffing along on one lung. East and West have need of each other and can draw life from each other as well as give vitality and depth. We have something to offer and much to gain from the world in which we live.

Matt Molloy is an Irish traditional musician, and leader of the music group, *The Chieftains*. Recently he has written his autobiography, and recalls his experience going back 40 years or more. In the 1960s they played on the Great Wall of China, played in communist East Germany, Africa, Cuba, America — really all over the world. What were they trying to do? To get everyone to play Irish music? Surely not. He insists that far from imposing our music on others, his wish is to use Irish music to draw out the music from the hearts and souls of other peoples. They must be proud of their own music and traditions; it is part of their identity. Celebrate it — and do not just rely on pop and rock music from the west. It struck me as something similar to what we are trying to do here, as a small group of priests. We are not here to bring God to a people without God. We are here so that the people will discover and come to love the God who is with them already. They already possess the treasure; they must rediscover and celebrate it.

For all this to happen some humble listening is vital. We need to listen well in order to identify the real needs of the people, and avoid the danger of answering our questions — not theirs. I think we can well be guided by the four basic thrusts of evangelisation as found in the Gospel:

Koinonia — friendship — welcome — to provide the people with a real sense of belonging. Can we help to form a Christian community which accepts, loves, forgives and supports the individual?

Diakonia — service. From the very outset, this was a clear mark of the Christian community. They cared for one another, rich supporting the poor, residents welcoming strangers, etc. This is also the tradition of the Vincentian Family, and very much suggests itself in a region where so many people find it difficult to make ends meet.

Kerygma — proclamation, in season and out of season. So much of the life of Christ was devoted to teaching the people, often freeing

them from the burdens of tradition and law which had been laid on them by their religious leaders. This is something which also marks out the Vincentian way of evangelisation — from the example of Vincent himself. It is something very much needed here today. People are spontaneously devout, but have very little knowledge of the Christian Faith, without which real commitment is scarcely possible.

Eucharistia — thanks and praise. This is the summit and heart of the Christian life, and the goal to which all our work ultimately leads. It is however the final destiny rather than a starting point.

If we go no further than the first two steps, we are truly evangelising. When Jesus healed the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter, he gave the mother all she wanted and told her to go home happy. There was no demand that she be in the synagogue that Saturday!

Many people — not just young people — may not yet be interested in the third and fourth steps of evangelisation; they may not yet be ready. Perhaps this is because they have not yet experienced the first steps, true friendship and support. We can only help others towards healthy change in so far as we love them. Jesus, Vincent, Justin de Jacobis and all the great evangelisers, loved people into the Kingdom.

Our society here is changing at a rate much faster than we knew in the West. Old certainties are turned upside down; people seek meaning. Many feel themselves left out, passed by. What they first need may well be support and encouragement, rather than sermons and Eucharist. (It sometimes strikes me that some of the newly arrived sects here appreciate this better than we do).

ii) *The Gospel after 70 years of communism*

As someone coming from the West I am very conscious of the recent history of the Soviet world. However walking down the central streets of Kiev, one is struck by how young and energetic the city is. People under 20 years of age scarcely remember communism, and are little concerned about it. During the German occupation of Kiev in 1942-1943 more than 100,000 people were executed in the woody ravine, Babi Yar, not far from the centre of the city. Kharkiv and many other cities had similar experiences. Earlier, in 1932-1933, as many as 7 million inhabitants of Ukraine died in a man-made famine associated with the Stalinist programme of enforced collectivisation. The scars and trauma which must result from such a brutal history, not to mention the Chernobyl catastrophe (and the immediate cover-up that accompanied it), may provide a starting point for the light and healing of the Gospel.

Generally the communist experience has resulted in people being more passive and dependant on government than is the case in the West. (How much of this is actually an Eastern way of viewing things, rather than a product of communism, is another question). The individual generally counts for less than the collective and people tend to view themselves in this way. Authority is respected and generally unquestioned, and political leaders (Church ones too) can continue in a very authoritarian fashion, and in some sense are expected to do so. It has also been observed — and I think largely correctly — that communism greatly damaged the moral values of the people, but left their religiosity intact.

All of this makes for very confusing signals: people appearing so devout, yet living lives in sharp variance with the Gospel. Much of what we are about, and are trying to do here, involves inculcating different attitudes and understanding from that which is prevalent in society. Christian help is not easily distinguished from the government welfare of before and people try to take advantage of it and get all they can for themselves.

With the end of the Soviet era, there was no great rush to religion and worship. After more than 13 years of independence, I would say perhaps 5% of the population of Kiev (at most), regularly goes to church on Sunday. Formal church going does not appear to hold a very central place in the lives of most people. Can it be that, as in the West, we face a long task of making the Gospel relevant to people, first by the way we live, and then by our preaching and teaching.

I am frequently struck by the fact that many in the Orthodox Church and also in the government are also engaged in caring for the poor, the elderly, the sick, the abandoned of the places where we work. I sometimes wonder if there is more that we can do to cooperate with these groups, rather than set out to create Catholic and Vincentian works in parallel with theirs. Working side by side with Orthodox priests in caring for the poor might be a much more realistic way of restoring unity and understanding than theological debate. This possibility is not available in every place, but certainly it is in some instances.

Conclusion

As I look back over three years here, I give thanks to God for the progress that is being made in establishing the creative and practical Christianity of St. Vincent de Paul. The progress has not just been since January 2001, but ever since the first Vincentians and Daughters of Charity returned after the formal end of communism. They have been responding with great and sometimes heroic

generosity. However everything we are trying to do depends on the financial and moral support we have been receiving from individuals and provinces around the world. Any achievements we have made here are also the achievements of our supporters. I wish to record my deepest gratitude to you, and promise the only return I can make, to regularly call the blessing of God on you in Mass and prayer.

The feast of Sts. Cyril and Methodius on 14 February has largely been eclipsed in the West by St. Valentine's Day. However in this part of the world, these 9th century missionary brothers, from Thessalonica, Greece, are greatly loved and venerated by Orthodox and Catholics alike. They are our heavenly patrons and I entrust our future to them. They will teach us how to belong here, and also offer us the example of combining the monastic and apostolic way of life.



Vice-Province of Sts. Cyril and Methodius: first meeting of all the members of the new Vice-Province (Kiev - Ukraine, September 2002). At the meeting, the Superior General, Fr. Józef Kapuściak (Assistant General) and the Visitors of Hungary, Poland and Slovakia also participated.