

LIFE IN THE CONGREGATION

Spain Celebrates the Tercentenary of the Arrival of the Vincentians (1704-2004)

by Mitxel Olabuenaga, C.M.

Province of Zaragoza

According to a famous expression, if you lose your beginnings, you have lost your identity. This is possibly only a romantic or nationalist expression. But it is certain that in our dynamic western societies, celebrations are more frequently of short duration. Married couples, families, educational institutions and organizations all celebrate some event that, one way or another, makes their past present to them. And, even more interestingly, these events conclude with wishes to have many more such events.

We Spanish Vincentians are celebrating in 2004 the tercentenary of the arrival of the first confreres in Spain. The Preparatory Committee has designed various programs to celebrate the event and, from what we have been able to tell, our confreres are showing great interest in them.

In these pages of *Vincentiana* we would like to present, in a much-abbreviated way, highlights of these three hundred years. These are words of thanksgiving, words to stimulate young provinces, and words of homage to the many confreres who have preceded us. Indeed, they are the main actors in these pages.

1. St. Vincent's wishes for a Spanish foundation

St. Vincent himself made three attempts to establish the Congregation in Spain. The first involved **Catalonia**, although we do not know exactly where. This is gathered from letters written by the saint to Bernard Codoing, a priest of the Mission, and from the recommendation that Fr. Martin learn Spanish. The second looked to **Toledo**, mentioned in letters sent to Edme Jolly, a confrere and superior of the house in Rome. The third attempt was to begin in **Plasencia** (Cáceres) as we learn in a letter of St. Vincent to the same Fr. Jolly. In none of these cases, however, was the foundation carried out.

2. First steps and consolidation (1704-1774)

Barcelona (1704): the directives of the Council of Trent about the formation of the clergy and the need to give missions to the people led bishops and priests to promote the creation of seminaries and institutions dedicated to the exercise of missions. One of those priests was **Francisco Senjust y Pagés**, archdeacon of the cathedral of Barcelona. Thanks to his vigilance, the first Italian Vincentians landed at Mataró (a seaport near Barcelona), on 8 July 1704. They were Frs. Giandomenico Orsese, Giovanni Battista Balcone and Luis Narváez, together with Brothers Antonio Camino and Giacomo Bisso. They began in *Calle Tallers* in Barcelona, with Fr. Orsese as the first superior. Their works were retreats for ordinands and clergy, ecclesiastical conferences and missions. The first seminary for future Vincentians opened in 1704.

A slow consolidation followed this first establishment: **Palma de Mallorca (1736)**, **Guisona (Lérida) (1751)**, **Reus (Tarragona) (1757)**, **Barbastro (Huesca) (1759)**. The consolidation of the presence of the Congregation in Spain received a significant boost when the General Assembly of 1774 decreed the creation of the **Province of Spain**, and the naming of Fr. Vicente Ferrer as its first Visitor. Fifty-six priests, 28 brothers and nine seminarians composed the new province. They lived frugally, although they had sufficient income to exercise their ministries freely. The levels of stability were changeable, since many left, both priests and brothers. During the French Revolution, several French confreres fled to Spanish houses.

The new province began a period of establishment with a large increase of personnel (77 priests and 33 brothers in 1808). A new foundation was added to the former ones: **Badajoz (1802)** which took care of secondary students of San Atón and supervised the seminary, gave retreats of all kinds, and preached missions.

3. Two major crises in the first third of the 19th century

The Spanish-French war of 1808 set in motion the swing between the contraction and expansion so characteristic of Spain in the 19th century. The house of Badajoz barely survived being looted, and the communities of Barcelona and Reus had to flee to Mallorca. Normality did not return until after 1815. The houses were then reconstituted, but the personnel had been reduced to 55 priests and 24 brothers. Two other foundations were made during the first third of the century: **Valencia (1820)** and **Madrid (1828)**, with responsibilities to assist the Daughters of Charity, to conduct an internal seminary, to preach retreats to all classes of people, and to give missions in the villages. Several characteristics are worthy of note: 1) a relatively youthful personnel; 2) an increase of stable confreres, although only in the last third of the century did this begin to be important (especially with the suppression of religious communities in 1835); 3) a large number of those entering as already priests or clerics; this tendency would decline by half during the 19th century; 4) the large number of coadjutor brothers; 5) the overwhelming majority of Catalans, and the majority of those from the province of Barcelona; 6) the notable stability in the Congregation, although several left of their own free will or were expelled; 7) a significant number of confreres dying before completing ten years of vocation.

The decisions of successive liberal governments (1820, 1835) profoundly damaged the province's organization and works, except for the assistance given to the Daughters of Charity. Out of the suppression (1836) and subsequent seizure of property (1837) only the house of Palma survived, thanks to the work of Fr. Alejo Davú. The confreres and students fanned out all over Spain, France and Italy, and from there to various countries in the Americas, where they developed a huge apostolate.

The Concordat of 1851 between Spain and the Holy See recognized the Congregation of the Mission. Three reasons helped in this: the government's need for help for the Daughters of Charity, the good offices of Fr. Buenaventura Codina (future bishop in the Canary Islands and victim of the intransigence of Fr. Étienne), and the secular character of the Congregation. Beginning at that time, a slow process of recovery of personnel and of new houses took place. Fr. José María Román has noted that out of 115 priests, brothers, students and novices, 40 died before the restoration of 1852; 38 returned to join the Spanish province; 13 remained until their death in other Vincentian provinces; eight left the Congregation entirely; and nothing is known of the other 16.

Of the eight houses that the Congregation had before 1836, it was able to recover only two: Badajoz (in the summer of 1858, for the purpose of helping the diocesan seminary; enlarged to include missions in 1863) and Palma (1853, although, as already noted, this house always had a confrere responsible for it.) New and interesting perspectives opened at this same time both in Spain's colonies (Philippines and Cuba) and in the peninsula: **Madrid** (1852, Calle Duque de Osuna, 5), **Vitoria** (1854, where Fr. Julián González de Soto labored, another victim of the close-mindedness of Fr. Étienne), **Arenas de San Pedro (Ávila)** (1862), **Barcelona** (1867) and **Teruel** (1867).

An internal conflict (linked with the cutting off of the Daughters of Charity of Reus, and the attempts to introduce changes to their habit) began to disturb the progress of recovery. The Visitor, Fr. Armengol, with the approval of some of his councillors, asked the Superior General, in view of political circumstances, for extraordinary powers to govern the province. Fr. Étienne brought the case to the Holy See, where a committee of cardinals examined the issue and decided *that nothing should be changed, and that the authority of the Superior General should remain one over the entire Congregation, and thus over Spain*. The most immediate result of this decision was the dismissal of Fr. Armengol as Visitor and Director General of the Daughters of Charity; Fr. Étienne later expelled him from the Congregation along with other confreres.

The Revolution of September 1868 put an end to this entire restoration. By the decree of 22 October, religious orders were dissolved, including those of Sts. Philip Neri and Vincent de Paul, and the subsidy granted for seminaries was suspended. Only the house of Palma de Mallorca remained afloat during this situation. The house of Arenas de San Pedro was able to continue for a year. Some confreres dispersed to offer service in parishes or to the Daughters of Charity, while others went abroad. Especially important were the groups that reached the **Philippines** and **Cuba**, accompanied by scholastics.

The ups and downs that our confreres experienced were many, but little by little the situation normalized, as is reflected in the various Circulars of the superiors general. The **Shrine of Los Milagros** (Orense) was given to the Congregation in 1869 as the result of a mission.

Year	Houses	Priests	Brothers	Seminarians
1704	1	6	4	5
1774	5	54	28	9
1808	6	77	33	5
1834	8	96	33	6
1851	1	12	2	14
1868	6	44	39	83
1875	5	30	20	24

4. Restoration, growth and expansion of the Congregation (1875-1931)

After the political restoration of 1875, the Congregation was able to recover all its houses in a relatively short time: Madrid [1875] (which needed a new location, at Calle García de Paredes where it is now), Badajoz [1875], Ávila [1876] (moved from the former house of Arenas de San Pedro), Barcelona [1876] and Teruel [1877]. The seminarians and the Visitor with the community arrived in Madrid from Elizondo in November 1875. The house of Palma was reestablished formally, although it had never been abandoned and, in 1876, it numbered six priests and eight brothers.

The interest and effort poured into the reconstruction of the province and the renewal of its ministries are well known. The list of new houses is as follows: the seminaries of **Sigüenza** (1877), **La Laguna** (1899) and **Oviedo** (1900); the chapel of **Andújar** (1879); the mission houses of **Alfranca** (1885), **Arcos de la Llana** (1888), **Tardajos** (1892), **Las Palmas** (1894) and **Paredes de Nava** (1897); the residences of **Figueras** (1894), **Hortaleza** (1896) and **Valdemoro** (1897); the schools of **Murguía** (1888), **Alcorisa** (1893), **Limpías** (1893) and **Villafranca del Bierzo** (1899) and the apostolic school of **Bellpuig** (1899). At the same time, personnel began to nurture the houses in the **Antilles**.

In 1902 the Spanish Province was divided into two, called the provinces of **Barcelona** and **Madrid**. According to the catalogue of January 1902, there were at that time in Spain, 21 houses, 147 priests, 124 brothers, 160 scholastics and 60 novices. Far from lessening the expansion of the Congregation in Spain, the division energized its growth and enlarged its fields of ministry. In this period, there were 26 foundations in very diverse parts of Spain and new apostolates as well: the mission houses of **La Iglesuela del Cid (Teruel)** (1902), **Rialp** (1904), **Santa Cruz de la Palma** (1906), **La Orotava** (1910), **Lodosa** (1914), **Pamplona** (1922, when it was

moved from an earlier location), **Puerto de la Luz (Canaries)** (1928, moved from Las Palmas) and **Gijón** (1929); the residences of **Orense** (1902), **Écija** (1906), **Cádiz** (1908), **Ayamonte** (1916), **Madrid-Lope de Vega** (1917), **Zaragoza** (1924), **Baracaldo** (1925), **San Sebastián** (1925), **Málaga** (1927) and **Sevilla** (1929); the seminaries of **Ávila** (1922) and **Orense** (1930); Vincentian formation centers at **Espluga de Francolí** (Tarragona) (1909), **Guadalajara** (1910), **Las Rehojas (Canaries)** (1917) and **Cuenca** (1922); and the schools of **Ramales (Santander)** (1917) and **Marín** (1926).

A detailed analysis of the activities of these foundations gives us the following results. *Missions* were still very important; the *Formation of the Clergy* underwent a small reduction, less so in the Direction of Seminaries but more so in giving Retreats and Ordination Retreats (in fact, in Madrid, the main center for this work, it was set aside in 1906 since the new seminary was opened); assistance for the *Daughters of Charity* took on a special importance; *Education* began to occupy a large number of confreres, both “extern” teachers as well as teachers belonging to the local house; *Vincentian parishes*, nonexistent in Spain, began to appear.

Three characteristics demonstrate the vitality of this period: the concern to form confreres, principally from Castile, Navarre and Galicia, both in our own houses and in universities; the beginning of the first mission *ad Gentes* (Cuttack, India, 1921) and a feverish interest in the study of our own history, of its works, rules, etc. It would not be right to omit mentioning the work of Fr. Benito Paradela, the publication of *Anales*, and other internal publications, such as *La Milagrosa*.

5. The crisis of the Republic and the Civil War (1931-1939)

This growth was cut off with the coming of the **Second Republic** and then the **Civil War**. The various restrictive laws, the anticlericalism manifested in attacks and outrages against Church property and personnel, and social instability slowed down enormously the activity of the Congregation. The circulars of the Superiors General reflect, once again, the tragic situation that touched several houses and confreres.

The outrages perpetrated against our houses and personnel were many, as they were elsewhere in the nation. The reports contained in the *Anales* describe them in all their raw detail. The official figures of those assassinated in the years 1936-1939 list 37 priests and 19 coadjutor brothers.* Twenty-five Daughters of Charity were

* Cf. *Vincentiana* 43 (1999) p. 39 ff.

likewise assassinated. Also, in the “Asturias Revolution” of 1934, two priests and one brother died violently.

The Vincentian houses and apostolates resumed as the Franco troops took over the territory controlled by the Republican government. Also, in those years, there were founded the houses of **Salamanca** [1938, *missions*], **Melilla** [1938, *parish*], **Valencia** [second time: 1939, *parish* in 1941], **Huelva** [1939, *parish*], **Vall de Uxó-Castellón** [1939] and **Hortaleza** [1939, *parish*]. As a result of the civil war, the confreres left the houses of Alcorisa (Teruel), Rialp (Lérida), Guadalajara and Madrid (Lope de Vega).

6. Summit and worldwide extension (1939-1975)

The Concordat of 1953 and the vocational “boom” favored not only the recovery of the Congregation, but also its foundation in places where it had never before been present. Some characteristics of this period are: 1) the gradual leaving of houses dedicated to popular missions (5 in 1974) in favor of parishes (38) and works of education (23) and the disappearance of houses dedicated to the formation of clergy; 2) personnel dedicated preferentially to popular missions, to the formation of candidates and to missions *ad Gentes* (in the traditional works of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Honduras, Peru, the United States, as well as the Philippines and the recent mission of Cuttack, India, and the newest mission of Madagascar, 1966); 3) the international repercussion of the Major Missions, that is, missions conducted in entire cities or rural districts (Pamplona, Valencia, Sevilla, etc.) or in entire dioceses (such as Valencia, Ávila, Cáceres and Logroño); 4) the creation of the Mission Brotherhood (an association of Vincentian priests and diocesan clergy to give missions wherever the bishops might need them).

Despite not a few polemics and plans, the province of Madrid was reorganized in 1969. This gave rise to the present division into four provinces: **Zaragoza**, **Salamanca**, **Madrid** and **Barcelona**. The new Visitors were named on 25 December 1969.

Along with the division of the province, there began a period of deep crisis, coming both from new social and religious issues (democracy, Vatican II), and from the decline in the number of candidates.

The evolution of the houses and personnel in the most important moments of this period are shown in the following table:

Years	Houses	Priests	Brothers	Scholastics
1876	5	35	18	20
1902	20	140	121	220
1931	44	297	119	217
1939	42	255	74	133
1970	61	482	81	274
1975	66	434	67	91

7. Maturity and crisis (1975-2000)

The division of the province in 1969 was the occasion for a broadening of activities and a maximum use of resources. The new provincial councils brought new life to local communities and broadened their works. These were years of organization and contentment with a dash of utopian idealism. We find examples of the latter in the various provincial norms, in the formation options offered to their scholastics, in the mission dynamic, and in the search for resources. These were years of beginning works in priest-poor areas: **Sierras de Albacete, Almería, Huesca, Teruel**, etc.

Nonetheless, at the same time, a new problematic emerged: the need to adjust to the new breezes flowing in from the Council and the palpable vocational crisis. Changes in theology and in the Church wreaked havoc on some confreres who had already lost their way. The formation given had not been the best suited to respond to new challenges. The ministries, especially the popular missions, did not find their new place in the scheme of things; parishes were experiencing the dialectic of maintenance of old works versus new evangelization; and new experimental lifestyles began.

On the other hand, the demographic pyramid was showing a notable narrowing at its base. The number of students did not assure the replacement of the previous generations; add to this more departures from the community, fewer entering candidates, progressive aging of the confreres, and the closing of the majority of the apostolic schools (Esplugá, Los Milagros, Murguía, Pamplona, Teruel, Villafranca del Bierzo) and higher formation centers (Cuenca, Hortaleza, Salamanca), etc.

All this brought about a period of imbalance and frustration that only became evident beginning in the decade of the 90s, when, as far as possible, solutions were being offered. This chart illustrates these changes.

Years	Houses	Priests	Brothers	Members per house	Scholastics	Median age
1975	75	510	63	7,64	70	49
1980	77	492	58	7,14	33	52
1985	78	468	48	6,61	41	55
1990	76	456	46	6,60	35	57
1995	73	433	38	6,45	24	59
2000	69	383	33	6,02	23	62

From these figures, we can deduce a few realities: a significant lessening of the number of confreres and of candidates, the reduction in the number of local communities, and the aging of the personnel. As a result, the replacement of personnel in the next generation has been stifled. In addition, an examination of each of the four provinces will demonstrate a similar profile, although with some significant differences.

The ministries to which the confreres basically will dedicate themselves are not going to differ much from the previous generation, such as, especially, parish ministry (in more than a hundred of them). Popular missions, assistance to the Daughters of Charity, Vincentian movements (especially in the revitalization of the Vincentian youth, JMV), and schools will all continue to be important. The systematic abandonment of our educational centers, those destined to the formation both of future confreres and of laity, will begin. Nevertheless, as much as possible, the presence of the confreres will increase in Madagascar, Mozambique and Honduras.

8. Perspectives (2003)

a) *The data*

Province	Houses	Priests	Brothers	Scholastics	Median age
Barcelona	10	45	2	7	60
Madrid	17	114	16	4	64
Salamanca	20	91	12	4	64
Zaragoza	20	122	3	5	63
Total	67	372	33	20	63

b) *Commitment*

The fundamental commitment of the active population of the confreres (two-thirds of the total) is to parishes (in round numbers, 70) for the most part established in urban areas, whether in the central city or the suburbs. Non-parochial churches, chaplaincies, assistance to the Daughters of Charity, Vincentian movements, and educational centers occupy about one-third of the active personnel. A significant group is dedicated to the popular missions and to the missions *ad Gentes* (Honduras and Mozambique). A dozen confreres serve in the “new poverties,” such as the prisons in Donosti and Albacete, the immigrants in Pamplona, Teruel, Níjar, England, United States, Germany and elsewhere. Evidently, our infirmaries are daily becoming increasingly crowded.

c) *The new realities*

Together with these figures, valid for the current and future mission, we are in the midst of certain realities which, one way or another, have already begun.

Intensification and meaning of our work: just like any business which wishes to be efficient, it seems necessary to insist on these two dimensions. To intensify implies “intensity” despite the numbers. If history teaches us anything, it teaches that situations are cyclical (motives are another question), and that cycles grow shorter and shorter each day. At the same time, our activities have to be meaningful, that is, they have to be recognized and be clear in their content.

Professional management: this refers to human and material resources. It is daily more evident that, to maintain a business, it is necessary to be concerned about this dimension. Numbers, age, genuine availability (“a good idea without expertise is a bad one”), economic means, needs analysis — all this will have to be handled professionally.

Interprovincial collaboration: any division of a province, whether desired or imposed from on high, brings along a period of identification with the new province. This is what happened and what was experienced in the two divisions of provinces that took place in Spain. Following the last one, several aspects led to collaboration among the provinces, such as assistance to the Daughters of Charity, popular missions and the novitiate. The next several years will be decisive in the establishment of new areas of cooperation.

Coordination with Vincentian associations: the efforts to come to understand the meaning of each of the organizations with a

Vincentian character has to bring the Congregation of the Mission, acting out of the deepest respect, to set up joint activities based in practical units. In our days, it seems more convenient to speak of a Vincentian presence or activity rather than of this or that precise organization. Doubtless, this effort will bring with it a large dose of soul-searching in the groups and their activities.

Concrete projects (national or international): to be moved by ideals is absolutely required if we do not wish to end up wasting our time in useless endeavors. Ideals can be brought into being. One way or another, planning can open us to new realities and forms of collaboration. In this way, the future will come about: plans jointly made, jointly developed, jointly financed and jointly evaluated.

(JOHN RYBOLT, C.M., translator)