

150 Years of the Province of Chile (1853-2003) ¹

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Province of Chile

On 17 November 1853, the *Magallanes* weighed anchor at the French port of Bordeaux, capital of Aquitaine, at the mouth of the Garonne. Among the ship's passengers were two Vincentian priests, Felix Claude Vence and Raphael Dominique Sillere, along with Brother Joseph Marie Liegeois. These confreres were traveling with 30 Daughters of Charity, whose white cornettes were whipped about by the wind blowing over the water. Sr. Marie Bricquet was the Visitatrix, and Srs. Stephanie Pirot, Josephine Gavary and Louise Panes were the Sister Servants. Their ship would make its slow way along the coast and at last reach the Chilean port of Valparaíso, known as the Pearl of the Pacific.

The arrival in Chile of these Vincentian and Daughter of Charity missionaries had been in the planning since 1844, when the Minister of the government, Manuel Montt, during the presidency of Manuel Bulnes, began asking for Daughters of Charity to offer their services for several hospitals in Santiago. Only at the end of nine years was a contract signed between the Congregation of the Mission and the Government of Chile. Signing for the Congregation was Fr. Jean-Baptiste Étienne, Superior General; for the Church in Chile, Rev. Joaquín Larraín G., and for the Chilean government, Antonio Varas, Minister of the Interior of President Manuel Montt. The date was 27 June 1853.

This contract laid down the obligations of both parties in 20 articles. We cite here only the three most significant: Art. 8: "The Vincentians agree to offer spiritual aid to the Daughters of Charity." Art. 9: "The Government of Chile agrees to provide a freestanding and furnished house in Santiago for the Vincentians." Art. 10: "Each of the Vincentians will receive the amount of 500 francs yearly." The other articles dealt mainly with the Daughters of Charity.

¹ This article also appeared in the Provincial Bulletin, *Vicentinos - Chile* (January-April 2004, pp. 2-10), under the title "Celebremos 150 años. Mirada histórica (Celebrating 150 years. An Historical Look)."

The passage to Chile was somewhat stormy, with strong winds and high waves rendering travel difficult. Prayers were offered, and a few medals were tossed into the sea, but these did not produce the miracle of Jesus calming the Sea of Galilee. Only after four months, and thanks to quiet seas, did the group reach their goal of Valparaíso. The day was 15 March 1854. On the same date in 1660, the soul of Louise de Marillac arrived at the gates of eternity; now, in the person of her daughters, she was arriving at the “happy homeland of Eden” (*patria feliz del Edén*) as we sing in our national hymn. As they left the boat, a tremendous welcome awaited them, offered by religious, civil and military authorities, and especially by a delighted population.

A period of a few days spent in recovering their forces was necessary after such a long and painful journey. Besides, Santiago was still awaiting them, 119 km away, along a winding unpaved road, which they took in stages, as if going from Nazareth to Bethlehem through Jerusalem. When the travelers reached Santiago, they realized that the “freestanding and furnished house” stipulated in article 9 of the contract was still being repaired, and so the Vincentians and the Daughters were forced to spend four months together. They used this time to assimilate the language of Cervantes. When the problem of their lodging was resolved, each group began to occupy its own house, and so the contract was being implemented.

Besides the obligation of giving spiritual aid to the sisters, the Vincentians added a spiritual service to those whom the sisters were helping. This is the explanation of why, on some occasions, the priests were hospital and school chaplains of institutions run by the Daughters. And, perhaps imitating St. Vincent, who took care of galley prisoners, his sons began a ministry as chaplains for the Santiago prison at the request of the Chilean government.

Later on, Fr. Delaunay, second Visitor of Chile, pointed out that during the seven years that his confreres were ministering in the prison, they were receiving a monthly sum of \$ 25, which barely allowed them to cover the costs of the horse that they were using to transport them to their post. He added that during the War of the Pacific, which Chile was waging against the Peru-Bolivia Confederation, the Vincentians had had to take charge of the military ambulances as chaplains at their own expense. Chile, at least, gained two provinces for its territory.

Even though the apostolic work of the confreres was already more than enough, they were able to find time to preach missions to the poor in areas around Santiago: Ñuñoa, San Bernardo, Maipú, San José de Maipú, San Roque, Lampa and, a few kilometers further, Codegua, Quillota and Curacaví.

When the Daughters of Charity opened new works in the provinces, the Vincentians would try to found a mission work in the same area: Concepción and Talcahuano (515 km south of Santiago), Chillán (403 km south), La Serena (472 km north). All these evangelized areas came to know the mission work of the Vincentians and the charitable work of the sisters. Of course, good reinforcements had already arrived, but the harvest was still great and the laborers few. For this reason, the province had to keep looking for reinforcements and to begin vocational promotion. The first vocations that God sent to bless the province went to France for their studies. In 1911 Fr. Figueroa was ordained; the following year, Fr. Troncoso; and in 1913, a vocation arrived from the sisters, Fr. Emilio Caracuel Ossa, who would later die in a house of the Daughters at the age of more than 90.

With these new members and others, foundations could be laid for our own seminary, the fondly remembered and famous seminary of Ñuñoa, on Avenida Ossa, a road full of both religious houses and “sporting houses” or brothels. The date was 12 March 1917. The last living graduate in Chile of this seminary is Fr. Teófilo Navarro, dean of the province. He is the pastor of the church of St. Vincent, the same parish that the first Vincentians began in 1854. This seminary took on an international character with the creation of the Province of the Pacific, since it welcomed and formed young confreres from Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador and Peru. It would close its doors in 1942 for lack of vocations.

The work of the Congregation of the Mission in Peru and Bolivia focused on the formation of native clergy, and from this apostolate there arose figures both clergy and lay, important in the history of those two nations. The First World War entailed the return to France for military service of the majority of French missionaries teaching in those seminaries. Since the vacuum they left could not be filled, the seminaries passed into the hands of the Province of Madrid, which already had a vice-province in Peru. One by one the houses of Peru and Bolivia closed, and the Province of the Pacific thereby became history. After 1965, it was only the Province of Chile.

Nevertheless, mission work in Chile was intensifying. In 1944, the double mission of Abarca-Lagos was formed, destined to play an important historical missionary role in the geographical provinces of Colchagua and Rancagua. Over time, it spread even to distant China, since Fr. Pierre Hahn (a French confrere who had worked in China) extended his mission outreach among the indigenous people living around Temuco (673 km to the south), sharing with them their language, their rough dwellings, their meals, and even their ferocious bugs, famous for their bite.

As they went through the countryside, the Vincentians began noticing vocations to the priesthood. This made an apostolic school

necessary, to be established in San Francisco de Limache, some 42 km from Valparaíso, by Fr. Manuel Godoy, the Visitor at the time. In its 15 years of life, 1946-1961, only five reached the priesthood, each one the fruit of the vocational work of the sisters, directly or indirectly. The school was moved to Macul, but it lasted only five more years, without offspring.

When Fr. Enrique Padrós Claret left office as Visitor in 1964, the Superior General, William M. Slattery, asked the Visitor of the Western Province, USA, James Fischer, to “lend a hand” to the province of the Pacific (cf. *Vincentiana*, 1964, p. 141). As a result, there arrived Frs. Ray Francis Ruiz as Visitor, Stephen Ganel as superior of the central house, and Gerald Brown, to be pastor of the Church of San Vicente.

Popular missions were in the new Visitor’s plan. His mission project involved taking on several adjoining rural parishes to make of them a “Mission Zone.” In this way, the province undertook the parishes of Pichilemu, La Estrella, Rosario Lo Solís, each one with a director, who all had frequent meetings. They all now participate in an eternal meeting in the glory of God. Lack of personal, however, led to the closure of this project. May it, too, rest in peace.

New Visitors and workers for the vineyard then arrived to open new mission fields. They took on mission parishes at Los Ángeles, Teno, Perquenco, Collipulli, Sucre (Bolivia), San Columbano (in Santiago), and Puerto Montt, each one with dozens of rural chapels. The cry of bishops was heard to arrive from various dioceses asking for a Vincentian presence in their areas, but their requests could not always be fulfilled. Confreres cannot be spread around without at least a minimum of three in each work for community life.

Given the importance that community life has in the province, one more means was established to intensify it, the “Province Day.” During this time, confreres come from all over the nation to share their life and experiences, to participate in ongoing formation, and to receive national and international news. These meetings have a goal of ongoing formation as well as recreation and information. Besides, various committees take advantage of the time. It is likewise important to note that there are yearly meetings of young priests (less than ten years of ordination), annual superiors’ meetings, and meetings of treasurers. All this, in one way or another, helps the province to progress.

The province has demonstrated its commitment to vocational promotion in the establishment of “Vocation clubs” in all our works. These assemble young men with vocational questions in local groups, one weekend a month; and, at least twice a year in longer meetings, these young men come together from all the works of the province. A summer mission is arranged with their help, along with that of

seminarians and some priests of the province. In this current year, 2004, five of these young men have entered the preparatory program in Valparaíso. They must have at least finished their elementary and secondary education.

Since 1977 we have had our own Internal Seminary. We say “our own” because previously we had sent our young candidates to Colombia, Ecuador and Santo Domingo. While the internal seminary was running in Chile, Fr. Jaime Corera twice came from Spain as its director. When the Visitors of Argentina, Chile and Peru began the Internal Seminary of the “Cono Sur,” (the southern triangle of South America), our Chilean candidates joined those of Argentina, Paraguay and Peru for their novitiate. The “Cono Sur” rotates, in the sense that it remains at least two years in each country.

Thanks to the fact that we have had good leaders at the head of the province, we can say that these 150 years of life find us on a good footing. The port of Valparaíso celebrated 15 March 2004 the sesquicentennial of the arrival in our land of the first Vincentians and Daughters, the sons and daughters of Vincent de Paul.* In the Valparaíso cathedral, there resounded songs and prayers of thanks to the Lord of the mission and Lord of charity. Joining with us, as always, were our sisters, the Daughters of Charity. From Iquique in the north to Punta Arenas in the south, they have been liberally planting the seeds of Vincentian charity in daycare centers, dispensaries, schools, orphanages, hospitals, homes for the elderly, etc., and binding up into huge sheaves merits for the granaries of heaven. Members of the Vincentian Family likewise attended in their different branches, as well as others involved in our works.

The celebration of 150 years is not a sign of old age, but rather a look back with new verve, because we realize that we are heirs of past generations who spent themselves giving luster to the **Vincentian mission and charity.**

We have been encouraged and strengthened by the words of our Visitor in his presentation of our current Provincial Plan. He wrote: *We are at the dawn of the third millennium, in a globalized world that has not yet overcome social inequalities, but that has instead increased them. It is a world that has not put an end to wars, violence and terrorism, but that, on the contrary, is experiencing a surge of new conflicts and the worsening of others; a world, too, in which indifference is growing, where, in some people, the idea has developed that God has no place.... As a province, we are inserted into this reality, with our own Chilean reality.... In the midst of this reality, we are called to proclaim Jesus Christ, Evangelizer of the Poor. We are called*

* In the March 2004 issue of *Nuntia* (item 21) a long notice of this event was published.

to “launch into the deep,” and, with the entire Vincentian Family, to “globalize charity.”

And so we undertake the challenge of these modern times from the perspective of our own proper experience. Although we are a small and poor province, we are at the same time a young one desirous of growing, not only in the number of its members or in material goods, but fundamentally in our commitment to make the charism of St. Vincent real, here and now.

In the here and now, the Church in Chile, which has in some way imitated the Vincentian charism, is calling us to work for a mission Church, with open doors, which goes out to meet persons and cultures, which offers the pearl of the Gospel to the people where they live. This is a missionary Church, ready to serve and give humble reason for its hope: a Church that forms the laity, which renders the Gospel living and active in families and in society. Such a Church is the right place to be, since it is open to the Vincentian charism, and in this way we understand why the bishops want us to work in their dioceses. Likewise, they are calling us to boldly promote vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life. Some confreres are already working along this line with the diocesan clergy in local meetings.

On the subject of the diocesan clergy, although we do not now direct seminaries, as we once did in Peru and Bolivia, we have always collaborated directly or indirectly with the diocesan clergy. Some of our confreres have been professors in the pontifical seminary of Santiago or in that of Valparaíso. Frs. Francisco Sampedro and Carlos de la Rivera have taught in the Catholic University of Valparaíso, where, besides laity, there are men and women religious — all of this in collaboration with the Chilean Church. Fr. Sampedro, an expert in the field of ecumenism, has been called, especially by seminaries, to speak on this topic, not only in our own country, but elsewhere.

The participation of some of our members in mass media, whether in a stable way or sporadically, has allowed us to bring the Christian message to television and radio. In addition, some of our students got into mass media during the recent “Vocation Year.”

As we blow out the 150 candles on our provincial cake, we congratulate ourselves for being a young province, anxious to grow, and for having a hopeful seminary with an increasingly vital community and apostolic life. May Mary, the “Star of Evangelization,” extend her maternal hand over the Vincentian Family always and bring us her powerful intercession with the Father. And may St. Vincent smile on us from heaven.

(JOHN RYBOLT, C.M., translator)