

FEATURE:

Some “Lesser-Known” Confreres (I)

Words of Life, Not a Life of Words

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“So, Brothers, have a look at your life and ask yourselves whether you are God’s workmen. Let each one put his activity under scrutiny and check whether he is working in God’s vineyard. You see, anyone who in this present life is watching out for his own interests has not gone into the Lord’s vineyard. On the other hand, the man whose efforts are directed towards God’s glory rather than to his own interest, who is tired out through charitable work and time given to God, whose commitment is to the good of souls and who wants to bring others to eternal life along with himself, is working for the Lord” (St. Gregory the Great [604]: *Homilies XIX*, 1-3).

There are lives which are lived out in the shadows, lives of humble people. There are lives of which nothing survives except the shadows. There are people whom it is better to forget. There are lives which we are duty bound to draw out from the shadows because, even though their lives are over, they continue to challenge and teach us.

This is the feeling we get when we read these notices. The “notices” are neither necrologies nor panegyrics. They are sort of journey notes of persons, whom we knew (as some were privileged to do) or would like to have known, who have been brought back into view as a stimulating ideal of Vincentian life.

The confreres in question had varied experiences. They belong to different countries. Three are Europeans transplanted into

America. Three were bishops. Three, again, are of the 19th century while another three lived in the light of the 20th. Four are recalled because of their pastoral work, while the work of two others was at a high cultural level.

There is also another aspect to this. During the first hundred years of its life there developed within the Congregation of the Mission varying Vincentian ways and styles of doing things. The Congregation in France was basically a community of seminaries and parishes, very much tied to the government and with a pro-Gallican ecclesiology. In the Italian states, on the other hand, the missionaries have been more open to the clergy and to missions, and have been closely linked with the Papacy.

It would have been a miracle if such different starting points had not produced disagreements. **Bishop Giuseppe Rosati (1789-1843)** springs from a disunited Community. At that time, in fact, the Congregation was split into two stumps, with a vicar general resident in Rome, who had jurisdiction over the entire Congregation, and a vicar general resident in Paris whose jurisdiction extended only to France and the Daughters of Charity. In spite of this the Community was able to work out its own way of operating. Rosati was a member of the Province of Rome, born in Sora. Along with Felice De Andreis (1778-1820) he was one of the founders of the American Province. He established the Congregation in the United States and was chosen by the Sulpician Msgr. Du Bourg, Bishop of Louisiana, as his coadjutor. When Du Bourg resigned, the Holy See split the diocese in two (1826) and entrusted the new diocese of Saint Louis to Rosati. This was an enormous territory which would eventually comprise at least 46 different dioceses. He constructed many churches but more importantly he built up the spiritual Church. He helped the Congregation to consolidate itself in the United States, but favoured the reunification of the Vincentian Family in Europe. He was a great bishop because he was a holy bishop.

The same can be said of **Bishop Peter Schumacher (1839-1902)**, the cause of whose canonization is approaching the end of its procedural journey. He was born in the Prussian Rhineland. In that area, Wilhelm Ketteler (1811-1877) was Archbishop of Mainz, a man open to social awareness. Schumacher entered the seminary in Paris and was ordained in 1862. After an initial missionary experience of six years in Chile (1863-1869) he was one of the founders of the Ecuador Province, where he spent 12 years in clergy formation and direction. In 1884 he was appointed Bishop of Portoviejo. In his pastoral ministry he was always a Vincentian bishop. He established the seminary, invited other congregations and orders to evangelize his diocese and organised charitable projects. In 1895 he was forced out of his diocese. He did not, however, live on with the sadness of an exile but with the hope of a saint.

The third sketch from the 1800s presented in this list is that of the Frenchman **Georges-Marie Salvaire (1847-1899)**. He was 24 years of age in 1871, a sad time in his native land. He was a missionary in Argentina, working among the indigenous peoples. He was a Marian apostle, on the model of Grignon de Monfort. It was he who was behind the building of the Shrine of the Blessed Virgin in Luján, the national shrine.

The new century began with a holy missionary, **José María Alcácer (1899-1994)**, a Spaniard, who got to its heart by the spoken word clothed with music. He was a precocious composer, and his vocation all through life was to listen to a “a music never heard.” It is a pity that such music has been little known outside Spain.

A Colombian, **Tulio Botero Salazar (1904-1981)** was Bishop of Zipaquirá (1952-1957) and later of Medellín (1957-1979). He would have been merely a name on a list of bishops if the hurricane of Vatican II had not struck him. As for many other bishops the Council was a new Pentecost for him. It was like a rebirth. He put into practice St. Augustine’s statement: “I am a Christian like you, but a bishop for you.” Medellín used to be just an episcopal city. It became a name and a symbol.

This panoramic viewing of significant figures closes with **Aleksander Usowicz (1912-2002)** from Poland. He was a man of wide culture, a philosopher and theologian. He knew, however, how to combine fidelity to classical scholastic thinking with an obligation to rethink the value of human dignity, of human rights, of freedom, of justice and of peace.

St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote a life of his sister St. Macrina, and composed the following as a summing-up of her prayer life: “Eternal God, on whom I have been focussed from my mother’s womb, whom my soul loved with all its strength, to whom I dedicated my body and my mind from my childhood up to now, you put beside me an angel of light who took me by the hand to the place of refuge where the water of repose was to be found, alongside the heart of the holy patriarchs” (GREGORY OF NYSSA, *The Life of St. Macrina*, 24).

The sketches given above are of “angels of light” for us, who can guide us along the road of the Third Millennium. Each of their lives was not a life of words, because each of them is a word for us.

(THOMAS DAVITT, C.M., translator)