

# Fr. Julio Pineda Portillo, C.M. (1842-1900)

Founder of the Vincentian Missions in El Salvador

by José Francisco Ramos Cárcamo, C.M.

*Visitor of Central America*



**“The Most Necessary Things Are Easily Overlooked”**

## **Introduction**

The Congregation of the Mission founded by St. Vincent de Paul, like other Congregations in the Church, has had the grace to have in its ranks sons to whom the words of Sirach 39:9 could be applied: **“Many will praise his intelligence and his fame will live for generations.”**

Fr. Julio, who was born in the smallest country of the Americas and became the first Salvadoran Vincentian, was the founder of the

Mission in El Salvador and of the Casa Misión de San Jacinto. He is one of the famous sons of Vincent de Paul who is also the glory of the Salvadoran Church.

### **Family, Birth and Vocation**

Fr. Julio was born in the Canton Los Pozos in the jurisdiction of Arcatao on 20 December 1842 in the Department of Chalatenango in El Salvador. It was there, in the din of manufacturing indigo and the singing and dreaming of the Chalateco peasants, that the young Julio forged his life as a worker and a peasant in a way which much later would give him the strength to be a holy and zealous missionary. His parents, Don Antolín Pineda and Doña Teodora Portillo, instilled the spirit of the Gospel in him. The road to the priesthood and the missions opened up to him at a later date, thanks to the simple and generous faith which they practiced. He was baptized in the parish of San Bartolomé de Arcatao on 8 February 1843.

His earliest studies were in his hometown of Arcatao, where he grew up alternating studies with work and where he seems to have learned how to cultivate indigo. History has preserved a few stories of his youth, which reflect the character of the future founder of the Vincentian missions in El Salvador. It was repeatedly said that Julito ran away to the seminary when his mother sent him to bring lunch to his father and the other workers. Another story from his early days happened when he accompanied his mother to the river. While she was washing clothes, he went up on a large rock to preach to the people who were also washing clothes in the river, maintaining that when he grew up many people would come and make their confession to him. He carried on until his mother caught up with him and the other kids began making fun of him. The large rock remains at the intersection of the road and the river as a silent witness under the inclement sun. "The dreams of childhood... the truths of adulthood."

His father Don Antolín died of a heart attack in San Salvador during one of his regular visits to his son while he was a student in his more advanced courses.

### **The Socio-Political Situation of El Salvador**

Conflicts between the liberals and the conservatives filled the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Central American isthmus. El Salvador was violently shaken by these conflicts. This profound crisis manifested itself in a vicious struggle for power. It had its antecedents in the first struggles for independence of 1821, which led to the birth of the five sister nations of Central America. It was a very bloody birth, the high price that had to be paid for life and

liberty. Economically indigo, which was at the heart of the economy of El Salvador dating back to the time of colonization, lost its value with the introduction of chemical based colors. At the same time, the Church did not have any room to act in any of these matters because of the dominance of the political powers.

### **The Ecclesiastical Situation**

The Church during colonial times existed and grew under the tutelage of the Spanish Crown. At the time of emancipation, the five provinces formed one single ecclesiastical province with Guatemala as the episcopal see. Pope Gregory XVI with the Bull, *Universales Ecclesiae Procuratio*, erected the diocese of San Salvador on 28 September 1842, separating it from the Archdiocese of Guatemala. Its first bishop was Fr. Jorge Viteri y Ungo, who was installed on 27 January 1843. The young diocese had only 27 priests.

### **Lawyer and Teacher**

In Fr. Julio's time it was common for students to graduate from the university in both civil and ecclesiastical law. Adorned as he was with all the gifts which every young person has, as well as a strong will and a fine intellect, as Fr. Nerio confirmed, it was easy to foresee a very bright future for him.

*In the year 1862, after he had made his preparatory studies in philosophy, he dedicated his time to studying jurisprudence. He studied four years as a disciple of the eminent legal experts Dr. Pablo Buitrago and Dr. José Trigueros. He was able to hold his own in the class along side of Salvador Gallegos, Manuel de Jesús Miranda, Alberto Mena and Ricardo Moreira, who later became famous lawyers and continue to be held in honor in El Salvador. Faced with the sudden death of his father and so the loss of resources to continue his studies, from which he was gaining great benefit, he nevertheless met his difficult situation head on and succeeded in graduating as a Bachelor in Jurisprudence.*

To continue his studies after the sudden death of his father, who supported him financially, the young student of law became a teacher in the Calvario district of the city.

*He dedicated himself to teaching children and directing the school of the El Calvario neighborhood. His heart carried him along on this road enabling him to serve his equals by his word and example and his practice of virtue. People affectionately called him "The teacher of El Calvario," as if they had a presentiment that this modest educator was destined for an important work of the Lord.*

When he was living and teaching in the El Calvario neighborhood, the local people elected him neighborhood treasurer in the

year 1868. This new experience of teaching and tangible confidence in the neighborhood, where he won the hearts of the lowly and the great alike, show us the human stature that marked the future founder of the mission of El Salvador and of the Casa Misión de San Jacinto, the neighborhood next to El Calvario. From a poor family, at the same time that he was a teacher in the school of El Calvario, he was able to assist at the classes of the seminary as an extern. It is an admirable example of answering a divine call.

### **Gospel Path**

The record shows that Julio's path did not have too many twists, turns and surprises: *"He stopped pursuing a career as a lawyer in order to devote himself to his theological studies and enter into the clerical state. He was intelligent, had a good memory and applied himself diligently. We both assisted together at the theology courses in the National University and we were together in the seminary for perhaps a year"* (Testimony of Fr. Nerio).

Fr. Julio wrote in his first letter to the Bishop of San Salvador: *"After having thought about my vocation for many years, to which I was inclined from birth by divine providence and so without any merit on my part, in order to serve God better I have decided to embrace it by taking the cassock of a secular cleric. Therefore I ask your Excellency and humbly and devotedly beseech you to grant me the permission I seek subject to the steps your Excellency judges convenient. It is this grace that I seek with my solemn word, Most Illustrious and Reverend Monsignor,"* Julio Pineda.

A key to Julio's personality emerges from this carefully written letter, in which he expresses his desire to enter the clerical state: *"I have thought about this for many years."*

The Bishop responsible for the pastoral care of Arcatao, who showed himself solicitous in gathering information about the life and habits of Julio Pineda, replied: *"On the contrary, everyone, especially persons of sound judgment, know you to be a son from a legitimate marriage, and they have known that from your infancy your life has been adorned with virtues and good qualities which make you worthy to ascend to the priesthood."* The same ecclesiastical notary, Don Bartolomé Rodríguez, came to the point: *"He is a man with a good name."*

Fr. Julio entered by the front and only door, as a true pastor. He finished his years of theology. His professors and companions admired him. No one could say anything against him concerning the uprightness of his conduct; and the same was true for his virtues. He was in the prime of life. The year 1869 was decisive in his journey of faith and marked his life forever as a moment of human and

Christian maturity: *“After having thought about it for many years, here I am, send me!”*

Minor Orders were conferred on him in Guatemala, because the Bishop of San Salvador, Bishop Tomás Miguel Pineda Zaldaña, old and infirm, was overcome by the political and social situation of his people and by the State’s interference in the life of the Church. At the same time, the Bishop in Guatemala, Bishop Mariano Ortíz Urruela, was a well-known friend. So it was prudent to be ordained in Guatemala. What is certain is that a good number of those to be ordained went to the Tierra del Quetzal to receive sacred orders.

**The order of deacon** was conferred on 31 October 1869. A year passed between his diaconal and priestly ordinations. He returned again to Guatemala, where he received **the sacerdotal anointing on 17 December 1870 in the Capilla del Socorro of the Metropolitan Cathedral. He had with him the dimissorial letters issued by the Bishop of San Salvador.**

### **The First Fruits of His Priesthood**

“The journey has begun for you” is a line from a popular song, and so it was for Fr. Julio and his ordination companion, Fr. Fernando Araujo. The journey had begun. They were already on the road to their native Chica. El Salvador was a “tierra de fuego” — a country on fire. The Church did not have the space and freedom she needed to accomplish her mission, because an anti-ecclesial, an anticlerical spirit reigned and filled the political air she breathed. The Bishop, Pineda Saldaña, was sick, tired, worn out by his struggles for liberation; the Coadjutor Bishop had resigned; and there were many other troubles. It was this totally asphyxiating climate that welcomed the new priests, who were aware of the situation, since it is where they grew up and were educated, and yet chose to be priests there. They believed they had nothing to fear, even if the waters were turbulent, because, seated in the stern of the boat, with a firm hand on the rudder, was an old and excellent Fisherman.

What was the new priest’s itinerary when he arrived in San Salvador? Considering that the whole of El Salvador was one diocese, that there was a shortage of clergy, that priests were continually expelled, that religious Congregations were forbidden to enter, we can suppose that a marathon of pastoral activities awaited him, the same situation in which the other priests found themselves. There the young apostle stood in the presence of his aged bishop, ready to carry out his wishes in order to alleviate his sufferings and lighten his pastoral burden. There the former student stood on the level of his former teachers to sow with them the seeds of the Good News of the Kingdom. There the priest stood, who much later would become the founder of the Vincentian Missions and of the Casa Misión de

El Salvador, missions which were to shine through seven decades as light for the hearts of the Salvadoran people.

His first pastoral responsibility was the Parish of San Miguel, a city in the east of the country. Later we find him in Aculhuaca substituting for Fr. Umaña, who was gravely ill. In November 1871, we find him becoming pastor, taking possession of the Vicariate of Sonsonate: "26 November 1871. On this date I turned over, by higher order, this parish, which was my responsibility, to the care of Pastor Don Julio Pineda."

Fr. Antonio Conte in his book, *Thirty Years in the Land of El Salvador*, says: "On returning to the capital, Fr. Pineda was sent to Sonsonate in the role of pastor of that extensive parish. He took possession on 26 November 1871. Tall of stature, with a robust complexion, still physically fit, his look was serious but his gaze was open and kind. He had the good fortune to be pleasing to Christians and Moors alike, because of his gentlemanliness in social contacts, his constant habit of visiting the sick, his faithfulness in the confessional and his holy independence in the pulpit. He remained five years as Pastor of Sonsonate, from 26 November 1871 until 28 April 1876."

There in Sonsonate the political sea was turbulent and the winds were in their faces. It was a locale for expulsions, but the son of the peasants of Arcatao was there. His hand was to the plough. Rising well before dawn, he was on the road before daybreak en route to distant fields. He was early each day into the vineyard. On the day following his arrival, he registered his first baptism. During the five years of his presence in Sonsonate, he was absent for several intervals. "In 1875 when the priests and sisters were expelled from Guatemala, some of them passed through El Salvador and preached missions, which later on were to have great importance for Frs. Vaysse and Gougnon. We ask ourselves: where was Fr. Pineda during these times of absence? Was it then that he began communicating with the Vincentian Fathers of Guatemala? Or, was it through these missions that Fr. Pineda came to know the missions of El Salvador? What remains beyond doubt is that Fr. Pineda, having suffered much from seeing the religious ignorance of his people, did introduce the missions among his people."

San Miguel Aculhuaca and later Sonsonate were the first fruits of Fr. Pineda's priestly ministry. It was enough time for him to take the measure of the religious ignorance of his people and the anti-ecclesial and antireligious bombardment to which they were subjected by the malice of the politicians in power; namely, the negation of eternal values, the expulsion of priests and bishops, the suspension of the Chair of Theology at the university, the laicization of education, the prohibition against founding new religious orders, etc. All this worried him and lay heavy on his heart. "Zeal for your

house will consume me” (Jn 2:17). How could his dream be reconciled with this oppressive situation, especially in the face of the new project in his life? What will his fellow priests say? How will the bishop react if he runs out on his nomination as Vicar and Administrator General of the diocese, a duty to which he had just taken an oath? An appointment and an oath would have bound someone else for sure, but ecclesiastical authority is not able, according to the law, to oppose his calling to a more perfect life, the bishop would say at a later time.

### Meeting Vincent de Paul

At the point at which the city of Sonsonate believed it had a dynamic pastor in Fr. Pineda, he himself was glimpsing new and broader horizons and heard a voice which said to him: “Come up higher, son, always higher, because men of your temper never find a place to rest except on the heights. You are a son of the mountains.” The pastor of Sonsonate did not decide to wait or to ask. He immediately made contact with Fr. José Vaysse, the superior of the Vincentian Fathers in Guatemala, asking him to admit him into the Congregation of the Mission. In taking this decision he was urged on by his yearning for Christian perfection and by his ardent desire to give to his native country a group of missionaries residing in the capital, who could supply for the lack of secular priests and attend to the spiritual needs of so many sheep put on the wrong road by the dearth of shepherds.

His goal in entering the Congregation, according to Fr. Vaysse, was to give to his country, El Salvador, a missionary religious Congregation. “When the river sounds, stones move,” is a refrain of a prayer. The comings and goings of Fr. Pineda pushed the red alert button among the faithful of Sonsonate and they took action. Believing that the bishop was taking away their holy pastor, they were neither timid nor lazy in collecting signatures, and on 21 May 1876 they wrote a letter with 94 signatures to the Bishop of San Salvador, in which they expressed their progress in faith, the advances in the liturgy, and above all the virtues of their zealous apostle, “... *and for the exemplary conduct of this pastor which is rare among men and necessary in these present times.*”

The serene and penetrating gaze of Vincent de Paul turned out to be more powerful than the 94 signatures on the letter asking not to remove Fr. Pineda. The bishop also found himself disarmed in the face of the decision of his fellow worker. Two days later the bishop wrote to the people, and, among other things, he said: “*I thank you for your solicitude in pursuing the noble cause of seeking the return of Fr. Julio Pineda to Sonsonate. It is a demonstration of the appreciation your community has for him. I must say to you, nevertheless, that the*

*one we are speaking about has the intention to pass over into the religious life and, according to the law, Church authorities cannot stop him from going to a more perfect state of life."*

Sonsonate lost a priest and pastor of exemplary conduct, the Congregation of the Mission gained a holy and excellent missionary of the stature of the great missionaries, and El Salvador eventually saw the birth and growth of the daily work of the missionaries for more than ten decades, which has been the source of great spiritual benefit to it.

Guatemala was his new destination. Fr. Vaysse reported to the Superior General: "In 1876, Fr. Pineda, a Salvadoran priest, arrived." He arrived as a postulant to look over the terrain. He began indeed from the bottom. He made no display of his sacerdotal rank, on the contrary, he submitted to everyone as a neophyte, and when he had fulfilled all the requirements of the *Directory* and the expectations of the Directors of the Internal Seminary, he was received into the Internal Seminary 28 August 1876 by Fr. José Vaysse.

A year passed and the instructed novice had already reached his maturity in the Congregation. On 2 August 1877, the Local Council gave him permission to make his Good Purposes (proper to the Congregation), which were to precede his vows. So, "*On 24 June 1879 in the presence of Fr. Gustavo Foing, the delegate of the Superior General, and with a simple formula Fr. José Julio Pineda Portillo pronounced his holy vows.*"

## The First Two Missions in El Salvador

The dreams of this zealous apostle of Sonsonate began to be realized: he was a missionary in El Salvador. Blessed perseverance! "**Fr. Gustavo Foing designated Fr. José Vaysse and Fr. Julio Pineda for the missions in El Salvador.**" Salvador now became the question. How can the missions begin if the winds are not favorable? Even the Superior General wrote at this time: "*The revolution which is convulsing the Central American States opposes and disturbs the works of the Church. The same is true in Colombia and Ecuador. I hope the disruption is passing. The anger of the parties will be disarmed by charity.*"

Neither timid nor lazy, they were up before the sun and on the road to El Salvador to put themselves at the service of their friend and companion José Luis Cárcamo Rodríguez, Bishop of El Salvador. The first mission began on 8 December 1879 with Fr. Vaysse in the center and west of the country in seven parishes along with their mission stations. It ended on 28 March 1880. The second began on Monday, 28 November 1880 and lasted until 27 July 1881. It took in 12 communities. It is good to stress that many

diocesan priests joined them in these large missionary undertakings. Among them was Fr. Ramón Peña de Opico, who later was a missionary in Colombia and died on the missions in Peru, and Fr. Guillermo Rojas, missionary in Cauca, who was the founder of the mission of Nátaga and then the first Archbishop of Panama. A third mission was held in San Jacinto during Lent 1899.

All these apostolic travels foreshadowed for Fr. Pineda a bright future. However, though the wind was at his back, the God of Vincent de Paul let him hear his voice: your undertakings are not my undertakings. So, one day the ship and its captain were shaken from their sleep and had to leave for other seas. The wind blows where it wills! Africa, Costa Rica, Cauca were waiting for him, the Superior General would tell him, and he sent him there for 14 long years. When he returned he was a real veteran in the work of the missions. The Congregation is missionary and the mission *ad gentes* was calling missionaries of great stature.

Africa was waiting for him. The Superior General called him, so on Saturday, 31 March 1882 at 10 o'clock in the morning in the port of La Libertad in El Salvador he boarded ship. All this was in spite of his great devotion to the missions of El Salvador: *"Ah, my beloved missions! My poor Fatherland, which is now passing through such a dangerous time! How many well-disposed souls will be lost for lack of priests? Ah, if there were a group of missionaries some of whom could take care of the major seminary while others went around to the parishes doing missions and still others who would be occupied in the primary schools in order to preserve the people from heresy and impiety."*

When he arrived at the Motherhouse, Fr. Antoine Fiat, the Superior General, sent him to Algiers, Africa, so that there he might work with great care for the glory of God and the salvation of the Christians and Moslems, while his projects were coming to full maturity. *"Go without care to Africa, to Algiers, and sooner or later you will return to your beloved El Salvador."* Later the Superior General called him: *"Now then, my dear brother, I have thought about you for the missions in Colombia. I have been receiving letters non-stop from those distant lands asking me for reinforcements. Go, IN NOMINE DOMINI, and there you will be just two steps from your native land. I know that when the hour comes to realize your cherished dream, Providence will take care of everything. From Colombia to El Salvador is a very short distance."*

An order of this nature would have been very upsetting to anyone who did not have the spirit of faith and obedience that Fr. Julio had. We have the circular letter of Fr. Fiat: *"Paris, 1 January 1884. Today the following confreres were sent to the foreign missions of Central America: Augusto Birot, Julio Pineda, Constante Veltin, and*

*Brother Juan Bautista Concedan.*” He was delayed two years in Costa Rica, because of the anticlerical climate in the mission countries, even though Costa Rica was no exception and had a policy of expelling priests. Fr. Birot went back to Colombia after having been brutally expelled and harassed by the despotism of César Conto in 1876. Fr. Pineda reached Colombia on 3 March 1886 and got to Popayán on 8 March, where he stayed until 1892. He had great pastoral success preaching missions along the Pacific coast, in the vast reaches of Quindío, and south of Tolima. He also devoted himself to the formation of the clergy in the seminaries and was an excellent spiritual director.

*“His preaching, simple like every son of Vincent de Paul, came from his heart with such unction that it drew many tears from his listeners. His austere and penitent life was itself a sermon which went to the heart. The people looked on him as a saint. He achieved conversions that were considered miraculous. He was always like a torch fired by the heavenly glory of God and the salvation of souls.”* This brief recollection of this son of St. Vincent, I believe says all that needs to be said about the ten years he was a missionary in Colombia.

### **Straight to the End**

The short 16 years from the beginning of his missionary work in El Salvador gave Fr. Pineda a truly apostolic bearing. He was the worker in the fields with the plow in this hand working from sunup to sundown in Africa, Costa Rica, El Cauca, Tolima, which became for him his school of specialization. *“February 1896. In the first days of this month I left Tunja in Colombia. My liver bothered me so much that I believed I could not make the journey to Guatemala, but I had scarcely begun the journey when I began to feel better. I had the intention to obey God in my superiors, and so he helped me. God brought me to found the missions of El Salvador and I did not understand his divine designs.”* How could there not be joy among his old companions and formators in that beloved house in Guatemala? How many questions would there be about his mission in a foreign land?

### **Foundation of the Mission House of San Jacinto**

Fr. Julio had been contemplating missions in El Salvador for a long time. It was in the end worth waiting for. *“November 1898. The road to El Salvador. On 29 October Fr. Hetuin and I left Guatemala for El Salvador to begin the foundation. We arrived here on 5 November at 8 o’clock in the evening. (Later he said): We can say that it was on 8 November of the past year that the Mission House of El Salvador was*

*begun.*" The birth of the Congregation in El Salvador is a very important date for the Congregation in the Province of Central America. A block from the Church of San Jacinto, along the street which leads to La Vega, they bought a beautiful two and a half manzana plot (= 4375 acres).

*"December 1899 San Salvador. Today, 31 December finishes the year 1899. This year has been very important for me, because of the distress I experienced in establishing the mission. It was on 1 December that we first used the Mission House in San Jacinto."* The dreams of Fr. Pineda were already realized and one could speak of a mission house in El Salvador. *"Twenty years ago I cried out before God asking him for this grace. I could not be detached from seeing so many souls in my native country being lost without caring about them"* (Letter to the Superior General). Fr. Hetuin wrote to the Superior General: *"Fr. Pineda triumphed in the end."*

### The Fourth and Final Mission

Once installed in the new mission house of San Jacinto with all the details taken care of, the three missionaries prepared themselves for the new missionary era. It is the year 1900 toward the end of February. Fr. Pineda judged the hour had come for answering the desire of the villages that had in cries called for the Holy Mission. Among them was his own town and parish of Arcatao. He was moved by love of his own, as well as by the missionary fire in his heart, to give them preference. So on 26 February they set out for Arcatao. This mission lasted until 24 May. It included missions to Arcatao's four outstations.

The results were very reassuring. El Salvador is a mission land of the sons of St. Vincent de Paul. But it happened that, when joy was at its peak, sadness overcame their joy. We know it is true that extremes touch each other, and the sage says: "The end of joy is sorrow." Scarcely had they returned to the capital then Fr. Pineda felt weak, stretched by his missionary works, hurt by contradictions. Then abruptly, having a cerebral hemorrhage on 29 June 1900, at the age of 58, with 21 years of vocation in the Congregation of the Mission, he came to the end of his journey. His final words were a résumé of all that he had preached and lived in his life as a missionary: *"The most necessary things are most easily overlooked."*

Those who knew Fr. Julio knew a true apostle who incarnated the Gospel in his life. The local press the following day wrote: ***"We acknowledge publicly the mercies of this impeccable gentleman."*** The clergy of El Salvador in their bulletin expressed themselves in this way: *"We certainly do not have to ask for spiritual blessings from Fr. Julio Pineda, our Vincentian countryman, who, with the charity of St. Vincent de Paul, so generously distributed them more than others in*

*his lifetime. He remains interested in our spiritual welfare. Fr. Pineda, with his solid words, knew how to enkindle the sacred fire in the hearts of the priests.” The clergy of Colombia said: “He was a consummate teacher, as a director of consciences and a preacher of retreats to the clergy. No one could surpass him, I believe, as a preacher of spiritual retreats to the clergy. All the priests with whom we have spoken have assured us that they always carried very moving and helpful impressions from the retreats. They praised to the sky his retreats to the clergy.”*

Fr. Pineda, esteemed and loved, full of health and life, seemed to have been born in Colombia and would also die in Colombia. His apostolic zeal guaranteed for him the affection of all who knew him. The Bishop of Tolima expressed these same sentiments: *“The people had great affection for the Vincentian missionaries from the moment they came to appreciate the missionary works of Fr. Julio Pineda, whom they considered a saint and an apostle. All the parishes wanted Fr. Julio Pineda to preach the mission for them. All the people praised him.”*

**Rest in peace, O self-sacrificing  
apostle of Jesus Christ,  
who will not abandon the field opened  
in the harvest of the Father.  
Your brothers and successors  
will be responsible for watering  
it with their sweat and carrying  
the good odor of the name  
of José Julio Pineda Portillo  
to the borders of your beloved country.**

(HUGH F. O'DONNELL, C.M., translator)