

Thematic History

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HISTORY

Since the theme I have been asked to develop is Thematic History, I think I should begin by saying what I understand by history. Although some of these points have been treated in detail by Fr. Olabuenaga when speaking of Methodology, I think it is necessary to recall them as an introduction to Thematic History, for many of these concepts are being discussed by modern historians.

At the present time there is an infinity of ideas about the definition of history and its study, as many as there are schools or methodological tendencies among historians. Indeed, lately historical study has undergone a profound renovation both in theory and content as well as in methodology. The internet has also entered into history questioning it and obligating it to look over its access to the sources and information; and the historian finds himself subjected to a continual process of *recycling*.

The majority of modern historians try to explain that the history of the past is not something static, like a series of slides projected on a wall which we look at seated in our armchairs. Today history is presented as something dynamic, something in movement; and for that very reason there are historians who think that history only has activity and dynamism if it is given a socio-economic dimension. For if history is about the evolutionary processes of a past age, then one must bring to the foreground the demographic phenomena, the economic and social structures, the civilizations, the ideologies, or as is commonly said, the mentalities. In this way history is close to sociology. Before getting to the qualitative, it looks for the quantitative through statistics, charts and graphical curves which give direction to the numbers. It is believed that only in this way is history a science; for there is no more science except what can be measured and counted.

And so we have to ask ourselves what characterizes history and its study today? One characteristic of modern history is that its object takes in areas once considered forgotten or marginalized by the "traditional history" which centered almost exclusively on political, military and diplomatic phenomena. Today history is marked

essentially by the primacy of economic and social factors, with political history relegated to a second plane.¹

Another characteristic of modern historiography is the diversity of ideas about temporality, about what past time is because the phenomena studied by history are situated in past time. This is still one of the major themes that occupy the reflection of contemporary historians. What is the dimension of historic time in which the facts related are developed? Is the object of history just the human past, or is it also the historical present? Is history the knowledge of the human past, or of men in time, or the science of historic time?

Historic temporality is a serious problem, above all, for post-modern historians and for others who dedicate themselves to studying contemporary history considering that contemporary times only take in the *current history of the world* (which includes from the end of World War II in 1945 up to our times), or the *immediate history of the world* (around the last 30 years) or the *history of the present* (the time in which it is supposed the last witnesses of the occurring facts will live). These historians give to time the only value it should have — they say — of the continuity of the present which incessantly becomes the past and is in continual change. Some attack these historians saying their work is journalism more than history; and one cannot confuse the historian with the journalist, because the *historian, [is] different from the journalist, and outside the epoch he is analyzing, and although he may also work with the concepts of temporality and change, tries to exhaust the sources of what he is studying; he analyzes, interprets and treats the study of the historical facts with a sense of context and synthesis.*² That is to say the historian also tries to relive the past in the present, but with a serious scientific methodology.

Another discussion in vogue among historians today is about the value which must be given to *objectivity*, that is about the different ways of thinking about what is the truth and what is objective while investigating in the documents what happened and how it happened, for one may look upon the facts investigated in a different way. But we will examine this point more carefully later on, as well as the relationship between the action of the individual and social structures, between the particular and the general.

¹ RODRIGO AHUMADA DURÁN in *Revista Communio*, Santiago Chile, 1999, no. 2, pgs. 87-107 (web).

² ALICIA ALTED VIGIL - JUAN A. SÁNCHEZ BELÉN, *Métodos y Formas de investigación en historia moderna y contemporánea*, Ed. Unversitaria Ramón Areces, Madrid 2005, p. 140.

Finally, and perhaps one of the most interesting points for us to bear in mind may be the different *methodologies* which the investigator may employ and the value he attributes to them, that is to say the techniques we use as we investigate the documents and as we present and write the history, with the narration at the center of the discussion. All these aspects involve a notable difficulty for establishing classifications, sequences and consequences since the schemes used by modern historians are very different, says Vidal Jiménez.³

The School of Annales and the New History

Although Fr. Olabuenaga has also spoken about it, I am going to briefly recall some ideas about how the different conceptions of History have come about in the historiographic panorama of recent years. I think that may facilitate a better understanding of Thematic History and of the methodology which must be used in its investigation.

One cannot avoid starting with Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886). With Germanic dedication and precision he laid the foundation for historic methodology, firstly, by passionately seeking "the original source" in order to carry out afterwards a strict critique of the documents. He is thus the first representative of "*historical positivism*." Bearing in mind the dynamic of the documentary sources in which Ranke so insisted, in 1929 Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre and Georges Lefebvre began a new stage in the study of history, founding the magazine *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, over against the traditional or narrative history. New ideology and new methodology are used, thus giving birth to the so called *Nouvelle Histoire* of the past century in which we discover two characteristics: on the one hand, new methods of investigation basing themselves in the serious and deep investigations of historical positivism which many prefer to call *methodic* investigation and on the other hand allying themselves with the social sciences, which some Marxist oriented historians have taken to the extreme of historical materialism and the class struggle. The golden age of this historical current arrives in the 60's and 70's of the past century when Fernand Braudel had taken over the direction of *Annales*.

³ RAFAEL VIDAL JIMÉNEZ, "La Historia y la Postmodernidad," in *Espéculo. Revista de estudios literarios*, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, no. 13 (November 1999 - February 2000).

According to these guidelines, it could be said that until the arrival of the new era in the last quarter of the past century — which began to be called postmodernist, the historiography of the modern tradition was rationalist and it assumed, as principles, the search for complete objectivity, the universality and unidirectionality of the human past; that is, the possibility of establishing, among the phenomena being studied, how some events are the causes of others, all of this within the overview of history which could give a global sense to human experience.

However, since the decade of the 80's of the past century, the criticism of this methodical and rationalist current of history has increased to the degree that Pierre Vilar says that the *Annales* school, i.e. *social history with its radical and unidirectional objectivity*, has died. Dead or not, one must confess that almost all Western historians were influenced by its ideas.⁴ These ideas I would classify in this way: 1) resounding criticism of classical narrative history, 2) placing socio-economic history as the center of history, 3) rigorous methodology taken from historical positivism, 4) more or less structuralism, according to the epoch of the magazine, in many historians of the *Nouvelle Histoire*, 5) historical materialism which brings with it a Marxist interpretation of history, and 6) what may most interest us in this conference, a preponderance of Thematic History within, certainly, total or global history.

And so, taking into account two aspects of this concept of history, namely, first, Thematic History which some consider “a growing fragmentation of history into multiple objects and methods,” and second, “the proposal on the table to integrate without further ado history with the closest social sciences” — it is logical for the historian Barros to wonder: does not today demand a common redefinition, according to the *Nouvelle Histoire*, of the reason for being of the historian beyond his methods and the object of his work? Or is one to understand that the crisis does not affect the conception of history which in its day the *Nouvelle Histoire* proposed, even though its founders were not philosophers of history?

Recently doubts have arisen among new historians with regard to the scientific status of history and with regard to history as problem as a substitute for history as narrative in the form of narration and

⁴ See, otherwise, the guidelines they give to future historians PIERRE GUIRAL - RENÉ PILLORGET - MAURICE AGHULON, *Guide de l'Étudiant en Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, PUF, Paris 1971. For a broader vision, cf. CARLOS BARROS, “La Nouvelle Histoire y sus Críticos,” *Manuscripts* (Revista del Department d'Historia Moderna i Contemporània de la UAB), no. 9, 1991, pgs. 83-111.

they make clear that to renounce the narrative is to renounce the specificity of history. There are historians, like Coutau-Begarie⁵ who call for the return to a narrative, biographical, diplomatic, military history as an alternative school to the *nouvelle histoire*, or who defend, like Pierre Renouvin, a history of international relations. But, keep in mind this intent to return to narrative history is not in opposition to thematic history.

From the years when post-modernism was at its height, some historians have arisen declaring that the historical is a way of thinking exclusive to modernism and does not make so much sense in our post-modern world. Historians appear who propose new ways of conceiving and doing history, giving to the objectivity, the universality and the temporality of the past a sense more relative and individual and not so rational or scientific. And these historians defend the fact that the interpretation which the historian gives to phenomena of the past is always influenced by an infinity of circumstantial factors which complete it, clarify it and can even modify it — *factors such as religious affiliation, educational traditions, territorial solidarities, the customs that give rise to the professions, the mentality of each generation and even sexual relationships*. This is the “new cultural history,” and in a certain way, “microhistory.”

That is to say that the diversity of interpretations springs from the responses which are given to questions like these: What is history — a science or an intelligible kind of social knowledge? What is the object of history? Is it possible to arrive at the truth in the field of intelligibility? What is the work of the historian? What is a document and what is its epistemological function? What are the distinctions and what are the relationships between history and the social sciences? These are *fundamental* matters that the historian cannot evade if he does not want to “mortgage” the objectivity or the “limits of the objectivity” of his own knowledge (AHUMADA DURÁN).

A Simple Definition

I, a simple scholar, without getting into the maze of schools, systems and the philosophy of history, and recognizing that Thematic History is done today on the bases of new approaches, perspectives and sources, present to you some ideas which those who wish to study Vincent, the Congregation and Vincentiana should not overlook.

⁵ HERVE CONTAU-BEGARIE, *La phenomena “nouvelle histoire”. Strategie et ideologie des nouveaux historiens*, Economica, Paris 1983.

If we consider the history of the facts or events of personal, familial, community, social, national or universal life as facts which existed and were real in another time, for example what Vincent, St. Louise, Ozanam, the missionaries or the poor did, one can say that *history is the period within which it is possible to obtain or reconstruct a trustworthy account of the events which affected a human group*. If it is considered as the study or investigation of a time period, then history is *the study of the social processes which explain the events and tendencies of the past, which helps us to understand the present and try to anticipate better the future*, for example of the Congregation of the Mission. This is what the Spanish philosopher Zubiri said: *the human person, upon entering into himself, finds himself being what he is because he had a past and is realizing himself in light of the future; and history, as a science, is much more a science of the present than of the past, for the human person is a historical being who is constantly changing reality by means of his freedom, carrying out historical events, and in doing so he is in some way acting upon the future as well.*⁶ That is to say, that history is my life, or expressed in a way that takes in the present, my life is an ongoing history.

These ideas will be very much discussed and criticized by the historians of the latest schools of thought, but I think they are classic ideas and understandable to the majority of those of us here present. The historian Joan Pages begins an article, which I cite below in a note, with a phrase from Marc Bloch which can capture everything said previously: "The lack of understanding of the present stems fatally from the ignorance of the past. But it is perhaps no less vain to worry about understanding the past while knowing nothing of the present."⁷

THEMATIC HISTORY

With these ideas more or less respected, I think the second point would be to clarify what I understand by Thematic History, which is the title of the work SIEV has charged me with. Thematic History was in vogue some twenty-five years ago, without meaning to say by that that it no longer interests historians. On the contrary one must affirm that it has opened the way to new currents of history, from the

⁶ XAVIER ZUBIRI, Prologo a la Primera Edición de *Historia de la Filosofía* de Julián Marías, *Revista de Occidente*, Madrid 1967, p. xxiv.

⁷ MARC BLOCH, *Apología de la historia*, Empúries, Barcelona 1984, p. 37, citado por JOAN PAGÈS, "La comparación en la enseñanza de la historia," en *Clio y Asociados*. "La Historia enseñada," no. 9-10 (2005-2006).

time Braudel took over the direction of *Annales*, although his epistemology has certainly received a fair bit of criticism, some of it well deserved.

Thematic History is very much in consonance with the tendencies of present day society so inclined to substantial changes which lead, even in history, to specialization in one area or theme. The Congregation of the Mission is too big and the history of the Vincentian institutions too extensive to be treated as a whole. Indeed the schools of History of many universities configure their departments into thematic studies so that students may choose: economic and social history, the history of political and administrative institutions, the history of religions, of international relations, etc. And bookstores, publishers and libraries organize themselves according to the different themes of history.

Considering now the nature of what can be considered Thematic History, with some frequency the idea may occur to us that Thematic History is opposed to Chronological History. I think this is not so. Moreover, many Chronological Histories are also thematic; and it is easy to find *Chronological Histories of...* whatever theme: drugs, migrations, missions, seminaries, retreats to ordinands; and more concretely, the history of these themes in different countries or places. Therefore, when writing the biographies of St. Vincent or St. Louise or the Superiors General it is very common to place an appendix with the chronology of the political, religious and social events of the epoch. The opposition between theme and chronology may have come to us because many biographies and Chronological Histories of historic figures seemed like annuals which related the history of the person's life year by year from birth to death, or they presented to us chronologic narrative of facts, foundations, activities and even documents without showing any connection between them and without analyzing the causes and motives which gave rise to such happenings nor the basic reasons which caused them to be related. They were simply a narrative of the seminaries, the missions of the Congregation in different countries, from their origins or birth up to the present day. But Thematic History tends to investigate in depth a matter about which we can draw some response to the current problem. In the modern era almost no historian opposes Thematic and Chronologic History, for a Thematic History, as is that of the Congregation, of the seminaries, of the missions in general must take into account the times and the geography.

When I speak of Chronological History I do not refer to history as proposed by St. Augustine, giving it a Judeo-Christian vision with an apocalyptic direction; a linear or cyclical vision of history which begins with God the Creator and ends with God the Judge of all

humanity, and therefore of history. According to this history, human beings are instruments of God and follow his providence, but they are not the protagonists of history. The protagonist is God. Although reading St. Vincent, it may at times seem to us to be reading a providentialist, this vision of history ended with the Renaissance, which placed the human person as the center and author of history and above all, from the 18th century when history began to be considered as a science more than a literary narration even though this too sought objectivity. You will say no one is now capable of following this conception of history. True, but do not forget that in some environments, a certain fundamentalist traditionalism is being revived; and in others, with an air of biblical or scientific research, the theory of the so called *intelligent divine design*.

Thematic History – Overall History

What Thematic History is opposed to is a traditional vision of some historians who only pay attention to the political, military and diplomatic aspects within the spheres of kings and their courts, while today greater importance is given to the history of civilizations, of thought, and above all to the economic and social, that is to say, the human sphere. And if Thematic History is not opposed to Chronological History, even less does it confront Overall History. It is true that, in contrast to Overall History — what some call global or general history — Thematic History concerns itself with certain moments, themes or fields which the historian has selected because they are significant and because they lead us to know the facts, affairs and phenomena which place their stamp on an epoch: social, economic or religious themes, or those of spirituality and human rights which in some way have to do — in our case — with Vincentian themes, the Congregation and the poor. It does not forget geography and the chronology itself, because every phenomenon occurs within an historical context of time and place; and it does not forget either the theoretical and concrete context of Overall History, i.e. the history of why and how some past events have marked an epoch, have been consigned in some documents and have defined in some way the lives of their contemporaries. There are some very concrete historic themes which affect and interest us Vincentians in order to reflect on their effect on evangelization and the service of the poor in past epochs, it is true, but which make us analyze their possible repercussion and application in the present, as long as we do not convert history into an auxiliary science to sociology or anthropology.

“Bloch, Febvre, Braudel, working together on the magazine ANNALES, were the ones who gave the greatest impulse to Thematic History in the years 1930 to 1950. But these same authors and others more recent such as Duby and Le Goff, put historians on guard against any attempt to separate Thematic History from Overall History”⁸ so as not to dismember it. The fact is, in reality, Thematic History is either included within General History, collaborating with other human sciences, or it becomes an Encyclopedic Dictionary of History with no life or connection between the articles, that is, it becomes an archipelago of little “histories” that are like islands with no communication with one another. In this case, *“history is not a coherent discipline; not only because it may be less than the sum of its parts, but more because there is not even a whole, but only parts.”*

It is the accusation Dosse directs against those who wish to convert history into a *history of little pieces*.⁹ “History is a process and one fragment cannot be isolated from the process and studied in an isolated way... everything is interconnected” said Ved Mehta.¹⁰ This is the defect that Andre Dodin imputes to the Life of St. Vincent written (1860) by Ulysse Maynard: “Better suited to showing the continuity of the works (of St. Vincent) in time, than to illuminating the connection between the works and the economic, literary and spiritual situation, little studied at that time, Maynard inevitably isolates his hero and thus deprives him of his beautiful and precious humanity.”¹¹ A similar defect may be attributed to Pierre Collet with regard to his life of St. Vincent from 1748. Despite going through an enormous amount of documents which were presented for the

⁸ Cf. the article of VITTORIA CALVANI, “Storia settoriale contro storia generale? Un conflitto insensato,” in *RES* no. 24 (October 2002), pgs. 8-13. In October of 2005 Caroline Jouneau-Sion summarizes the debate among the authors of the book *1515 et les grandes dates de l’Histoire de France*, moderated by Alain Corbin and published by Clio; they are concerned by the abandonment of chronology in teaching, and she emphasizes that for Marc Ferro, one of the authors, “Thematic history, which was once fashionable, could lead to reflection about the past, but it has upset the sense of chronology. And should only be done when the occasion presents itself.” In another place she cites Braudel: “Against those who hold for an autonomous history of each area, Lucien Febvre urges us to reclaim the rights of overall history, attentive to the totality of life, from which no one can be separated, unless it is done arbitrarily.”

⁹ FRANÇOIS DOSSE, *La historia en migajas*, Edicions Alfons el Magnànim, Valencia 1989.

¹⁰ Cited by RICHARD J. EVANS in the Introduction to EDWARD H. CARR, *¿Qué es historia?*, p. 43.

¹¹ ANDRÉ DODIN, *San Vicente de Paúl y la caridad*, CEME, Salamanca 1977, p. 183.

canonization of the Saint and being very respectful of his sources, we read that Life as a chronicle of St. Vincent de Paul isolated from his historical context. On the other hand, although I am not in agreement with some of his points and the focus he gives to others, the *Vida del Señor Vicente de Paul* by Fr. Jaime Corera (1988) presents St. Vincent year by year; but it is not a simple chronology of his life; for in a certain way, it tries to center it within the context of 17th century France.

For all of these reasons, it is a good idea to establish that by Overall History one does not understand just social history, a sense which many historians today give it. However there would be no great difficulty in giving the primacy to the social aspect if it were not for the fact that the term "social" is politicized generally with a tilt to the left. For all history is social, because in the final analysis it is dominated by the socio-economic. And so Ahumada Duran writes: "According to the historiographic-methodological project developed by Fernand Braudel: 'History is destined to become a kind of *super* discipline, guiding and unifying all the other social sciences which converge in the understanding of the human phenomenon (sociology, anthropology, economics, demography, etc.), by way of the idea of *historic temporality*. Today this aspiration is very far from becoming a reality. On the contrary, the tendency we observe is just the opposite: *history* has been transformed into sociological history, anthropologic history, economic history or demographic history.'"¹²

On the other hand, when it is said that Thematic History should fit into Overall History, one must be careful not to study the theme of history as part of a systematic history where all the events of the theme are considered as "a part rooted within" an already predetermined global system: traditionalist or progressive, authority or freedom in the case of our Congregation, and whose interpretation should serve to justify the system. Even less should a theme be chosen to express with it an ideology with the intention of indoctrinating the readers.

When it is said that Thematic History should fit within Overall History the idea is that a history must be written in which the chosen theme takes into account all its relationships with the ideas, facts and situations which explain it, clarify it and give it objective sense. Let us take an example.¹³ Many Spanish missionaries have considered

¹² RODRIGO AHUMADA DURÁN en *Revista Communio*, Santiago Chile, 1999, no. 2, pgs. 87-107 (photocopy).

¹³ BENITO PARADELA, C.M., *Resumen histórico de la Congregación de la Misión en España, desde 1704 a 1868*, Madrid 1923, pgs. 216 s., 241 s. and 383-392.

Fr. Etienne's actions with the Spanish province a clear injustice on the part of an absolutist and dominant Superior General. One can study the theme of *those relationships*: but if they are not fitted into the framework of the Overall History of the 19th century, one cannot arrive at a very objective consideration. Therefore one must take into account, on the one hand, the French invasion in the time of Napoleon and the anti-French atmosphere within the Madrid government and people. One must also consider that the Daughters of Charity, for the Spanish king and his ministers, were a state company similar to the army, doctors and professors, with an internal seminary funded by the government for the recruitment of sisters. And the Visitor of the Vincentian priests was the Director and Superior of these Daughters of Charity and could not be subject to Paris. On the other hand, one must consider that, after Napoleon, the Province of Spain was for many years dependent, by order of the Holy See, on an Italian Vicar who lived in Rome and not on the Superior General who resided in Paris. In the same way one must consider that, according to the mentality of the Madrid government, the Visitor of Spain asked for and even demanded from Fr. Etienne powers similar to his own. There was danger of a secession of the Spanish Province from the universal Congregation. And so Thematic History must take into account Overall History; and if it does not there is created, in the words of the Italian historian Vittoria Calvani, a *senseless conflict*.

Therefore when investigating Thematic History one examines a series of documents about a concrete matter which indicate its direct or indirect, but close connection to any events, any dates or places, any ideologies or circumstances found in those documents or others which refer to the concrete and well defined theme we are treating. Thus the researcher discovers a close connection between historical facts, thematic thought, present day application and future projection.

In order to research a theme of history clear ideas are essential. For we are seeing that in these post-modernist years, while studying Thematic History, a confusing tension is created between globalizing tendencies and situations at the local, concrete, singular and well defined level, so well liked by post-modernist society where the fleeting, the subjective, the relative and the transitory are mixed with the concrete and singular. From this perspective, grand historiographic narratives now have no sense. Nevertheless and quite contrarily, even though the themes of history may be concrete, they are not singular, but rather particular with a more or less general projection.

Micro-history

Although Thematic History may not be identified with post-modernist micro-history, they can aid one another. Micro-history and micro-analysis have had and have great importance among some Italian historians. The most representative is Giovanni Levi. For him, *micro-history is essentially an historiographic practice more than a theory, although it may have multiple theoretical, and in a certain sense eclectic, references.* This way of doing history takes into account, above all, the methodology and intention of the historian who does not subject himself to any orthodox doctrine; he renounces prediction, the establishment of prior theoretical frameworks which subject the studied historical phenomena to preconceived direction. His objective is to understand and interpret — without being tied down by general laws — human actions and conflicts in their double autonomy. Without implying radical relativism, micro-history understands social reality not as a structure of universal objects, but rather as changing relationships within some contexts which are permanently adapting themselves. Two aspects should be emphasized:

The first has to do with the way of observing historical facts: it concentrates on concrete individuals inserted into local relationships, configured into what has been called “exceptional normal”; that is to say, the particular situations of everyday people or families which, after intense study, are considered useful for arriving at flexible generalizations relatively capable of being extrapolated to other areas of history in the present or the future. It is a continual to and fro between the particular and the global, between the anecdotal and the structural.

The second aspect refers to the idea of “context” which is no longer seen as a given social structure, but rather as an historical framework of changeable and not necessary social connections. In this sense, the analysis taken to the micro level leads from the structure to the particular set of circumstances and to the detail in order to return to the global. Its aim is to understand and interpret, without subjecting itself to universal laws, the human actions, conflicts and phenomena of common people who lived in the past. This point of view can be useful to us as Vincentians as we study certain themes or persons who may seem irrelevant to us.

Let us look at an example. Fr. Mitxel Olabuenaga in the defense of his doctoral thesis *Misiones Populares de la C.M. (España 1704-1975)* (*Popular Missions of the C.M., Spain 1704-1975*) tells us: “From the preparation in 1980 of the thesis for my Licentiate in Theology

Popular Missions of the C.M. Franco Era, we arrived at three conclusions: the extraordinary development the missions had in Spain in the post-war period, their evident decline during the 70's, and their interdependence with the socio-political situation. Together with these conclusions came two new questions: "What causes motivated such a situation? Have there been other similar moments in their history?" His intention was to give a present day answer with regard to the purpose for which St. Vincent founded us and to the mandate of Vatican II on the revision of our institutes, bearing in mind our origins and the secularized reality. For this end, Fr. Olabuenaga treats, examines and studies the missions in several larger cities in Spain, but also in the small, remote, nearly forgotten towns; and he studies them surely bearing in mind the good and extensive official documentation, ecclesiastical and civil periodicals, but also, and perhaps with greater impact, the brief and occasional memoirs of Vincentian missionaries unknown to those not related to the Congregation. It is a new way to do historical research — although some call it the history of popular culture — going out to the street and traveling through the countryside, seeing the problems and the customs of the simple people, visiting and seeing families and speaking with them. The historians who seek in archives documents about structures and personalities had forgotten that a part of the past continues to live in these small towns. And these historical sources so impacted the listeners that one of the members of the Tribunal before which he defended his thesis asked him in public to please lend him the documentation because *he deemed quite interesting the vision of the History of the 19th century developed from the point of view of the missions of the Catholic church*. That member of the Tribunal saw how a particular theme, perhaps insignificant for society as a whole, reaches a new social dimension as the historical framework in which its interrelation with other themes is examined. It seemed to me he was not so interested in analyzing the structures of the society as he was in the social dynamics that affected them and which the micro-analysis of the popular missions done by Fr. Olabuenaga had brought to light.

Once again I repeat that I am not trying to identify or even assimilate Thematic History with Micro-history or with the history of every day culture with its down to earth flavor, but rather confirm that the deductions and conclusions of particular or personal themes of the past which seem ordinary to us have general repercussions for Overall History.

The fact is that the "scientific" historian little by little has forgotten the human factor which is the basis of all history. The institutions and structures which should have been only the stage where

man makes history, had more importance than the actors. It is like giving all the importance to the study of the Constitutions and not to the persons who live them, or centering the missions in their methodology and not in the missionaries who give them and the people who receive them; it is looking exclusively at the structure of the seminaries and not at the missionaries who established them or the seminarians who lived in them. And so the historian Vicens Vives warns the philologists *that the word, the document "does not reflect the new reality it tries to define" for today's world; and he reminds the professionals of history that the institution is born, if not dead, at least static. Those who will give account of its vital content will be the men who struggled in it to carry out their ambitions.*

Real life is doubtless found in the great legislative collections, but also in the humble archives of the house of the missionaries or the seminaries they directed, or in parish archives, in the files where the buying and selling of houses or fields is registered, in the decisions of the tribunals, etc. Positivism, in its last derivations about the great collections of documents it published, was ready for sentencing, but not dead, for one cannot deny the great importance of these collections. When Febvre speaks of "Overall" History and Bloch of "human" history, they are sending the same message; because history, in Bloch's words, is "the science of men in time" or "a fragment of the universal march toward knowledge."¹⁴

Theme-ology

Let us not confuse Thematic History with theme-ology which has more to do with literature and music, and whose objective is to examine the theme of a literary or musical work. Theme-ology looks at the *motif* which contains musical or literary references. Perhaps the words which best capture Thematic history are matter, affair, theme. But theme-ology, although these terms may be applied to it, seeks to find those elements which have gone to create a literary form or inspire a musical motif. Certainly the theme of a novel — the tension between the plot and the sense the reader gives to a theatrical work, a poem may, for example, sink its roots in the autobiography of the writer, in the events of life, but always directed and focused by the imagination, fantasy, dreams, inspiration, etc. Clearly, theme-ology can deal with themes of history, sociology, economy or real life as does Thematic History, but not with the same exactitude,

¹⁴ See ANTONIO GABRIEL ROSÓN, *Sociedades Históricas y cambio en el tiempo*, p. 13, on the web page.

the objective seriousness or rigorous documentation with which Thematic History studies them, especially with regard to revealed religion. Historical truth is quite distant from literary truth, especially of the novel. That is to say, the term theme-ology remains at the level of the inseparable union between form and content or matter and style. Although the theme dealt with may be identical, there is not the same degree of truth in an historical novel about St. Vincent as a slave or as a galley slave as there is in a serious documented study about these same themes. It is true that the objective truth in history admits of multiple representations, according to the vision of the historian; but in this case, it is better to say that literature creates its truth, while history tries to describe the truth.

Thematic History helps to enter more deeply

Thematic history can be approached not only by researchers with degrees in history who wish to go more deeply into particular aspects of history, but also by students interested in a particular theme like those who begin to study some aspect of Vincentian history, since as time goes by or historians from other places become interested in it, forgotten things are discovered, other visions of some events are seen, new aspects come to light and themes known only superficially come to be known more deeply, as for example the economic situation of St. Vincent's family which could give us a very different vision of his priestly vocation than the one we have today, or the relationship between St. Vincent and Berulle and the influence the latter had on Vincent's holiness and spirituality, etc. Much has been said of St. Vincent's influence on St. Louise, but has her influence on him been studied? Because if it is true she idolized her Director and Superior, it is also true that she was an intelligent woman with a talent for solving social and community problems, with a very feminine ability to bring St. Vincent around to what she saw clearly; and St. Vincent, who loved her dearly in the Lord, knew it but hid the fact that he did. But it happened that they were both spiritual beings who loved the poor; and this, together with their search for holiness, joined them together. In all the biographies of St. Vincent his relationship with the Abbe Saint-Cyran is written about; but has his influence on St. Vincent, a truly strong and holy man, been studied? For the abbot, a strong personality as well, had an enviable formation in patristic and spiritual theology. And St. Vincent would say that conversing with him captivated, elevated and inflamed him. Their friendship was long standing and heartfelt; they even shared a common purse for a time and often ate together and visited one another. St. Vincent lent him a horse a short time before Saint-Cyran

was imprisoned. And although there was some tension between them and even a small confrontation because of the theological ideas which Saint-Cyran seemed to defend and which seemed doubtful to St. Vincent, neither of them ever wanted to break off their friendship. And when, by order of Richelieu, St. Vincent was called on with the intention of getting him to accuse his friend of heresy, he did not accuse him.¹⁵

And if we get into social matters, there are themes which concern us as Vincentians in such a way that we cannot get around them, and which our charism bids us to investigate more deeply today so as to find Vincentian solutions: immigration (the former war refugees), families fallen on hard times (the ashamed poor of the 17th century), children of the street or on the street (abandoned children of Vincent's time); as well as finding ways to resolve, or simply explain today's urgent problem of the lack of vocations, without disdaining more speculative themes such as unbelief or secular religiosity (libertines of the past), progressive or traditional spirituality (ongoing reflection of Jansenism). In this era of feminist movements and equal rights, it would also be fitting to respond to the following questions: why were Vincent's Charities only for women, when up to that time they had been only for men? How did he manage to get the Daughters of Charity tolerated and even accepted by civil and ecclesiastical authorities? Or in our times when so much is said of globalization and the identity of consecrated institutions, did St. Vincent copy from previous congregations the secular nature of the Missionaries? And if he changed something, why did he do so?

There are still many important themes to investigate regarding our Founder and about Vincentiana within the scope of Overall History. One could make a long list of interesting topics about the history of the Congregation, of the Company, of the seminaries or other ministries, whether by nations or by centuries, but always choosing concrete themes which concern us to see if we can give an answer to today's problems, without forgetting that the subject of history is the

¹⁵ Cf. PIERRE COSTE, *Le grand saint du grand siècle. Monsieur Vincent*, vol. III, Desclée de Brouwer et C^{ie}, Paris 1931, p. 135 ss. Four reasons lead me to accept as generally authentic the narrative of St. Vincent about the Abbe Saint Cyran (X, 107-112) even though it may have been manipulated in some points by the Jansenists: pointing out that St. Vincent was born in 1580 against what Abelly says; the fact that Richelieu did not introduce the saint's testimony in the dossier of accusations; the fact that the Jansenists contradicted the doctrine taught by the Abbe; and the fact that St. Vincent went to congratulate him when he got out of prison, thus indicating that he had not the least influence in his imprisonment because he did not testify against him.

individual person, certainly, but always inasmuch as he is a socially interrelated being. For example, I have still not found any modern study on the interrelationship of European missionaries and those of other continents which draws conclusions from a singular fact: there was a time when “centrifugal” Europe sent missionaries to other countries. Has the time come when “centripetal” Europe takes in missionaries from other places?

There is no doubt that the results of the study of these themes would be to give us some profound research and some ideas useful to the whole Vincentian Family. Although history is not, nor does it have the capacity to be, a visionary who predicts the future — because it is not a mathematical science; this way of writing Thematic History is widespread among important historians today whether in longer works or in essays, with the advantage that it helps us develop the sense of knowing how to differentiate the themes and their times, and to see as natural the change in institutions. In a word, it invites us to be creative.

Thematic Categories

Throughout this article I have given some examples. They are only examples. Nevertheless, for what I want to achieve in this article, I have thought it fitting to present how some historians of civil history with no relation to Vincentian institutions, group together, in a few broad sections, the many and distinct themes of so called universal history which are the object of study with the idea that in this way they are valid for all times, for all places and for all civil and religious institutions, but always with a connection to general history. In Spanish language historical writing I have hardly been able to find any model to clarify the ideas I have just expressed. Perhaps one of the easiest examples to apply in the research of those of us who are beginning Vincentiana studies is that of Josep Fontana¹⁶ who presents a Thematic History which covers the following areas, useful no doubt for all students of Vincentiana:

0. The Stage of History

1. The number of men: life, subsistence and death of human beings
2. The forms of subsistence: I. Agriculture

¹⁶ JOSEF FONTANA, *Introducción al Estudio de la Historia*, Editorial Crítica, Plaza edición, Barcelona 1999. I have taken many ideas from JOAN PAGÈS, *article cited*, in nt. 1, pgs. 17-35.

3. The forms of subsistence: II. Trade and markets
4. The forms of subsistence: III. Industry and economic growth
5. The forms of collective organization: I. Society
6. The forms of collective organization: II. State and Nation
7. The foundations of politics: violence and power
8. Ideas: I. Beliefs and religions
9. Ideas: II. Culture, civilization and science
10. Ideas: III. Popular culture, alternative culture

Fontana justifies his proposal with some remarks I find very much to the point: "The thematic criterion which has been adopted to formulate this list is that of choosing the great problems — not all, but those which struck us as the most representative — which affect the men and women who live in society, which is the subject about which history concerns itself. Problems which are of the past and of the present, and very likely of at least the immediate future, and which are considered in a temporal evolving perspective which history should have. Therefore we will take any of these great questions in a global way and we will analyze it in its evolution, not to do a complete study of it from its origins to the present day, but rather to show how this method of analysis can help to understand fundamental human problems.... Its purpose is to help combat the topics and prejudices which get in the way of understanding the world in which we live: stir one to think about history and the world personally, critically."

It should not surprise us that Fontana, focused on a *Nueva Historia Económica*, would give such importance to economic, social and demographic themes, since from the school of the *Annales* and the *Marxist* interpretation of history, economic history explains and embraces all the areas of social reality, endeavoring to make history pass from the individual fact to the collective one. They are the preferred areas of development in modern society and they are also the tendency of a way of writing history which tries to catalogue social realities in series in order to better measure them statistically. Although the research from past centuries will never be able to give us the desired statistical precision about production, there are authors, like Pierre Vilar, who say that it is possible, even for the 17th century, to find documentation which facilitates the drawing up of statistics about production in that century: by examining tithes, fiscal controls, salaries, rents, etc.¹⁷

¹⁷ PIERRE VILAR, *Crecimiento y desarrollo. Economía e historia. Reflexiones sobre el caso español*, Ed. Ariel, Barcelona 1974, pgs. 58-59.

This classification of themes should not upset us Vincentians; it should even make us happy, because, in the final analysis, the service and evangelization of the poor, on the one hand, is what identifies us and what makes us different from other religious institutions, and on the other hand, is the reason we have been founded. They are themes which are directed to the poor who are excluded from our society economically and socially; and may well be themes to be taken up by Vincentians in order to give a more universal projection to our studies, bringing to the general public a series of themes we studied only for ourselves.

History of the Congregation

It is time to set for ourselves the challenge of writing a History of the Congregation of the Mission, of the Company of the Daughters of Charity or of the Vincentian Family. Other congregations have them. Jose Maria Roman, John Rybolt and Luigi Mezzadri have worked or are working on this. We need this Overall History, for I have explained that Thematic History should take into account Overall History. It seems that what is happening is what I have mentioned: each province or country is writing its own history in isolation, without bridges to one another, like grains that do not form a loaf.

Or perhaps we should put together our universal history according to local themes, by countries or by provinces; and afterwards a commission of historians would compile the General History of the Congregation.

With regard to Vincentian themes, besides what I have cited throughout this article, yesterday Fr. Mezzadri spoke of "Nine Areas of Investigation for Vincentian Studies," as challenges which can attract our young researchers to work on this long awaited history, and as themes of the history of the missionaries which still need to be clarified.

The Biographies

Now that I have set forth these ideas on the diversity of themes to be chosen, I think I should dedicate a section to biography, and that for two reasons: because, in the end, biography is one of the themes that history encompasses; and secondly, because in our day there is great interest in biographies. Society is tired of collective protagonism, of collective tragedy, of social opulence, of anonymous history, and has an interest in personal, individual history, for the real life of each individual.

Biography chooses as a *theme* of history the life of a real person, usually dead, setting forth his achievements from birth to death. It is usually written in an expository or narrative form, usually in the third person. While dealing with it as a theme of history, I think there can be different classes of biography, not only in the external literary or audio-visual form, but also in its content, in the aspect the author most wants to emphasize, giving us as a result a psychological, social, cultural or political biography, etc.

In accordance with the idea of accepting particular themes within Global History, the biography of a person of the past should also explain his acts within the social, cultural and political context of his time, attempting to reconstruct through documents his thought and his impact. For we ought not to forget that history always takes into account the present looking towards the future. Thus, through knowing what other persons have lived through, we learn useful things for the present and the future. We can extract a teaching from the experience of other people, even if they are from other times. Furthermore, if the person written about is representative, for example, Saint Vincent or St. Louise, his life can give us an unequalled knowledge of the society of 17th century France in which he lived. This is what Coste attempted to do in his almost definitive Life of St. Vincent with the title *The Great Saint of the Great Century*. With a scrupulous methodology following the positivist or methodical school, he compiles and analyzes a rather exhaustive documentation. Nevertheless, for Fr. Andre Dodin, “he did not manage to integrate him into his historical milieu and he left him outside of the spiritual world of the 17th century.”¹⁸ This is what Fr. Jose Maria Roman has tried to correct in his life of St. Vincent, and what I have tried to keep in mind in the life of St. Louise de Marillac: that the two saints are protagonists of 40 years of French history.¹⁹

To this end, it is necessary that the biography be historical and not guided by remote control, like *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul*, which Abelly published in 1664. A theologian more than a historian, despite wanting to be honorable and working from the oral and written documentation of his contemporaries, “he wrapped him all up in an edifying hagiographic style.” It was what the Superiors of the Congregation wanted so that the Life of the Saint would be the pious complement of the Rules and “the practical

¹⁸ ANDRÉ DODIN, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

¹⁹ BENITO MARTÍNEZ BETANZOS, C.M., *Empeñada en un paraíso para los pobres*, CEME, Salamanca 1995; JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *San Vicente de Paul, I, Biografía*, BAC, Madrid 1981.

commentary on the Gospel," according to Fr. Dodin. The same can be said of Gobillon's *Life of the Venerable Louise de Marillac* (1676).

Another danger the biographer must watch out for is that, because of having great sympathy for the person he writes about, he offers a slanted vision of the Overall History through the life of his subject in order to extol him, especially when a theme is chosen in which to compare the action or life of the subject with the actions and lives of his contemporaries within some historical structures that were as they were and cannot be modified as we might have liked them.

To undertake the biography of St. Vincent, St. Louise, Blessed Ozanam or any other Vincentian figure is a great risk, because it obliges us to immerse ourselves in the serious study of the atmosphere and the mentalities of a past epoch, and because the historian is not without feelings and these can lead him to adopt a methodology which helps him to interpret the hypothesis he may have formulated, because he analyzes and interprets the documents according to his inclinations between macro and micro-history, and because he is influenced by his position as a Vincentian and his own ideology. And so we have biographies of St. Vincent as social revolutionary, politician, countryman, doctor, etc. One runs the risk of deforming or disfiguring the subject of the biography or turning him into a myth in which everything is directed towards his fulfilling the destiny he had before his birth. There is a danger of disfiguring the authenticity of real lives and their deeds. But by the same token one can run the risk, because of a wish to demythify the person, of disfiguring the truth and exaggerating what was not clear. And this risk is very real if it is a Vincentian or a Frenchman who is writing the life of St. Vincent, a very popular saint in France, and turned almost into an institution by the French state and church.

To avoid these dangers one must endeavor, in the first place, to not want to be original at all costs, but rather honest. And for that, it is absolutely necessary to have a thorough knowledge of the historical frameworks which help to explain the rise of the person. Secondly, one must take into account the personal idiosyncrasy and nationality of the biographer and his subject. How will a Spaniard study a Frenchman, a Frenchman a German, a German an Irishman or Englishman, and all of these an Italian? How will North or South Americans look at Europeans, or the latter at Americans, Asians, Africans or people of Oceania? All this means that, to write a biography, one cannot disregard history. The good biographer feels the obligation to be an historian; and without abandoning his subject, he rises above his own nationality, his sympathies as a human being and the currents of interpretation which, certainly, are always chosen by him.

Without doubt, in our day there are many novelized biographies which provide us with pleasant moments as we read of the vicissitudes of other human beings. But then that is not thematic or any other kind of history. It is the genre of fiction called the novel because it relates the real by means of the unreal or imaginary, manipulating its materials in order to achieve a literary result.

I think I should say that one can draw moral or spiritual lessons from the lives of many people. But biography cannot become edifying hagiography, falsifying the life of a person in which everything is holy. It is a common sin, from the *Parallel Lives* of Plutarch and the *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* of Suetonius to *The Golden Legend* of Voragine, but also in the biographies of St. Vincent, St. Louise, Vincentian missionaries and Daughters of Charity, especially popular Lives written in the first half of the last century. It is a sin which Mezzadri has carefully avoided in his Short Life of St. Vincent.

Nevertheless, when writing the biography of a saint it is good not to confuse piety with spirituality. In the book *La Señorita Le Gras y Santa Luisa de Marillac* (1991), I chose one theme: analyze both the spirituality the saint lived and the one she inculcated in her Sisters. But since it was the spirituality of a woman, I had to study her life in order to explain her spirituality.

In our day, I think that, among ourselves, this sin has been overcome. Thanks to the methodology of methodic positivism, the concern for documentation about our saints, blessed, venerables, etc. has increased (the search for manuscripts, spiritual writings, diaries, correspondence, etc.) as the basis of the biographical narrative, as well as the concern to situate the subject in his/her authentic historical-social milieu. Yesterday Mezzadri spoke of the documents which concern Vincent and his thought. But we must be very careful, nevertheless, that the abundance of documentation not become the protagonist and drown the person who remains hidden behind the foliage, as happened with Coste, and which Fr. Dodin avoided in an original way in *St. Vincent de Paul and Charity* (1972).

Still and all, the biography should be pleasant to read, it should attract. And so it should be well written literarily, as long as the literary quality does not falsify the history. It would be good to bear in mind the advice of Soto Gamboa,²⁰ "In biography, just as in

²⁰ ÁNGEL SOTO GAMBOA (Reseña), "Gonzalo Vial. Pinochet. La biografía," *Historia UC*, no. 36 (2003), pgs. 450-458. In note no. 1 he clarifies: I owe these ideas to Alejandra Eyzaguirre, to whom I am very grateful for making available to me the manuscript *La biografía*. Santiago, Universidad de los Andes, 2001/2002. Unpublished work sponsored by FONDECYT, whose project is called: "Narración: ficción, historia y moral. Influjo recíproco de lo

historical discourse, the esthetic, scientific and ethical problem arises. Andre Maurois, the great French biographer, in *Aspects of a Biography* has posed the question about the knowledge of its methods and knowing where their value lies. For him, there can be a convergence between two aspects of biography: that it be true, i.e. documented and scientific, and at the same time, that it be a work of art. Both aspects are a real challenge for the historian who must use every documentary device at the risk of having his subject hidden by the documents that are his source. Maurois himself has pointed out that: "The search for truth is the work of the wise man; the expression of a personality is more the work of an artist." That means an historical theme, especially the biography of a human being, is beautiful if it distances us from a series of unconnected events and facilitates the deeper, organized and clearer understanding of what happened in the chosen theme or in the biography of the person. "To the patience of the scrupulous documentarian should be added the art of presentation."

It is what Fr. Corera, in his *Life of St. Vincent* and especially Jean Calvert in his literarily impeccable *Lives of St. Vincent and St. Louise*, have born in mind.

Research in Thematic History

Even though the methodology of history and the archives which must be consulted have been spoken about in this colloquy, I remind you that for Thematic History it is necessary to establish the theme, if necessary determine the geographic area in which the event occurs, and the time or dates: from which time and to which time one intends to cover the matter to be covered. That may require knowing and identifying the different categories of archives the historian needs to employ: for the Vincentian time period, the civil archives of Paris, those of the Mother House or of other religious congregations, for example, those of the Visitation or Salesian Sisters which surely must contain some conferences of the many St. Vincent gave as their superior, as well as many documents relating to the superior himself. For other time periods a little reflection will tell us which archives or documents we have to research so as to better discover, learn about and establish the correlation between the different themes of the historical research and the piles of documents. Do not forget that interesting documents can be discovered in almost unknown

ficticio y lo histórico en lo narrativo" (Narration: fiction, history and morality. Reciprocal influence of the fictional and the historical in the narrative).

archives. I would only add that it is the methodology that defines the historian and that differentiates good history from bad history.

Despite everything, I am going to dwell upon a few aspects: first, once the theme is chosen and the facts established just as we discover them in the documents, it is necessary to interpret them, relating them with one another, analyzing causes and effects, selecting those which strike us as most important to best develop the chosen theme. That is, to find the truth. But in Thematic History the objective truth does not interest one as much as the truth discovered by the historian. The *objective* truth is the historic fact just as it happened and which is written down as an historic fact (document, source). Thus it cannot be altered or modified. On the other hand, the *subjective* truth lies in how the historian understands the fact consigned in the sources and how he explains and narrates it. This relationship between the cold fact and the interpreted fact tends to be forgotten by the historians of the methodic school and their contemporary disciples. The objective truth concerning the events can be definitive, while the truth discovered by the historian as he interprets the facts can be sustainable or refutable.

I will give some examples: St. Vincent de Paul, within French culture and civilization of the 17th century, lived out in a concrete way his own vocation which led him to found the Charities, the Congregation of the Mission, and together with St. Louise de Marillac, the Daughters of Charity (they are objective truths). The historian who has chosen as his theme St. Vincent as founder interprets those facts and concludes that St. Vincent was a genius or a good copier of what already existed, that he was a man involved in social work or simply an evangelical saint (the truth discovered by the researcher). Another example: in the 19th century, the Vincentians directed a certain number of seminaries in France (objective truth); they directed them well or adequately or badly, it was worth the trouble or not, they produced some eminent priests, etc. (the truth discovered by the historian). In other words, the historian discovers the *manner* in which St. Vincent *lived in the world with sense and meaning*, instructing us for the present and the future.

Overall History, although it is permeated with subjective truth, generally affords us objective truth, while Thematic History, although it must always reflect objective truth, is generally permeated with the truth discovered by the historian through the three aspects of methodology that seem important to me in order to research Thematic History. I refer to hypothesis, constructing a model, and comparison.

The Historical Hypothesis

Fr. Olabuenaga has already clearly explained the idea of hypothesis and its qualities. I would only add that the hypothesis is a logical way the historian has of responding to a theme he proposes to investigate. When someone proposes to research a theme, aided by the methodologies of interpretation, by the available information and the elements common in other similar events, if there are any, he goes on to arrive at conclusions and possible answers to the questions posed by the investigation. He does so setting forth some hypothesis which he considers the true conclusion to the selection of the theme and to the organization done according to a plan. And then he dedicates himself to the task of gathering evidence and data which will permit him to either prove the viability of his hypothesis or reject it. For example: in 2006 I was asked to prepare something for the Vincentian Week in Salamanca on the theme "The Holiness of St. Vincent de Paul"²¹; and then I established a hypothesis: "St. Vincent's holiness was not the fruit of a conversion in the sense of a break with the past, but rather the natural evolution of his youthful piety." Then the work of investigation began in order to prove it. At the end of the investigation I could have arrived at two conclusions: the holiness of Vincent began with a conversion from a life of sin to another of sanctity. There was a break. And then I would have had to reject my first hypothesis and accept as a new hypothesis, the conversion. But during my research I thought I could prove with adequate arguments that his holiness was the fruit of the evolution of his youthful piety. And what began as a hypothesis turned into a study with conclusions that seemed serious and true to me.

How many themes in the form of hypothesis can be done today! For example, about the dark night St. Vincent went through between 1613 and 1617 about his dedication to the poor before Chatillon, about the discovery he made while a slave in Tunis or during his dark night that charity obliged him personally, about the idea he came to in Chatillon that charity, to be effective, must be done with team work, etc. Obviously, hypotheses that can be verified. It can be a particular hypothesis (applicable in a certain number of cases) or a universal one (applicable in all cases). But a singular hypothesis, i.e. one that works only in one case and cannot be more or less generalized, is no good. However, there are singular hypotheses that

²¹ BENITO MARTÍNEZ BETANZOS, C.M., "La santidad en san Vicente de Paúl," in *Urgencias pastorales de la Familia Vicenciana. XXXII Semana de Estudios Vicencianos*, CEME, Salamanca 2007, p. 19.

because of their repercussions become particular ones. For example, in the life of St. Louise, I proposed the hypothesis that Louis de Marillac was not her father, and that St. Louise was the daughter of unknown parents, although one of them was a Marillac.²² It was a singular hypothesis that turned into a particular one for the repercussion it had in her life as a young girl, a married woman, a widow and in her relationship with her son Michel, as well as explaining her meeting with St. Vincent, the foundation of the Daughters of Charity and an infinite number of relationships and consequences as Superior General of the Company. But it was also applicable to many women, even of the nobility, whose parents did not recognize them, even as illegitimate children.

“It is the researcher’s task to provide himself with the necessary information to question or to prove his hypothesis; and since he has not lived what he is studying and he can be influenced by the facts he investigates, frequently he must depend on deduction and logical analysis, using the experience recorded by others more than direct observation. To make sure this information is as true as possible, he should base himself on ‘first hand’ data.”²³

Constructing the model

There is another method similar to the hypothesis which greatly facilitates the development of the theme; it is the method called “constructing the model” and it is used when what is selected as a theme is a structure, a system or a spirituality, for example of the Congregation, of the Company or any branch of the Vincentian Family. Once again a few examples will explain it better than my exposition. We know that in the 19th and in the first half of the 20th century the religious state was admired in an exaggerated way; and because of that, the Congregation took on many similarities with the religious state not only in its life, but also in its structures. This method consists in imagining what would have happened if the Congregation had remained firm in its life, in the primitive structures and in its secular nature. To answer that question and to study the theme, a model is constructed and the results are compared until one can draw conclusions that are valid for the present time and can be

²² BENITO MARTÍNEZ BETANZOS, C.M., *Empeñada en un paraíso para los pobres*, CEME, Salamanca 1995, pgs. 11-17.

²³ See TEVNI GRAJALES GUERRA, *Conceptos Básicos para la Investigación Social* (Publicaciones Universidad de Montemorelos) Nuevo León, México 1996. Cp. 5^o: Las hipótesis de la investigación.

projected towards the future.²⁴ The same method is applicable when one wishes to study the theme of the marginalized in the 17th century or in other eras:²⁵ the country people, women, slaves, Jews, outlaws, vagabonds, etc. The model of what should have been and what in fact was can help to get a better idea of the society of that time.

The Comparison

The fact that Thematic History deals with matters that have occurred in time, in a place and to some groups of people provokes, without doubt, comparisons. That is to say, comparing among themselves the happenings of different countries and institutions or of different ages. A Vincentian researcher can choose as a theme concrete events of the history of the Congregation, of the Daughters of Charity, or themes related to the ministry in seminaries or among the poor; and then he has to analyze these same themes in light of the politics and economy, or examine similar facts and phenomena that occurred in other times and places. And he feels the need, in order to clarify, enrich, complete and better understand the theme, to make comparisons with other figures of the time or with the activities of other congregations, and even with the activities and dealings of governments or individuals who have another religion or none at all. How much light could be shed for us by comparing the development of the missions given by Vincent and his missionaries — or in other times — with the development of those given by the Oratorians, the Jesuits, the Capuchins. Was there similarity or difference in the thrust given to seminary work by the Vincentians and the Oratorians?²⁶

This aspect of Thematic History is called today Comparative History. It is a kind of history that seeks to elucidate and better understand a theme by comparing among themselves facts and witnesses who belong to languages and cultures that are different or similar.

²⁴ ALICIA ALTED VIGIL - JUAN A. SÁNCHEZ BELÉN, *Métodos y formas de investigación en historia moderna y contemporánea*, Editorial Universitaria Ramón Areces, Madrid 2005, pgs. 14-16.

²⁵ BENITO MARTÍNEZ BETANZOS, C.M., "Los excluidos en tiempos de san Vicente," in *La exclusión social*. XXII Semana de Estudios Vicencianos, CEME, Salamanca 2004, p. 17 ss.

²⁶ This is what F. LEBRUN does, "La pastorale de les conversions intérieures: l'exemple des lazaristes en Haute-Bretagne au XVII^e siècle," en *La conversion au XVII^e siècle. Actes du XII^e Colloque de Marseille (janvier 1982)*, C.M.R. no. 17, 1983, p. 250.

However, one must be very careful, when comparing situations and people of different times, always to analyze and understand the differences in meaning in the statistics, in the words and in the social strata and ways of life that changing times always produce. The historian Roger Chartier says that “*there is always a great danger when historians try to interpret the present on the basis of comparisons with the past. Every historical configuration has specific characteristics which prevent an immediate analogy with contemporary times.*”²⁷ And Julio Arostegui warns of the risks of falling into anachronisms when comparing societies, institutions, events or persons separated in space and time, but he affirms that “in present day Historiography the advantages are greater than the risks, and they present a great advance inasmuch as, despite the dangers, comparative history is the best way to understand the processes of “globalization” and other characteristics of contemporary societies.”²⁸

The anachronism has come to us, when analyzing the priestly vocation of the young Vincent and the family ambition to improve its social standing, of considering him as a young priest with no interest in the care of souls who only looked for money in order to live comfortably in his native town, or with no interest in holiness in his early years. We have invented for ourselves a conversion that is a complete break with his former life. The anachronism consists in focusing on his priestly vocation, the care of souls and holiness with the mentality of today, or with the one the saint had after the reform of the priesthood in France.²⁹ Only if one takes into account the differences in mentality in different times and places can one draw general conclusions that are valid for the present.

In order for Thematic History to be able to compare between historical persons and events, I repeat, it should do so within General History, seeing it as a whole which, when comparing themes about different times, places or institutions, will instill in us an experience about what was and is our history. Other examples: we understand much better the secularity of the Congregation if we compare it with the diocesan priests, the Oratorians, the Jesuits or other religious. To understand the Daughters of Charity it is more necessary to

²⁷ CIENCIA HOY, *Revista de Divulgación científica y Tecnológica de...*, Interview with Roger Chartier, vol. VI, no. 31 (Sep.-Oct. 1995).

²⁸ JULIO AROSTEGUI, *La investigación histórica: teoría y método*, Editorial Crítica, Plaza edición, Barcelona 1995, pgs. 310-313.

²⁹ I think I cleared up this anachronism in the conference I gave in Salamanca in August 2006, BENITO MARTÍNEZ BETANZOS, C.M., “La santidad en san Vicente de Paúl,” in *Urgencias pastorales de la Familia Vicenciana*, CEME, Salamanca 2007, pgs. 15-54.

compare them with the secular confraternities and with the religious, especially the Salesians, the Ursulines and the daughters of Maria Ward.³⁰ Vincent himself, when he wants to clarify what is and how is the Vincentian spirit, compares it with the Carthusians, Jesuits and Capuchins. In the same way a comparison helps us know how were and are our charism, our vows, our evangelization of the poor, etc., in the past and in the present in relation to the constant and unstoppable changes of the times. Investigation and study of themes will lead us to an evolution and a creativity that facilitate our mission in modern society without breaking with the essence of our origins, our past, the tradition and the charism. For example, the primitive Rules that St. Vincent gave us placed as the second end “to evangelize the poor, especially of the country,” and the Constitutions of 1983 have changed it to “evangelize the poor, above all the most abandoned.”³¹ Is that valid for today? Will it be for the future?

There are some pressing questions. Will young Vincentian historical researchers understand the similarities and differences between times, countries, regions, the diverse institutions of the church in order to know how to give appropriate answers to the profound problems of today's poor and to the problems of the Congregation which worry us today? In thematic analyses and as they formulate comparisons, will they know how to relate them with the contexts in which they originated, in which they developed and in which we live today?

Summarizing what has been said up to now I would say that, as we study a theme of Vincentian history, historical comparison sets out events and phenomena of one place and time and presents them with the intention of reconstructing a past reality from present day perspectives which, in their turn, are related with expectations about the future, but without falling into the temptation of doing systematic history, that is, of producing a rational system in the present and applying it indiscriminately to societies of the past, whether that is valid or not. This is forcing history; this is anachronism. What I am trying to say is that comparison in Thematic History distinguishes itself because it analyzes in context the themes which have been the object of study taking into account, on the one hand, the processes of change, and on the other, the relationships and influences there may have been among the different religious insti-

³⁰ BENITO MARTÍNEZ BETANZOS, C.M., *Empeñada en un paraíso para los pobres*, CEME, Salamanca 1995, p. 83 s.

³¹ Cf. BENITO MARTÍNEZ BETANZOS, C.M., “Motivaciones sociales en la fundación de la Congregación de la Misión,” in *Vicente de Paúl, pervivencia de un fundador*, CEME, Salamanca 1972, pgs. 17-30.

tutions, their charisms and ministries, as well as among the different social strata, cultures, civilizations, regions and even countries.

There are occasions in which comparative history is what stabilizes and gives unity to a chosen theme; and without the comparisons, there would be no concrete theme to study. For example, the French historian Bartolome Bennassar just published a book about 120 queens and princesses in the European courts from the end of the 15th century until the 18th century.³² The hypothesis was the idea that the power sought by the kings led them to marry off the princesses in their adolescent years in order to form alliances or obtain advantages. And what the princes sought in these marriages was to have heirs to carry on the monarchy. But this objective led to the result that more than half of the 120 princesses died before they were 30 years old, many of them worn out by so much child bearing. Another conclusion was that the majority lived unlucky in love and in their social life; and that, since they had no power, they are not remembered except the ones who were left widows and became regents, like Maria de Medici and Anne of Austria. It is easy to see that without comparative history this theme could not have been developed.

History as Science and Comparison

According to Kocka, comparative history can put more emphasis either on the contrast, on “understanding the differences and knowing more exactly the individual cases included in the comparison,” or on the generalization, on “studying the coincidences and, therefore understanding and systematizing the general relationships,”³³ because for many historians history is science only if it can draw out general conclusions. Or as Arostegui states, only by comparing epochs and societies will our researches not be disembodied and distant from life, for then phenomena and events which of themselves are *singular*, will always be able to have a *general* application which is useful in the present and opens pathways of hope for the future. That is, by applying the comparison in Thematic History to the present, one can respond to the most flagrant contradiction of history: that we study human, concrete, individual fact in their singularity in order to find general and universal

³² BARTOLOMÉ BENNASSAR, *Reinas y princesas del Renacimiento a la Ilustración: el lecho, el poder y la muerte*, Paidós, Barcelona 2007.

³³ JÜRGEN KOCKA, *Historia social y conciencia histórica*, Marcial Pons, Madrid 2002, pgs. 43-63.

formulas that are useful in the present and the future, for only in that way would history be a science.

It is the famous debate between the singular and the universal in the sciences. In this debate Le Goff³⁴ emphasizes the importance of comparative method in history: "The scientific character of history resides as much in the valuing of differences as in the valuing of similarities," and he points out that monographic studies, singular and limited in space and time, are valid if they set forth a general and universal problem. In this case, the comparison helps to construct the present and plan for the future, at the same time that we learn to reflect on what historical research is and what it entails.

Not only for Le Goff but for other historians as well, the contradiction between the singular and the universal in history is resolved by means of the comparison; and they say that history can be science, but in the realm of the *social sciences* as far as they are *purely empirical*, outside the realm of the ethics and morality of *human acts* and of *freedom*. And they affirm that the comparison is the means by which historical phenomena are empirically demonstrated.

Other authors (for example, Lucien Febvre and his present day heirs of the *Nouvelle Histoire* school) have believed that history, despite that contradiction, can be considered a science, not without ambiguity, according to the *post-modern* idea of science, seen as a group of problems and hypotheses, that the comparison resolves in an empirical way.

The Spanish historian Luis Suarez-Fernandez has proposed that on the basis of certain elements, history could be considered as scientific knowledge: *historical knowledge "is scientific for it is aimed at discovering that which was previously unknown to it: the testimonies it uses are frequently written documents, but many others of very different kinds are also useful like... cultural traces in their almost unlimited variety. All the questions are formulated in the present time, to which the answers must adapt themselves."*³⁵ There is no doubt that the comparative method of Thematic History responds better to the questions the choice of the theme has provoked.

Thus Henri Marrou has seen the possibility of justifying history as a science, not in a proper sense, but inasmuch as it employs *scientific methodology*, for the historian *approaches* his formal object, not in a *common* or *ordinary* way, but rather in a rigorous and "technical" way, such as the comparison.

³⁴ JACQUES LE GOFF, *Pensar la historia. Modernidad, presente, progreso*, Paidós, Barcelona 1991, p. 46.

³⁵ *Corrientes del pensamiento histórico*, EUNSA, Pamplona 1996, p. 19.

The Selection of Themes and Comparisons

The focuses we may give to themes should be well thought out in order to facilitate a better understanding of the processes as much of change as of continuity in the time of the Vincentian spirit, life, charism and mission, for they establish for us Vincentians the evolution of determined matters from the 17th century, at least, to the present time and what can be projected of the future. Likewise, it is better that the comparisons we may make try to identify the common characteristics or the contrasts there may have been by means of the study of themes and facilitate some simple references that help us resolve the difficulties inherent in the focus we give to the themes.

One of the biggest problems in Thematic History is the selection of themes. There is no common criteria for the different proposals. What does not seem to be a good idea is choosing a theme because of the urge to shine. Although there may be themes from our history that seem to be itching for erudition, they are not. They are themes which can spring up as answers to some questions which concern us to understand better the nature of our own history. For example, how much did the fact that it was a Parisian Company and not a provincial one influence the approbation and expansion of the Daughters of Charity? The fact that it was connected to the nobility and the court through its founder and the Ladies of Charity? Because St. Vincent was a national figure, did his death have repercussions for the stability of the Congregation, leaving a void that was difficult to fill until the arrival of Fr. Etienne? How did St. Lazare with its lands and goods affect the structures of the Congregation either during the life of St. Vincent or after his death?

I think the criterion which should always determine the selection of a theme is *its necessity, its relevance and its impact* for the present. (Although others have already spoken about this area, I would like to touch on it as well for the sake of completing the conference.) The *need* responds to the age old principle that *the needs of the present show us what past we want to investigate* to understand and find avenues of solution to present day problems or so that the chosen theme become a model that lights up the way, without translating it into a slogan to defend an ideology or a position. *Relevance*, not fashion, either because it is an appropriate theme for participating in an Assembly or to recognize a scientific value or some aspect of our nature, spirit or charism. Finally, its *impact* on some problem which concerns us, such as the popular missions, the Vincentian family or the collaboration with the laity on today's social problems. However, for those of us gathered here I would add one more criterion — *viability* — finding out whether the documents I need to find, the

counties and places I need to go to and the language I need to know are in consonance with the economic means at my disposal, with the permissions I need to obtain, with the time I have and with the capacity for understanding the language of the documents and of the bibliography I need.

To say it in another way: that the theme should respond to a theoretical or practical problem we need to solve, for example vocation work; that the scientific study could contribute new lights to the solution of the problem that could exist in other times and places; and that there be possibilities and material means to be investigated. That is, one must respond to three well known questions: what does one want to investigate? What for? What means does one have at hand? For this reason, I repeat, it is a good idea to limit the theme with regard to time and space or place, besides finding out all that has been written about the theme, in how much depth has it been studied and what answers have other researcher given. Only after all these steps can we formulate the hypotheses from which we will begin to study the chosen theme.

The same difficulty is found in choosing the contents and terms which we want to compare, because when comparing some aspects of a theme among themselves and not others, one can change the focus we should always give to our investigation and end up with a static study of facts and contrasts more than with an emphasis on evolution and progress. Or said another way, if the interest in the theme to be studied depends on the importance of the applications we want to draw out for the present and the future, the importance of the comparisons which we make will depend on the question we formulate for ourselves in accordance with the objectives we look for in the study of the theme. For this reason it is worthwhile to bear in mind the interests and problems not just of the Vincentians, but also of the people among whom we live.

For all these reasons, the selection of themes and comparisons is one of the most important and difficult steps in Thematic History, because this conditions the results and demands very basic theoretical and practical reflections ahead of time. For this very reason, I would like to recommend what Pierre Vilar advised: it is a good idea to choose a very concrete theme, with a well defined and homogeneous geographic space; to have a workable time frame, from such a year to such a year; and to establish a clear and solid institutional framework.³⁶

³⁶ PIERRE VILAR, *Crecimiento y desarrollo*, Ariel, Barcelona 1976, pgs. 36-37.

Allow me now to set out a series of comparisons to try to be clearer: our own spirituality compared with other spiritualities; evangelization in general or of the poor compared with that of other congregations, with ecclesial, secular or lay evangelization; the personality and influence of the founders and the Superiors General or Visitors compared with those of different times or with different social, national or regional situations; creativity and influence of earlier local, provincial and General assemblies compared with the creativity and influence which our latest Assemblies have had or the Assemblies of other congregations; compare the cultures and religious world in which our predecessors evangelized with those in which we evangelize.

The Human Person an Interrelated Actor of History

Do not forget, however, that Thematic History compares structures and processes, but also experiences and guidelines of action for men, because, briefly, the actors of history are men with their personal psychology and circumstances. As a rule we like to deal with structural themes, institutional or theoretical, with secularity, the charism, the spirit, our vows or the community in theory. But I repeat what I said in the previous conference: *what really interest us are people — what we lived and how we lived it.*

What has made our history, what has been written down in the documents are the interrelationships of the missionaries. It is not the same studying the *history of climate in France* as studying the *history of the French people in dependence on climate change*. And applying these ideas to Vincentian studies leads us to take into account in certain themes and comparisons the Vincentian confreres who lived, for example, the influences of religious life on our customs during the 19th and 20th centuries because of the exaltation of religious life at that time, or when we protested that our vows are not religious; and the poor people who suffered or who suffer when we compare the levels of poverty of the country people and the vagabonds of the 17th century with those of today. Today we have the advantage that the encounter between the social sciences and the humanities has smoothed the way and shed light on the selection of themes about the history of the poor.

There is a note that we Vincentians have to take into account when we judge the morality of institutional facts, because the more individual and concrete the theme the greater the moral weight it entails, and with a morality that can be anachronistic. It is true that the historian, especially if he is a believer, cannot avoid making

moral judgments about institutional and social situations that arise in the chosen themes, for example, slavery, the regimen of Richelieu, the galleys, certain laws, etc. But, in all of this, there is a danger that some Vincentians, generally clear thinkers, make so many moral judgments they seem more moralists than historians.³⁷

I have spent time on the idea of the comparison in Thematic History because, for many people and especially for Vincentians, the historian's task consists in establishing the facts and interpreting them with the perspective not only of past time, but also the present and the future. Comparing our facts with those of other times and places helps us to do that. And he cannot forget that the researcher must use objectively two resources: first objective judgment, so as to better analyze, compare and evaluate, and so be able to give a plausible interpretation, repositioning in real time the theme of his research; and secondly, what lesson does he intend to draw for the present and the future. For one must bear in mind that, like true history, Thematic History should try to make sense of the present, making an effort to set up a dialogue with the past that can be useful to prepare for the future that is coming for Vincentian institutions and their members.

The Psychology of the Researcher

It is true that a good historian, who does not wish to remain in the simple role of an erudite man, should have a mature vision with regard to the social and cultural reality of the time in which he lives and be inculcated in it so as to be able to choose some themes that respond to present day problems. For that same reason, the Vincentian researcher must love his vocation, the Congregation, his ministry; he should have no peace before the problems which concern us and feel a concern to solve them in the present and open new and prophetic roads into the future. Otherwise his studies will be purely erudite studies whose content interests no one and contributes nothing to the Vincentian Family for its life and ministry in today's society.

But it is also true, as other speakers have already said, that the researcher is obliged to be honest and have common sense so as not to add or subtract anything from the truth he discovers in the documents for he should be critically, scientifically and humanly objective: critically, so as not to falsify the sense of the documen-

³⁷ EDWARD H. CARR, *¿Qué es la historia?*, Ariel, Barcelona 2003, pgs. 153-165.

tation; scientifically, to use scientific method; and humanly because his objectivity is not that of a naturalist, a physicist or biologist, but rather that of human researcher who interprets documents which portray human acts and the life of other people who act freely. And like it or not, it is impossible for him to disconnect himself from his mentality and his feelings when he chooses and ponders themes, and from his psychology when he interprets them. Like every other man, the historian cannot detach himself from the circumstances that formed his personality, as Ortega y Gasset has said.³⁸ The researcher is the son of a concrete time and place, and he questions the past in light of his present day concerns. The good historian should surely make use of his understanding, but also of his feelings — he is not a naturalist. And he needs to connect to the human experiences contained in the documents. He should use as well his imagination and even his fantasy to recreate the past in his mind. The research will be more intense and the exposition more agreeable.

The classical ideal of objectivity is unattainable. Honesty does not mean speaking impartially nor painting everything the same pleasant gray, but rather with all the colors, even if it means adding a little black. Even more, it is necessary for him to connect with the human experiences which are transmitted by means of the documents and other testimonies. With those human experiences he wants to measure and catalogue an age in order to be able to contribute some relative values for our time and the future. And that does not mean that we already bring — before studying the documents — preconceived ideas and definite conclusions, and that we want to demonstrate them by way of past history, trying to project the present into the past. But he does need to construct some reasonable and well founded hypotheses that open up the present and facilitate access to the future. The historian cannot deny that one thing is the history lived by some men, the product of a certain situation, and another is the history he *constructs* and writes about interpreting those lived facts from another time. For if he is not impartial when he chooses the themes according to his inclinations, likes and intentions, neither will he be impartial in selecting and interpreting the documents. Perhaps the objectivity necessary for an historian may be, as you heard when speaking of historical methodology, being honest in the methods he employs.

That means he has to know how to distinguish between the freedom of persons and determinism, individual events and those of

³⁸ JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET, *Meditaciones del Quijote. Obras completas*, t. I, Revista de Occidente, Madrid 1957, p. 322.

society; he must know how to distinguish when some happenings are the result of chance and when some events are the cause of others. The historian is not an analyst who points out that one thing follows upon another, but rather a scientist who suggests how one event leads to others. But, above all, he must know how to distinguish the objectivity of past happenings and the subjectivity of the historian's interpretation. This means that, although it may be impossible for him to find absolute objectivity, he should try to approximate it as closely as possible within the human fallibility implied by unforeseen circumstances of time and place.

It is an objective difficult to achieve especially in these last years when post-modernism has produced a series of relativist historians, proclaiming that historical events are relative and, as a result, we cannot know the past with any surety since the interpretation the historian gives to the documents is subjective. Now one will not insist upon the fact that in all historiographic discourse we find the presence of an *interrpretation* by the historian, but rather one will insist upon the fact that *history* is a *pure and simple interpretation or construction of the historian*. For this reason, it cannot be surprising that some historians have gone so far as to uphold that the problem of *objectivity* and *truth* in history today has been overcome. History is knowledge of the human past. From here can be understood the premises, now classical, that history is *inseparable from the historian* and that *history is made with documents* (AHUMADA DURÁN).

When the historian investigates a particular theme from a determined place, from a concrete time period or about real people, he must at least flee from the anachronism of tacitly equating the experiences of that time with modern ones, from which they are separated by an unbridgeable abyss such as time and social, familial and even personal circumstances: for example, the experiences which St. Vincent, St. Louise and the first missionaries felt in the face of those displaced by war (the migrations of that time), or what the Vicars General, Fr. Slattery and the missionaries felt in the face of the migrations during and after World War II, with what we feel today especially in France, Spain and Italy in the face of the boats full of immigrants who arrive at our shores. And even though the researcher, when he studies the phenomena that marked an age, cannot fail to evaluate and interpret them according to his own psychology, he should always bear in mind the changes which occur in time, whether long or short, sometimes suddenly and other times slowly, but continually.

The Context; the social guards

One of the accusations that has been made against the analytical school is that it ignores what could be called the contextual dimension in history, the articulation between scientific, religious and philosophical thought, between knowledge and statement, between cultural, mental habits and the customs we discover have left impressions in the documents. This is what we call context and it has an essential importance in Thematic History, even though context has different dimensions or points of view according to the interpretation which the historian may make, according to the historical school he follows or the historical system he applies. Is the context for him an immovable social structure which he finds already established or a social and historical framework that is variable and not necessary except according to the psychology of the historian? Does the historian accept the structures which connect and can direct events or does he place anonymous subjects in the concrete role which they play within the context to which they belong in tension with his own interests? In the words of Ricoeur: *does the historian relate things just as they are or does he relate things as they happen to us?*

When we choose a theme to study, we have said it is necessary to begin by inserting it in a time and place, thus letting it be enclosed within a set of social circumstances which we call social context. Well, in relation with the social context, we have to bear in mind what some historians today call the *social guardians*, which “would be precisely those collective symbols which govern the systems of social identification and integration, and which make visible the social invisibility.” Thus the social order established in Europe from the time of St. Vincent to the French Revolution has a social mentality called the Ancien Regime; the one that marked the social life of the 19th century is known as the Illustration; while the period from World War II until 1980 produced a series a social guardians which allowed the pacific domination of two different systems of social order: the countries of capitalistic democracy and the countries of the so called “real socialism” or “state capitalism” or “communism.” In our day one social guardian which takes in and constructs modern society is “democracy.” But, *how have the social guardians that have permitted the permanence of the reigning social order in Europe for the last fifty years been constructed?*

Durkheim affirmed at the beginning of *The Rules of Modern Sociology*: “There are some ways of acting, thinking and feeling that present the notable property of existing outside of individual

consciences. These types of conduct or of thought are not only external to the individual, but they are also endowed with an imperative and coercive power in virtue of which they impose themselves on (the individual conscience), whether it wants it to or not.... There are cases in which the coercive character is not easily recognizable... what is special about social coercion is that it is owed not to the rigidity of some molecular arrangements, but to *the prestige with which certain symbols are endowed.*"

Parsons would reduce the sense of "the collective" to a "possession in common", and set forth the problem, supposedly metaphysical, of the separation between "social reality" and "symbols or manifestations."³⁹

Auxiliary Sciences

Although those of us who are here trying to animate one another to study Vincentian themes are Vincentians, we know that our field is religious, spiritual and social in all the aspects that have to do with the poor, from the economic to the educational. This means that the themes to be studied can be innumerable. Given, then, the enormous accumulation of sources, it is necessary first of all to establish which of them are indispensable for the work later on; this is the terrain of the so called "auxiliary sciences" of history which not only provide us with information, but at the same time become personal tools for the researcher: historical geography, philology, paleology, epigraphy, chronology, etc.

If an historian wants to investigate any aspect of St. Vincent or Vincentiana, he has to have some sufficient knowledge of General History, as well as of the language, the customs, the passions and life of the age and the places that took in Vincent de Paul and the Congregation of the Mission. I remind you that, although today many good books are translated into all languages,, nevertheless we will often need to know the language of the documents related to the theme to be treated; or better yet, the language of the age of the theme to be treated. For example, if today we wished to deal with the theme of immigrants and draw some hints from the behavior of the Vincentian Family during the Fronde or the 30 Years War, we would find that *lordly regime* is not the same as the *feudal regime*, that the *orders* are not strictly *social classes*, that government is not admini-

³⁹ JUAN LUÍS PINTOS, *Los imaginarios sociales. (La nueva construcción de la realidad social)*, 1994. Web page of the Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales de la Universidad de Santiago de Compostela.

stration, and that in the latter the bourgeois officials supplanted the nobles, and the commissars the officials. It is necessary to know that Parliament is made up of the First Estate (the clergy), the Second Estate (the nobility) and the Third Estate (the people). But in reality the First Estate was made up of bishops and abbots, and that simple priests did not belong to that clergy; and the Third Estate was formed almost totally by the middle class, and for that reason the (common) people did not form part of Parliament, becoming the class of the excluded. In the relationships St. Vincent had with wealthy people one must bear in mind that *nobleman* does not mean noble, but honored; that every gentleman is noble, but not every noble is a gentleman. The gentleman is only the noble of the sword and not of the toga.

Presupposing, then, all this information, the first thing the researcher should do is situate the historical figure or the theme and enter into heuristics, that is, in the search for documents or studies that help him in his investigation, and to verify the objective truth of all of them, for the sources are the protagonists. I will not dwell on this because in the conference on methodology you were told of all the work the researcher has to do before proceeding to create his work, of the search in general for his material and the verification of them, for the sources are the protagonists. Nor will I say anything of the internal and external critique of the documents, because you have already heard that. I just remind you that here too comparative history comes into play.

But I do want to remind you that the professionalization of historical studies in the second half of the 19th century led to the consolidation of some auxiliary disciplines that should help the historian to determine the authenticity and veracity of the written document preserved in the public archive. The vertiginous acceleration of events throughout the 20th century, the globalization of phenomena, their immediacy and presence anywhere on the planet thanks to ever more powerful means of communication, the rapid scientific and technological advances...; all this means that the social scientist and consequently the historian have to face a huge amount of new and varied information which obliges them to continually revise the theoretical and methodological proposals of their disciplines. This problem affects not only the historian of the present, but also the one who studies bygone eras has to rework his epistemological and methodological work plans, because the technological advances have changed the ways of accessing information in a way unthinkable a few decades ago.

On the other hand, the sources the historian works with are subject to technological changes which lead continually to a

redefinition of the bases upon which the auxiliary disciplines have traditionally been established. To this must be added the interdisciplinary character of history (not just the history of the present) with other social sciences and the employment of the methods and techniques of the latter. This should not be seen as a limitation for history, but rather as a source of enrichment. Furthermore, the historian can count on three methodological elements which allow him to go farther than any other social scientist: temporality, globality, and the capacity for synthesis.

With regard to temporality, history is not a science of the past, but rather of “societies in time.” This means that it does not exclude from its object of study any chronological period, and it makes possible a vision of the temporal as a continuum, backward and forward from the present. Secondly, “the historian,” as opposed to other social scientists, needs to combine all the elements which contribute to a process, in order to see how they interrelate with and influence each other. This overall perception of historical phenomena permits, finally, developing the capacity for synthesis necessary to be able to make sense of and interpret the whole group of factors which are found at the center of every historical phenomenon.⁴⁰

Translation: JOSEPH V. CUMMINS, C.M.

⁴⁰ ALICIA ALTED VIGIL - JUAN A. SÁNCHEZ BELÉN, *o.c.*, pgs. 139-140.