

Vincentian Studies in Latin America

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1. Introduction

This presentation is an attempt to give a simple overview of the state of Vincentian Studies in present day Latin America. I want to begin by offering two quick thoughts on the terms in the title of this conference.

I understand Vincentian Studies as an attempt to reflect on how the Vincentian charism has taken shape in different historical moments and in specific cultural situations. In other words, it is the study of fidelity (and sometimes lack of fidelity) to the charism. From this perspective, the Vincentian charism becomes the criteria for evaluating our history, spirituality, etc. Otherwise, Vincentian Studies becomes a series of unconnected anecdotes or a history of institutions. If we can evaluate how the charism was incarnated in the past, we can learn something valuable for the present.

For sake of convenience we speak about the southern hemisphere of the Americas as Latin America. There are some common characteristics shared throughout the region, but many more differences. In reality, there are more than twenty countries, each with its own history, often with a past relationship with a European colonial power. Each of the nations contains several languages and cultures — mestizo, indigenous, Afro-American — which marks the uniqueness of the country.

Let me point out some of the general tendencies in Vincentian Studies in Latin America:

2. From the perspective of the home country

Most of the Latin American Provinces began as missions from Europe. In the second half of the Nineteenth Century and beginning of the Twentieth, the Congregation responded to the urgent needs of the Latin American Church. For a long time a good percentage of the personnel came from outside the continent.

A number of studies have been done by the Provinces which sent missionaries to Latin America (see for example the recent history of

the Barcelona Province or the History of the CM in the United States). Latin America has been included as part of these studies. These point out the sacrifices in money and manpower that these Provinces embraced for the good of the Church and the service of the poor.

Of course, the obvious drawback to approaching the history this way is that it reflects the history from a place outside of the continent. Sometimes local concerns, issues and sensitivities are missed.

3. From the perspective of Latin America

Another approach has been to view the Congregation as part of the Latin American Church. These studies have tried to reflect on the Vincentian insertion in the local history. The Vincentian presence can be viewed as a response to Latin American needs and sensitivities.

For a number of years, Enrique Dussel directed a project for a history of the Church in Latin America under the auspices of CEHILA (see www.cehila.org). The historians who worked on the multivolume study divided up the history in this way:

a) *The colonial period (1492-1820)*

b) *Independence (1820-1860)*

This was separation from European colonial powers, not revolution. Life changed very little for the common people. One elite was substituted for another.

For the Church it meant a significant loss of resources, both economic and human. Huge numbers of clergy returned to Europe. The Holy See refused to name bishops in some countries for decades rather than risk problems with the ex-colonial powers.

The Congregation began to arrive at this time to respond to the huge pastoral vacuum. The two traditional works of the CM (seminaries and missions) were exactly what were needed.

c) *Liberal Governments (1870-1900)*

In the last decades of the Nineteenth Century liberal movements inspired by philosophical currents from Europe came to power. Frequently, the Church was at odds with the new governments. In some places there were persecutions, exile for the clergy and loss of property.

d) *Conservative Governments(1920-1960)*

At the beginning of the Twentieth Century conservatives came to power, in many countries with the aid of the Church. The hierarchy welcomed the chance to develop pastoral activity in relative freedom after decades of government opposition. The trade-off for permission to open schools and churches was silence in the face of growing injustice.

4. Since Medellin (1968-)

The years since Vatican II and Medellin have been marked by tremendous changes in the Latin American Church. There has been a rethinking of the old alliances with the conservative elites. The Church has made the option for the poor one of the central focuses of its pastoral activity.

One way to do Vincentian Studies from a Latin American perspective is to see how the Congregation has lived its charism in each of the time frames. What works were accepted and why? Where did we send our members to work? How did we work?

5. Professional-Academic Studies

In most parts of the world Vincentian experts have come from the ranks of the seminary or university professors. Most were not trained specifically for Vincentian Studies. They took their studies of history, theology or canon law and applied them to Vincentian themes.

The area of professional studies has probably been the weakest element of Vincentian Studies in Latin America. Those countries which have produced academic histories (Colombia, Mexico, Brazil) have also been the countries which have had to prepare men for work in seminaries.

6. A Pastoral Emphasis

The strength of Latin America in the field of Vincentian Studies has been its pastoral emphasis.

Most of the Provinces are missionary, called to abandoned areas, with few priests and grinding poverty. The currents prevalent in the Latin American Church since Medellin and Puebla (option for poor, liberation theology, new evangelization) have produced Vincentian reflections with a pastoral direction. The studies that have been done all exhibit that pastoral sense (Ubillus, Tamayo, Valenga, etc.).

Credit should be given here to the role of CLAPVI (Conference of Latin American Vincentian Provinces). For thirty-five years CLAPVI

has provided a space for the interchange of ideas and reflections for the confreres, Daughters of Charity and laity. It has done this in several ways:

- CLAPVI Bulletin which is published several times each year with Vincentian topics.
- The CLAPVI Meetings usually held twice a year (once in the northern zone and once in the south). In recent years the meetings have discussed such topics as: popular missions, parishes, seminary formation, the Ratio Missionum, etc.
- The School of Vincentian Spirituality which is now conducted every two years.

7. Conclusion

A lot has been done over the past quarter century in the area of Vincentian Studies in Latin America. Of, course much still remains to do. In conclusion I want to point out three areas that need attention for the future:

a) *More investigation*

Some province have yet to write their histories. Biographies of confreres who have lived the Vincentian charism in the continent have not been researched or published.

b) *Better preparation*

Not all Vincentian Studies need to be done by professors or in an academic setting. Nonetheless, academic preparation for some confreres would add a dimension to the studies and reflections being done in this continent.

c) *More dialogue with Vincentian Studies from other areas of the world*

I am frequently amazed at how little confreres know about Vincentian Studies in Latin America. Outside of this continent, how many Vincentian libraries receive the CLAPVI Bulletin? The consequence is that a rich vein of Vincentian reflection is rarely taken into account.

Of course, dialogue is a two-way street. How many Latin American confreres pay attention to Vincentian Studies done in other parts of the world?

One area that needs attention, something that SIEV and CIF might promote, is more dialogue from around the world on Vincentian topics.