

Italian Vincentian Historiography

by Luigi Mezzadri, C.M.

Before grappling with the theme and inserting it into the overall picture¹ of historiography, it is necessary to preface it with some observations on the political use of historiography and the role of the Italians within the Congregation of the Mission.

Political use of historiography

When René Alméras was launching the biography by **Abelly (1664)** he asserted that three books would be sufficient for a confrere, The Bible, the Common Rules and the biography of the founder. The Sacred Scriptures are the common rule for all Christians, the second book is the special rule for confreres, and the

¹ C.-J. LACOUR, *Histoire générale de la Congrégation de la Mission commençant depuis la mort du B. Vincent de Paul et finissant vers l'année 1720...*, ms. in the archives of the General Curia in Rome. The printed edition of this is *Histoire générale de la Congrégation de la Mission*, in *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission* 62 (1897) 137-138, 296-329; 63 (1898) 131-161, 312-329, 620-635; 64 (1899) 156-176, 411-430, 509-535; 65 (1900) 290-306, 424-442; 66 (1901) 436-448, 570-580; 67 (1902) 148-154, 269-303, 572-604; A. ALLOU, *Précis de l'histoire de la Congrégation de la Mission depuis la fondation en 1625 jusqu'à la mort de M. Etienne en 1874*, in *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission* 89 (1924) 575-1026; 90 (1925) 5-223; P. COSTE, *La Congrégation de la Mission dite de Saint-Lazare*, Paris 1927; E. ROBERT, *Histoire de la Congrégation de la Mission*, in *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission* 95 (1930) 686-696; 96 (1931) 24-32, 294-319, 457-475, 700-713; 97 (1932) 7-15, 221-234, 417-434, 661-676; 98 (1933) 51-64, 224-241, 441-461, 679-703; 99 (1934) 13-30, 229-241, 437-454, 680-700; 100 (1935) 37-55, 229-248, 523-548, 758-780; 101 (1936) 5-30, 201-223, 481-508, 773-776; 102 (1937) 5-26, 277-310, 543-569, 785-825; 103 (1938) 3-58, 169-220, 417-460, 641-683; 104 (1939) 3-53, 257-319, 645-676; 105 (1940) 39-72; 106-107 (1941-1942) 88-123; 108-109 (1943-1944) 64-91; 110-112 (1945-1947) 147-166, 366-399; G. GOYAU, *La Congrégation de la Mission des Lazaristes*, Paris 1938; J. HERRERA, *Historia de la Congregación de la Misión*, Madrid 1949; R.S. POOLE, *A History of the Congregation of the Mission, 1625-1843*, n.p. 1973; L. MEZZADRI - J.M. ROMÁN, *Storia della Congregazione della Missione, I Dalla fondazione alla fine del XVII secolo (1625-1697)*, Roma 1992; L. MEZZADRI - F. ONNIS, *Storia della Congregazione della Missione, II La Congregazione della Missione nel sec. XVIII: Francia, Italia e Missioni (1697-1788)*, Roma 2000.

third is a more restricted and admirable paraphrase of the other two.² The idea, therefore, was to pass on to posterity a vision of the founder, ignoring the possibility of future interpretations emerging, as happened in the case of the Franciscans.

Is this a baseless suspicion? Underlying this, at that time, was the question of Gallicanism, the relationship between a religious congregation and the Head of State (in this case Louis XIV of France and the Holy See). At issue, therefore, was an ecclesiological question: on whom does a congregation depend, to whom does it report? The Pope or the Sovereign?

This whole thing came to a head with the death of Edme Jolly (1697), when King Louis XIV invoked his veto to block the election of Maurice Faure, who was a Savoyard; he required a Frenchman to be elected. The Instruction to the Prince of Monaco, dated 28 January 1699, when he was entrusted with a mission to Rome, looked on the Congregation of the Mission as a French institution which had some houses outside France, though this was regarded as an exception. The bottom line of the Gallican customs was that the king could not tolerate the election of a foreigner as head of such an institution, one which, moreover, had charge of some parishes and chapels built in places where the Court used to reside.³

² L. ABELLY, *La vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul, instituteur et premier supérieur générale de la Congrégation de la Mission*, Paris 1664 [Facsimile edition Piacenza 1986]; L. MEZZADRI, *L'Historiographie vinctienne selon les époques culturelles*, in *Vincentiana* 28 (1984) 292-313; A. DODIN, *La légende et l'histoire de Monsieur Depaul à saint Vincent de Paul*, Paris 1985. The Congregation recommends two other official biographies, P. COLLET, *La vie de Saint Vincent de Paul, instituteur de la Congrégation de la Mission et des Filles de la Charité*, 2 vols., Nancy 1748; P. COSTE, *Le grand saint du grand siècle. Monsieur Vincent*, 3 vols., Paris 1932.

³ [Translator's note: The author gives this quotation in French]. "As the congregation of the priests of the Mission has its principal establishments in France and few houses in foreign countries, the election of a Superior General has always involved a French subject of the King. As *Le sieur Joly*, Superior General died during the course of the recent war, His Majesty decided that such a happening called for new precautions to be taken to prevent the normal procedure being broken and that a foreigner might be elected General of a congregation of priests to whom His Majesty has entrusted care of parishes and chapels where His Majesty has his main residence, and one which, besides, has the greater number of its houses in his realm. Now that election time has arrived the priests of the Mission have been informed that His Majesty expects that not only will they choose the most suitable person, but that moreover they will ensure that a foreigner will not be elected." Paris, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Correspondance politique, Rome*, vol. 399, ff. 8 ss.: *Instruction donnée par le Roi à M. le prince de Monaco (28 janv. 1699)*. The instruction is also published in the *Recueil des instructions données aux ambassadeurs de France depuis les traités de*

Lacour regarded this as a normal problem. To his way of thinking a king was invested with a religious mission, being anointed by the Lord, the image of God, his vicar.⁴ It would, therefore, be against God's will to disobey the king, whose power is the guarantee of the Church's freedom.⁵ It was not, therefore, a question of cesaropapism, but a Gallican tradition which all down the centuries had managed to work out a delicate balance, practical rather than theoretical, one of its expressions⁶ being the declaration of 1682, but which also expanded into the relationship between the religious in the kingdom and the Holy See.⁷

A drawn-out disagreement began, about acknowledging that the Congregation was French, marked by some very tense moments. The Italians and Poles did not accept the surrender of the French to the will of the Sun King, and threatened to secede from the main body of the Congregation. In 1704 the Superior General, Watel, seriously considered appointing French superiors to the Italian houses.⁸

The situation worsened in 1724 when the Superior General, Jean Bonnet, had to face up to the tricky matter of the Bull *Unigenitus*, which the Congregation had not officially accepted.⁹ On this occasion Pope Benedict XIII obliged Bernardo Della Torre, the provincial of Rome, to threaten the Superior General with grave sanctions

Westphalie jusqu'à la Révolution française publié sous les auspices de la commission des archives diplomatiques au ministère des Affaires étrangères, t. 17, Rome, par G. Hanotaux, 2 partie (1688-1723)... par J. Hanoyeau, Paris 1911, 210. As a matter of fact the Congregation had charge of the royal parishes or chapels in Fontainebleau (1661), Versailles (1674), Invalides (1674), St.-Cloud (1688), St.-Cyr (1690).

⁴ P. BLET, *Le clergé de France et la Monarchie. Étude sur les Assemblées Générales de 1615 à 1666*, 2 vols., Rome 1959.

⁵ At this point there is an important omission: [**Translator's note:** The author gives this quotation in the original French] "The Visitors of France will be careful to give solid support to these warnings, pointing out that this exclusion is not of their own making and that *one may not disobey the King*": AMF, 292, *Histoire* (ms. f. 270 s.).

⁶ We should not make too precise a contrast between the attitudes of St Vincent and his successors; in fact they changed over time. Cf. R. CHALUMEAU, *Saint Vincent de Paul et le Saint Siège*, in *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae* 5 (1967) 263-288; A.-G. MARTIMORT, *Le Gallicanisme de Bossuet*, Paris 1953, pp. 192 ff.

⁷ Regular clergy in the Kingdom had to depend on superiors who were subjects of the King.

⁸ L. MEZZADRI - F. ONNIS, *Storia della Congregazione della Missione*, II, 45.

⁹ L. MEZZADRI, *Gallicanesimo e vita religiosa*, in *Divus Thomas* 76 (1973) 65-109; *Id.*, *Fra giansenisti e antigiansenisti. Vincent Depaul e la Congregazione della Missione (1624-1737)*, Firenze 1977.

should the assembly persist in declining to subscribe to the Bull. The document which we have already published says, among other things, that each member, especially superiors of seminaries and professors of theology, had to sign, and that recalcitrant superiors were to be deprived of all assignments. If opposition were to continue, the bishops of France would have been obliged to withdraw all seminaries and colleges from the Congregation. It concluded: "Should it happen that neither exhortations nor threats achieve their purpose, in such a case Fr Bernardo, in union with the three above mentioned provincials, is to notify the Superior General and chapter that His Holiness will authorise the three provinces of Rome, Lombardy and Poland to have no further dealings or links with those of France, from which they will remain separated, and that His Holiness will command that they provide themselves with a different General as Governor."¹⁰

The situation calmed down, more or less. There were red hot embers beneath the ashes. Tension between the French and Italians remained insidious, with the Italians in favour of the Superior General moving to Rome. To counteract the establishment of the province of Italy (Turin), Picardy and Brittany became provinces. Every opportunity for a clash was seized upon. At the 1747 assembly the dress code for confreres was discussed. Italians, Poles, Spaniards and Portuguese accused the French of having changed the quality of the material for soutanes. St Vincent's clothes were re-examined and it was found that in actual fact the material used by the founder was lighter and of better quality than that wanted by the French.¹¹ Another clash about clothing erupted in 1774-1775. The Superior General, Jacquier, had stated in a circular letter that lack of uniformity in clothing destroyed the unity of the Congregation. Early in 1775 a brother told Cardinal Braschi that he got annoyed when the kids on the streets in Rome made fun of the brothers, calling them "Baggypants." The cardinal promised that had he been elected Pope he would have ordered the superiors to change the material for the brothers' clothing. As soon as Pope Pius VI was elected he issued a decree to this effect, of which the Superior General took a very poor view. He interpreted the Pope's words as merely expressing a desire on the part of the Pope to put an end to abuses by the brothers.¹²

¹⁰ L. MEZZADRI, *Nuovi documenti sulla crisi dell'Unigenitus*, in *Carità e Missione* 3 (2001) 134-146.

¹¹ L. MEZZADRI - F. ONNIS, *Storia della Congregazione della Missione*, II, 138.

¹² L. MEZZADRI - F. ONNIS, *Storia della Congregazione della Missione*, II, 346.

With the restoration it was normal that the Congregation should regain its autonomy. The Holy See attempted to profit from the situation and have the Superior General transferred to Rome. This matter was brought to the attention of the Bourbon king, Charles X, who imposed his veto. For the French government the Superior General must always be French and the seat of his general curia must always be in Paris.

The “Frenchness” remained woven into the Congregation of the Mission, as for example on the foreign missions where the confreres of various nationalities used French passports and availed of the French protectorate. This explains the case of Vincent Lebbe (1877-1940), who backed the claims of the Chinese clergy and was opposed to the wrongful use of the protectorate. The protectorate had become a means of colonial expansion. On top of this the “*ius commissionis*,” which entrusted an area to a religious community, worked against the establishment of an indigenous clergy. Lebbe had to leave the Congregation of the Mission, but his ideas were welcomed by *Maximum illud* of Benedict XV.¹³

Opera omnia

These introductory remarks are important for understanding the development of Vincentian historiography in Italy. Among other things we must not forget that after France, Italy holds the majority of primary sources relating to the saint. There are 324 of St Vincent’s letters in Turin. The Vatican and the Italian archives contain a very high number of Vincentian documents or ones with relevance to the Congregation.

There have been two approaches.

The first was to “translate” from the French. All the *Opera omnia* of the saint were translated in Italy:

- 1931-1932: *Carteggio, conferenze, documenti*. The Coste edition with notes, Piacenza, Alberoni. 1931-1932, Tomi IX-XII, 4 vols., XX+508, 525, XVI+327, 360 pp., 25 cm.
- 1941-1944, the *Conferenze di San Vincenzo de’ Paoli* were re-printed. This was the Coste edition with notes. Vols. IX and X. The Italian version was revised. Roma, Edizioni Liturgiche Missionarie. 1941-1944, 2 vols., XX+508, 525 pp., 24 cm.

¹³ LEBBE, *Lettres*, a cura di P. Goffart - A. Sohier, Tournai 1960; C. SOETENS, *Apôtre et chinois: Vincent Lebbe*, in *Historiography of the Chinese Catholic Church*, edited by J. Heyndrickx, Leuven 1994, 206-221.

- in 1959 a one-volume edition of the conferences to the confreres: *Conferenze ai preti della missione*. This was the Coste edition with notes. Roma, Edizioni Vincenziane. 1959, XX+1000 pp., 19 cm.

As regards the letters: *Opera omnia di San Vincenzo de' Paoli. Corrispondenza*. Roma, Edizioni Vincenziane. 1951-1982, 16 vols.: 1° 216, 2° 219, 3° 218, 4° 250, 5° 218, 6° 250, 7° 239, 8° 470, 9° 574, 10° 580, 11° 414, 12° 377, 13° 543, 14° 646, 15° 554, 16° 572 pp., 18 cm.

On the occasion of the centenary of the saint's birth the *Conferenze spirituali alle Figlie della Carità* were published: Edizione a cura di Luigi Mezzadri, C.M., Roma, Edizioni Vincenziane. 1980, LIV+1600 pp., 18 cm. (This is an annotated edition; the notes have been used by the Spanish edition): *Conferencias espirituales a las Hijas de la Caridad*, Trans. by A. Ortiz according to the edition by P. Coste. Revision by M. Abaitua and A. López with notes from the Italian edition by L. Mezzadri. Salamanca, CEME. 1983, 1051 pp., 20 cm.

The Italian edition still lacks a translation of volume XIII of the Coste edition, the documents, and volume XIV the index, necessary for navigating the huge collection of St Vincent's letters.

[*Translator's insertion*: What follows is about the problems of translating French into Italian, but similar decisions have to be made with regard to translation into English, even of this article!]

During the past few years a new critical edition has been gotten under way. The editors have started with a revised French text, corrected, and integrated with later discoveries. They then entrusted the translation to a group of scholars, well prepared and motivated men and women. In cases like this it is not easy to blend fidelity and modernity. One could go on forever discussing how to translate *Monsieur Vincent*. "Signore"? In the 1960s it used to be rendered "Signor Vincenzo." But in the 21st century such a rendering would be incomprehensible. In Italian the word "signore" is used about, or to, a wealthy person, or someone from the middle classes. The alternative was to leave it in French, though in inverted commas, as the American editors have done. But I am convinced that translation means taking personal responsibility and trying to utilize expressions current in our own context. Another problem was with regard to the word *Mademoiselle*, especially when applied to Louise de Marillac. As she was a married woman she should have been

entitled to *Madame*, but since she had married a man from a lower social rank than herself she was moved down a step in the social scale and entitled only to *Mademoiselle*. This is natural in French, but how are such nuances to be dealt with in Italian? Is she to be called “signorina” or “signora”? It was a subtle problem. The decision was taken to use “padre” or “signore” for *Monsieur*, according to the context, while *Mademoiselle* was always retained for Louise de Marillac. Then there was the matter of *vous*; more discussions. The final decision was to make a choice paying more attention to Italian usage. Following this, *vous* was translated as either *tu* or *lei*. *Lei* is used for St Louise, and also for Portail or Lambert aux Couteaux. In the English edition the preference was for holding on to the French terms for money (*livre, écu*) or institutions (*Parlement, Chambre des Comptes, collège*), which has not been copied by the Italian translators.

Sentences have been broken up, when they seemed too convoluted or wordy. Some expressions such as *honorer, dévotion, états, esprit*, have been literally translated into Italian, because each of these expressions has a rich resonance. We remember the saint speaking of “honouring the states of Jesus Christ.” “To honour” means “to share,” but also to reflect with special intensity, to contemplate the Incarnation in its various phases. It was, therefore, necessary to add notes which would help the reader to grasp the nuances and implications, from a vocabulary long out of date, but which still resonate with us today. The translators have been courageous and resolute. They have come up with a flowing, easy to read, version of a text from so far back in time, but near to us because of the spiritual union linking us to the depths of the living Church.

Per se it would be useful to publish the original text, parallel with the translation. Given the fact that the French text, and also the Spanish, is available on the Internet, it is very easy to control the accuracy of the translation of individual sections. In addition, in the margin of the pages, cross-references are given to the Coste edition. An effort was then made to annotate the letters in a fresh and up-to-date way, and to prefix each volume with two long introductions. In the first draft the state of the Vincentian texts and the different editions and translations was described. (Subsequent to the Italian and Spanish translations, the English translation of the letters, in eight volumes, has been completed). The introductions are something completely new. One is historical (L. Mezzadri) and the other theologico-spiritual (A. Antonello). Until now four volumes of the new edition have been completed. A fifth (the conferences to the confreres) is in the press.

St Vincent

The Italian interest in the saint came very early on. The translation of Abelly by Domenico Acami, an Oratorian, came out in 1677.¹⁴ The biographies by Pierre Collet and Coste were also translated. A translation of the biography by José María Román (1928-2002) was published in Milan in 1986: *San Vincenzo de' Paoli. Biografia*.

An original biography in Italian was published in Rome in 1959: *San Vincenzo de' Paoli, servo dei poveri*, by Igino Giordani (1894-1980). A second, revised, edition followed in 1981. Fathers Luigi Mezzadri and Luigi Nuovo made an original contribution by publishing a biography, directly linked to the texts: *S. Vincenzo de' Paoli. Pagine scelte*, Roma 1981.

Father Mezzadri himself has published three different biographies, L. MEZZADRI, *San Vincenzo de' Paoli. Una carità senza frontiere*, Cinisello Balsamo 1986, 2^a ed. 1989; ID., *S. Vincenzo de' Paoli. Una vita spesa per gli altri*, Roma 1989; ID., *S. Vincenzo de' Paoli e il carisma della carità*, Roma 2002.

Spirituality

Up to the middle of the 1970s Italy had shown little sign of interest in Vincentian studies. Few had made a study of St Vincent. There was no general opinion. Initiatives were isolated moves.

Carlo Riccardi, with his important book *Perfezione evangelica. Tutto il pensiero di San Vincenzo de' Paoli esposto con le sue parole*, was a forerunner and pioneer. The first edition came out in 1964, the latest re-print in 1990¹⁵. There was an important breakthrough in 1976 with the establishment of the "Gruppo di Animazione Vincenziana" (GAV). From that date onwards the "Convegni di animazione Vincenziana" were held each year.

Giuseppe Toscani made two substantial contributions. The first was entitled *La mistica dei poveri*, Pinerolo 1986. The second was *Amore, contemplazione, teologia. Gesù Cristo visto da S. Vincenzo*, Pinerolo 1987. Luigi Mezzadri, in his book on Jansenism (*Fra giansenisti e antigiansenisti. Vincenzo de' Paoli e la Congregazione della*

¹⁴ *Vita del ven. Servo di Dio Vincenzo de' Paoli, fondatore e primo superiore generale della Congregazione della Missione raccolta da quella, che già scrisse in lingua francese monsignor Ludovico Abelly..., e pubblicata nell'idioma italiano da Domenico Acami...*, Roma 1677.

¹⁵ [C. RICCARDI], *Nella Chiesa al servizio dei poveri. Tutto il pensiero di S. Luisa de Marillac esposto con le sue parole*, Roma 1978. [A thematic anthology].

Missione), devoted part of one chapter to Vincent's spirituality. In a later contribution (*A lode della gloria. Il sacerdozio nell'Ecole Française. XVII-XX secolo*, Milano 1989) studies in parallel St Vincent's understanding of priesthood and that of authors of the so-called French School.¹⁶

Some other works – G.L. COLUCCIA, *Spiritualità vincenziana, spiritualità dell'azione*, Roma 1978; P. PROVERA, *Purificazione ed esperienza di Dio in S. Vincenzo de' Paoli*, Roma 1983; L. MEZZADRI, *San Vincenzo de' Paoli. Il primato della carità*, in *Le grandi scuole della spiritualità cristiana*, Roma 1984, 553-576; *La Chiesa nell'età dell'assolutismo confessionale. Dal concilio di Trento alla pace di Westfalia, 1563-1648*, a cura di L. Mezzadri (*Storia della Chiesa*, XVIII/2), Cinsello Balsamo 1988; L. MEZZADRI, *La sete e la sorgente*, 2 vols., Roma 1992-1993; L. MEZZADRI, *Pellegrini nella preghiera, pellegrini nella carità. Sulle orme di san Vincenzo*, CLV, Roma 1994; L. MEZZADRI, *Con San Vincenzo ai piedi della Santa Montagna. Le Beatitudini*, CLV, Roma 1995. The *Dizionario storico-spirituale vincenziano*, a cura di L. Mezzadri, CLV, Roma 2003, is also important.

History of the Congregation

Two histories of the Congregation of the Mission in Italy have been published: [S. STELLA], *La Congregazione della Missione in Italia dal 1640 al 1853*, Parigi 1884; a continuation followed: [V. TASSO], *La Congregazione della Missione in Italia. Continuazione dal 1835 al 1874*, Parigi-Torino 1899.

A new history was published in 1925: [P. SILVA], *Cenni storici su la Congregazione della Missione in Italia (1642-1925)*, Piacenza 1925. All these works are lacking in some respects, they are too analytic, and their framework is the houses. P. Giuseppe Guerra has published a history of his province [Naples]. The results are no better.

The Collegio Alberoni in Piacenza is a subject which has proved very productive. This college was founded by Cardinal Giulio

¹⁶ There have been other contributions: *San Vincenzo de' Paoli. Il primato della carità*, in *Le grandi scuole della spiritualità cristiana*, a cura di E. Ancilli, Roma 1984, 553-576; C. BROVETTO - L. MEZZADRI - F. FERRARIO - P. RICCA, *La spiritualità cristiana nell'età moderna (= Storia della spiritualità, V)*, Roma 1987 (capp. IV-VII); *La chiesa nell'età dell'assolutismo confessionale. Dal concilio di Trento alla pace di Westfalia 1563-1648*, a cura di L. Mezzadri (= *Storia della chiesa*, XVIII/2), Cinsello Balsamo 1988; the request for a contribution under the heading "S. Vincenzo" in several dictionaries (*Dizionario di Mistica*, *Dizionario di Pastorale giovanile*, *Dizionario di Teologica pastorale della carità*); *La sete e la sorgente*, 2. vols., Roma 1992-1998.

Alberoni and has a tradition of important publications: P. CASTAGNOLI, *Il cardinale Giulio Alberoni*, 3 vols., Piacenza 1929-1932; R. QUAZZA, see in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* 1 (1960) 662-668; L. MEZZADRI, *Il Collegio Alberoni di Piacenza (1732-1815). Contributo alla storia della formazione sacerdotale*, Roma 1971 (new revised edition 2006); G.F. ROSSI, *Cento studi sul Cardinale Alberoni con altri studi di specialisti internazionali*, 4 vols., Piacenza 1978; F. ARISI - L. MEZZADRI, *Arte e storia nel Collegio Alberoni di Piacenza*, Piacenza 1990; *Il cardinale Alberoni e il suo Collegio. Atti del convegno internazionale di studio*, Piacenza 2003.

There have been various contributions on the subject of parish missions. One may refer to: *Le Missioni popolari della Congregazione della Missione nei secoli XVII-XVIII*, a cura di L. Mezzadri, Roma 2002.

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