

SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW

175 Years on Mission... and Counting!

Turin Confreres Offer 35th Anniversary Reflections



John T. Maher, C.M.

Five confreres from the Province of Turin, ordained priests in 1980, met together on their anniversary to thank the Lord for the gift of their priestly vocation in the Vincentian Community and to share their reflections on the past thirty-five years of ordained ministry. Pictured above are Giampiero Artitzu, Bursar at Cagliari-College; Fr. Giovanni Luigi Colombi, a missionary in Albania; P. Francesco Gonella, Superior of the Mission of Como, Italy; Father Mario Grossi, Superior of the Mission of Turin; and Giuseppe Turati, Secretary General of the General Curia of the Congregation of the Mission. They gathered in Rome on April 27, 2015 for prayer and the Eucharist at the Sanctuary of Mentorella in the Prenestini Mountains outside Rome, a place dear to Pope St. John Paul II. It is staffed by Polish priests of the Congregation of the Resurrection.

At the time of the homily, each confrere shared with simplicity some reflections on his own experiences as well as with his hopes for the future. We are pleased to present in *Vincentiana* the reflections of these confreres.

1. The encounter with the poor

FRANCESCO GONELLA, C.M.

In these years of priestly ministry, what has been my encounter with the poor? I believe that this is a question and a challenge that cannot be avoided by any confrere in the Congregation of the Mission. This, then, is my reflection: I am also “poor” – inadequate to fulfill the mission that has been entrusted to me! I ask myself: have I always been attentive to the “cries” of the people whom I have met? My first experience in ministry was that of living with a group of young men enrolled in a vocational training school. This was a challenge because I had to assist them in their studies and also has to help them develop study habits as well as assist them in completing their workshop projects.

At another time I accompanied young people whose lives were battered as a result of psychological problems: mental illness, depression, and other “demons” that make everything seem futile. Despite all the challenges involved in accompanying people with such complex problems, I could not resist caring about them as a friend and as a Vincentian priest.

Now I assist women who, after a period of incarceration, engage in a process of social reintegration into the community (they look for work and housing). The goal of this process is to free these women from having to endure a second incarceration, that is, a “social incarceration” resulting in some form of marginalization (so many people continue to believe that “once a criminal, always a criminal”). The Gospel command “to liberate the oppressed” is not simply some ideal! People who suffer severe marginalization come together and I am challenged to approach them and enter their world. But how can I respond to their needs? What more can I give them beside the Gospel of Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor!

Collaboration

In every experience, I found a profound richness in efforts of collaboration with confreres, Sisters, and laity, especially members of the Vincentian Family. No confrere can avoid confronting the challenges of collaboration and therefore, I must continually ask myself: how do I collaborate with others in ministry? St. Vincent set a standard that still applies today: without collaboration between the those who evangelize and those who are evangelized, very little can be accomplished.

True collaboration requires good communication skills, mediation, and a willingness to share. This is a most challenging, important aspect of evangelical conversion: we must remember that we are not omnipotent; we are merely an instrument of communion and positive transformation of the reality around us. Alone, we are nothing and therefore, we need to reflect, study, and develop our own method of collaboration; otherwise there will be no systemic change. Through collaboration we will discover that many different charitable works can be integrated into our pastoral ministry. In planning and implementing projects, we learn to share our ideas and we see such a process as an opportunity for renewal.

The Animation of Charity

I would also like to reflect on the words: *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me*. After 35 years of priestly ministry as a Vincentian I have come to realize that my ministry must be focused on being a “leader in charity.” We are simply “entertainers” who spend time with the poor but do not become involved in service. As Blessed Paul VI said, “We only become masters when we become witnesses.” I have often experienced difficulty in organizing different forms of social ministry, but I find it even more challenging to organize authentic works of charity! I still believe that the true value of voluntary charity for a Vincentian is to encourage and to train others to be bearers of the charism, to encourage and to train other to carry on the Vincentian mission which is none other than continuing the mission of Jesus Christ.

At this time in my life, I want to devote time and energy to develop my leadership abilities in being an apostle of charity because such charity is able to transform society.

2. The Lord has sent me to proclaim the good news to the poor: Mission ad Gentes

GIOVANNI LUIGI COLOMBI, C.M.

I thank God, my family and the Congregation for the gift of being called to serve Christ in the poor. After 35 years of priesthood, I wish to share some reflections on my various experiences.

1. I have been able to care for and educate children and I have also been able to serve and to participate in the life of the poor with meaningful gestures and personal witness (workshops, meetings summer camps, etc).
2. From the time that I was a young seminarian, I was educated in the Mission with concrete and timely experiences of service. My love for the poor was not some sudden impulse but rather resulted from

visiting the poor and learning from others who served marginalized persons, especially those who were passionate about such service. I was also able to study and reflect upon those matters that will be helpful in my service on behalf of the poor. I realized that I had to offer people by various gifts and talents.

3. The process of evangelization is a participation in the daily life of the people with whom one lives. This has forced me to reflect on the mystery of the Incarnation which in turn has heightened my awareness of the importance of inculturation without which there can be no true evangelization.
4. It is important to avoid theoretical discussions about the poor and it is much better to dirty one's hands while serving and interacting with those who are marginalized. I have tried to bring people together while remembering that only the poor can be the protagonists of their salvation.
5. At the same time I have seen an advantage to investing financially in the service of the poor while encouraging others to do the same. It is important that the poor can eat every day and equally important to allow the poor to be evangelizers.
6. We must all remember that we are not bureaucrats but Missionaries in the Congregation who have been sent forth to evangelize with many works and few words the poor (just as Jesus did). St. Vincent said, "Charity is creative unto infinity."
7. The more difficult the task means that we must be convinced that God and the Spirit are guiding and inspiring our ministry. Our Congregation will always be relevant if we are faithful to Christ who lives in the poor.
8. Love, peace and joy must characterize our service on behalf of the poor and must give witness to the fact that all that we are and all that we do comes from God.
9. Creating a network through the process of collaboration highlights the gifts and abilities of all involved in such a process. In the end, when we have done all that could be done on behalf of the poor, we can then say that we are just useless servants and just did what we were called to do.

3. Community life

GIAMPIERO ARTITZU, C.M.

In recent years, there were few opportunities to dialogue about the question of our priestly vocation in general and more specifically, our vocation as members of the Congregation. The ministries and duties I exercised in various houses (seven to date), at times with confreres

with very different mindsets, has often led me to question the meaning of my vocation in its relationship with the Vincentian charism. This is especially true today when we often fail to find a certain convergence of ideas, for example, look at how long it took us to discuss something like parishes: yes, no, maybe, poor, a mixture, or something else?

For me, during my years of formation, there was a temptation to make community life a lower priority because of the difficulties I had with my studies. But I had so many wonderful experiences of community life and those experiences led to a deepening conviction that it is better to do a little less together than much more on one's own. Since then I have matured in another conviction: the obligation to offer my views and to express myself, but to do so in the right place and at the right time. I have come to appreciate the need to respect the many differences in community.

It was because of this belief (perhaps misguided to some), that when I was asked (before perpetual vows) about possible future ministry, I expressed a desire to go to the missions *ad gentes*. However, I never presented a written request (which was the proper manner to make such a request). I just wanted it to be known that I was available! As a result, I began my ministry in a parish and taught religion in a public school. Looking back now, I believe that the experience of those years was not much different from what I might have done in certain *missions ad gentes*.

After those first nine years, I became the bursar in Sassari and even this task, which I first felt to be very routine and ordinary, taught me something. For example, I participated in the CNEC conference in Rome, which helped me to understand more fully provide the service that I was providing for the other confreres. Although I did not expect it, I found this ministry to be very rewarding and it helped to prepare me for my ministry in Terramala... a ministry with young people.

I was then asked to take up ministry in a parish in Milan where I again served as the treasurer. From there, I went to Verona where I spent three years before returning to Sassari for another seven years as superior. Now I am presently at Cagliari and serve as an adviser to the members of the Vincentian Family. Over the years, there have been various situations, different problems, different people, various ministries and responsibilities. As you can imagine, all of this required considerable effort to adapt to each new situation... and community life, with all its ups and downs, was not always the easiest to live.

Let me give you some examples: arriving in a community where everything has been done a certain way for years and I was asked to bring change into the midst of such a community; – then, being sent to another community where everyone went their own separate way and I was asked to find ways to bring the confreres together! Imagine

that you are the youngest trying to discover the lifestyle that is proper for a Vincentians. Personally, I am more than ever convinced of what I said at Monte Oliveto Maggiore during a retreat in preparation for perpetual vows: we choose the Community for the gifts that it offers us but we always have to engage in a search in order to find them... but when you do find those gifts it is essential to rejoice in them! If this were not so, I would probably still out looking... but I think I can honestly say that in learning to reflect on and control my enthusiasm, I have also learned to better control my disappointments. After all, even the shortcomings of others have been helpful for my growth and development in community.

In conclusion, I am still convinced that, despite all the human limitations, the lifestyle of a religious community gives witness to a fuller, richer quality of life. For example, we may complain of having to endure some specific situation something which, while not the best, is certainly possible to survive as a result of the grace of God and God's love for all of us. I learned this in community life and I thank the Lord for this, but most of all I thank God for having kept me faithful.

4. From Vocational Promotion to the Care of the Elderly

MARIO GROSSI, C.M.

Looking back, I now want to express my gratitude for the many years of ministry and for the countless gifts that I have received during this time, beginning with the gift of health. At the same time, I am aware that I have not done as much as I could have done, but I leave all of that to the mercy of the Lord. Mindful of that reality I recall the words of Fr. Ronchini with regard to consecrated life. In quoting Cardinal Martini he said, "If you can keep the glow forever, you can preserve the memory of incandescence when the memory is fading."

All of this reminds me of the zeal that must be a part of my life. In the early years of my priesthood, I was involved in the ministry of vocational promotion, but now I am charged with caring for the elderly and sick confreres. With regard to the matter of vocations, I recall the words of Vincent who was not overly concerned about the number of vocation but greatly concerned about the quality of those vocations: *Our Lord's work is accomplished not so much by the multitude of workers as by the fidelity of the small number whom he calls* (CCD: III: 66-67) and on another occasion: *the Company does need men; but it would be much better to have fewer men than to have a number of difficult individuals and deeds of that sort. Ten good men will do more for God than a hundred of those people* (CCD: II: 421).

Now that I am also one of the confreres approaching my elder years, I must keep in mind that the men I serve are "the poor" who have been

entrusted to me. Thus, I do not have to go looking for the poor they are very near to me! And are not these poor “our lords and masters”? It is also true that we advance in years, each one of us will become poor in some way! Thus it is with gratitude and faith that I ask the Lord to accompany us with his grace as we journey through life and minister on behalf of God’s people.

5. Our Role in the Congregation and Church

GIUSEPPE TURATI, C.M.

If the Congregation of the Mission suddenly ended its service, how would that change affect the universal Church? It would probably be in need of having to replace staff in many parishes and there would be little impact with regard to the formation of the clergy. But assistance to the poor and human promotion would suffer a serious setback. This should make us reflect since the apostolic purpose of the Congregation is for “the evangelization of the poor, especially the most abandoned” (C .1.2) and to help “the clergy and laity in their formation” (C. 1.3).

From the time of St. Vincent to the present, there have been many changes in both society and the Church. Civil society, which in the 17th century was unable (or unwilling) to respond to the many existent needs (i.e., education, health care, land reform), has slowly become more organized, creating an efficient system of social protection. Here it is important to recall that during the more recent centuries the Congregation and the larger Vincentian Family have given witness to their concern for the less fortunate members of society by engaging in activity on their behalf.

The training of clergy in the Church had a great impact and it has resulted in high levels of theological competence, at least in many Western countries and we, as Vincentians, played an important role in bring about that change. We can therefore conclude that the Congregation, having played a significant role for centuries in the Church, can stand on its own merits today. On another note, the Dutch Province decided that as of August 1, 2015, they will transition from being a province to a region dependent on the General Curia for an indefinite e period.

Personally, I do not think this is the inevitable fate of the Congregation in Europe, even though some groups have made that choice. I think that the Congregation in Europe (as well as in other Western countries) has become weaker, but has not totally lost its identity. In some ways the Congregation reflects what is happening in the larger Church, especially in terms of its institutional commitments. An example of this is seen in the number of confreres who serve in parishes, the largest single ministry of the Congregation.

This shift is more serious from an apostolic view when we consider the reality of poverty and the relationship of that reality to the question of migration, the economic crisis and the ever widening gap between those who are rich and those who are poor.

Thus we can consider the current needs from not only an academic or theological perspective, but must also view this situation from the perspective of pastoral ministry. We need a profound rethinking of our sacramental theology which was developed from the perspective of a society that was profoundly Christian. Today, we are challenged to meet the religious needs of a society that is markedly secularized (for example, consider the sacrament of Reconciliation which is so much a part of our Vincentian tradition).

Another important aspect as I reflect on the Congregation in which I have ministered for 35 years is "a sense of belonging". The growth of the Congregation over the years led to the formation of many provinces now present on five continents. Today, in many of these provinces we see a dramatic decrease in the number of confreres and at the same time we see an aging of their members. It is clear that the formation of the provinces was the result of missionary effectiveness in those areas.

Today, many provinces we are in decline. Yet proposals for reconfiguration, (proposals intended to achieve a more effective apostolic outreach), meet much resistance, a clear sign that confreres feel more attached to an institutional form (a particular province), than to the charisma (mission). Just a quick look at some data. Today, more than half of the provinces of the Congregation have under 50 members (27 of 50 provinces), and four provinces have under 15 members. In a province with a small number of members, a lot of energy is being diverted away from apostolic needs in order to maintain the province as such.

A weakened sense of belonging is evidenced in the fact that during the past 15 years, nearly a hundred confreres have asked for a dispensation from vows in order to be incardinated into a Diocese (an average of 5-6 confreres per year).

One last issue I would like to mention in this brief reflection is the place of the Congregation within the universal Church and here I refer to the characteristic of its internationality. In the Congregation of the Mission there are two types of missions *ad gentes*: the missions that some provinces take on and as a result send their missionaries abroad (e.g. the Province of Turin in Madagascar) and the International Missions, begun in 1992 by the Superior General. There are currently twelve such missions that receive confreres from various provinces. In a quick comparison between these two forms of missions *ad gentes*, it is obvious that the International Missions are the weakest, because they are dependent on volunteers from the various Provinces and, once

again, because confreres feel attached to their Province they often find it difficult to appreciate and understand the international needs and concerns of the Congregation.

A comparison with other missionary congregations (such as Camboni and Scalabrini Fathers) clearly shows that we, as a Congregation, need to hone our skills in the mission field. This includes improving our preparation and our understanding of inculturation, and deepening our sense of belonging to an international congregation.

In conclusion, there are three areas for growth by which the Congregation should be measured: a sense of identity in the Church, a sense of belonging to the Congregation, (not just as a Province), and an appreciation of the international nature of the Congregation of the Mission.

