

The Vincentian Charism in North America

by John E. Rybolt, C.M.

Midwest Province

In any consideration of the development of the Vincentian charism, a methodological problem arises: How genuine can the Vincentian charism be outside France? The question is not an idle one, as we will see, but for Vincent de Paul himself, it apparently was not an issue, since he established the Congregation during his lifetime in Italy and Poland, and sent his confreres to do the work of the Congregation in other countries.

Uniformity versus Adaptation

In the years to follow, even shortly after his death, the competing ideals of uniformity within the Congregation and adaptation to local circumstances remained to be resolved. René Alméras, for example, issued an anxious circular letter, which has remained unpublished, concerning the reasons for the change of the time for the main daily meal at Saint Lazare, from 10:30 to 11:00 a.m.¹ He hoped his confreres would not be too disturbed and invited them to consider changing. In another letter, he only grudgingly permitted his confreres to wear leather gloves in winter time, even in Poland, even though Vincent himself did not make use of them.²

Uniformity was an ideal often presented in the circular letters of the Superiors General and in the General Assembly decrees of the Congregation, but it was applied somewhat loosely in practice. After the Revolution and the restoration of the Congregation in France, the dynamism for centralization and uniformity grew. The early Superiors General made uniformity a part of their program, but none more so than Jean-Baptiste Etienne. He repeatedly insisted that

¹ Circular, 16 March 1663, in ACMP, Alméras papers, copy.

² Circular, from Jolly, in Alméras's name, 28 September 1667, Archives CM, Kraków, Circulars, original.

absolute uniformity of principles and practice be maintained, something he was never able to accomplish, as he himself admitted.

Through his visits to other provinces outside France, particularly Italy and Ireland, he sought to maintain uniformity. He knew that missionaries outside Europe, particularly in China, Ethiopia and the United States, had been adapting Vincentian life to local practice. His ideal was to have large central houses with regular community life as the Congregation had in France, and he urged his Chinese confreres and their European brothers to move in this direction. He publicly criticized Justin De Jacobis, the first Vincentian to be canonized after Vincent de Paul, for not having founded a house in Ethiopia.³ He said: Justin left “no institution, no work, and so to say, no other trace of his passage through the vast lands that he traversed, except for the good odor of edification that he never ceased to spread.” Etienne understood too that many American confreres were forced to live apart from a community house because of the needs of the apostolate. Added to competing pastoral needs were severe restrictions imposed on Vincentians in several countries, cutting them off from official contact with France. Naples for many years ran its own affairs, as did Portugal and later Brazil, along with Lithuania. The closest the Congregation ever came to schism was in Italy and Spain, as a result of these differing perspectives concerning uniformity guaranteed by centralized direction from Paris. To overcome this, Etienne at first planned to have a single Internal Seminary (novitiate) for the entire Congregation, but when this was shown to be impossible, he wanted at least to require all the directors spend time in Paris. None of this would happen.

This conflict of ideals, between uniformity and adaptation, between centralized control and local administration, has been a factor of Vincentian life throughout its history. The Constitutions of 1984 enshrine, but without exactly explaining how, the sense of the need to adapt Vincentian principles to the cultures of the people among whom its members work, plus the centrality of control on the level of individual provinces.

For some, consequently, suspicions can easily arise as to the genuineness of the Vincentian charism as lived out in different cultural situations. These suspicions came to the fore particularly during the difficult and heated discussions leading up to the extraordinary General Assembly of 1968-1969, and in the two following Assemblies. Speaking as a participant in some of those

³ Allocation at the opening of the General Assembly, 27 July 1861: “... sans laisser aucune institution, aucune œuvre et pour ainsi dire, d’autre trace de son passage à travers les vastes contrées qu’il a parcourues, que la bonne odeur d’édification qu’il n’a cessé de répandre.”

discussions, I can attest to the lack of understanding and appreciation of the differences among various provinces. For some confreres, it appeared that there was only one possible way of being Vincentian, and that those who did not adopt that way were not genuine Vincentians. This was particularly true concerning the issue of the “end” of the Congregation. The members of the Assembly of 1980 struggled to express their understanding but, thanks to a last-minute intervention, a text was finally agreed on: “The purpose of the Congregation of the Mission is to follow Christ, the evangelizer of the poor.” Despite this affirmation of a single end, the Church’s own official statement is different, listing two ends or purposes: “The Congregation of the Mission, founded by St. Vincent de Paul, has the special apostolic purpose of preaching the gospel to the poor and promoting the formation of the clergy.”⁴ Thus, the dichotomy so carefully negotiated and prayed over during the Assemblies has remained.

The American Experience: Universities, Seminaries, Missions

In 1816, the Congregation of the Mission arrived in the newly-independent United States to establish and run a seminary for the western part of the new nation, the Louisiana, purchased from France in 1803. At the same time, and true to the Vincentian charism, the first confreres to arrive from Europe insisted on preaching parish missions. What they found, however, was that there were very few parishes, and that the Church needed not parish missions but parish pastors, since the nation was growing so quickly through immigration. Besides, not everyone who came to the parishes was Catholic. In the early days of the Republic, Catholics and Protestants often came to church out of curiosity, to hear a sermon, and to understand their neighbors better.

The result was that American Vincentians were not initially involved in parish missions. They appreciated the problem and chose at times to speak of their founding and support of new parishes as a kind of permanent mission, but this was certainly not what Saint Vincent had in mind.

Out of the seminaries developed other works, described in several studies in *Vincentiana*⁵ and elsewhere. For our purposes here, we will concentrate only on the ministry in higher education, at the

⁴ Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, Decree, 29 June 1984, Constitutions, 1984, English ed., p.v.

⁵ See in particular *Vincentiana* 45:3 (2001) for several articles on this subject.

university level and in seminaries, and on popular missions. The founding of independent Catholic universities is in many ways a distinctively American undertaking. The reason is that, in many other nations, the system of university education is either tightly controlled by the state or has been in existence for centuries, such that the founding of new universities under Catholic auspices can be a rare and difficult event. The American Vincentians did not begin with the thought of founding universities. Each of the three universities currently under Vincentian direction started as something else, a secondary school or seminary, and these gradually developed, through the call of the local Church, into larger institutions.⁶

Over the years, then, the three Vincentian universities grew in size and importance for the American Church. It took the new Constitutions, particularly statute 11, §§ 1, 3, to help these institutions refocus their attention on the Vincentian mission of the universities. *"1. Recognizing the great importance of education for both youth and adults, members should take up this work of teaching and educating where it is needed to achieve the purpose of the Congregation. 3. Schools, colleges, and universities should, according to local circumstances, admit, and promote the development of the poor. All the students, however, should be imbued with a sensitivity for the poor, according to the spirit of our Founder, while the confreres affirm the value of Christian education and provide a Christian social formation."* This providential statement came out of a proposal during the Assembly of 1980 that, if approved, would have led to the abandonment of these institutions. Instead, the members of the Assembly became convinced of the utility of these and similar institutions for carrying out the mission of the Congregation. Furthermore, statistics gathered in the United States have shown that one of the most effective ways for someone to break out of the cycle of poverty is to receive a university education.

The result has been that graduates of Niagara University, Saint John's University and DePaul University, in improving their own situation, have also been imbued with a Vincentian sensitivity for the poor. Indeed, new methods are constantly being developed to train faculty and administration in the Vincentian charism, and many ongoing programs exist in each institution to recruit poor students, particularly those from families who have never had any university education, and then to support them through their years of education until their graduation and even afterward. The values at the core of Vincentian education have, in summary, been described as being

⁶ See STAFFORD POOLE, "The Educational Apostolate: Colleges, Universities, and Secondary Schools," in JOHN E. RYBOLT (ed.), *The American Vincentians*, New York, 1988, pp. 291-346.

holistic, integrated, creative, flexible, excellent, person-oriented, collaborative and focused.⁷

The Vincentian faculty members of these universities also underwent significant personal development. Many became renowned experts in their fields of teaching and research, while others served the Church through their administrative skills. Many of them, in addition, underwent a profound conversion in the time of the many changes and revisions that followed the Second Vatican Council and the new Constitutions of the Congregation.⁸

Besides the development of Catholic universities, which enroll many non-Catholic and even non-Christian students, and which have non-Catholic and even non-Christian faculty members and administrators, the American Vincentians in recent years have seen the decline of their former work in diocesan seminaries. A question is easily asked: Did we leave the seminaries, or did the seminaries leave us? It is difficult to answer such a question, since the historical situation is complex. In some cases, the Congregation did leave the seminaries, since diocesan vocations declined and the community lacked the personnel or other resources to continue. In other cases, diocesan clergy took over the institutions little by little. At no time did the provinces decide to leave seminaries entirely as a part of their provincial planning processes. One after another either closed or passed into other hands, many of whom were priests trained by the Vincentians.

Another similar question that is easily asked but answered only with difficulty deals with the parish or popular missions: Did we leave the missions, or did the missions leave us? The fact is that, despite many attempts over the years, the parish missions in the United States never reached the top rank in the apostolates of the American provinces. Periods of advance, with large numbers devoted to various sorts of missions (particularly in the form of the Miraculous Medal Novenas), were followed by periods of decline and virtual extinction. Although the missions today are being preached and are appreciated, the local Church is not consistently calling the Congregation to offer this sort of ministry. Since the situation of American parishes is so totally different from those of France in the 17th century, this militates against attempts to impose the traditional missions on our contemporary setting. Changes have been made in format and approach, but missions are generally not regarded by bishops and pastors as something essential, but only something extrinsic.

⁷ LOUISE SULLIVAN, *The Core Values of Vincentian Education*, Niagara University, 1997; reprinted Chicago, 1997, p. 43.

⁸ DENNIS H. HOLTSCHNEIDER - EDWARD R. UDOVIC, *The Vincentian Higher Education Apostolate in the United States*, Chicago, 2001.

The American Context

In which ways does the American situation differ? The nation is built of immigrants, and immigration to the United States continues in record numbers of both documented (legal) and undocumented (illegal) immigrants, reaching about one million yearly in the last ten or 15 years. This is happening so rapidly that our parishes and other works have a hard time adjusting to new cultures and peoples.

Also, the United States never experienced a period of official persecution of the Church. Although Catholics suffered from prejudice and exclusion, the Church was never suppressed here as it was in many other countries. Also, since 1812, there has never been a foreign war fought on American soil, with its attendant waves of refugees and displacement of peoples. The United States has never experienced the peasant class that existed in many other places. Today, of course, those who work the land are often wealthy and entrepreneurial, and only a very small percentage of Americans actually live on the land to produce food or other products.

The advancement of the great mass of the American people can also be explained through a culture that emphasizes freedom, equality, hard work and individual initiative. This sort of culture is ruled out by an emphasis on unquestioning uniformity. From the American perspective, these ideals were confirmed by many of the documents issued by the Second Vatican Council and subsequent statements and legislation. The Church, in other words, has been attempting to recognize cultural differences, and the Congregation has followed the same path.

Thanks to a favorable geopolitical and economic climate, the United States has never stopped growing both in population (now estimated at 300 million), wealth and influence. To the great surprise of many, its Catholic population is among the best educated, the most respected and the wealthiest of all our citizens. Many Catholics have entered politics and are represented in the federal Congress, state legislatures and the judiciary, while others are the heads of large corporations and universities, and are at the top of their chosen professions.

Out of all these considerations there arises the issue of how the Congregation of the Mission is to minister in this land. Direct service of the poor is always central to our planning,⁹ but the poor among us are often (but far from exclusively) non-Catholics, another factor differentiating American pastoral life. They are rather unchurched, Protestants or members of non-Christian religions. Nevertheless, this

⁹ See "Ratio Missionum Congregationis Missionis," *Vincentiana*, 46:1 (2002) 7.

has led the universities and the parishes to focus on these groups. Paramount among them at present are Hispanics, particularly recent immigrants. Many Vincentian works exist to reach out to these brothers and sisters of ours: direct financial aid, legal aid for immigration problems, providing a Church community for worship and fellowship, planning and organization, access to public services of all sorts. As an outgrowth of this reality, many confreres in the American provinces have learned Spanish or other languages to improve their ministry. In addition, the confreres have worked assiduously at multiplying their effect through their outreach to lay people, especially lay leaders, many of whom are eager to volunteer in Vincentian works.

American Contributions

What have American Vincentians contributed to the Congregation of the Mission at large? One is the principle of participatory democracy, very dear to our citizens. As a result, it is difficult for American Vincentians to conceive of a congregation whose members would have little or no participative voice in its planning and governance. Another principle is that of “playing by the rules.” It has often become clear in the General Assemblies of the Congregation that the approach to its Constitutions and Statues is not uniform. For certain cultures, the Constitutions are a set of ideals that one strives



Ongoing Formation Meeting of the Vice-Province of Nigeria;
2-4 May 2007

to reach at some point, but from the American constitutional perspective, the Constitutions are fundamental and obligatory. For this reason, it is difficult to conceive of changes of Constitutions and Statutes that reflect temporary situations or are on the level of mere exhortation. A third contribution is generosity coupled with openness to others, manifested in a large scale of financial and personnel support of other provinces, whether by individual confreres or provinces.

Besides principles, the American provinces have also contributed leaders to the Congregation, in particular four Superiors General in recent years, Fathers Slattery, Richardson, Maloney and Gay. Others with organizational and leadership skills have helped guide various congregational undertakings. Recently, for example, the Vincentian Studies Institute, headquartered at DePaul University which now sponsors it, has developed into a major international source for Vincentian learning and research. American Vincentians have also contributed over the years to the foreign mission outreach of the Congregation, chief among them being Panama and China. Today we have to add the growing Kenyan mission, with its emphasis on formation of the diocesan clergy and care for the poor, supported willingly but at great cost to the Congregation in men, money and organization, as all the missions have been.

Conclusion

This study began from a request to present the state of the Vincentian charism in North America. It was my conviction that, to understand the situation, it would be necessary to examine the development of the Congregation in the United States, not only in its works but also in the principles behind this development. To accomplish this, it is also necessary to study the very model of the Congregation of the Mission, whether as branches of a single tree, or as something approaching a community of self-governing provinces. This has shown that, yes, the genuine Vincentian charism does exist in North America, despite the fact that its realization has taken on a distinctively American appearance.