

Spring 1984

## Vincentian Missions in the Islamic World

Charles A. Frazee

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj>

---

### Recommended Citation

Frazee, Charles A. (1984) "Vincentian Missions in the Islamic World," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol5/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Digital Commons@DePaul. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@DePaul. For more information, please contact [digitalservices@depaul.edu](mailto:digitalservices@depaul.edu).

# Vincentian Missions in the Islamic World

*Charles A. Frazee*

When Saint Vincent de Paul organized the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, one of his aims was to provide a group of men and women who would work in foreign lands on behalf of the Church. He held firm opinions on the need for such a mission since at the very heart of Christ's message was the charge to go to all nations preaching the Gospel. St. Vincent believed that the life of a missionary would win more converts than theological arguments. Hence his instructions to his disciples were always meant to encourage them to lead lives of charity and concern for the poor.

This article will describe the extension of Vincent's work into the Islamic world. Specifically, it will touch on the Vincentian experience in North Africa, the Ottoman Empire (including Turkey, the Near East, and Balkan countries), and Persia (Iran).

## North Africa

When St. Vincent decided to send his first Missionaries abroad, it was to North Africa for there the need was greatest. In the seventeenth century, the cities along the Mediterranean coast held thousands of Christian captives who were brought there from raids on Christian Europe or were taken from vessels at sea. By his account St. Vincent would have known from personal experience the terror of imprisonment by the Barbary pirates. Soon after Pope Urban VIII approved his Congregation in 1633, the first Vincentian missionary endeavor was launched.

It has been estimated that nearly thirty thousand men

and women were held in Tunis, Bizerte, and Algiers under the most difficult conditions. Most were kept in prisons, called *bagnos*, which held from two to four hundred people. They were packed into cells, chained two by two, fed hardly at all, constantly beaten and harassed by their jailors. Some were required to work on rock piles. Others were condemned to be rowers on the galleys of the corsairs. Within months the weakest would be dead. The survivors' only hope was to be ransomed by Catholic missionaries from Europe.

In July 1643, King Louis XIII donated 10,000 *livres* to St. Vincent and the Duchess d'Aiguillon provided a house for the training of priests and brothers destined for work among the Christian captives. In November 1645, St. Vincent appointed Father Julien Guérin and Brother François Francillon to proceed to North Africa as the pioneers of the Vincentian mission. Their entry into Tunisia was as chaplains serving the French Consul. At once they began what their main charge entailed: visiting the captives in Tunis and Bizerte and assisting them both materially and spiritually. Father Guérin's charity earned him such a reputation that even the Muslims were impressed. The Dey of Tunis became a friend and his son a secret convert to the Catholic faith.

A year after the Tunisian foundation, St. Vincent commissioned Father Boniface Nouelly to go to Algiers as chaplain to the consulate. Within the year Nouelly was carried off by plague and no sooner were successors named than they too fell victim to disease. After losing three men so quickly, St. Vincent was hesitant to risk the life of another in Algiers.

Meanwhile in 1647, Father Jean Le Vacher had arrived in Tunis to replace Guérin who had died from the rigors of his apostolate. Le Vacher proved able to withstand disease much better. He soon was recognized as a friend to all, and the Dey of Tunis gave him complete freedom to visit the *bagnos*, learn the prisoners' names, and send word to

relatives in Europe that they were alive. If a ransom could be raised, Le Vacher made the necessary arrangements for the release. Daily Le Vacher visited his wretched flock, leading them in prayer, anointing the sick and dying, reconciling sinners through the Sacrament of Penance and then giving them the Eucharist.<sup>1</sup>

When the French Consul in Tunis died, the Dey suggested that Le Vacher be named to the post, so that for a time he added one more responsibility. Later an official came from Paris and Le Vacher returned to his more welcome task of serving the captives. In 1650, recognizing his ministry, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (commonly called Propaganda) appointed him Vicar Apostolic of Tunisia.<sup>2</sup>

A year later St. Vincent de Paul commissioned Father Philippe Le Vacher, Jean's brother, to go to Algiers to reopen Vincentian work there. Like his brother, Philippe's strong constitution enabled him to serve in North Africa for twelve years, until 1662. Philippe traveled up and down the coast, from Fez in Morocco to Tripoli in Libya, bringing whatever consolation he could offer. Captive priests were his special concern. Perseverance in their vocation was no easy task during captivity.<sup>3</sup>

In 1662 ill-health forced Philippe Le Vacher to return to France. Six years later his brother Jean went to Algiers after having turned over his mission in Tunis to two

---

<sup>1</sup>P. Coste, "St. Vincent de Paul et la mission de Barbarie," *Revue d'histoire des missions*, I (1924): 202-214. Guérin's activities are recounted in *Memoires de la Congrégation de la mission* (Paris, 1864), II, pp. 7-38. There were fourteen *bagnos* in Tunis and five in Bizerte.

<sup>2</sup>For a time several other Vincentians served as Consuls, but the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith frowned on this arrangement. Nevertheless, St. Vincent de Paul kept a hand in choosing the officials who went to North Africa. A report of Le Vacher concerning his work in Tunis is to be found in a letter to Propaganda, 29 January 1654, published in *Revue d'histoire des missions*, I (1924): 232-42.

<sup>3</sup>Coste, "St. Vincent," 215-17.



Capuchins. He continued his brother's ministry until the summer of 1683. At that time Louis XIV ordered a French fleet to anchor off Algiers in an attempt to reduce the number of corsairs leaving the harbor. The Dey of Algiers, Hadji Hasan, known as Mezzomorto, was so angered that he ordered Le Vacher arrested and condemned to death. The Vincentian's executioners asked if he would like to save his life by renouncing Christianity and professing Islam. The intrepid missionary told them that he had been waiting for martyrdom all his life and that he did not now intend to lose that opportunity. He was bound, placed at the mouth of a cannon, and died when it was fired. Thirty-six years of missionary work came to an end. His successors, Father Michel Montmasson and Brother Francillon, who had begun his work in North Africa with Father Guérin, suffered the same fate five years later.<sup>4</sup>

Undeterred by the loss of their compatriots, the Vincentians continued to staff the consulate and care for the captives until 1790 when the French Revolution brought a temporary halt to their work. The Spanish Bourbon sovereign, Charles IV, offered to take over the Vincentian mission after Father Alasia, the last to hold the title of Vicar Apostolic, died in 1798. In 1806, the French Vincentians regained their posts but only for a short period of time. In 1830, after the French occupation of Algeria, thousands of Europeans made their home in the country, prompting Rome in 1838 to appoint Antoine Adolphe Dupuch Bishop of Algiers.<sup>5</sup> Father Viallier arrived in Algiers to reopen the Vincentian apostolate four years later. Since the corsairs no longer brought in captives, Viallier and his successors opened a new ministry,

---

<sup>4</sup> Georges Goyau, "Le christianisme sur les côtes barbaresques jusqu'au XIXe siècle," *Revue d'histoire des missions*, VII (1930): 34-37. A biography of the martyr's life has been written by Raymond Gleizes, *Jean Le Vacher* (Paris, 1914).

<sup>5</sup> The Vincentians' return to North Africa is told in Antoine Pons, *La nouvelle eglise d'Afrique* (Tunis, 1930), pp. 40-42.

the training of young men for the priesthood to serve the Algerian *colons*. The Vincentians later staffed the seminaries of Oran and Constantine so long as the French flag flew over Algeria.

Today, with Algeria's Catholic population at only 58,000 persons, the seminaries are closed and the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity who work there minister to both Muslims and Christians as teachers and social workers. Tunisia has only 18,000 Catholics scattered through twenty-four parishes and, although this country's atmosphere is more secular than that of Algeria, the work of the missionary is tolerated only to the extent that it serves the whole population. Social custom, if not the law, prohibits the conversion of Muslims to Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

### The Ottoman Empire and Turkey

The Ottoman Empire was truly a pluralistic society: Muslim, Christian, and Jew lived side by side. By the seventeenth century, at least a dozen major ethnic groups and many minor ones with their own customs, laws, and languages existed inside its borders. The Latin Catholic population was relatively small. It consisted of the Catholic Greek islanders, the northern Albanians, several thousand Bosnians, several hundred Arabs in Aleppo, and an Italian merchant community that lived in Galata, across the Golden Horn from Istanbul.

In addition to the Latin Catholics, there were Eastern Catholic churches: the Maronites of Mt. Lebanon, the Chaldeans of Mesopotamia, perhaps forty thousand Armenian Catholics, and growing communities of recent converts among the Syrians, Melkites, and Copts of Egypt. The Turks considered Eastern Catholics native to the

---

<sup>6</sup>The statistics are from the *Annuario statisticum ecclesiae*, 1980 (Vatican City, 1981). See also Norman Horner, "Christianity in North Africa Today," *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, IV, 2 (1980): 83-88.

region as *dhimmis*. A *dhimmi* was a non-Muslim who enjoyed the protection of the Sultan for life, liberty, and property as well as the right to worship according to his or her conscience. On the other hand, *dhimmis* had certain restrictions placed on them: they were forbidden political office, could not hold a position in the army, often had to wear distinctive clothing, and were required to pay a head tax, the *cizje*, which sometimes was very burdensome. They could not proselytize, build new churches or ring church bells, and their clergy had little opportunity for education.

Ottoman Latin Catholics were treated differently. Because of Turkish recognition of the military strength of Western Europe's Catholic powers and the need to do business with them, the Sultans usually treated the Latins better. They fell under the Islamic law for foreigners which gave them considerably more freedom.

From the sixteenth century the Sultans were in alliance with the French monarchs against the Habsburgs. Treaties, known as capitulations, allowed French Catholic priests to come into the Turkish empire to serve as chaplains to the large foreign diplomatic staffs resident in Istanbul and to serve as ministers to Western European merchant communities which settled in Ottoman cities to take part in the oriental trade with the West. In addition, the Turks always recognized the right of the Franciscans to serve in the Holy Land as guardians of the Latin shrines and to host Catholic pilgrims who journeyed to Jerusalem. The French Ambassador in the Turkish capital served as guardian of the Catholic missionaries wherever they were stationed.<sup>7</sup>

The Vincentians first came into the Ottoman Empire in 1763 when Propaganda appointed Father Armand Bossu

---

<sup>7</sup>H.A.R. Gibb and Harold Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West*, 2 vols. in 1 (London, 1951-1957), pp. 213-45. Antoine Fattal, *Le statut legal des non-musulmans en pays d'Islam* (Beirut, 1958), pp. 159-231.

to become Vicar Apostolic for Aleppo in Syria. This was an important post since a number of Latin Catholic Arabs and European merchants lived there, as well as Maronites, Catholic Melkites, Armenians, and Syrians. In addition three Catholic missionary orders were located in the city: the Franciscans, the Carmelites, and the Jesuits. Harmony among the Catholics was an elusive goal to obtain, given the great diversity of the communities. Bossu found his task a difficult one, so difficult indeed that after three years he returned to France and no Latin successor replaced him.<sup>8</sup>

The appearance of the Vincentians in force occurred only in the late eighteenth century as the result of the misfortune that befell the Jesuits. In 1773 Pope Clement XIV disbanded the Society under pressure from the European governments then strongly under the influence of anti-clericals in Madrid, Lisbon, and Paris. Rome required the Jesuits to take inventory of their properties and then to hand everything over to secular clergy. In the Eastern Mediterranean, except for the Greek islands and Albania, there were no diocesan priests, a fact that prompted the French Ambassador in Istanbul, the Comte de St. Priest, to encourage the ex-Jesuits to hold on to their missions lest all their properties be lost to Ottoman authorities.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, negotiations were in progress both in Rome and Paris to encourage the Vincentians to replace the Jesuits. The Superior General, Father Antoine Jacquier, asked the Superior of Algiers, Father Pierre Viguier, to tour the Near East and to report on the condition of the

---

<sup>8</sup>G. C. Anawati, "The Roman Catholic Church and Churches in Communion with Rome," in A.J. Arberry, ed., *Religion in the Middle East*, 2 vols. (London, 1969), I, p. 405.

<sup>9</sup>F. Charles-Roux, *France et chrétiens d'Orient* (Paris, 1939), pp. 83-86. In 1779 a proposal to have all French missions in the Near East transferred to the Franciscans in the Holy Land was put forward but rejected as impractical.



missions there. Viguier's report was positive, so a decision was made in Paris to accept the offer. On 22 November 1782, Propaganda approved the transfer and the government of Louis XVI confirmed it the following month. The King required that the Prefect Apostolic, the Superiors, and a majority of the Missionaries be Frenchmen. It was a heavy burden for the Vincentians since their numbers were not sufficient to staff all the Jesuit establishments without drawing people away from other responsibilities. Nevertheless, seventeen priests and brothers were recruited for the Near East and China. The King agreed to subsidize their work. An annual payment of 20,000 *francs* would be sent from the Navy Department and the Royal Treasury for their support. These funds were derived from confiscated Jesuit property.<sup>10</sup>

Their first destination after leaving Marseille in January 1784 was Istanbul where the Missionaries took possession of St. Benedict's church (St. Benôit) in Galata, the former headquarters of the Jesuits in the Ottoman Empire. This church had a long history. It had first been built by Benedictine monks from Monte Cassino in the fourteenth century at a time when a Christian emperor still ruled in the East. After the Ottoman conquest in 1453, the Dominicans settled there, but by the mid-sixteenth century church officials had closed it because of the decline of Catholics who lived in its vicinity. In November 1583 the Jesuits reopened St. Benedict's, making it the residence of their Superior. In 1610 it suffered from fire and again in 1732 but was still adequate for the Vincentians when they arrived. Istanbul, at that time, had approximately 20,000 Catholics served by several other religious communities.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Viguier to Ministère des Colonies, Paris, 15 November 1782, quoted in Antoine Rabbath, ed., *Documents inédits pour servir à l'histoire du christianisme en Orient (XVI-XIX siècle)*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1905-1911), I, p. 625. P. Coste "La Congrégation de la Mission dans les missions étrangères (1625-1925)," *Revue d'histoire des missions*, II (1925): 324.

<sup>11</sup> R. Janin, *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'empire byzan-*

The other Vincentians took up residence in Salonica on the Greek mainland, on the Aegean islands of Thera (Santorini) and Naxos, and on the Asian coast at Izmir (Smyrna). The Catholic populations were approximately 300 at Salonica, 700 on Thera, 1300 on Naxos, and 3,000 at Izmir but this latter city also held a Franciscan church. In Syria the Missionaries assumed the Jesuit church in Aleppo and the Lebanese school at Ayn Toura.

The Missionaries were at their posts barely five years when the French Revolution brought momentous changes to their lives. In early 1789 the Vincentians had seventy-eight houses in France with 824 members belonging to the Congregation. The Community was the object of hatred to those who wanted to destroy the King, the Church, and the nobility. On 13 July 1789, the day before the storming of the Bastille, the Vincentian Motherhouse of St. Lazare was pillaged and the community dispersed. When the Superior General, Father Félix Cayla de la Garde, voted in the National Assembly against the adoption of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, the Vincentians became even more unpopular and Father Cayla was forced into exile in Rome. The final blow fell in February 1792, when the Assembly suppressed all religious orders in France but cautiously excepted the missionaries working abroad. Nevertheless, the government subsidy was halted and the Vincentians were forced to rely on their own resources. Moreover, Citizen Marie Descorches, the ambassador sent from revolutionary Paris, arrived in Istanbul. He required the French clergy stationed there to take the oath to support the Constitution. When the Vincentians refused, the Ottoman government confiscated St. Benedict's and turned it over to local clergy. Descorches spoke of the

---

*tine*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1953), III, p. 594. François Belin, *Histoire de la Latinité de Constantinople*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1894), pp. 249-268. E. Dalleggio d'Alessio, "La monastère de Sainte-Marie de la Miséricorde de la Citerne de Pera ou de Saint Benoît," *Echos d'Orient*, XXXIII (1934): 59-64.

Vincentians as “fanatics” who carried on a “diabolical apostolate.”<sup>12</sup>

Over the next several years the dispersion of the Community’s members, the impotence of the Superior General, Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt, which commenced a state of war between the French and Ottomans, were reflected in the confusion in Istanbul and the rest of the Turkish missions. By October 1802, when France and the Sultan were reconciled, the Vincentians regained St. Benedict’s, although they found that there was very little left of their property which was not damaged or missing, except for the church building itself. Events were soon to better their state for Napoleon, now First Consul, had decided to restore the Daughters of Charity in 1800 because of his need for nurses and was now contemplating a similar move on behalf of the Vincentians. A shrewd diplomat, Napoleon wanted to use the Missionaries as an arm of his diplomacy in the Eastern Mediterranean. He was encouraged to make this move by a letter from Father Vicherat to Cardinal Fesch, then serving as the Consul’s ecclesiastical advisor. After recounting all the problems of the past decade, Vicherat concluded, “From these details, Illustrious Eminence, you will see the great need we have of personnel, money, and protection . . . . We have suffered very much. It is now apparent that it is time for the government to concern itself about the French missionaries who, by their labors in these nations, bear the honor of the French name.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> John W. Carven, *Napoleon and the Lazarists*, vol. 72 of the International Archives of the History of Ideas (The Hague, 1974), pp. 80-81. Le Baron Henrion, *Histoire général des missions catholiques depuis le XVIIIe siècle jusqu’à nos jours*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1946-47), II, p. 637. The Vincentians were always known as Lazarists in France and in the missions.

<sup>13</sup> Vicherat to Cardinal Fesch, Istanbul, 15 November 1803, “Missions Lazaristes en Orient” in Archives Nationales de Paris, F. 19.6239, quoted in Joseph Hajjar, *Le christianisme en Orient — études d’histoire contemporaine (1648-1968)* (Beirut, 1971), p. 295.



Napoleon acted on 5 May 1804, officially restoring the Congregation of the Mission. Tangible proof of Napoleon's concern, now that he was Emperor, was seen when Brune, his ambassador in Istanbul, resumed payment to the Vincentians of their annual subsidy.

At that time the Vincentian Community in the Ottoman world was still intact. Six members were at St. Benedict's where Father Renard acted as Superior. Three Missionaries lived in Izmir, two in Salonica, three were on Naxos and one on Thera. In the Arab world a single priest was found in Aleppo and Ayn Tournai.<sup>14</sup>

The reconstitution of the Vincentians in France was short-lived. Napoleon quarrelled with the Vicar General, Father Dominique Hanon, over the direction of the Daughters of Charity. The Emperor was also peeved at Pope Pius VII's refusal to ban British shipping to the Papal States, so in early February 1809 he suppressed the Congregation a second time, commenting "I want no more missions." Hanon was imprisoned and spent most of the following years under arrest, until Napoleon's fall (1814).

News of the second dispersion of their Community distressed the Vincentians in the Orient, whose future was once more thrown into doubt. Brune immediately wrote Napoleon urging an exemption for the Missionaries in the Near East:

I pray that Your Excellency take these matters under consideration. Although the monastic orders in France have long been abolished, the missions of these orders still flourish and several are endowed by Your Majesty. It seems to me that the missions of the Lazarists should be kept in existence in the Levant after the suppression of the order [*sic*] in France. I trust Your Excellency will let me know your intentions in this regard.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup>Carven, *Napoleon*, p. 116.

<sup>15</sup>Brune to Napoleon, 26 September 1809, quoted in Hajjar, *Le christianisme*, p. 92.



St. Benedict's clergy managed to hold on at their church until 1812, but in that year were again expelled. The same story was repeated in the other Vincentian establishments. By 1816 only seven Missionaries were still at their posts. Then conditions suddenly changed for the better. The French monarchy was restored and on 3 February 1816 Louis XVIII gave permission to Father Hanon to reestablish the Congregation of the Mission. In a short time the Vincentians were strong enough to dispatch a new contingent of Missionaries to the Near East.<sup>16</sup>

During these troubled times the two Vincentians in Syria, Fathers Gandolfi and Deslardes, had a number of problems. Both had been extremely active in interjecting their views into a dispute within the Catholic Melkite church. The Melkite Bishop of Aleppo, Germanos Adam, had published several tracts which were looked upon by the Latin Missionaries as close to heretical and hence they sided with Adam's opposition among the Melkites. In addition, almost all the Melkite hierarchy resented the Missionaries' introduction of Western piety into their church. They especially resisted the formation of confraternities, such as the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, among the Melkites.<sup>17</sup>

After Adam's death in October 1809, his disciple, Maximos Mazloun, was regarded by the Missionaries with the same hesitation. They would have nothing to do with him and barraged Rome, urging that he be kept from the See of Aleppo. The Melkite Patriarch, without waiting to hear from Propaganda, consecrated Mazloun bishop. In

---

<sup>16</sup>Carven, *Napoleon*, pp. 171-72. M. Combaluzier, "Les missions des Balkans et du Proche Orient" in Simon Delacroix, ed., *Histoire universelle des missions catholiques*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1956-59), III, p. 389.

<sup>17</sup>Pope Pius VI had authorized the Vincentians to allow Eastern Catholics to transfer to the Latin rite. Hilaire de Barenton, *La France catholique en Orient* (Paris, 1902), p. 288. Cyril Karalevskij, *Histoire des patriarchats melkites*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1910-11), II, p. 334

1811 Rome's response was to forbid Mazloum to act as bishop and it named Gandolfi Apostolic Delegate to Syria. He was consecrated bishop and was to choose an administrator for Aleppo. He did just that, speaking of Bishop Maximos as a "deadly snake." Mazloum went into Italian exile for the next fifteen years.

In Aleppo Father Nicolas Gaudez, a Vincentian, had been the principal opponent of Maximos. He was heartily disliked by the Melkite Patriarch for his involvement in the confusion surrounding the bishopric. So upon his complaint, Propaganda ordered Gaudez to leave Aleppo. Despite these orders, Gaudez refused to leave and, with the support of his partisans, members of the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament and the Confraternity of the Sacred Heart, stayed put. Gaudez had the backing of his Superior, Father Renard, in Isbantul. The Melkite Patriarch forbade any of his people to join the confraternities but it was too late, for the Vincentian priest had a large following among Eastern Catholics, who saw no harm in assuming Latin devotional practices.<sup>18</sup>

In 1830 a new crisis struck the Oriental missions following upon the Revolution in France during that year. Some Vincentians feared that all the missions would again be closed. That did not occur since Louis Philippe (1830-1848), like his predecessors, regarded them as an arm of French influence in the East. Closer to home, the invasion of Syria by the Egyptian Ibrahim Pasha and its subsequent occupation resulted in an administrative division. Gregory XVI separated Mesopotamia, Kurdistan, and Cilician Armenia from Istanbul. The new Vincentian head in the Syrian world was Father Marc-Antoine Poussou, while Father Louis-Florrent Leleu took charge in Istanbul.

In 1831 Maximos Mazloum returned from Italy and within four years became Patriarch. As soon as he was

---

<sup>18</sup>Joseph Hajjar, "L'activité latinisante du Lazariste Nicolas Gaudez en Syrie," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, LXXV, 1 (1980): 43-46.

elected the conflict over the Confraternity of the Sacred Heart erupted. He ordered it disbanded and asked Rome that the Vincentian house in Aleppo be closed. In 1836 Father Gaudez resigned as head of the confraternity in a move to bring peace but, despite efforts to dislodge him, he stayed on in Aleppo until his death in 1844. His activities show how difficult it was for the Latin missionaries to divest themselves of their own spirituality in the East and how, because of their propagation of Western devotional practice, Eastern Catholic churchmen began having second thoughts on the usefulness of the Latin missionaries in their midst.

In Istanbul the Vincentians enjoyed great success illustrated by the founding of a *collège* at Bebek, a small town just outside Istanbul on the Bosphorus. The *collège* opened in July 1831 with three Vincentians assigned to it: Father Moitrelle, Superior; Father Brunet, spiritual director; and Father Lainé, director of studies. The priests served as the entire faculty of the *collège*, the only institution of its kind in the area of Istanbul. No sooner had the school opened than a great fire swept through Galata, forcing many of the students to leave since their families had been ruined. Life was hard for the Fathers. Bills mounted and revenues dropped. In a move meant to reduce expenses, they “went without wine for six months,” an experience which was still so painful for Lainé when he wrote about it forty years later that he underlined the words.<sup>19</sup> Later the number of students increased and Bebek College prospered so greatly that it was possible to purchase a second property in San Stefano for the *Collège* to run a summer session.

On 8 December 1839 the first two Daughters of Charity arrived in Istanbul to open a school for girls. At their head was Sister Siviragol, who had formerly been Sister Servant (i.e., Superior) at a house in Brittany. Two

---

<sup>19</sup> Report of Lainé, Constantinople, 1872, in *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission*, XXXVII, 611-14. Hereafter *Annales*..



local women, named Tournier and Opperman, converts to Catholicism, soon joined the Sisters. In addition to the school, they accepted orphans who lived in a house directed by the Sisters.<sup>20</sup> The Daughters went to Izmir in the following year to begin a school there. By 1842 the number of Daughters increased to thirteen in Istanbul and eleven in Izmir.<sup>21</sup>

The Vincentians were happy to welcome the advent of the Christian Brothers to Istanbul, for when they arrived in 1840 they assumed the task of staffing the Catholic elementary school for boys which heretofore had been done by the Vincentian priests. This allowed the Vincentians to concentrate on secondary education in their *collège*.<sup>22</sup>

A report of Father Leleu written from Istanbul in 1848 provides an insight into the philosophy behind the work of the Vincentians at that time. Leleu saw the importance of the mission in Istanbul emanating from the importance of that city as the pivot between East and West, where Europe met Asia and Catholicism confronted Orthodoxy. The great challenge to the Missionaries was to win the souls of the Eastern Christians. Their two great opponents were American Protestant missionaries and agents of the Russian government who thought of themselves as defenders of Orthodoxy.

The Catholics had the upper hand for a number of reasons but principally because they offered superior educational opportunities. While the Americans distributed their Bibles and the Russians pressured the Ottoman authorities to limit missionary work, Vincentian schools, orphanages, and medical facilities were more than a match for both Protestants and Orthodox.

---

<sup>20</sup> Report in *Annales*, XLII (1877): 26-28.

<sup>21</sup> Henrion, *Histoire générale*, II, p. 638.

<sup>22</sup> J. B. Piolet, *France au dehors: les mission catholiques françaises au XIXe siècle*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1901-1903), I, p. 75.



Father Leleu explained the strategic position of Istanbul for Christians:

Last summer at a given moment there were eight or nine patriarchs in Constantinople, both Catholics and heretics, which is to say all were here except for Mt. Lebanon and Cilicia. At Epiphany of this year at an ecclesiastical assembly there were seven bishops or archbishops, three prefects apostolic, one provincial, six superiors of religious communities; there were four bishops of different [Eastern] rites and religious of four different orders with people speaking five or six different languages all at the same time.

Where, Leleu asked, could such a scene be duplicated anywhere else in the world except in Rome?

The Vincentian Superior saw the Russian hand extending everywhere seeking to stir up trouble for the Latins. The Russian goal was simple: "From the Adriatic to the Caspian, from the Arctic to the Persian Gulf there will be one and the same faith, Orthodoxy, and a single flock, the church of the East, and one and only head, the Russian emperor." The Latin missionaries, alert to the danger, were essential to forestall this event. They were acting to shore up the strength of the Eastern churches joined to Rome lest they lapse into schism or heresy.

Leleu listed Vincentian accomplishments. In the previous ten years they had built or reconstructed eight churches or chapels, opened nine new missions, established a printing press with Latin, Greek, and Armenian type, built a pharmacy and completely refurbished the Salonica mission which had burned down in 1839.

The press was in constant use printing catechisms in Greek and Armenian adapted to the needs of the people "with refutations of the Eastern church's errors." The press was a thorn in the Greek Patriarch's side and the Russian Ambassador never stopped complaining to Ottoman authorities to have it closed. Since the French Ambassador countered the Russian arguments, the Turks

took no action.

The Daughters of Charity were now at work in five schools in the Orient. Both resident and day students attended. The *collège* at Bebek was recognized as the best in all Istanbul. The Vincentians also had *collèges* on Naxos and at Ayn Toura.

Leleu noted that the two Communities of St. Vincent had in the space of one year cared for 20,000 poor in Istanbul, clothing and feeding them. The Daughters' hospital had three doctors while the Sisters themselves acted as nurses and one served as the pharmacist. On certain days five hundred patients were cared for. Turkish and Jewish women felt comfortable at the hospital for the Sisters had learned Turkish. The orphanage continued to care for homeless children.

The statistics of the Vincentians in Istanbul were listed by Leleu as follows: Five priests and two brothers at Bebek, five priests and three brothers at St. Benedict's. Two brothers lived at the Church of St. Vincent of Asia which served as a parish for the Polish colony in exile. Two more brothers worked at a pharmacy making the medicines needed for all the mission dispensaries scattered about the Near East.<sup>23</sup>

By 1848 a new Superior, Father Doumerq, was at the head of the Istanbul missions. He reported to the Superior General, Father Etienne, on the activities of the clerics at St. Benedict's. They spent their time in offering Mass and providing the sacraments and preaching on Sundays in French, Italian, and Greek. On Pentecost two hundred children made their First Communion and were Confirmed the following day. The church offices attracted a large number of sailors who made their confession. The Fathers spent a part of each day instructing converts. While Armenians were many, Greeks were few, since they "have

---

<sup>23</sup>Leleu to Propaganda, Constantinople, 27 January 1845, in *Annales*, X (1845), pp. 194-225.

a very great prejudice against Franks and especially against the authority of the Sovereign Pontiff.” The number of converts was not impressive: forty-six Armenians, nineteen Greeks, and twenty Protestants of different nations. In addition, sixteen apostates to Islam had been reconciled to the church.<sup>24</sup> In a letter of 1850 Sister Lesueur reported on the work of the Daughters who had treated 58,000 sick and 47,000 poor during the previous year. They had helped to convert five Muslims and seven Jews.<sup>25</sup>

In May 1851 the Vincentians in Istanbul received a new Superior, Father Eugène Boré, whose past twenty years had been spent between the Orient and Europe as traveler, educator, and lay missionary. When in Istanbul, he had always stayed with the Vincentians and it had been at his suggestion that the Congregation had begun its work in Persia. He studied theology with a priest of St. Benedict’s throughout 1850 and progressed so quickly that he was ordained a priest and took vows in the Vincentian Community in January 1851. In May of that same year he returned to Istanbul as Superior of all of the Congregation’s missions and activities in the Near East. His rapid promotion was due to the strong friendship and high esteem in which the Vincentian Superior General, Father Jean Baptiste Etienne, held him.

Boré’s universal interests in the Orient occupied the next fifteen years of his life. He personally directed the life of the Bebek students, regularly visited the other Vincentian houses of the Near East, and supervised the Daughters of Charity. When the Crimean War commenced in 1854, he served as chaplain to the French army in the Crimea and directed the Daughters’ hospitals to open their doors to the sick and wounded. After the conclusion of the war, he plunged into activities which he hoped would

---

<sup>24</sup> Doumerq to Propaganda, Constantinople, 1 February 1848, in *Annales*, XIII (1848): 5-17.

<sup>25</sup> Sister Lesueur to M. Etienne, Galata, 1850, in *Annales*, XV (1850): 333-38.



unite the Bulgarian church with Rome.<sup>26</sup>

The rise of Bulgarian nationalism in opposition to both the Ottoman government and the Greek Patriarch of Constantinople resulted in a movement toward the Catholic Church. Boré encouraged this in every way possible and when, in 1861, a Bulgarian convert cleric was consecrated bishop in Rome by Pope Pius IX, Boré was at his side as translator. Later the bishop, Josif Sokolski, was kidnapped on orders of the Russians and the Istanbul Bulgarian community was thrown into disarray. Nevertheless, the Vincentians did not despair, for in Macedonia and the Bulgarian homeland converts could still be made.

During the last five years of his residence in Istanbul, Boré came under fire from a number of sources who felt that his frequent absences were hurting the Vincentian mission in the Orient. Bebek's enrollment declined, the Jesuits and the French government opened rival institutions, and the morale of the Missionaries was very low. Despite Father Etienne's efforts to keep him in office, he had to recall him to Paris in 1866 and name a new Superior in Istanbul.<sup>27</sup>

The Vincentian mission in Izmir, dedicated to the Sacred Heart, flourished throughout the nineteenth century. In 1850 the house held five priests and two brothers and served as a residence for two native priests. Their principal work was teaching at the *collège* which was given to the Vincentians in 1845. This institution had originally

---

<sup>26</sup>Stafford Poole, "Eugène Boré and the Vincentian Missions in the Near East," *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*, XXXVIII, 3 (1982): 167-76. Gerard van Winsen, "La vie et les travaux d'Eugène Boré," *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*, XXXIV, 2 (1978): 83-85. Boré actively sponsored the St. Vincent de Paul society to aid the poor in Istanbul. See Jacques Zeiller, "La Société de St. Vincent de Paul dans le Levant et le Sud-est européen," *Revue d'histoire des missions*, X (1933): 2-6.

<sup>27</sup>Poole, "Boré," pp. 179-81. In 1874 Boré succeeded Etienne as Superior General of the Vincentians. The present St. Benedict's church in Istanbul dates from 1871 after a fire destroyed the former structure.



been built in 1837 and staffed by the Archbishop, Bonamie, with Picpus [Sacred Heart] missionaries. Later it was handed over to the Vincentians by Archbishop Mussabini. The *collège* in 1853 had fifteen professors and 179 students. Of the student body, 143 were Latins, sixteen Armenian Catholics, fourteen Orthodox, three Armenians, and three Protestants. No Jews or Muslims attended. At Izmir, as at Bebek, the Vincentians served primarily the foreign merchant community. The classes, all taught in French, concentrated on language instruction, which included English, and on a curriculum that mixed the liberal arts with the natural sciences.<sup>28</sup>

At mid-century, in the Arab-speaking parts of the Empire, the Vincentians were stationed in their old missions of Aleppo and Ayn Toura, while new stations had been opened in Damascus, Beirut, and Alexandria in Egypt. The latter two foundations were both opened in 1844 to serve the ever growing number of Catholics in the Near East.

Ayn Toura held the Vincentian *collège* meant to educate the Arab youth of Syria. It was located in the heart of the Maronite country, about twenty-five miles north of Beirut. It was only in 1834 that the Missionaries were sufficiently numerous to reopen the former Jesuit school. The opening class held but six students, but by 1857, 104 were in attendance. Father Marc-Antoine Poussou translated a *Christian Catechism* into Arabic as well as Alphonsus Ligouri's *Visits to the Blessed Sacrament* for the students.<sup>29</sup>

In 1844 the Vincentians first came to Egypt along with a group of Daughters of Charity. The Egyptian ruler,

---

<sup>28</sup>M. Fougeray to M. Salvayre, Smyrna, 25 March 1853, in *Annales*, XVIII (1853): 362-84.

<sup>29</sup>Georges Goyau, *La Congrégation de la Mission des Lazaristes* (Paris, 1938), pp. 163-70. Emile Joppin, "Le collège d'Antoura, doyen des collèges de Syrie," *Revue d'histoire des missions*, VIII (1931): 493-501. "Poussou" in *Notices bibliographiques sur les écrivains de la Congrégation de la Mission* (Angoulême, 1878).

Muhammed Ali, donated a large piece of land in Alexandria for their use. A *collège* was opened first in 1852 but never held the same reputation that Bebek enjoyed. It closed in 1860 for a seven year period.<sup>30</sup>

Because of increased Western European pressure on the Turkish government, the Sultan issued a number of decrees in the nineteenth century to better the condition of Ottoman Christians. While the officials might believe it important to raise the status of their non-Muslim subjects, this was vigorously resisted by the ordinary Muslims as an affront to their superior status guaranteed by the Koran.

In 1850 anti-Christian rioting broke out in Aleppo, placing the community on notice that it must be concerned for its security. The worst was yet to come. A decade later rioting broke out in Damascus. Thousands of fanatical Muslims stormed into the Christian quarter, murdering and pillaging. The Vincentian priests and Daughters of Charity, who kept an orphanage, appeared to be doomed. In the moment of greatest peril an Algerian exile, Abd el-Kadar, rescued them, leading them across the mountains with an armed guard to the security of Christian Beirut.<sup>31</sup>

In the Greek Islands the mission on Naxos remained small with but a single priest and brother who held school for twenty-five boys. On Thera the priests were two, accompanied by a brother, and the school held sixty boys. The Daughters of Charity were on both islands after 1856 with girls' schools.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup>J. Faivre, "Alexandrie" in A. Baudrillart, ed., *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastique*, 15 vols. (Paris, 1912—), II, p. 364. M. Pémartin to M. Fiat, Loretto, 29 December 1879, in *Annales*, XLV (1880): 41-42.

<sup>31</sup>Charles-Roux, *France*, pp. 185-192. Twenty thousand Christians were killed and eleven churches destroyed. For Muslim attitudes toward Christians, see Robert M. Haddad, *Syrian Christians in a Muslim Society* (Princeton, 1970), pp. 32-67.

<sup>32</sup>Doumerq to Propaganda, *Annales*, XV (1850): 20-21.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Vincentian missions increased their personnel in some cities but abandoned others. Aleppo was given up in 1870, Naxos in 1876, and, after the bombardment of Alexandria by the British in 1882, the *collège* was severely damaged and never reopened. The Missionaries turned to parish activities, operating from the church of the Immaculate Conception. On the other hand, Ayn Toura's enrollment turned it into a large institution. By 1914 the students numbered 353. New houses were located in Palestine: in Jerusalem and Tabgha where schools were staffed by members of the Congregation.<sup>33</sup>

The main thrust of the Vincentians was, however, in European Turkey, especially in Macedonia. In 1867 the Bulgarian Orthodox Bishop of Monastir (Bitola) converted to Catholicism, opening up a whole new area of missionary activity. Schools were begun in Monastir and Kukus (Kilkis) for the large influx of Orthodox seeking union with the Catholic Church. The new converts were frequently harassed by the Orthodox. Father Bonetti tells of a conflict between Orthodox and Catholics that occurred in the village of Bogdanzi. There 280 families, a majority of the inhabitants, had become Catholic but Ottoman authorities insisted on the right of the Orthodox to retain the church. The Catholics then proceeded to construct a wooden building to serve them. Several months later someone set fire to it and it burned to the ground. The Catholics continued to visit the site summer and winter to pray there and eventually raised enough funds to rebuild. When the new church was dedicated, over 6,000 people attended. Other Catholic villages were at Stogarovo, Diavoto, and Jehovo, totaling 1,000 people. In all Macedonia, the Vincentians were caring for 65,000 Catholics. In order to provide priests for the Bulgarian Catholics, the

---

<sup>33</sup>Joppin, "Le college d'Antoura," 517. Coste, *La Congrégation de la Mission*, p. 325.



Congregation began a seminary in Salonica (Zeitenlik).<sup>34</sup>

By the last decade of the nineteenth century the Near East missions were in a flourishing condition through the whole of the Near East. The Congregation held seven institutions in Istanbul, five in Syria, four in Egypt. There were 135 Daughters of Charity serving in ten locales in Istanbul, sixty-seven were in Izmir, 120 in Beirut, serving as nurses, teachers, and social workers.<sup>35</sup> The secondary school population in all the Ottoman Empire in 1896 counted 31,000 Muslims in Muslim schools, 76,000 in Christian and Jewish schools, and 7,000 in foreign government-sponsored schools. This demonstrates what a great impact the presence of the missionary men and women were having on Near Eastern education.<sup>36</sup>

In the twentieth century, especially during World War I, when France was on the side of the Allies and the Turks among the Central Powers, the French presence became limited, but Austrian Vincentians and Daughters of Charity, who had come to Istanbul in 1882, were able to continue to provide services. After the war both French priests and Sisters participated in a massive effort to care for refugees.<sup>37</sup>

In 1923 a new Turkish national state was born under the aegis of Mustafa Kemal, Atatürk, based upon a secular model. Christian communities, who had lost millions of

---

<sup>34</sup> Bonetti to Fiat, Salonica, 30 August 1882, in *Annales*, XLVIII (1883): 61-62. R. Grulich, *Die unierte Kirche in Mazedonien (1856-1919)* (Wurzburg, 1977). R. Janin, "L'Eglise catholique en Turquie d'Europe," *Echos d'Orient*, XVI, 3 (1913): 107-115.

<sup>35</sup> P. Michel, "Les missions latines en Orient," *Revue de l'Orient chrétien*, I (1896): 107-155.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Issawi, "The Transformation of the Economic Position of the Millets in the Nineteenth century," in Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, 2 vols., (New York, 1982), I, p. 277.

<sup>37</sup> Report of P. Lobry, Istanbul, in *Revue d'histoire des missions*, I (1924): 134. Postwar events can be traced in Hg. Göckenjan, "Die Türkei and ihre christlichen Minderheiten," *Öst-kirchliche Studien*, XXX (1981): 97-127.



people during the war, found their numbers further depleted as their congregants believed they would never be welcome in Turkey. The Vincentians, however, continued to work in Turkey: in 1927, twenty-six priests and nine brothers served at St. Benedict's and at Bebek, while four priests were stationed at Izmir. In the Arab world, thirty priests and ten brothers lived in Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt.<sup>38</sup>

After World War II the number of Christians in Turkey declined even further. The Greek Orthodox, who had once been the most numerous, were about 160,000 in 1945, 56,000 in 1960. Today they number about 4,000. Catholic losses have also been great as the foreign population of Istanbul and Izmir has declined. Since 1965, when 10,000 Catholics still called Istanbul their home, the number has been halved to 5,000 people. Bishop Gauthier Pierre Dubois (a French Capuchin) shepherds his flock in twenty-two parishes and schools. Eight secular priests, forty-three religious, and 123 Sisters still serve in his diocese, which in 1980 had but eighteen baptisms. In Turkey, as in North Africa, the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity are called upon to be missionaries entirely through their social and educational services.<sup>39</sup> Church leaders remain optimistic that a revival of the church may appear in the future. The Turkish constitution of 1971 permits conversion and the Capuchin priest in Izmir, Vincenzo Succi, believes that Turks themselves will make up the new Christian community. He argues that Catholicism in the old Turkey was superficial, the religion of foreigners. "I sought the reason for this and found that the

---

<sup>38</sup> "Chronique," *Revue d'histoire des missions*, V (1927): 106-111.

<sup>39</sup> Figures are for 1980 given in the *Annuario pontificio per l'anno 1980* (Vatican City, 1981), p. 905. See also "The Church in Turkey," *Pro Mundi Vita Dossiers* (Brussels, 1981), pp. 1-19. In addition to the Latins an Armenian Catholic bishop cares for 4,000 people. Izmir has 1900 Latins left. In 1981 there were ten baptism.

priests here were more concerned with preserving the Christianity of the past than in carrying on direct activity with Moslems." Bishop Dubois is encouraged that an ecumenical spirit is now found among all the Christian communities and their leaders, including the Greek Patriarch and his staff. "When I arrived in Turkey, many years ago, we had no contact at all with them. We did not even greet them." Happily this has changed altogether as two Popes have made their way to Istanbul to greet the Patriarchs in a spirit of love.<sup>40</sup>

### Persia

The first Vincentians to come to Persia arrived while Napoleon was at the height of his power and anxious to secure the Persians against the British and Russians. The Emperor concluded an alliance with the Persian Shah, Fath Ali, as part of his Near Eastern policy. Accordingly, in 1807 he sent an officer, General Claude Gardannes, to meet with Fath Ali and accompanying Gardannes were two Vincentians, Fathers Damande and Marcopoli, from St. Benedict's church in Istanbul.

Their instructions were to survey the situation and to report on the feasibility of a permanent French Catholic establishment in Persia. The Vincentians reached the conclusion that the prospects were not favorable for such a venture. Latin Catholics were very few: three in Teheran, seven in Isfahan, and a handful in other cities. The only bright spot Father Damande encountered was at Kosrova

---

<sup>40</sup>Cirillos Tescaroli, "Turkey: Shepherding a small flock. Interview with Bishop Pierre Dubois, O.F.M.Cap., Vicar Apostolic of the Latin-rite Catholics at Istanbul and with Fr. Vincenzo Succi, O.F.M. Cap." *World Mission*, XXXII, 3 (1981): 14-18. Criticism of the foreign missionary's inability to adapt to the Near Eastern environment is found in Harry Haas, *Christianity in the Asian Revolution* (London, 1966), pp. 43-53, and Joseph Hajjar, *L'Apostolat des missionnaires latins selon les directives romaines* (Jersusalem, 1946), pp. 8-29.

(Salmas), where a Chaldean Catholic bishop was located among a sizable congregation. The Vincentians agreed that God alone would determine the time for the conversion of Persia.

The Frenchmen succeeded in preparing the way for that moment by persuading the Shah to issue a *firman*, a grant of privileges, for Christians. "Priests, monks, and religious who follow the law of Jesus who live in Persia to provide services shall enjoy imperial protection and no one may molest them."<sup>41</sup>

No European Catholic took advantage of that protection for the next thirty years. Then into the self-contained world of northwestern Persia, the province of Azerbaijan, came a fervent Catholic missionary, Eugène Boré. Boré was no ordinary missionary. Indeed, his journey to the Orient was as a scholar, for he had been awarded a grant from the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres and the Minister of Public Instruction to proceed to the Near East to study Armenian. His linguistic ability was phenomenal and had earned him, while still a young man, a series of fellowships. For a time Boré joined the inner circle of Catholic romantics who gathered about the Abbé Felicité de Lammenais. There he learned how the world might be regenerated through a rebirth of devotion to the Catholic faith.<sup>42</sup>

By the time he came to Persia, Boré had decided that Eastern Christians must be assisted by Catholics from Europe if they were to survive. He regarded himself as the precursor of a missionary movement which, by establishing schools for Near Eastern youths, would restore their ancient position. At the same time, he was an avid French

---

<sup>41</sup>Quoted in Annibale Bugnini, *La Chiesa in Iran* (Rome, 1981), p. 187. Bugnini's book provides a very extensive account of the Vincentian mission in Iran. For the earlier Catholic missions there, see Robin E. Waterfield, *Christians in Persia* (New York, 1973), pp. 59-70.

<sup>42</sup>Poole, "Boré," pp. 161-63. Van Winsen, "La vie," pp. 82-83.



nationalist and saw his country providing the funds and personnel for the Near Eastern venture.

While in Istanbul he stayed with the Vincentians who lived at St. Benedict's, their headquarters in the Ottoman Empire. His enthusiasm inspired them to agree that a *collège* should be opened at Tabriz as soon as possible. He and Father Felix Scafi departed Istanbul in May 1838 and spent the next several months in Armenia which gave them an opportunity to assess the state of that nation and its religion. After they reached Persia, Scafi returned to France to solicit funds while, singlehandedly, Boré opened his Tabriz school late in 1839.

A large and prosperous Armenian community existed there, as well as Christians who belonged to the Church of the East, popularly known as Assyrians, and Chaldeans, who were converts to Catholicism from the Church of the East. Boré was also interested in having Muslim scholars who, in fact, were a majority in the first class that entered. He was fortunate that Quahrman-Mirza, the Shah's brother, became his patron.<sup>43</sup>

Father Scafi's trip to France was eminently successful. He obtained the support of the Secretary-General of the Vincentians, Father Etienne, who promised that he would dispatch three Vincentians to aid Boré. The Society for the Propagation of the Faith would underwrite their expenses.<sup>44</sup>

Meanwhile the restless Boré had spread his interests into other parts of Persia, beginning new schools as soon as he could find someone to staff them. Kosrova, a town which was almost entirely Christian, received his special attention. He had also been busy on the diplomatic front,

---

<sup>43</sup>Eugène Boré, *Correspondance et mémoires d'un voyageur en Orient*, 2 vols., (Paris, 1840), II, p. 63. Poole, "Boré," pp. 172-73. Aristide Chatelet, "La Mission lazarisite en Perse," *Revue d'histoire des missions*, X (1933): 504-04.

<sup>44</sup>Etienne to Boré, Paris, 14 April 1841, in *Annales*. XLIII (1878): 431-33.

preparing for the arrival of a French ambassador to Persia. This was Count de Sercey who arrived as Louis Philippe's envoy to the court of Mohammed Shah. Father Scafi was appointed to be his chaplain. Boré joined him on his journey to Isfahan and assisted him in conducting negotiations which led to the issuing of a *firman* reaffirming the right of Christians to worship freely in Persia. This *firman* of 1840, contrary to Islamic law, even permitted the building of new churches. Boré and Sercey participated in a celebration promulgating the *firman* at Dhul'fa. When the ambassador left for Isfahan, Boré, before his own departure, established one more school in that city.<sup>45</sup>

Towards the end of 1840 Father Ambrose Fornier, the first of the three promised Vincentian priests, finally arrived in Tabriz. Father Fornier held the title of Prefect Apostolic of Persia. A year later Joseph Darnis and Augustin Cluzel, along with two lay brothers, David Cluzel and Théophane Dequavauvilliers, joined Fornier in Tabriz. By this time Boré had left Persia for Istanbul, leaving Fornier in charge of the Tabriz school.

The Vincentians were not the first western missionaries in Azerbaijan. An American Presbyterian mission had settled at Urmia as early as 1830, served by Eli Smith and H.G.O. Dwight. They had later been joined by Justin Perkins and Asahel Grant. The Americans immediately took action to limit the French Catholic threat. They worked in league with an Armenian bishop, disgruntled at the number of Catholic converts among his people, bringing charge to the Persian court that the French were stirring up sedition among the monarch's subjects. They were ably assisted by the Count de Medem, the Russian Minister at Teheran, who feared the French presence in Persia. The attack upon the Vincentians proved successful. In November 1841 Mohammed Shah issued a new *firman*

---

<sup>45</sup> Comte de Sercey, *La Perse en 1839-1840: une ambassade extraordinaire* (Paris, 1928), pp. 262-63.

which forbade anyone to pass from one religion to another. Moreover, the document ordered Boré and Fornier to be expelled from the country. Since Boré had already left, the ban fell only upon Fornier who, under armed guard, was escorted across the Ottoman border and returned to France.<sup>46</sup>

Meanwhile Cluzel was on his way to Isfahan to assume the direction of Boré's school there. It was a difficult journey in the midst of a severe winter. He found the school filled with a full roster of students, but within a few weeks an order from the Shah's government forced its closure and Cluzel received orders to go to Urmia. Darnis, who had taken charge of the Tabriz school after Fornier's departure and now became the Vincentian Superior, was told to join Cluzel in Urmia, which became the Vincentian headquarters. In 1843 a small church was built, dedicated to Mary, which became a place of worship for the Christians who came to worship with the Latin missionaries and receive catechetical instruction.

Following upon Boré's original plan, the Missionaries concentrated their attention on the Armenians who lived in Persia. They were numerous and many were successful merchants and tradesmen. Many of them knew of Catholicism since as early as the thirteenth century Dominican friars had evangelized their ancestors in Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan, and for centuries a Latin archbishop had lived in this remote corner of the Christian world. Little by little this mission had been worn away because of the incessant warfare between the Ottomans and Persians which commenced in the sixteenth century. The last handful of Armenian Catholics from Nakhichevan had migrated to Izmir in the eighteenth century.

This had not meant the end of Armenian Catholicism. French and Italian missionaries in Istanbul, Anatolia, and

---

<sup>46</sup>Report of Cluzel, *Annales*, XLV (1880): 72-74. The Protestant missionary activity is summarized in Aziz S. Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity* (Notre Dame, 1968), pp. 279-81.



Syria had resurrected the Armenian Catholic church in the seventeenth century and thousands of converts now belonged to the Catholic rather than the national church. Important monasteries of Armenian Catholic monks, known as Mekhitarists, taken from the name of their founder Mekhitar, existed in Venice and Vienna. In addition, a Catholic Armenian patriarchate was now firmly established in Lebanon.

Despite the success of the Catholics in the Ottoman world, Persian Armenian Catholics were very few. Only the passage of a visiting Catholic priest from Istanbul or Lebanon reminded them of their allegiance, until Boré appeared on the scene. While Boré, who knew Armenian well, could stir up their consciousness and interest, the Vincentians who followed Boré met with little success. They found the language difficult, if not impossible, to learn and the opposition of the non-Catholic Armenian clergy who threatened excommunication for anyone consorting with them a formidable obstacle. This turned the Vincentians towards the other Christian community of Persia, the Church of the East.<sup>47</sup>

This church in the nineteenth century was divided into the Chaldean, the Catholic branch, and the Assyrian, non-Catholic national church. Both were the remnants of what had once been the Syrian church based in Edessa and which, in the fifth century, had been incorporated into the Sassanid Persian Empire. During the Christological controversies of the fifth century, these Syrians had adopted the theology of Nestorius and looked upon him as one of their saints. Once they had been a strong church, with members from Mesopotamia all the way to China, with outposts in southern India and the islands of the Indian Ocean. The days of magnificence had come crashing down as a result of the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth

---

<sup>47</sup>The early mission to the Armenians is discussed in a letter of Chasseing to Bourdarie, Isfahan, 14 May 1880, in *Annales*, XLV (1880): 63-71.

century. Since that time the survivors, under a Catholicos, lived in a triangle whose borders fell within what is today northern Iraq, southeastern Turkey, and the province of Azerbaijan in Iran. In the sixteenth century Catholic missionaries took advantage of a division within the church to win over a part that allied itself to Rome.

The Pope himself consecrated the Catholicos of those who had renounced Nestorianism, founding the Chaldean church. Yuhanna Sulaqa, its first head, was martyred for his Catholic faith, but just before his death created a hierarchy for the church. In the late eighteenth century conversions to Catholicism became more common. Latin missionaries had also won over the head of the Church of the East living in the monastery of Rabban Hormizd, located at Al-Qosh, a town outside Mosul. Ironically, the line of Patriarchs descending from Sulaqa had lapsed back into Nestorianism by the time the Vincentians came to Persia. It was these Christians, popularly known as Assyrians since the early nineteenth century, whom the French religious sought to win over to the Chaldean branch of their church.

The French missionaries offered certain rewards for conversion. As soon as they could, they opened schools for the Chaldeans, teaching them in their own language but also in French so as to acquaint them with the European world. The missionaries also provided rudimentary medical care and a refuge in times of emergency, since they enjoyed the protection of the French government. The presence of the missionaries was a bulwark for the Chaldeans and Catholic Armenians, bringing them out of the sterile isolation of centuries.

The small band of Missionaries located at Urmia sought to expand their labors into an adjacent village known as Ardishai. A Chaldean church had once existed there but had fallen into ruins. Under the direction of Brother David Cluzel, the church was rebuilt. Father Augustin Cluzel noted its small size and bare mud brick walls but

commented, "It passes for a marvel in this country, as poor as it is."<sup>48</sup>

No sooner was the church completed than the Assyrian bishop of the town claimed that the property was his. His claim was confirmed by the American protestant missionaries who urged him to take his case before the local *kadi*, the Muslim judge. The Vincentians defended their cause successfully before the judge, so a delegation of three Assyrian bishops and a Protestant minister went off to plead before the Shah. In Teheran the Russian Count de Medem joined the group and together they prevailed. The decision of the Teheran court was to hand over the Ardishai church to the Assyrians and, moreover, to expel Fathers Cluzel and Darnis from the country. Soldiers arrested Darnis in Urmia and a newly arrived Vincentian, Father Rouge, and they were temporarily imprisoned and then expelled. Cluzel, who was out of town, hid out in a friendly Christian village near Teheran until the French ambassador, Sartiges, should arrive and work to overthrow the previous verdict.<sup>49</sup>

His plan was a wise one since Sartiges proved a powerful advocate before the Shah's court and the expulsion order was reversed on condition that the Vincentians not return to Urmia. Father Cluzel's fear, "If France abandons us, our influence in Urmia is over," was only partially correct.<sup>50</sup>

With Urmia closed to them the Vincentians settled in Kosrova. There they purchased a house, built a church dedicated to St. George, and decided upon beginning a seminary for the Chaldeans. It opened in November 1846

---

<sup>48</sup> Cluzel to Etienne, Urmia, 30 October 1843, in *Annales*, IX (1843-1844): 242.

<sup>49</sup> Cluzel to Darnis, Teheran, 6 October 1844, in *Annales*, X (1844): 104-106.

<sup>50</sup> Cluzel to Martin, Souk-Boulak, 30 March 1844, in *Annales*, IX (1843-44): 458. Cluze to Martin, Teheran, 9 June 1844, IX, 477-82, and Rougé to Martin, Urmia, 7 August 1844, X, 83-88.



with Fathers Darnis and Cluzel serving as faculty and administrators. Eight Chaldean young men enrolled in the first class. Cluzel began the arduous work of translating Latin theological works into Syriac, a task complicated by the fact that there were two dialects: one spoken in the mountains, the other on the plain. News of the seminary and the Vincentian house earned Kosrova high repute among the Chaldeans. They called the town "the little Rome of Persia."

The Missionaries used their Kosrova base to go to the villages where they sought to visit the Chaldean churches and instruct the people. The Chaldeans were organized in bands with a headman as their leader. Most were poor peasants and knew little of their faith. They attended the liturgy only two or three times a year, there were few who confessed, and the Chaldean priests practically never preached. Secret marriages were common. The Vincentians sought to bring the Chaldeans into line, a difficult task since so many Oriental traditions differed from those of Europe. In addition, the Chaldean Bishop of Mosul moved from there to Kosrova and announced his return to Nestorianism.

Despite all their difficulties, the Chaldeans were usually delighted when the Missionaries visited their villages. When it was suggested that they should build a church, they eagerly agreed and Brother David provided the supervision. In this way five new churches appeared in the countryside. Moreover, in 1852 the Vizier of Shah Nasir ud-Din, who had recently come to power, allowed the Vincentians to regain their church and property in Urmia.

In 1856 a welcome addition to the Missionaries appeared. Five Daughters of Charity from France came to Kosrova, opening a school for girls. A year later they opened a school in Urmia, followed later by an orphanage and a small medical center. By 1858 the Vincentians numbered three in Kosrova and the Daughters of Charity

nine. At Urmia there were three priests and a brother and five Daughters. The Vincentians now ministered in nine churches that had a population of six thousand Catholics. In that year, after seventeen years in Persia, Darnis died. On his tomb were written the simple words, "He will be remembered for his great love of the Chaldean people."<sup>51</sup>

Upon Darnis' death, Augustin Cluzel, his companion since the beginning of the Persian mission, became the Vincentian Superior. Under his direction the seminary at Kosrova was expanded so as to hold more students. Seminary life was not easy for the Chaldeans, especially those who came from mountain tribes. They had little comprehension of the need for rules.

In 1861 the missions welcomed back from Paris Paul Bedjan, a Chaldean priest who was an alumnus of the Kosrova seminary. Bedjan had finished his studies in France and joined the Vincentians. In his baggage he brought a printing press and a harmonium, a small reed organ. He accompanied Mass with this instrument to the astonishment of the natives, who exclaimed, "He sings with his mouth, hands, and feet!"<sup>52</sup> Bedjan joined the seminary faculty, preached in the neighboring villages, and became a hero to many of his compatriots. Later he returned to Europe to edit the Chaldean liturgical books so as to have better copies for his church. In addition, he composed devotional literature for the Chaldeans. Over his lifetime he authored some thirty-six works. Often nominated for a bishopric, Bedjan refused, asserting that he could best serve the church as an educator and author.

In 1862 the Persian mission was separated from Constantinople, becoming an autonomous province. Augustin Cluzel was named Provincial. A year earlier a new Vincentian house had opened in Teheran, served by two priests, Louis Plagnard and Jean-Baptiste Varese. The small

---

<sup>51</sup> Chatelet, "La mission," XI (1934): 403-405.

<sup>52</sup> Bugnini, *La Chiesa*, p. 196.

chapel that they constructed in their house was dedicated to the Immaculate Conception and served the Latin Catholic merchants of the city who numbered eighty-seven at the time of the foundation.

Encouraged by the French ambassador, Father Plagnard opened a school for children dedicated to St. Louis. At Christmas, in 1867, thanks to the generosity of European patrons, a new church was dedicated. Emperor Louis Napoleon sent a cross as his personal gift at the time of the dedication.

After 1870 and the overthrow of the Empire, the Missionaries fell upon hard times. The Third Republic abolished their subsidies and the Vincentians were thrown back on their own resources. In March 1874 Cluzel was named titular bishop and received the title of Apostolic Delegate. He returned to Paris to be consecrated the first Vincentian bishop in Persia. It was a happy coincidence that he was in Paris so as to be present at the election of Eugène Boré as Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, since Boré had begun the mission in Persia thirty-four years before. When Cluzel returned to Persia, he was welcomed by all with great enthusiasm. Presenting his credentials to Shah Nasir ud-Din, he was honored with a decoration from the Persian government.<sup>53</sup>

The next few years were productive ones for the Vincentians. They installed a new Chaldean printing press which published devotional works for both clergy and laity. In 1878 the New Testament appeared in a popular edition. Eight more churches were built and whole communities of Assyrians sought to become members of the Chaldean church. In Urmia Cluzel commissioned a cathedral that was so large that it dominated the city skyline.

In 1879 and 1880 the Kurds attacked the Christian villages of the Urmian plain. The Christians, both Chaldean

---

<sup>53</sup>Report of Cluzel in *Annales*, XLV (1880): 533-34.



and Assyrian, were massacred in great numbers. Thousands of refugees lined the road to Urmia where Bishop Cluzel took charge of caring for the homeless. The Daughters of Charity's hospital was filled to capacity. The Kurds placed Urmia under siege but a company of Persian regulars dispersed the attackers. The Shah personally honored Cluzel for his loyalty and his work on behalf of the refugees but the Kurdish revolt had taken its toll. Six of the Chaldean churches had been destroyed.<sup>54</sup>

On 12 August 1882 Cluzel died after having served for forty years in Persia. His funeral was a civic event, attended by five thousand people who honored him for his devotion to the church and the Persian nation over so many years. At the time of his death there were ten Vincentian priests located in three stations and twenty-three Daughters of Charity. There were eighty-three schools under Vincentian direction with two thousand students and three medical dispensaries.

Cluzel's successor was Father Jacques Thomas, a Vincentian whose whole life had been spent as a seminary teacher and administrator in France. Despite his lack of experience, he was consecrated bishop in Paris and sent off to Persia as Apostolic Delegate.

Thomas' arrival in Persia resulted in several important changes in the Vincentian mission. He began charging fees for attendance at schools and for receiving medical aid. He ordered that students at the Kosrova seminary must choose celibacy as a requirement for ordination. Many of the Missionaries were chagrined at his preference for the Armenians in Persia rather than the Chaldeans, who heretofore had been the major concern of the Vincentians. Thomas commissioned the building of an Armenian Catholic church in Tabriz to show where his sympathies lay. In 1890 he returned to France and resigned. A sigh of relief

---

<sup>54</sup>Cluzel to Pémartin, Urmia, 5 June 1880, in *Annales*, XLV (1880): 543-49. Cluzel, "Incident d'un voyage de M. Breidenbach," 25 July 1879, XLV, 63-71.

was heard from the Missionaries.<sup>55</sup>

One of their own, Hilarion Montéty, a veteran of thirteen years, became the new bishop and Apostolic Delegate. Montéty had been Superior in Urmia and felt that moving the Kosrova seminary there would enable him to supervise its affairs. Despite many protests, this was done. The growth of the Chaldean Church in Urmia was quite evident. In 1892 the Chaldean Patriarch's appointee, Thomas Audo, arrived in the Town as bishop for the Eastern Catholics.

That may have been one of the motives for Montéty to move his own residence to Teheran. There was no doubt that he felt that the two offices of Vincentian Superior and Apostolic Delegate should be kept distinct. Moreover, as Delegate he wanted to live in the capital where the government was located and important decisions made. The Chaldeans felt he favored the Armenians over them, resulting in some hard feelings. In 1896 Montéty handed in his resignation and asked his superiors in Paris to be transferred to Madagascar. He was on his way there when he received word to come to Paris, an instruction that he obeyed. His contribution to the Persian mission was the construction of a Catholic church in Old Shemiran, the location of the foreign embassies in the mountains during the heat of the Teheran summer.<sup>56</sup>

François Lesné succeeded Montéty in Teheran. Formerly a missionary in Urmia, Lesné sought to soothe Chaldean complaints by restoring the seminary to Kosrova and, in 1897, began the publication of a newspaper. At the same time he encouraged the Armenian Catholic community in Tabriz. He secured a priest from Istanbul to serve there and established an orphanage and school directed by Sister Elizabeth Martinroche. A small seminary

---

<sup>55</sup> Thomas to Fiat, Urmia, 17 May 1885, in *Annales*, L (1885): 584-601. Chatelet, "La mission," XII, 397-406.

<sup>56</sup> Chatelet, "La mission," XIV, 92-97; 254-57. Bugnini, *La Chiesa*, pp. 215-17.

accepted students for the priesthood. In 1902 the Vincentian concern for the Armenians expanded when Dhul'fa was assigned to them by Propaganda. Soon Dhul'fa had church, school, and Armenian printing press under the direction of Father Emil Demuth.<sup>57</sup>

A year later the Kurds, aided by Turks, commenced their raids once more upon Christian villages in Azerbaijan. Government troops sent out to defend them were poorly trained and were no match for the tough mountain warriors who claimed that the area belonged to the Ottoman Empire. It was dangerous to travel without armed escorts so that the Vincentian Missionaries could no longer freely visit the Chaldeans as they had in the past.

The Missionaries were soon to be engulfed in even more difficulties during the time that Jacques Emil Sontage served as Vincentian head and Apostolic Delegate. Nationalism was now abroad among the Chaldeans, a new phenomenon, at the very time when Turkish and Kurdish raids were stepping up their pressure on the Christians. In Kosrova a movement known as the Chaldean Union was founded with the intention of making that town the capital of a Chaldean nation. The Chaldean bishop in Kosrova, a native of Mosul and unable to speak the Urmian dialect, let himself be used by the nationalists and dismissed those who sought to persuade him that the creation of a political entity by the Chaldeans was a fantasy.

In September 1911 a Russian cossack army arrived in Azerbaijan and occupied Kosrova. The Russians allowed Mirza Benjamin, secretary of the Chaldean Union, to become the town administrator. He ruled as though he were independent of all central control. The Vincentians were forced from their house to make room for the Chaldean bishop. In January 1915 the Russians announced

---

<sup>57</sup>Chatelet, "La mission," XIV, 390-94. Waterfield, *Christians*, p. 83.



they were leaving Urmia. The Chaldeans panicked. Without Russian support they would be defenseless. People received the Eucharist as if it were *viaticum*. Their premonitions were right. No sooner had the Russians withdrawn than the Turks and Kurds occupied the town. Houses were pillaged, women were raped, men were taken out and shot. For five months a wave of terror swept Urmia until the Russians returned in May.

The Christians counted their dead: 4,000 had fallen. One of the Vincentians, Emmanuel Renault, who had volunteered to help bury the dead, died after contracting typhus. Three churches outside Urmia were completely destroyed, eighteen others were severely damaged. Several Chaldean priests had been martyred. Fearing the instability of the situation since the tsarist cause was obviously flagging in Russia, Sontag ordered the Daughters of Charity to take their orphans to Teheran.

In other parts of the country the Russian withdrawal affected the Christians. Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Armenians in the region of Kosrova fled to the Caucasus with the Russians rather than trust their fate to the Muslim forces. Most of the Vincentian Missionaries and Daughters of Charity left the country since they were unable to continue their work in these circumstances.

Foreign armies passed back and forth throughout Iran during the period of the First World War. The Assyrian Patriarch, Shimun XX, personally formed an army to battle the Turks. The final outcome was a disaster for his people who were slaughtered by the thousands and scattered throughout the Near East.

Chaldean losses were also great. Kosrova, with its church and seminary, was completely destroyed, never to rise again as were dozens of other Christian villages. In July 1918, Turkish and Kurdish forces entered Urmia. Bishop Sontag expected the worst. On 31 July Kurdish officers approached him demanding that he place the Vincentian mission and the cathedral, which then held over a

thousand refugees, at their disposal. Sontag refused. Soldiers broke through the gate and opened fire on all who were there. Sontag was shot and killed along with eight hundred refugees whom he had tried to protect. Three other Vincentians, including a native, Father Nathanael Dinkha, were also killed. The bodies of the victims were then collected into a common grave and buried in front of the cathedral. The massacre in Urmia continued until every Christian male in the town was dead. The women were forced to join a march northwards. Of the two thousand who left, three hundred survived. All the Christians who remained in Azerbaijan crowded the roads to the south, hoping to reach the English lines. Without food or water, in constant peril of roving bands of Kurds and Turks, the Chaldeans of the province who had been the care of the Vincentians for eight decades were completely annihilated. When the armistice was signed and the Turkish forces abandoned Azerbaijan, all remaining mission churches, schools, and hospitals were burned. At the end of 1918 a single Vincentian, Aristide Chatelet, was left in all of Persia, living in Teheran.<sup>58</sup>

Despite this disaster, the Vincentians soon returned to Persia at the conclusion of the war. In 1922 Father Chatelet was on hand to welcome a new group of Vincentians who re-entered Persia, rebuilding their churches in Isfanah, Urmia, and Tabriz. The newly-consecrated Bishop Bertounesque took up residence in Teheran.

In the capital, the College of St. Louis, which had originally opened in 1913, was revived and the Daughters of Charity commenced a school dedicated to St. Joan of Arc. Once more the Vincentian priests and the Daughters of Charity became the major source of Christian education in Persia. St. Louis Collège was the best known school in the country, attracting Muslim as well as Christian young

---

<sup>58</sup> Bugnini, *La Chiesa*, pp. 227-38. *Revue d'histoire des missions*, I (1924): 139.

men, especially those who intended pursuing higher education in Europe. Although Urmia held but seven hundred Chaldeans, the Vincentians reopened a seminary there which continued to train priests until 1937 when it closed.<sup>59</sup>

Just before the Islamic revolution of 1979, the Vincentians held five stations in Persia. Their major activity was to provide the faculty for St. Louis in Teheran, which had moved to more spacious grounds in 1975 and served thousands of Iranian students. In Teheran they staffed the parish of the Immaculate Conception, which was the parish church of French and other European and American Catholic residents. In Old Shemiran the Vincentians held Sacred Heart parish as well as two churches outside the capital in Tabriz and Isfahan.

\* \* \* \* \*

The mission of the Vincentian priests and brothers and the Daughters of Charity in North Africa and the Near East has demonstrated the fidelity of the two Communities to the ideals of Saint Vincent de Paul. In the Islamic countries few converts could be gained, but there was always ample opportunity to demonstrate compassion and concern for the poor, the sick, and the uneducated. Today the era of colonialism is over and the Catholic missionary can no longer look to Paris or Rome for support. The Vincentians and Daughters of the future must adapt to new and ever-changing circumstances. If Christianity is to survive in these lands, they must continue their quiet witness in schools and hospitals, if not in churches, to witness Christ to the Muslim world.

---

<sup>59</sup> Bugnini, *La Chiesa*, p. 305.



*An humble submission and obedience to the decrees of the Holy See is a good method of distinguishing the true children of the Church from those who are rebels to her authority.*

St. Vincent de Paul



*The things of God develop of themselves, and true wisdom consists in following Providence, step by step; be assured of a maxim which seems paradoxical: he who wishes the things of God hampers them.*

St. Vincent de Paul.



*Although the Missionaries cannot go everywhere or accomplish all the good they wish, they do well to desire it and to offer themselves to God to serve as His instruments in the conversion of souls, at the time, in the places, and in the manner He wills. Perhaps He shall be satisfied with their goodwill and perhaps also, if that will is well regulated and strong enough, He will make use of them, frail though they be, to do great things.*

St. Vincent de Paul