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Stafford Poole C.M.

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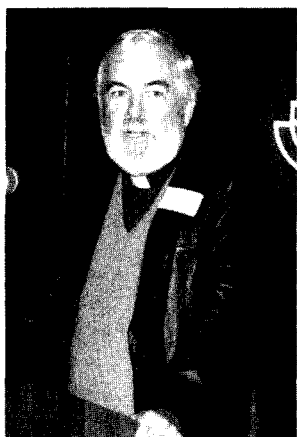
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## **"A Brave New World": The Vincentians in Pioneer America**

BY

STAFFORD POOLE, C.M.



*Reverend  
Stafford Poole, C.M.*

Shortly before midnight on 12 June 1816, thirteen missionaries boarded an American brig called the *Ranger* at Bordeaux, France, to begin a long and perilous journey to a brave new world. It was an ethnically mixed group, consisting of seven Italians, one Belgian, one Rhinelander, one Spaniard, one Bohemian, and two Frenchmen. Eleven of the group were Vincentians or would later join the Vincentian Community; and two were seminarians from the college of Propaganda in Rome. Before leaving their lodging in Bordeaux, the group did something that was both practical and intensely symbolic. They laid aside their

cassocks and European clerical garb and donned the black suits, ties, and round hats that were worn by Catholic clergy in the United States.

With that journey began the Vincentian mission in the United States. In this paper I want to describe that mission in its pioneer stage, that is, from 1816 until the Civil War. The dating is arbitrary, since the United States Department of the Interior did not formally declare the frontier to be closed until 1890. I am also taking the term "mission" in a broad sense, not just of the parish or home missions that were a primary Vincentian work, but in the sense of all the apostolates that were exercised in what were quite clearly missionary conditions. Finally, I will make some generalizations about the Vincentian Community and its contribution to the Catholic Church in the United States during that period.

The Vincentian Community, officially called the Congregation of the Mission, was founded by Saint Vincent de Paul in France in 1625 in cooperation with a wealthy family called the Gondi. Its initial purpose

was to evangelize the neglected rural areas of France. Soon, however, it also moved into the nascent seminary apostolate. Throughout most of its history these two works were the ones to which the Community was officially dedicated. Others, however, were soon added. Despite an official disapproval of working as parish priests, the Vincentians were compelled to accept a number of parishes, beginning with the town of Richelieu in 1638. Under pressure from Louis XIV the Vincentians reluctantly accepted the royal parishes of Versailles and Fontainebleau and the chaplaincy at Madame de Maintenon's school for young noble ladies at Saint-Cyr. Saint Vincent had always hoped to involve his Community in foreign missions. Except for a brief and tragic experience in Madagascar, however, this was not done until the eighteenth century. In 1782, again under pressure from the crown and again reluctantly, the Vincentians began to replace the recently suppressed Jesuits in China, Constantinople, and other parts of the eastern Mediterranean.

The Vincentian presence in the United States came about because the Sulpician priest, Louis William Dubourg, newly appointed apostolic administrator of Louisiana, went to Rome in 1815 to recruit priests and seminarians for his far flung territory. After his arrival in Rome Louisiana was erected into a diocese and Dubourg named bishop. An initial contact with a saintly Vincentian, Felix De Andreis, determined him to seek the Congregation of the Mission for this vast see. After some complex maneuvers that included pressure from the pope, the Vincentian superiors gave approval for some of their most talented subjects, including De Andreis and Joseph Rosati, the future bishop of Saint Louis, to go to the New World. Their primary purpose was to establish a seminary in the Louisiana Territory and, to the extent possible, give local or parish missions.

It took two years (1816-1818) for the Vincentians and their companions to make the journey from Rome to Bordeaux to the United States. Originally their destination was to have been New Orleans, but because of ecclesiastical politics in the Crescent City Dubourg impulsively changed the location to Saint Louis. This too was changed when some Catholics from the Barrens Settlement, about ninety miles south of Saint Louis, seeking to have resident priests among them, offered the bishop land for his proposed seminary. Thus in October 1818 the pioneer Vincentians opened their first establishment in the United States: Saint Mary's Seminary in what is now Perryville, Missouri.

For more than thirty years Saint Mary's was the hub of Vincentian activity in the United States. Until 1843 it was the only canonically

established house that the Vincentians had. In the beginning it served a variety of purposes. First and foremost, it was the diocesan seminary for the vast diocese of Louisiana, that is from Saint Louis to New Orleans, with all the intervening territory. It also served as a house of formation for Vincentian students. At an early stage, in response to local needs, it functioned as a lay college for boys from the immediate area and later from the entire Louisiana territory. Between 1818 and 1842, however, the principal function of Saint Mary's was as a seminary. Following a formula that was common in the United States at that time, the seminary students also acted as teachers in the lay college.

The early days of Saint Mary's were difficult. The buildings promised by the local people were slow in coming. Living conditions were primitive. There was much prejudice on the part of local Protestants. There was a great deal of discontent among the brothers, who found that their work, so valued in Europe, was in America equated with that of slaves. They also believed that the land was infertile and the location unhealthy. The most serious problem, from a legal point of view, was that the Vincentians did not have the title to the property. They lived in a precarious position, in every meaning of the term. It was only after Rosati became bishop of Saint Louis that the title was transferred to the Vincentian Community. Despite these obstacles Saint Mary's Seminary produced some notable alumni: Michael Portier, later bishop of Mobile, Alabama; John Mary Odin, first bishop of Galveston and later archbishop of New Orleans; John Timon, first provincial of the American Vincentians and first bishop of Buffalo, New York; and Irenée Saint-Cyr who, after serving in rural parishes in Missouri, established the first permanent Catholic church in Chicago.

As a lay college Saint Mary's also encountered problems, but most of these came from within the Vincentian Community. The Vincentians had directed institutions of this kind in various parts of Europe, especially after the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773, when they fell heir to some of the Society's educational institutions, including Saint-Benoît in Constantinople, which is still functioning, and what is now the university of Heidelberg. Still, these were not regarded as proper Vincentian apostolates. Father John Baptist Tornatore, the second superior of Saint Mary's, registered his shock that worldly subjects, such as dancing, drawing, and fencing were in the college's curriculum. With regard to drawing, one of the best known alumni of the lay college was Andrew Jackson Grayson, who with John James Audubon was the foremost American illustrator of birds. The opposition to the college on

the part of the Vincentian superiors in Paris led to a decree of suppression in 1835. The decree was eventually rescinded, but it was decided that the seminary and the college should be separated.

In 1842 the diocesan seminary was removed to Carondelet, a suburb of Saint Louis. The Carondelet seminary, as it is commonly called, had a checkered history. For some time the Vincentians had the direction of it, but then it went to the diocesan clergy. Shortly before the Civil War the Vincentians resumed the direction of the seminary, but only briefly. It was soon compelled to close its doors.

In 1843, just after the removal of the seminary to Carondelet, the lay college was transferred to Saint Vincent's College in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Despite numerous problems, including personnel difficulties among the faculty, it appears to have prospered. Shortly before the Civil War it began accepting candidates for the priesthood, thus returning to the mixed seminary/college format. With the demise of the Carondelet seminary it became de facto one of the seminaries to which the archdiocese of Saint Louis sent its students.

On 2 September 1835 the superior general, Jean-Baptiste Nozo, raised the American Vincentian mission to the status of a province, with John Timon, a native of Pennsylvania, as the first provincial. It was the first Vincentian province outside of Europe. More remarkably, it was a province that had only one canonically erected house. With this, there came a great expansion of the Vincentians' seminary apostolate. As if by a common impulse bishops throughout the country began to offer foundations to the Vincentians or sought in some way to entrust priestly formation to them. In 1838, at the invitation of Bishop Anthony Blanc of New Orleans, the Vincentians opened a diocesan seminary in Plattenville, Louisiana. Two years later Bishop John Hughes asked Timon to accept the college and seminary at Rose Hill, New York. Within a short space of time the Vincentians were directing seminaries in Philadelphia, Bardstown (Kentucky), and Cincinnati, but they were unable or unwilling to accept offers in Nashville, Pittsburgh, Vincennes (Indiana), Emmitsburg (Maryland), Charlottetown (Canada), and Richmond (Virginia). Timon wrote to Paris that the bishops of the United States were calling the Vincentians to the direction of all diocesan seminaries but two. "The bishops of this country, as if by a preconcerted move, are offering us their seminaries."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Timon to unidentified, probably Jean-Baptiste Étienne, DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives, Saint Mary's Seminary, Perryville, Missouri, Timon Papers, vol. 3.

Timon was able to respond affirmatively to some of these requests because of an increase in manpower caused by conditions in Europe. Spain, in particular, was beset by the difficulties that accompanied the first Carlist war and the suppression or dispersal of many religious communities. Many Spanish Vincentian priests and students—and in this context “Spanish” actually means Catalan—went to France and from there to the United States. Two of them, Thaddeus Amat and Michael Domenech, became bishops respectively of Los Angeles and Pittsburgh. A third, Mariano Maller, escaped episcopal appointment by accepting a post in Brazil. At the same time the first candidates from among the newly arrived Irish began presenting themselves to the community.

The Vincentian predominance in American seminary education did not last long. A number of factors were responsible for this short-lived brilliance. Foremost among them were conflicts with bishops. Some bishops, such as Hughes of New York, wanted the Vincentians to continue the mixed college/seminary format, using the students as teachers, a situation with which the Vincentians had had unhappy experiences. Others, like John Baptist Purcell of Cincinnati, interfered in seminary administration and made impulsive decisions without consultation. Still others did not live up to their contracts, especially as regard financial support. In some places there was hostility from the diocesan clergy. In others, such as Philadelphia, the lack of a qualified person to fill the office of rector, forced the Vincentians to withdraw. Finally, numbers of foreign-born Vincentians were called to other countries or to their homelands.

Despite these setbacks there was at least one notable and long lasting success: Our Lady of Angels Seminary in Niagara Falls, New York. It was founded by Father John J. Lynch, later bishop and archbishop of Toronto, who, after giving a retreat to the clergy of Buffalo, was asked to stay on and start a seminary. It formally opened in 1856. Like many seminaries of the time, it suffered numerous problems and crises, but eventually became one of the most enduring and successful of Vincentian enterprises.

Though the establishment of a seminary was the reason why the Vincentians first came to the United States, historically the parish missions were their primary apostolate. The missions undertaken by Vincent de Paul in seventeenth-century France were not the one or two week penitential missions that we are familiar with in the United States. They were primarily catechetical in nature and sought to bring the basic

Christian message to the rural areas of France. "Vincentian missions were a systematic intervention in the life of a parish in order to ground the people thoroughly in their commitment to the gospel, primarily through instruction, secondarily through exhortations to receive the sacraments."<sup>2</sup> By its very nature this kind of mission was lengthy and, as it turned out, could not be easily adapted to the United States, where there was no peasant class or village life as such.

The contract of foundation in terms of which the Vincentians came to the United States specified that the priests were to have the opportunity to give missions. Because of the press of other duties, this happened only sporadically in the pioneer period. In 1817, before the first Vincentians arrived at the Barrens settlement, Joseph Rosati gave a mission in Vincennes, Indiana. No other missions were given for seven years, and then they tended to be centered in the town of New Madrid, Missouri. In September 1824 Odin and Timon gave a mission there; in the spring of 1826, Odin and Leo de Neckere did so again; in the fall of 1826 Odin and Timon gave another. In addition to the last named mission Father Philip Borgna gave one at Donaldsonville, Louisiana in July 1826. After that there is evidence of only sporadic missions throughout the Missouri area, including Cape Girardeau (1835), Vallé's Mines (1837), Ste. Genevieve (1838), the Saint Louis area (1839). The missions did not become a major Vincentian activity in the United States until after 1860.

One difficulty in analyzing these early missions is that the distinction between a mission and parish/mission station was often unclear. Some work that the Vincentians labeled as missions was indistinguishable from short-term parochial work. Parishes had never been a formal Vincentian apostolate and in fact they were actively discouraged. Despite this the community had engaged in parish work in Europe and even more so in mission countries. Saint Mary's Seminary at the Barrens settlement was itself an active parish and the first formal, established one that the Vincentians had in the United States. Priests from the seminary and from the novitiate and cathedral in Saint Louis often made visits to outlying parishes or missions. Others acted as more or less permanent pastors. Father Charles Acquaroni was the first resident pastor at Portage des Sioux from 1818 to 1822. Ste. Genevieve,

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<sup>2</sup>Douglas Slawson, C.M., "To bring Glad Tidings to the Poor": Vincentian Parish Missions in the United States," in *The American Vincentians: A Popular History of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States 1815-1987*, John E. Rybolt, C.M., ed. (Brooklyn:1988), 163.

Missouri, was a Vincentian parish from 1822 until 1849, as were Saint Michael in Fredericktown from 1827 to 1842 and Saint Joachim in Old Mines from 1821 until 1841. Some of the mission stations later became full fledged diocesan parishes, such as the present day Saint Agnes in Bloomsdale, Missouri, Saint Joseph in Zell, and Saints Philip and James in Rivière aux Vases (Vincentian from 1842-1848). In the lower Louisiana territory, the Vincentians ministered in Thibodaux (1822-1826), Opelousas (1824-1833), and Donaldsonville. Two early Vincentian parishes are still functioning and still under the direction of the community. These are Saint Vincent's in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, (1838) and Saint Vincent de Paul in Saint Louis (1844).

One of the most important early mission/parish foundations was that of Lasalle, Illinois. The Catholics of the area, predominantly Irish but also including Germans and Canadians, for the most part worked on the canals that were being built as part of the internal improvements craze of the eighteen thirties. When they asked Bishop Rosati of Saint Louis for priests, he responded by requesting Timon to send missionaries to them. In 1839 Timon sent an Italian, Blaise Raho, as the first superior. He and his confreres had to work against incredible odds, including parishioners scattered over an 18,000 square mile area of central Illinois. They ministered in forty-eight different mission stations that are known for sure. The Lasalle Mission eventually became the parish of Saint Patrick and was one of the most thriving works in the western region until it was turned over to the diocese of Peoria in 1982.

The arrival of the Vincentians in Texas, which will be mentioned later, brought with it the temporary care of a number of parishes, mission stations, or chapels, including Houston in 1847-1848, San Antonio, and Victoria (1840-1847). In the east the Vincentians opened Saint Vincent de Paul parish in Germantown, Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania 1849, though the official founding date was 1851. It, too, is still functioning under Vincentian direction. Shortly before the Civil War Immaculate Conception parish was established in Baltimore (1857). It also continues today in a church that was built in 1972 to replace the earlier one.

There was one apostolate that appealed strongly to the first Vincentians and which they were never able to realize: missions to the Native Americans.<sup>3</sup> Felix de Andreis devoutly hoped to carry this out

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<sup>3</sup>See John E. Rybolt, C.M., "Vincentian Missions among Native Americans," *Vincentian Heritage* 10, no. 2 (1989):150-78.



and even began the study of native languages. Nothing came of this, in part because the areas where the Vincentians found themselves did not have large native American populations, in part because of the other, multitudinous demands placed on them.

Perhaps nothing demonstrates better the demands placed on the early Vincentians and the need for flexibility in responding to them than the mission to the republic of Texas. In 1838 Bishop Anthony Blanc of New Orleans wrote to Rosati and Timon that the Holy See wanted a reliable report on the religious situation in the newly independent republic. After visiting Texas in 1838, Timon wrote a full report that he submitted to Blanc and through him to Rome. Within two years Rome appointed Timon prefect apostolic of Texas. After sending Odin ahead of him, Timon returned to Texas in that same year with letters from the Vatican that were the equivalent of recognition of Texas independence. In 1841 Texas was made a vicariate apostolic with Odin, raised to the rank of bishop, as vicar apostolic.<sup>4</sup> Five years later he became the first bishop of Galveston. Perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of this mission is that Timon was carrying out all these duties while he was still Vincentian provincial.

As we look over the history of the Vincentian Community in pioneer America, we can discern some interesting generalizations.

One is the appalling difficulties and obstacles that the early missionaries encountered. Language was clearly one of these, though in the earliest days the predominance of French, and to a lesser extent Spanish, in the Mississippi Valley mitigated this. Most of the Italian, French, and Flemings made a brave effort to conquer the chaotic grammar and pronunciation of English. Some, like Tornatore, apparently failed. Others, like Rosati, seemed to have a good speaking knowledge, though heavily accented. Still others, like Leo de Neckere, the bishop of New Orleans from 1829 until 1833, spoke it fluently.

Culture shock was not handled so easily. The early Vincentians came from a background and society that had almost nothing in common with that of the United States. From closed, monarchical,

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<sup>4</sup>An interesting but little known aspect of this was the Mexican government's opposition to the erection of the vicariate apostolic. Since Mexico refused to recognize Texas independence, it held that the vicariate violated the rights of the bishop of Monterrey. See Jesús García Gutiérrez, *Bulario de la Iglesia Mexicana: Documentos relativos a erecciones, desmembraciones, etc., de Diócesis mejicanas* (Mexico: 1951), 577-81.

socially stratified, officially Catholic societies, they were plunged into a frontier situation, characterized by Protestant predominance, social mobility, informality, and what seemed to them an unpardonable liberty and license. From the earliest days until recent times it is possible to find in the correspondence of European Vincentians complaints about the excessive freedom and independence of Americans, especially seminarians and women. In the earliest days the missionaries were shocked by the American mania for dancing and whiskey. They were equally appalled by what they regarded as the ridiculous antics that took place at Protestant camp meetings. Yet there were other ways in which they adapted rather quickly. Almost all used the English form for their given names. Most became American citizens at an early date, though in part this was to guarantee property rights. Saint Mary's Seminary was incorporated at an early stage and granted the right to grant degrees by the state legislature. The reason for this was a desire to get public money from the state. Most surprising is the ease with which all but a few accepted the peculiar institution of slavery.<sup>5</sup> Aside from De Andreis and Timon, almost no one seems to have had qualms about owning and selling slaves. Sometimes the adaptation was too good. James Rolando, who came to the United States in 1840, returned to Italy in 1863, but finding that he could not adapt to his native land, returned to the United States in the following year.

Geography presented major problems. The Europeans were not accustomed to the vast distances that they encountered in the United States. From the beginning they had to endure extensive travel under harrowing conditions over bad roads or on treacherous rivers. Improvements in transportation prior to the Civil War gradually relieved this difficulty, but not entirely. Steamboats on the Mississippi brought rapidity to travel, but also the danger of explosions and snags. In 1858 Father John Delcros was killed in a riverboat explosion. Railroads and stagecoaches speeded overland travel. Around the year 1840 Bishop Joseph Rosati of Saint Louis could remark with admiration that the trip between Baltimore and Pittsburgh, which had taken the first Vincentians nine days in 1816, twenty-four years later required only three days!<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>See Stafford Poole, C.M., and Douglas Slawson, C.M., *Church and Slave in Perry County, Missouri, 1818-1860* (Lewiston, New York: 1986).

<sup>6</sup>Joseph Rosati, C.M., "Recollections of the Establishment of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States of America, II," Stafford Poole, C.M., trans. and ed. *Vincentian Heritage* 2 (1981):42.

The Vincentian apostolate in pioneer America was characterized by a high degree of tactical flexibility. The Vincentians responded to the needs of the American Church, even when this required a departure from the familiar and safe. Lay education and parochial work were examples of this. The missions were adapted to a frontier situation. The missionaries learned how to deal with isolated Catholics and inactive Catholics. They seem to have been quite successful in learning to deal with Protestants. In some cases, most especially in the first years in Missouri, this required entering into public religious disputations and controversies. Mostly, however, it was a matter of approaching these people in a friendly and respectful way. This often led to conversions. The early history of the Vincentians in the United States has numerous examples of benefactions by non-Catholics to the Vincentians and their works. When Timon made his visitation of Texas, he was received in a friendly way by all the principal politicians and even addressed the legislature. The Texas experience itself showed how the early Vincentians not only had to take on unaccustomed tasks but also balanced various conflicting demands of the apostolate.

The nature of their work and its tremendous geographical extent created a tension between the demands of the apostolate and the demands of community living. Much of the ministry in the pioneer United States was simply incompatible with Vincentian life as it was known in Europe. There the Vincentians led a regular, routinized life, centered around spiritual exercises within the house. Apostolic or ministerial work was done from there, but the life of the house remained central. While the European superiors embraced this view, at least officially, the Vincentians in the United States were more divided. Rosati, after becoming bishop of Saint Louis, needed to fill numerous posts throughout his sprawling diocese. Timon, Odin, and others often found themselves spending long days in the saddle, finding rest and hospitality wherever they could. Others had to live in outlying parishes, often alone. Even in the seminaries the demands of teaching, formation, parochial work, and temporal administration made it difficult to lead a Vincentian life as it was known in Europe. The attempt in 1835 to bring together the dispersed Vincentians who were working in isolated parishes and mission stations and return them to communal life at Saint Mary's Seminary represented a triumph of the traditional view. It was, however, short lived. The demands of the apostolate could not be refused.

Another result of these demands was that personnel was spread thin and was overworked. It is axiomatic in the history of any religious community that there are two eternal problems: money and manpower. The Vincentian Community in the United States never had enough personnel adequately to cover all the demands made of it. This was especially true during the provincialate of John Timon, when the Vincentians accepted more foundations that they were really capable of filling. In addition, the apparent abundance of personnel was deceptive, as in the case of the Spanish Vincentians who came to this country and then went elsewhere. The lack of personnel was often a determining factor in deciding which apostolates that the Vincentians undertook or retained.

A personnel problem of a different order was that of Vincentians who were removed from the community to be made bishops. In the period before the Civil War the community lost some of its most talented men to the hierarchy. This began with Joseph Rosati, who was appointed coadjutor bishop of Louisiana and the Two Floridas in 1823, a scant seven years after setting foot on American soil. He was soon followed by Leo de Neckere, who was elected bishop of New Orleans in 1829, Thaddeus Amat, who was elected to the see of Monterey in 1853, Michael Domenech who was appointed to Pittsburgh in 1860, John Lynch, elected coadjutor of Toronto in 1859, John Mary Odin, elected vicar apostolic of Texas in 1841 after declining Detroit and later first bishop of Galveston, and John Timon elected to the see of Buffalo in 1847, after having refused six other bishoprics. The Congregation of the Mission gave its human resources to the American Church, but at great cost to itself.

The tactical flexibility that characterized pioneer Vincentian work also meant that there would be a great deal of institutional instability. Until the foundation of Saint Vincent's College in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, in 1843, the Vincentians had only one canonically erected house. Before and after that there were numerous other establishments, whether as houses or not, but the Vincentian involvement with them came and went with dizzying rapidity. This was certainly true of the seminaries. It should, however, be noted that seminaries in this country have throughout their history been characterized by a high degree of institutional instability. Vincentian directed parishes and mission stations were even more numerous and more short-lived. It is sufficient to glance at the list given in Appendix E of *The American Vincentians* to get an idea of the almost giddy variety of places served.

Like any human enterprise the Vincentian mission in pioneer America had both positive and negative aspects. Given the obstacles and difficulties that had to be surmounted, it must be said that on the whole the Vincentian Community acquitted itself with distinction. It was blessed with men of quality, vision, and leadership. An examination of their letters and others documents reveals numerous instances of frustration, anger, depression, and discouragement, but always suffused with a strong faith. They were brave new men in a brave new world.