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The First Twenty Years of the Vincentian Studies Institute of the United States (1979-1999)

BY

EDWARD R. UDOVIC, C.M.

The modern origin of the Vincentian Studies Institute can be found in the Second Vatican Council's mandate that religious communities renew themselves in light of the "signs of the times." The council suggested that this renewal take place within the context of a careful self-reflection by each community of its charism, heritage and praxis.¹

A more remote origin of the Institute can be found in the work done by a variety of French Vincentian historians beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, after the Vincentian Family's post-revolutionary restoration. The fourteenth superior general, Jean-Baptiste Étienne (1801-1874), had a lively concern for the preservation of the "primitive spirit" of the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity. He and his successors commissioned the publication of a variety of materials including the *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission*, editions of selected letters of Vincent de Paul, editions of community documents and a multi-volume history of the Congregation of the Mission.² Confreres such as Gabriel Perboyre, Jean-Baptiste Pémartin, Félix Contassot, Jean Parrang, Fernand Combaluzier, Pierre Coste, and André Dodin are representatives of this French school of Vincentian historiography. Their research established the foundation for all contemporary work in Vincentian studies.

In the early 1970s there was an attempt to found an organization similar to what would become the Vincentian Studies Institute. The inspiration for this idea was the Jesuit Historical Institute in Rome and the Academy of American Franciscan History, then located in Bethesda, Maryland. The idea was that the American Vincentians should have a similar organization. The Provincial and Vice-Provinceals of the west-

¹ *Perfectae Caritatis*, "Decree on the up-to-date renewal of religious life, October 28, 1965, *Vatican II the Conciliar and Post conciliar Documents*, Austin Flannery, O.P., ed. (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Center, 1975), §2b: 612.

² See for example, *Recueil des Principales Circularies des Supérieurs Généraux de la Congrégation de la Mission*, 3 vols. (Paris: Georges Chamerot, 1877); Jean-Baptiste Pémartin, C.M., *Lettres de Saint Vincent de Paul*, 2 vols. (Paris: Pillet et Dumoulin, 1880); Gabriel Perboyre, C.M., *Histoire de la Congrégation de la Mission*, 12 vols. (Paris: Congrégation de la Mission: 1863-1867).

ern region of the United States initially accepted this proposal but, for reasons that are not entirely clear, nothing came of it at that time.³

In 1973, the Very Reverend James Richardson, C.M., the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity, met with the Visitors (provincial superiors) of the United States provinces. He requested that they undertake a new and complete translation into modern American English of the correspondence, conferences and documents of Saint Vincent de Paul. This meant the translation of Pierre Coste's monumental fourteen volume French edition originally published from 1920-1926.⁴ This new edition also would include those Vincentian materials discovered since the Coste translation.⁵

After the 1974 General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission, Reverend Richardson established the Group International d'Études Vincentiennes (G.I.E.V.). Two American confreres including John Carven, C.M. (USA East), and Stafford Poole, C.M. (USA West), were involved in this effort. The objectives of this organization were: (1) to promote scientific Vincentian studies and assure their dissemination; (2) to make known Vincentian thought and spirituality; and (3) to help the members of the Vincentian Community learn more about their heritage.

The organization proved unsatisfactory, in part because of a lack of clarity about its purpose and functioning and the infrequency of its meetings. Because of dissatisfaction with it, a revised organization was proposed and approved by the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission in 1980. It was known as the Secrétariat International d'Études Vincentiennes (S.I.E.V.), and is still in existence.⁶

In 1978, at an annual G.I.E.V. meeting held at Niagara University,

³ Both Reverends Stafford Poole, C.M., and John Rybolt, C.M., provided personal reminiscences for this article.

⁴ Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris: Libraire Lecoffre, 1920-1926).

⁵ This *Vincentian Translation Project*, which is now approaching its thirtieth anniversary, has to date published the first eight volumes of Coste in translation. The first volume published in 1985 is dedicated to Reverend James Richardson and is a tribute to his role in the encouragement of Vincentian Studies. This effort, now under the editorship of Sister Marie Poole, D.C., has also played an important role in the contemporary revival of Vincentian studies in English. There is, however, no formal relationship between the *Vincentian Translation Project* and the *Vincentian Studies Institute*.

⁶ For the latest information on the structure and activities of S.I.E.V. see, Robert P. Maloney, C.M., "International Secretariat of Vincentian Studies (S.I.E.V.)," *Vincentiana*, 44, no. 2 (March-April 2000): 139-41.



"We Are DePaul." Mural by Bro. Mark Elder, C.M., and Students. Dedicated September 13, 1999, Thomas Levan Center, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

The Vincentian Studies Institute is headquartered at the university.

Photo by Halley Smith.

New York, a number of representatives of the North American Provinces attended, including Reverends John Carven, C.M. (USA East), Stafford Poole, C.M. (USA West), James King, C.M. (USA East), Frederick Easterly, C.M. (USA East), William Eigel, C.M. (USA Midwest), John Rybolt, C.M. (USA Midwest) and Douglas Slawson, C.M. (USA West). These confreres had the idea of forming a national organization for the study of Vincentian history and spirituality. They felt that an American version of the international organization would be better able to serve the needs of the United States provinces. There was also discussion of a possible role in the organization for the Daughters of Charity.

A preliminary proposal was drawn up and submitted to the Vincentian Conference (comprised of the five United States Visitors) in October 1978. The response was favorable, and the organizers were

authorized to have two meetings in which to draft a constitution, by-laws, and prepare a preliminary budget. The two organizational meetings were held at Kenrick Seminary in Saint Louis, Missouri (November 1978), and Mater Dei Provincial House, Evansville, Indiana (March 1979). Out of these meetings came the Constitution and By-laws approved by the Vincentian Conference in October 1979. The following March the organization began its work with a meeting held at Saint John's Seminary College, Camarillo, California. The first election for a presiding officer turned into a tie. Since the newly adopted constitution did not provide for this eventuality, the choice was decided by a flip of the coin. The late Reverend Frederick Easterly, C.M. (USA East), thus became the first presiding officer of the Vincentian Studies Institute. During the mid-1980s and early 1990s, Reverend John Rybolt, C.M. (USA Midwest), served three terms as Presiding Officer. In 1993, the author succeeded him as Presiding Officer.

As the Institute began each of the five Vincentian provinces appointed members, and provided annual funding. In 1982, the Visitatrixes of the United States provinces of the Daughters of Charity agreed to appoint sisters representing their provinces to the group without, however, accepting a formal role in sponsorship or funding. This arrangement would last for the next ten years. The organization always has met twice annually, in fall and spring, in various locations across the country.

Until 1995, the headquarters of the Vincentian Studies Institute was located at Saint Mary's of the Barrens in Perryville, Missouri. During this period the organization enjoyed the services of Mrs. Gerry Hartel as its Executive Secretary.

The mission adopted by the Vincentian Studies Institute was to "promote a living interest in the Vincentian Heritage." The organization began its work with the publication of a journal entitled, *Vincentian Heritage*. From 1979-1982 the Institute published one issue a year. Beginning in 1983 it began appearing bi-annually. The first editor was Reverend John Carven, C.M. (USA East). Reverend Stafford Poole, C.M. (USA West), succeeded him in 1986. In 1997, the Institute hired its first lay editor, Mr. Nathaniel Michaud.

Over the last twenty years 34 issues of *Vincentian Heritage* have appeared, representing the work of 113 authors, and totaling 4,292 pages. The journal published two commemorative issues, dedicated to Reverends William Slattery, C.M. (the 19th superior general from 1947-1968), and James Richardson, C.M. (the 20th superior general 1968-

1981), at the time of their deaths.⁷ Three issues have been dedicated to the papers given at our various national symposia.⁸ In collaboration with the Sisters of Charity Federation in the Vincentian-Setonian tradition the *Vincentian Heritage* has published two issues dedicated to the papers delivered at national Seton symposia.⁹ One issue published the papers of a Vincentian Heritage symposium held at DePaul University, Chicago in 1992.¹⁰

The journal has developed from a somewhat homespun effort to one that can now proudly stand next to any of its peers. Approximately every five years, the Institute undertakes a survey designed to gauge our readers' reactions to what we are doing, and their views on how well we are doing it. The results of these surveys have indicated high levels of interest and approval from our subscribers.¹¹

In 1987, after several years concentrating on the journal's development, the Institute undertook a new phase of its research and publishing mission by sponsoring the reprint of Joseph Leonard, C.M.'s English translation of Coste's three-volume biography of Saint Vincent.¹² In 1989, the Institute published two popular histories of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity in the United States.¹³ These were followed in 1993 by the first English annotated translation of Louis Abelly's 1664 biography of Saint Vincent de Paul.¹⁴ These works have in subsequent years been followed by the publication of other translations, reprints, magazines and original research in Vincentian history and spirituality. This latter group included the publication in 1995 by Paulist Press of *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: Rules, Conferences, Writings*. This volume was co-edited by Reverend John

⁷ *Vincentian Heritage* 4, no. 1 (1983); *ibid.*, 17, no. 2 (1996).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11, no. 1 (1990); *ibid.*, 12, no. 2 (1991).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 14, no. 2 (1993); *ibid.*, 18, no. 2 (1997).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14, no. 1 (1993).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12, no. 1 (1991); *ibid.*, 18, no. 1 (1997).

¹² Pierre Coste, C.M., *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, 3 vols., Joseph Leonard, C.M., trans. (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1987).

¹³ John E. Rybolt, C.M., ed., *The American Vincentians: A Popular History of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States 1815-1987* (Brooklyn, New York: New City Press, 1988); Sister Daniel Hannefin, D.C., *Daughters of the Church: A Popular History of the Daughters of Charity in the United States 1809-1987* (Brooklyn, New York: New City Press, 1989).

¹⁴ Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God: Vincent de Paul*, William Quinn, F.S.C. trans., 3 vols. (New Rochelle, New York: New City Press, 1993).

Rybolt, C.M. (USA Midwest), and Sister Frances Ryan, D.C. (USA East Central).¹⁵

The V.S.I. has undertaken two archival microfilming projects, producing microfilm editions of the *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission*, as well as materials in the archives of the General Curia of the Congregation of the Mission in Rome concerning the United States provinces.

As the 1980s drew to a close the Institute's membership explored new avenues of fulfilling its mission: particularly in the area of continuing education. In June 1989, the organization sponsored a national symposium entitled: *The Age of Gold: The Roots of Our Tradition*. This event, which examined the French spiritual roots of the Vincentian tradition, took place at Saint Mary's of the Barrens in Perryville, Missouri. Two years later, in 1991, to mark the 400th anniversary of the birth of Saint Louise de Marillac, the Institute sponsored a second national symposium at Marillac Provincial House, Saint Louis, Missouri.

The next continuing education effort sponsored by the Institute began in June 1997. After extensive consultation, the membership determined that a pressing issue in contemporary Vincentian experience was mission-based leadership development. This led to the choice of the theme for the next national symposium: *Vincentian National Leadership Symposium: Unfolding the Legacy of Our Mission*. The effort proved so successful that the Institute repeated the symposium three times in November 1997, September 1998, and November 1999. This offering drew a wide representation from all branches of the Vincentian family. The organization is presently discerning a future direction for these Vincentian leadership development efforts, and other continuing education efforts, both at the national and local levels.

Participants evaluate each continuing education program, and their input, critique and suggestions have always guided subsequent planning. Participant evaluations of these programs have been uniformly high. A total of 459 members of the Vincentian Family have attended the six national symposia.

From the time of its first continuing education efforts, the Institute noticed a growing awareness of a network of relationships within the charism in the United States that Vincentians, Daughters of Charity and others have now come to very familiarly call the "Vincentian Fam-

¹⁵ John Rybolt, C.M., and Frances Ryan, D.C., eds., *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: Rules, Conferences, Writings* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1995).

ily." For the last ten years the Vincentian Studies Institute has sought to expand its mission from the narrower concept of serving the "Double Family," to the much broader national and international reality encompassed by the concept of serving the "Vincentian Family." It would not be immodest to say that the Institute has been a leader in this movement.

In 1996, the Institute published Sister Betty Ann McNeil, D.C.'s (USA Southeast), monograph, *The Vincentian Family Tree*.¹⁶ This first ever "genealogical" study of "Institutes of Consecrated Life, Societies of Apostolic Life, Lay Associations and Non-Catholic Religious institutes in the Vincentian Tradition" was a significant contribution to the development of national and international Vincentian family relationships. This work represented the first of a planned series of scholarly monographs to be published periodically by the Institute. Future monographs will include the present author's studies of Jean-Baptiste Étienne's role in the 19th century Vincentian revival, Henri de Maupas du Tour's November 1660 funeral oration for Saint Vincent de Paul, John Rybolt C.M.'s English translation and annotated edition of the extant correspondence and writings of Felix de Andreis, C.M., and Sister Louise Sullivan, D.C.'s (USA Northeast), study of Sister Rosalie Rendu, D.C.

A major change in the Institute's governance took place in 1992. At this point the five United States provinces of the Daughters of Charity agreed to join the five Vincentian provinces as the organization's corporate sponsors. The ten provincial superiors approved a new set of constitutions and by-laws in 1994 corporately becoming the Institute's "Governing Body." The Governing Body meets annually to review the work of the Institute, its strategic plan, and to approve its budget.

At this time the organization also created a category of at-large membership to allow for members in addition to those representing the ten provinces, individuals who are appointed by the respective provincial superiors. The terms for all members are five years and are renewable. In the fall of 2000 the Institute welcomed its first at-large member from outside the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity: Sister Regina Bechtle, S.C., of the Sisters of Charity of New York. There is also hope in the near future that the Institute will welcome its first lay Vincentian as an at-large member.

¹⁶ Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., *The Vincentian Family Tree* (Cape Girardeau: Concord Publishing, 1996).

In 1995, the headquarters of the Vincentian Studies Institute relocated to the John Richardson Library of DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. The university donates office, storage and inventory space, and provides support and technology services. The V.S.I. organizational archives are now housed at the university's archives.

Also in 1995, with the closing of the Midwest Province's Saint Thomas Theological Seminary in Denver, Colorado, the Vincentian history and spirituality sections of the seminary library were given to the Vincentian Studies Institute. This multilingual Vincentian research collection is now located in the Richardson Library. In 2001, the remaining Vincentian volumes from the seminary library collection at Saint Mary's of the Barrens in Perryville, Missouri, will be transferred to the V.S.I. library at DePaul. The Richardson Library at the university maintains this non-circulating research collection. The Institute continues to add new, rare, and out-of-print Vincentian titles.¹⁷

Beginning in the late 1980s the Institute received increasing numbers of inquiries concerning the availability of back issues of our publications, Vincentian titles published by other publishers, and Vincentian Heritage art, post cards, medals, posters and other devotional items. The organization first experimented with operating a bookstore through its headquarters in Perryville, Missouri. This was followed by an arrangement with the bookstore at Saint Thomas Theological Seminary in Denver, Colorado. In 1995, as the Institute moved to Chicago, it established a partnership with the DePaul University Bookstores to manage our bookstore operations. DePaul University outsourced its bookstore operations in 1997. The new vendor, Follett's, has continued since that time to administer these activities. In the spring of 2000 the Institute added e-commerce capabilities to the bookstore operation through its web site.

Another consequence of the closing of Saint Thomas Theological Seminary in Denver was that the Institute took over sponsorship of a national Vincentian program designed to train spiritual directors for the poor. Under Vie Thorgren's leadership this collaborative program has expanded and is now established at two sites; Denver, Colorado, and Plainsboro, New Jersey. Sister Joanne Vasa, D.C. (USA West Central), serves as the V.S.I. liaison with this program. Sponsorship has now passed to the Vincentian Center for Spirituality and Work in Den-

¹⁷ The Institute is most grateful to DePaul University, and in particular to Doris Brown the head of Libraries and Kathryn DeGraff the university archivist for their generous support.

ver, Colorado. The Institute continues, however, to support this ministry through regularly reviewing the Vincentian content of its curriculum.

In the late 1980s the V.S.I. established an annual grant to support Vincentian research projects. Several confreres, sisters, and lay scholars, have taken advantage of this grant opportunity to support their Vincentian research, writing and publication. The Institute is presently exploring the possibility of expanding this program.

In the spring of 2000 the Institute's web site made its initial appearance. The address is www.depaul.edu/~vstudies. The site, and its e-commerce capabilities, was made possible through the work of Reverend Atilano Fajardo, C.M., of the Philippine province. DePaul University provided support to design and host the site.

Over the years the Institute's work has been made possible by a succession of members representing the various provinces. Several of these former members have died including, Reverends Frederick Easterly, C.M. (USA East), William Eigel, C.M. (USA Midwest), James King, C.M. (USA East), Warren Dicharry, C.M. (USA South), Frederic Braakhuis, C.M. (USA Midwest); Sisters Mary Basil Roarke, D.C. (USA Northeast), Hilda McGinnis, D.C. (USA West), Jacqueline Kilar, D.C. (USA Southeast), and Virginia Kingsbury, D.C. (USA East Central).

As the activities of the Institute have matured and expanded, the level of financial resources necessary to carry out our mission has grown commensurately. Sister Kieran Kneaves, D.C. (USA West Central), served as our Treasurer for a decade. Over the last several years, Sister Francine Brown, D.C. (USA East Central), has served as our Treasurer and has overseen the computerization of our financial operations. Brother Joseph Hess, C.M., the treasurer of the Midwest Province, and his office provide us with accounting support.

In 1997 with the retirement of our Executive Secretary Gerry Hartel and our editor Reverend Stafford Poole, C.M., the Institute hired its first full-time employee, Nathaniel Michaud. A graduate of Boston and DePaul Universities, Mr. Michaud serves as our Publications Editor and Executive Assistant.

Within the last several years the Institute has made a commitment to foster collaborative ties with the Ladies of Charity, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, and the Sisters of Charity Federation in the Vincentian-Setonian tradition. Sister Sheila O'Friel, D.C. (USA Northeast), has concentrated on the Ladies of Charity and the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, while Sister Betty Ann McNeil, D.C. (USA Southeast),

has worked with the Sisters of Charity Federation in the Vincentian-Setonian tradition. The Presiding Officer also attends the annual meeting of the heads of the Vincentian Family in the United States.

The V.S.I. has played a role in promoting Vincentian Heritage in the English-speaking international provinces of the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity. There are a number of subscribers to *Vincentian Heritage* from these provinces and missions. The bookstore also receives a steady number of international requests. The Institute regularly donates English language heritage materials to other international missions and provinces. Several confreres and sisters from outside of the United States also have attended our continuing education opportunities.

The work of the Vincentian Studies Institute is part of a larger international heritage effort. The 1980 General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission requested that individual provinces or groups of provinces establish local groups for the study and promotion of our Vincentian Heritage. Several provinces, especially in Europe and Latin America, have established such organizations in line with this request.¹⁸

The future of the Vincentian Studies Institute of the United States is linked with the future of the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, and the wider Vincentian Family in this country. As the number of confreres and sisters grows inexorably smaller, the Vincentian Studies Institute will change: through the use of technology, the attraction of a new generation of lay Vincentian scholars, and perhaps even the eventual turning over of the organization to the Vincentian laity who will almost certainly lead the charism in the new century.

Over the last twenty years the Vincentian Studies Institute has been faithful to its mandate to "promote a living interest in the Vincentian Heritage." The Institute has grown in ways that no one could have foreseen at its foundation. This growth reflects the classic model of providential unfolding that is so characteristic of all apostolic activities in the Vincentian tradition. The Institute approaches the future confident that its mission will continue to grow and evolve in ways that will promote "a living interest in the Vincentian Heritage" among the wider Vincentian Family in the United States. We believe that in turn, this "living interest" will continue to manifest itself in the multiple forms of Vincentian service to our brothers and sisters who are most in need.

¹⁸ Emeric Amyot d'Inville, C.M., "The Structure of Vincentian Studies and Animation," *Vincentiana*, 44, no. 2 (March-April 2000): 128-138.