

3-2002

A Letter to Father Vincent De Paul in Heaven about the 350th Anniversary of the Vincentians in Poland

Jan Dukala C.M.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana>

 Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dukala, Jan C.M. (2002) "A Letter to Father Vincent De Paul in Heaven about the 350th Anniversary of the Vincentians in Poland," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 46: No. 2, Article 11.
Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol46/iss2/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentiana by an authorized administrator of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact mbernal2@depaul.edu, wsulliv6@depaul.edu.

**A Letter to Father Vincent De Paul in Heaven
about the 350th Anniversary of the Vincentians in Poland**

*by Jan Dukala, C.M.
Province of Poland*

Our Most Venerable and Beloved Father Vincent,

On the morning of Friday, 17 September 1660, a convoy of horse-drawn carriages with three Daughters of Charity and four Vincentians left the courtyard of Saint-Lazare for Rouen (113 kilometres away), where they boarded a ship and sailed for Poland. It took them weeks rather than days to reach their destination (it was then about 3200 kilometres). As you remember — though it is rather we on earth who need to be reminded of things — you had been bedridden for more than a month when they came into your room to take their leave. They wanted your blessing for the journey and the mission they were to accomplish in the far-off kingdom ruled by King Jan Casimir and Queen Louise-Marie Gonzaga, whom you knew from Paris. When the small party had left, you dictated a letter to Brother Ducourneau with an account of that event. It was addressed to Firmin Get, Superior of the Congregation of the Mission in Marseilles and brother of Nicolas Get, the man who had just received your blessing for his Polish mission. He and his companions arrived safely in Gdansk and then in Warsaw where they were welcomed by the superior of the Holy Cross house, Guillaume Desdames. He had left for Poland with your blessing nine years earlier. Meanwhile, on Monday 27 September shortly before 5 a.m., you, dear Father, moved out of your Parisian abode to your heavenly home. While Mademoiselle Gras (Louise de Marillac), Francis de Sales, Jane Frances de Chantal and your departed friends must have greeted you with joy, your sons and daughters on earth were filled with sadness and grief. Your funeral in Paris was worthy of a king, as people have said ever since, but the mourning did not last long because all of those who knew you — kings and courtiers, cardinals and bishops, Daughters of Charity, missionaries and the poor — were sure that your new home was filled with light, warmth and love.

Dear Father, you often asked your missionaries and, later, the Daughters of Charity to write to you from wherever they lived, far or near, about all kinds of things that were happening to them, great or small. You called on them to inform you about the state of their health, the difficulties in their apostolic work, and, of course, about their successes which you saw as one of God's gifts and the fruit of our humble cooperation with him. We know from you that regular exchange of information is vital for the ties which bind our Congregation and for the strengthening of our unity. In my letter from Poland I am going to tell you about

the celebrations which not only marked the 350th anniversary of the arrival of the Vincentians in Poland but also stressed the fact that, since 1651, they have lived and worked in this country, sharing its eventful, complicated and paradoxical history.

Let me start with the basic facts about the broad context of our anniversary. We are a small portion of the Church which is the spiritual home of 35 million Catholics (out of a population of nearly 38 million). Until 1989, when the Communist system imposed on Poland after the Second World War finally crumbled, we had 48 male religious orders and societies. Since then their number has grown to 73; they comprise about 13,000 priests and brothers and some 3,000 aspirants. We, your missionaries, are just one of those religious Congregations. In our province there are three bishops, 247 priests, 42 clerics and eight coadjutor brothers. We live in 25 houses in this country and two abroad (one in Austria, the other one in France). Sixty-three missionaries — priests and brothers — who were born in Poland and received their formation in our seminaries have gone to work abroad in Europe and overseas (in Africa, America and Asia).

I am mentioning this to you, Venerable Father, because some of the missionaries who are working abroad returned to Poland for the anniversary festivities like birds that return to their old nests. Also many laymen, and not just from our parishes, joined in the preparation and celebration of the great anniversary of our province. Among them were the mayors and councillors of the towns where we have our houses, and some members of parliament. Even the Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek (a Protestant) acknowledged the occasion. Unable to attend the celebrations at the Holy Cross Church in Warsaw, he sent an eloquent and thoughtful letter to the Pastor, Mieczysław Kozłowski. Journalists too contributed to our jubilee. In a number of articles in the daily and weekly press and on the radio they talked about you, dear Father Vincent, your activities in France and your missionaries in Poland. There were also some slots on television, including an interview with our Visitor Bronisław Sieńczak. I am not going to write more about it so as not to annoy you. You disapproved of publicity even in your day. The Congregation was not to seek it lest its noise should drown the humility of the men of the mission and mere words replace real work for the benefit of the poor. Nevertheless, if Francis de Sales, the patron saint of journalists — you are still very good friends, are you not? — asks you about them, tell him that in Poland they can still talk and write about the Good News, spiritual life and Christian charity in an interesting and respectful way and not just run after political scandal, violence and

sex; i.e., stories which, unfortunately, seem to appeal most to the mass audience.

The anniversary celebrations were divided into four phases.

The opening took place in Bydgoszcz (northwestern Poland) in a basilica dedicated to you, dear Father Vincent. The construction of the church began in 1925 as a vow of gratitude to mark the 300th anniversary of the Congregation of the Mission. The present jubilee was inaugurated there on 23-27 September 2000. In the choir that sang *Te Deum laudamus* and *Magnificat* was the voice of the Superior General Fr. Robert Maloney. He concelebrated the thanksgiving Mass with three bishops (two of them members of the Vincentian family), the Visitor Bronisław Sieńczak and 110 priests (Vincentians, diocesan clergy and guests from other religious orders). It is worth noting that about 35 members of the Congregation hail from that parish. In Bydgoszcz the Superior General gave two conferences, one for the Vincentian clergy and the other for representatives of various groups within the Vincentian Family. Twenty buses brought them to the meeting from all parts of Poland, a visible proof of its steady growth over the last ten years. The ceremonies were also attended by the Daughters of Charity, who have their provincial centre at Chełmno on the Vistula, 60 kilometres from Bydgoszcz. They celebrated the 150th anniversary of their province a few days later — a festive occasion attended likewise by their Superior General, who travelled to Poland in the company of Fr. Józef Kapuściak, Assistant General. The Bydgoszcz festivities were well prepared and lasted three full days. As general participation in religious ceremonies continues to be high in Poland, the occasion was used for an in-depth evangelization reflecting the Vincentian spirit (Bydgoszcz is a big city of some 350,000). It was Fr. Augustyn Konek, local superior and pastor, who as host and organizer, made the Bydgoszcz festivities a resounding success.

The Kraków phase of the jubilee proceeded in two movements. The first began on 8 September with the opening and official blessing of the *Joyful News 2000*, a large educational centre at Piekary near Kraków. It was followed by a two-day symposium with prayers, lectures and discussions on the history of the province, the nature of today's apostolic work and perspectives for the future. The sessions took place on 13 and 14 October in the Kraków Provincial House. The opening of the *Joyful News 2000* centre attracted once again the Superior General Robert Maloney (who came from Rome) and an army of guests, Vincentians and laymen from Poland and abroad. Among them was Cardinal Franciszek Macharski, a handful of top-ranking politicians and, last but not least, Mrs. Josephine Gebert, a Swiss benefactress of the Centre and, if you will allow me to

make this comparison, a present-day Mme. de Gondi. The celebrities at the *Joyful News 2000* were hosted by Bronisław Sieńczak, who, together with his collaborators and especially Fr. Czesław Patoń, is its initiator and *spiritus movens*. I am sure that the Visitor, Bronisław Sieńczak, has been telling you about it for years because he cannot help doing it on each and every occasion no matter who happens to be his listener. The action of helping children from materially or spiritually impoverished families has been going on for ten years now in a few smaller educational centres run by the Vincentians in Kraków (there are three of them), Tarnów, Żmigród and elsewhere. We feel that there is now more need of this type of work aimed at helping families and the young people themselves than at any other time and that it opens one of the doors for the future in our province. It is at any rate a highly visible manifestation of the special charism of our Congregation.

Now I would like to return to the second act of the Kraków Jubilee which took place on 12-13 October in our House at 4, Stradom Street. The house can be described best in the following words from the litany in your honour, *semper sibi constans*. At first, for 200 years, the Congregation of the Mission conducted here the formation of priests for the Kraków Diocese (alongside the Vincentian students). Since 1901 it has been the cradle of all Polish Vincentians and, for the last few decades, it has helped in the formation of students from five to eight other religious congregations. Apart from the liturgy, solemnized in our beautiful, though somewhat cramped, church, the jubilee was celebrated in the hall of the Institute of Theology. Two days were packed with lectures and discussions about the history of the Congregation in Poland and its present-day activities. The occasion was used to promote two volumes (the third and last volume is being prepared) of a commemorative book marking the 350 years of Vincentian presence in Poland. The audience also had the opportunity to see the premiere of a one-hour film about the life of the Vincentians called *Infinite Mission*. It is the fruit of a year's work of a team of professionals and a Vincentian. Among the guest participants at the session were some Daughters of Charity, missionaries from three other religious societies, and members of the Kraków laity who maintain friendly relations with our community. The event at Stradom was organized and hosted by the superior of the house and rector of the Institute of Theology, Fr. Kryspin Banko.

Dear Blessed Father Vincent! The third instalment of the 2001 Vincentian Jubilee, which took place between 9 and 15 September in the Holy Cross Church in Warsaw, had the most impressive programme, featuring a “polyphony” of voices. As you remember, it was there that the first Vincentians to arrive in Poland

settled down in November 1651. Led by their superior, Lambert aux Couteaux, they took two years to learn Polish and take all the parochial duties in their stride. Later they built a beautiful church, which would play an immense role in Warsaw's history (for 100 years it functioned as the substitute Warsaw cathedral). Indeed, the church and its religious work continue to enjoy a high reputation and respect in the Polish capital. As Prime Minister Buzek wrote in the letter to Cardinal Józef Glemp and the pastor, Mieczysław Kozłowski:

This church with its missionaries has had a firm place in the religious, cultural, social, scientific and political life of our country. It is here that Poles and visitors from all over the world pay their homage at the urns with the hearts of Frederick Chopin and Władysław Reymont (the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1924).

The activities of the Vincentians in Poland, their invaluable contribution to various spheres of religious and national life (missions, pastoral work, diocesan seminaries, primary education, science, culture, charitable work for the ill and the poor) were the subject of homilies by the Apostolic Nuncio Archbishop Józef Kowalczyk, Cardinal Józef Glemp, Bishop Marian Duś, Archbishop Tadeusz Gocłowski CM and the Visitor, Bronisław Sieńczak, among others.

The celebrations in Warsaw attracted a large number of lay participants. Among them were, in addition to the parishioners of the Holy Cross Church, numerous journalists, who wrote articles about the Vincentians, talked about our missionaries on the radio, showed highlights of our festivities on television, and made two films for Polish television about the Congregation of the Mission and Holy Cross Parish.

Dear Father Vincent, I am about to finish. Excuse me for carrying on so long. I began my story by reminding you of the three groups of missionaries that came for your blessing to Saint-Lazare before leaving for Poland (in 1651, 1654 and 1660). We still need your blessing very badly. We begged for it during our anniversary celebrations and we have begged for it since. Having listened to the accounts of Vincentians who took part in our jubilee and who may in a way have a broader picture than ordinary observers, I am confident that the jubilee deepened our spiritual lives and refocused our charism and that its ripples were felt by many laymen, especially those who belong to the Vincentian Family. André Froissard of Paris, whose high regard for you is on record and needs no further proof, makes an intriguing disclosure on the last page of his wise and beautiful book on St Vincent de Paul:

Overawed and moved, spellbound by that face which knew something of heaven and tears, it was my turn to join the crowd of children and wretches whose lives were saved by Father Vincent de Paul. Today, too, there are amidst us missionaries, Daughters of Charity, as well as countless followers of that saintly man, who receive the mystery which, in Christ's name, reveals to them his heart. The mystery of the soul's growth is — compassion.

Thank you — let us all thank you — dear Father Vincent, for revealing to us the secret of the *unfolding of the soul*. It is possible, or even most probable, that the festive anniversary of the arrival of your missionaries to Poland let some of those that took part in it see the mystery of your heart.