Pa, Ma, and Fa: Private Lives of Nineteenth-Century American Vincentians

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Reposing in the archives of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia is a cache of fifty-six private letters written by nine Vincentians to members of the prominent Willcox family of Ivy Mills, Pennsylvania. These letters offer probably the only surviving glimpse of the private lives and thoughts of American Vincentians in the mid-nineteenth century. This article sets out the story of this charitable family and their relationship to their Vincentian pastors. Given the lack of diaries, biographies, obituaries, or even newspaper accounts, any information about these priests is valuable. The letters are all the more interesting since they were private and not the usual formal letters addressed to superiors reporting on conditions of Vincentian houses and works.

The Vincentian mission at Ivy Mills, Delaware County, Pennsylvania, does not form part of the standard American Vincentian story. Nevertheless, understanding how it functioned and the relationships involved there sheds an important light on how American Catholic parishes evolved. They began in the homes of Catholics before developing into small chapels and then generally into today’s large parish complexes.

Ivy Mills was a settlement in Glen Mills near Chester Heights, Pennsylvania, west of Philadelphia. Its story begins with Thomas Willcox (d. 1779), an early English settler. He married Elizabeth Cole, an Irish-born Catholic, and it was this marriage that probably led to his becoming a Catholic, making him the head of the first Catholic family in Pennsylvania. Mass was celebrated from 1720 in his family home, in a place originally called Concord (now in Concord Township). The Willcoxes had ten children, among whom was Mark Willcox (19 August 1744–7 February 1827). Mark succeeded his father in running the nearby family paper mill.

James Mark Willcox (12 April 1791–4 March 1854), Mark’s son, married twice. He married his first wife, Eliza Orne, on 4 October 1813. She died 28 January 1817 in Savannah, where she had gone for her health. His second wife was Mary Brackett (1796–1866), of Quincy, Massachusetts. They married on 1 November 1819. She was of strong and old Puritan stock. James succeeded his father at the family business. He energetically built up the family fortunes, rebuilding the century-old Lower Glen paper mill. Willcox also took an interest in the West Chester and Philadelphia Railway and built a station serving Glen Mills in 1845.

From 1804 to 1827, the Willcox family and others in the area received Father Patrick Kenny, the pastor of St. Peter’s, in Wilmington, Delaware. The chapel (actually a room in the family home) was called St. Mary’s. The family had a portable altar of uncertain date that would fold up for storage, and it and some of its ornaments survive.

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The old Willcox home was demolished in 1837 to be replaced by another on the same site. It continued having a space for Sunday worship and prayer. In 1852, when the Catholic community had grown, James donated land for St. Thomas Church. However, James and his father retained the privilege of having a private oratory in their home, an agreement that Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick of Philadelphia made. The original church was built in 1853.

James and Mary had five sons, of whom the eldest, another Mark (1824–1883), succeeded to the family business. He had studied in Georgetown and then in Rome, where he pursued languages, mathematics, and philosophy, in which he received a doctorate in 1847 from Pius IX. Back in Ivy Mills, he oversaw the work. He abandoned Lower Glen Mills after 1866, and in its place built Upper Glen Mills, on Chester Creek. It is believed that he invented good banknote paper, and his paper mill became a leading supplier of paper for Provincial, Continental, and Federal currency, as well as of banknote paper for several South American nations in later years.

His mother became a Catholic in 1827, much to her Puritan family’s dislike. Bishop Kenrick confirmed both her and her husband on 1 May 1842, during a visit to their community, at which time he also confirmed other members of the incipient parish.

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Mary and the Vincentians

The family began its relationship with the Vincentians in 1842. Three of them had moved from the Barrens in 1841 to take up the direction of the Philadelphia seminary. One confrere, Thomas Burke, came to celebrate Mass, and it is perhaps through this contact that the family offered their house for the seminarians. They wanted to provide a home and family setting for them. At the close of the academic year, then, faculty members brought some of the seminarians to Ivy Mills for a summer break. It is unclear how many there were, but out of about thirty seminarians, perhaps five or six would have lived at too great a distance to travel during the summer. With the exception of 1844, during the nativist riots in Philadelphia, the seminarians came yearly through 1854, when James (Pa) died. Family members who had a residence in the city sometimes returned the visits by calling at the seminary.

Besides the summer visits, in later years the Vincentians asked James and his son, also James M. (1824–1895), to sit on the board of trustees of Hamilton Village, in West Philadelphia. Four confreres (Thaddeus Amat, John Baptist Tornatore, Michael Domenec, and Andrew Rossi) and another layman, John Sullivan, laid there the legal groundwork for the purchase of land in Germantown for St. Vincent’s Church on Price Street.

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5 Metropolitan Catholic Almanac and Laity’s Guide (Baltimore: Fielding Lucas Jr., 1842), p. 81

The Vincentians from the seminary came to Ivy Mills not only in the summer but also during the year, beginning at least in 1844. After 1845, they would travel to Glen Mills usually twice a month to celebrate Mass and baptisms and to hear confessions. As Mary became interested in developing her spiritual life, she relied on spiritual directors, both diocesan and Vincentian, as the existing correspondence shows.

Besides the Vincentian correspondence, she kept the majority of her incoming correspondence with another ten priests, both diocesan and religious. None of her outgoing correspondence with the Vincentians has survived. Interestingly, both the seminarians and the Vincentians called her Mother or Ma, undoubtedly at her urging. They also referred to her husband as Pa, although none of his correspondence with the Vincentians apparently exists. Probably as a joke, at least one of the Vincentians referred to himself and his confreres as Fa. The impression is therefore given of lighthearted but respectful relationships with the family. Some of the Vincentians were more formal, addressing Mrs. Willcox as “respected lady” (Mariano Maller), “my dear child in Christ” (Bartholomew Rollando, although she was fourteen years older than he), and “most respectable & devout servant of God” (Tornatore). Their closings were also a mixture of informal and formal, as might be expected.

**Correspondence**

The surviving Vincentian correspondence dates from 1842 through 1856. The majority come from 1843 to 1847. The writers are presented here in chronological order of their earliest letters.

**Mariano Maller**

Maller (1817–1892) was the superior of the seminary in Philadelphia from 1841 to 1847, and vicar general of the diocese. Thirteen of his letters remain in the Willcox correspondence. He was young, nineteen years Mary’s junior. As superior of the seminary, he was responsible for the conduct of his students and must have kept a close watch on them during their time with the family. However, he never mentioned this concern in the surviving letters. As pastor of Ivy Mills in 1846–1847, he had many opportunities to visit. He succeeded John Timon (1797–1867) as provincial in 1846, but his office did not tie him down to a fixed residence. He supervised the union of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s of

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8 Mary died on 21 March 1866, and was buried with her husband James Mark in the family graveyard, up the hillside from the family home. This private cemetery contains graves and stones of the original founding family and many of their descendants.
Mother Seton, Emmitsburg, Maryland, with the Daughters of Charity. He moved to Europe in 1850, was later provincial in Brazil, and, after a variety of other important positions, became provincial of Spain in 1866.

His letters are clearly written, conveying spiritual direction on a variety of topics: prayer, the will of God, the Bible, meditation, and the sorrows of maternal life, such as the death of her daughter Mary Elizabeth (1831–1846). His writing shows a man sure of himself, sober, and capable of leadership.

He also gave a good description of the rigors of travel in his period. In 1847, he happened to be taking the same train as the famous Henry Clay. His appearance caused a sensation wherever the train passed. On the same trip, Maller took the stagecoach and then boarded a steamboat from Wheeling, West Virginia, on his way to Cincinnati and ending in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, his new assignment.

**Alexander Frasi**

Frasi (b. 1817) was a much different personality than Maller. Mary kept seventeen of Frasi’s letters, the most of any of her Vincentian correspondents. They date from 1843 to 1848. He was the only one to use “Fa” in his letters, perhaps a sign of his personality and closeness to the family. He arrived in the United States in 1842 from the province of Turin and came to Philadelphia to work in St. Charles Seminary. He was also assigned to what he called “my dear neat little church,” St. Stephen in Nicetown, a neighborhood in North Philadelphia, which he visited twice a month. He was its first pastor from 1844 to 1846. He was also the first Vincentian to be named pastor of Ivy Mills. In a letter from 1844, he described his work and added, “Though I a’int [sic] a Yankee, they tell me they understand me well enough.”

The nativist (or Know-Nothing) riots of May and July of 1844 disturbed his peaceful world in Philadelphia. The anti-Catholic rioters burned and looted in the city, but left the country alone. Since the bishop did not want the seminarians to stay at Ivy Mills in that period, Frasi reported that they fled and “were all frightened to death.” The riots were soon put down and “arrests increase daily.”

His language was often affectionate and even poetic, as in this letter of 15 March 1844, written to thank Ma for a gift of flowers: “James brought to me your present. How to thank you for it I know not. In there is such a delicacy of taste in the choice you have made.... I have mused over it, and I thought you intended to give me also an emblem in it of the

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10 Frasi to Mary Willcox, 13 August 1844, archives of the American Catholic Historical Society, Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center, Seminary of St. Charles Borromeo, Overbrook, PA. Hereinafter cited as ACHS.
11 Maller to Mary Willcox, 3 June 1844, ACHS; Frasi to Mary Willcox, 18 July 1844, ACHS.
priestly life I should live. I thought the white and fragrant camellia to mean the purity of conscience, the balmy odor of which must always be diffused from the minister of the altar.”

He was also affectionate toward members of the family, especially the children. He wrote of Mary’s son William Jenkins (1815–1845), his contemporary: “I love William very much.” Consequently, he was deeply moved by William’s death: “I have lost the tenderest friend I had, I should say a fond brother!” Clearly, he had found warm friends and a family. However, he was unhappy in Philadelphia, probably because he did not fit in with his other confreres. Consequently, Timon, the provincial, planned to send Frasi to St. Louis in 1844. He received a reprieve; even before moving to St. Louis in 1846, he asked formally to return to Italy, alleging that he had been neglected.

Once at the seminary in St. Louis, he became homesick for Philadelphia, and especially for the Willcox family. “I am your exiled child.... I live a hermit life.... I have never been so unhappy in my life.... When the blues come on, and in spite of all my exertions they come too often ... I think of you and get better.”¹² He made no friends in St. Louis and must have been severely depressed. One reason for his condition was the “Italian Faction” at the seminary in St. Louis, a source of student complaints about the strict discipline imposed by the other Italian confreres (Francis James Burlando and Joseph Demarchi),¹³ presumably supported by Frasi.

¹² Frasi, St. Louis, Missouri, to Mary Willcox, 25 September and 13 November 1846, ACHS.
¹³ Emmanuel Domenech, John Anselm, and Francis X. Weiss, St. Louis, to Jean-Baptiste Étienne, Paris, 6 April 1848, in Archives of the General Curia, Rome [Hereinafter ACGR], American papers.
Another change in his life was Timon’s appointment as bishop of the new diocese of Buffalo in 1847. Frasi, appointed the local (perhaps even the provincial) treasurer, had come down with typhoid besides. He wrote that Timon, “our good old man, is snatched away from us to make him a Bishop.” He presumed that Maller, his former superior in Philadelphia and then in Cape Girardeau, would succeed Timon, thus further disturbing his balance.\textsuperscript{14}

His regular correspondence with Ma ceases in 1847, either because he stopped writing or Mary did not keep his letters. In 1848, still in St. Louis, he had not improved and asked for a dispensation from his vows as a Vincentian, a request he repeated in 1849. His superior, Maller, stigmatized him as having a “bad character” and not living a regular Vincentian life.\textsuperscript{15} He was dispensed in 1850, went to Paris, returned to the United States, and then went at last to Italy at some point after 1854. There, he joined the diocese of Vercelli, where he died in 1871.

\textbf{Antonio Penco}

Penco (1813–1875), another Italian, arrived in the United States in 1840. Before he entered the Congregation, he completed his studies at the Vincentian school in Savona and then went to work in his father’s business. He was attracted to the mission in the United States after attending a sermon by Jean-Marie Odin (1800–1870) on a recruiting mission in Italy. Penco then made his novitiate and seminary studies and was ordained in 1840.

As a sign of the difficulties in those early years of the American province, Timon, lacking anyone else, assigned this newly ordained priest to be the superior of the seminary in New York.\textsuperscript{16} He moved several times. He was in Philadelphia for the 1842–1843 academic year and became pastor of the Ivy Mills community in 1845. He was superior of the Cape Girardeau seminary for the following academic year. Financial and disciplinary conditions were too much for him, and Penco asked to return to Italy.\textsuperscript{17} Instead, Maller had him return to Philadelphia.

When Maller left for Europe in 1850, Penco replaced him as the third provincial of the American province. He served until he returned to Italy to help manage family affairs after the death of his brother.\textsuperscript{18} He never returned to the province he had once led.

\textsuperscript{14} Frasi, St. Louis, Missouri, to Mary Willcox, 11 October 1847, ACHS.
\textsuperscript{15} General council minutes, vol. 1, meeting of 14 January 1850, ACGR.
\textsuperscript{16} Penco, New York, to Pierre Paul Sturchi, Paris, 2 November 1842, ACGR.
\textsuperscript{17} Penco, Cape Girardeau, to Étienne, Paris, 24 November 1845, ACGR.
His only letter to Mary dates from 18 October 1845. In it, he expresses his gratitude somewhat formally to Mary and her family for their friendship and hospitality. He was about to leave for Cape Girardeau and wrote, “It is on an occasion as this, when nature urges more forcibly her rights than ever, that such feelings seem to grow deeper and deeper, and scarcely differ [defer?] to be controlled ever; however, we must bow to the divine will, and willingly, if not we cannot cheerfully part.”

**Bartholomew Rollando**

From Rollando (1810–1847) there are eight letters, written from 1845 to 1847. He entered the Congregation in Italy and was ordained there before leaving for the United States in 1834. He and four companions departed Livorno in August that year and arrived at the Barrens in November. In the following year, he was named director of the novitiate (the internal seminary) but expressed significant reservations about their chaotic formation: six directors were appointed over a little more than two years.

Like Frasi and Penco, Rollando had problems in his community life. His service as novice director lasted until 1839, when he was sent to the mission at Old Mines, Missouri, perhaps in the hope that his absence from the central house would allow him to reassess his behavior. He also gave some missions and was in Springfield, Illinois, in 1843.19 Living somewhat apart from the community did not prepare him for his new assignment, the seminary in Philadelphia. He arrived there in 1844 and was pastor at Ivy Mills as well. Still

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19 Rollando, Springfield, to Étienne, Paris, 8 December 1843, in ACGR, American papers.
unhappy, he asked either to return to Italy or to be dispensed from his vows. Instead, Maller sent him to the mission in Texas. This was no better, and his “habitual irregularity,” that is, his lack of observance of the rules, made his relationships with the community difficult. The general council studied this ongoing case and reluctantly agreed to Rollando’s departure, but for some reason he remained in Texas. In 1847, he signaled his intention to return to Italy but the province would not provide the money for his passage. He then wanted to work for a bishop and receive a salary to enable his return, but he died soon thereafter.

His relationship with the Willcox family must have been one of the bright spots in his troubled life. His surviving letters to Mary are warm, and he regularly offered her spiritual guidance. All the letters date from his time in Galveston. He reached there after a trip by railroad, stagecoach, and steamboat. Once in Galveston, he set to work at its only church, the cathedral of Odin’s diocese. Among other works, he supported the Galveston Catholic Benevolent Society. It had 125 members, both Catholics and Protestants. Its leader was Mrs. Elena Reyes Blossman (1815-1893), the Spanish-born wife of Richard Daniel Blossman (1833-1878). He was a successful businessman and English convert, and she was known for her charity, intellect, and literary abilities. Rollando put Elena and Mary into contact, and one letter from Elena to Mary survives, joined to one of Rollando’s (19 August 1846).

The rest of his letters offer spiritual direction, information about his mission, and news about his health. One letter in particular, dated 22 May 1846, has a striking paragraph that Mary highlighted in the margin. Rollando is urging her to open her heart to God: “Ah, Madam, you have made this good God wait to [sic] long. He has been for so many years knocking & knocking again at the door of your heart saying to you, in the words of the spouse of the sacred canticles ‘Open to me my sister and my love ... behold I stand at the door and knock,’ without losing patience, without passing by, that having at last conquered it ... etc.”

A similar rhapsodic outpouring on humility and prayer followed in a letter of 11 February 1847: “Although I send the above canticle to Mark [her husband], it is for you also that you may burn, and be melted with very love for him who loved you when you were not born, who loved you when you did not love him, who loves you more now because you desire to love him, ... It is my ardent wish for one of my dearest children that I ever had, at the beginning of this new year and for ever.”

After Texas became a state, he was present when the American forces were recruiting soldiers for a war against Mexico. He clearly did not approve, writing, “They are here firing

20 General council minutes, vol. 1, p. 374, meeting of 6 October 1845, ACGR.
21 General council minutes, vol. 1, p. 387, meeting of 23 February 1846, ACGR.
22 General council minutes, vol. 1, p. 433, meeting of 2 August 1847, ACGR.
23 Obituary, Corpus Christi Caller, undated clipping, accessed from Elena Blossman, at: https://www.newspapers.com/image/77717491/
the canon [sic] very often to recruit volunteers for the Mexican war. Many of our men capable of bearing arms have already started for their work of destruction and plunder.”

In his own life, he battled illness. In August 1846, he complained of his recent sickness, “constantly puking,” but restricted himself to natural remedies. In the following December, he had the misfortune of being dosed with calomel (also known as mercurous chloride), a common remedy at the time, but one that was extremely toxic. Rollando only got worse, and his system was likely weakened. The yellow fever epidemic of 1847 that broke out in New Orleans spread to Galveston and claimed Burlando, as Rollando reported. Rollando himself died there on 11 October 1847, about a month after his final letter to Mary.

**Thaddeus Amat**

Mary preserved five letters from Amat (1811–1878), the best known among these correspondents because he became the bishop of Monterey, California.

He was born in Spain, fled from there during one of its many wars, and finished his preparations for priesthood in Paris. He was ordained there in December 1837 and departed for the United States the following August. He, six other Spaniards, and two Italians landed in New Orleans. His first ministry was in southern Louisiana. He moved to Missouri by 1844, serving in St. Louis and Cape Girardeau. He was also a member of the provincial

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24 Rollando, Galveston, to Mary Willcox, 24 December 1846, ACHS.
25 Rollando, Galveston, to Mary Willcox, 12 August 1846, ACHS.
council. He and his fellow consultors resolved that the visitor, Timon, should go to Paris to explain in person the important and pressing affairs of the young province. These generally involved financial and personnel matters, which Timon was managing poorly.

Amat was the first consultor and hence responsible for the affairs of the province during Timon’s numerous absences. By July 1848, Amat had moved to Philadelphia, where he served as the rector of the seminary until 1852. He was also the pastor of Ivy Mills, and the baptismal register shows him there from 1848 to 1850. He seems to have ministered there either every month or every two weeks. He continued as a provincial consultor. Because of this role, he was acting provincial from 1848 to 1850, while Maller was negotiating the union of the Daughters of Charity and the Sisters of Charity. Bishop Kenrick thought so much of Amat that he named him his vicar general. This lasted only briefly since Amat became bishop of Monterey (later Monterey-Los Angeles) in 1853.

When he received word that he could be named, he worked to avoid the appointment. He quickly went to Europe, visiting England, Spain, and France. Jean-Baptiste Étienne, the superior general, named him to accompany the first group of Daughters of Charity and Vincentians to Chile. This never happened since the group’s departure was postponed from 1850 to 1853, and by that time Amat was in Monterey.

His five letters to Mary date from 1849 to 1853. The earliest was written on 24 July 1849 from Paris. He related that cholera had recently broken out in the city, and the Daughters of Charity lost forty-two of their number during May and June. A year later, Amat was back in Philadelphia. He wrote to Mary with suggestions for her spiritual reading (Alphonsus Rodriguez, *Practice of Perfection and Christian Virtues*; and Lorenzo Scupoli, *Spiritual Combat*) and notes on what would help her spiritual development, such as weekly confession and regular communion. Nothing in these letters is found concerning his episcopal appointment, the turning point in his life. The letters are much less personal and revealing than those from his contemporaries in the Willcox circle of friends.

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27 “Liber Baptizatorum in Loco Ecclesiae Sanctae Mariae dicto vulgo ‘Ivy Mills,’ Delaware Co. Pennsylvania S[ta]tu ab anno reparatae salutis 1809;” “Liber Matrimoniorum pro Ecclesia Sanctae Mariae in ‘Ivy Mills,’” at Delaware County Historical Society, Broomall, PA, consulted in June 1997. A note accompanying the marriage records comes from Amat, who copied the original records for this register: “The following Records of from the actual Register of St. Mary’s Ivy Mills, and inserted here, some of which are translated from latin [sic], for the sake of uniformity, by Rev. Thaddeus Amat actually Pastor of said place.”


The eldest of the correspondents was Tornatore (1783–1864). Another Italian, he reached the American mission in 1829. His appointment was as superior of St. Mary’s of the Barrens, the central house of the mission. He was to replace Joseph Rosati, who had been a bishop since 1823 but had continued as the superior of the Barrens. The two responsibilities became incompatible as time moved along, since Rosati was often absent, and others replaced him in the house on an ad hoc basis. Tornatore, a domineering personality of the old school, was expected to whip the mother house into shape through observance of the Congregation’s traditional practices and outlook. One of his goals was to have his confreres live together in community, not separately in the scattered parishes that they had helped to establish in the Missouri wilderness.

As can be expected, his confreres did not share his commitments to strict observance, and he eventually moved to Cape Girardeau and to Old Mines. Thomas Shaw, who wrote a sketch of Tornatore’s life, mentioned that the Italians at the Barrens disliked being there. Others complained that Tornatore’s English was never very strong, and five unhappy young brothers even left the Congregation to return to Italy.

Tornatore was then called on to prop up the seminary of St. Thomas, near Bardstown, Kentucky. He was unsuccessful in the face of debts and opposition from local clergy, and he left after a short time for Philadelphia. There, he taught in the seminary and became its rector for the 1852–1853 academic year. Penco, who had taught there himself, was then the provincial, but he had no one to assign to Philadelphia after that year, and he withdrew his remaining men. Tornatore moved first to St. Louis then returned to the Barrens, where he would minister until his death in 1864.

In a letter to one of the Willcox men, Tornatore contrasted the peace of the Barrens with the noise of the city: “That is the solitary place, where I live tranquil, & undisturbed as well as when I was at Ivy-mill; that is, afar from such a noise, as it was in Philadelphia, caused, every night, by fire men, with terror. This establishment is no [not] rich, but pacific and collected [recollected]; hence I am pleased in it.”

The rest of his letters are general letters of news and personal information. One to Ida Willcox, one of the daughters whom he greeted as “dear daughter of Jesus,” was clearly written to a child:

I am very glad, that the fields begin to look green, and the trees bud; but I am not a calf to feed upon fine grass, neither a tree worm to eat into the leaves; I rather look for some red coloured fruit, as cherries, strawberries, as such ones I taste much.

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Therefore as soon as such relishing fruit shall be ripe, I hope, you will inform me. When we will come, with the Seminarians, we will buy a good provision of fish-hooks to fish in the pond Pa has dug; and, on Friday, we will be able to eat fresh fish. Take care of the English rabbits of blue eyes.

He also offered Mary words of consolation over the loss of Pa, who died in 1854. The priest opened his letter with the formal salutation “most respectable, & devout servant of God, Madam Willcox.” He then offered his advice for her new life without her husband: “Concerning your person, Madam, you know that you are entirely of God; God is your heart, God is your mind; God is your will; God is your life; God is your all. But you must be so wholly of God, as, in due time, you mind & regulate your family; as our Lord bids every widow, and as you, thanks [be to] God, verily do, with a great deal of merit before God.”

Timothy D. O’Keefe, Francis James Burlando, Andrew Rossi

The final three correspondents wrote between 1852 and 1854. O’Keefe (1819–1885) came to the United States from Ireland. He had entered the Congregation in Paris in 1842 after his ordination, and he came to the Barrens as a novice in 1844, when he took his vows. There is little information about him, except that he was at Cape Girardeau when he wrote the surviving letter, and was later at the Barrens. He served briefly at the Philadelphia seminary, where he came to know the Willcox family. “You may rest assured that it will be a long time before I forget my kind friends of Ivy Mills,” he wrote on 21 October 1852.
Burlando (1814–1873) is much better known. He entered the Congregation in Genoa in 1837, was ordained a priest in Turin in 1838, and came to the United States, still a novice. He made his vows at the Barrens on Christmas Day 1839. His first important assignment was as superior of the seminary in Cincinnati at its opening under the Vincentians in 1842. He found the material conditions there disastrous, but he drew his consolation from the priests and students.\footnote{Burlando, Cincinnati, to Sturchi, Paris, 6 June 1843, in ACGR, American papers.} The province left, however, in 1845. Burlando then became pastor of St. Vincent’s parish in St. Louis, taught at the adjoining seminary,\footnote{Metropolitan Catholic Almanac and Laity’s Guide (Baltimore: Fielding Lucas Jr., 1846), p. 134.} and was a consultor and provincial treasurer from 1848. When Maller left for Brazil in 1853, Burlando succeeded him as director of the Daughters of Charity in Emmitsburg, Maryland. He would fill that responsibility until his death following a stroke in 1873.\footnote{On Burlando, see “Notice sur M. Burlando,” Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission 39 (1874): 476–83.}

The single letter from him came from Mt. Hope Institution in Baltimore.\footnote{Burlando, Baltimore, to Mary Willcox, 28 January 185(?), ACHS.} He was recovering from some illness. The occasion of writing was to acknowledge a gift from Mrs. Willcox, a Christmas Day collection that had reached him only a month later. She was possibly embarrassed by the delay. In reply, he enclosed a picture of Pius IX.

Finally, there is one letter from Andrew Rossi (1819–1855), undated but probably 1854, inasmuch as it offers consolation on death of Pa. Rossi entered the Congregation in the house of Genoa in 1845. He arrived in the United States in the following year in company with three other Italian confreres. He was in Philadelphia from 1847 until 1853, as a member of the seminary faculty, and as a pastor at Ivy Mills (1847–1848). He continued his services at Ivy Mills until 1852. No more Vincentians appeared in the records after him. He himself went to Brazil in 1855, ostensibly for his health. As often happened, his health there declined rapidly and he died 19 January 1855.

In his letter, his condolences take the form of comparing the death of Jesus (he is writing on Good Friday 1854) with the death of Mr. Willcox: “I cannot write to you without touching the wound which is yet too fresh to be healed. It being good Friday, being a day on which the Church mourns for her divine spouse who is laid lifeless in the monument, I feel confident that in expressing my simpathy [sic] for you and in claiming a great share in your grief, I will not add sorrow to sorrow.”

\textit{Michael Domenec, Thomas Burke}

For some reason, there are no letters in the collection from these two remaining confreres in Philadelphia. Domenec (1816–1878), a Spaniard, taught at the seminary (1845–
1852) and was pastor in Nicetown after Frasi. Afterward he became bishop of Pittsburgh (later of Allegheny). He likely shared the hospitality at Ivy Mills.

Thomas Burke (1808–1877) was born in Ireland, entered the Congregation in Rome in 1834, and accompanied Bishop Odin and two others to the United States in 1837–1838. He was also at the Philadelphia seminary, its treasurer from 1842 to 1844.

Conclusion

What we can learn about the private lives of the Vincentians in this young period in the life of the American province?

The Willcoxes filled a significant emotional vacuum in the lives of these early confreres, almost all of whom had left their families behind in Europe and never saw them again. For Frasi, this was too much, and he returned to his homeland. Penco also returned, but only out of duty to his late brother’s family. Despite the large number of extant letters, we do not know how frequently the Vincentians wrote, since it is uncertain whether Mary saved only some or all of the correspondence. If her outgoing correspondence to the Vincentians existed, that would provide an answer. The texts refer to previous letters on occasion, but not enough can be gleaned from these passing references to draw many conclusions.

The Vincentians exercised their priesthood relative to the family in various ways: being responsible for the Philadelphia seminarians, writing words of spiritual direction and encouragement for Mary, and administering the sacraments in the Willcox home. The hierarchical boundaries between clergy and people were blurred because of their friendship. Indeed, some of the letters do not even hint at the identities of the writers; they could have been simply social friends, as they were, instead of pastors.
Vincentian life for the writers was often haphazard and disorganized as the province was beginning its life in the United States. Numerous changes of assignments are one indication of the condition, as are the complaints concerning financial and personnel issues. The writers, however, eschewed mere gossip concerning their confreres. Their health was another matter, since life was often rough. Rossi and Rollando both died in their thirties, but the others outlived the average age at death of Vincentians worldwide.

Their words of spiritual direction show a good balance in their recommendations. They proposed a standard range of spiritual practices, such as reading and meditation, and frequenting the sacraments. Surprisingly, these Vincentians never referred either to the Virgin Mary (or the Rosary), despite the name of their friend and hostess, or to Saint Vincent de Paul. They also avoided commentary on political issues, except for passing references to the nativist riots and the Mexican War. Neither did they discuss another major issue that would affect them, the union with Paris of the Sisters of Charity headquartered in Emmitsburg.

Their ministry in the United States faced great challenges in trying to establish faith communities in a mostly empty country. They also had to make their way through the new reality of dealing with members of numerous other churches, some hostile to Catholics. In this light, they took an interest in stories of conversion and were wary of persecution in a United States that was still working out the implications of its founding documents that guaranteed freedom of religion. One aspect that they could manage was construction, and new buildings were a significant index of accomplishment, as occasional references in the letters attest.

In general, these mostly young Vincentian missionaries come through in their letters as regular human persons, each with his own needs and ways of relating to others. Their spiritual teaching, which they hopefully followed in their own lives, shows them to be priests who were trying to be faithful to their commitments to the Church and the Congregation of the Mission.
Portraits of Mary Brackett Willeox and James Willeox.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
Views of the Willcox home in Ivy Mills, along with the altar inside the house chapel.

Courtesy of the author
Willcox’s Paper Mills. Etching by Henry Graham Ashmead in History of Delaware County (1884); and a painting after the etching.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
The old church, Ivy Mills, Pennsylvania.

Courtesy of the author
Portrait of Thaddeus Amat, C.M.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
The grave marker for James and Mary Willcox, and their cemetery monument.

Courtesy of the author
Ivy Mills town sign, and the clerk’s house at the Willcox old mill.

Courtesy of the author