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PRIEST OF THE MISSION: FOR WHAT PURPOSE?

A study of the development of the French Provinces from 1810-1960.

Andrés Sylvestre C.M.

Vincent's legacy.

On his death St. Vincent left about 120 confreres who had, with and through Vincent's guidance, deeply transformed the Church of their time. Their small number (this "little company" of which M. Vincent spoke) did more for the renewal of the Church than the serried ranks of the large well-known orders.

At a time when we are wondering about our survival and recruitment, at least in France and Europe, it is useful to seek to learn the lessons of history, particularly those St. Vincent has given us.

Having begun his ecclesiastical career, since it was at that time a career for him, circumstances then brought him into contact with poverty. Grippled by what he saw, Vincent would spend years exploring the terrible spiral of poverty: the hospitals, beggars, abandoned children, girls at risk, country people ravaged by war, and at the very bottom of that spiral, prisoners and the galley-slaves.

He put his finger on a festering sore of his times: the poverty of the weakest cheek by jowl with the extravagance of the powerful. Vincent comes to this conclusion: "The poor are dying of hunger ... and are being lost." He proclaims this conviction to the rich and powerful, and to all who have the influence and resources to change this state of affairs. He insists that the clergy be not like the priest in the parable who passes by the needy person without helping.

Vincent went to the very heart of the problems of his time and came up with an answer to them. Others, he knew, had also heard the urgent cries for help but often without understanding them. But he was in a good position to hear their cry because he himself was one of them. And the people knew and recognised Vincent as one of their own.

Vincent incarnated the Church's call as described in Gaudium et Spes No 4: "Search out the signs of the times ... get to know and understand the world we live in, its desires and expectations, its changing character...." Can we today adopt Vincent's approach? It was because he was responding to the needs of his time that Vincent was understood and joined by the first Priests of the Mission, Daughters of Charity, and numerous others since.

Among ourselves as confreres, we often wonder what is the Community's specific characteristic which is different to all other Congregations. The answers are varied. But on

the evidence of St. Vincent, it could be said : "Nothing, except to respond to the most pressing needs of our times." But surely this is the call of the whole Church, one that cannot ever be lost sight of, one that the Council has re-emphasised. Vincent merely did what the whole Church is called to do, and managed to remind the Church of that call.

The good times.

Begun by Vincent, the Company continued till the French Revolution, both in France and abroad. There were some difficulties but I will not delay on this period. The Company then disappeared in the storm of Revolution, at least in France where about 20 confreres were martyred, some of whom have been beatified. Twenty years after the start of this persecution the Congregation rose from its ashes. There are several reasons for this new growth and we will try to tease out some of them.

In response of the Vicar General, M. Hanon, confreres scattered throughout the dioceses started to regroup in communities from 1809 on. About 100 confreres came together and by the middle of the century the number rose to 220, to 585 in 1875, and to 680 by the end of the century.

What did this unusual growth mean to the Company in France? It was in fact a sevenfold increase in less than a century and at a time when the Community had no means of recruitment worth talking about. However four Apostolic schools were set up in the last part of the century.

We must bear in mind the birth and growth of missionary communities in the course of the nineteenth century. Our Community was carried along in this tide and benefited greatly from it. However, leaving aside these general reasons which were common to all communities, we can point to some specific facts concerning which we played an important role.

The Company appeared very well integrated into the French Church: it was responding at different levels to the most urgent needs of this century.

1. The reorganisation and the preaching of the Christian message which were necessary once more. In the middle of this century we managed to re-establish 7 Mission houses. This number would rise quickly to 30 by 1875.

2. The formation of a sound clergy to reinforce the Christian message. In the middle of the century we once again took charge of 11 major seminaries and 1 minor seminary. By the end of the century there were 19 major seminaries and 5 minor seminaries. This development is proof of the great trust placed in us.

3. The large scale opening of the foreign missions, missions which had a particular appeal to the French sensibility. Missions in Islamic countries, especially since the conquest of Algeria, missions in Latin America where liberation movements in favor of independence had been widely inspired by French ideas, a mission in China where France intervened as a protector of the missions.

As a result of these three involvements and indeed others as well, the community found itself at the heart of the French clergy. Two facts prove this: the extraordinary success of the travel accounts of P. Huc and the beatification of Blessed Perboyre. A priest who was ordained in 1900, in a diocese where we had no confreres, Nancy, told me in 1950 about the great excitement caused by the beatification of J G Perboyre among seminarists and priests shortly before 1900.

Entrants to St Lazare.

The register of entrants to the internal seminary tells us that between 1850 and 1900 there were 523 seminarists who came from the major French seminaries. That is an average of ten or eleven a year. In the same fifty year period 281 diocesan priests also asked to be admitted to the internal seminary, which is an average of five or six per year.

They knew that they were going into St Lazare to work in one or other of the Church's major objectives. They knew that by entering St Lazare they would have the support of the community life. They also knew that in the Congregation of the Mission they would have a much broader canvas than the limited horizons of the diocese. A kind of balance had been established between the community and the diocesan clergy. The community worked for them and with them, and was in a way an extension of them.

The most pressing needs in the minds of the diocesan clergy had their repercussions with us. Priests of the Mission were by the end of the century at the forefront of the French Church in intellectual pursuits: Pouget, Ermoni ... in ecumenical dialogue, Portal in missionary expansion. One need only mention the great bishops of China, Mouly, Jarlin.... About 1900 we had 680 French confreres of whom 260 were in mission countries.

The exile.

The community in France suffered a terrible blow by the separation of Church and State. Due to the fact that we were unhappily regarded as religious we almost completely disappeared from the French Church. Although we had been involved in various works in about thirty dioceses, with some dioceses having up to three houses like Montpellier, Carcassonne, Combrai, Marseilles, after the separation we only had four houses: Paris, Bordeaux, Dax and Marseilles.

Almost 200 confreres went abroad either to help the 260 already on the missions or to begin new works. In this way in response to the Holy Father's request four diocesan seminaries were taken on in Sicily.

This great test was perhaps to the advantage of the whole Church since some Orders benefited. But for us it was a disaster, a complete disorganisation since all of our assets in the French Church were removed. The German province had suffered a similar fate as a result of Bismarck's Kulturkampf. This situation continued until after the First World War.

The restoration or the misfortune.

From 1919 onwards we went back to France and quickly took up our role again. In spite of these testing years and our absence we still had almost 500 confreres in place of 680 twenty years earlier.

In 1920 we again took on eight major seminaries and opened eight mission houses. In the following years apostolic schools were reorganised or started: Berceau, Primecombe, Marvejols, Loos, Beaupreau, Gentilly and Belletence which soon was transferred to Cuvry.

The number of confreres grew. From 500 after the war the number rose to 552 in 1939. Replacing those who died in these twenty years and the increase of 52 represents a little more than 200 new confreres ordained between 1919 and 1939.

Our recruitment and formation teams included a total of 55 confreres in apostolic schools for at most 400 students. The future of the company seemed assured, it seemed to have developed normally again, then the numbers began to rise. That was how it seemed but something had been broken and the injury could not be seen.

The close link so important for us between the community and the French clergy, our presence at the heart of the French Church and at the core of her problems, our attention to the pressing needs of the world of France were gone. Some of those clergy who knew the community well and held it in high esteem sometimes spoke with regret about this.

An effort to explain.

We had been absent for twenty years and like emigrants coming back to France at the restoration of 1815 we did not notice that the world had changed. It had changed without them and also without us. Doubtless we had our halo from before the Separation and without necessarily saying it we would too willingly fall back on our experience before the exile. We did not give sufficient consideration to the present state of affairs and the needs of the world in the period between the two wars.

In our seminaries and in our missions we used tried and trusted methods. But it was much easier to rest on the glory and security of our past than to try to find answers for a new world.

Now, also, in this evolving world apart from: the beginning and development of the Children of Mary; the birth of the Marillacs; the formation and the spread of the Miraculous Medal and Novena, we had been neither prime movers or collaborators in the birth of any of the major apostolic movements which characterised the life of the French Church between 1920 and 1970. Among these were the birth of Catholic Action, the formation of Catholic Aid or the Ragpickers of Emmaus, the Fourth World A.T.D., the establishment of the Mission of France for which we had been asked to set up the seminary but which we had declined.

Perhaps, all of us could not have been at the heart of the life of the Church to the same degree as M. Gounot, but the Church was not mistaken when choosing him as bishop.

We continued our work as previously and thanks to our apostolic schools we continued to get vocations. People still joined us but they did not really know why. A general consultation of the confreres of the Paris and Toulouse provinces took place in the winter of 1966-67 and the following question was asked: "Why did you become a Priest of the Mission?" More than half of confreres under 55 answered: "By chance of Providence."

Providential it may be, but still it is regrettable that so many confreres only entered the community by chance. Would our idealism be damaged to some degree if so many entering the community did not know clearly why they were entering, even if later on they became more aware. Older confreres gave a much clearer answer to the same question. They knew why they entered, for the foreign missions or the seminaries or the popular missions.

Our apostolic schools which had been reorganised after the First and Second World Wars fulfilled their role. Thanks to them the community was able to carry on and look to the future. Without them we would only have a third or a quarter of our French confreres, and that is a positive outcome. Unfortunately, however, due to the fact that we were able to recruit more or less normally through these schools, we failed to ask ourselves important questions about our presence and our role in the French church. At least, shortage of numbers did not force us to ask these questions brutally and bluntly. Reassuring numbers were like a curtain hiding us from reality. In the years preceding the Second World War we had 15 to 20 ordinations each year. Our numbers gave no concern as to our future.

However, one fact should have troubled us. Apart from rare exceptions hardly anyone came to us from the major diocesan seminaries, and this was during a period when the seminaries had big numbers between 1930 and 1940, and between 1945 and 1950. During these years only 17 major seminarians and 2 priests sought admission to the internal seminary. We were far removed from the extraordinary numbers of the second half of the previous century when 16 or 17 entered each year.

They no longer wanted to join us, they could no longer see what they would be doing. In spite of daily contact with numerous diocesan seminarians (between 500 and 600) and our confreres teaching in seminaries, we seemed to be strangers living in a separate world, while in some houses we certainly lived apart.

The problems of the time, the demands of evangelization, the initiatives of the clergy trying new methods all seemed to us, perhaps, to be a fruitless struggle compared to the eternal Church and the unchanging character of the community. We had our history and thanks to our increasing numbers we also had our future so why do anything at present?

Each of us can in the light of his own experience consider the truth of this analysis. One may say that as far as he is concerned he felt that he understood the problems of his times very well and that he got on well with the clergy. I will not argue with this because at the time I thought so myself. However, major problems always come to the surface eventually even if they remain hidden for a long time.

For the Church as a whole a moment of truth arrived. As a result of the Council she had to ask questions about her role in the world, about what the Church should be for mankind. Otherwise, she would become introspective focusing on her internal affairs and would be nothing more than a ghetto. Similarly, for the community as a result of its renewed interest in St Vincent, it is time to search with him for what is required of us to prepare the Church of tomorrow. If we do not wish to do this all that remains is to write our epitaph and prepare for the last rites.

Our numbers.

I was writing in 1967 when we had 465 French confreres in France and abroad according to our catalogue. I added on that considering the age profile this number would be halved in 20 years. 27 years have elapsed since then and at the end of 1994 there are 224 French confreres more or less half of what there were.

The works.

The Seminaries.

In 1955 we had 54 confreres directing 10 diocesan seminaries and two university seminaries. In 1968, 13 year later, only Montpellier remained and a few confreres teaching in regrouped seminaries, in all about 15 confreres teaching in seminaries. One should add to this number those who were teaching in our own houses of study. How many confreres are involved in formation work in seminaries or in permanent formation of the clergy today? For the two provinces this number is less than 10.

A serious consequence is the fact that we do not have more than 40 confreres to teach theology or to do research. This is a serious loss of grey matter.

The Missions.

In 1955 there were 8 mission houses in France with a total of 65 missionaries. In 1967 there were only about 30. Today there is properly speaking only one mission house which does marvelous work in the general diocesan struggle to reorganise the rural areas.

Former missionaries and teachers in apostolic schools have turned to the parish ministry working in parishes or groups of parishes. The bishops asked no more of us than to come along and fill the gaps.

The aim of these teams in rural areas is not or rather is no longer simply to replace diocesan priests who are in short supply. It is rather to respond to one of the pressing needs of the Church in the country areas. The aim in huge areas where there are no longer any priests is to awaken the laity by a mission or some other means to bring them to take on pastoral responsibilities and to undertake the organisation and the life of the church in their area. This is no small matter.

Elsewhere we have taken charge of urban areas in imitation of other congregations. Confreres have done and continue to do excellent work there. But we were less well prepared for this type of work and some confreres have been unable to adapt and have left us.

The Apostolic Schools.

In 1938 we had six apostolic schools consisting of about 600 students with 55 priest-teachers. These ensured record numbers entering the internal seminary. In 1938 48 students entered. True enough it was the war period and out of this number only 15 became Vincentian priests and three diocesan.

After the war we built several new apostolic schools and refurbished several others. In 1955 there were 7 with 70 confreres. Unfortunately, they did not repay the efforts made to establish them. Educational reforms forced us to make changes in them. They became schools or else they ceased their work. All of a sudden we had scarcely a single vocation coming from this source.

What might we have done instead of simply closing them? Perhaps, we should have established some hostels to prepare vocations. It is a pity that this experiment was not tried out.

The Foreign Missions.

We are rightly considered to be a missionary institute and in this area we have a long and glorious history. A certain number entered the community to go on the missions.

But our missionary resources have lessened considerably. In 1938 out of 515 French confreres under the age of 75 almost half, 245, were on the missions. In 1967 out of 400 confreres under 75 only a quarter, 101, were on the missions. In 1994, out of 133 French confreres under 75 years of age there are only 29 on the missions. It is true that in several countries local recruitment has taken up the slack.

We must maintain the missionary dimension of our provinces. In the course of several journeys I have been able to note numerous provinces which have been grateful to the French confreres for having set them up and then helped them for a long time and even still. Quite often young people are attracted to join us by this missionary dimension.

I have been unable to assemble the numbers of those who entered and left the internal seminary between 1960 and 1990. I can say that like the French dioceses the numbers entering collapsed, and are beginning to rise a little. The comments I have made about our numbers in the last 150 years do not allow me to predict the future. But one can legitimately wonder:

What should we do?

So that young people might wish to join us they must feel that we are trying to respond according to our vocation to the needs of the Church. I do not have to say what should be done, provincial assemblies must consider this question. However, let me point out two needs which I think deserve our attention because they are in the mode in which St Vincent acted.

1. The country areas are becoming a religious desert unless they are evangelised to establish teams of lay people who will be capable of taking charge of the life of the Church. In this work we find a hint of St. Vincent.

2. The world of the marginalised in whose service so many people are devoted. We should study this problem in our society and make our young people aware of it. At the end of our retreat in Aiguebelle with Fr. Durand O.P. we had more or less resolved to take on this analysis and reflection. At least we ought to encourage and support the vocations of confreres who feel called to this work.

All of this should not make us neglect the foreign missions, to assist provinces in mission countries by way of exchange and to send some confreres on missions and to welcome students and priests coming from these provinces.

Candidates entering and leaving St. Lazare 1840-1960.

	Entrants				Departures					
	From dioc. clergy		Total	%	Oth.	Tot.	10 years		Before	After
	Prie.	Semin.					Total	%	Oth.	Tot.
1840-44	18	35	53	51%	48	101	25	5	30	30%
1845-49	31	56	87	68%	42	129	51	-	51	38%
1850-54	26	55	81	66%	41	122	19	7	26	21%
1855-59	553	63	116	73%	43	159	24	1	25	17%
1860-64	28	58	85	64%	49	135	29	1	30	22%
1865-69	39	93	132	76%	43	175	42	8	50	29%

1840-69	195	360	555	67%	266	821	190	22	212	26%

1870-74	31	89	120	56%	93	213	60	8	68	32%
1875-79	27	33	60	50%	61	121	54	6	60	50%
1880-84	21	41	62	42%	86	148	37	11	48	33%
1885-89	15	38	53	34%	105	158	26	15	41	26%
1890-94	19	25	44	29%	105	149	33	14	47	32%
1895-99	21	56	77	38%	125	202	46	5	51	25%

1870-99	134	282	416	43%	565	981	256	59	315	32%

1900-04	4	43	47	28%	120	167	44	24	68	41%
1905-09	5	14	19	20%	78	97	39	10	49	49%
1910-14	6	2	8	12%	61	69	21	12	33	48%
1915-19	2	2	4	6%	65	69	25	7	32	46%

1900-19	17	61	78	19%	324	402	129	53	182	45%

1920-24	5	5	10	10%	92	102	24	10	34	33%
1925-29	4	9	13	14%	79	92	41	4	45	49%
1930-34	1	4	5	3%	185	190	54	6	60	32%
1935-39	-	1	1	0,7%	153	154	97	4	101	66%

1920-39	10	19	29	5,5%	509	538	216	24	240	45%

1940-44	-	-	-	0%	112	112	72	4	76	68%
1945-49	0	12	12	25%	37	49	45	0	45	92%
1950-54	-	-	-	0%	62	62	27	6	33	52%
1955-60	3	4	7	15%	41	48	32	6	38	80%

1940-59	2	16	19	7%	252	271	176	16	192	71%

Récapitulation

	Entrants				Departures					
	From dioc. clergy		Total	%	Oth.	Tot.	10 years		Before	After
	Prie.	Semin.								
1840-69	195	360	555	67%	266	821	190	22	212	26%
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1900-19	17	61	78	19%	324	402	129	53	182	45%
1920-39	10	19	29	5,5%	509	538	216	24	240	45%
1940-59	3	16	19	7%	252	271	176	16	192	71%

120 ans	359	738	1097	36%	1916	3013	967	174	1141	37%

1st column priests entering the CM; 2nd column seminarists; 3rd total of both; 4th percentage of total entries; 5th layment entering; 6th total entries: 7th departures before ten years of presence; 8th numbers leaving after 10 years; 9th total number leaving; 10th percentage of entrants who left CM.

Eamon Devlin, C.M., Translator