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Our Vincentian Mission in China — Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow —

By Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General

St. Vincent had wonderful breadth of vision. In an age when transportation was difficult, when communication was slow, when most people lived and died within five miles of their birthplace, he founded a Congregation that became international even in his lifetime. With a courage that some skeptics regarded as reckless, he sent missionaries to Algeria, Madagascar, Poland, Italy, Ireland, Scotland, the Hebrides, and the Orkneys, and he dreamed of Canada and the Indies.

The Prelude

It is clear too that Vincent dreamed of China, even though the mission there began 39 years after his death. On January 15, 1664, Nicolas Etienne, a missionary in Madagascar, wrote to Vincent's successor René Alméras, asking for a mandate to preach the gospel everywhere in the world and he reminded Alméras: "It was the plan of the deceased Monsieur Vincent, our blessed father, that I should go even to China."

Nicolas Etienne did not get beyond Madagascar; he died as a martyr there shortly after he wrote to Fr. Alméras. But it was he, in fact, who financed the first journey of the missionaries to China. He was a handicapped young man who was told that he could never be a priest, but his goodness and zeal so impressed St. Vincent that he sought a dispensation from the Holy See so that Nicolas could be ordained. On September 20, 1659, he offered the Congregation a foundation out of his own family patrimony that would produce a significant annual interest for the support of the mission in Madagascar. When he first suggested this foundation, he was still a seminarian, and St. Vincent wrote to him words that later became familiar to generations of Vincentians.

I thank you most affectionately, dear brother, for your heartfelt, effective love for your poor mother (the Congregation); you are like a well-born child who never ceases to love tenderly the one who gave him birth, however poor and unattractive she may be.¹ May God be pleased to grant the Company to which you belong the

¹St. Vincent used this same comparison in the *Common Rules* of the Congregation, Chapter XII, Article 10.

*grace of raising you by its example and practices, to a great love of
Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our father, our mother, and our all.*²

But being a farsighted man, Nicolas put a clause in the contract saying that if the mission in Madagascar should cease, the annual revenues should be employed for other missions outside France. The mission in Madagascar closed in 1674 and the foundation went unused for two decades. But 1692, Monsieur Jolly, the third Superior General of the Congregation, resolved to use the money for China.

The First Phase (1699-1767)

Five years later, Propaganda Fide called us to go to China, and the first missionary, Luigi Antonio Appiani set off on February 10, 1697, accompanied by John Muellener, a diocesan priest who entered the Congregation during the journey.

Right from the beginning, the mission to China captured the imagination of Vincentians. Fr. Appiani and Fr. Muellener wrote long, fascinating accounts about their journey and their early ministries in China. Their journey lasted two years and eight months (while my flight here took 12 hours!). Their basic mission was to establish a seminary where young Chinese men could be formed for the priesthood. Fr. Appiani spent many of his years in China in prison, but Fr. Muellener, who became the first Vincentian bishop on the mainland, was able to begin the work of priestly formation. The first two Chinese Vincentians, Fr. Stephen Siu and Fr. Paul Sou, were ordained from the seminary he established in Chongqing.

The early Vincentians also sang and played for their living. The talented, but fiery, Théodoric Pedrini won his entry into the emperor's court at Beijing because of his musical talents and spent 35 years there (1711-1746).

Unfortunately, the first missionaries fell prey to the controversy over Chinese rites and fell out of favor with the imperial court. The first group died out by the 1760s.

The Second Phase (1784-1820)

The Vincentian mission in China began anew in 1784. Two fundamental reasons motivated our return. First, in 1783 the new Bishop of Beijing,

²SV V, 534.

Alessandro de Gouvei, impressed by the work of the Vincentians at the seminary in Goa, invited them to come to staff the seminary in Macau. A Portuguese confrere, Manuel Correa, and an Italian confrere, Giovanni Augustino Villa, arrived in Macau in 1784 to undertake this work. Others soon followed, like the Frenchman, Raymond Aubin and the Irishman, Robert Hanna.

Secondly, with the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773, one of its members, Jean-Joseph-Marie Amiot, suggested to the French government that a French Community should take over the Jesuit mission in Beijing. With some hesitation, the Congregation of the Mission accepted. The Superior General chose three missionaries: Nicolas-Joseph Raux, Jean-Joseph Ghislain, and Brother Charles Paris.³ Knowing that the Jesuits had won favor at the emperor's court because of their scientific acumen, the Superior General chose men who were quite competent in that regard. Raux was an astronomer and geographer who also knew botany well. Ghislain was a mechanical expert with knowledge of pumps, magnetism, vacuums, electricity (which was at an early stage of investigation), and many other practical matters that were very useful in Beijing. Brother Paris was a talented watchmaker and repairer.

Fr. Raux had extraordinary personal gifts. As superior of the community, he succeeded in creating a climate of peace and brotherly love between the Vincentians and the ex-Jesuits. A Jesuit of the time wrote: "We live together like brothers because the Lord has wanted to console us for the loss of our good mother."

The confreres soon began missions in the area around Beijing. Then in 1798, Joseph Han (1772-1841), a tireless missionary, set out for Mongolia. Out of this small beginning three apostolic vicariates eventually developed and a considerable number of native vocations began to come to the Congregation.

There were martyrs too. In 1795, Raymond Aubin gave his life for the faith. In 1820, Francis Regis Clet was killed after three decades of service in China.

Interestingly, the confreres at the new mission in Beijing had an indirect influence on the birth of the Church in Korea. A group of Korean laymen came to visit the emperor at Beijing. While they were there, one was converted and brought Catholicism back to his homeland where within a short time there were another 200 converts. Fr. Raux helped this group when they returned to China in 1789 for further instructions. Since the Church in Korea was completely lay, without priests, Fr. Ghislain offered to go there. Instead, Fr. Raux sent a Chinese priest, James Chou Wen-Mo, who found 4000 lay Catholics in Korea and on

³Originally, Brother Bernard Faure, a nurse, was chosen. He was unable, however, to depart.

Easter Sunday, April 5, 1795, celebrated the first Mass there. When a persecution broke out, he was beheaded in 1801.

In 1811, the emperor expelled from Beijing all but three Portuguese Vincentians who were members of the Bureau of Mathematics and the French Vincentian, Fr. Louis-François Lamiaux, who was the French interpreter at the court. Nine years later when Lamiaux was exiled to Macau, the mission in Beijing, under the protection of the court, ground to a halt.

The Third Phase (1820-1949)

With the departure of the French, Fr. Matthew Xue served as leader of the mission for 15 years. He and Fr. Joseph Han were extraordinary Chinese Vincentian confreres. They regularly visited the dispersed Christian communities in the north of China and in Mongolia. Fr. Han, who was a priest for 47 years, lived on little, was fearless, and touched others deeply by his preaching. He also translated a book of meditations for lay people.

At the beginning of this third phase, the focus of the Vincentian mission shifted to Mongolia. Fr. Evariste Huc and Fr. Gabé made a journey through Mongolia, Tibet, and China to investigate the possibilities of preaching the gospel among the nomads. Fr. Huc's book, *Souvenir d'un voyage dans la Tartarie, le Thibet, et la Chine*, entertained generations of readers. Fr. Xue transferred the preparatory seminary from Macau to Mongolia in 1835. In that same year, the future bishop, Joseph Martian Mouly, began to labor in Mongolia too. In 1840, he became apostolic vicar there and eventually became Apostolic Vicar of Beijing and the North.

This period too knew numerous martyrs. Near its beginning, in 1840, John Gabriel Perboyre died a death similar to Francis Regis Clet's 20 years earlier.

We know that in 1852 there were 25 Chinese Vincentians serving in Beijing, Mongolia, Honan, Zhujiang and Jiangxi. Our seminary at Beijing had 36 seminarians. From this time forward, there would be a great influx of foreign missionaries. They eventually came from Holland, Poland, Belgium, Italy, the United States, and Ireland. Native vocations continued to grow too. By 1942 (the last available statistics), there were 192 Chinese Vincentian priests and brothers.

This period too knew its tensions and misunderstandings. Fr. Vincent Lebbe played a prophetic role in the cause of the indigenous Church and the creation of an indigenous hierarchy. Like many prophets, he drew sharp

reactions. A large number of foreign missionary confreres failed to understand him. But he was much appreciated by the Chinese Vincentians. To him belongs much of the credit for the Holy See's eventual decision to ordain six Chinese bishops, two of whom were Vincentians. Today we pay tribute to him with joy for what he achieved and with sadness because so many of us his brothers failed to understand him.

The work of the formation of the clergy also continued to grow. The Vincentians had minor seminaries in most of their 14 vicariates and also staffed three major seminaries: the regional seminary in the Vicariate of Ningpo, the major seminary in Jiaying, and the major seminary in Beijing which after 1920 became a regional seminary. By the 1930s there were 260 major seminarians in the 14 Vincentian vicariates, as well as 875 minor seminarians.

The Fourth Phase (1949-1992)

The third phase of the Vincentian mission ended abruptly in 1949 with the advent of the Communist government. But the mission continued in two streams.

A first stream continued to flow through the mainland. The 192 Vincentian priests and brothers were scattered. Many were sent to prisons and forced labor camps. The stories of their love for their people, their pastoral devotion in the face of adversity, and their fidelity in the face of persecution are largely undocumented. But we know that much blood was poured out into this stream. Many gave their lives for what they believed. Archbishop Joseph Chow of Nanchang is perhaps the most notable of these heroes. He spent 22 years in prison and under house arrest before he died in 1972 after refusing the Communist Party's offer to make him the Chinese "Pope."

The other stream flowed into the Church on Taiwan. After being expelled from China from 1949-1952, Chinese, Dutch, and American confreres continued their mission in Taiwan. In the early years they believed that it was only a matter of time before they would go back to the mainland. But as this hope disappeared, they poured their energies into the pastoral care of the young communities they founded. With exuberant zeal, they built more than 30 churches and baptized countless thousands of converts. From 1952 to 1965, Catholics on the island grew from 10,000 to 250,000

The Fifth Phase (1992-)

The fifth phase has a prelude too. It really started in the early 1980s when Sr. Emma Lee discreetly began to reestablish contact with the Chinese confreres and Daughters of Charity on the mainland. Little by little she found 90 elderly Chinese Daughters of Charity and 14 Vincentians.

Then in 1992, the General Assembly challenged Vincentians “to go to the ends of the earth, even all the way to China.”

The Superior General and the Mother General were soon able to visit many of the priests, sisters, and brothers on the mainland. They found men and women of vibrant faith who live simply and joyfully, who have suffered for what they believe, who remain deeply convinced of their faith as Catholics, and who continue to love their Vincentian charism. Little by little, with increasing contact with the mainland, the members of our Vincentian Family began to hear the stories of the many heroes, living and dead, who have represented and continue to represent the Vincentian charism in China.

As they heard about these heroic missionaries and Daughters of Charity, confreres from nine provinces volunteered for the China Mission. But while in the fourth phase various countries were entrusted with different regions in China and lived and worked separately, in this fifth phase an “international” mission was organized. In other words, these confreres have come to live and work united as a team, even though its members are from many different lands.

Challenges for the Future

Right from the beginning, China aroused the interest and won the heart of the Congregation. It continues to do so today. Wherever I go, people ask me about China. As we envision our Vincentian mission in China in the future, what are the principal challenges that lie before us?

1. To exercise a listening presence

We must listen before we speak. We must learn before we teach. We must discern before we act. The missionary needs great humility. He must listen as a servant. He must seek to understand what lies in the hearts of his masters the poor and find ways of watering the seed of the Word that God has already sown in their hearts and in the created world around them.

What do the poor say to us today in Taiwan? What do they say in continental China? We must not come bearing gifts that we ourselves have chosen and wrapped. As servants, we must come responding to the Chinese people’s call.

Our numbers are much smaller in 1999 than they were in 1949. Then we had hundreds of missionaries in China: today we have less than 50. But history teaches us that numbers are not of huge importance. In several periods where we were relatively few in number, we had an enormous impact because of the influence exerted by a few well-prepared men.

In continental China today, most forms of explicit ministry are forbidden to us. Our role must, therefore, be largely one of presence. But that is what servants do. They are present, ever ready to do what is asked. Already a number of the members of our family are on the mainland teaching languages. They are deeply convinced of the value of this silent service to the people of China. It is clear to me that they and our older Chinese confreres and sisters touch the lives of many.

2. To be deeply inculturated and to learn well the languages of those we serve

Today more than ever we are conscious of the importance of language and culture not just as personal tools for the use of the missionary, but as a way of understanding the minds and hearts of those whom we are serving. We have wonderful examples of missionaries right here in this room who have learned Taiwanese, Mandarin and other languages very well in order to be good servants of God's people. For us foreigners, learning oriental languages is difficult. Today I encourage all foreign missionaries here to make linguistic and cultural studies a part of your daily bread. Without an adequate grasp of language and culture, you will always be seriously handicapped.

3. To be inventive in devising new forms of popular missions, involving the various branches of our family

Here in Taiwan are there ways in which we can renew our parishes through some creative form of mission involving Vincentians, Daughters of Charity, lay men and women, both older and younger? Are there ways in which we can similarly evangelize the aboriginal people? Are there ways in which we can renew the faith of immigrant Philippine workers? In continental China there are more than 850,000,000 "country people." Is it possible to envision some small, focused, inventive evangelization effort among them when political circumstances change?

4. To contribute to the formation of the clergy

In each of the phases of our history, this work has had a central place in the mission of the Congregation. What are the needs of the clergy today in Taiwan and continental China? Can individual missionaries bring an expertise to China in biblical studies, in liturgy, in other fields? It is clear that the formation of the clergy is one of the great needs right now in continental China. Can we teach young priests there English, or French, or computer science, or bible studies, or theology? Or can we offer them a rule of life, as they recently asked of us, that will strengthen them in living out the gospel that they preach? Can we ourselves move beyond regional and national differences and work side by side with the diocesan clergy and other communities for the formation and growth of the Church in China?

5. *To engage in the formation of youth*

Recently, much to my joy, Vincentian Youth groups have sprung up spontaneously here in Taiwan. Such groups are multiplying rapidly throughout the world; they are the fastest growing member of our Vincentian Family. One of the great challenges we face is to offer these youth groups a profound, healthy formation. I encourage you to reach out to young people wherever you serve as missionaries. The young are the future of the Church. They are the Church of the third millennium. They will be the evangelizers here in Taiwan and in continental China in the decades that come. Members of our family who live at present on the continent attest that the young there yearn for something, that they sense a deep need for transcendence and that they want to open their hearts. What can we do for young people in Taiwan and on the continent now and in the future?

6. *To provide formation for our Vincentians and Daughters of Charity on the continent*

Life is still difficult on the continent. The Vincentians and Daughters, young and old, struggle to live out their faith and express it. Our renewed contacts in recent years have been an encouragement both to them and to us. They cry out for help in regard to their own ongoing formation. Happily, we have been able to offer modest assistance in that regard. They are deeply grateful. I encourage you to continue to do so.

7. *To concretize the intellectual apostolate*

At various periods in the history of China, the Jesuits and the Vincentians served the intellectual needs of the court and of the people. They were very

conscious of the importance of learning and wisdom within Chinese culture. Today we have also become more and more aware of the need for intelligent solutions if we are really going to grapple with the problems of the poor. Intelligent understanding and energetic action must go hand in hand if we are to serve the poor realistically in the future. Can our Vincentian universities in the United States and the Philippines help in responding to some of the needs of China's people both in Taiwan and on the mainland? Can they bring expertise to fields where the Chinese people feel a vacuum? What are these fields? How can we serve?

8. *To engage the wider Vincentian Family in our mission*

Today we are very conscious that we act not simply as Vincentian priests and brothers, but as members of a family that also includes sisters and lay men and women of varying ages. Ours is in fact a huge family with several million members organized in large groups like the Vincentians, the Daughters of Charity, the International Association of Charities, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Miraculous Medal Association, the Vincentian Marian Youth groups, and many others.

Can we envision our mission in Taiwan and continental China not simply as a Vincentian mission or a mission of the Daughters of Charity but as a mission of our whole family? Can we interest especially the young members of our family to find ways in which they can serve, perhaps by dedicating a year or two or three to working among the aboriginal people of Taiwan or to teaching English on the continent?

9. *To promote devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus*

From the time of St. Vincent, a notable aspect of our tradition has been to promote devotion to the Virgin Mary, who was the first of the saints. To use Vincent's words, she penetrated to the meaning of the gospel more than all other believers and lived out its teaching. As I have visited Taiwan and continental China over the years, I have been struck by how prominent devotion to Mary remains. I remember how often and with what great enthusiasm St. John Gabriel Perboyre wrote back to Paris asking for more Miraculous Medals for his people. Can we find ways of holding up Mary in China as an icon of the tenderness of God and a model for all believers?

10. *To undergo conversion*

On a recent visit to continental China, I visited the tomb of Vincent Lebbe. Priests and seminarians there hold him in the highest esteem, as do so many lay people today. One of the embarrassing questions a young seminarian posed to me was: Why did we not recognize him?

Unfortunately, we do not always recognize our own prophets. Will we see the prophets of the future? That is certainly an enormous challenge. To do so we must be persevering listeners with open hearts. To do so we must be fixed not on our own ideas, nor on our own methods, nor on our own native cultures. Our focus, rather, must always be on those we serve. How can we promote them? How can we make them agents in their own promotion? What are their deepest needs?

Today leadership in the Church both here in Taiwan and on the mainland is in the hands of the Chinese themselves. The passage of leadership from foreigners to Chinese came at a high price, but the Church is now deeply indigenous and that is a great blessing. Vincent Lebbe was a prophet in this regard. I hope that in the future, we can hear prophetic voices like his.

So, my brothers and sisters, those are ten challenges for the future of our mission in China. Today we thank God for the many gifts we have received over these 300 years. We ask God to renew our hearts with the gift of ongoing conversion. And we ask God for the strength and creativity we need to meet these challenges.

A new millennium stands before us. May it be one of peace, growth, and spiritual flourishing for the people of Taiwan and continental China.

*November 1999
Taipei, Taiwan*