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John Rybolt C.M.

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The Congregation of the Mission in the United States: An Historical Survey

*By John Rybolt, C.M.
Director of CIF*

1. Roman Mission, 1815-1835

The Congregation of the Mission in the United States began with the arrival of four Italian Vincentians from the Province of Rome. They came to America in 1815 at the invitation of Bishop Louis William Dubourg to staff a seminary for the then Diocese of Louisiana. Dubourg, a Sulpician, had accepted the enormous diocese, comprising the entire Louisiana Purchase, but only as its administrator. He made his definitive acceptance of the episcopacy contingent on securing the help of priests to staff a seminary. While lodging with the Vincentians at the house of Montecitorio in Rome, he chanced to meet Felix De Andreis (1778-1820). De Andreis was a Vincentian missionary priest whose responsibility extended also to providing spiritual support to other clergy in Rome. Dubourg heard De Andreis addressing a group of clergy and, impressed by his abilities, determined to enlist him and other Vincentians for his diocese. The Roman Province at first refused the sacrifice of one of its most important members but, with the insistence and approval of Pius VII, it relented. Dubourg and the provincial drew up a contract confirming this mission to Louisiana of members of the Province of Rome. The first Vincentians were Felix De Andreis, the superior; Joseph Rosati (1789-1843), John Baptist Acquaroni, and Brother Martin Blanka. The first three were Italians, and Brother Blanka was born in the Czech Republic, but was a member of the Province of Turin, assigned to Piacenza. Other diocesan priests seminarians and postulant brothers joined them, all intending to become Vincentians in America. The Vincentian apostolate was to assure the formation of priests for Louisiana and to preach missions.

The missionaries, thirteen in number, assembled gradually in Bordeaux, France, and then during the night of 12/13 June 1816, they departed for Baltimore, Maryland, where they landed on 26 July. They made their way overland through Pennsylvania to Pittsburgh, and then down the Ohio River to Louisville. Benedict Joseph Flaget, the kindly Bishop of Bardstown, Kentucky, accepted them in his seminary at St. Thomas, close to his see city. The majority remained there almost two years, learning English, completing their seminary studies, and in general preparing themselves for the American mission west of the Mississippi River.

De Andreis left Bardstown the following October 1817, in company with Bishop Flaget, Brother Blanka, and Joseph Rosati. Rosati was later to succeed De Andreis as superior of the American mission and Dubourg as Bishop of

Louisiana. Their purpose was to prepare the way for Bishop Dubourg. He followed the same route as the others from Baltimore to Bardstown, and shortly left there for his diocese. He arrived in Ste. Genevieve, Missouri, on New Year's Eve, and reached St. Louis on 6 January 1818. For the next several months, the bishop oversaw the preparation of land and cabins to accommodate his traveling seminary at the Barrens Settlement. The seminarians, led by Rosati, reached the Barrens, now incorporated into Perryville, Missouri, in the following October. Rosati arrived on 2 October, and the rest a day or so later. The American Vincentians regard the founding of their first house, St. Mary's of the Barrens, on that date.

From the beginning, there were two foundations under one superior. The first was the seminary at the Barrens, which slowly grew in numbers. The Vincentian candidates were to make their internal seminary in St. Louis, the second foundation. Since Bishop Dubourg had insisted that De Andreis remain by his side in the city as his vicar general, he was to divide his time between parish and missionary responsibilities. The first American internal seminary began on 3 December 1818.

De Andreis's frail health suffered from deprivation and depression, and he finally succumbed on 15 October 1820 to the combined effects of fever and being dosed with mercury. He was buried in the pioneer church at the Barrens, and his remains were moved to the present church in 1837. Generations of Vincentians have prayed at his tomb for his canonization.

Rosati then moved the internal seminary from St. Louis to the Barrens and continued the work of the (external) seminary, which accepted both Vincentians and diocesan candidates. Bishop Dubourg felt himself forced to resign his see especially because of a scandal involving one of the priests he had ordained, to whom he entrusted important diocesan business in Europe. The bishop had already ordained Rosati as his auxiliary and successor, 25 March 1824. The new bishop had to travel widely to visit the scattered Catholic communities along the Mississippi River, as well as to handle the affairs of the Vincentians, whose superior he remained. Gradually, St. Mary's Seminary produced lay graduates as well as clergy and Rosati looked back with some satisfaction at the pioneering work of the first American house.

2. One Province, 1835-1888

Rosati relinquished his duties as superior in 1831 and then focused his efforts on the diocese of St. Louis, whose first bishop he had become in 1829. The new superiors at the Barrens began to station the Vincentians elsewhere, in the state of Louisiana in particular. The increasing numbers of Vincentians arriving in the United States from Europe, as well as the newly ordained, led to

the founding of an American province, independent of the Province of Rome. This took place under Fr. Jean-Baptiste Nozo on 2 September 1835, following the General Assembly. The new province became the first one established outside of Europe since the founding of the Congregation of the Mission in 1625.

The first provincial was John Timon (1797-1867), a native of Pennsylvania, who while a seminarian had known De Andreis. Timon guided the province into traditional Vincentian works, seminaries and missions. He overextended the members of the province, such that by the time he became Bishop of Buffalo (1847), American Vincentians conducted seminaries in the states of Missouri, Louisiana, New York, Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Ohio — too many for the small province. The province's commitment to missions took the form of founding mission parishes. Astonishing numbers of these were either founded or served in the states of Missouri, Illinois, Maryland, Louisiana and Pennsylvania. Another important work was the care of Texas, committed by the Holy See to the Congregation in 1840. Timon oversaw the work but needed someone else to reside there, and so he chose his fellow seminarian John Mary Odin (1800-1870). Odin became a bishop in 1842 and governed the Texas mission until he transferred to New Orleans as archbishop in 1861.

One issue that troubled the Vincentians was the practice of slavery, particularly slave-holding by the province. The four founding confreres agreed that they would resist slavery when they reached America, but they came to understand that slavery was a part of the American social structure that they could not resist. De Andreis himself quoted the legal expression *Necessitas non habet legem* ["necessity knows no law"] to justify this. Slave numbers grew, through gift and purchase, until the time of John Timon. From then on, numbers declined until the abolition of slavery in the 1860s.

An interesting outcome of the Vincentian presence in the United States was the union in 1850 of the majority of the Sisters of Charity (founded by St. Elizabeth Ann Seton) to the Daughters of Charity. The Sulpician directors of the Sisters of Charity, feeling close to the charism of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, promoted the union. Vincentians were then appointed their directors, and the two Congregations, the Double Family, have continued to work together, particularly in recent decades.

The source of vocations to the Congregation was, at the beginning, mainly immigration. At first the confreres were Italians, then Irish and Spanish with some French, Germans and others. By the end of the American civil war (1865), almost 90% of the vocations were either Irish immigrants or others born in the United States. It because of the Irish that the name "Vincentians" gradually supplanted "Lazarists" in the United States around 1900.

Another issue confronting the American Vincentians in the period before 1888 was the large number of confreres who became bishops, and so were lost to the Congregation. Joseph Rosati, the superior following De Andreis, was ordained bishop in 1823. Leo De Neckere succeeded Dubourg as Bishop of New Orleans in 1830. John Mary Odin, mentioned above, became Apostolic Vicar of Texas in 1841. John Timon, the first provincial, became the founding Bishop of Buffalo, New York, 1847. Thaddeus Amat, an energetic Catalan, became Bishop of Monterey, California, 1854. Michel Domenec, another Catalan, was Bishop of Pittsburgh, 1860. In the same year, John Lynch, born in Ireland, became Bishop of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Stephen Vincent Ryan, Canadian-born and provincial for eleven years, succeeded Timon at Buffalo in 1868. One, Mariano Maller, who served with distinction as provincial in America (and later in Spain), fled to Brazil to avoid being named a bishop.

3. Two Provinces, 1888-1975

With the growth of Vincentian vocations, it became clear that it would be necessary to divide the sprawling province into two. This was accomplished on 4 September 1888, under Fr. Antoine Fiat. The Eastern Province, headquartered at Germantown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, assumed, in general, the states east of the Mississippi, while the Western Province, headquartered in Perryville, Missouri, had the western states. In reality, in 1888 the only Western Province foundation outside the Mississippi Valley (with Chicago, Illinois) was in Los Angeles, California.

The newly-independent Western Province continued the earlier Vincentian works of seminary education and missions (with parishes). At the same time, the confreres branched out into other works that grew from the peculiar demands of the American Church — a Church mainly composed of poor immigrants. Some seminaries had residential high schools attached, and these developed into independent institutions. In Los Angeles, the original idea — developing priestly vocations coming from St. Vincent's College — never worked out as envisioned. The College continued, however, until the Jesuits assumed it in 1911. St. Vincent's College, Chicago, Illinois, had similar hopes. The Vincentians opened a high school on Chicago's north side in 1898. It gradually developed into De Paul University, now the largest Catholic university in the United States. Much less successful was the University of Dallas, Texas, opening as Holy Trinity College in 1907. It was dogged by administrative and financial problems until the diocese bought it for a girls' orphanage in 1930. In the Eastern Province, the foundations at Brooklyn, New York (later St. John's University), and at Niagara, New York, (Niagara University) had a similar origin and enjoy great success.

The work of rural parish missions, so dear to the heart of Vincent de Paul, continued in the United States but was only gradually distinguished from the founding of parishes in mission territory. With the repeated encouragement of the superiors general in Paris, their American confreres organized a formal mission apostolate beginning in the 1870s. After initial successes, it declined somewhat in the Western Province, especially because of a concentration on seminary and lay education, and the need to staff established parishes. Further, the growth of devotion to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal led to the institution of missions with a special Marian flavor. These normally took the form of solemn novenas with a mission flavor. This work began in the Eastern Province in the early decades of the 1900s and spread west. These Marian works have resulted in two branches of the Association of the Miraculous Medal, with the Central shrine at Germantown (1915), and the National shrine at Perryville (1917).

One distinctive development from the missions was the work called the Motor Missions. Originally a work of rural evangelization based at Kenrick Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, it grew to have a more permanent base in the province. Confreres involved seminarians, both diocesan and Vincentian, in itinerant missions given in rural Missouri. From 1934 to 1965, teams of missionaries witnessed to the Church in public squares or on the main streets of small towns. They traveled in small trailers (caravans) to preach and also to celebrate the sacraments for scattered Catholics.

Confreres from the Eastern Province carried on similar works of evangelization through their commitment to the Church in the state of Alabama. Beginning in 1910, Vincentians founded mission parishes and served many scattered communities of Catholics. With the growth in numbers of Spanish-speaking Catholics in Alabama, the focus of these parishes has changed somewhat.

The Eastern Province agreed at about the same time to enter the Panama Canal Zone, a part of the United States. Their apostolate would be to give missions to English-speaking workers building the canal, many of whom were of African descent. This mission started slowly, but began officially in 1913. The focus was principally American parishes, but it eventually broadened to include Spanish-speakers both in the Zone and elsewhere. The Vincentian missionaries gradually developed native Panamanian vocations and, together with confreres from the Central American Province, continue to serve the Church in Panama.

On a mission from the Holy See, the first Vincentians entered China in 1699, although not in large numbers. As the Church in China grew, so did the need for missionaries. Confreres of the Eastern Province began their work in Kiangsi [Jiangxi] province in 1920, and the Holy See requested that the Western

Province also take up a China mission. After much hesitation because of severe financial and personnel problems, the Western Province, in 1929, assumed the control of another mission district in Kiangsi. Four confreres became bishops there (John O'Shea, 1928; Edward Sheehan, 1929; Paul Misner, 1935; Charles Quinn, 1940.) American Vincentians remained in Kiangsi until expelled by the Communist government. For about 30 years, they had suffered from nearly constant wars and unrest: nationalist insurgents, the Japanese during the second World War, and then the Communist revolution. In 1952, almost immediately after their expulsion, two priests with missionary experience went to Taiwan where they began to minister to mainland Chinese Catholics who had fled there. This mission grew, and by 1987, the American missionaries, together with their Chinese and Dutch confreres, joined to form a new Province of China.

For many years, the principal work of the American Vincentians in the two provinces was seminary formation. Both offered formation programs for their own candidates, beginning in several minor seminarians. To form diocesan seminarians, they also served seminaries that they owned (Denver, Colorado; Niagara and Albany, New York; Boynton Beach, Florida) or simply staffed (St. Louis, Missouri; Los Angeles, California; San Antonio and Houston, Texas). Some were minor seminaries but the majority were major seminaries.

Out of these seminaries came a certain elite in both provinces: future superiors, provincials, and even four superiors general (French-born Charles Souvay, William Slattery, James Richardson, and Robert Maloney). In addition, many confreres devoted themselves to their craft of teaching and to scholarship, particularly in the theological sciences. It must be admitted, however, that those confreres assigned to parishes and other pastoral works (such as chaplaincies for hospitals and the armed forces, or mission bands) were often regarded as of less importance in the provinces. The many brothers in the two provinces were, as well, subject to some discrimination and marginalization. The attention given to surviving two world wars and to the great economic depression of the 1930s reinforced the status quo.

4. Five Provinces, 1975 —

The American Vincentian experience paralleled that of the general Catholic experience in the United States: rapid growth and an increased prosperity particularly beginning in the 1950s. Pressures to ease the work expected of its provincial superiors led to the creation of two filial vice-provinces, New Orleans and Los Angeles, in 1958. Western Vincentians were free to work in any of these areas, including the so-called "mother province," now headquartered in St. Louis. By 1975, after the Second Vatican Council and the major revision of basic Vincentian law, the three areas became three independent provinces: Midwest, South and West. Together with the Eastern

Province and the independent New England Province, American Vincentians now had five provinces in the United States, the largest number for any country in the Congregation.

The three provinces gradually diverged into their own works and styles. The Midwest Vincentians, with their members mainly devoted to works of education (seminaries and university) and parishes, began slowly to review all their commitments. They did so because of the general encouragement coming from their revised Constitutions of 1984. In the spirit of the Council, Vincentians undertook to examine all their works in the light of the original inspiration coming from St. Vincent de Paul. This was summed up in the important phrase in the first article of the Constitutions: “to follow Christ, the evangelizer of the poor.” Henceforth, all Vincentian works would have, in some way, to be explicitly faithful to this perspective. For this reason, the Midwest Province has gradually withdrawn from some works while beginning others. The decline in the number of members of the province, too, has forced the issue.

The new works were elaborated because of long-range planning, undertaken over several years. Among those works are renewed emphasis on parish missions, the growth of Vincentian works in Kenya, help for priest-poor dioceses (such as Pueblo and Colorado Springs, Colorado), and an increasing number of individual works done in a Vincentian context: lay formation for ministry, prison chaplaincy, seminary commitments, direct organizational work with the materially poor.

The members of the Province of the West followed the same system involving a thorough revision of works and common life. They pioneered a mission in Burundi in 1979. The missionaries joined the Daughters of Charity, already working there, but political conditions turned so serious and dangerous that the province withdrew its members in 1985. Since then, Burundi has gone through catastrophic civil wars and massacres, but confreres from Colombia have recently been able to resume the apostolate there.

The Southern Province, too, revised its works, emphasizing ministry among the rural poor, at first in the state of Arkansas. They had a mission for some years in rural Guatemala, beginning in 1980. With the increasing presence of Spanish-speaking Catholics, confreres have shifted somewhat into more direct work with Hispanics throughout the territory of the province. One important development has been a ministry to native Americans, the Indians so central to the plans of Felix De Andreis and the earliest Italian Vincentian missionaries. In this, they have been joined by members of the Province of the West, working in the Diocese of Gallup, New Mexico, the poorest in the United States.

The Eastern Province, like the others, experienced a decline in the number of its members. Together with the new approaches taken by the Constitutions of the Congregation, the confreres engaged in a thorough revision of its ministries through long-range planning. As seminaries and other works closed, many confreres became available for other ministries. Some devoted themselves to university work in a new way (emphasis on their specifically Vincentian charism), to ministry among Hispanics, and to the international missions of the Congregation.

The New England Province has not been mentioned in this overview since its members followed a different historical path. St. Vincent himself had sent missionaries to Poland, and both Polish and foreign confreres labored there with great fruit. The disastrous partitions of Poland in the 18th century reduced the work tremendously, but the province was able to begin again in 1866. Large waves of immigration from Poland to the United States led to calls for missions among them. Polish Vincentians arrived in 1903 and gradually opened mission houses and parishes for Polish immigrants. Educational works of various sorts (a high school, Erie, Pennsylvania; publications; parish schools) also characterized their apostolate and led, in 1920, to the erection of the American mission into a vice-province. By 1975, the vice-province had developed sufficiently to be erected into an independent province. Its members continue the traditional works, but have branched out into American parishes without a Polish majority.

In addition to the American provinces, confreres from several other provinces have worked in the United States, principally to help Catholic immigrants from their home countries. Several confreres from different provinces of Spain (Barcelona, Madrid, Zaragoza) and Italy (Naples, Turin, Rome), and from Portugal and Mexico founded houses and works, principally after 1900. In addition, the fortunes of wars and revolutions have brought other confreres to the United States. Although they joined the established provinces, temporarily or permanently, many of them have had a special outreach to Catholics from their native countries. Confreres from China, Slovenia and Vietnam could be mentioned, along with others.

All five provinces have, even before 1975, developed closer links with each other. Confreres from the three provinces formerly making up the Western Province have continued to work in all three areas. Some confreres have worked, even temporarily, in the educational works of other provinces. The provincials meet regularly to discuss matters of mutual importance, such as common formation. Another of these works is the Vincentian Studies Institute, a work now sponsored as well by the five provinces of the Daughters of Charity. Its purpose is to further the Vincentian heritage, particularly through research, publication, and conferences.

All five provinces also are developing ways to be in stronger relationships of prayer, work and friendship with the many others, lay, religious and clergy, who form part of the larger Vincentian Family. First among these has been, and continues to be, the Daughters of Charity. In addition, American Vincentians are forging new links with members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Ladies of Charity, and other congregations of women religious, particularly those who share the charism of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. The founding of lay volunteer organizations has also begun.

Bibliography: *The American Vincentians. A Popular History of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States. 1815-1987.* Edited by John E. Rybolt, C.M. Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1988.