

5-2001

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Recommended Citation

Dosen, Anthony C.M. (2001) "The Popular Missions of the CM in the United States: Historical Aspects," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 45: No. 3, Article 4.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol45/iss3/4>

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The Popular Missions of the CM in the United States: Historical Aspects

By Anthony J. Dosen, C.M.

Introduction

This historical essay is based primarily on the work of Dr. Douglas Slawson in *American Vincentians*. In this work, Slawson (1988) stated that the popular mission apostolate was the poor stepchild of the American provinces. Perhaps an alternative interpretation might be that the popular missions were a labor that the American Vincentians undertook above and beyond the other works to which they were assigned. Throughout the 19th century, the confreres responded to the urgent requests of bishops to assist in the education of clerics and poor, immigrant youth, as well as assisting in parishes; thus the popular missions took second place to these other works. Slawson judged this state of affairs as ignoring the defining ministry of the Congregation. However, one might argue that the popular missions came to fruition in the United States because individual Vincentians were committed to the popular missions and willing to conduct them, above and beyond their assigned apostolate.

James Smith, C.M., in an article on the early history of the Vincentian Mission, posits that the development of the Vincentian mission in St. Vincent's time was the result of the circumstance of 17th century France. Similarly, the Vincentian popular missions in the United States developed within the context of 19th century U.S. social and religious history. The result was that the popular missions in the United States looked notably different from their counterpart in Europe and certainly different from the missions of St. Vincent's day. There are three key differences between the U.S. and European mission work. First, Vincent developed the missions with the rural poor in mind. His plan for the mission was that it be directed "all but exclusively" toward the country poor.¹ In the United States, the poor were primarily urban, not rural, and immigrants. The other definable group of the poor were the African slaves recently freed after the American Civil War. Thus the American Vincentians gave missions not only in rural areas, but in the cities as well. Secondly, the traditional Vincentian mission was to last over a number of weeks, allowing time for individuals in the parishes to learn and grow in faith. In the early 19th century, the few popular missions that were preached lasted for a number of weeks. However, by the mid-19th century the Vincentian popular mission lasted on average from one to two weeks. Usually, if the mission lasted for two weeks or more, it was because each week of the mission was devoted to a particular group of individuals (e.g., married men, housewives, single men, single women). Thus the four-week mission,

¹ John Smith, C.M., "The Vincentian Mission, 1625-1660" in *Vincentian Heritage* IV:2, (1983), 40.

would in actuality be four one-week missions. Finally, St. Vincent was very concerned about the renewal of those already baptized who lacked knowledge of the faith and thus were unable to live a life of faith. Therefore, the missions preached by the community in St. Vincent's day were more catechetical in nature.² In the United States, the Vincentian missions struggled to maintain their catechetical nature. The more popular penitential mission was quite popular among religious communities in the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries. Whether the preaching was primarily catechetical or penitential, the final result was usually the same – large numbers of individuals were brought back to the Sacrament of Penance.

The Early Years

When Bishop William DuBourg sought the assistance of the community for his newly created diocese of the Louisiana Purchase, he was seeking missionaries who would be seminary professors. Reluctantly, the Vincentian superiors in Rome gave their blessing to Rev. Felix DeAndreis, C.M., Rev. Joseph Rosati, C.M., and their companions to undertake this mission. However, one of the stipulations made by the superiors was that the confreres would undertake the work of the popular missions in the United States as soon as feasible. The confreres arrived in the United States during the fall of 1816. Unfamiliar with English, their first task was to learn the language. Aided by the Sulpicians, the confreres made their way across the country. As the band progressed from Bardstown toward Missouri, Fr. Joseph Rosati, C.M. preached the first Vincentian mission in the United States at Vincennes, Indiana in 1817. This was the first, and only, mission that the Vincentians gave in the United States for the next seven years. The work of founding the seminary at Perryville consumed all their time and effort.

In 1824, Bishop Rosati, C.M., the auxiliary bishop of the diocese and later first bishop of St. Louis, asked Fr. John Mary Odin, C.M. and Deacon John Timon, C.M. to preach a mission to the people of Little Rock in the Arkansas territory. As they traveled to Little Rock, the missionaries stopped in New Madrid, Missouri, and gave a mission in that town. The people of New Madrid had minimal contact with clergy and both Catholics and non-Catholics sought out the ministry of these two Vincentians. Many had not had access to the sacraments for over 40 years. The parish church, destroyed by a flood, was symbolic of the disarray the missionaries found among the residents. Two years later, Fr. Odin returned to New Madrid with Fr. Leo DeNeckere to offer an extended mission to the people of this area. The success of these missions was measured in the number of communions and confessions. After several months of work, the missionaries left a renewed Christian community. Odin and Timon returned to

² Ibid., 43.

New Madrid several times in the following years to provide this community with the consolation of the sacraments.

The young American province, founded in 1835, struggled to staff both its pastoral commitments and the popular missions. This did not keep the confreres from dreaming about the missions and creating plans to make those dreams a reality. Mariano Maller, C.M. (provincial 1848-1851), along with several other confreres, communicated with Fr. Jean-Baptiste Étienne, C.M., Superior General, about their hope for a massive conversion of U.S. citizens to Catholicism. He explained that the missions were the best approach for accomplishing this task and requested that Fr. Étienne send confreres to assist with the missions. While massive conversions of American citizens were unrealistic, it did provide an impetus to move the mission apostolate forward. Maller's successor as provincial, Stephen Vincent Ryan, C.M. (provincial from 1857-1868), wrote Fr. Étienne about the large number of missions that were undertaken during his administration. Ryan preached many of these missions, since other confreres were occupied with their assigned apostolates.

A common problem that confreres faced on the missions was an insufficient number of confessors. The number of individuals seeking the sacrament were so great that the missionaries often heard confessions continuously throughout the day and into the night, as late as 11:00 p.m. In 1870, the mission work had to be suspended so that the work of opening St. John's College in Brooklyn could begin. The missions resumed in October, 1871.

The Popular Missions in the 20th Century

At the time of the separation of the American Province into two (1888), the apostolate of the popular missions had not yet reached a solid footing. Personnel problems such as lack of due preparation, lack of due propriety, or the severity of a confrere in the confessional caused additional problems for the mission apostolate. The problems of individual missionaries had a negative effect on the apostolate. For example, Henry Cosgrove, Bishop of Davenport, Iowa, when requesting a mission from the confreres was quoted as saying, "Anyone but Fr. Devine!"³ Unfortunately, the small number of Vincentians in the United States during this time made it all but impossible to remove individual confreres from the work and still sustain the work.

In the Eastern Province, a renewed commitment to the popular missions took the form of assigning new members to the mission bands. By 1913, the Eastern Province had 22 missionaries, living in five separate houses, preaching

³ Slawson, Douglas, "To Bring Glad Tidings to the Poor": Vincentian Parish Missions in the United States" in *The American Vincentians: A Popular History of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States 1815-1987* (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1988) 184.

over 100 missions per year. The work of these confreres extended from the Canadian border to the Gulf Coast. The Western Province did not have near the success during this time period. Institutional commitments and the urgent requests of bishops stretched the limited numbers of the province. Fr. Fiat, Superior General, continued to recommend and cajole the province to move forward with the work of the mission, but the realities of the province's works and the limited number of confreres continued to give the province little option in making a concerted effort at developing a comprehensive mission program. With the closing of St. Vincent's College in Los Angeles, California, in 1911, some thought that there would be sufficient funds and personnel to develop a sustained mission apostolate on the West Coast. However, the confreres who were stationed at St. Vincent's College were subsequently transferred to DePaul University in Chicago, so that the scholastics who were assigned to sustain the work before their own studies for ordination were completed could go back to complete their studies. The funds that were promised from the sale of St. Vincent's College barely paid the massive debt that the college had incurred. Despite these complications, the confreres of the Western Province preached 108 missions between the years 1911 and 1914, 48 of those missions preached in the year 1914. After this brief period, the work of the missions was suspended yet again in the west from 1915-1923.

As the work of the missions in the Eastern Province continued to grow through the Second World War, the popular missions in the west continued their halting growth. In the east, the success of the mission centers from 1910 through the 1920s, spurred the province to expand its mission presence into Jackson, Michigan with the establishment of Queen of the Miraculous Medal Parish. The parish served as a mission center for the Michigan area, and also provided service to the Daughters of Charity in the area. The confreres at the parish, took on the chaplaincy of Mercy Hospital and care for the Catholic prisoners at the state prison. The confreres inaugurated the prison ministry with a two-week mission for the Catholic prisoners.

In the west, the work of the missions was being examined yet again. Fr. Charles Souvay, C.M., professor of scripture at Kenrick Seminary in St. Louis and later Superior General, wrote Fr. Verdier, the Superior General, expressing his concern about the lack of interest and commitment to the popular missions in the Western Province. As a result of this communication, Fr. Verdier visited the province in the fall of 1922. He convinced Fr. Finney, the provincial (from 1906-1926), that the province needed to get serious about this primary work of the community. The following year, Finney assigned two confreres to the mission band — Francis McCabe, C.M. and Stephen Paul Hueber, C.M. It was a modest beginning that met with difficulties when McCabe had to resign for reasons of health. In 1926, William Barr was appointed provincial. Like his predecessors, he turned his concern to the missions, but found that it was much

easier to offer verbal support, then to send non-existent personnel to the work. Over the course of the next 15 years, on average, the province assigned two individuals to the work of preaching the missions. In 1929, the gifted preacher, Frederick Coupal, C.M. joined the band. His style was dramatic, and his approach to missions was decidedly penitential. Despite his popularity, Coupal did not hold the trust of his superiors. In the end, the missions declined. By the end of the Second World War, the mission apostolate in the west was all but gone, yet again.

In the late 1940s, the Miraculous Medal Novena band replaced the mission band. The primary goal of the novena band was to conduct and preach at solemn novenas throughout the country. The members of the novena band recognized the need for parish missions and adapted their work, so that pastors could request a solemn novena, eight-day mission or three-day retreat. This good work came to an end when the Provincial, James Stakelum, C.M. (provincial from 1950-1962), dissolved the band in 1957 after a conflict with the novena band's director, Preston Murphy, C.M. In the same year, Stakelum invited missionaries from the east to preach in several parishes staffed by confreres of his own province.

The Popular Missions since the Second Vatican Council

The work of the missions in the east waned during the era of the Second Vatican Council. Two factors affected the work of the missions. With the advent of television in the late 1950s, attendance at missions declined. After the Council, younger priests trained in the theology of the Council, found the style of mission sermons employed by the older confreres unacceptable and as a result refused assignments to the mission band. Thus the mission apostolate in the Eastern Province waned. In 1986, the Eastern Province sent a confrere to Australia in order to study the new methods of Vincentian missions that were in practice there. The Midwest Province did likewise during the same year. In the late 1980s, the Eastern Province had developed two mission teams, one English-speaking and the second Spanish-speaking. The work continues through today.

In 1975, the Western Province was split into three provinces: Midwest, South and West. In contrast to its previous history, each region sought to reinvigorate the work of the missions by assigning several confreres to mission bands. The efforts of the South and the West provided an updated form of parish mission to the rural communities in their provinces. The Southern Province concentrated on bible-based missions, with instruction provided for senior citizens in the morning, business men during the noon hour and an evening service with preaching and Eucharist. In 1984, the South developed a specialized mission team that preached to the Spanish-speaking population of Southern Texas.

The Midwest Province saw a blossoming of the work of the missions. In 1974, two men were appointed to the work of the missions with their headquarters in St. Louis. They continued to reside in St. Louis until 1979 when the headquarters was transferred to the buildings of the recently closed St. Vincent's College, a former minor seminary. The team grew to include three priests and one Daughter of Charity in 1983. Later that year the province opened a formal mission house in Kansas City, Missouri. The house continues to function to this day housing seven missionaries, who preach approximately 60 eight-day missions throughout the United States each year.

Conclusions

The history of the mission apostolate in the United States has been one of ebb and flow. While the formal work of the popular missions has not always been a top priority in the work of the American Provinces, it certainly has been a part of their heart and history. Individual confreres generously gave of their time to give missions in times when there were insufficient numbers to do those things that the province committed itself to do. After 175 years, the popular missions have taken root in the United States and flourished.

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