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“Cast Your Nets Boldly” The Mission *Ad Gentes* in Kenya

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On 22 March 22 1648, Vincent wrote to Fr. Charles Nacquart in Richelieu, assigning him to open the Mission in Madagascar. “The Company has cast its eyes on you,” he wrote “as the best offering it has, to do homage to our Sovereign Creator and to render this service, together with another good priest of the Company.”¹ This seven-page letter is loving, encouraging, energetic, and humorous. After discussing the geography of Madagascar, the example of St. Francis Xavier, and some of the problems and chief concerns of the new mission, Vincent warns Fr. Nacquart to be careful because “husbands bring their own wives to the Europeans to have children by them. But the unfailing grace of your vocation will protect you from all these dangers.”² Every line of the letter reveals Vincent’s excitement and surety about the importance of this mission. If it were at all possible, Vincent laments, he would go himself. Since he cannot, he mandates Nacquart: “Go then, Monsieur, and cast your nets boldly.”³

Vincent’s letter about the new mission in Madagascar has a special meaning to the confreres who today are continuing a mission *ad gentes* in Kenya. For in reading Vincent’s words, we share with him the excitement, the challenge and the joy of continuing this work of the Congregation in East Africa. For 20 years the confreres of the Midwest Province have worked in Kenya. In these next few pages, I would like to reflect on those years by describing the initial history of the mission, the present status, and the hopes and challenges of the future.

The Republic of Kenya is situated on the equator in eastern Africa and its capital is Nairobi. The city of Mombasa is in the southeast corner facing the Indian Ocean. Directly to the east, Kenya borders Somalia. To the north are Ethiopia and Sudan. On the west lies Uganda and our southern neighbor is Tanzania. The population of the country is 38 million. In 1900 there were 2700 Catholics in Kenya;⁴ today there are approximately nine million.

Because of this phenomenal growth, the Catholic Church was in desperate need of missionary assistance and, in particular, the bishops wanted major seminary teachers and formators. In 1979 Bishop Charles Cavallera, the Bishop

¹Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences and Documents, Vol. 3. 1992 ed. Letter # 1020, pp. 278-279.

²Ibid. p. 281.

³Idem.

⁴David B. Barrett (ed.) World Christian Encyclopedia, Nairobi (Oxford University Press, 1982) 432.

of the newly created Diocese of Marsabit, contacted Fr. James Richardson pleading with him to send confreres to his new diocese to open a major seminary. The candidates were young men from the pastoral tribes of the Samburu, Rendille, Gabbra and Borana. The language of education in Kenya was English, so he was asking for English-speaking Vincentians who had some expertise in the formation of diocesan priests. Fr. Richardson turned to the Midwest Province of the United States to ask if the confreres from there would answer this call. Three confreres, including Fr. Richardson himself, were sent to Marsabit in 1980 to begin this new mission.

In 1980 Good Shepherd Major Seminary of Marsabit Diocese Kenya was established in the desert town of Maralal. It was not a place to cast nets, but the confreres began their work boldly and with a clear mission. They had come to establish a major seminary that would prepare young Catholic men from the pastoral tribes for the priesthood. Three confreres made up the permanent staff and others came regularly from the States for periodic stays to help with the teaching. The confreres, who were permanently assigned to the work in Maralal, also did pastoral ministry at the various mission stations around the area and assisted the bishop in developing his pastoral plan for Marsabit. In the initial years of the mission, there was no intention of accepting candidates for the Congregation. Although the confreres frequently received requests to join the Congregation, and the new ordinary, Bishop Ambrose Ravasi, continually encouraged the community to begin a Vincentian formation program, that bold thought was not harbored, but suddenly their work took a surprising twist.

In 1990 Good Shepherd Major Seminary of Marsabit Diocese Kenya was closed. There were a variety of reasons for this, but two were quite significant. First, the number of candidates applying and being accepted to Good Shepherd Major Seminary was dwindling. Second, a new major seminary in the neighboring diocese of Nyeri was recently opened and, in time, it would be offering a spiritual year, a two-year philosophy program and a four-year theology curriculum. Bishop Ravasi and his council felt that this program would serve his students and the diocese very well so he intended to send his students to Christ the King Major Seminary in Nyeri. However, he greatly hoped that the confreres would accompany his men to Nyeri and would join the faculty of this new seminary as teachers and spiritual directors. The provincial and his council in St. Louis acceded to Bishop Ravasi's request and a new chapter of the mission in Kenya was about to be written.

Closing Maralal and moving onto this new enterprise in Nyeri was not easy. However, at the time of its closing, 13 men had completed the major seminary program and became the first diocesan priests of Marsabit. The ten years of work had many successes but some sorrows. Fr. Ted Wiesner, one of the early full-time confreres missioned to Maralal, died suddenly of hepatitis in

1987. Fr. Patrick O'Brien, the first rector of Good Shepherd, returned to the States because of health problems. Yet, the mission, through God's grace, accomplished its hope: to prepare young men from the pastoral tribes in Marsabit Diocese to become priests. At the time of the seminary's closing, a presbyterate existed. So, in the midst of some sorrows, there was much joy. And now the confreres moved on to continue their work in Nyeri. But in this second decade of their work, something different was happening.

Because of the work the confreres were now doing at Christ the King Major Seminary in Nyeri, their outlook about the mission in Kenya began to change. One significant aspect of their apostolate now was that they were preparing men for the priesthood from 17 different dioceses in Kenya and from almost every tribe and region of the republic. They were also continuing to work in ongoing formation with the priests from Marsabit Diocese whom they had trained. And, while they were engaged in those ministries, the Bishop of Meru Diocese in central Kenya pleaded with the confreres to work with his men too through periodic programs of ongoing formation similar to what they were doing for the diocesan priests of Marsabit. It was at this time that the confreres began to seriously explore the possibility of opening a formation program in Kenya for eastern Africa.

For the first ten years of the mission, the confreres had no intention of founding a permanent mission in Kenya. However, during their second ten years their work expanded and their awareness deepened with regard to the suitability of the Congregation setting its roots into the soil of Kenya. A change took place. What started as a temporary commitment now began to look and feel differently. Between 1990 and 2000 new questions were being asked and new challenges began to arise. Conversations led to plans, plans led to proposals, proposals eventually led to the construction of DePaul Centre in Nairobi which today is the center for Vincentian formation in eastern Africa. Fr. Robert Maloney, C.M. dedicated the compound on 25 January 2000. At the close of the second decade of the work in Kenya the original, singly-focused mission of the Congregation in Kenya had evolved, grown and become multifaceted.

The apostolate of helping to form Kenyan candidates for the diocesan priesthood at Christ the King Major Seminary in the Archdiocese of Nyeri still continues. However, with the opening of DePaul Centre in Nairobi, the confreres' horizons have widened and their works have expanded. Four men are assigned to the Vincentian formation program. Presently there are 18 Vincentian candidates residing at DePaul Centre. They are doing their studies at either the Consolata Institute of Philosophy or they are enrolled in the theology program at Tangaza College. The confreres at DePaul Centre are also involved in teaching at those two institutions as well as at St. Thomas Aquinas, the national diocesan theologate of the Kenya Episcopal Conference.

Apostolates involved with the formation of diocesan priests are increasing. The ongoing formation programs for Meru and Marsabit Dioceses are continuing in conjunction with DePaul Centre. At the close of last year, a week of renewal was offered at DePaul Centre for the alumni of Christ the King Major Seminary. The seminary now has 25 priest alumni and 15 of these newly ordained men from all the various dioceses of Kenya arrived at DePaul Centre for a week's workshop. The confreres continue to accompany these young priests as they begin their ministry throughout Kenya. But the work of the Congregation in Kenya is also involved with the poor.

The confreres came to Kenya thinking they were alone in this Vincentian mission but, in time, everywhere they turned they discovered their brothers and sisters of the Vincentian Family accompanying the poor and they have invited the confreres to join in this mission. The Vincentian Family had been working for the poor for decades in eastern Africa and today the Congregation in Kenya is trying to collaborate with the different members of the Vincentian Family in this mission. The St. Vincent de Paul Society is well established in Kenya and Uganda and it has welcomed the confreres and Vincentian students to join them in their works for the poor. Weekly the seminarians serve the poor with members from a variety of different conferences in Nairobi. The confreres and the students have also helped to establish two new conferences in the archdiocese. "The Vincentian Response to the Issue of Poverty in Eastern Africa" was the topic of a workshop that DePaul Centre hosted in the spring of 2000 for the members of the Vincentian Family in Kenya. Over the past two years, different St. Vincent DePaul Conferences have come to DePaul Centre for prayer days that have helped them to reflect on their Vincentian vocation and to share about the challenges and consolations they have experienced in working with the poor. Vincentians from Kenya and Uganda gathered at DePaul Centre in December 2000 to attend a workshop for new members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. During their long break from school in June and July 2000, four Vincentian seminarians from DePaul Centre were sent to Uganda to work with the many conferences around Kampala.

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Collaboration has not been exclusively involved with the lay members of the Vincentian Family, but it is experienced with two groups of our own confreres as well. The first group we work with is the confreres assigned to the international mission of the Congregation in Songea, southwestern Tanzania. Five confreres from the Indian Provinces are working in this remote area. Since the community staffs no parishes in Kenya, the presence of the confreres in Tanzania affords a unique pastoral opportunity for the Congregation's formation program in Kenya. During the long break, some of the Vincentian students are sent to Songea for an eight-week pastoral experience.

The second group of confreres that the mission collaborates with is the Vincentian formators representing the Conference of Visitors of Africa and Madagascar (COVIAM).

In July of 2000, a group of Vincentian formators working in the various provinces and regions of Africa and Madagascar met at DePaul Centre for a workshop on Vincentian formation. This was the first in a series of yearly workshops that will be hosted by DePaul Centre at the request of COVIAM. A great need that all the formation programs in this part of the world experience is men who are trained and experienced in Vincentian formation. These gatherings are reminders that one needs to collaborate not only with those people outside one's community, but very importantly the confreres need to be working very closely with their own.

Here in Kenya we also visit and work with some of the religious communities who are part of the Vincentian Family. The Cottolengo Communities, the Daughters of St. Anne and the Brothers of Mary Mother of Mercy are all affiliated with the Vincentian Family. All have works in Nairobi and all gather annually on the feast of St. Vincent with the community of DePaul Centre to celebrate their common spiritual heritage. The CMM Brothers have been particularly close to the community. At two of their houses, Vincentian candidates have lived with the brothers and worked in their apostolates with the poor while they discerned their calling to join the Congregation. In turn the confreres have given classes, workshops and retreats to the brothers to help them deepen their devotion to St. Vincent, the patron and model of their institute. Twenty-one years have passed since the confreres boldly began their mission in

Kenya. Only the Lord knows what the future holds, but we can see a few things on the horizon.

We have been missing an essential part of our family here in eastern Africa. The Daughters of Charity are not with us. Indications are, however, that before too long they will also be serving the mission here in Kenya. At the close of last year, two Daughters came for a short look and see visit. They stayed with the community at DePaul Centre and talked to and visited some of the works the Vincent de Paul Society is sponsoring. This was a quiet, unofficial visit but very promising. Shortly after they departed, however, one of the Kenyan bishops wrote to DePaul Centre. He said he heard a rumor that the Daughters of Charity were visiting Kenya and that they were considering opening a mission here. He asked the confreres to please let them know that he had a convent prepared for them in West Pokot. Describe to them, he pleaded, how desperately poor the area is and how great is its need for the Daughters. He said to tell them that the poor were waiting for them. Before too long we feel certain that Daughters will be here in Kenya.

Over the past 20 years the road of this mission has taken many turns. It has been very challenging. The term *road* is an apt image for the Kenya mission. When DePaul Centre was opened, the confreres were looking for some kind of icon of St. Vincent that could hang in the entrance of the students' residence, Ravasi Hall. A local artist was asked to create an artwork of St. Vincent in Africa for the entry wall. Since the artist was unfamiliar with Vincent's life, the confreres gave him a short biography. Months past and then the man returned with an oval shaped wood carving about five feet high. He called it "Vincent on the Road of the Poor." At the top of the carving is an African hut. From the hut flows a curved road. The first figure walking down the road is a refugee carrying what little he owns on a stick that is slung over his shoulder. He represents the 20 million refugees on the African continent. At the next curve of the road is a prisoner under a tree. This chained man symbolizes all those who are spending their lives in prisons throughout Africa or are in other ways incarcerated. Finally, at the bottom of the road is a sick man sitting on a stool suffering from malaria or Aids or typhoid or malnutrition or some other incurable disease that runs rampant in Africa. Kneeling before the poor man and gently feeding him is Vincent. The artist said, I have Vincent kneeling because he says, "The poor are your masters." Then he said: "This is how I picture Vincent in Africa." And does it not capture what the Vincentian mission and challenge in Africa is about?