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The History of the Asia Pacific Visitors Conference (APVC)

*by Hugh O'Donnell, C.M.
Executive Secretary of the APVC**

The predecessor of the Asia Pacific Visitors Conference, which itself held its first meeting in April 1994, dates back 13 years to August 1981. The meeting was called the "Asian Provincials' Meeting," but by 1994 no one had remembered it, except through some pictures produced by one of the participants.

Asian Provincials' Meeting, August 1981. The minutes of the August 1981 meeting reveal, however, a substantive agenda with Fr. Richard Mc Cullen, who was elected Superior General the previous year, attending the meeting. Fr. Paul Henzmann, the Secretary General, was with him. The provincials were four in number: Fr. Anthony Netikat from India, Fr. Rolando DelaGoza from the Philippines, Fr. I. Suharto from Indonesia and Fr. Keith Turnbull from Australia. The meeting was held in Sydney.

The Constitutions and Statutes had been completed a year earlier in the General Assembly of 1980 and the English translation was already in circulation among the confreres of the region. The principal theme of the meeting was how to help the confreres understand and appreciate the spirit and thrust of the Constitutions and Statutes, as well as how to foster the changes and transformations that would be called for in the provinces and the lives of the confreres. Since a principal means was to be a follow-up provincial assembly, considerable attention was paid to the ways of making the assemblies fruitful. On the agenda there were also three other topics for discussion: 1) the promotion of vocations, 2) the specific needs of the individual provinces, and 3) ways in which the Curia could be of help. It is clear from the minutes that regional collaboration, which was to become the focus of APVC, was not yet a central theme. In light of subsequent developments, however, it is interesting to note that there already was a longing for deeper formation in the charism of Vincent and Vincentian heritage.

The Asia Pacific Visitors Conference. The first meeting was held in Sydney, Australia in April 1994. At that meeting the Visitors established a simple set of guidelines to govern the conference's business, which goes by the name "A Minute of Understanding." Basically the Visitors committed themselves to meet annually. The meetings were to be rotated through each of the provinces. In the years in which there was either a General Assembly or a

* At the time of publication of this issue of *Vincentiana*, the new Executive Secretary is Fr. Maurice Sullivan, C.M.

Visitors Meeting, the annual meeting would be held before, during or after these gatherings. As the meetings rotated through each province, the provincial of the host province would become the chairperson for the year and would be responsible for eliciting the agenda and chairing the meeting. In the 1999 meeting in Taiwan it was decided that an Executive Secretary should be appointed who could follow up the work of the annual meeting and deal with the ongoing business of APVC working in collaboration with the Chair for the current year.

The broad goals of the Conference are to know each other's situations, to share with one another at the provincial level, to support each other, and, finally, to organize events and take initiatives that will cooperatively advance the charism of Vincent and the mission of the Congregation in the Asia Pacific Region. The decision-making process is entirely by consensus and mutual agreement. The foundational element in each meeting is the sharing by each provincial on the status, hopes, needs and plans of his province, which is then open for dialogue and discussion. Each provincial is invited to submit items for information, discussion or deliberation in advance of the meeting, but these items can also be introduced during the meeting.

One of the most important reasons for rotating the meetings has been to introduce the members of the conference to the life, customs and realities of the host province through personal experience. During the five-day meeting there are usually a couple of days or parts of several days devoted to visiting confreres and their works, to visiting the Daughters of Charity and their apostolates, and in a special way getting to know the local people firsthand. In addition, the host provincial usually creates an option for those who can come early or stay late to have a further experience of the people and culture of the host province. This has been very successful.

The meetings to date have been in Australia (1994), Indonesia (1995), Salamanca (1996), Orissa, India (1997), Rome (1998), Taiwan (1999), Lebanon (2000), Dublin (2001) and the Philippines (2002). The next scheduled meeting will be held in the province of Southern India in March 2003. Then the rotation will begin again.

How the meeting was held in Lebanon in the Holy Year is a story by itself and has to do with the reach of the Asia Pacific Region. The members of the APVC are the provincials of the Provinces of Indonesia, the Philippines, North India, South India, Australia and China. In reality the members comes from both Asia and Oceania. Gradually the Visitors became aware that the Province of the Orient, though geographically distant, is in fact an Asian province. They also became aware that the Province of Madagascar shares many interests with Asia, since a significant minority of their peoples is of Asian ancestry. This led to an invitation to the provincials of Lebanon and Madagascar to attend the 1999

meeting in Taiwan. They were interested and when they came they shared their status, hopes, needs and plans along with the other provincials. At the end the question of membership was addressed. Since these provinces have strong and natural bonds with Europe and Africa respectively, everyone recognized the value of having them remain in their present regions. At the same time, everyone also agreed that it was mutually beneficial to invite them to APVC's annual meeting. Then, because of the Millennial Holy Year of 2000 and with the offer of visiting the Holy Land, the APVC accepted the invitation of the provincial of Lebanon to hold its annual meeting there and to visit the holy places.

The Assistant General for the Missions, Fr. Victor Bieler, has faithfully attended the meetings and his presence has been an important bond with the Curia and the Congregation internationally as well as a support for all the provincials. In addition, of course, his Asian experience has been of special benefit to APVC. Fr. Maloney participated in the 1999 meeting, which confirmed the direction taken by APVC and at the same time raised the consciousness of the members to larger international concerns.

Formation of Formators Workshop. The most important initiative to date of the APVC has been the biennial Formation of Formators Workshop. Vocations are numerous in a majority of the provinces, namely in Indonesia, the Philippines and North and South India, and promising in Fiji. In 1994, at the first meeting, it was acknowledged that the formators were doing a good job and efforts were being made to send them away for specific training in formation. At the same time it was recognized that they generally were young and often lacked adequate support for this demanding ministry. To address this need and to enable confreres in formation throughout the Asia Pacific Region to know and help each other, while at the same time to pursue ongoing professional development, the Visitors decided to establish the biennial two-week Formation of Formators Workshop.

The first session was held in the Philippines in 1996, the second in Indonesia in 1998, the third in Orissa, India in 2000 and the fourth in Fiji in the summer of 2001. The fifth is scheduled for Taiwan, February 9-19, 2003. Beginning with the workshop in Fiji we are on an 18-month rotation. The Superior General and the Council had urged each region to have these workshops annually. However, because APVC's area is so large and covers both the northern and southern hemispheres an 18-month rotation was agreed upon, which allows us to schedule the meetings during the summer months in the respective hemispheres. The sessions have had a facilitator and the reports have been thorough and complete, practically book length. In Orissa, the Indian confreres and the students in formation were invited. Everyone thought this was a valuable move. In the future the confreres and seminarians of the host province are invited. Since most of the candidates of the Australian province are Fijian, the 2001 workshop was held in Fiji.

The Vincentian Center for Asia Pacific. At the invitation and with the support of the Visitors of APVC, Adamson University in Manila established the Vincentian Center for Asia Pacific on the campus of the University. Adamson and the Philippine province have been generous in providing prime space, equipment and staff.

The center will serve the needs of the Vincentian mission in Asia Pacific. In the beginning the emphasis will be on Vincentian resources and service to the participating provinces. The first four immediate goals are:

- First, establish the Asia Pacific Identity of the Center by collecting and displaying documentation and pictures regarding our apostolates and mission from each province. This should also include current reports on meetings, events, etc.
- Secondly, manage the website and link it with the Asia Pacific websites. The goal is to provide information and a means of communication in the region as well as to make resources available on line.
- Thirdly, collect and gather Vincentian resources (books, periodicals, audio-visual, etc.). Four general categories are suggested: 1) the letters, conferences and documents of St. Vincent, our saints, etc.; 2) biographies, studies of Vincent and our saints, as well as historical materials, with special emphasis on the Asia Pacific region; 3) Vincent's world; and 4) our world of Asia Pacific in relation to our mission.
- Fourthly, make these resources available to individual researchers, to the Vincentian Family in Asia Pacific and other interested parties. In this connection, it might be possible to establish a Vincentian Bookstore for materials otherwise only available outside the region.

There is also a future goal, which at this time is in the order of a hope and a dream, and thus awaits future deliberation and action. The hope is that the Center can offer courses and eventually a Certificate or even a Degree Program in Vincentian Studies through Adamson University. The courses might take the shape of weekend seminars, intensive courses over a couple of weeks or semester courses.

The Charism and Culture Committee. For at least two years the Conference has been aiming at the establishment of what was originally called "An Asian Vincentian Forum." The hope has been to establish an annual meeting on Vincentian topics to which members of the larger Vincentian family may be invited. The goal would be to bring people together to reflect on the Vincentian charism in the Asian context. Recent considerations of a Vincentian Theological Forum have expanded the vision. The two goals have been combined and the

work has been given to a committee called “The Charism and Culture Committee” which is scheduled to meet in February 2003. The directions given to the committee are:

1. To **advance the process of inculturating the charism** of St. Vincent in the Asia Pacific Region (this will complement the work of CIF which has done so much to put us in touch with our roots and history);
2. To **provide a forum in which all members of the Vincentian Family** can deepen their understanding of St. Vincent’s charism precisely within the realities of their local cultural situations;
3. To **stimulate research and reflection** on Vincent’s charism within Asian Pacific perspectives and to **promote the growth of Vincentian literature** in the region;
4. To undertake these tasks **in dialogue with the poor, the culture and other religions**, not in Catholic and Vincentian isolation.

In conclusion, it can be said that timing and a spirit of easy collaboration among the Visitors have been special blessings in the first ten years of APVC.

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