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The 80th Anniversary of the Presence of the Vincentians in Indonesia (1923-2003)

An Historical Reflection

by Franciscus Eko Armada, C.M.

Province of Indonesia

Prelude

The year of the beginning of the Vincentian mission in Indonesia was not 1835. Yet it was a time of blessing from which the Vincentian spirit of missionary activities flowed in Indonesia. In 1835 the great missionary and martyr, St. John Gabriel Perboyre, CM, arrived at Batavia, the contemporary capital of Java Island (Indonesia). That same year he lodged for a month in Surabaya, to which the first Dutch Vincentians would be sent almost a century later (1923) by *Propaganda Fide* to announce the gospel.

“We were in Surabaya from 14 July (1835)... We stayed there for three weeks. This occasion was a real blessing for us. It was like a holiday in which we could take a walk and breathe the fresh air of the mountains surrounding Surabaya. Once or twice a week we celebrated the Holy Eucharist. Afterwards, sometimes we walked along the beach of Java or Madura...” (*Letter of St. John Gabriel Perboyre, 9 September 1835*).

The Vincentian Mission to Indonesia has often been considered by the missionaries as a mission of following the “footprints” of the martyr and saint John Gabriel Perboyre, CM. Fr. de Backere, CM, the superior of the first five Vincentians in Indonesia wrote a touching letter on 15 November 1923: *Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre has been an invisible friend and guide for us in our missionary journey to Java.... We are sure that our apostolate in this fertile land will be fruitful as it has been carved and blessed by the “footprint” of our great and blessed missionary.*

In the history of the Vincentian presence in Indonesia St. John Gabriel Perboyre, CM, surely could not be considered as pioneer of the mission. Yet his sojourn at Surabaya for a month before

continuing his journey to China in 1835 became a prelude to the missionary presence of the first Dutch Vincentians in 1923.

Indonesia was a colony of the Dutch. As colony, it was called *Oost-Indië* (the East Indies) with Java as one of the most important islands. The area of the Vincentian mission is the eastern part of Java Island.

The call of *Propaganda Fide*

The beginning of the mission was in 1923. Fr. François Verdier, CM, the Superior General, announced the mission to the *East Indies* in his Circular of 1923 as follows: “The Dutch Province in China has already had a vicariate guided with gracious wisdom by Msgr. Geurts, CM.... I do hope that the Java Island may soon be open as the new land of mission of the Dutch confreres.”

Five Dutch confreres were chosen as the first Vincentian missionaries to Indonesia. They were Fr. Dr. Theophile de Backere, CM, Fr. E. E. Sarneel, CM, Fr. Jan Wolters, CM, Fr. Theodore Heuvelmans, CM, and Fr. Cornelius Klamer, CM. The first four left from Holland on 25 May 1923 for Paris (then Rome) and finally they boarded the ship *Johan de Witt* from Genoa on 6 June 1923 for Indonesia. The fifth confrere came from China, as he had been a missionary in the Vicariate of Yung Pingfu. He joined the other four in Singapore. On 6 July 1923 the first missionaries of the Vincentians arrived in Surabaya. They were called by *Propaganda Fide* to set up the mission in East Java that had been initiated by the Jesuits.

At the beginning of the mission there were three regions (Surabaya, Rembang, and Kediri) for which the Vincentians took responsibility. But in 1928 the Vincentians took over the region of Madiun as well.

The three regions altogether encompass 20,000 square kilometers. They are as big as two-thirds of Holland with a population of six million, of whom 60,000 were Chinese and 15,000 were Europeans. The indigenous Catholics numbered only 40. Under such conditions, our first missionaries faced difficult challenges. Aside from that, they also suffered a lot because of the very hot, tropical climate in Java.

The spirit of the first missionary Vincentians

They were sons of the times. During the first mission to Indonesia, Pope Benedict XV released an encyclical *Maximum Illud* (30 November 1919) that strongly promoted indigenous vocations and responsibility to mission regions. In addition, the encyclical described missionaries as messengers of Christ. “Leave and forget

your country and family!" Such was the missionary motto promoted by *Maximum Illud*. People outside the Catholic Church were considered as those who did not possess knowledge of salvation. There were three goals of the mission: 1) to propagate the Catholic faith; 2) to build Christian communities; 3) to spread the Reign of God.

The spirit of the Encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae* (28 February 1926) of Pope Pius XI also fostered the missionary spirit of the first Vincentians. Our missionaries were inspired to evangelize the indigenous people, rooting the Christian faith into their own culture, and educating children. To learn the Javanese culture became very important for inculturation. In addition, *Rerum Ecclesiae* highlighted the role of indigenous vocations in mission as well.

The concerns of the first Vincentian missionaries in Indonesia were in conformity with both *Maximum Illud* and *Rerum Ecclesiae*. They strived to plant the Christian faith into the hearts of the indigenous people, to build Christian communities in villages, and to promote vocations among the young native men. Vocational promotion was realized in 1933 when two young Javanese were sent to Holland for their novitiate formation as the first CM candidates. They were Dwidjoesastro and Padmosepoetro. The former became the first indigenous Vincentian in Indonesia (priestly ordination in 1940), whereas the latter left his vocation during his formation. During those same periods before the Second World War our missionaries also promoted vocations for diocesan priests. There were two diocesan candidates. One of them, Rev. Dibyokarjono, later became the second bishop of Surabaya (1982-1993).

First apostolates to build the Prefecture of Surabaya

When the first Vincentian missionaries arrived, there were many Europeans in Surabaya. Nevertheless, from the beginning of the mission, our missionaries knew that they were sent first to evangelize the indigenous people of East Java. How did they begin evangelizing the natives? They did home visits wherever Catholic families lived, built chapels and schools in villages, and constructed mission centers, health services, and even hospitals.

"We spend our time doing home visits. We visit families in the afternoon or evening. During the daytime we learn the Javanese language and prepare many things for liturgical celebrations in the evening..." (*Letter of Fr. T. de Backere, CM, March 1925*).

As mentioned above, there were five priests among the first missionaries. They shared the missionary tasks as follows: T. de Backere, CM, was the superior of the mission; Theodore Heuvelmans, CM, was responsible for pastoral service to the Europeans; E.E. Sarneel, CM, served as parish priest; C. Klamer, CM, offered

pastoral service to the Chinese people; and Jan Wolters, CM, the youngest, was assigned to visit towns and villages outside Surabaya, evangelizing the indigenous people of Java. In one of his letters, Jan Wolters described himself as the “missionary of the muddy road,” as he had to walk all the time through villages with bad and muddy roads and only occasionally went by horse when crossing hills or valleys. In the first year of his presence, Jan Wolters complained (in a good sense) about his assignments: “The area of mission in Java is as big as two-thirds of Holland, but there is only one missionary who walks through it.... Who wants to help me to bring these good people to the salvation?” (*Letter of Fr. Jan Wolters, CM, in 1924*).

Under the Dutch colonial government, education of the indigenous in small towns and villages was much neglected. In villages there were no educational institutions for the Javanese children. Education at that time was very expensive and elite.

In 1925 or earlier our missionaries created a Foundation with Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre as its the patron saint. This Foundation would provide financially for all the things necessary for pastoral work in the educational field, health services, building chapels or churches. With the help of this Foundation our missionaries started to construct many school buildings in villages. They were called the *desa* schools. These refer to modest buildings where children of the villages (*desa*) could gather together and learn how to read and write. Our missionaries were inspired by the lack of education to build more and more school buildings everywhere. In just ten years (from 1923-1933) there were more than 40 *desa* schools constructed by the Vincentians. They usually built both schools and chapels in the villages or chapels were also used as schools where the Javanese children could hear of the Christian faith while learning school subjects.

In the same year, 1925, the Vincentians set up a hospital named RKZ (*Roman Katholieke Zieken Huise*) of St. Vincent de Paul. The hospital was handed over to the Servants of the Holy Spirit (S.Sp.S.), since the Daughters of Charity had not yet come at that time. Presently the RKZ St. Vincent de Paul is very developed and has become one of the leading hospitals in Surabaya.

Setting up the Prefecture of Surabaya (1928)

When the first Vincentian missionaries arrived, Surabaya was only a parish that became part of the Vicariate of Jakarta (almost 1000 kilometers from Surabaya). In 1928 the Prefecture of Surabaya was set up. Msgr. Dr. T. de Backere, CM, was the Prefect Apostolic. At that time there were 15 Vincentian priests, 25 religious brothers, 88 Ursuline sisters and Sisters of the Holy Spirit, and 10,345 Catholics.

The creation of the Prefecture of Surabaya produced a new phase of the Vincentian mission. The missionaries had to distinguish between the “missionary administration” of the CM and that of the Prefecture. Though there were some misunderstandings, they were united in the one intention of building the Prefecture of Surabaya. In 1934 the superior of the mission was Fr. Smet, CM, who replaced Msgr. de Backere, CM, the Prefect Apostolic.

Vincentian presence in the Prefecture Apostolic of Surabaya was dictated more by circumstances and contextual needs than by policy. The Javanese people needed more and more schools and health services, especially for the indigenous peoples. And so the confreres provided these during their first missionary apostolates in Surabaya, Rembang, and Madiun.



Four of the five first Vincentians in Indonesia: From left to right: J. Wolters, T. de Backere (standing), T. Heuvelmans and E. Sarneel, all coming from Holland. A fifth Vincentian, also Dutch (C. Klammer), came from the mission in China.

The magnificent inculturation of the “Pohsarang” church building

The term “inculturation” was not yet available to describe the magnificent church building in a village called “Pohsarang.” Yet there would be no more exact word other than “inculturation” to designate the purpose of such a building. It was built in 1936 by Fr. Jan Wolters with the help of Mr. Maclaine Pont, an architect who had been concerned with the preservation of Javanese archeological artifacts.

The church building of Pohsarang has been very well known since the beginning of its construction. At the present time, it has become the shrine to the Blessed Virgin Mary most frequented by Catholics. The architectural style depicts the sense of the Javanese culture. It creates an atmosphere of a kind of house for the king in the Javanese background. Its gate is narrow so as to offer a personal sense of welcoming given by the king to those who want to come.

“The dark nights” of the missionary periods

By “dark nights” I mean times of persecution during the invasion of the Japanese troops of Indonesia during the Second World War (1942-1945). The Japanese military looked inviting to the Indonesians, since it wished to free them from Dutch or Western colonization. But the fact was this. Upon the arrival of the Japanese troops, new miserable conditions for the Indonesians began. There were numerous victims of the evil violence done by the Japanese. In the meantime, the Dutch missionaries suffered a lot during that time. Priests, religious sisters, laymen — as long as they were Dutch — were all brought to the camps (*internir*), tortured, punished and even killed.

What was the condition of the missionary apostolates? Christian communities, especially in villages, were almost totally abandoned, as there were not enough indigenous priests who could take care of them. Schools, church buildings, chapels, convents, houses of priests (*pastoran*) were damaged or taken over by the Japanese for military operations.

All of our missionaries had particular stories and vignettes that have come down to us to paint a picture of loyalty, fidelity, suffering, imprisonment, love of the people and attachment to their vocation. Fr. Gerard van Ravestein, CM, the *vlootaalmoezenir* (priest who is in charge of the Navy) sank together with the ship bombarded by the Japanese military on the Java Sea. Fr. Gerard Boonekamp, CM, and Fr. van Goethem, CM, suffered a lot because of physical tortures given in connection with false accusations. Fr. van Megen, CM, was best remembered as a sick prisoner who was fed “rat meat” by the Japanese officers.

After the war our missionaries returned to the parishes where they had been before, but due to exhaustion of body and mind from living in miserable camps, they went home to Holland for medical treatment. There were about 12 Vincentian priests who returned home. Providentially there were newcomers among the Vincentian missionaries who just came from Holland. They would restore the mission apostolates that had been damaged and destroyed by the war.

During the war the Prefecture of Surabaya was changed into a vicariate in 1942. Msgr. Michael Verhoeks, CM, was the Vicar Apostolic. He passed away in 1952 from pulmonary illness. Msgr. Johannes Klooster, CM, then inherited the responsibility as the Vicar Apostolic.

The providential start of the minor seminary

To build a seminary was the great desire of the Vincentian missionaries from the beginning of the mission. As recommended by the encyclicals *Maximum Illud* and *Rerum Ecclesiae*, indigenous vocations were very important to the mission. Due to difficult situations and times of war, there had been no success in initiating seminary formation. In 1948 there was a providential event. Fr. Dwidjoesastro, CM, the first ever indigenous Vincentian, brought with him from Kediri to Surabaya eight young men with one purpose: they wished to be formed in a seminary. There were difficulties in traveling from Kediri to Surabaya due to military conflicts between the Dutch and the Indonesian Republic troops. At that time, Fr. van Megen, CM, was the superior of the mission in Surabaya. He at once became the rector of the minor seminary. Fr. Herman Niessen, CM, took over responsibility for the English and the Dutch.

The start of the minor seminary was indeed by reason of divine providence and unplanned by the confreres. Fr. Dwidjoesastro had not told the confreres before coming to Surabaya. From this time onward, and into the next decades, there would be an increasing number of seminarians formed in the Vicariate. Later on, in 1958, the minor seminary at Surabaya was transferred to a small town called Garum (Blitar), where it still remains.

Besides the minor seminary, in 1958 a Catholic university, Widya Mandala, was also built in Surabaya with the help of our Vincentian missionaries. This university showed the missionary fervor of the Vincentians in offering better human resources to the Javanese people. Fr. Paul Janssen, CM, whose concerns were in the educational field, started to create an institution for forming lay Catholic teachers in Madiun.

Toward an autonomous Province of Indonesia

In 1950 the new phase began. Indonesia became a vice-province of the Dutch Province. There was a minor seminary already built, which had more than 40 seminarians. Many Dutch confreres joined in the work of the Vicariate of Surabaya. There were three indigenous priests (a Vincentian and two diocesan). Schools were established by the religious sisters and brothers. In 1958 Indonesia became an autonomous province. The majority of the priests were still Dutch but there were already some indigenous candidates who would eventually be ready to take over the province.

To build the major seminary land and persons who could take charge of the formation were needed. In 1952 there were some young men who wished to become CM priests. With the blessing of divine providence, our missionaries built the major seminary at Rembang (about 300 kilometers from Surabaya). Fr. Piet Boonekamp, CM, who had been expelled from China due to the Communist Revolution, took the job as rector and teacher of philosophical subjects. After two years of philosophy, the candidates were sent to Holland for theology. Because of a diplomatic conflict between Indonesia and Holland concerning the so-called "Irian Jaya" in 1958, our seminarians transferred from Holland to Italy and USA. In the meantime some candidates were sent to Australia until the major seminary of the CM in Kediri was established in 1962.

The major seminary of the CM at Kediri lasted less than ten years (1962-1971), for in 1971 the CM confreres were invited by the Carmelites to collaborate in the construction of a major seminary (philosophy and theology together). With sacrifices by both the Carmelites and the CM the School of Philosophy and Theology "Widya Sasana" was built and well established in Malang. From this time onward the STFT (School of Philosophy and Theology) has been one of the leading institutions not only in terms of priestly formation (diocesan and religious) but also in the philosophical and theological fields in Indonesia.

The erection of the Diocese of Surabaya

In 1961 the creation of an Indonesian hierarchy began. The Vicariate of Surabaya became a diocese. The first bishop of Surabaya was Msgr. Johannes Klooster, CM. Along with the creation of the Diocese of Surabaya, a new phase of the CM presence in Indonesia began. As the diocesan priests have increased in terms of number, the CM priests have had to hand over some parishes to the diocesan priests.

The Indonesian CM then concentrated more on exploring its original and Vincentian charism than keeping works in parishes. For

instance, priestly formation in seminaries was always one of the characteristic concerns of St. Vincent. It now gained more attention and serious plans for its renewal were developed. Evangelization of the poor has been carried out more convincingly. Handicapped children and poor people have won the heart of Fr. Paul Janssen, CM, who has been so diligently dedicating himself to caring for them. The lepers, who have always been alienated, rejected, and ostracized by society in the absolute sense, inspired Fr. Ernesto Fervari, CM, to build what have been called *Wireskat*, houses dedicated to rehabilitation of the lepers. Parishes that were handled by the Vincentians have been more concerned with helping poor people by distributing necessary things or creating channels of employment for the jobless, etc.

The coming of the Italian and French Vincentian missionaries

The presence of the Italian and French confreres has depicted the Vincentian characteristic in missionary apostolates. Thanks to the invitation of the Bishop of Surabaya, Msgr. Johannes Klooster, CM, the Italian confreres took over some parishes in the diocese in 1965. They settled in two regions (Madiun and Rembang). With typical Italian style they worked hard in pastoral services for the poor in some towns and villages close to Madiun and built some schools. Later on, some of the Italian confreres dedicated themselves to the mission in Kalimantan that was initiated by the French missionaries.

Our French missionaries first came to Indonesia in 1976. They were only three confreres (Jacques Gros, CM, Gabriel Dethune, CM, and Victor Berset, CM), who had been expelled by the Communists from Vietnam. Unlike the Italian confreres who came to Indonesia at the bishop's invitation, the French Vincentians came to Indonesia with the intention of "continuing" their missionary spirit as carried out in Vietnam. They looked for a place that would be similar to Vietnam (in terms of persons rather than geography). Providentially they found the Diocese of Sintang, which welcomed them to work there. Divine Providence works in daily events. As time passed, the Indonesian Province has paid attention to the missionary activities in Kalimantan. We have considered that such a mission is indeed Vincentian, as the place is poor, isolated, and needs much charitable assistance. When our missionaries have worked hard, indigenous vocations spring up, granted by God. The mission in Kalimantan has indeed required sacrifices from the missionaries and province, but it has always been blessed by God. It has been nothing other than the faithful realization of the Vincentian missionary charism.

In Kalimantan our Vincentian confreres have also set up a practical educational institution for the young indigenous people at

Nangapinoh. Fr. Carlo Karyanto, CM, who has dedicated himself to the mission in Kalimantan for more than 25 years, pioneered the development of missionary activities in educational fields and the building of a place of lodging for the sick. In addition, there have been some educational activities offered by confreres and Vincentian laymen to the children in the interior of the large island of Kalimantan.

Rediscovering and fostering the Vincentian charism

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) engraved a new spirit of renewal in the heart of the Church. A new spirit of renewal flowed into the heart of the Indonesian Vincentians as well. The province began to renew the sense of living community, of doing charitable works, of dedicating itself to priestly formation, of evangelization of the poor, of working in parishes and of being missionary.

In line with the spirit of renewal which sprang from Vatican II, the Vincentians have been rediscovering and fostering some activities characterized by St. Vincent's charism. Just to mention some of them: Fr. van Steen, CM, founded a monthly magazine, *Busos*, that outlined the Social Doctrine of the Church; in addition, he gathered some Christian workers to advance themselves with a new understanding of justice and empowerment. Some young confreres have begun giving attention to street children, empowering employees, developing informal schools for poor children, credit unions for workers and farmers, formation of Vincentian laity, etc.

In the meantime, some confreres who work in parishes have striven to introduce the Vincentian charism into the daily activities of the parishioners. Foundations of social activities and the SSVP (Society of St. Vincent de Paul) have always been main focuses in pastoral services.

Two retreat houses have been built for the formation of the laity. Vincentian confreres who are presently in charge of retreat houses have been actively creating some models of formation for lay people in the spirit of St. Vincent. Our schools of St. Louis and in Surabaya have always asked them to undertake the spiritual formation of their Catholic students and teachers.

Popular mission, an activity much loved by St. Vincent, has been developed into the *provincialis opus* that makes priests, sisters and religious brothers or even laypersons (those of the Vincentian family) unite and get involved actively in evangelizing the poor. The Diocese of Banjarmasin has even made a contract for the Vincentian popular mission for three consecutive years. The Bishop of Banjarmasin hopes that the Vincentians might evangelize the Catholics throughout parishes in his diocese.

Formation in seminaries (minor and major) has been renewed continually. There are actually two minor seminaries that are staffed by the Vincentians (or at least the Vincentians partake actively in formation). They are St. Vincent Seminary at Garum and the minor seminary at Sintang, Kalimantan. In addition, there is a major seminary called School of Philosophy and Theology, "Widya Sasana," Malang with almost 400 students (from different congregations and dioceses) to which the Vincentians dedicate themselves in the field of priestly formation.

Toward a missionary province

Eighty years ago the Indonesian Province was just one of the Dutch missions. Now, it has been transformed into a missionary province. The missionary spirit of the confreres has been realized in three places of mission: in Taiwan (three confreres), in the Solomon Islands (one confrere, as well as one or more others preparing themselves), in Papua New Guinea (three confreres). A new domestic mission has also just opened. It is in the so-called "Indonesian Papua," inside jungle, a part of the Manokwari Diocese. Two young confreres have generously made themselves available to go to this new mission.

On the 80th anniversary of the arrival of the first Dutch Vincentian missionaries, we would like to thank God for the missionary zeal granted to our province. This brief overview of the history of the Vincentian presence in Indonesia evokes thanksgiving, pride, joy, and admiration for the zeal to preach the gospel and love for the Indonesians reflected in the lives of our confreres.

There are still many challenges to face in the future, such as: to be deeply inculturated into Indonesian culture and to learn well the needs of the poor; to be more fervent in renewing forms of popular missions, priestly formation in seminaries, formation for Vincentian laypeople, pastoral services in parishes, formation of youth, social and charitable activities, and in concretizing the intellectual apostolate, interreligious dialogue, etc. God's grace, however, is our hope, that we may be able to continue our mission in spite of difficulties and failures.

[This reflection is a summary taken from the book, ARMADA RIYANTO, C.M., *80 Tahun Romo-Romo CM di Indonesia (The 80 Years of the Presence of the CM Priests in Indonesia)*, Malang, 2003.]*

* Cf. *Vincentiana* 47 (2003) 369.