

VIII.  
**THE AMERICAN VINCENTIAN  
EXPERIENCE:  
REFLECTIONS ON MISSION**

by  
**The Editorial Staff**

For almost three and a half centuries there existed in the Congregation of the Mission a form of shared prayer called repetition. In it the superior called on an individual confrere to give his reflections, feelings, judgments, inspirations, and resolutions on a given subject of meditation. Having researched a vast amount of history, much of it previously unknown, and having reduced it to accessible form, the editorial staff of the Vincentian Studies Institute feels called upon to share its more personal reflections on what it has done. We began by asking ourselves what we have learned.

**Preliminary Comments**

The first lesson is that Vincentian history in this country falls into rather neat chronological categories. It begins with the pioneer era of the American mission (1815-1835). Then comes the period of the American province (1835-1888). The final periods include the development of the Eastern and Western Provinces (1888-1945), the age of expansion (1945-1965), and the years after Vatican II (1965-1987).

We also realized that during this time most Vincentians have lived in an historical vacuum. For more than a century and a half, Vincentians individually and collectively have had little or no knowledge of their Community's history in the United States, beyond anecdote or sometimes apocryphal stories. In this they have been like many other communities in this country. In general this

lack of historical awareness has had detrimental effects. One has been the tendency to accept the present as normative. The term "traditional" has been too easily applied to structures, practices, and approaches that were in fact of recent origin—or perhaps even alien to the original spirit of the Vincentian Community. Another has been the inability to learn from the past. Theory replaces experience as a guiding principle, often bolstered by a kind of Vincentian fundamentalism in which appeals are made to the words of Saint Vincent while both context and historical reality are ignored. Lastly, far too many Vincentians have been unaware of the richness of their Community's history and its substantial contribution to the Catholic Church in the United States.

When the Second Vatican Council called on religious communities to search out and return to the charisms of their founders, it was implicitly issuing a call to historical studies. These were not to be just studies of the life and teachings of the founders. What was needed was research into the ongoing life of a community, for charism is a heritage that is lived, not just a body of doctrine passed unchanged from one generation to the next. The old principle that custom is the best interpreter of law has a place in discerning the charism of the Vincentian Community.

A third lesson is that the American Vincentian experience has paralleled that of the American Catholic Church in general. Like the American Church, the Community strove to fit its European apostolates, such as parish missions and seminaries, into a new environment. It faced the question of assimilation while keeping a distinct identity. It felt the impact of immigration and the resulting ethnic tensions—it was once suggested that there be a separate house in the east for the Irish. The exceptions to these parallel experiences were the Americanist and Modernist controversies. True, two presidents of DePaul University, Peter Vincent Byrne and Francis McCabe, seem to have been Americanists, not in the doctrinal sense of *Testem Benevolentiae*, but rather in the mold of Cardinal James Gibbons or Archbishop John Ireland. Charles Souvay may have had some Modernist sympathies and he was certainly careful in what he wrote after Pius X's condemnation of doctrinal Modernism. These, however, were isolated examples. There seems to have been no difficulty when all the American confreres were required to take the oath against Modernism. Why did the Community escape those two crises? Perhaps it was because it was never in the forefront of any intellectual or doctrinaire move-

ment in the American Church. The Vincentians have historically had a tendency to avoid extremes. The demands of a varied apostolate, often with insufficient personnel, created concern with daily practicalities rather than with long-term theories, something that was characteristic of Saint Vincent himself.

With these ideas in mind, the editorial staff asked itself two basic questions. First, what impact has the Congregation of the Mission had on the American Church? Second, what impact has the United States had on the Vincentian Community? Obviously, the answers will be subjective, but they are grounded on solid research.

### **The Vincentian Impact on the American Church**

Even a cursory glance at Vincentian history in this country reveals an extraordinary geographic influence. The sheer number of places and locations served is awesome, particularly in the parish apostolate. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of these establishments were short-lived. There was a high degree of institutional instability, particularly in parishes and seminaries. In the case of seminaries this was also true of the country in general. In one sense, this can be interpreted as a sign of missionary mobility, the willingness to go where and when needed or to move on when circumstances demanded. A sense of collaboration in the ministry—a readiness to work with others for the sake of the gospel—has often characterized the American Vincentians, but it has by no means been universal. Collaboration has meant different things in different times. This cooperation showed itself in a myriad of ways, whether a vicar general in Los Angeles, a confrere at Mount Saint Mary's, diocesan priests helping with missions. In contrast, the Community once viewed total administrative control as integral to directing a seminary. The collaborative model has been stronger in the years since Vatican II in all areas of the apostolate.

The American Vincentians have never been identified exclusively or even predominantly with any one apostolate. The variety of these—seminaries, parishes, missions, and higher education—has meant that the Vincentian impact has been more than geographical. It has also meant that resources and personnel have been spread thin. In the present stage of research, it is impossible to quantify that impact with any accuracy. Still, when one considers the numbers of bishops, priests, lawyers, judges, legislators,

workers, and immigrants touched by Vincentian ministries, the impact must be seen as substantial. The full story, however, has yet to be written.

All of this was done without self-glorification or publicizing. The concept of corporate, as opposed to personal, humility, so strongly inculcated by Saint Vincent, has been a tenacious characteristic of the Congregation of the Mission since its beginning. In a real sense, the Vincentians have been the "silent service" in the American Church. The American Vincentians have generally maintained a low profile in the American Church and hence have shown little leadership on the national level. Was this the result of the charism of corporate humility or rather a satisfaction with mediocrity? Or perhaps did the two feed on each other? Probably both. Vincentian formation once put a high value on the virtue of prudence, defined not in its classic scholastic sense of choosing appropriate means to a specified end but with a strong connotation of caution bordering on timidity. This, together with an egalitarianism that discouraged individual achievement, for example, the avoidance of "singularity," created a climate that was not conducive to leadership in the wider church. The attitude engendered was that it was better to do nothing than to stand out or take a chance on making a mistake.

## **The American Impact on the Vincentian Community**

### *Apostolic life*

If there has been one consistent theme in the apostolic development of the American Vincentians, it has been response to the immediate needs of the Church. The widespread staffing of parishes, the missions in China and Panama, and the acceptance of seminaries and universities are but three examples of this. As in the days of Saint Vincent, the call of bishops was a major indicator of God's will for the Community. All too often, however, this demanded improvisation, the attempt to do too much with too little, whether in finances or manpower. Examples can be found in the use of scholastics to fill college faculties or the precarious financial base of so many seminaries and colleges. However, it also led to creative responses to new situations, such as the motor missions,

religious correspondence courses, and innovations in the university programs.

The quality of leadership over the past century and a half is difficult to assess. There is always a tendency to glorify the pioneers in any institution and to exalt them as embodying the "heroic age." The truth is that even the great leaders of the early days made mistakes, such as John Timon's overly rapid expansion of the seminary apostolate or his tendency to transfer troublesome confreres from one house to another. In addition, different periods of history called for different forms of leadership: creativity at one time, consolidation at another. In the nineteenth century the Community was clearly hurt by the appointment of so many of its capable men to bishoprics. Others, like Mariano Maller and Bonaventure Armengol, were transferred to important Vincentian positions outside the United States, to the detriment of the American Province.

From the beginning there have been tensions among the personnel working in different apostolates, but most especially between those in college and university work and those in the missions and parishes. From the days of the college at the Barrens, lay education has played a role in the Vincentian ministry. It encountered resistance from many confreres who regarded such educational endeavors as an aberration that siphoned off personnel needed for the traditional Vincentian works, especially the missions. This difficulty has not been entirely resolved to the present day.

There are two problems that have afflicted Vincentian apostolates since the days of Saint Vincent: finances and personnel. There has never been enough of either and the United States is no exception.

The problem of finances has, often as not, been managerial rather than monetary. Until recent times the American willingness to go into debt caused deep concern to European superiors who, accustomed to having steady incomes or endowments for their houses, were also accustomed to paying cash. American recklessness in this regard not only frightened the Europeans, but did in fact create serious financial crises. The American Vincentians were far too ready to undertake works or projects without a sufficient financial base and to go into debt with little thought for the future. In recent years, increased professionalism and more secure sources of money have remedied this in great part.

As for personnel, no one has ever believed that there has been enough, either in quantity or quality. Those in charge of apostolates, whether past or present, have always wanted more and better. There is no doubt that some works, such as seminaries and missions, were often operated on a marginal basis as far as manpower was concerned.

The contemporary Vincentian Community tends to separate community life and apostolate—for example, in residence, leadership roles (such as house superior and university president or seminary rector), and finances. This has proved more efficient for the apostolate and healthier for community life because it recognizes that specific gifts are required for different offices. The role of the apostolate has also led to different ideas and expectations of Community life. For some the concept of Community takes precedence over apostolate—Vincentians should not be defined by their work. For them the primary function of Community is to provide for the growth and emotional support of its members. For others, the Congregation of the Mission is an apostolic community, one whose existence and meaning arise from a shared ministry. The latter concept has found support in the 1984 Constitutions. Tensions, however, continue over such allied questions as the nature of common life or the need for small group living.

### *Government*

Until recent times Vincentian government was centered in the superior general and his council. In theory the superior general possessed an almost unlimited authority. He appointed all provincials, provincial consultors, local superiors, and novice directors. He alone had the power to erect and suppress houses and to admit candidates to vows and orders. In earlier times the slowness of communications moderated the dependence of distant provinces on Paris. The communications revolution of modern times, including the telegraph, the Atlantic cable, the wireless, the telephone, and improved postal service, helped to make this theoretical centralization a reality. In the early twentieth century the use of telegrams and cablegrams for transacting Community business became fairly common. A key element in centralization was the increasing demand for reports on the status of houses, which superiors and members of house councils had to send at stated times to the superior general and the provincial.

Despite this, some old ways endured, and the American provincials often acted with surprising independence, using modern communications to inform the superior general of decisions already made. The confusion about American geography and society that reigned in Paris aided this independence. So did the long generalate of Antoine Fiat (1878-1914) who, by the turn of the century was old, deaf, and reluctant to make decisions. There is an anecdote, perhaps apocryphal, that in exhorting his confreres to rise punctually in the morning, he told them that every Vincentian in the world was getting up at the same time as they. Someone later tactfully informed him of the existence of time zones.

Governance within the Community was paternalistic. The analogy of a family was frequently used and individual houses or provinces were often called families. In 1869 the superior general, Jean-Baptiste Etienne wrote:

local superiors should be persuaded that they are the fathers of the respective families confided to them, and that they ought to exercise a truly paternal solicitude toward the members of which these families are composed.<sup>1</sup>

This "paternal solicitude," it should be noted, was primarily concerned with discipline, rules, and control.

Because of this attitude, Vincentians who wrote to the superior general—and they did so with amazing frequency and freedom—often used effusive terms of father-son relationships. These relationships created a kind of psychological tutelage. If there were difficulties in a house, the members would write to the provincial or superior general rather than attempt to work them out on the local level. Most surprising, however, was the frequency with which individuals went over the heads of local superiors and provincials to the superior general. These letters were read and taken seriously. The heavy volume of correspondence from the United States caused some wonderment in Paris. It is impossible, however, to evaluate its overall effect on the ponderous machinery of Vincentian government.

Despite its occasional unevenness, the exercise of authority over confreres was strong, even down to recent times. An individual could be transferred from one house to another without consultation and at a moment's notice. Similarly he could be moved from one apostolate to another, even though he may have had no special

liking or qualification for it. When William Barr became provincial of the Western Province in 1926, he wrote to Patrick McHale, then the American assistant general, that "what is needed above all else in a superior, in this twentieth century and in these United States, is the ability to command sternly and, if you will, to inspire fear."<sup>2</sup> Yet this same authority could be selective in its own observance of the Vincentian constitutions. At the turn of the century restrictions on spending, legislated by various general assemblies, were unknown or ignored. At one point during the provincialate of Thomas Finney in the West (1906-1926), the formal meetings of the provincial council were reduced to one or two a year. Local superiors, especially in the West, were allowed or usurped a frightening independence in accumulating debts that became the obligation of the province.

This authority had no time limits. The superior general was elected for life. The appointments of provincials and local superiors were open-ended. In 1904 Thomas Smith celebrated his twenty-fifth anniversary as provincial. Thomas Finney held that office for twenty years in the West and James MacGill for twenty-one years in the East. Local superiors sometimes had equally lengthy terms. The code of canon law (1918) set limits, but the change came slowly to the American provinces. Barr, provincial of the West from 1926 to 1932, was the first to be compelled to observe a six year term — to the shock and dismay of many members of the province. The same limit was eventually imposed on local superiors, although their moves in both provinces tended to be lateral, that is, from one superiorship to another. This, in turn, created an aristocracy of superiors, a kind of "establishment" that was often bitterly resented by those outside of it. What was gained in continuity and experience was often lost to inertia and authoritarianism. Superiors at all levels were regarded as the guardians of a tradition, as system preservers rather than innovators. The superior's rules of office demanded that they were not to leave a house worse than they found it. Today, in contrast, the superior's role is not as clear as it once was, being viewed in terms of his being a "spiritual animator." Some provinces and houses have sought to clarify the definition of the superior's role for themselves. Also the leadership position lacks the prestige that it once had and confreres are more reluctant to accept the responsibility.

## *Internal life*

A key concept in Vincentian life was that of the "primitive spirit." This referred to the rules, practices, and way of life that originated with Saint Vincent and that was supposed to be transmitted intact from one generation to another. It was a heritage that was to remain unchanged, even down to the particulars of daily life. The loss of this spirit, it was claimed, would lead to the destruction of the Community. According to the 1954 Constitutions (90, 2, 2), a primary function of the preparatory commission for a general assembly was "to examine whether and in what ways the Community has fallen away from its primitive spirit." At one time in the not too distant past every priest in the Community was supposed to say one mass a month with the preservation of the primitive spirit as one of his intentions. The same 1954 Constitutions embraced the static view of Vincentian life by making it virtually impossible to amend the Constitutions (87, 2).

This spirit laid great stress on uniformity of dress, order of the day, and life-style throughout the world. Though Vincentians wore no habit as such, the accepted form of dress was a Roman cassock (that is, one that buttoned up the front) and a tied cincture. This zeal for uniformity sometimes seemed to know no bounds. In 1903 Constant Demion was sent as commissary to make a visitation of Saint Mary's of the Barrens. In deference to American custom and "having seriously considered the matter before God," he permitted the eating of meat for breakfast. He stipulated, however, that no one should refuse to eat it as an act of self-denial because "uniformity in all things is the greatest mortification."<sup>3</sup> The extreme expression of this sense of uniformity was given by Etienne in 1869:

In clothing, both as regards the style and the quality of the material, the usage of the motherhouse should be followed. To ensure this uniformity we have determined to establish in our motherhouse a depository of cloth and materials for both winter and summer and from this each house will be able to get supplies. The local procurator will take care to send his orders to the general procurator, who will transmit to him immediately what he needs.<sup>4</sup>

This was never implemented, if only because the Franco-Prussian War of the following year showed its impracticality.

As can be seen from the above, this uniformity often meant conforming to French models, which many considered to be

normative. The rules used in the American internal seminaries (novitiates) were the same as those at the Paris motherhouse and hence contained references (such as the arrangement of the dining room) that were meaningless in a different context. Sometimes the French dominance was expressed blatantly, as it was by Fernand Combaluzier, at that time the secretary general of the Congregation, in an address to the scholastics of the Eastern Province at Germantown about 1932. He informed them that every Vincentian had two fatherlands, his own and France, and that France came first. Personnel catalogues were written in French until 1963.

The daily schedule in Vincentian houses throughout the world was almost identical. Rules and customs, such as particular and general examination of conscience, meditation in common, reading at table, colloquies on ecclesiastical subjects (*collationes de re morali et liturgica*, a form of continuing education), the poverty meal (that is, only one course at the Friday evening meal as an act of mortification), and common recreation varied little or not at all. A Vincentian traveling in a foreign country could be sure of encountering a familiar order and life-style in most of the houses he visited.

All of this led to a great emphasis on externals, especially in the years of formation. The ideal Vincentian had a modest and gentlemanly demeanor. He walked with eyes cast down and did not cross his legs while sitting (this was contrary to "clerical gravity"). His biretta, when not worn, was held *per modum crucis* ("in the form of a cross," that is, one thumb crossed over the other in the form of a cross). Poverty was externally manifested in the prohibition against silver shoe buckles, gold spectacle rims, or gold watches. The latter prohibition endured in the Western Province until 1952.

Regularity was a major Vincentian virtue. Prompt and consistent attendance at all spiritual exercises, especially morning meditation, was the mark of regularity, and its importance can scarcely be exaggerated. It was the first virtue that was sought in superiors. A bitter but frequent complaint was that superiors were chosen primarily for their ability to rise at five o'clock in the morning. An individual's effectiveness in the apostolate was secondary to his regularity within the Community, and the regularity of a house was the hallmark of its spiritual vitality.

Vincentian life also required the asking of multiple permissions, particularly in regard to the vow of poverty. A general permission was usually granted by provincials to carry a certain amount of

money, with a limitation as to how much could be spent on individual purchases. Permission was needed for lending and borrowing, leaving the house or grounds, or spending a night outside the house. Such requirements enhanced the power of the superior but tended to keep the ordinary Vincentian at an adolescent level.

### *Continuity and change*

In the United States all of this began to suffer erosion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In part this came from new apostolates, especially the colleges and parishes. In 1878 Maller reported that work in these two apostolates had destroyed the rule of silence in all the houses of the province except Germantown. As parish life grew and developed in the period of the great immigrations (roughly 1890 to 1914), the demands made on parish priests were incompatible with traditional Vincentian life. In an industrial age, when many parish activities took place at night, it was impossible to retire at 9:00 P.M., as required by the rule. This, in turn, coupled with multiple early morning masses, made rising at 4:00 A.M. and meditation in common very difficult.\*

Pastors and superiors made frequent complaints to the superior general about this situation. To the modern reader the importance attached to this may seem exaggerated, but within the context of earlier Vincentian life it was the touchstone of regularity and prayer. Saint Vincent's maxim that "the grace of vocation depends on prayer and the grace of prayer on that of rising" was taken quite literally.<sup>5</sup>

Vincentian life had always been task-oriented and as the nineteenth century advanced, it became notably more so. Although the first missionaries faced many hardships and lived with constant and strenuous labor, the internal religious life of the house provided both a buffer and a support. Nevertheless there is evidence from the earliest days of individuals' suffering from exhaustion, fatigue, and depression. As the pace of American life and the demands of the

*\*In the 1830s 5:00 A.M. was the accepted hour of rising for Vincentians in the United States. At some unknown time the worldwide hour of 4:00 was reintroduced.*

apostolate quickened, the toll on the Vincentians increased. In the references to persons' being "troubled in spirit" or overcome by "melancholy," one can see the modern concepts of depression, nervous exhaustion, and burn-out. The increasing problem of alcoholism, almost unknown in the first half century of American Vincentian life, may also be linked to this.

Traditional Vincentian life felt the onslaught of the growing technology of modern conveniences. Many new conveniences, or consumer goods, were for the most part of American origin and hence presented a special problem to those whose societies had not yet felt their impact. In this regard the differences between the United States and Europe were vast. These things, such as automobiles, radios, movies, television, and air conditioning, had to be evaluated within terms of the Vincentian concept of poverty. In 1935, when the Eastern Province was planning Mary Immaculate Seminary at Northampton, Pennsylvania, William Slattery, the provincial, wrote to Charles Souvay, the superior general, to get a decision concerning private bathrooms in the priests' rooms. Noting that they would be "simple and without elaborate fixings," he wrote that "the worry on the part of some is in regard to the Community's spirit of poverty."<sup>6</sup> Equally worrisome was the lack of a precedent and the fear of setting one—Saint John's in Brooklyn was the only house that had private baths.

An allied question with strong American overtones—the use of tobacco—was typical of the dilemmas faced by Community authorities. Its use was forbidden by the general assemblies of 1843 and 1861, and the prohibition was repeated by several superiors general. Maller reported in 1878 that the prohibition was so disregarded in the United States that one could ask if it even existed. The more conscientious Vincentians, it was true, had asked for a dispensation from it for reasons of health or because their physicians recommended it, but the vast majority simply ignored it. The Americans were unanimous in declaring that the prohibition was unreasonable for the United States. "If the custom of smoking were in use among the French clergy, no one would bother us here," was one frequent comment. When Maller was asked the reason for the prohibition, he responded with the axiom, "the person who smokes, drinks." To this the Americans replied, "that axiom must have many exceptions, because we see everyone smoking and not everyone drinks to excess."<sup>7</sup> Maller did not know what to suggest. James Rolando, the provincial at that time, proposed that the confreres be

permitted to smoke in private for a specified number of times a day, but Maller saw little merit in the idea. The real difficulty, he wrote, was to be found in the Americans themselves:

if among our missionaries there was a little more spirit of piety, prayer, [or] mortification, it would all be easy to settle. But, alas, our confreres of the United States do not generally stand out in these things. They are hardworking, generous, dedicated to effort and work, zealous for good but they are too flighty. Hence reforms by their very nature are so difficult to introduce.<sup>8</sup>

The general disapproval by superiors of what they considered to be the diluting of Vincentian life by this increasing worldliness is well exemplified by what Timothy Flavin, the provincial of the Western Province, wrote in 1934 when calling for volunteers for the China missions. After recalling the missionary spirit and virtues of Vincentian forebears, he added:

If these qualities do not fire your hearts and kindle your ambitions, then the cold, calculating selfishness of worldliness has crept in with modern conveniences, with the radio, with the moving and talking pictures, with the sport sheets, with the easy, perhaps "molly-coddling," access to doctors and to hospitals, with the modern camping conveniences, with the ready auto transportation, with the greater liberty regarding visitors, with the general permissions that have done away with a realization of obligations.<sup>9</sup>

This stands in stark contrast with Timon's solicitude for the food and health of the confreres in his "Epitome" of the visitor's regulations in the previous century, which are summarized in chapter I. Most of these innovations, however, were eventually accepted, especially after their use had become common in Europe.

The reaction was similar with regard to travel and vacations. In general, permission to travel outside one's own country was given only by the superior general after approval by the provincial. Vacations first became an issue in the 1840s and they were viewed with disfavor by superiors. The construction of a forty room vacation house for the Western Province at Long Beach, Mississippi, in 1904 was part of an effort to introduce the European concept of a house of rest in which vacations were taken within a Vincentian house. As an enforced vacation spot it was never popular, and the fact that it was destroyed by fire a few years later was not a matter of general

regret. In the Western Province the concept of the vacation house stayed in force among the scholastics in the form of a summer camp or villa. In the Eastern Province the house at Cape May, New Jersey, shared somewhat the same nature but without the concept of obligation.

Modern means of transportation were another problem. On 15 August 1956 William Slattery, the superior general, issued a number of regulations on the ownership of motor vehicles by individual confreres.<sup>10</sup> These were heavily slanted against the individual. For the ownership of bicycles, whether ordinary or "equipped with a light auxiliary motor," the permission of the local superior was sufficient. For the ownership of a motorcycle or motor scooter the permission of the provincial was sufficient. Only the superior general could grant permission for ownership of an automobile and that he would not do unless it was for the benefit of the Community. Even then the superior had to retain the keys, the auto was to be available for common use, and the confrere who owned it had to pay all the expenses connected with it. Such minute regulations were not necessarily legalism run rampant. They were the inevitable result of trying to preserve a seventeenth century tradition in the face of a twentieth century reality. Until Vatican II, the general tendency was to resist the twentieth century.

### *Value conflicts*

Perhaps the greatest tension in Vincentian life arose from the conflict of American with European values. The traditional European outlook stressed obedience, uniformity, submission, and dependence. These were viewed as positive and important virtues. To be called submissive was a compliment, whereas independence was a pejorative term. Americans placed more value on self-reliance, personal autonomy, democratic procedure, and individualism. It was in terms of such qualities that Europeans defined "Americanism." In 1830 Rosati had noted this growing problem among the brothers. "This spirit of republican pride infects those who by their profession and their vocation ought to love dependence, submission, and humility."<sup>11</sup> In 1856 John Masnou, the substitute provincial, explaining the need to use female domestics in the houses of the American Province, wrote "it is quite difficult to secure men as domestics in this unhappy land of liberty

and independence."<sup>12</sup> The official book of meditations that was used in the Congregation until recent times spoke of "seeing our Superiors in the Lord and the Lord in our Superiors and keeping ourselves in their hands as the file in the hands of the workman." The same book, in a context other than obedience, declared "When subjects have revolted against their rulers, the only suitable peace is based on the submission of the rebels. Every concession made to them would be for the superior a step toward his shameful servitude."<sup>13</sup> European Vincentians who came to the United States in the 1890s and early 1900s, such as Ambrose Vautier, Charles Souvay, and Aloysius Meyer, commented critically on the American penchant for individualism, criticism of authority, and anti-intellectualism. Meyer was amazed to hear discussions about politics and negative comments on speeches by the president or cabinet members. Any such political interests had been forbidden by Saint Vincent and were rare among European Vincentians.

By the beginning of this century there were signs of a move away from European dominance. The *directoires* which had governed the direction of seminaries, parishes, and missions became dead letters by the beginning of the twentieth century, and probably earlier. Even the Community's name changed. Throughout the nineteenth century the term Lazarist had been universal in the United States. Around the year 1900 it began to disappear and was quickly replaced by Vincentian, the term that had been used by the Irish from the time that they united with the worldwide Community. Exactly how or why that came about is not clear, but it was probably connected with a growing American identity and the increasing numbers of Irish immigrant members.

Beyond doubt this conflict of values created tensions and pressures for individual American Vincentians. Young men who entered the internal seminary found themselves in a milieu quite different from the one in which they had grown up: a proliferation of spiritual exercises, including two lengthy retreats a year, novenas, days of recollection, and numerous Marian devotions; a hierarchy of privileges according to rank; extreme deference to authority; a high degree of regimentation; the rules of separation (that the differing groups within the Community, such as novices, students, or brothers could not talk to each other); the use of proper titles (Father, Brother, Mister) in place of American informality; and the inferior status of brothers, to mention but a few. To some extent this situation remained throughout the years of formation and even

after. Most resolved these tensions or accommodated themselves in some way. Others, however, experienced a lifelong, though perhaps smoldering, rebelliousness. Still others found ways to circumvent the system or accepted a life of passivity and dependency. The stresses, however, were there and manifested themselves in demands for greater democratization of Community structure, proportional representation, and the like. The matter would not be totally exorcised until after Vatican II.

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Since the Second Vatican Council, the American Vincentians, like their confreres throughout the world, have been asking themselves what it means to be a Vincentian and what special or distinctive charism this brings to their lives and apostolates. The answers used to be enshrined in rules, directories, institutional structures, and quotations from Saint Vincent. Today they come more from meetings, dialogue, assemblies, house plans, and various kinds of processes. Underlying all this has been a deeper understanding and appreciation of Saint Vincent, both in historical and spiritual terms. The answers may be more diffuse than in times past, but they represent the collective voice of a province or house. Perhaps the greatest change has been that the questions are not only discussed openly, but that they are asked at all. The editorial staff of the Vincentian Studies Institute, which has prepared this history, believes that the answers are more internalized than in times past and that as a result the Congregation of the Mission in the United States has drawn closer to the genuine spirit of Saint Vincent de Paul.

In the traditional formula concluding the repetition, "These were some of the thoughts we had on the subject."

## ENDNOTES

1. Circular letter of 1 March 1869, *Recueil*, 3:423.
2. Barr to McHale, from Denver, 17 May 1926, GCUSA, series D, roll 2.
3. Visitation ordinances, September 1903, DRMA, Smith papers.
4. Circular letter of 1 March 1869, *Recueil*, 3:423.
5. Circular letter of 15 January 1650, Coste, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, 3:539.
6. Slattery to Souvay, 18 September 1935, GCUSA, series D, roll 2.
7. Visite de M. Maller, ff. 8-10.
8. Ibid.
9. Circular letter of 2 October 1934, DRMA, Flavin Papers.
10. Slattery to worldwide Congregation of the Mission, 15 August 1956 in [James Fischer] "Notebook of Letters and Decrees from Superior General and Provincials (1943-1963)," 95, DRMA, uncatalogued.
11. Rosati to Dominique Salthorgne, 23 April 1830, original in the archive of the Vincentian motherhouse, Paris, copy in DRMA, Rosati letters, vol. 14.
12. Masnou to unknown, 11 April 1856, DRMA, Masnou letters.
13. *An Abridgement of the Course of Meditations for Every Day of the Year for the use of the Congregation of the Mission by a priest of the same Congregation* (1958), 220-21, 210. The original French can be found in *Abrégé du cours de méditations pour tous les jours de l'année à l'usage de la Congrégation de la Mission par un prêtre de la même Congrégation* (Paris, 1920), 186, 177. The first quotation is a conflation of two sentences from the Common Rules, 5:1, 2.

