The Decline and Fall of Saint Mary's of the Barrens: A Case Study in Contraction of An American Catholic Religious Order - Part One

Richard J. Janet Ph.D.
The effects of a secularizing American culture on the Catholic Church in the United States, heightened by the reforms and debates of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), have been well documented and reviewed. While historians have long pointed out the dissonance between a democratic, individualistic American culture and a more traditional Roman Catholicism, the last 50 years have surely accentuated tremendous challenges to the various institutions and groups comprising the Catholic Church in the United States. Prominent among those challenges has been the status and fortunes of the clergy, including members of religious orders, and the institutions established by those orders. The overriding tension evident in the religious clergy, as documented in numerous recent studies, has been the conflict between corporate identity, mission and values, and the needs of the individual members of that corporation.\(^1\) These internecine tensions, often resulting in acrimonious debates over the past half-century, have occasioned changes in the identity of religious clergy and in the apostolates pursued by religious. Declining personnel and resources have added to the pace of change until the institutional landscape of many religious orders has undergone profound alteration. Apostolates once thought essential have been reevaluated, commit-

ments once thought sacrosanct have been reconsidered, and institutions once thought secure have been de-emphasized or abandoned.

A case in point is the recent history of Saint Mary’s of the Barrens Seminary, the motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States, established in Perryville, Missouri in 1818 and home to generations of American Vincentians. The closing of Saint Mary’s of the Barrens Seminary in 1985, and the subsequent disposition of seminary property by the Midwest Province of the Vincentians, illustrate some characteristic elements in the late 20th century contraction of American Catholic religious orders. Among these elements are attempts to come to grips with the new demographics of Catholic religious vocations and the new contours of American Catholic culture, and uncertain efforts to maintain a communal identity in increasingly individualistic organizations. The story of the Barrens highlights important points in the recent history of the American Catholic Church and trends in the contemporary history of Catholic religious orders.

Saint Mary’s of the Barrens and the American Vincentian Community

The Congregation of the Mission, founded in France by Saint Vincent de Paul in 1625, first came to the United States at the invitation of Bishop Louis Dubourg of Louisiana in 1816. Impressed by the activities of Vincentians like the young Felix De Andreis in Rome, Dubourg recruited the order to open a seminary for the training of priests in his sprawling new diocese. When turmoil in the Church at New Orleans prompted Dubourg to move his headquarters north, a group of Catholics in Perry County, Missouri offered the bishop 640 acres and free labor for the construction of his seminary in return for the pastoral services of the clergy. The small band of mostly Italian Vincentians arrived in Perry County in October 1818 and proceeded, against tremendous odds, to build what became Saint Mary’s of the Barrens Seminary.

From its beginnings in 1818, Saint Mary’s of the Barrens Seminary served the American Church, the Vincentian order and the local Catholic laity in a variety of ways. From 1818 to 1842, the Barrens operated as the diocesan seminary for the entire territory of Louisiana in addition

to the primary house of formation for all Vincentian candidates. Incorporated by the state of Missouri in 1823 and empowered to grant degrees in 1831, the Vincentians found it profitable to run a lay college at the site as well. Vincentian officials in Paris frowned on the commingling of diocesan clerical candidates, young Vincentians and lay students, and moved to suppress the young establishment in 1835. Partly in response to the fears of the order’s superiors, diocesan students were moved to Saint Louis in 1842 and a new college for lay students was opened in Cape Girardeau in 1843.

By 1862, the Vincentian formation program was moved to Saint Louis and the Barrens was left with the few lay students who did not transfer to the college in Cape Girardeau. Reverend Stephen Vincent Ryan, provincial superior of the American Vincentians, explained the move with reference to “the backward inland situation” of the Barrens, citing its “difficult[y] of access, its bad and at times almost impassable roads” and its unhealthy climate. When the building housing the lay boarders burned in 1866, the Barrens was left with only a small academy, maintained in accordance with its state charter, in addition to a parish for the local population and a working farm. For the next 20 years the Barrens floundered, suffering from poor management, rising debts, a dwindling population and outbreaks of malaria. Reverend Mariano Maller, the provincial superior who considered selling the property in 1870, offered a poignant glimpse of the Barrens during a visit in 1877:

It would be impossible to describe what I found there last November when I saw the Barrens after an absence of more than twenty-seven years. It was there, thirty-seven years ago, that I first began active duty. At that time [it was] so happy, so populous, so lively; now so dreary, so lonely, so quiet. A profound sadness came over my whole soul, and I asked myself what sin had thus deserved such desolation? Isolation, of course, malaria and everything that is said to justify what has been done did not satisfy me....

---

4 Ibid., 109.
The fortunes of the Barrens did not revive until 1886, when the impending division of the American Vincentian community into two provinces prompted the return of the formation program for western C.M.'s to Perryville. For the next 100 years Saint Mary's of the Barrens Seminary educated generations of American churchmen, many of whom went on to staff the growing seminary apostolates taken on by the Vincentians during the course of the 19th century.

The seeming security in numbers and the mindset of the American Catholic clergy over the course of the 20th century, interrupted only by brief concerns over Vatican condemnation of an "Americanist" heresy in the early 1900's, masked a growing tension between proponents of modernization and adherents of traditionalism in the international Church. That tension found its clearest expression in the debates of the Second Vatican Council, an event that ushered in a period of "change, questioning, turmoil, confusion, discovery and progress" for the American Vincentian community. In response to the Vatican decree on the renewal of religious life (Perfectae Charitatis), the Congregation of the Mission established a commission "to examine the whole life of the community in the light of Vatican II and help prepare for

---

adaptation.\textsuperscript{6} That commission, and the call for an extraordinary General Assembly of the order in 1968-69, inspired Vincentian provinces and houses throughout the world to undertake critical self-studies of their operations. In the United States, provincial assemblies held often contentious debates over the future of the community. In the western province, the proffered preparatory document was rejected and a Committee on the Apostolate was established to review the future commitments of the community.

The General Assembly of 1968-69 led to a growing decentralization of authority in the international Vincentian community and revealed tensions, evident among many Catholic religious orders, between the demands of corporate identity/mission and the needs of individual community members. In this climate, exacerbated by a growing exodus of priests in the American Church (after reaching its peak in 1970, the number of priests in the western province of the Congregation of the Mission began a precipitous decline\textsuperscript{7}), discussions regarding the apostolic commitments of the Vincentian community proceeded.

The Committee on the Apostolate (COTA) commissioned by the Joint Provincial Assemblies (western U.S.A. Vincentians headquartered in Saint Louis) in 1970 offered its final report in preparation for the 1974 assembly.\textsuperscript{8} The committee pursued its charge of reviewing the status of Vincentian works through a self-study involving two separate questionnaires. The surveys were designed and evaluated with assistance from consulting psychologists and Saint Louis University faculty, and the tabulated results offer a revealing snapshot of the attitudes of Vincentians in the western United States in the early 1970's. Overall, two-thirds of respondents agreed that "the Province is stretched too thin with respect to manpower, and a drastic strategy must be developed to alleviate the strain."\textsuperscript{9} The feeling that the order was approaching a critical situation in its ability to honor its apostolic commitments, expressed in this 1973 document, was present even before the most precipitous decline in personnel experienced in the later 1970's. Respondents also indicated some preference for reevaluating present

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{7} Rybolt, \textit{The American Vincentians}, 460.
\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Report on Self-Study}, Joint Provincial Assemblies, Congregation of the Mission, Region of Western U.S.A., 1973-74. Located in \textit{The De Andreis – Rosati Memorial Archives}, Special Collections, Richardson Library, DePaul University, Chicago, IL.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 95.
commitments – 24% said the province should “gradually contract or eliminate some apostolate-commitments and strengthen some remaining apostolate-commitments,” while 21% said the province should “maintain present commitments but shift resources to address the needs of the highest-priority apostolates.”

The COTA report also addressed specific attitudes about Vincentian commitment to its college formation program at Saint Mary’s of the Barrens. Interestingly, some apparent contradiction emerges from the survey. While an impressive majority of Vincentians (87%) supported the strengthening or maintenance of “our own” college seminaries (even more among Vincentian students and novices), 52% foresaw major adjustments in the broader seminary commitments of the order. The “C.M. college seminaries” placed third in a ranking of support for “general apostolate categories,” just under “C.M. theology seminaries” and parishes, and second among Vincentian students and novices (just under “C.M. theology seminaries”). An impressive number of students indicated a preference for future work in the province’s college seminary. The results seem to indicate a generalized notion that the order should seriously review its present commitments, yet also an overall satisfaction with its existing college formation program. Of course, demographics and changes in the organizational structure and culture of the Vincentians combined to force reconsideration of the fate of Saint Mary’s in the coming years.

Among the results of the self-studies and provincial discussions of the early 1970’s were the subdivision of the western province in 1975, and a conscious decision to return to the original Vincentian charism of concern for the poor. The reconsideration of American Vincentian organization and values led the order to pull back on its seminary commitments, and the quarter century after 1975 witnessed a dramatic decline in the number of seminaries operated and staffed by the Vincentians.

The Closing of Saint Mary’s of the Barrens Seminary

For Saint Mary’s of the Barrens, the cultural, demographic and structural changes brought on by the Second Vatican Council meant

---

10 Ibid., 113.
11 Ibid., 119-23, 114.
12 Ibid., 124.
13 Ibid., 133.
further adaptation of its always variable role and, eventually, questions about its future as a house of formation. By 1964 the novitiate program had been moved to Santa Barbara, California and the theologate to Lemont, Illinois. If the Barrens was to continue as a viable house of formation, its aging facilities required expensive maintenance—this in an era when educational costs were beginning to rise dramatically. Aware of the need to update and maintain the plant, Vincentian superiors planned extensive renovations in the early 1970's. Funds were sought from the Estelle Doheny Foundation in 1971 and, in response to the Foundation's concerns about the future of Saint Mary's of the Barrens, provincial superior Reverend Cecil Parres, C.M., wrote Reverend William G. Ward, C.M., an officer of the Foundation:

The Provincial and his Council now see Saint Mary's Seminary at Perryville as a center of education for the students of the province and do not foresee any circumstances that will lead to its abandonment in the future.¹⁴

When the Doheny Foundation agreed to fund the Barrens project, eventually providing $950,000 for various improvements and renovations, Reverend Parres expressed his gratitude, noting that the project would make it possible to:

preserve our Vincentian heritage in the western part of the United States at the place of our beginnings, Perryville, Missouri. This is something quite dear and precious to me. It is something which transcends physical plant, academic programs, formation programs, etc. and at the same time permeates them all and breathes a life and spirit into them.¹⁵

Additional changes to the student building and the community chapel were proposed in 1978 (at an estimated cost of over $800,000), and consideration was given to the sale of some seminary lands to finance the project. The proposal drew a strong reaction from at least

¹⁴ Cecil Parres, C.M., to William G. Ward, C.M., 14 September 1971, Midwest Provincial Files, Earth City, Missouri (hereinafter referred to as Provincial Files).
one confrere, who vehemently opposed the sale of any land for development. In a letter that foreshadows later disagreements over the transfer of seminary property, Reverend Thomas Cawley, C.M., argued that land:

is not a possession or an asset to the community; it is a trust, a talent loaned to the community for the common good of that area... held in perpetuity.16

Reverend Parres answered:

What you say about money and land is certainly true.... But land can become a liability as well as an asset. This may be true of the part across 55 [the parcel of land west of Interstate 55 under consideration].

The Quadrangle of Saint Mary's of the Barrens Seminary. Mid-twentieth century photograph.

Courtesy of the De Andreis-Rosati Memorial Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois

16 Thomas Cawley, C.M., to Cecil Parres, C.M., 14 January 1978, Provincial Files.
I am not sure of this, but there may be times when you cannot afford not to sell or lease.\textsuperscript{17}

In the meantime, the subdivision of the old Western Province into the South, West and Midwest Provinces, scheduled for 1975, raised serious questions about the future of Vincentian formation in those areas. These questions were answered by the Provincial Assembly of 1974, which affirmed the interprovincial decision to retain common houses of formation for the next 10 years, whereupon a review would be undertaken by the superiors of each province regarding renewal of the agreement.\textsuperscript{18} Saint Mary's of the Barrens Seminary was given new life by the foresight of its leaders in attempting to modernize its facilities, and by the interprovincial decision to retain common houses of formation.

Unfortunately, the continued decline in numbers of students, noted by the visiting team of the North Central Accrediting Association as early as 1976 and reiterated in 1982,\textsuperscript{19} kept the question of the future of the Barrens alive, as did continued changes in the culture and organization of the Vincentian community. A movement to close free-standing college seminaries developed across the American Church. The arguments against maintaining the old system of seminary education were summarized by an article in America as early as 1967:

The "close the seminaries" apologists take the stand that it is silly for the Catholic Church to run separate undergraduate institutions for young men who want to become priests. Formidable arguments support their stand. Maintaining such institutions, they say, is unwise because in the great majority of American seminaries there can never be enough seminarians to pay the cost of a first-class educational operation. Consequently, the operation is either wildly uneconomical or not first-class. (The large number of seminaries existing without educational accreditation suggests that the latter is more often the case.)

\textsuperscript{17} Cecil Parres, C.M., to Thomas Cawley, C.M., 4 March 1978, Provincial Files.
\textsuperscript{18} Minutes of the Joint Provincial Assembly, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Session, 25 June 1974, Provincial Files.
\textsuperscript{19} Advisory Visitation Report, North Central Accrediting Association, April 1982, 1.
Secondly, the apologists for immediate closing of the isolated seminary would say, the “total-institution” type of seminary separates the young man from the rest of mankind at too early a stage in his development. He needs to rub shoulders with people who do not see the rest of the world as he does, whose life goals are different from his own. As he rubs shoulders, he is forced to articulate and deepen his own goals or lose them. If he loses them, the argument goes, there is no real loss; for he would either have lost them anyway or he would have been somewhat less than effective as a priest. And if he retains and deepens them, he will win other college students over to his cause. 20

Reverend William Hartenbach, C.M., rector of Saint Mary’s of the Barrens Seminary College from 1979 to 1985, recalls that the 1964 move of the theologate to Lemont (accomplished as the Second Vatican Council called for an opening of windows to the world) occasioned theoretical questioning regarding the move of the college seminary from the Barrens as well. 21 However, the sheer number of students at the time, and the expense of recreating college facilities, made such a move impractical. Hartenbach assumed he would be closing the Barrens when he was named rector in 1979. He cites the drying up of traditional sources of vocations, the continued discussions about seminary culture, the needs and desires of the three provinces involved, and the high costs of education with diminishing results in permanent community membership as the bases for his assumption.

20 Robert J. McNamara, “Seminary Education: Separate and Unequal,” America (April 8, 1967): 533-34. McNamara accepted these propositions in his article and argued for the education of priestly candidates in existing American Catholic universities. However, Cardinal William Baum, in his 1986 report, “The State of U.S. Free-Standing Seminaries,” Origins 16, no. 18 (October 16, 1986), suggested that the graduates of free-standing college seminaries were better prepared academically for the study of theology than students from a non-seminary background and lauded the “unique” and “invaluable” contributions of college-level seminaries. The debate has not ended. In a 1994 article in America, Terrance W. Klein argued that, far from being shielded by isolated seminary settings, students in free-standing college seminaries “are thoroughly rooted in U.S. culture.” (“U.S. Culture and College Seminaries,” America (June 18, 1994). 21 William Hartenbach, C.M., interviewed by the author, Saint Louis, Missouri, 10 June 2002.
The available sources on provincial decision-making regarding the status of Saint Mary’s Seminary in the early 1980’s reveal a basic uncertainty and, sometimes, contradictory messages regarding the future of the Barrens. Reverend Hartenbach’s assumption that he would be closing the seminary on his appointment to the rectorship in 1979 belies the vote of confidence given by the province at the Midwest Provincial Assembly of 1982. Participants at the Assembly, with an eye toward the upcoming renewal of the common formation agreement due in 1985, voiced continued support for continuing college formation at Perryville (by a vote of 45 yea’s, 6 no’s and 3 abstentions). Indeed, some sentiment was expressed that the imminent transfer of the theology program from Lemont to Denver might increase support for the continuation of the college program at Perryville. In their preliminary comments regarding the 1983 Provincial Visitation of the Barrens, provincial officials noted the challenges of maintaining a full college formation program in Perryville, citing practical concerns about the rigor of the academic program, the psychological support system provided the students, and the problem of providing adequate personnel for the program. However, one visitor concluded that:

It seems to me that in the theoretical order Saint Mary’s is not a bad place for college formation and may even be a good place. Formation on this level is about challenge, intellectual, psychological, social and physical. I think that eighteen to twenty-one year old people need things to run themselves up against in order to test themselves and their capacities. In the theoretical order Perryville can provide at least some of the challenges: the intellectual challenge can be provided, given a serious commitment to academic excellence on the part of the seminary administration. The psychological challenge is more complicated; I think it can be met at Perryville in part and in part it cannot be met here.... In theory, I think that both the social and physical challenges can be met within the context of Saint Mary’s.23

---

22 Minutes of the 1982 Midwest Provincial Assembly, Provincial Files.
23 Miscellaneous Papers, Provincial Council, Provincial Files.
Despite these votes of confidence, the question of the future of the Barrens remained a serious issue in the midwest provincial council. At the end of 1983, Reverend Hugh O’Donnell, C.M., provincial superior, informed his Council that the Southern and Western Provinces were “seriously considering withdrawing from Perryville at the end of the conventio in 1985.” The real prospect of the non-renewal of the common college formation agreement pressured the Midwest Province to make its own decision about the future of Perryville rather than merely react to the decision of the other provinces. While the council felt it prudent to wait until the agreement expired before making a definitive decision, it was agreed “that there is need for further information and examination of the Perryville program from all perspectives.” At its next meeting in January 1984, Reverend O’Donnell proposed the drafting of a statement “of the values of the program at Perryville and what that program offers our Province in college formation.” The ensuing council discussion focused on several areas of importance for a college formation program in general, and Saint Mary’s of the Barrens particularly, including “the tradition and historic roots of Perryville”, the “exposure to older C.M.’s and their life stories” and the “benefits of a small liberal arts program that can be tailored to our needs.” Negatively, the council cited the need for a “contemporary environment/atmosphere” and the expense of maintaining Perryville as an independent program.

Among the data compiled for the interprovincial governing board of Saint Mary’s and the midwest provincial council was a report by Beth Lipsmeyer, a clinical psychologist contracted by the seminary, on the students enrolled at the Barrens. Presented to the provincial council at its February 1984 meeting, Lipsmeyer’s report offered a psychological profile of the student body and concluded that, on the whole, the students were too dependent and passive with a low sense of self-esteem and serious questions of sexual identity. The report blamed, by implication, the environment of the isolated, free-standing semi-

---

24 Minutes of the Midwest Provincial Council Meeting of 14-15 December 1983, Provincial Files.
25 Ibid.
26 Minutes of the Midwest Provincial Council Meeting of 13-14 January 1984, Provincial Files.
27 Ibid.
nary program at Perryville for these psychological deficiencies but failed, as council minutes noted, to provide "prescriptive measures that could by taken by the program at Perryville to address issues of personal growth." At the same time, a report on "The Current State of Transition in the Church" by Reverend Louis Brusatti, C.M., a faculty member at Saint Mary's, cited the critical changes within the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council and offered a historical and cultural context for discussions about the future of Saint Mary's. "We are again living a transition," Reverend Brusatti wrote, "seminaries are moving toward a system based on a collegial and collaborative model that provides a context for personal growth and spiritual formation. This is what we are attempting to do here as we prepare to move on." 

Brusatti's essay ended with a poignant quote from the Reverend Stephen Vincent Ryan, C.M., provincial and superior of the Barrens in 1862 when "the central house of the Province was moved from the Barrens to Saint Louis." If the Lipsmeyer and Brusatti reports are illustrative of the information coming to the provincial council as it pondered the future of the Barrens, it seems clear that the fate of the seminary was sealed in early 1984. Indeed, at its April 1984 meeting, the Council recommended that a committee be established "to examine other options that might be available for our college formation." In May, Reverend O'Donnell reported to the council on his meeting with provincial pastors and superiors in the aftermath of the announcement that ended the interprovincial common formation agreement. O'Donnell indicated that "as a group they all seemed to recognize that the Seminary as it is right now cannot be maintained, e.g., enrollment is much too small for the financial investment." The superiors and pastors agreed that the "final decision rests with the Provincial and his Council," although careful communication must be maintained with

---

29 Minutes of the Midwest Provincial Council Meeting of 10-11 February 1984, Provincial Files.
31 Ibid.
32 Minutes of the Midwest Provincial Council Meeting of 5-6 April 1984, Provincial Files.
33 Minutes of the Midwest Provincial Council Meeting of 16-17 May 1984, Provincial Files.
the entire province and, particularly, the members of the community at Perryville.\textsuperscript{34}

As part of its effort to collect information and maintain open communication, the Provincial Council solicited feedback from the entire province regarding the future of college formation at Saint Mary's of the Barrens. A survey was sent to all midwestern Vincentians asking their opinions regarding the state of the college formation program, including the option of closing Saint Mary's and relocating the college program. The results of the survey were discussed at the August meeting of the council, and an appendix to the minutes of the meeting detailed the collective responses of the province.\textsuperscript{35} A total of 62 responses were received by the council and the majority (48) agreed that “it did not seem feasible to keep our program as it is in Perryville.”\textsuperscript{36} The council acknowledged, however, that the minority opinion offered strong arguments for the maintenance of the Perryville program, with responses emphasizing the “great symbolic power” of the Barrens and offering alternatives that might keep the seminary open. One Vincentian wrote directly to Reverend O'Donnell detailing his negative reaction:

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{35} Minutes of the Midwest Provincial Council Meeting of 24 August 1984, “Responses of the Province to the Perryville Questionnaire,” Provincial Files.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid. Twelve disagreed, one answered yes/no, and one was undecided.
I do not agree that the college program must necessarily move from Perryville. I did agree when I first read it; but talking to confreres at retreat, I learned of the proposal of Chas. Shelby [Reverend Charles Shelby, director of the Miraculous Medal Association Office on the campus of Saint Mary’s of the Barrens]: to open our seminary college program at Perryville to poor provinces and poor communities and poor diocese(s), admitting numerous seminarians on scholarship through M.M. [Miraculous Medal Association] funds. It would allow us to retain a college formation program and assist at the same time the “poor” church. I think it has merits.37

The responses outlined in the council’s summary indicate a wide variety of opinions among midwestern Vincentians regarding the decision to close Saint Mary’s Seminary. While some respondents questioned the timing of the decision (“why the rush?”), others suggested that the decision was long overdue given earlier studies, including the report of the Committee on the Apostolate in the early 1970’s. Some respondents questioned the process followed in determining the future of Saint Mary’s while others supported the “best judgement of the Council.” Some asked if the decision was being made “in light of our mission as a Province” and called for more clarity regarding the province’s formation program in general. Some cited the expense of maintaining the Barrens while others cautioned “that it will be just as expensive elsewhere.” Some called for an analysis of why “40 students have left over the past two years” while others noted that “the small number of students can be an asset in terms of education.” Obviously, given the large majority supporting the decision to close the Barrens, the minority opinion was vocal and articulate. Their questions regarding the process of decision-making in the province, the historical significance of Saint Mary’s of the Barrens, the broader identity and mission of the community, and alternative uses for the Perryville campus would be continuously posed over the next two decades as the future of the remaining apostolates and property at the Barrens were discussed.

With the decision regarding the seminary at Perryville essentially settled, the council proceeded to organize “phase two” of the process, establishing a task force to explore alternative sites for the college formation program of the province. The task force included a working committee, charged with overseeing the project and submitting a final report, an advisory committee to act as a “resource of wisdom” to be drawn on by the working committee, and a committee on “the future of Perryville” to explore future uses of the Barrens campus. An ambitious timeline called for a final report to the Provincial Council by January 1985.

The provincial files contain little information about the proceedings of the “Phase Two” task force outside the composition of the committees and the final recommendation of the working committee, chaired by Reverend William Hartenbach, C.M. In later correspondence with the editors of Seminary Forum, Hartenbach summarized the work of the “Phase Two” committee:

The members of the Task Force had two principal sources of information: (1) a study which had been done by our Eastern Province on the same issue in the

---

38 Minutes of the Midwest Provincial Council Meeting of 24 August 1984, Provincial Files.
past year; and (2) again, a questionnaire to the membership of the Province. The questionnaire was constructed in such a way as to allow the members to indicate any preference or idea they might have relative to the question. The options were quickly reduced to two – both related to educational institutions run by our community: Cardinal Glennon College in Saint Louis, or DePaul University in Chicago. The Task Force, in a unanimous decision chose to recommend that the students live in a house of studies; in a split decision, the Task Force chose to recommend Cardinal Glennon College as the site for academic formation.39

Further insight into the mindset and expeditious work of the committee can be gained from two documents in the provincial files relating to the task force. One paper, entitled simply “Historical Transitions,” probably the report called for in the official charge of the task force on “the past status of the College formation program at Perryville,” detailed both the chronology of the Barrens from 1820 to 1985 and broader historical movements among the American Vincentians.40 An “interpretation” of American Vincentian history was included in the report that emphasized the ebb and flow of historical Vincentian responses to the needs of the American Church. The Second Vatican Council presented “new Church needs,” combined with a crisis in religious vocations, to which the Vincentians responded with a “change in mission” that included withdrawal from seminary commitments and focus on other community apostolates. The document offers a Vico-esque philosophy of history, with a schema of development that begins with an initial enthusiasm, followed by a period of expansion, then stability and consolidation before the inevitable breakdown involving “death, minimal survival and renewal” in a new period of transition.41 An accompanying document, entitled “The Congregation of the Mission: The Age of Adaptation” confirms the interpretation that

---

39 William Hartenbach, C.M., to Adrian Fuerst, O.S.B., 27 February 1985, Provincial Files.
40 “Historical Transitions,” undated (unpublished paper), Provincial Files.
41 Ibid.
the community was "seeking new formational models to meet the needs of a changing Church and society" and reiterates the cycle of institutional rise and decay. These reports represent an effort by the task force to understand the "abandonment" of the closing of the Barrens as a normal response to changing cultural needs while at the same time minimizing the trauma of closing a seminary that had already experienced numerous historical transformations. Such reasoning also adds philosophical luster to a decision inspired largely by practical considerations of demographics and finances.

The "Phase Two" task force on Perryville submitted its report to the provincial council at its December 1984 meeting, recommending the establishment of a resident house of studies in Saint Louis to replace the free-standing seminary at Saint Mary's of the Barrens. Council members asked numerous questions regarding the process followed by the task force and the consideration of other options, and postponed the final decision on acceptance of the recommendation until its January 1985 meeting. In January additional questions were raised before the recommendation of the task force was approved. Saint Mary's of the Barrens Seminary was officially replaced as the site of college formation for midwestern Vincentians by this decision.

Even before the final council decision to relocate the college, Reverend Hugh O'Donnell publicly announced the closing of Saint Mary's of the Barrens Seminary and news stories appeared in various local journals, including the Saint Louis Review, Saint Louis Post-Dispatch and the Saint Louis Globe-Democrat. The Globe-Democrat article cited the declining enrollments at Saint Mary's (down to 35 students in its final academic year), and the decisions of the western and southern provinces to relocate their formation programs. The article also quoted Reverend O'Donnell regarding future uses of the Barrens campus, including its possible future as a Catholic archives and study center.

---

43 Minutes of the Midwest Provincial Council Meeting of 17-18 December 1984, Provincial Files.
44 Minutes of the Midwest Provincial Council Meeting of 24-26 January 1985, Provincial Files.
46 Ibid.
This premature announcement about the future of the Barrens prompted at least one angry response from a member of the committee on the future of Perryville:

I want to indicate that I am another person who has been upset by the way things have been handled relative to the closing of the college, the question of the apostolates that will remain, etc. The articles on the front page of the *Saint Louis Review* and in the *Post-Dispatch* regarding the closing of Saint Mary’s Seminary and of the apostolates that will definitely remain and of the probable future added apostolates seem to indicate that decisions have already been made on the provincial level in these regards.\(^{47}\)

This response foreshadowed future conflicts over the disposition of property and possible uses of the American Vincentian motherhouse at Perryville.

Saint Mary’s of the Barrens officially closed with the commencement exercises of 18 May 1985.\(^{48}\) Reverend Hartenbach remains proud of the manner in which the seminary community accepted the transition, citing efforts to promote bonding in the community and a sense of closure among those most directly affected.\(^{49}\) A review of events leading to the closing of Saint Mary’s supports the notion that the decision itself was made on the basis of a combination of practical and theoretical considerations, reflecting both the circumstances and the evolving culture of the post-Vatican II American Church and the Vincentian community. In his response to an inquiry by the editors of *Seminary Forum*, Reverend Hartenbach cited as primary reasons for the closing of Saint Mary’s the decision of the provinces to pursue their own formation programs and declining enrollments.\(^{50}\) The ultimate

---


\(^{48}\) For an account of student and faculty emotions on the event, see: “Seminarians’ Graduation a Bittersweet Event,” *Perry County Republic*, 21 May 1985; and “First Seminary in the West Goes Way of Wagon Train,” *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch*, 22 May 1985.

\(^{49}\) William Hartenbach, C.M., interviewed by the author, Saint Louis, Missouri, 10 June 2002.

\(^{50}\) William Hartenbach, C.M., to Reverend Adrian Fuerst, O.S.B., 27 February 1985, Provincial Files.
decision, he summarized, was made by the provincial superior and his council after consultation with the province (in the form of the Perryville survey). Future decisions regarding the disposition of the Barrens property and the fate of the remaining apostolates at Saint Mary's would prove more difficult to summarize.

Saint Mary's of the Barrens, 1985-1995

The closing of the college seminary in May 1985 did not equate to Vincentian abandonment of the Saint Mary's campus or its other Perryville commitments. The order continued to own over 1800 acres on and around the campus, with responsibility for maintaining the old academic and residence halls of the seminary. The main academic building continued to house a rich archives of American Vincentian history and museums with collections of rare books, furniture, and objets d'art. The acreage included a working cattle farm staffed by Vincentian brothers, and a retirement center for senior Vincentians with an assisted living unit and infirmary. Finally, the campus housed the offices of the Miraculous Medal Association and, in the historic Saint Mary's of the Barrens Church, the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal.

The future of these apostolates was to be determined over the next fifteen years by a confusing array of committees and task forces. The history of Saint Mary's of the Barrens over this period is full of uncertainty. Various and ambitious plans and proposals came to naught until eventually the administration of the province felt forced to deal with the components of the complex in a piecemeal fashion.

The original committee on the future of Perryville, formed as part of the "Phase Two" Perryville project, included numerous members from the Perryville house and was chaired by Reverend Ralph Glaser, C.M. That committee proved ineffective and the provincial council noted in its November 1985 meeting the group's lack of direction. Perhaps the closeness of the members to the issue of the future of Perryville complicated the work of the committee. Perhaps the trauma of closing the most historic, populous and vital of the Barrens apostolates

51 Ibid.
52 Minutes of the Midwest Provincial Council Meeting of 13-14 November 1985, Provincial Files.
left members shocked, numbed and in need of healing time. Certainly some members felt frustrated with the process leading to the closing of the seminary and, as cited earlier, complained about the lack of communication with the provincial administration. Whatever the cause, by the end of 1985 the Provincial Council commented frankly:

The committee has stagnated. A new committee is needed of people with more creative ideas and less vested interest. Reverend O'Donnell and the Council are in agreement here. A question arose as to whether the Province really supports any future for Perryville. It is an enormous plant with little going on and it will take some time to develop something. The Provincial office will attempt to generate some names for the new committee.53

At its May 1986 meeting the provincial council officially dissolved the Future of Perryville committee and deferred on reforming the committee for lack of available personnel.54 By September 1986 the council proposed to reform the Future of Perryville committee, with the approval of the Perryville house, and charged it with the study and presentation of "real options (including selling)" based on "real research" in a professional and expeditious manner.55 In December 1986, Reverend Barry Moriarty, C.M., was appointed chair of the new committee and the composition of the group was discussed.56 However, the Council did not return to consideration of the question of Perryville for the next several months, a period that marked the end of Hugh O'Donnell's tenure as provincial superior and a preoccupation with the status of the province's other seminary commitments (Cardinal Glennon, Kenrick, Lazare House of Studies, minor seminaries in Saint Louis, Kansas City and Chicago).

---

53 Minutes of the Midwest Provincial Council Meeting of 18-19 December 1985, Provincial Files.
54 Minutes of the Midwest Provincial Council Meeting of 7-8 May 1986, Provincial Files.
55 Minutes of the Midwest Provincial Council Meetings of 12-13 September and 13-14 October 1986, Provincial Files.
56 Minutes of the Midwest Provincial Council Meeting of 7-8 December 1986, Provincial Files.
Over the next seven years (1987-1993) there was little real movement for systematic planning or abrupt change in the status of the Barrens. Under the rectorship of Reverend Alphonse Hoernig, C.M. (1985-94), the Perryville house operated with a semblance of efficiency and unity. Reverend Hoernig, himself active in the local Church, brought lay retreats to the Barrens and worked hard to gain the trust of the community. In 1988 he proposed extensive remodeling of the old community chapel at the Barrens and pushed the provincial administration to commit to some kind of investment in the future of Perryville.\footnote{Alphonse Hoernig, C.M., to John Gagnepain, C.M., 3 February 1988, Provincial Files.}

In the interim, other proposals were made for the use of the Barrens campus. The most ambitious of those plans was offered by Reverend Charles Shelby, C.M., director of the Miraculous Medal Association and a member of the original committee on the future of Perryville. As early as October 1985 Reverend Shelby made a proposal to the committee that envisioned a Saint Mary’s busy hosting events for the Vincentian Studies Institute, the Miraculous Medal Association and the province, as well as for local civic and recreational groups. The Shelby proposal entailed maintaining the archives and museum collections at Saint Mary’s and hiring an administrative staff to oversee the campus.\footnote{Charles Shelby, C.M., “Proposal for the Use of the Facilities of Saint Mary’s of the Barrens,” October 1985, Provincial files.} The Vincentian brothers who worked the cattle farm at Saint Mary’s proposed to use the income of the farm for the maintenance of the new college formation program in Saint Louis.\footnote{William Hartenbach, C.M., to Hugh O’Donnell, C.M., 7 May 1985, Provincial Files. The request was denied.} One confrere proposed returning the internal seminary to Perryville in 1987 and establishing a training program for permanent deacons to serve the local dioceses.\footnote{Lawrence Christensen, C.M., to John Gagnepain, C.M., 13 July 1987, Provincial Files.} Another confrere proposed the establishment of a “Vincentian Spirituality Renewal Center” at Perryville with programs available for the international community of Vincentian men and women.\footnote{Carl G. Schulte, C.M., to John Gagnepain, C.M., 1 August 1989, Provincial Files.} Several sources mention the disposition of the seminary library and museum collections, ranging from an informal query by local businessmen to confreres proposing the transfer of the archives and museums to DePaul University, and a California Vincentian passing
on the expressed interest of Christie's auction house in the Doheny collection at Perryville. None of these proposals were acted on by the provincial administration.

The year 1993 marked the 175th anniversary of the founding of Saint Mary's of the Barrens and the event was marked by appropriate ceremonies on the old campus, including remarks by Reverend Christopher Robinson, C.M., that envisioned a revitalized Saint Mary's in line with the modern mission of the Vincentians. Just a month before Robinson's remarks, the provincial finance committee offered a report entitled "Project Perryville: The Future Mission" that proposed a systematic year-long study leading to new proposals for the future uses of Saint Mary's. The finance committee recognized the Perryville campus as "one of our largest and most significant assets" with "a rich and distinguished history" that presented "not... a problem in search of a solution, but... an opportunity for the Province and its members... to advance the mission of the Province for the year 2000 and beyond, rooted in its history." The finance committee report proposed specific criteria (mission-based, cost-effective), a procedure and a timeline for the work of a new "Project Perryville" task force. The committee report was approved by Reverend John Gagnepain, C.M., superior of the midwest province, and "Mission Project: Saint Mary's of the Barrens" (popularly known as the SMOB project) was established on 1 February 1994 with a task force headed by assistant provincial Reverend James Swift, C.M.

Among the first tasks of the SMOB committee was the solicitation of ideas and suggestions from Vincentians throughout the province regarding the future of the Barrens. Members of the province responded with a wide variety of ideas, reflecting a lack of consensus about the future direction of the motherhouse. Some proposed returning the internal seminary to Perryville. Others suggested expanding the retirement center, building a shelter for the homeless, a center for the mentally disabled or AIDS victims, a halfway house for convicts, a lay ministry center, an institute for continuing clerical formation, a retreat cen-

---

62 Alphonse Hoernig, C.M., to John Gagnepain, C.M., 4 April 1989; Charles E. Miller, C.M., to John Gagnepain, C.M., 12 November 1987, Provincial Files.
ter, a golf course or a housing development project. Some proposed designating the Barrens a center for research in American Vincentian history. One suggestion was to demolish all the existing buildings and construct a new “one-level, multi-winged structure” to house senior and disabled Vincentians, and host provincial retreats and assemblies. Others advised selling the land, moving the archives and museums and transferring the retirement center.65

The SMOB task force was instructed to respect input from confreres, engage the services of an experienced outside consultant, commission market studies and real estate assessments and confer with the community on the contours of a final proposal, all within designated criteria established by the provincial administration, including a directive that “the Midwest Province is not leaving or closing the Barrens.”66 The enormity of the task, to be completed within a calendar year, obviously complicated the work of the committee and was reflected in its November 1994 report to the provincial council. The report proposed the establishment of a “Barrens Outreach Initiative” incorporating existing ministries like the Miraculous Medal Association, the Vincentian Studies Institute and Catholic Home Study Service. It proposed the development of new ventures like a Perry County Pastoral Unit (a team of Vincentian priests to pastor the large Catholic parish in Perryville, and smaller parishes and missions in the surrounding area) and a “rest and relaxation center” for Vincentians and other area clergy. The report concluded that the establishment of such an initiative might entail the closing of certain existing ministries and offices, including the library and museums and possibly the retirement center, and the sale of land outside the core campus.67

Perhaps more important than the specific recommendations of the SMOB task force were the general conclusions drawn up by the group after its study and consultation. The task force recognized two “primary assets” at Saint Mary’s – its land/location and its history/heritage of mission. None of the other works, “sometimes misnamed apostolates,” currently residing on the Barrens campus constituted primary assets.

---

67 Ibid.
In the light of mission criteria, the farm (for example) is at best a support activity. It generates necessary revenue for the mission of SMOB. It is not an apostolate. Thus, its future disposition can be determined on the basis of the level of maximization of return desired from the land asset that the farm utilizes. If sale of all or part of the farm property is deemed as more beneficial to the province’s mission, such action should not be delayed because of mistaken definition of the farm activity. A similar assessment applies to the other works at SMOB (Association of the Miraculous Medal [MMA], Catholic Homes Study Service [CHSS], the museums, archives, retreat work and even the retirement operation). This definition should not be taken to mean that the work done is not important or valued, only that it is not essential to the mission of SMOB and/or not in accord with mission as defined by the province.68

The task force hit on a reality that had plagued the province since the closing of the seminary nearly 10 years earlier. The seminary had provided the unifying apostolate of the Barrens – the farm, the MMA and National Shrine, archives and museums – all had developed either in support or as outgrowths of the primary work of seminary education. Without the seminary, no consensus could be reached on the status and future of the Barrens. The campus was left much as it was between 1862 and 1886, when the departure of the formation program left the site, in the words of the Vincentian provincial superior in 1877, “so dreary, so lonely, so quiet.”69 The SMOB task force, by identifying the “primary assets” of the campus, proposed a new unifying spirit in the Outreach Initiative that built on the provincial mission value of evangelization. No single apostolate would be as dominant as the old seminary – hence the task force proposed a fresh model for the new Saint Mary’s. “If SMOB is to be renewed,” the report suggested, “the TF agreed that it must be more like a university than the small private school it has been. That is, there needs to be a collection of works that

68 Ibid.
69 Poole, The American Vincentians, 109.
The major contribution of the SMOB task force to the future of the Barrens was its recognition that the campus lacked a unifying apostolate and spirit and that, lacking such factors, its various components could be considered objectively with an eye toward their ultimate disposition.

In the meantime, Reverend John Gagnepain, C.M., provincial superior, was faced with responding to the conclusions and recommendations of the report. The report was accepted and the task force, having fulfilled its original charge, was disbanded in December 1994. Recognizing the gravity of the task force’s conclusions and its potential consequences, Gagnepain wrote to Reverend Robert Maloney, C.M., the superior-general of the order in Rome, for support. Reverend Maloney answered:

When issues are thorny and deeply felt, the tendency is to avoid them and delay on making decisions. Delay can sometimes be useful in that it enables us to develop new options and write new scenarios. But eventually, the responsible use of our resources demands that we make some hard choices. I know, from our conversation, that you and your Council are already developing those options and are very sensitive to promoting our heritage and offering alternatives to the confreres who are most affected. Because the question of Perryville is such a delicate one, and so many confreres have ties there, it is important that the members of the province walk along with you as the decision-making process takes place. In the long run, I think that the common sense of the confreres will lead them to support you as they come to grasp the problems involved in the current situation and the reasonable alternatives that you lay out before them.

Before publicizing the provincial council’s response to the SMOB report, Reverends Gagnepain and Swift met with members of the Perryville house on 23 March 1995. The house members were presented

---

with a copy of the provincial report outlining the decisions made regarding the SMOB report and confreres were given opportunities for feedback. Several members questioned the nature of the report. Had the specific recommendations of the task force been, indeed, accepted? Were these decisions final? In the words of one confreer, “I was expecting a bomb and all we got was a smoke screen.”72 One confreer questioned the assertion that the farm was not an apostolate. Another asked for clarification regarding the status of the Perry County Pastoral Unit proposal. As for their advice on the public announcement of the provincial report, the Perryville house council noted that initial reaction would be anxious and fearful, that close consultation with affected members was necessary before final decisions were implemented, and that clarification was needed regarding decisions that “sounded like a theology textbook – many distinctions and no overview.”73

Essentially, the announced decisions of the provincial council regarding the SMOB report were long on general principles, short on specific details. The provincial administration accepted the general conclusions of the task force but stopped short of endorsing its entire plan. In a 23 March 1995 summary of its decisions, the council noted their endorsement of “a series of insights gleaned from the work of the Task Force... [that] will now guide the future deliberations about Saint Mary’s.”74 Those insights included recognition of the primary assets of the Barrens (after its personnel, the provincial council accepted the task force’s designation of history/heritage and land/property as primary assets) and an understanding that, while valuable, none of the existing activities at Saint Mary’s was necessarily tied to the existence of the campus. In other words, the retirement center, farm, old seminary buildings, Miraculous Medal Association, National Shrine of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, and programs like the Catholic Home Study Service and the various physical assets of the Barrens (library, museums) were “not integral to Saint Mary’s of the Barrens.” Their future could be determined separately and objectively, without reference to the broader meaning or status of the Barrens.75 Indeed, the

72 Minutes of Meeting of House Council with Provincial and Staff to Present Provincial Level Decisions Regarding the Future of Saint Mary’s of the Barrens, 23 March 1995, Provincial Files.
73 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 9-10.
provincial council called for separate studies of the retirement center issue, the “shrine” or “core” campus, the farmlands, “other services” (including Catholic Home Study Service) and “other physical assets.”\textsuperscript{76} The pursuit of those studies, some quickly, others more gradually and incrementally, constituted the next steps in the decision-making process on the future of Saint Mary’s. In the meantime, Reverend Gagnepain released a public statement on the future of the Barrens that envisioned an enhanced campus surrounding the National Shrine and “a reduction of residential facilities.”\textsuperscript{77}

The SMOB report, as accepted and modified by the provincial council, failed to provide the kind of detailed plan for the future of Saint Mary’s that its ambitious charge projected, but it did offer conclusions that guided subsequent decisions regarding the various activities housed at the Barrens. An implementation report issued one month after the public announcement on the plan designated five separate “segments,” each assigned to a provincial administrator or appointed chair, for future consideration and decision-making.\textsuperscript{78} Decisions about the various apostolic works of the Barrens would be made individually over the next few years, with separate research studies, collection of data, lobbying campaigns and public announcements, but no overall vision for what remained of Saint Mary’s of the Barrens. The SMOB report appeared to have released the province from any obligation to consider the Barrens as a site of apostolic work. In the words of the March 1995 provincial council report:

Only with the preliminary report [by the SMOB Task Force] to the Provincial and Provincial Council were they able to say that perhaps nothing apostolic needs to continue at Saint Mary’s and that perhaps Saint Mary’s true asset is simply itself, that is, its history/heritage and its land/properties. Perhaps Saint Mary’s real and enduring value to the Province is its being a

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 10-11. The report noted that the governing board of the Vincentian Studies Institute had already separately decided to move its headquarters from the Barrens to DePaul University.


\textsuperscript{78} Saint Mary’s of the Barrens: Implementation Report Update, 12 April 1995, Provincial Files.
sort of psychological symbol for the Province, something we need and want to preserve, more for its own value and not for its being part of any apostolic endeavor.\textsuperscript{79}

If so, the provincial council decisions of early 1995 mark a definitive break in the history of Saint Mary’s, perhaps even more dramatic than the closing of the seminary itself ten years earlier. The way was now clear for practical decision-making regarding the assets of the Barrens without attachment to the health or future of any provincial apostolate. The Midwest Province of the Congregation of the Mission reached an important stage in its historical development, and contemporary contraction, in its 1995 decisions regarding the disposition of its motherhouse.

Of course, the psychological ties of the Barrens remained strong for some confreres, and the remaining residents felt slighted by the province’s disparagement of their works. Reverend Arthur Trapp, C.M., superior of the Barrens in 1995, expressed the sentiments of the house in an April 1995 letter to Reverend Gagnepain, “I am sitting here at The Barrens on a solitary island within a flood of anger and hurt and disgust and blame roaring ‘round me, but I can’t get anyone to express that to you.”\textsuperscript{80} Trapp’s eloquent letter asked the provincial to “put himself” in the place of the men at the Barrens affected by the recent decisions, men seemingly told that a lifetime of work was no longer valued, that they should celebrate a heritage while denied the necessary resources, that their personal care in their declining years would be decided by outside experts. Trapp’s letter put a human face on decisions that referenced abstract values, “physical assets” and institutional futures.

\textbf{End of Part One}

Part Two will appear in \textit{Vincentian Heritage}, Volume 23, Number 1

\textsuperscript{79} Report to the Province, 8.
\textsuperscript{80} Arthur Trapp, C.M., to John Gagnepain, C.M., April 1995, Provincial Files.
Since God is satisfied with our good will and our best efforts, let us also be satisfied with the outcome He gives to them, and our actions will never be without good results.

(Saint Vincent de Paul, letter 962, To Étienne Blatiron, In Genoa, 21 June 1647)