Talk Given upon Acceptance of

the *Pierre Coste Prize*

Thursday, April 27, 2006

By

Stafford Poole, C.M.

Next month I will celebrate fifty years of priesthood, and in October fifty-nine of membership in the Vincentian Community. When I look back over those years I never cease to be astounded at the progress of Vincentian Studies, especially within the past thirty years. Counting on your patience, I would like to share some of the highlights of that very interesting period.

When I entered the internal seminary (a term I consider more appropriate to Vincentian tradition than the religious term novitiate) at Saint Mary's Seminary, Perryville, Missouri, in October 1947, we lived in a far different world. Thus, for example, the journey from Los Angeles to Saint Louis took three and a half days by train, one that now takes about three and a half hours. After a night in Saint Louis we took the Frisco line to Saint Mary's, Missouri, and from there were driven to Perryville, a journey of about half a day. On the Frisco the three of us from California encountered another rude fact of life in those far off days: we accidentally sat down in the Jim Crow section!

During the ensuing years of formation we were taught almost nothing about the history of the Community. As seminarists we prayed for the beatification and canonization of Felix De Andreis, we learned something about Vincentian bishops, but for the most part this was anecdotal. One reason for this was that there was no one to teach us, no one on the faculty who had any real knowledge of authentic Vincentianism. The Community had no real tradition or sense of history.

Our knowledge of Saint Vincent de Paul came from standard biographies. Sometimes it was the classic one by Pierre Coste, but most seminarists and scholastics found that difficult reading. More likely our knowledge came from popular but often misleading works by Jean Calvet, Jean Morel, Emanuel de Broglie, Abbé Maynard, and other more or less popular biographies, all of which perpetuated traditional but erroneous stories. Much of our information came from morning meditations and the letters of the superiors general. These at times perpetuated legends. Saint Vincent was presented as the paragon of all virtues, far transcending the merely human. There was no indication that he could be inconsistent, short-sighted, irritable, or, God forbid! make mistakes. He was also separated from his social and intellectual milieu. The original French edition of Coste's biography of Saint Vincent was titled *M. Vincent: le grand saint du grand siècle* (M. Vincent: The Great Saint of the Great Century). One critic complained that he had given us the great saint but not the great century. Our picture of Saint Vincent was that of a pioneer who almost alone reformed the French Church of the seventeenth century.

As for the history of the Community there was virtually nothing, not even the brief history by Coste. It is noteworthy that his biography of Vincent de Paul was translated into English almost immediately after its publication in France in 1932, but that his history of the Congregation never was. At one time Father John Zimmerman, the director from 1939 to 1947, had a seminarist, Bruce Vawter, translate the biographies of the superiors general that were found in the collection of their circular letters. These were mimeographed and formed part of our Holy Founder reading. While they contained valuable facts and statistics, they were hagiographical in character and were written from the perspective of an intense French nationalism. One of these, I recall, spoke of "our first victories in Africa," in reference to the French conquest of Algeria. Thus one gained little or no knowledge of the Italian-French antagonisms and the governmental schism at the time of the French

Revolution. On the other hand we often heard about notable French missionaries in China, specifically, Francis-Regis Clet and John Gabriel Perboyre, but never a word about Johann Mullener, Ludovico Appiani, or Teodorico Pedrini.

This generalized lack of historical knowledge could have lamentable, even harmful results. The principle one was a progressive assimilation of the Community to a religious institute as it lost or diluted its essentially secular nature. This was most immediately noticeable in the vows, which gradually lost their private character and took on the characteristics of the public vows of religion. This was especially true of the vow of obedience. The 1954 Constitutions came up with a definition of the vows that bordered on gibberish. Similarly, the internal seminary, which was originally two years of probationary membership, became a preparation for vows. Any day spent away from what was now called the novitiate had to be made up, and an absence of thirty days during the first or so-called canonical year required that the novitiate be begun anew. I personally know of three cases in which that happened. None of this had any basis in authentic Vincentian tradition.

The same can be said of practices introduced into the formation program at Perryville over the years, for example, giving the incoming brothers a "name in religion," or adding such a name when taking vows. Though such customs were more irrelevant than harmful, they strengthened the identification with the religious life as such.

It is important to remember that Vincent de Paul himself was responsible for much of this attitude. He was opposed to any historical work that would glorify the Congregation and do harm to its humble character. In 1653, when Father Martin Delville published a short account of the Congregation of the Mission, Vincent was very upset.[1] True to a lifelong principle the Saint feared that his "Little Company" might be sinning against humility through such publicity. It was enough

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[1]*Annals of the Congregation of the Mission* (English Edition), 22:59-68.

for him that God knew about the work. In the early eighteenth century Father Claude-Joseph Lacour wrote an account of the Congregation from 1660 to 1720, but it remained unpublished until the early twentieth century and then in bowdlerized form. Father John Rybolt has prepared a critical edition that currently awaits publication. In 1927 Father Pierre Coste published a brief history that was accurate but very brief. The French produced a series of *Mémoires* that deal with Vincentian missions but these were not in wide circulation. Various provinces produced *Annales*, *Annali*, *Anales*, and *Annals*, valuable works but not always specifically historical. In general, for most Vincentians the history of the Congregation of the Mission was *terra incognita*.

The Lacour manuscript that I just mentioned is of supreme importance. He had the happy inspiration to reprint in full a number of documents that are no longer known or which perished during the French Revolution. Thus, for example, he is our only witness to the presence of four Vincentian priests as chaplains to the court of James II of England, the last Catholic royal chaplains in that nation's history. Lacour also quoted in full a letter from one of them concerning their difficult apostolate. He included interesting anecdotes and comments. My favorite is his observation about life at the Motherhouse in Paris during the generalate of Father Edme Jolly (1673-1697): "Never was Saint Lazare better provisioned than in his time. The bread and meat were always good, and the wine came from Burgundy."

"The up-to-date renewal of the religious life comprises both a constant return to the sources of the whole of the Christian life and to the primitive inspiration of the institutes, and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time. . . . Therefore the spirit and aims of each founder should be faithfully accepted and retained, as indeed should each institute's sound traditions, for all of these constitute the patrimony of an institute."[2] With this relatively simple declaration, the

[2] Decree "Perfectae caritatis," 2, in *Vatican Council ll: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar*

Second Vatican Council initiated a revolution in the religious life. The norms for implementing this decree added, "institutes must seek after a genuine understanding of their original spirit, so that they will preserve it faithfully when deciding on adaptations, will purify their religious life from alien elements, and will free it from what is obsolete."[3] In response to the Council's call, religious communities throughout the world began to research and reevaluate the original charisms of their founders. In a series of general assemblies from 1968 to 1980, the Congregation of the Mission sought to bring its constitutions into line with the post-Vatican II Church and to bring it closer to the original intention of its founder. An integral, even essential, part of this process was the inauguration of historical studies on a scale never before seen in the Congregation and the establishment of historically oriented organizations, such as the Group International d'Études Vincentiennes (GIEV, after 1980 the Secrétariat International d'Études Vincentiennes, SIEV), the Middle European Group of Vincentian Studies (MEGViS), and the Vincentian Studies Institute (VSI). Many provinces held study weeks or heritage days as a form of continuing education in matters Vincentian. Histories of different provinces were written, including Mexico, Australia, The United States, and the Near East.

It would be pretentious to compare this period with the Florentine renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but it is a fact that in nations, institutions, and certain periods of time there is often a sudden outburst of creativity and the coming together of interested and capable individuals. Such a thing, I believe, happened in the Vincentian Community in the years following Vatican II. There is also a warning because such periods of creativity can exhaust themselves and fade away.

Documents, Austin Flannery, O.P., ed. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1975), 612.

[3] Paul VI, *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, 6 August 1966, ibid., 627.

My own experience began in the early 1970s. For some years I had been helping out with the formation program at Saint Mary's Seminary in Santa Barbara, California, and had put together some lengthy notes about the history of the Vincentian Community. I decided to extend them into a book. With the financial support of the Western Province I arranged for the resulting history to be privately published (1973). Though it went only to the year 1843 it was the most comprehensive history yet published. Unfortunately, I was still in my early years as an historian and did not have access to primary sources. As a result, as subsequent research has shown, this work contains a large number of inaccuracies.

At that time I was deeply impressed by the work of two religiously oriented historical groups. The first was the Academy of American Franciscan History, at that time headquartered in Bethesda, Maryland. It was oriented toward my own specialty, Latin American History, and published a quarterly review, *The Americas*, which still enjoys high repute. The other was the Jesuit Historical Institute in Rome. One of the key figures in the latter organization was Father Ernest J. Burrus, S.J., who was a co-director of my doctoral dissertation. It occurred to me that the American Vincentians should have a similar organization, and around the year 1974 I drew up a proposal for the American provincials. They responded affirmatively, but for some reason I did not follow through on it.

One reason may have been that there were already plans afoot to establish an international organization for Vincentian studies. In September 1975, at the direction of Father James Richardson, the superior general, an organizational meeting was held at the Motherhouse in Paris. The presiding officer was the assistant general, Father André Sylvestre. In attendance were Father James Murphy from the Irish Province (who acted as my interpreter), Father Luigi Mezzadri of the Roman province, Father John Carven of the Eastern Province, USA, Father Gerard van Winsen of

the Netherlands province, Father José María Román of the Madrid province, yours truly, and others whose names may elude me. Out of this emerged the Group International d'Études Vincentiens or GIEV.

Unfortunately, the group was never successful. It met only once a year at different cities and did not really have a permanent, standing headquarters. It became the custom at each meeting to invite some local Vincentians to attend, with the result that a great deal of time was wasted in explaining the organization to guests who often did not stay for the entire meeting. The group also lacked strong organizational guidance and within a few years, in Father Román's words, "O se reforme o se suprima." The general assembly of 1980 reorganized the group into the Secretariat d'Étude Vincentiennes, but the successor has not proved to be more successful

In 1978 the GIEV met in the United States, at Niagara University. As usual a number of non-members who were interested in Vincentian Studies were invited to attend. As I recall the attendees included Fathers John Rybolt, John Carven, Frederick Easterly, and Douglas Slawson. A proposal was submitted to the Vincentian Conference in 1978 and with its approval organizational meetings were held in Saint Louis, Missouri, and Evansville, Indiana. The Constitutions and by-laws were approved in 1979. In 1992 the five United States provinces of the Daughters of Charity formally joined in the governance and support of the VSI. One of them immediately pointed out that the constitutions defined the VSI as an "autonomous" organization, a description that immediately set off bells and whistles. That term had been included in the original document to mark its independence of the Group International d'Études Vincentiens, not of any provincial authority.

The VSI has made extraordinary contributions to Vincentian studies: the journal *Vincentian Heritage*, a series of monographs, reprints of classic Vincentian works, the establishment of a

research fund to encourage further studies, and the outreach to other parts of the Vincentian Family. Those who would like further information on the work of the VSI are directed to the excellent article by Father Edward Udovic on the VSI website.

Certainly one of the major steps forward has been the VSI's relationship with DePaul University. What we have now is a center of Vincentian studies at a major academic institution. To my limited knowledge this situation is unique. I know of nothing comparable within or without the Vincentian Communities.

What, then, are the tasks that lie ahead of us? First of all, I think that we must give all possible support to the general history of the Congregation of the Mission being researched and guided to completion by Father John Rybolt. The same is also true of his edition of the Lacour manuscript, whose publication will be a major contribution.

Outside of that I believe that we need a new, up-to-date one or two volume biography of Saint Vincent. The recent biography by José María Román, and the more specialized works of Luigi Mezzadri or André Dodin, do not fill that need. A new biography should place the Saint in his social, religious, and intellectual milieu. It should judge critically or discharge the legends that still surround his life: the so-called captivity in Tunisia, his taking to himself the temptation of the doctor of theology, the false accusation of theft by the judge of Sore, and the sermon at Folleville as the foundation date of the Congregation of the Mission. It should reexamine his relationships to Jansenism, to Madame de Gondi, to Saint Louise de Marillac and the Daughters of Charity. It should give a rigidly historical account of the vows, not the myth that continues to be propagated. It should investigate his relationship to the Company of the Blessed Sacrament, his style of governance, and his various methods of finding financial support for his work. Why was his concept of community life so monastic, and how did it differ from that of the Jesuits, Sulpicians, or

Oratorians? These are only a few of the questions that need to be addressed.

We also need a study of the relationship of the various superiors general to the Daughters of Charity prior to the French Revolution. How much control did they actually exert? Where did the concept of a director of the Daughters come from?

I would propose new biographies and evaluations of our American Vincentian bishops, especially two: Joseph Rosati and Stephen Vincent Ryan. The former was a major figure in the early Church in this country, but the only existing biography is a doctoral dissertation by Father Frederick J. Easterly. It was published in 1942 during the Second World War, and so Father Easterly was denied any direct access to European documents. In the more than sixty years that have intervened there has been great research into American Church history that will cast new light on a true pioneer bishop. As for Ryan, an obscure bishop of a small diocese, his ideas on governance and Americanization deserve study and evaluation.

As I look at the past fifty or sixty years and see the progress that has been made in Vincentian studies, do I have any fears for the future? Definitely. The predominant one is: where are our successors coming from? We live in a new age of anti-intellectualism, and pursuits like history are deemed irrelevant. The preferential option for the poor has become an exclusive option, and scholarly pursuits are not attractive to a younger generation. A Jesuit friend of mine, a major figure in the study of American Church history, often complains to me of the rise of anti-intellectualism among American Jesuits and the loss of their intellectual tradition. A younger generation, he says, "wants to turn us into little-league Franciscans." The Academy of American Franciscan History was, for a while, in danger of perishing because of this lack of interest. Its past two directors have been laypersons, one of them a non-Catholic. The journal *The Americas* has a large board of directors, of whom only two are Franciscans, both of them living outside the United

States. I am not decrying this development, just the attitude of indifference that gives rise to it. In the Vincentian Family we are in danger of falling back into what historians call presentism. We need to encourage younger people to follow our paths and, more importantly, to appreciate the value and importance of historical and institutional studies. For this reason it is essential that such information be an integral part of our formation programs. We must never return to the situation I encountered in 1947.

In Santa Fe, New Mexico, there is a building, apparently a former school, on whose wall is written in characters for all the world to see, "The nation that is ignorant of its history has no future." It is a lesson that we need to take to heart.