American Vincentian Evangelization: Some Historical Perspectives

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Here’s something I read recently written by a Vincentian Volunteer, Steve Wiederkehr. He witnesses to being evangelized, I believe, in a Vincentian context, by coming to appreciate Divine Providence, as Vincent de Paul did:

I arrived at work around 11:00 a.m., and found out from the parish secretary that the group who was supposed to provide the meal couldn’t make it. . . . I was able to come up with spicy chicken breasts, vegetables and dessert. . . . My cooking expertise doesn’t go much farther than spaghetti and hamburger helper. This problem was solved when a parishioner, who happens to be a retired chef, stopped by the office. He started to take over the cooking while I wisely got out of his way.

A further problem was that we didn’t have any bread or salad to serve. That problem was quickly solved when the St. Vincent de Paul Society made their weekly drop-off. . . . This experience taught me several things: . . . that God definitely has everything under control. . . . also. . . that God uses everybody’s individual gifts and talents in order for His work to be accomplished. No person can do it alone. St. Vincent’s Church ministries to the poor are a good example of this fact.1

This is one way of being evangelized: seeing the presence of God in daily life. Since 1816, our confreres have been evangelizing and being evangelized in countless other ways. Rather than recounting the history of institutions, since this has been done many times,2 I thought it would be more important to examine three common myths about our work. By “myths” I mean perceptions about our identity. These may be true or false, but they say something important, even comforting, about how we think of ourselves. For the last several months, therefore, I have been gathering a few words from our confreres to compare their lives with our myths. My hope is that at the end we will have a better sense of ourselves as Vincentians, “following Christ the Evangelizer of the poor” as the Constitutions say. We will, I hope, have approached the truth of what we do, and in the truth we will be free for a better future.

MYTHS AND REALITIES

Myth Number One: Seminaries are our real work.

This myth has guided our thinking and emotions for a very long time, longer even than our lifetimes. It is true, of course, that Bishop Dubourg in 1815 invited the Vincentians to the United States to run his seminary. But we should also look carefully at the entire document of foundation, carefully discussed and negotiated, where we will see that our confreres were interested primarily in evangelization, and not in seminaries.3 The preamble reads: “the missionaries will go out with him [the bishop] to form an establishment in his diocese, discharge the different functions appertaining to their institute, and especially to found a seminary as early as possible. . . .” Article 3: “While the urgent wants of those souls who have been so long destitute of spiritual assistance will require much zeal on the part of the missionaries, who will go here and there to assist and instruct them, the novices will remain stationary at the principal residence . . .” Article 4 speaks of parishes: “therefore, all the parishes that the bishop may wish to confide to the missionaries must be taken in the name of the whole society. . . .” Article 6 talks of parish missions: “. . . before settling in any place, the missionaries should begin by a mission, given according to our rules, in order to make a good beginning, and promote the solid and permanent welfare of these poor souls.” These articles were, to be sure, based on plans for the mission, not on actual experience, apart from that of Dubourg.
The rest of the articles mention future developments, such as the founding of a seminary, and handing over to the diocesan clergy the parishes already founded or run by the Vincentians, “restricting themselves to the usual functions of the [Congregation].”

I present these texts because we have the tendency to think back to the “glory days” (another myth to be addressed below), while forgetting that our Vincentian ministries were called forth in response to the needs of a young and developing Church here in America. A glance at figures drawn from the official printed catalogues of personnel will show that the work of the Vincentians was multiple, multifaceted, sometimes truly original, and not exclusively involved in seminaries.

From the time of the first printed catalogue in 1853, until 2000, the percentage of personnel attached to our seminaries of all levels, rarely exceeded 50%.

In the earliest period, before the division of the province in two in 1888, the percentages moved between 29% and 54%. In the period of two provinces, from 1888 to 1975, the Western province contributed between 24% (1915) and 41 or 42% for several years: 1947, 1950, 1955, 1960, 1965, 1970. The Eastern province in the same period generally had smaller percentages, between 11% and around 40% of the confreres working full or part time at all levels of seminary formation. The picture from 1975 to the present is well enough known, from about 40% downward.

Unfortunately, intellectual and class snobbery sometimes characterized relationships among the confreres in the seminary apostolate. If a candidate was not deemed smart enough to go into seminary work, the provincial would send him to parish or mission work; those who could not master Latin or otherwise get good grades they counseled to become lay brothers. (The same distinctions were drawn for those in the work of higher education.) Now this set of distinctions was not confined to the American provinces, since every superior general, with the exception of Saint Vincent de Paul, René Alméras, and Jean-Baptiste Etienne, as far as I know, had been seminary professors. It is no wonder, then, that the collective understanding of ourselves, particularly in this country, has centered around education, mainly seminary education.

The enormous struggles at the general assemblies from 1968 to 1980 centered, it seems to me, around two poles: (1) those heavily invested in education would presumably lose their Vincentian identity if they turned their attention to the materially poor; and (2) those with a heavy personal and institutional investment in ministry to the poor would denigrate those who were not. A marvelous sentence in Constitutions, article 15, concerning the apostolate of seminaries, at least broke the impasse: “They [the confreres] should work to encourage in them [seminarians and priests] the desire of fulfilling the Church’s option for the poor.” In other words, Vincentian seminary and priestly formation should have the specifically Vincentian character summarized in that sentence: fulfilling the Church’s option for the poor. (I should add that the specific Vincentian character of our educational work is mandated in Statutes 11, section 3: “All the students [of Vincentian institutions] should be imbued with a sensitivity for the poor, according to the spirit of our Founder. . . .”)

To summarize, the myth is that we are all about seminaries. The reality is more nuanced, partly because our identification with seminaries came from outside the Congregation. The provinces did enormous good work in their seminaries, but this work occupied only half, at most, of the personnel. This myth also colored how we thought about ourselves, whether in that charmed circle of education and formation, or outside it. We realize now, probably better than ever, that all Vincentian work, particularly work in education and formation, should be about evangelization, with a distinctive emphasis on service to the poor.
Myth Number Two: Vincentians do it better, because there is one distinctive Vincentian way.

This myth comes out of a sense of ourselves and pride in our past. I have often heard it said that “we do it better than anyone else,” that is, our seminaries were better than those run by mere diocesan clergy; our missions are the best; our parishes are shining examples of genuine dedication; we celebrate Mass better than others, and so on. Let’s ask pardon of God for such acts of pride, and avoid this kind of exaggeration in the future. It does no honor to our confreres, since God alone grants success to the work of our hands. The myth of superiority and distinctiveness was reinforced by the centralizing tendencies in life and work characteristic of the Congregation in the 19th and early 20th centuries. A confrere received approval if he followed the company line, the Vincentian way of running parishes or seminaries, or giving missions. Those who fell outside the standard way were exceptions, non-conformists, bull-headed, singular, or, as my French friends say, “original.”

The reality, of course, is more complex. The superiors general, beginning with Jean-Baptiste Etienne, continued by Antoine Fiat and others, published numerous “Directories,” that is, standard operating procedures for various Vincentian works. While originally intended to be of help to confreres, particularly new superiors, they became sets of rules that had the effect of homogenizing the operation. In any case, confreres found ways around them. The real “Vincentian way,” in my opinion, was the personal dedication of the confreres to their work in the spirit of Vincent de Paul in all our ministries. Let’s look at this.

First, we are talking here about real people, our brothers in the Congregation for the last 186 years in this nation. How many hours did they spend at quiet, humble work: in the confessional, at meetings, researching in libraries, preparing classes, correcting papers, celebrating mass in country missions, cleaning, repairing, painting, cutting hair? All of these activities—the stuff of daily life, and generally hidden from view, is quiet evangelization by their presence and by good example.

Second, the Vincentian way in the United States was decidedly not European. The American province was the first Vincentian province founded outside of Europe, and in days when communication was difficult and uncertain, many American customs became normative for the confreres here. This is what Constance Demion wrote about Perryville on 31 July 1903 at the end of a special visitation ordered by the superior general:

> The custom of eating meat at Breakfast. This custom is certainly contrary to the Encyclical Letters of the Very Rev. Superior General, but it is to be considered universal in America. Moreover you have not in your country, as in France, the custom of drinking wine at each meal; and finally you use only one kind of meat at Dinner. Wherefore, moved by these reasons and having seriously considered the matter before God, it seemed to me that this custom should be considered to be a special law of this House. But if there be any of you who would prefer to be satisfied with a lighter Breakfast, for the sake of mortification, let them understand that uniformity in all things is the greatest mortification, and certainly a mortification most pleasing to God.

He also had another remark in a similar vein:

> Some of our confreres, it seems to me, are too fastidious about their hair. Alas, Brothers, how can, I will not say clerics, but even laymen, be still subject to such vanity, a vanity permissible only to little boys. If custom in your country permit not the use of the tonsure, as in France, it does not then follow that immoderate care of the hair should be a matter of indifference to you Americans.
Our European conferees made admonitions like these at various times, as they tried to understand our distinctive American way of Vincentian evangelization.

A third point is that each confere never did the same thing in the same way. This contradicts the myth that we were all alike. Many American Vincentians were creative, original, out-of-the-box thinkers and planners. They followed Divine Providence leading them, I think, in reading the signs of the times and responding creatively.

Let’s name a few names here, and these are simply the best known. Think of Joseph Skelly, whose original creative idea for fund raising has grown into two large national, even international, organizations promoting devotion to Our Lady, and helping the financial solidity of our provinces. Aloysiuss Meyer had a special care for his fellow German Catholics, founding parishes for them whenever he could. John Lynch, laboring under intense financial pressures, was able to begin a small work that developed into Niagara University. Lester Fallon’s evangelizing creativity led him to begin the Motor Missions, a work done normally out of the seminaries but in the summers in the days before air conditioning. Simple appeals for help have led to many generous responses, culminating in the New England province (under George Glogowoski preaching missions for Polish immigrants), in the Panama mission (to minister to English-speakers involved in the building of the canal), in China, in the Kenya mission (to help in a poor seminary serving seminarians from nomadic tribes), in the many Alabama parishes (helping neglected or fallen-away Catholics and reaching out to others). Despite the creativity of some, other conferees felt compelled to leave the Congregation, to pursue elsewhere their vision for the Church.

So, was there one Vincentian way of doing things? Yes and no. Yes: there were directories and rules, but they were often ignored; and yes, the conferees gave themselves generously, as Vincent did, searching out God’s will in the signs of the times, responding to unmet pastoral needs. But no: the American Vincentians were often creative, original, and hard to force into one mold. Thank God.

**Myth Number Three: There were giants in those days.**

This citation from Genesis 6:4 shows how old this myth is. It’s comfortable, of course, since it values our past, but also uncomfortable, since it shows what midgets we are today! This fits in with a kind of Vincentian pride in our past, as mentioned above.

Instead of concentrating on heroic acts, I like looking at what our men were really doing and thinking and saying and feeling. Here’s an excerpt from Alexander Frasi, an Italian-born confere in the 19th century.5 He and the Philadelphia conferees loved to spend vacation times with the Willcox family at Ivy Mills, Chester Heights, Pennsylvania, but Frasi had been moved to Saint Louis and missed the family.6 Mrs. Willcox he called “Ma,” her husband “Pa,” and they sometimes called him “Fa.” Listen for the realities of his emotional life. Can we connect with him?

St. Louis, 25th of Sept. (46)

Dear “Ma,” . . . I kept still however, waiting every day that you would at least remember your exiled child. At last the letter has come. I was in Retreat at the time but do you think I could wait till it was over to read it? No I could’nt [sic]. But lo! what was in it? A good scolding in the form of a pious sermon. Thank you. Indeed I needed it. . . . You ask my news. I would like to be able to give some either interesting or consoling but I have none of the kind. . . . This is my regular routine. Some sick call now and then, some confessions in the Church, a little preaching. I visit the sick of the house and mix medicines for them, and of late an additional class of Theology
in the bargain. . . . I have never been so unhappy in my life . . . although occupied the whole day at the end I find nothing done worth notice.

Six weeks later, he writes:

St. Louis, 13th Novbr. 1846

Dear “Ma,” . . . For when I get one of your letters, I have no peace till I have devoured its contents. If in my situation, I should be deprived of the satisfaction I have in writing to you and receiving from you occasionally a letter, I do not know if I could stand it. When the blues come on, and in spite of all my exertions they come too often, I think very frequently of “Ma” . . . And you must not wonder at this, for I have no friends here, as I told you before, and I don’t care to have any because first, of the difficulty to find one; and then because I see that there is no use in having any if at a moment’s notice we are bound to separate for thousands of miles, and for how long? Perhaps forever, I mean in this world. . . .

Respectfully & affectingly yours, A. Frasi, C.M.

We get another perspective from an Italian of a different stripe, Bartholomew Rollando, on the mission in Texas. We know from other letters that Mrs. Willcox had been Rollando’s spiritual directee, which may explain his more distant tone. He sounds like one of the giants of the land, but he was also very human.

Galveston Texas, the 18th of Novem. 1845

Dear Madam,

You will rejoice to hear that after a prosperous voyage of 17. days by rail-road, by stage coaches, by rivers, & by sea I arrived at last in this town on Sunday the 9th Inst. at 11 o’clock a.m. in good health and better spirits. . . . On board the steamboat I had to sleep, as many other passengers did, on the floor, still my voyage was very agreeable. . . . When I arrived here there was nobody at the Episcopal residence . . . All the companions I found herein were a cat, a small puppy which ran away from me as from an intruder, a host of innumerable ants, and moskitoes without end, which for my consolation I was told they would last only from the 1st of January to the last of December.

. . . How is my little angel? Give a kiss for me to my dear Ida; she was my best friend, but if she has not already, she will soon forget me. Give also my best and warmest respects to Pa, Mark, Connie, Deby, Barney, etc. etc, and all your children nominatim, and do not forget to pray for a poor [son in?] exile.

Rollando wrote again in mid-August of his recent sickness.

Galveston the 12th of August 1846

My D[ea]jr. Child in Christ,

Since my last in the month of June I have been very sick: for four consecutive days I have been constantly puking. I never puked so much in all my life.
Citations like these could be repeated for everyone, but we don’t have to, since we can realize that, after a little reflection, these men, our brothers, are just like us: not giants, except occasionally, but rather normal human beings trying to be faithful to their vocation.

Here’s an appraisal written by Martin Dyer, transferred from the East to Los Angeles in 1883. He was not optimistic about the future—all of which shows that the gift of prophecy was not his. He writes to his niece:

They have a few rainy weeks in midwinter and never a shower or even a dew the rest of the year, so that the country is totally parched and baked, save gardens and fields which are watered regularly. The dust is terrible . . . I cannot see a single inducement why anyone should come or remain here. On the contrary, for one who has been accustomed to four well defined seasons of the year and all the freshness, variety, and vigor which they bring, to settle down under changeless skies, with ceaseless sun, cloudless sky, and monotony all the year round seems a kind of madness. For myself, I came because of my vow of obedience.

We have tended to glorify the Chinese missions as one of the high spots in our history. The missioners were truly giants, we suppose, putting up with the worst conditions, a model for us all. However, listen to Louis M. Bereswill writing to his sister Rosanna, from Poyang, China, 19 December 1930:

My dear Sister,

Fathers Misner, Murphy, and myself left Shanghai on the tenth of the month. We received quite a fine send off by the Fathers at Shanghai. At dinner that evening we were treated to a toast by the Superior of the best wine they had in the house, and after the dinner we gathered in the recreation room where gossip was very enjoyable. After an hour, or at eight o’clock, we got our belongings, those which we did not trust in the rough handling of the Chinese, and soon we were speeding to the dock in two nice big autos.

. . . When we got near to the house here one of the priests spied us, so he summoned the other two and they came running to meet us. Here we exchanged a hearty hand shake, and together we walked to the gate. On reaching the gate, a Chinaman lit a long string of firecrackers, about three feet long, and what a reception. True Chinese fashion. . . . This morning we said Mass in the beautiful Church, and the people recited the prayers out loud during the entire Mass. I like to hear them pray.

. . . With love and a kiss, I remain, Your missionary brother, Louis.

Conditions were not so idyllic, however, as he wrote on 20 December 1931.

Last night two telegrams reached us informing us that three places have fallen into the hands of the Communists, and that one priest, whom I had the pleasure of meeting this summer, had been taken captive. There is no immediate danger for us, but we cannot tell how long we will enjoy peace. . . . Pray that if it might happen that in my missionary labors in China, I might be taken captive, that then I will have the grace of preparing myself well for death, and of suffering for the love of God the tortures and hardships which might be my lot.

In 1945, the Polish confreres suffered for their faith in China. Condemned for collaboration with the Japanese, and for not caring for their people, Bishop Ignatius Krause with other confreres and Daughters of Charity were beaten. Father Wojciech Sojka recalled:
In the morning after breakfast, we were told to empty our pockets... our hands were tied and then we were marched through the streets,... Throughout the square special raised platforms were set up, on which we stood in groups of three.... Shouts rang out through the public square: Revenge! Beat them! Our outer clothes were torn off, the Sister had her veil only torn off her. I was struck on my face and head. The Bishop was whipped on his bare back. I saw our Sister, Daughter of Charity,... with a broken nose and bloody face. She was beaten with the large rosary she left in her room. Fr. Arciszewski took off his winter coat and placed it on her shoulders.... Dunce caps were placed on our heads with our “crimes” written on them.

The myth is that there were giants, heroes, abroad in the land in those days. The reality, as usual, is difficult to specify. Many of our brothers, and Sisters, were heroes, giants, tested to the limits. But the majority were not given that opportunity and spent their lives in the humdrum ways we are all used to. I presume, in faith, that the good Lord accepted these lesser sacrifices as readily as those greater ones. Our Vincentian lives are complex, multi-faceted, and far from ordinary.

A FUTURE

History, as I understand it, is not just about telling the story of the past. It should also involve some present and future perspectives. So, basing my hopes on the human creativity and American drive of our confreres, with the help of organizational ability and networking, there are several avenues open to us. First, I am convinced that we must do everything with an eye to the Vincentian character of our existing work. For a long while, we hid this, or de-emphasized it. Only recently in its institutional life did De Paul University, for example, wake up to the fact that its name came from Saint Vincent De Paul, and that his presence there should mean something. The confreres in our other institutions have made similar decisions, and these are changing the climate of those institutions.

Second, the superior general, Father Maloney, has called us to think more clearly about the larger Vincentian Family, let alone the worldwide Congregation of the Mission. In this expanded setting, American confreres have continued their services in Panama and Kenya, moving out also to missions in many other countries. I am thinking here of American Vincentians in Ethiopia, Tanzania and the Solomon Islands. We have begun to focus more on direct service to the poor with other congregations and especially with laity. I am always moved when I hear lay people who think enough of us and of our Founder to share with us what it means to them to be Vincentians too.

Third, Vincentian youth groups are springing up gradually, together with volunteer programs and associates programs. Our challenge is to become involved and to promote them.

Fourth, other specific kinds of works have long existed in our provinces, but have been underemphasized or gone unrecognized. One work, usually involving the poorest of the poor, is prison ministry. This was one of Vincent’s earliest endeavors. Another work, equally one of Vincent’s, is running retreat houses. These can follow up on successful missions, since the parishioners are hungry for more.

“Refoundation” is a buzzword today for religious life, but I think that what we have been involved in as a Congregation is “re-branding,” in marketing terms. We have occupied a niche in the market, such as seminaries, parishes, and missions. Much of this has changed, and the Congregation, recognizing this, has called on us to look at ourselves differently, or to “re-brand,” even “re-package” ourselves. Frankly, we cannot live just with the certainties of the past, which were often myths.
I would like to close with an example from the Gospel of something we have done and will continue to do very well, something very Vincentian: foot washing. The Lord Jesus, on the night before he died, washed the feet of his disciples. He said, Do this in memory of me. That’s our challenge: to humbly and simply wash the feet of our brothers in Community and to wash the feet of the poor whom God sends us.

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3 For the text, see, *The American Vincentians*, pp. 451-54.

4 “Admonitions particular & general To be given to at the close of the Visitation of the House of Perryville,” in DRMA, Provincial Files (Smith), E(MO)2.

5 Frasi, born 1817 in Piacenza, came to the United States in 1841 or 1842. He eventually left the Congregation, and was incardinated into the diocese of Vercelli, where he died in 1871.

6 The originals of the Vincentian-Willcox correspondence are found in the archives of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia, Record Group 10.

7 Rollando, born in 1810, was to die in Galveston, 11 October 1847, perhaps from the disease he described in his letter of 12 August 1846.

8 Communicated by Stafford Poole; original in the archives of the Province of the West, Montebello, CA. Dyer, born in Missouri, 1840, entered the Congregation in 1857, and died in Los Angeles, 27 June 1901.


10 Original text prepared by Fr. Wojciech Sojka in 1986. Communicated by John Sledziona, C.M.; original in archives of the New England Province, Manchester, CT. Father Sojka was born in Poland, 1911, joined the CM in 1932, was ordained in 1937. He died in 1994.