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Introduction

Just as the First World War brought Verdier to the office of vicar general, so the Second World War was the occasion for Edouard Robert (1871–1960) to guide the Congregation. His tenure began with Souvay’s death in December 1939 and ended with the election of William Slattery in July 1947. The German occupation of Paris made his years particularly difficult, but he was able to guide the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity nonetheless.

He served the Congregation as secretary general from 1914 to 1927, when he became an assistant. Souvay selected Robert as vicar general upon his death.

Circular Letters of Edouard Robert

1939, 24 December, [unpaged, but 3 pp.]
Announces death of Souvay, after a year of heart problems. Rested at Dax and Villebon; presided over general assembly, which tired him out. Death, funeral, burial at Montparnasse, letters of condolence.

—Includes necrology for 1939, ending with Souvay, 18 December
[English in DRMA]

Impossible to hold a general assembly now, since some men have been called up for military service, and for some provinces travel is dangerous. – Still working on constitutions for next general assembly.

1940, 18 December, in AnnCM 105 (1940): 221-33, for French confreres
Souvay’s death was hastened by the war because of his anguish and concern. Robert counts on the good will of the confreres.

NEWS: only about France, since he has practically no other information. Assistants are working on revising the constitutions. The French are now obliged to do penance for their removal from God, for being a lay state separated from the Church. We should fast and pray, accepting the restrictions that the situation imposes. The farm at Villebon will supply the mother house with food. Rarely have meat, good grain, cheese, sugar, coffee, milk. Restrictions on light and heat, on leaving the house, on letters. Urges regular and solid prayer, which “allows us to deflect the anger of God.” (p. 224) Say rosary together for peace. Pray for the dead. Pray for peace among nations.
Impossible to hold an assembly. – He has extended the extraordinary permissions granted by Souvay. Perhaps this separation into two zones will prepare for the autonomy of the French provinces. Apostolic schools have only a few students. Very hard to preach missions. Seminaries, sometimes in new locations, are still operating. – Thanks Aroud for his work in Vichy; the nuncio is living at the Maison du Missionnaire.

Surviving: submission to God, abandoning ourselves to his goodness. Reading newspapers, listening to the radio, talking will not change things; only prayer and work in the spirit of St. Vincent will change the country. Cooperate with ecclesiastical and civil authorities to rebuild France.

1941, 18 April, in AnnCM 105 (1940): 233-68
Notes about the deceased, beginning with Souvay, and twenty-three others.

1941, 20 December, in AnnCM 106-07 (1941-42): 3-24, includes necrology for 1941
Death deprived the Congregation of Souvay at the time when we needed him. The war has put everything on hold. How to manage: 1) Prayer, especially to St. Vincent, with his proper office; reciting the breviary in common used to be sacrosanct. 2) Practice of the rules: reviews topics from Common Rules. 3) Reading life of St. Vincent, good bread, very nourishing. Coste is good but quite long; we need something shorter: “a true life, complete, intimate, elegant, and short.” 4) Communicate to the houses the edifying things that God is doing, as through Annales. Also necrology notices, especially of those “who died piously in a humble observance of our rules and of those of their offices.” The Curia does not receive much of this any longer. All will help to “develop the primitive spirit.”

NEWS: Mother house: body of St. Vincent is absent, but the traditions continue. The Villebon farm helps support the house with vegetables. Many pious works continue. 34 priests, only two or three clerics, but 27 brothers and some postulants. – Internal seminary at Pontchevron, with 32; philosophers, 42, also at Pontchevron, and 48 theologians in Dax. – Major seminaries: Angouleme, Beauvais (transferred to Montmagny), Troyes, Évreux (transferred to Paris), Verdun. He has permission to visit the “free zone,” (Vichy), and visited houses in Aquitaine and Provence. Aquitaine divided by a demarcation line. Death of Frasse. Prime-Combe: apostolic school, novitiate, and philosophy. Describes his visits. – Holland: some studying at Nijmegen. Portugal: to Mozambique. – Pius XII, 25th anniversary of episcopacy. – Are we at the dawn of a new and better world? Only God knows.

Three years of war, restrictions, separation difficulties, and without a superior general. We abandon ourselves to the hands of God. Our peace is troubled also by striving for comfort, following our own will, desire for news, imprudent words, and inconsiderate judgments.

NEWS: Had audience with Pope in May, and with heads of congregations in Rome. Reprints letters from pope. – Mother house: we have had to cut back on expenses and subsidies for formation programs. Two confreres deputed to manage the two areas of France, occupied and not. Death of Parrang, 21 January (obituary notice). Same for Colliette, a Paris native, born on rue de Sevres, visitor of Paris. Death of Bro. Véron, assistant of Pouget. – Évreux: seminary burned, and some students in Paris, others at St.-Aubin. – Pontchevron: cold and humid in the woods. – Gentilly: 30 young students; property at Villebon purchased. – One prisoner, Louis Meunier, allowed to be ordained in Rheims. – Details about non-occupied zone, which he
visited. Prime-Combe has students; internal seminary there, then at Grau-du-Roi, and back to Prime-Combe. Hard to get supplies for PC. Mission houses, also helping wounded soldiers. – Ardouanne, minor seminary or school. — Major seminaries at Nice, Montpellier, Montauban, Albi, Périgueux. – Château-l’Évêque: body of St. Vincent there. Death of Poupart, formerly in Colombia and Ecuador; back to France after First World War. – Vichy: several missionaries from other congregations. – The “forbidden zone” or “closed zone” in the East, often bombed. – Germany: Cologne house bombed. – Belgium: he visited Visé, has part of the apostolic school. – Cavalla: now said to be in Bulgaria, formerly Greece. – Spain, many martyrs; saw some confreeres in Vichy. Sisters and confreeres hard at work; many vocations. – Holland: at Wernhout, on Javanese works there too. Many Dutch living in France. – Hungary: new houses in Csepel, and two in later Rumania. – Rome: 300th anniversary of founding of first permanent house (1642). Archives at Leonine are a treasure. Confreeres give missions. Cottolengo Sisters work in the house. Our journals come from San Silvestro, plus Ordo. – Naples: despite bombing, visited houses. – Turin: also visited, with Nazarene Sisters, and Cottolengo. Many houses damaged by bombing. – Portugal: in peace. – Yugoslavia: parts went to Germany, Italy (Ljubljana), and Bulgaria; another is Croatia, and then Serbia. – Slovakia: three houses. – Turkey: continuing as before. – China: still at war. Notes deaths of Sageder, Verdini and Poizat: unknown details. – No news from India. – Vietnam: Sisters at work. – Algeria: he wanted to visit but could not; in grip of war. – Madagascar: some letters arrived, with usual news. – Argentina: visitor died suddenly, Bauden, born in France. – No news from Brazil. – USA: Slattery’s term up, but Holy See agreed that he should stay on. – Indonesia and Philippines, both at war.

Etienne’s anniversary (1843-1943). – Suffrages: try to do one’s best, even with a secondary intention at Mass, and a secondary collect.

Includes necrologies: but with incomplete dates.

1943, 4 January, in AnnCM 108-09 (1943-44): 8-9 [inserted in circular of 1 January 1944]

The reduction, because of war conditions, of suffrages for the departed.


Pius XII consecrated world to Immaculate Heart of Mary (end of 1942), as Leo XIII did to Sacred Heart of Jesus. Reflections on the two hearts: love, humility. “Perhaps if there had been more victim souls, more Moses, more Aarons, more victims among those consecrated to God, the war might not have come.” Our negligences have wounded the heart of Jesus. – Encyclical on Mystical Body of Christ, 29 June 1943. Reflections on the encyclical. – Other Roman pronouncements, and discussion of rights of bishops over the Daughters of Charity. – Just around Christmas 1942, the Christmas crib burned and nearly burned down the chapel and the mother house. – University professors present at Mass, 24 January, for annual event, and commemorating Fathers Portal (who worked with them), and Pouget (who worked with students of the Normal school). – Hard to provide food for the mother house, with 67 mouths to feed. – Air raid alerts. – Six confreeres [later wrote: 7 brothers and 1 priest] agreed to go as workers to Germany to minister among French (forced) laborers. – Ladies of Charity annual meeting. – Mother general taken away by Nazis; no one knows where; announced on 11 February 1943; still away on 19 March; returned 30 March, from Sarrebour, since several Sisters had rescued prisoners. – Line of demarcation removed between North and South. – Villebon property offered for use of wives of prisoners. – “War time” instituted, advancing clocks by two hours. – Many other events and celebrations. – His visits to Prime-Combe, Dax (ordinations), and several
houses of Sisters. Also to Folleville, Amiens, Ecouen (Jean Le Vacher). – Etienne anniversary, and notes on his years, and the growth of the Congregation. Very strict on common recitation of breviary. His practice of virtues. – Nearly destroyed on 3 September, with bombs falling on Cherche-Midi, St.-Placide, Ferrandi, Rennes, avenue du Maine. – Several young confreres applying for degrees in philosophy, theology, canon law, Arabic. — Prayers for the prisoners, the “absent.” – Villebon: growing vegetables, sheep, other animals. – 22 Sisters killed in bombing in Dusseldorf. – Robert consecrated Congregation to Immaculate Heart of Mary (8 December), as Etienne did in 1843. – Other celebrations and commemorations.

Statistics: 15 workers in Germany, 7 in youth workshops; 21 workers in France; 55 prisoners in Germany. – Remarks on apostolic schools. Concerned about assuring their health. Promotes major and minor seminaries, and requisite qualities in teachers.


—Necrology for 1944 (and some 1945), pp. 296-99


Paris has been freed after fifty months. Now it is necessary to free ourselves from evil deeds. – News about the Congregation, especially from 1940. Many rooms were sealed, such as library, office of vicar general, but these were removed some weeks later. – Villebon had been occupied. – In 1943, hard to supply the mother house, with light, heat, food. Prices were high. – Sisters occasionally visited concentration camps where Jews were, like those who visited the prisons in the 17th century. – No more milk, eggs, practically no meat, no automobile. – Some shells fell in our courtyard, 28 February 1944. – Imprisonment of Most Honored Mother at Sarrebourg for 40 days, frequent questioning.

Analysis of reports from French hierarchy, as well as CM and others, on condition of Church, and youth: problems and proposed solutions. Important: the formation given in major seminaries: issues and proposed solutions. – Remarks on France, pays de mission, which caused a sensation through its analysis of the French Church. – More details about life in 1944, especially time of liberation. Metro closed, no electricity; snipers, etc., until surrender, 25 August. Secretariat and the superior general’s apartments sealed since 26 July 1940 were opened. Celebrations. – Final notes on the immediate future.

1945, 8 May, for French Missioners, on the armistice, in AnnCM 110-11 (1945-46): 35-44.

Give thanks to God for the armistice. Remarks on giving thanks, motives, means. Thanks also to Mary, to Michael the Archangel, to Joan of Arc. – Thanks to CM prisoners, who suffered so much. – Houses are gradually trying to begin again.

1946, 1 January, original in DRMA; AnnCM 110-11 (1945-46): 44-70.

Due to restrictions on paper, electricity, and workers, the Annales are out of order. 1943-44 have been ready since the armistice; then 1944; followed by 1945-46. – Cannot have a
general assembly in July 1946 as expected. Has to wait for provinces to meet. – Reflections on “Expectatio Israel.” Hopes that confreres will continue preaching, evangelizing, in the face of so many non-Christians. Pray to Mary and Joseph. – The assemblies of 1914, 1919, and 1933 were blamed for having some occasions of a bad spirit, against the spirit of St. Vincent, blaming the constitutions, the assemblies, the superiors general. The next one should be better. – Those who come to “this house,” the mother house, should do so only with permission.

NEWS: mother house did not suffer destruction, only some small damage. Rooms were sealed, but we could enter through the windows into the secretariat! – Beaucamps, a vacation house, was occupied and badly damaged. – Relics of St. Vincent returned from Château-l’Evêque on 3 June 1945. The relics’ rochet was washed and the cassock arranged. – Complaints about Coste’s biography; they want one shorter and more literary. Someone has been found for this [not named]. – Algeria: the point of departure for the liberation. Ethiopia part of this province; Italians there were expelled. – Germany: Cologne destroyed. Schleiden burned and destroyed. Henri-Chapelle: returned to Germany. Those in Jerusalem were imprisoned. – Central America: internal seminary now in Guatemala. – Aquitaine: changes of personnel. Two confreres went with army to Vietnam as military chaplains. – Austria: exists again after war. Thirty were drafted, only 6 returned. Kaiserstrasse house used by Gestapo; Vinzenzgasse destroyed. Istanbul: CM and DC interned in Ankara. Two Austrian confreres imprisoned in France. – Belgium: many V1 and V2 rockets fell there. Lille continues, etc. Cuvry in ruins. – China: great suffering, difficult to find food. Several confreres were imprisoned. – USA: O’Shea had to hide in the mountains to avoid bandits. Much destruction in Yukiang. – France: many houses and changes mentioned. – Holland: damage, especially at Wernhout. Java: De Backere died in 1945. Japanese occupied island in March 1942; confreres interned in cells, 4 September 1943 to September 1945. Then Indonesians revolted, imprisoned some Dutch confreres. – Hungary: still very unsettled. – Madrid: flourishing. The differences between the two groups of Sisters are earnestly being redressed. – Naples: much damage of provincial house, also Benevento. – Pacific: financial problems. Seminarians will go to Colombia. – Philippines: much destruction. – Poland: much destruction, killing of confreres, deaths at Dachau. Warsaw badly damaged. Many men killed, burned in crematoria. – Portugal: death of Souza-Borba. – Provence: various houses mentioned. – Rome: execution by Nazis of Morosini; deaths of others. The repairs of confiscated houses will cost millions. – Syria/Lebanon: apostolic school, moved around; currently at Antoura. Tesfa-Selassie spent war in Alexandria, now back in Addis. – Turin: many houses receive wounded, etc., but much damage. – Turkey: news. Church and house burned in 1944 in Thessalonica. Rumania: news. – Yugoslavia: many men were killed or imprisoned.

Hopes for the Congregation to be one, holy, Catholic, apostolic. Asks for respect, awareness of vocation, regularity about spiritual exercises. – Slattery chosen as substitute consultor until next assembly.

[English in DRMA]

1946, 2 July, original in DRMA; AnnCM 110-11 (1945-46): 70-78.
Reports on a visit to Rome with Fugazza, first assistant. Still a call to build a new church to St. Vincent in Rome; decide this at next assembly. – Constitutions: some comments on issues. – Hope to have CM in Japan. – China now handed over to diocesan clergy. Chala and St. Michael, Beijing, should be run by CM in agreement with Cardinal Tien. – Catherine Labouré to be canonized; miracles described. – General assembly to be held 2 July 1947. – Letters from authorities in Rome are reprinted.
Wishes and hopes for the new year; reflections on “Ora et labora.” – Looks forward to a new superior general, and a study of the constitutions. The proposed text has been printed, under Cocchi’s guidance. The assembly will have to submit them to the Holy See. Then other issues, the postulata. Reminder of threat of excommunication for any electioneering. Recalls decrees about anonymous pamphlets printed without permission.

NEWS: Thanks to USA provinces, which have been generous in helping other provinces. First prize is deserved. – More information about Latin American provinces. – Congo: good progress. Madagascar: much illness. Ethiopia improving. North Africa: more confreres have arrived. Egypt: Siderouss destined for Ethiopia, but became superior of the Coptic seminary. – Hopes for more men in Middle East, including Iran. – China: Church has established hierarchy in China; we are not done there, but the country is in the hands of bandits. CM has three large provinces: Hebei with 6 dioceses; Zhejiang, with 3; Jiangxi, with 4. – Japan: some developments. – Vietnam (Indochina): we have military chaplains there ready to go to China. – Philippines: arising from the ruins. – Indonesia: great damage, but development. – Australia developing. – India: great work being done.

Other countries still occupied: Rumania, Hungary, Yugoslavia (several men condemned to prison), Slovakia. Poland: recovering, and sending out members to Brazil and USA. They gave up the China mission (Wenchow). Not many details.

Western Europe: his travels to Holland, Belgium. Paris: Slattery arrived on Pentecost Monday, and preparing for general assembly. Apostolic schools being reopened; we must give up having a mixed school of high-school students and seminarians. – Spain: many vocations, and service of overseas provinces. Asks Madrid and Barcelona to work on bringing the two groups of Sisters together, create an atmosphere. – Italy: Naples, rebuilding Vergini. Turin: thanks to Cocchi. Rome: thanks to Bugnini. International house reopened. Calls for increased devotion to and identification with the Holy See.

Thanks confreres for their support during his time as vicar general. Has high hopes for general assembly.

Adds letters from Rome about relationships between CM superior general and DC, 17 October 1946. Another on minor seminary programs involving “promiscuous schools,” i.e., open to both boys and girls; also other issues, such as finances.

—Includes necrology for 1946 (pp. 229-31); a prayer to receive a worthy superior general; and the outline of the Constitutions (pp. 231-32).