
Fall 1983

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Recommended Citation

Smith, James E. C.M. (1983) "The Vincentian Mission, 1625–1660," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol4/iss2/1>

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The Vincentian Mission, 1625-1660

James E. Smith, C.M.

Vincent de Paul did not invent the parish mission. He was far from the first to pursue the mission as a ministry. He was not the only one to evangelize the country poor of France in the mission manner. Nor was he the only individual of the seventeenth century to see a need for a uniform mission style and to pursue its development.

But Vincent became the first to conceive and develop a mission all-but-exclusively intended for the country poor. He stands as the first to make that method uniform for the Congregation of which he was both founder and, for thirty-five years, its leader and director. His resolute conviction about the mission, his devotion to it, his close supervision of it, his insistence on fidelity to his method — all of this enable us to speak of the “Vincentian Mission” as an identifiable reality. Throughout his lifetime and beyond, the Congregation of the Mission adhered faithfully to the mission as their chief ministry and to the style of their Founder. Its structure, its content, its spirit — all were his and all constitute the Vincentian Mission.

It will be the purpose of this article to offer a sense of what that mission was. It is not necessary to examine every single aspect and detail of the mission. In studying its main lines, one can appreciate how clearly it was designed, with what audience in mind. The needs of the country poor as Vincent perceived them gave rise to the mission as he developed it.

FRANCE: A MISSION FIELD

Vincent's mission came into being, not in a vacuum, but in a nation genuinely and deeply in need of reform. The seventeenth century is known to history as an age in which the Catholic Church reformed herself and returned to healthy spiritual life. The reform itself was not realized until the second half of the century. Prior to that, for over a century and a half, the Church in France was in a very bad way.

By virtue of the Concordat of 1516, the King of France exercised a significant measure of control over the French clergy. Since the Church owned perhaps a third of the productive land in the country, and since, further, land was the source of wealth and power, it was the kings' ambition to gain control of these revenues by gaining control of the nominations of bishops and of the heads of monasteries. In this ambition they were highly successful. Many episcopal and abbatial sees were purchased by the wealthy for their own families. It was quite common, therefore, that bishops and abbots and priors, while not necessarily evil people, were, nevertheless, vocationless individuals with little or no interest in the responsibilities of their offices. Despite Church law, absenteeism was common. The behavior of the upper clergy was often scandalous. The situation went on deteriorating throughout the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth.¹

The consequences for the lower clergy are not difficult to imagine. Each parish was a benefice, with its own income. Pastors were appointed by the bishop and the same simoniacal spirit which beset the appointment of the upper clergy beset also the lower clergy.

It is not surprising, then, that the clerical state was frequently seen in terms of its income. In that age of

¹J. Lestocquoy, *La Vie Religieuse en France du VII au XX Siècle* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1964), pp. 105; 106; 112.

economic uncertainty, a benefice brought security and position. Its income was all but guaranteed by the laws of the Church and of the State. This is not to say that there was no worthy clergy in France, nor to say that the French clergy were immoral. It is rather to state that, in general, the clergy of France were spiritually bankrupt, with neither leadership from above nor zeal from within.²

The standards of education and spiritual formation were very low. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) had legislated reform of priestly preparation, but it had fallen on largely deaf ears in France. Trent was regarded as a "Roman Council" by the Gallicanist bishops of France and little heed was paid to its decrees.³ It was not until 1642, in fact, that the Archdiocese of Paris founded its first major seminary under Olier and the Sulpicians. There was no set body of studies uniformly imposed on the future clergy. No truly effective program of formation was provided for them. The result was that, more often than not, the clergy consisted of men ordained after a smattering of theological training, men who had been approved for Orders with little or no concern for proper qualifications.⁴

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a period in which the Church was profoundly dependent upon the clergy for the spiritual life of the people. Most of the faithful were illiterate. The clergy were therefore responsible for instructing the people. Without this instruction, ignorance had to be the result. In this age so dependent upon clergy for instruction, the clergy were frequently ignorant, undedicated men themselves. Uninspired to learn, with no real episcopal leadership, the

² *Ibid.*, p. 110.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 129-130.⁵

⁴ Jeanne Ferté, *La Vie Religieuse Dans Les Campagnes Parisiennes [1622-1695]* (Paris, 1962), pp. 145-147; 151.

lower clergy were sadly inadequate. And nowhere was this more the case than in the countryside. Eighty to eighty-five percent of the population of France were peasants. They were a farming people, usually poor. These were the most neglected of all. Even some of the better-trained clergy assigned to work with them were frequently absent, using the revenues from their benefice to support them in the more attractive life of the cities. Behind them were left the wandering mercenary priests, with no benefices of their own, who were simply hired by the pastor to fill in during the latter's absence.⁵

In short, while there was no shortage of clergy in Vincent's time, there was a shortage of good clergy. The principal evil flowing from this was the ignorance of the people. The most ignorant and the most neglected were the country poor. It was to these that Vincent dedicated his life. It was for their sake that he founded a Congregation to preach that mission. Let us now turn to an examination of the mission he designed.

GRATUITOUS MISSION FOR THE COUNTRY PEOPLE

Vincent's mission was not one which was limited in its usefulness to the service of the country poor. It might seem to be that in view of his insistence that his men serve the latter exclusively. Nor was it because Vincent had some objection to serving the urban populations of his time. It was rather that he saw the poor of the countryside as so neglected, so ignorant, so in need that he felt that it was his vocation to serve them. To have served another population would only have taken from the ones he felt called by God to serve. He pointed out on several occasions that he had no objection to preaching the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

mission in cities on certain occasions, such as an urgent request from a bishop, and provided that there was a genuine need. It was his concern that, such instances aside, he and his confreres never diminish their efforts on behalf of those to whom they were to dedicate their lives.⁶ It was this vision that he wished to preserve and to protect. He took pains to identify exceptions and nothing more. Even when he permitted his men to conduct a mission to the galley slaves, he took pains to point out that this was an exception to the policy of the Congregation.⁷ Our knowledge of Vincent leaves no doubt about his concern for the poor of the cities or for those condemned to the living death of the galleys. It is simply that his was an even greater concern for the country poor and for the conviction of God's Will calling the Congregation to their service.

It was part of the concept of the mission that the Congregation give it free of charge. Nothing was ever accepted as payment for it. Vincent was adamant on this point. Every now and again one of the Missioners did accept something, mistakenly thinking that it was acceptable to do so and subsequently reporting the fact to St. Vincent. The Missioner was immediately informed that he had committed an error in judgment and that the money was to be returned. On one such occasion, Vincent even wrote to the would-be benefactress, blaming himself for the misunderstanding, thanking the lady for her kindness, and making it clear that his Congregation never permitted any exception to this policy.⁸

Vincent also remarked on more than one occasion that

⁶Pierre Coste, *Saint Vincent DePaul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents* (14 vols., Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1921-1925), Vol. II, pp. 176^r; 275; 378-379.

⁷*Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 395.

⁸*Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 261.

so much of the benefits of the mission was due to this policy. Vincent cannot have been other than acutely aware of the impact this policy must have on the poor. The Church had suffered for so long from the shortcomings of a venal clergy. He kept money out of the way entirely. He wanted it clear not only to the missionaries, but to the people themselves, that these men served them for the love of God and that money and personal profit had absolutely nothing to do with it. What a contrast for these people who had at times seen their priests refuse even to say Mass for them until the parish collections were properly paid!

Vincent went further. He wanted the Missioners to live as simply and poorly as possible. Not only were they not to accept money for their work, neither were they to accept food or firewood, etc. All of this they were to provide themselves. At times they brought their bedding with them. At less fortunate moments, they slept on the bare floor. Unlike the Capuchins who were forbidden by rule to ride in a carriage, Vincentians were permitted to ride, but they were urged to walk whenever possible.⁹

The resources of the Congregation supported the mission activity. Vincent never allowed a mission house to come into existence until the financial basis was secure. A foundation was set up by a wealthy lay person or ecclesiastic, and the operation of the house was financed by the income from the foundation. Vincent wanted that base secure. He would not allow the terms of the foundation to be altered in such a way as to compromise the work of the mission and was careful to make his contracts ironclad. He was unswerving on these questions throughout his life and the Congregation maintained the same fidelity after his death.¹⁰ It is not until the

⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 281.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. VII, p. 434.

eighteenth century that the Community records reveal any change in the policies that Vincent had laid down.

Both his policy of giving the missions without recompense and his policy of giving the missions to the country poor alone are indeed part of the Vincentian mission. So, too, was the manner in which Vincent and his Missioners related to the local clergy. The rules of the Congregation and the regulations of the Directory are most explicit in this area.

It goes without saying that Vincent would never schedule a mission in a parish without first having the authorization of the local clergy. The team, or at least the director of the team, was to arrive at the parish well in advance of the mission itself. The first order of business was for the team to present itself to the pastor and ask his blessing on their work. They then set about finding out from him what the conditions of the parish were. Had the Vincentian Mission been a "packaged" program of fixed exercises and sermons, this would have been superfluous. The Vincentians were to determine in as much detail as possible what special needs the parish had. They needed to know if there were special problems of ignorance, of enmity among the parishioners, of religious practice, etc. For all of this they turned to the parish clergy themselves. This enabled them to adjust their preaching and their confessional practices, their instructions and the scheduling of the exercises of the mission so as to bring them in line with the needs of that place. Their pre-mission investigation was no cursory or token visit. It was to be thorough and detailed. It was a key part of the mission policy for the men to arrive early enough to spend time with the pastor.¹¹

¹¹ René Alméras, *Directoire pour les Confréries de Charité, la Predication des Missions, Exercitants* (Paris: Archives de la Mission, 1668).

It was also a policy of Vincent that his men recruit diocesan clergy to work with them on the missions. At times the men could foresee the need of asking for help when there were a great number of confessions to be heard. But the real reason was deeper. Vincent knew full well that, if the benefit of a mission were to last, it would be necessary to have good local clergy to sustain the life of the parish. It was for that reason that he moved the Congregation into the work of seminaries. It was his concern here, also, to bring diocesan priests onto his teams to help them grow through the experience. They were to be screened, to be sure. But they were not just a source of manpower for the mission. It was for the renewal of the local clergy that he sustained this policy, just as for the same reason he had supported the Tuesday Conferences in Paris.

Any number of diocesan priests did, in fact, join the Vincentian Missioners in the giving of missions. Most notable among them, perhaps, was Jean Jacques Olier, who spent years preaching missions with Vincent before going on to found the Society of Saint-Sulpice for the education of seminarians.¹²

Before addressing the exercises of the mission, it is worth discussing one other and very significant circumstance of the mission — the time of year it was preached. As mentioned above, the country poor were peasants. Their lives revolved around the farming cycle of the year. From mid-spring until late autumn they worked continuously in the fields from the turning of the soil to the storing of the harvest. To have attempted to conduct a mission during that period would have been literally impossible. The people could never have set aside their work. Accordingly, the mission was conducted only during the remaining months, i.e., the coldest and wettest of the

¹² Coste, *op. cit.*, Vol. VII, p. 33.

year. Working in unheated churches, exposed to drafts from broken or missing windows, sitting for long hours in the confessional — these were not the work of the faint-hearted. Until Cardinal Richelieu intervened, it was not even the practice of the Congregation to give the Missioners a day of rest per week during the mission. In 1638 Vincent wrote to his Missioners to have them begin the practice lest, as the Cardinal feared, the men wear themselves out. At that point, but only then, did the practice become a standard for the Congregation.¹³

As Vincent was fond of pointing out, much of the fruit of the mission, much of the good effects which it produced were due to the edifying life and self-sacrificing service of the Missioners themselves. Their devotion was part of the mission.

THE EXERCISES OF THE MISSION

The mission consisted essentially of sermons. There were two types: the exhortatory and the instructional. Mass was celebrated every day. The object of the mission was to renew the life of the parish and it was to last until all the members of the parish had made their confessions. At its briefest, the mission lasted five to six weeks; at its longest, three or four months. There was no specific period of time assigned to it. After it began, it lasted until it was over.

Inasmuch as the Little Method of St. Vincent is studied elsewhere in this issue of *Vincentian Heritage*, there is no need to discuss it here. Enough to say that it lies at the heart of the way the Vincentian Missioners preached and is therefore at the heart of the mission itself.

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¹³ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 468-469.

The mission began with a major sermon, delivered by the director of the mission team. He had arrived before the other Missioners in order to consult with the pastor and to establish matters for their maintenance for the duration of the mission. When all was ready, he addressed the people of the parish. His purpose was two-fold — to explain the mission to the people and to exhort them to make it. A model for this sermon was available to the Missioners and contained the following elements:

1. Announcement that the mission exercises are four in number and are preaching, catechisms, confessions, and the resolution of personal enmities.
2. There are to be one or two sermons a day, and the hours are to be announced, although the hours may vary according to the circumstances.
3. The catechisms will be conducted regularly at one o'clock in the afternoon for those who are preparing for First Communion. Parents are urged to cooperate by sending their children and domestics and have them enrolled in this part of the program as soon as possible. Objects of piety will be distributed to the youngsters.
4. Announcement of the day the Missioners are due to arrive.
5. Announcement of the hours when the Missioners will be available for confessions.
6. The people are advised not to receive Communion during the early stages of the mission in order that they might achieve better dispositions for reception.
7. The Missioners are not to be offered anything because they must not accept any kind of payment in return for the work they do in conducting the mission.
8. Certain basic items of furniture may be loaned to the Missioners, but they must be returned at the

end of the mission.

9. Announcement of the indulgences that are obtainable for making the mission, of the dispensations the Missioners are empowered to grant, and of the possibility of the sacrament of marriage for those who have entered into conjugal relationship without the benefit of it.
10. A final exhortation to all the people to make the mission in its entirety.¹⁴

Whenever feasible, another sermon of the same type was delivered in the evening of the same day, beginning with a resumé of the first and concentrating upon the rudiments necessary for confession: the various types of sins that might have been committed involving each of the Commandments, and the manner of examining one's conscience as to the number of times one might have committed serious sins of these various types.

Throughout the mission, the sermon, i.e., the principal discourse of the day, was delivered at an hour most convenient for the people. This was, ordinarily, at five in the morning on working days! And it was preceded by Mass! On Sundays it took the place of the sermon of the principal Mass of the parish which was usually a sung Mass.

There were two catechisms or instructions. The lesser was designed for children and the greater was for the adults of the parish, although not exclusively so. The lesser catechism was usually scheduled for one in the afternoon and the greater catechism was delivered at an evening hour when the work day had come to an end. This would vary from one parish to the next. But the mission was intentionally flexible. It was clearly designed to fit into and not to interfere with the life of the people of the parish. The one day of the week when the mission

¹⁴Charles Bonnet, *Collected Papers* (Paris: Archives of the Mission, 1709-1718).

exercises were not conducted, the day which Vincent was prevailed upon by Cardinal Richelieu to grant his men as a day of rest, was always to be the market day of that locality. Market day varied from region to region. Whichever day it was, was the day off for the Vincentians.

The morning sermon was largely one of exhortation. Given Vincent's insistence upon the use of the Little Method, all Vincentian preaching contained nature, motives and means, both instructional content and motivation. The difference between the sermon and the catechism or instruction was essentially one of emphasis.

It was Vincent's policy that only the more experienced of Missioners deliver the major sermon and the greater catechism. The lesser catechism for children was conducted by the less experienced members of the team.¹⁵

We note that shortly after Vincent's death there is evidence of a second major sermon, delivered later in the day and only if it was not inconvenient for the people and if there were a sufficient supply of Missioners on the team.¹⁶ We cannot say with certitude that this was or was not done in Vincent's time. The Congregation tended to be tenaciously faithful to his mission concept long after his death, but there is nothing in the earlier documents which would enable us to conclude that this later or second sermon was permitted in his lifetime.

In any event, it seems clear that Vincent would never have allowed a second sermon if there were a danger that it might interfere with the benefits of the greater catechism which was reserved for the evening. As observed earlier, Vincent regarded this exercise of the mission as its heart. Given the ignorance of the people and given the still more pitiable ignorance of the country people, Vincent perceived

¹⁵ Alméras, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ _____, *Receuil de Principaux Circulaires des Supérieurs Generaux* (18 Vols., Paris: Archives of the Mission), Vol. I, p. 88.

this element of the mission as that from which its principal benefit was derived. It was here that he urged his men to reach for perfection as he wrote to a Missioner in 1638:

Everyone agrees that the fruit realized by the mission is due to the catechism. In the name of God, Father, make all the men of your house aware of that. We can incorporate into the major catechism all of the moral questions we have to treat because, as I have already said, we observe that all of the benefit derives from that.¹⁷

On July 29, 1657, so close to the end of his life, Vincent wrote to one of his men, "I am saddened to hear that, instead of scheduling the major catechism for the evening, you have substituted other sermons for it in the course of your mission. You must not do this." Vincent, so seriously does he take the situation, goes on to elaborate the reasons for his position:

1. because the preacher of the morning sermon might find it difficult also to handle this second sermon;
2. because the people have greater need of the catechism and it is more beneficial for them;
3. because in conducting the catechism we are in a way honoring Our Lord by adopting the manner he employed for the instruction and conversion of the world;
4. Because this has been our way from the beginning and it has pleased Our Lord to reward this practice amply.¹⁸

Nor would Vincent permit the lesser catechism to encroach in any way upon the major catechism. In the Assembly of 1651, it was proposed that the lesser catechism, ordinarily conducted in the early afternoon, be

¹⁷ Coste, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 428-429.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. VI, pp. 377-378.

conducted instead shortly before the greater catechism. It was further proposed that the decision be left to the discretion of the mission team. Vincent opposed the proposal. It was possible for the children to come to church by themselves during the day. There they were prepared for their first confession and first Holy Communion. But in the evening, they were always with their parents. Which means that what some Missioners were proposing in 1651 would have resulted in the adult population sitting through an instruction of at least a quarter of an hour before hearing the major instruction designed for themselves. Vincent obviously felt that this would jeopardize the impact and value of the major catechism. Not surprisingly, the Assembly voted against the proposal.¹⁹ But the incident, coming as it does after so many years of mission experience, both by Vincent and a good number of his men, bears ample witness to the special place reserved for the greater catechism in the concept of the mission.

The style of the lesser catechism was clearly quite different from that of the evening instruction. The men were not to remain in the pulpit, but to be down with the children and to speak in the warmest and most light-hearted of ways. Sarcasm was never to be used.

The Capuchin Fathers of that period, similarly engaged in the giving of missions in France, employed a somewhat different style. Frequently, two of them would team up, the one giving the instruction and the other asking questions of the presenter. They found it effective and maintained it as a tradition.²⁰ Vincent, who knew of their practice, clearly preferred his own style. There is no evidence whatever that any of his men ever made use of the Capuchin style in the giving of the instructions.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. XIII, pp. 328; 348.

²⁰ _____ *Mélanges Capucines* (Paris: Capuchin Archives, 1609).

At the basis of both catechisms was one single source, i.e., the Roman Catechism or the catechism of the Council of Trent. However the Missioners organized their material, however they approached their subject matter, its principal source was this one catechism. One would expect this of Vincent whose ambition it was to see the reform spirit of the Council of Trent introduced into France, and who was himself so sensitively a son of the Church of Rome. And one would have assumed such to be the case even were the documentation for the period insufficient to establish it. But the documentation is clear that from the beginning of his apostolate Vincent had established the Roman Catechism as the basic source for the preaching of his Missioners.²¹

The Vincentian mission was not particularly distinguished in this regard. The Jesuits had begun the preaching of missions in France at least twenty years before Vincent took up the work. They were uniform in their reliance upon the Roman Catechism, but it is appropriate in any treatment of the Vincentian mission to include the source of its doctrinal content.

CONFESSION

From the first missionary experience of Vincent at Folleville, the making of a good confession was the goal of Vincentian preaching. It was largely to persuade all of the people of the parish to approach the sacrament that the sermons and instructions were geared. It was their program not to leave a parish until all of its people had had ample opportunity to receive absolution. It was in the confessional itself that Vincent saw the fruit of the mission realized. In a conference of 1651 he stated:

²¹Coste, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 133; 191.

I have thought, in the first place, that the sacrament of Penance is a great help to people in glorifying God since it places them in such a state that He pardons them all their sins. In the second place, I believe that if we do not do our utmost to receive this sacrament well, we mistrust in a way the grace which God offers us in this sacrament by which are applied to us the merits of the death of the Son of God. In the third place, if we do not receive this sacrament well and prepare for it to our utmost, we place ourselves in danger of dying impenitent and without the grace of God, which fate we well merit for having refused this grace.

May you find joy, then, in having made a good confession, observing all these things that I have spoken of for a good examination of conscience, of contrition, of a firm purpose of amendment, of a complete confession and satisfaction. Blessed be God! because *it is the basis of perfection!*²²

As already seen, the opening sermon of the mission was geared to emphasize the place of the sacrament. A glance at the list of sermons traditional in the Congregation during the lifetime of Vincent further indicates the importance attached to confession. In addition, Vincent is very emphatic in his insistence on the importance of the preliminary investigation in enabling the Missioners to prepare their confessional practice in accord with the needs of the parish. Shortly after his death, a General Assembly of the Congregation reaffirmed what it declared to be the constant tradition of St. Vincent's concern for the hearing of confession:

1. repetition of the need for conferences among the Missioners dealing with cases of conscience;
2. seeing to it that the younger priests read and learn the regulations of Saint Charles Borromeo for confessors; =

²² *Ibid.*, Vol. IX, pp. 551-553.

3. practice testing of young seminarians in hearing confessions;
4. strict examinations on confessional practice to be held regularly and frequently in all houses of the Congregation and for all of its priests;
5. cautioning superiors and directors of mission teams to employ great prudence in assigning priests to confessional work, allowing the younger ones especially to begin by gradually hearing confessions in less vice-ridden localities.²³

Vincent frequently cautioned his Missioners not to make reference to their own confessional experience in such fashion as to allow others to believe that they might be violating the confessional seal. In general, his concern seems not alone with the virtue of the Missioners, but with protecting this element of the mission which he regarded as so vital to it.

Beginning in 1623 and throughout the lifetime of St. Vincent, the Congregation sought and received from Rome the permission to grant the plenary indulgence and the apostolic blessing to those who made the mission, but provided that they made their confession during the course of it. This condition was explicit both in the request and in the granting of the authorization.²⁴

Finally, it should be noted that the General Communion of the parish and the First Communion for the children of the parish did not take place until the mission was at an end. During that period of history, the Eucharist was received seldom. Three times or so per year might be considered a common practice. Accordingly, it was not considered unusual that no one was permitted to receive Communion during the course of the mission.

²³ _____ *Receuil*, Vol. I, pp. 138-139.

²⁴ Coste, *op. cit.*, Vol. V, pp. 571-572.

Everyone was to wait until all had made their confession of sins.²⁵ The Oratorians and the Eudists, also heavily engaged in the preaching of missions during the same era, followed the same practice.²⁶ If one inspired the other in this regard we do not know, but it is clear that the Vincentian mission is not singular in this regard. What is clear is the place of the confession in the Vincentian mission.

COMMUNION

Vincent's men kept the First Communion for children separate from the general Communion of the parish. He makes clear in a letter of 1647 that this was the practice of his Missioners. He wrote to a pastor who wanted the two combined that this just was not the way it was going to be done. Among other reasons, he states that, in the Vincentian experience, the children's Communion was one of the best ways of influencing the most hard-hearted of the parish, so touching was the devotion of the children and the care taken of them. There were limits, however, which he felt constrained to impose. Apparently some of the priests were following the practice of dressing the children up as angels. Vincent forbade the practice and the Congregation continued the prohibition after his death. The careful instruction of the first communicants and the preaching of a special sermon on the eve of their communion appear to have been, in his judgment, sufficient emphasis.²⁷

²⁵ Alméras, *op. cit.*

²⁶ L. Batterei and M. Ingolo, *Mémoires pour Servir à l'Histoire de l'Oratoire* (6 vols., Paris, 1904), Vol. III, pp. 58-93.

²⁷ Coste, *op. cit.*, Vol. XI, p. 104.

OTHER FEATURES

Two other features of the mission deserve attention: the resolution of personal relationships and the care of the poor.

The evidence for the way in which the Missioners handled the reconciliation of feuding parties is sparse but adequate. Some cases were handled as a matter of course in the confessional. Others came forward voluntarily to request the assistance of the Missioners in settling disputes. Others were brought to light by preliminary investigation which preceded the mission. Apparently the Missioners were not content simply to await the presentation of the parties themselves. It is remarked that they actively sought out and worked to reconcile those who were separated.²⁷ *The delicacy of the activity may be reflected in the fact that, while in earlier years only the more difficult cases of reconciliation were to be referred to the director of the mission team, by the time of the promulgation of the Common Rules in 1658 all such cases were to be referred to him.*

The poor were, it goes without saying, very close to the heart of St. Vincent. He could not be content to have his men leave a parish without making some attempt to provide for the lasting relief of the truly poor. Certainly, the Missioners were given monies to distribute to relieve their sufferings. But the real contribution lay in the establishment of the Confraternities of Charity for the continuing aid of the poor. The Missioners would leave the parish after a stay of some weeks, but it was Vincent's policy to place in the hands of the laity of the parish the responsibility of dealing with the problem in an ongoing fashion. The Missioners were not there primarily, it would seem, to relieve poverty, but to see to it that that poverty

²⁷Coste, *op. cit.*, Vol. XI, p. 104.

was relieved. Theirs was the mission to preach the Gospel to the poor. Close to the end of his life Vincent wrote:

Take care please that you be familiar with the dangers to those of our priests who take pains to ease the sufferings of the sick poor, lest they be overcome themselves These charities can be observed provided that such corporal remedies do not impede them from their spiritual functions and do not cost them too much.²⁸

CONCLUSIONS

This, then, was the mission of Vincent and his confreres of the seventeenth century. It was clearly aimed at a specific audience, although that audience was better than three-quarters of the population of France. It was flexible, bending to the needs of each parish rather than being a fixed program. It was firm as the guiding hand of the Founder was firm, maintaining the primacy of its purposes of instruction and reconciliation. It was offered gratuitously by men whose charge it was to exemplify in the generosity and simplicity of their lives the generosity and simplicity of the Lord they preached.

As stated earlier, Vincent did not invent the parish mission. The Jesuits began their own local missionary activity in France over twenty years prior to Vincent's experience at Folleville. The Capuchins also preceded him in the work. The Oratorians began either at the same time or very shortly before him and the Eudists were to take up the work in the 1640s. Unlike his, those other groups did not begin with a fixed mission format, and most would not adopt a single-style or single-concept approach until much

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. VII, p. 27.

later and largely due to his inspiration when they did. Unlike the Jesuits who frequently took their immense personal talents and learning into combat with non-catholic Christian preachers, Vincent limited the Congregation's activity to the work of Catholic renewal and ordered them to avoid such confrontations. His close supervision of the work of the missions, his vigilance in following the work of his men as submitted through mandatory reports, and his written communication with all of his houses enabled him to maintain a firm direction of the missionary activity of the Congregation. It was his mission, the mission as he conceived it, that they were to preach. It was to a specific population alone that they preached, in a style he made mandatory and with an approach and a life-style he made mandatory throughout the Congregation. Truly, this was the Vincentian mission, the mission of St. Vincent de Paul.



Although faith comes by hearing, nevertheless, the virtues which we see practised make more impression on us than those we are taught.

St. Vincent de Paul