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The following article was written by Fr Tony Mannix CM for the September 2000 issue of 'Oceania Vincentian' . ('Oceania Vincentian' is a Publication in the Australian Province of the Vincentians):

The Congregation of the Mission and The Mission of the Church to the Poor

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I THE MISSION THEN (1)

Origins revisited

Vincent was confirmed in his mission to the poor but was still discovering its extent when, on 17 April 1625, the contract was drawn up with the De Gondis to provide a sure foundation from which the mission could move forward. Convinced "that poor people are losing their souls because they are ignorant of the truths necessary for salvation and because they do not know how to go to confession, " he had discerned the pastoral action to take: "It was knowing this state of affairs that made us establish the company" . (2) He responded to the need.

The numbers of poor in Paris and throughout France were great, yet Vincent was never put off by that nor deterred from making a start by the fewness of personnel. He responded as and where he could, however inadequate the response seemed to be. The Congregation numbered only about forty-six members by 1635, ten years from its foundation, yet Vincent wrote to Antoine Portail later that year, "How fearful I am, Monsieur, of big numbers and expansion. And how many reasons do we not have to bless God who allows us to be few in number, like the disciples of his Son!" (3) It was the spirit that counted -- the Spirit who counted!

Statistical probabilities did not complicate Vincent's making decisions. At the level of faith and in the context of prayer, he observed the need, sought wisdom in discerning the will of God, waited for some indication of being called to a particular mission (eventually expressed as "responding to the call of the bishops") and then he deployed what personnel and funds were available. "Are you fully aware ... that we have the maxim and practice of not requesting any foundations, and that Our Lord alone has established us in the places where we now are?" (4) The need always far exceeded the resources of the Congregation to meet it adequately. Having discerned a situation, Vincent acted upon it.

Others involved, too

Vincent and the Congregation were not the only ones to respond to these needs. He supported and

welcomed the efforts of others. Of his contemporaries, consider St John Eudes working in the Normandy region and Jean Jacques Olier in Paris. He knew them and learned from their experiences, too. He was not in competition with others working or able to work in the field, so he bypassed the cities and turned to the country districts.

From such a small base he did not hesitate to send members of the Congregation to distant places: country France, Rome, North Africa, Britain, Madagascar, Poland ...

Vincent called lay people forward to engage in apostolic works and, given discernment of an issue, did not hesitate to break new ground in pastoral practice.

II THE MISSION NOW

The Second Vatican Council speaks (5)

The Vatican Council recovered and developed a basic New Testament insight into the mission of the church: mission to the poor is at the heart of its mission to the world ...

"Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and oppression, so the church is called to follow the same path if it is to communicate the fruits of salvation to humanity... the church encompasses with its love all those who are afflicted by human infirmity and it recognizes in those who are poor and who suffer, the likeness of its poor and suffering founder. It does all in its power to relieve their need and in them it strives to serve Christ..."

('Lumen Gentium' par 8)

The Gospel Word moved Vincent de Paul to initiate his pastoral response to the needs of the poor with very few members; the same Gospel Word has now moved the whole church to the poor with its vast number of members.

Thirty-six years since 'Lumen Gentium', have we yet paused long enough to reflect on the extent of its pastoral vision, to thank God in some corporate way for it and also for what Vincent and the Congregation have contributed towards this pastoral vision?

Apart from, or with ?

How has this vision affected the Congregation of the Mission? Has it really put us out of business? If so, we could sing our 'Nunc Dimittis' (Canticle of Simeon) and happily merge again with the priests and laity from whom we took our origin. Such a step would demand discernment in accord with Vincent's own criteria; his few words about the duration of the Congregation were, in reality, a fervent prayer and exhortation to his confreres to be true to the spirit of the Congregation and its mission and to get on with the task in the right spirit! (Where are those words?) (6)

Or, does this vision call us to re-align awareness of our mission so that we see it, not as setting us apart from others similarly involved but, because it takes us to the heart of the church's own mission, as bringing us closer together with those others who are similarly involved? We would then be defined by our commitment to staying with the poor, regardless of other considerations, called to working with those being overlooked (who will often coincide with the 'poorest of the poor') and we would be identified by our corporate spirit and mobility to pursue those works beyond the boundaries of the dioceses, as service to the local churches.

The Congregation would be a sign in the church of faithful dedication to the poor. It would not

necessarily be the best at the work, or the most effective but would be striving always, moved by the zeal that Vincent saw as important. Discernment of its apostolic undertakings would be paramount.

Today's steps

The years since the Vatican Council have exposed our need to be thoroughly renewed for its pastoral programme by making its ecclesiology our own. We have often been unduly concerned about our declining numbers and influence and have been busy shoring up community in the face of declining mission. We have reached out to the poor but sometimes for our need rather than for theirs!

A necessary step is to tune into and engage in a more concerted study of "the signs of the times", worldwide and province-wide, to try to hear the more pressing cries of the poor and so discover the "lords and masters" who are calling us now. Like Vincent, having discerned what needs doing we could then act.

We need not wait until the discernment is exhaustive and complete. When the cries we hear clearly resonate with our own spirit and charism and are echoed by the bishop(s) we can move. The doing then becomes part of the ongoing discernment.

As Vincent and his companions were missionaries of the Council of Trent, so we should be missionaries of the Second Vatican Council. Renewal for mission will entail our being thoroughly steeped in the ecclesiology of Vatican II with its clear focal point.

(1) These reflections were accompanied by a reading of "St Vincent de Paul -- A Biography" by José Maria Román CM (translated by Sr Joyce Howard DC) London 1999.
(2) Letter to François Du Coudray, 1631 (St Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents Brooklyn N Y 1985-- (cited below as CCD) Vol 1 p 112; translation as in Román p 187).
(3) Letter to Antoine Portail, 16 October 1635 (CCD Vol 1 p 304; translation as in Román p 278 where date is 16 September 1635).
(4) Letter to Mother Catherine de Beaumont, 19 May 1647 (CCD Vol 3 197; and other reference in Román p 291).
(5) Dogmatic Constitution on the Church - 'Lumen Gentium' , from "Vatican Council II - The Basic Sixteen Documents" edited by Austin Flannery OP New York / Dublin 1996 pp 9-10.
(6) Note, for example: "And those who come after us, in three or four hundred years time, will look upon us as their fathers ... what example should we not leave our successors. . ." (Repetition of Prayer, November 25, 1657) in Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul, compiled by Pierre Coste CM, translated by Joseph Leonard CM, edited Eastern Province U S A, Philadelphia 1963 p 266.