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The following article was written by Fr Greg Walsh CM for the September 2002 issue of 'Oceania Vincentian' . ('Oceania Vincentian' is a Publication in the Australian Province of the Vincentians):

SIN, SWEAT AND SORROW A TALE OF THREE PARISHES

Greg Walsh CM

My experience of Rockhampton didn't quite live down to Anthony Trollope's famous description of the city. (I think he was the culprit!). I couldn't use his three Ss as a summary, but there's no denying they are still around in Rocky!

This is a reflection article about my work in the Rockhampton region in relation to the Vincentian Mission. I offer it for the purpose of informing you about my work, which was a little different to "normal" parish ministry. The work I did might be similar to the type of work members of our Province are asked to do in the future, so it may be of interest for this reason, too.

I went to Rockhampton as a deacon in January of 2000, returning to Nyngan to be ordained to the presbyterate the following May. Returning north the next month, I spent until January 2002 working as a priest there.

My perceptions are naturally coloured by my newness in the role of priest. In fact, when I came back from my first holidays I didn't feel like I was a priest anymore. Perhaps my antics at Fr Mick Hayes Golden Jubilee Mass were a good metaphor: I began the Mass dressed as a priest and standing on the sanctuary, but finished it dressed in 'civvies' and sitting in the pews. It caused the Bishop some puzzlement when I received Communion from him - for he hadn't seen me flee the sanctuary. There was a reason of sorts for this strange behaviour, but perhaps it speaks of a time of vocational schizophrenia as I grew into the new role.

A beautiful big brown river splits Rockhampton in two. It then snakes about 20km to the coast where it pollutes the southern part of the Great Barrier Reef with mud and fertilizer; it was named the Fitzroy, but the ancient indigenous name is Toonooba. The river forms not only a physical barrier, but a psychological one for the significant number who hesitate to cross it without a grave cause.

The Southside of Rocky used to be the main part of town, but now the Northside has more residents. As far as I know, Rocky used to have six parishes on the Southside and three on the Northside. At the moment there are effectively four parishes on the Southside and the North still has three.

My "mission field" was confined to three parishes on the Southside of Rockhampton that were attempting to function as a "Cluster". This was the preferred model for the sharing of clergy in the cities of the Diocese. The parishes were St Vincent's, St Peter's and St Joseph's (the Cathedral parish).

I worked under the guidance of two people: Peter Reedy CM as Parish Priest of St Vincent's, and John Daly as Administrator of St Joseph's and St Peter's. In theory I was to share myself evenly between the three parishes; in practice I probably did a bit more work in St Joseph's and St Peter's than in St Vincent's. I count myself very fortunate that Peter Reedy and John Daly had the generosity and understanding to allow me a fair bit of leeway. Frank Gilbert was another diocesan priest who worked as an assistant priest with John Daly – Frank was nearing retirement age and I found him an excellent mentor.

When Peter was out of town I made up in part for my usual absence from St Vincent's weekend liturgies. The fact that I had my office at St Vincent's meant that I regularly saw people who came to the parish office, even though this was normally not formal ministry. In addition, I was a member of St Vincent's Parish Pastoral Council, being absent from the Councils of the other two parishes.

For the first five months of my appointment I was a deacon – perhaps more of a liturgical deacon than a servant-of-the-poor deacon. On weekends I would accompany one of the three priests to various Masses and assist by preaching and serving at the altar. In the cluster there are four regular weekend Mass centres, and so I was exposed to a variety of praying communities, from the more elderly and traditional feel of the Cathedral to the younger and more laid-back community of St Paul's. The latter has a new church built in the round, and is located at Gracemere, a growing town a few kilometres west of Rocky.

I recall in a few of our Provincial gatherings something along these lines has been said: 'whatever work we are doing, we do it with a Vincentian spirit and therefore all our works are genuinely Vincentian.. I'm happy to affirm that up to a point, but when it comes to discerning new ministries the question is surely valid: "Would Vincent (knowing what we know today) send me to do this work?"

I'm not going to try to justify my work in 2000 and 2001 by proving its Vincentian-ness, but perhaps there are a few things about working in a cluster of parishes that are quite true to our missionary tradition.

Clustering Indicates a type of Poverty

Probably the most obvious thing about working in a cluster of parishes is that it means working in a place that is, in some way, poor in priests. The city of Rockhampton is not as poor in clergy as the outlying regions of many of our dioceses where great distances mean that it is difficult for many people to have access to a worship service led by an official minister. Even if Rocky had only one Sunday Mass, everyone who had "wheels" could get there within 30 minutes. However, the people we serve need more than Sunday Eucharist; therefore the ratio of ministers to parishioners needs also to be considered, and Rockhampton certainly has less full-time Catholic ministers per unit of population than it once enjoyed. Therefore each person has less access to the attention of their ministers. This is part of the poverty behind clustering.

The other part of the poverty is that clustering represents a change from the fondly remembered and stable past. Clustering is firstly a loss for parishes because they lose their priest. He is no longer at their service exclusively. My particular cluster was spoilt because it had four full-time priests (until Frank retired) and a pastoral associate (although Sue was on long service leave in 2001). Despite this there was poverty for all the parishes. The Cathedral and St Peter's had no priest all to themselves, and St Vincent's had one to itself, but also a second Vincentian whom they had to share for the first time. St Peter's parish had suffered most in recent years when it lost its residential priest and many of its weekly Masses.

The second part of the poverty of change in clustering is that in the current times it is a stepping stone to worse poverty. The age profile of the priests of the Diocese of Rockhampton would be fairly similar to that of our Province, if not worse, and its vocations prospects would also be similar or worse. Even without a beautiful mathematical mind one can see that a steady decline in the number of full-time priests will be the order of the day for many, many days to come in this land. Therefore clustering is a stepping stone to something else, and "something else" represents even bigger losses for each parish. Clustering is the beginning of the end of the Church as the parishioners knew it: Father and

his curate living in the presbytery, working in our parish, dependable as the seasons. The main poverty involved in clustering is the loss of life as Catholics knew it, and I mean all Catholics, from the clergy to the 'nominals'. It seems that changes in the church are perhaps even more devastating for those who have only very infrequent brushes with the formal church. They notice big alterations and their perception of the church as an unchanging rock is shattered.

So, working in a cluster means working with people who are poor in that their safe world is changing too fast for them.

Clustering Provides an Opportunity to Support the Local Clergy

Being in a cluster of parishes means that one works closely with other clergy, and it gives one the opportunity to be supportive of them (as well as enjoying the support they can give). I found that I learnt a few things about diocesan clergy, and also made some good contacts with the bishop and priests of the entire diocese. I think that the insights and links I made could be invaluable in helping me to be in a better position to discern how I might be able to help diocesan clergy today. In addition, by working closely with John and Frank and Sue, I effectively gained a bigger support community to be in, taking some of the pressure off what the two-man Vincentian community life had to provide.

The other thing about clustering is that it presupposes collaborative ministry, certainly with the non-ordained as services are reduced, but perhaps most challengingly, between several ministers working as colleagues. It is sometimes difficult for a bishop to find neighbouring parishes who are 'clusterable' due to the leadership style of the particular men in charge of them. The fact that Wandal was willing to be clustered with St Joseph's and St Peter's was no doubt helpful to the bishop and to the diocese in that it allowed the diocese's new staff sharing policy to start being enacted.

Conclusion

It has been heartening and humbling to hear the Vins spoken of with such love and respect by the vast majority of parishioners in Wandal and Southport. There is no doubt in my mind that Vincentians have done, and continue to do great work in parishes. However, I am not so sure that we are able to bring the gospel to the poor in a plain enough way in parish ministry to attract people to join us in living out Vincent's charism. If we must be in parishes, then perhaps parish ministry with a 'mission to the poor' component is the way to go. One of the main reasons I was sent to Rocky to work in a cluster of parishes because it was deemed to be an amenable enough environment for this green priest, but there was a missionary aspect to the appointment, also. To choose to join a cluster is to choose to be part of a diocese's poverty, and so perhaps it would have Vincent's approval
