

# COLLOQUE

Journal of the Irish Province of the  
Congregation of the Mission



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## Editorial

The bulk of this edition is taken up by two texts, both ‘impressionistic’ in their own way.

In the first, we record the events of the Provincial Assembly held in October of 2005. The format of that time does not allow for a very formal reporting of minutes but the events were of such import that they deserve to be recaptured here.

The other text is an imaginary journey through France with Vincent de Paul. Richard McCullen offers his interpretation of his predecessor’s reflections on the world of today through this medium.

Con Curtin continues to write for Colloque and we are proud and pleased to publish his reflections of *Lectio Divina*.

The final piece is from the late Brian Magee; it is an interesting side-light into his own life and into the tensions and divisions which have scarred Irish history for so long.

# His Will, Our Call

*A record of the Provincial Assembly  
All Hallows College, Drumcondra  
October 26-29 2005.*

Eugene Curran CM, secretary

The experience of the provincial assembly was, of its nature, very impressionistic. As secretary, the account could have been either very brief or exhaustive and exhausting. Nonetheless, much that was said deserves to be recalled, if only to act as fuel and fodder for our further reflections. It is in that vein that what follows is offered.

*Opening address by Kevin O'Shea, Visitor.*

## *His Will – our Call*

No doubt you have heard the story of the two countrymen who arrived at the Phoenix Park and were studying the layout of the park on the map. An arrow with the words '*you are here*' indicated their exact location. One turned to the other and said, "*they tell us this is where we are*" and the other replied "*how come, who told them we were here?*"

As we begin this Assembly it would be easy for us to give our location in human terms. We are conscious of our ageing profile, diminishing numbers and withdrawal from many of our works etc. The picture could be bleak and could lead to despair if we were not conscious of the Faith that binds us together. It is in the context of this faith that I invite you to enter into this Assembly. Some years ago, Fr Maloney called on us to look to our faith, reminding us "*It is not the closure of houses or the diminishing numbers that should alarm us, but rather our lack of faith in Christ.*"

The theme of our Assembly, *His Will – our Call*, presumes this faith. Can we accept that we are God's creation, and that He is forming us according to his way? From the human perspective it may seem to be death and decay but from the divine perspective it is the "grain of wheat dying so that it can bring forth new life". We can resist God's call and resort to human efforts in seeking our own fulfilment and in building our Province. Deep down we know the odds are against us. Vincent would encourage us to be open to God's ways and not our own. "*What happiness it is, Monsieur, to be where God has put us, and what unhappiness to set ourselves up where God has not called us*" (SV

1655, V5, 351)

At an assembly in the retreat house in Blackrock many moons ago – I think it was in the early 70’s – I spoke, with the arrogance of youth, of our inability to make best use of our human resources. I made the rash judgement that many confreres were not doing the work they should be doing and one of my suggestions was that we should avail of some research work in regard to time and motion to see how best we could use our resources. I was in full flight when suddenly Maurice O’Neill, who was sitting directly behind me, whispered in an audible voice, “Kevin, give us old fellows some hope.” The place erupted and my argument evaporated! Hopefully, as I have matured so also have my insights into my vocation.

The paradox of Christianity is that it does offer us hope, in time, but not by telling us a story of the future. We have no road map. I cannot open the Book of Revelation and say, “hey fellow, five plagues down and one to go!” We believe that we are on the way, ultimately, to the resurrection but in the meantime we are called to build God’s kingdom in our world today. We are uncertain and have no idea of how our future will pan out, but as Vincentians we trust in Divine Providence. All we know is that we are earthenware jars carrying the mystery of God. Our hope is not anchored in any particular story of the future, but in a God who is calling us. *His Will ~ Our Call*. Jesus himself embodies this for us, and Vincent would remind us “*what a blessing to be called to do on earth what the Son of God did*”.

Those of you on retreat at the Berceau last June will recall a story told by Eamon Devlin. It was the story of an old Indian water carrier with his earthenware jars hanging from the pole across his shoulders. One of the jars was cracked and inevitably lost most of the water as he journeyed home. This went on for quite some time and then the broken jar spoke to the master. “*The sound jar is doing its work for you but I am afraid my broken condition means I am not of much use to you. Get rid of me and get a new jar.*” The old man said, “*you are of value, you are playing a part.*” “*I don’t see it,*” said the broken jar. So the master said, “*as you journey today with me to and from the river, keep your eyes open, see what is happening around you.*” Later that evening he spoke again to the jar, “*what did you see?*” “*Well I noticed many wild flowers.*” “*Yes, said the water carrier. You have been watering those flowers for many a day. I select the best of them and bring them to my master’s table. You see, unknown to yourself you have been doing good, you have been creative and you are of use to me.*” Perhaps it is when we open our eyes – the eyes of faith – we begin to recognise that, despite our cracked nature, our decaying nature, we are somehow bringing about God’s Kingdom in unexpected ways.

Hence our approach to this Assembly has to be reflective and prayerful if it is to be life giving. Some of you will have read an article in the *Religious Life Review* (June 2004) where Donal Dorr talks of the parliamentary model of debating, proposing amendments, voting etc as having certain basic democratic values, but which many find uncongenial, burdensome and deadening. As we attended various assemblies, many of us here will recognise the validity of his words and my hope is that the new proposed format of our Assembly might be for us a more energising and a life-giving experience. Hence, I very much welcome the proposals of the Preparatory Commission to make this Assembly a reflective one where perhaps we can focus on *who we are* rather than *where we are or what we are* about. I thank them for highlighting for us the importance of our Vocation and Community Living and asking us to give as much time to reflecting on these as we give to ministry.

*Revitalising our Vocation:*

As Visitor I have become acutely aware of the importance for each one of us to root our life in Christ.

We all need to make time and space just “to be” and recognise our true vocation. There are many obstacles in our active life preventing us from doing so. Our culture tells us we must be doing something all the time. If we are not doing something we are wasting time and wasted time is lost effort. Culture also tells us that “we are” what “we do”. It will take a firm resolve, both as individuals and as a community, for us to centre our lives on Christ who has first called us. “*He called those he wanted to be with him*” (Mark 3:13) and “*then he sent them out two by two*” (Mark 6: 7). The quality of our being in Christ is dependent on our ongoing response to the common call that Christ issued to his first apostles and has a direct bearing on the quality of our apostolic ministry.

In his apostolic letter, at the close of the Jubilee year, Pope John Paul wrote:

*“A new century and new millennium are opening in the light of Christ but not everyone can see this light. Ours is the wonderful demanding task of becoming its reflection. This is a daunting task if we consider our human weakness when so often we are opaque and full of shadows but it a task which we can accomplish if we turn to the light of Christ and open ourselves to the grace which makes us a new creation.”*

In his mature days St. Vincent had two preoccupations, to live in Christ and to adapt his life activity as closely as possible to the design of God’s will. He tells us in our Common Rules – “*make every effort to put on the spirit of Christ and to do the divine will in all things*”. This has

been the inspiration of our martyr confreres throughout the centuries. Our constitutions reiterate it for us. *“Therefore the spirit of the congregation comprises those intimate personal attitudes of Christ which our Founder recommended to the members from the beginning – love and reverence toward the Father, compassionate and effective love for the poor and docility to Divine Providence”* (Const. 5. 6).

In his recent book on the priesthood, Fr. Tom Lane has a chapter on ‘in persona Christi.’ In concluding this chapter he challenges us:

*“A persona can conceal and distort, as well as reveal. The suggestion of masked men can have hideous connotations. The hardest thing Jesus said about the Pharisees was that they were ‘hypocrites’ literally stage actors, masked men. But being in persona is a programme and a life-long process. All through his life the ordained person is invited to grow into the persona of Christ, grow up into the Head (Eph 4: 15). Instead of seeing him as impersonating Christ, perhaps we should say that he is called to a daily conversion that would enable him to be an authentic image, ‘in-personating’ Christ. In this, he is beyond acting; he is exercising a ministry of transparency.”*

In her talk at All Hallows in 2002, Sandra Schneiders spoke of the ‘God quest’ and put the challenge to us in a very earthly manner:

*“If a couple were to celebrate their golden jubilee without being able to have the confidence that their love for each other had grown during their 50 years together, that jubilee would be very empty.”*

She told us that the same is true of religious life.

*“If we had not grown in our relationship with God during the time we lived our religious commitment, then it is of no consequence at all.”*

She goes on to acknowledge that in both vocations, staleness can creep in, the mundane can dominate at times and the stars are not always in view. Yet, when the long view is taken in both cases, the direction needs to be towards growth and a deepening of love, if it is to be worthwhile.

Hence, in my humble opinion, the fundamental question for all of us during this Assembly is “where is Christ in my life?” Answers to all other questions will flow from it.

#### *Strengthening our Apostolic Endeavours:*

Fr. Maloney writes, *“the church today needs preachers who radiate God’s presence. The great missionary is not so much a man whose words are beautiful as the man whose life is striking. Let me state it very clearly, the missionary today must be holy. Unless he is a man of God he will not be genuinely effective, nor is he likely to persevere.”* (On Being a Missionary Today – page 125).

“*Imitatio Christi*” is a dynamic principle in the Vincentian way of life. Having contemplated the mystery of the Incarnation, Vincent

reached out to the poor, and saw his mission as a participation in this divine initiative. It was what gave him direction, focus, and energy in his apostolic endeavours. Not surprisingly he chose the Lucan text as a motto for the Congregation. "*The Spirit of God is upon me. He has anointed me and he has sent me to bring good news to the poor and to heal the broken-hearted.*" (Luke 2: 18). The three key elements in our vocation, according to St. Vincent, are; that we are anointed by God; sent to the poor; to bring them good news of salvation. As we review and discuss our apostolic endeavours, these three elements must always be to the fore and we must never forget that we are going out in the person of Christ.

I wish to acknowledge the immense contribution that confreres have made to the Mapping Process over the last three years. The various groups have sought to formulate a vision and came up with some concrete proposals as we move into the future. The Provincial Council has reviewed these proposals and are recommending the following concrete tasks.

- Parishes, the CM parishes to meet twice a year, to explore and assess their progress in:
- the establishment of a collaborative and confident lay parish leadership
- evangelisation and the reaching out to the non-church going population
- the promotion of Vincentian charism
- the active engagement with the justice issues of the day.
- Chaplaincy group. The importance of ensuring the Catholic ethos and the establishment of a Chaplaincy in our schools was stressed. This will be the responsibility of the Vincentian Council for Education, a new Trustee Body which was established this September.
- In regard to the general Chaplaincy Group, we recommend that they and some associates would attend the Spirituality Day on June 24th 2006 and that they meet together on one other day to discuss the strengths, weaknesses and challenges in their Chaplaincy work. One matter they should address is the issue of training people to take Eucharistic services, and prayer services when a priest is not available.
- The Ember Team has been very active and successful under the leadership of Maureen Treanor. I thank her and the team. Sean Farrell, who was to take a sabbatical break, has opted to assist the team and use the experience as a base to reflect on 'evangelisation today'. The Ember Team has been asked to review their ministry during the coming twelve months.

- Parish of the Travelling people. As you are aware, we indicated to the Archbishop that we would be unable to continue the work from summer 2006. For the last two years, some diocesan priests and confreres have been discerning the way forward and have submitted their report to the Archbishop. He has now indicated that he himself wishes to engage in the discernment process during the coming months.
- Formation for Ministry/Young adults. Michael McCullagh has been a real trailblazer in this field and we are greatly indebted to him for his initiatives over the last few years. We are anxious that this work be extended throughout the Province but to ask Michael to do so would be too demanding. Equally, in our Province, there are other areas where this work can be promoted – Ember Team, engagement with our Schools, Parishes etc.  
Michael McCullagh is to be invited to meet with the Council, to discuss how we might implement one of the suggestions of this group viz. carrying out a structural analyses of the needs of Young Adult ministry within the ambit of the Province.
- In September we launched the London Project and are happy to welcome Fr. Austin Mbelu (Nigeria) and Fr. Chacko Panathara (Southern Indian Province). These are early days, and the progress during the coming twelve months will be slow, but in time I have no doubt that their ministry will be fruitful. I ask the confreres in the London region to continue to support and encourage them in their difficult assignment.
- The Spirituality Group will be organising the Vincentian Spirituality for Mission Day, on June 24th 2006. The keynote speaker will be our Superior General, Fr. Gregory Gay. This is an opportune time for you to try and think of whom you might invite to accompany you on the day. The Spirituality group is actively engaged in preparing some relevant material on the life and spirit of St. Vincent.
- With our withdrawal from the Parish of the Travelling People and the diminishment of our work with the Deaf Community, we should be giving serious thought to establishing some new initiative for the less privileged here in the Irish Region – one that perhaps will suit our age profile. I do not envisage a major work but an initiative such as those that have taken place in the Province over the last few years. The establishment of the VLM and Micah Group, the opening of the Refugee Centre, the Mass for the African Community, the launching of the London Project have all been life-giving to us and are very relevant in our work of evangelisation. We should have the courage to risk new beginnings and not just focus on withdrawal or consolidation

Although they are not part of our mapping process, I wish thank and assure those confreres who are engaged in “ministry for priests” and on “mission at gentes” that these ministries are core ministries for our Province. Despite our diminishing resources we will continue to support them in every way we can and would encourage confreres who feel they are called to these particular works to pursue their heart’s desire.

Within our home Province I would also wish to acknowledge and encourage the contribution of those confreres who represent our Province collaboratively with the Daughters of Charity, Vincent de Paul Society, De Paul Trust and other agencies in our joint projects.

On behalf of the Province I extend our sympathies to the VLM, the newest member of our Vincentian Family here in Ireland, on the death of Joyce Campbell. As I informed you in my letter, Joyce was a Vincentian Volunteer, who was tragically killed in Ethiopia last August. Thankfully the other two volunteers Paul Brady and Alan Matthews, who were injured in the accident, have made a good recovery. My personal hope and prayer is that this tragedy will be a source of new growth and vigour for the VLM. On behalf of the Assembly I ask Michael McCullagh to convey our sympathies to Joyce’s Family, and the members of the VLM.

Whether by design or because of our diminishing numbers our institutions no longer play a central role in our apostolate. This change has had a positive effect on apostolate, and I commend you on your mobility, your readiness to take on new initiatives even when advanced in age, whatever of wisdom.

*Renewing our Community Life:*

Our constitutions remind us “*that St. Vincent gathered the confreres together within the church so that living a new form of community life, they might undertake the evangelisation of the poor. Consequently, the Vincentian Community is organised to prepare for apostolic activity and to foster and promote it continually.*”

As Visitor, it would be remiss of me, not to express my concern in regard to Community living, which will slowly disintegrate if we do not actively work at creating it anew.

In an article, Hugh O’Donnell reminds us, “*our communities are no longer a given. If they are only a given then our houses would be merely hotels. They have to be created in a new way they did not need to be created before. The reason for creating our communities is sharing, free, deliberate, conscious, willingness to share our lives, our experiences, our spirituality, our relationship with God with one another.*” (Vincentian Heritage: Volume 16. No. 2)

We must continue to search for new and meaningful ways of praying, of participating in liturgy as a community. In the past perhaps we have

reduced our spiritual life in community to mere schedules and routine and some of us may have opted out. However, it is important to recognise that we have been called to community and one of our responsibilities is to deepen our prayer life and to support one another in our efforts. Do I judge our common prayer mediocre, not suited to my personal prayer style, even annoying and then excuse myself from it?

St Vincent was very concerned that our common convictions should be rooted in the mystery of the Trinity and the Word of God. Echoing the passage from the gospel “*that all may be one so that the world might believe*” he told the missionaries “*how can you attract people to Jesus Christ if you not united with one another and united with him?*” Fraternal union “after the manner of dear friends” and union with Jesus Christ are signs and means for evangelising the poor.

We cannot withdraw from the mission under the pretext of safeguarding community life; but on the other hand, according to St Vincent, to sacrifice community life would be a fatal blow to our mission.

We have heard the dictum:

“Community without mission is inward looking and sterile,  
Mission without community leads to disillusionment and burn out.”

The correct balance is essential. Some two years ago, Fr Des O’Donnell OMI highlighted for us the danger of “nestling in Community”, of making it a safe haven where we simply exist. The opposite scenario of seeking out companionship and community elsewhere is also very real. Can we in this day form a community that can be life giving and supportive?

During Visitations I have asked local communities to reflect on the “*Key Moments in the Life of the Local Community*”, originally alluded to by Fr Maloney in his writings and which is now included in the *Practical Guide for the Local Superior*. All of us must actively participate in this reflection if they are to be fruitful and productive. A document drafted by a few is sterile and unproductive, while a genuine commitment on a few fronts by all the confreres in community can be life giving.

The advice of St Vincent to the confreres coming to Ireland some three hundred and fifty years ago, “*Be united and God will bless you*” is as relevant today as it was then.

#### *Nurturing new life.*

In our Vocation Plan we spoke of the importance of creating a new culture of vocation. We do this more than ever by our personal witness, both as individuals and community. In a response to a recent survey (2003) young people throughout Europe highlighted a deepening of their spiritual life and a sharing in a Christian Community as two possible reasons for entering religious life. The new movements in the

Church also testify to these desires. Although the climate for calling others to follow us in the footsteps of Christ is not very favourable we must not lose heart. I would appreciate if you would give it some thought during your reflections.

### *Conclusion*

I began this talk by reminding you that our journey is primarily one of faith.

The dying that we experience as a Community and as a Church is painful, but it is an invitation to kenosis and holiness. We must not let the challenge or the pain deter us from responding to “Our Call”.

Can we trust that the God who has called us is still calling us, and forming us as individuals and as a Province to be what he calls us to be.

*“I know the plans I have for you – it is Yahweh who speaks – plans for peace, not disaster, reserving a future full of hope for you”* Jeremiah 29,11

The purpose of this Assembly is to *“Preserve and promote the spirituality and the apostolic vitality of the Congregation”* con 135

Can we as a group undertake this task with courage and conviction?

The words of Mervin Wilson, which I read at a recent group reflection, sums up our task.

*“Do not try to recapture,  
But do not devalue,  
The vintage once you knew.  
The gospel ever explodes yesterday’s vessel:  
“The wine comes fresh for you.”*

May God’s good wine be poured abundantly upon us these coming days.

*“Glory to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever.”* Ephesians 3,32

**Day One**; Wednesday 26 October 2005

The Provincial Assembly began with an address from the Provincial, given above.

Following the address a series of elections took place; Eugene Curran was elected Secretary on the 2<sup>nd</sup> ballot and, following that, Paschal Scallon and Stephen Monaghan were elected Moderators, on the second and first ballots respectively.

By a show of hands, the assembled confreres accepted the Directory, the Agenda and the Timetable for the Assembly. They also accepted Jim Campbell as Facilitator.

Before the evening came to a close, Austin Mbelu gave a brief presentation on the beginnings of the work in Isleworth, in which confreres from Nigeria and India will be working in Southwark and Westminster dioceses towards helping in the integration of people from their own countries into the life of the local church. Austin indicated some of the challenges which face them so far in this work.

The evening ended with a prayerful remembrance of the confreres who are sick at present and of those who have died since our last Assembly.

**Day Two**; Thursday 27 October 2005-11-05

The day began with an opening prayer and an introduction to the Agenda by Jim Campbell. This was followed by a brief presentation by Chacko Panathara CM on his experience so far in the new mission in Isleworth.

The purpose of the morning's session was to reflect on the past 25 years, in the life of the Community, the Province, the Church, Ireland and the UK and the World.

Confreres were invited to take some personal time to reflect and to go on an Emmaus Walk with another confrere. and then share their reflections in smaller groups. The contributions from the smaller groups were then put up on a 'Wall of Wonder'

Points of transition, a major shifting point or a water shed point were:

- 1986 — Tooting and Travellers Missions
- 1989 — Clongowes Convocation
- 1992 — Scandals
- 1992 — Focus on Justice
- 2000 — Departures from the community

In response to the question, "*Where do you see a trend running through these years?*" people identified:

- Diminishment

- All Hallows' mission since the 1980s
- From ownership to service
- Being more real and honest
- From selves (CM) to point of collaboration (family)
- From clerical to lay
- Living by faith and not by sight
- We don't do work for ourselves but for others
- Making individual confreres available to other agencies

In the afternoon session, Eileen Glancy DC read from Scripture (Luke 2:25-38) and, in the person of Simeon, Richard McCullen led a meditation, the text of which follows;

*A Reflection on Luke 2:25-38*

My name is Simeon. May I welcome you to this Temple, which is the glory of our people. Forty–six years it was a-building, and painstakingly and lovingly each stone was cut and laid one upon the other. Not a single stone which Yahweh's hand has not placed. Hardly a week now passes but I hear some voice exclaim in wonder to the official Guide in the Temple precincts *Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!* Need I tell you that I love the beauty of the Temple, and have over the years made my own the psalmist' desire and prayer *to live in the house of the Lord, all the days of my life, to savour the sweetness of the Lord, to behold his Temple.* Now I am old and grey-headed and have reached that outer limit of which David pensively sang, *Our span is seventy years or eighty for those who are strong.*

Life, it has been said, is a pilgrimage from illusion to reality and growth to maturity is largely a process of shedding one's illusions. The coming of the Messiah – could that be an illusion? A sort of collective national illusion inherited from generations of my people who have seen in the Messiah *the Hope of Israel, and its deliverer in the day of trial?* For all that, I have nursed and nourished these latter years a personal desire - and made it a daily prayer - that my eyes would see *the salvation which the Lord had prepared for all nations, and bring to maturity the work of thy right hand...* Then I would bow my head and pray, *Now you can dismiss your servant O, Lord.*

Of course there are those who consider me an impractical dreamer: friends who will quote the prophet Daniel, *For we, O Lord, are fewer than any nation, and are brought low this day in all the world because of our sin.* There are those, too, who seem to chase a future that is ever receding, and there are those who rather nostalgically hanker after an imagined past.

	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005
<b>The Province</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Move from seminary formation at All Hallows, 1980</li> <li>-Parish of the Traveling people*</li> <li>-Change—urge to and urge against From control to serve (Strawberry Hill, Drumcondra, Damascus Hse.)*</li> <li>-Growth in Nigeria—83, last entry to CM here in 82*</li> <li>-Charism Statement in 81 and Mission Statement in 92</li> <li>-New developments (Travellers, Refugees, All Hallows)</li> <li>-Friends of the Vincentians, 1984</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Vocational Slump, 85</li> <li>-Tooting Mission, 1986 forward</li> <li>-Celbridge, 1977-1988*</li> <li>-Diminishment, deaths &amp; departures 1987 on*</li> <li>-Deaths, illness departures</li> <li>-Clongowes Convocation*</li> <li>-St. Pats Armagh withdrawal, 1988*</li> <li>-Reduction in educational commitment*</li> <li>-Institution down, charisma up</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-International mission plus London project</li> <li>1992 forward</li> <li>-New mission team 1979 &amp; 2002</li> <li>-Last ordination in Irish Province, 1992</li> <li>No vocations to CM in Ireland, last ordination, 1991</li> <li>-New focus on justice</li> <li>-From ownership to ministry 90s</li> <li>-Vincentian Family, CIF</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-New collaboration mission (Rendu, VMP, VRC, etc.) 1995</li> <li>-Vincentian Family emphasized, 1995</li> <li>-Collaboration (Rendu, VRC, VPI, VLM, VMP)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Establishment of Nigerian Vice Province</li> <li>-Nigerian Vice Province</li> <li>-Nigerian Vice Province, 2000</li> <li>-VLM, MICAH, 2000</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Withdrawal from deaf apostolate</li> <li>-Vincentian Family (current)</li> </ul>

	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005
<b>The CM</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-CM new constitution 1980s</li> <li>-Search for CM identity 1980 forward</li> <li>-Superior Generals writings 1980 forward</li> <li>-Irish Superior General, 1980—1992</li> <li>International Visitors' meeting (1983)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Lay—role of All Hallows</li> <li>-Development of lay ministry/formal mission, 1992 on-</li> <li>-International Missions, 1994</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Contributions of Superior Generals, 1980—2000</li> <li>-International Missions, 1992 on-</li> <li>CIJ, 1994</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-International Missions, 1995</li> <li>-MISEVI, 1997</li> <li>-Vincentian Family (1998)</li> <li>-CM international mission, Vincentian Family, 1990s</li> <li>-Effective Priests share power and control</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Vincentian Family</li> <li>-Ferns, 2005</li> </ul>	

	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005
<b>The Church</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Pre80s—culture saps evangelization</li> <li>-Pre80s—the switch to evangelizing the culture</li> <li>-Vat 2 and Papacy of JP2</li> <li>-Election of John Paul II</li> <li>John Paul visits Ireland/UK (Minus N.I.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-John Paul II 1978—2005</li> <li>-Shift from 1<sup>st</sup>. world to 3<sup>rd</sup>. world</li> <li>-Papacy of John Paul II</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Vocation a rarity, 1990 forward</li> <li>-Casey Scandal. 1990*</li> <li>-Church—1) JP2, 2) Decline in W. World (Secularism &amp; fundamentalism) 3) Sex abuse scandal</li> <li>-Scandals, 1985—2005</li> <li>-Sex scandal</li> <li>-Scandals started with Casey 1992</li> <li>Scandal 1990s</li> <li>-Scandals in the church, 1990s</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Church scandals—English speaking countries</li> <li>-re Priesthood Role toward witness</li> <li>-From religious to spiritual (ecology/new age)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Catechism—inaccessibility of language 1996</li> <li>slay up, clerical down</li> </ul>	
<b>Ireland and UK</b>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Pub culture, 90 forward</li> <li>-Secularism takes over, Celtic Tiger</li> <li>-Celtic Tiger</li> <li>-Economic Boom 90 forward</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Economic Growth consequences</li> <li>-Good Friday Agreement 97</li> <li>Good Friday Agreement 98</li> </ul>		

	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005
<b>The World</b>	-Live Aid—global response 1984 -Live Aid	-Consumerism and Globalisation -Fall of Berlin wall, etc. 1989 Berlin Wall-1990	-Global village—communication -Travel and communication growth -Technological revolution -Computer/Internet -Peace processes (N.I. & Middle East) 1990s Globalisation 1990s	-mobile phone, mass communications 1995 -movement of peoples (VRC/VLM/Micah)	-9/11, militant Islam 2001 -9/11, 9/3, Bali	-Rise of IT (current)

\*--Indicates cards that people in the group identified as signal events or defining events through the 25 years.

Living at the heart of that tension between past and future I fall back on and look to the present, for is not eternity but the hidden depth of the present moment? And when this present moment is filled with love, then I touch the eternal flame of the love of Yahweh, whose glow will be *a lamp for my steps and a light for my path*. Attending lovingly to the present with all one's mind and heart, will generate – who knows when? – one of those transcendent moments when the *kairos* of God will strike and the walls of Jerusalem will be built up.

One such moment was mine some months ago. A beautiful young mother with her new-born infant in her arms came here with her husband to make the customary offering forty days after giving birth to her Son. Silently she presented the infant to me. Making eye contact with the infant the boundaries of my own religious vision suddenly exploded, and I saw a new thing that God was working in the world beyond the frontiers of my religion. You could describe it as *a light to enlighten the gentiles and to give glory to Israel, God's people*. That little bundle of life... Could that infant be the Messiah?... In a flash I saw *Infinity in the palm of (my)your hand / And Eternity in an hour*.

It may be still winter and the air frosty and cold, with the grayness of the season settled upon our land. *To believe is easy*, wrote a Gentile poet, *God shines out in the splendour of his creation. To love is relatively easy, for we live amidst such misery that it is not difficult to experience compassion. It is hope that is difficult. What is easy for us and towards which we are inclined, is to despair. This, he wrote, is the great temptation*. Hope is God's winter name. During one of my nation's darkest hours the prophet Jeremiah lifted his voice and said; *"This is what I will tell my heart, and so recover hope: the favours of the Lord are not all past, his kindnesses are not exhausted; every morning they are renewed; great is his faithfulness*.

Faithfulness is holding fast to one's Spirit-inspired priorities. A great and holy man – a Gentile – and a passionate love of the *anawim* – with whose writings you are, I am sure familiar, set down in stone what he called a set of priorities. *Matters involving our relationship with God, he wrote, are more important than temporal affairs; spiritual health is more important than physical; God's glory is more important than human approval... We ought to have confidence in God that he will look after us since we know for certain that as long as we are grounded in that sort of love and trust we will be always under the protection of God in heaven, we will remain unaffected by evil and never lack what we need even when everything we possess seems headed for disaster...*

And what of the future ?

*"Go out into the darkness  
and put your hand into the hand of God*

*That shall be to you  
Better than the light  
And safer than a known way!"*

After Richard's reflection, confreres were asked to go into small groups and share on the three questions;

- What chimed with me?
- What does this call forth in me?
- What does this call forth for the Province?

In taking the feedback, Jim did so by asking confreres to give words or phrases from the reflection that had resonated with them. These included;

- God's favour is new every morning
- A pilgrimage from illusion to reality...
- Not eternity but the hidden depths of the present moment
- Waiting when the Kairos of God will strike
- Flushing out the meaning of the word 'hope'
- Kairos leads to rebuilding
- Nostalgically hankering
- The favours of the Lord are not all past
- My name is Simeon
- Faithfulness is holding fast to one's spirit-inspired priorities
- Dismiss your servant, O Lord

He then asked confreres to share what words or phrases had come to them in their own time of reflection. Among them were;

- The past is history, the future mystery and the present grace
- Good for us to be together
- God is at work in all things, bringing all things to good
- Importance of faithfulness
- Letting go
- Zacchaeus; Salvation has come to this house today
- Mary's joy – and her sense of responsibility
- God comes in winter
- My own religious vision exploded
- Faithfulness had not passed
- Grace has its moment
- Where might hope come from?
- Gratitude for personal hope

After this, confreres were asked for words or phrases that had emerged from the group discussion;

- Life-giving
- Discussion is important
- ‘The Darkling Thrush’
- Intentional Community
- Willing to be in each other’s company
- Honesty
- There is a mega-change taking place, something totally different is coming
- Life is a pilgrimage
- “If you keep a green bough in your heart, the song bird will come”

Sharing with us some reflections on Vaclav Havel’s letters to his wife, in which Havel wrote “Hope is a state of being”, Jim asked the question; “Who came to your mind?”

- Oscar Romero; “We are not Messiahs...”
- Jack Farrell; “It is time to move on”
- Teilhard de Chardin
- St Paul; “the whole creation awaits...”
- Jean Gabriel Perboyre; from such beginnings came the saint
- Peguy; it is hope that is difficult
- Timothy Radcliffe OP on priesthood
- Kavanagh; “Beyond the frontiers of my religion...”
- Kavanagh; “Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful God/ showing His love in a cutaway bog”
- The Holocaust writers; Ten Boom, Franckel etc
- Roger of Taize
- James Cahalan’s dream of Vincent’s death; “Get out there...”
- Jean Vanier and Michael Stroud

Jim then asked for the group to tell some of the stories of Vincent that came to mind;

- His devotion to the Blessed Sacrament
- His continued efforts for Madagascar
- His motives for becoming a priest; “He was an ‘ordinary punter’!”
- Blamed a printer for a mistake of his own
- His naming of the new Mother General of the DCs
- The efforts he went to in order to ensure the establishment of the CM
- Taking on the temptations of the theologian
- Support for his confreres and sisters
- His notion of providence
- The return of a departed confrere; Vincent readmitted him when the confrere reminded him that he had assisted him in the past

To the question “Who never lost heart?”, conferees cited from their own experiences;

- Catherine O’Driscoll DC
- A student at Strawberry Hill
- Jean Vanier
- Leo Close
- A student in St Patrick’s, Armagh
- A parishioner with a son in a deep coma
- The wife of an alcoholic
- Maurice Kavanagh

Asked to list the qualities of such people, they named;

- Highly focussed
- Endurance
- Active acceptance
- Faith
- Affirmation of the dignity of the person
- Ability to see beyond the moment
- Strength to break the mould

Finally, they were asked; “What does all of this say to us as a community?”

- Deepened sense of faith and hope
- We build on experience
- God is at work within us to will and to do his good pleasure
- We need to capture the attitude of Simeon
- We need to keep in focus that it is Christ who is celebrating
- The vulnerability and weakness of the people mentioned speak to us
- The spirit of who we are and not the definitions
- The source of strength of people in need is often found in others.

Following this exercise, conferees were invited to go into local community groups to discuss how this would impact in the various houses.

### ***Day Three***; 28 October 2005

The opening prayer was led by Chacko Panathara and then Eileen Glancy DC read from Luke 5;1-11. Eamon Devlin’s reflection on the doubting Peter was read to the group by Brian Moore:

Sometimes, in my quieter moments that are not quiet at all because they are really moments of deep disturbance, I stand shoulder to shoulder

with Simon, a Simon unsure of himself and ill at ease with the Peter he has become.

What did the one who called call me to? Where has the call led me, what has become of me? To be fishers of men - a call to go together; to the community of Jesus – a community for mission, a mission that made sense, to me, to all of us there and then, fishermen convinced by that catch, caught is the net of the One who called. But I yearn for the community of Simon and Andrew, of James and John and their mission: A community for mission that makes sense, a community for like-minded men; fishermen, focused, the how of community fine-tuned by the why of our mission; a mission clear and undisputed, concrete and measurable, a mission that matters and makes a difference. The mission of fishermen at least is one where community and mission compliment, co-operate and consolidate each other.

The one who called, did he not know that we had our own community of like-minded men, could he not see that I would yearn time and again to make once more a community of like-minded men for a mission measurable and that matters? Why does He who calls call to community that is none of these, men of many minds, in community for mission that is not clear nor concrete, hotly disputed and barely measurable where the deep waters of diversity yield nets that are knotted and tangled? And yet when He called I left all and followed – could He have meant the community of those who are like-minded that I hanker for from time to time, to leave it too for the uneasy community for mission unmeasurable?

Put out into the deep and pay out your nets for a catch. And when we did our strange mission brought unbelievable results, so many that we called others to help and community came about, naturally, to meet a need, a pressing need. And now that I have exchanged the boat of Simon for the Barque of Peter I pine at times for that call to the deep that makes community. And as we strain and strive to make community I struggle to face the deep that is around and among us, called to community, a deep so much more disturbing than the deep of mission, the deep that is our dyings, our diminishments and our daily call to be for each other, those men who differ and disagree and whose patience and perseverance call me to more than I can be. I did not understand the deep then nor do I understand it now. Except that it brings about community, community of Jesus, a community that is not a comfortable place where we may settle down and circle wagons.

The community of Jesus where Jesus is himself fish and food and where each is called to nourish and to be nourished. A place where people who differ and somehow seem not to fit. A place from where to cast out into the deep of others who themselves have been cast off or cast aside, the

overlooked, the unheard, those overwhelmed and unloved: and reaching out and drawing in to find myself and them at one once more in the community of Him who stepped into the boat of all our struggle to bring belonging once again.

Having reflected in smaller groups, the confreres were later led in reflection by Jim Campbell. Firstly, he led some word association exercises;

*Life together*

Decision	Life itself	Unity	Challenge	Support
Hope	Group	Tension		Celebration

*Discipline*

Order	Schedules	Serve	Sensitivity	Regularity	Strict
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*Common Life*

Un-like minded people together	Boredom and struggle	Togetherness	Difficult	Community plan
		Community		

*Consensus*

Agreement	Endless discussion	Ideal	Impossible	Suspicion	Process
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*Poverty*

Oh No!	Sharing	Pain	Struggle	Permission
Endless talk				

*Obedience*

Old-fashioned	Listening	Responsibility	Sharing
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Jim then told the story of reading Teresa of Avila and becoming fascinated with her as a human being, especially in the letters to her foundations, and his equal fascination with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, especially in his descriptions in *Life Together*. The question Jim then posed was; "Who or what informs my understanding of life in community?"

Teresa of Avila

Basil Hume's *Searching for God*

Ministry to Priests

Charles de Foucauld

Jean Vanier

Charlie Hollywood

John Gabriel Perboyre

Vincent Dwyer *Lift your Sails*

## Being beaten at chess by a seminarian in Ushaw College

Speaking of touchstones, Jim asked confreres to reflect on what have been such touchstones in our vincentian heritage;

Meekness	Zeal	Hospitality
Support	Affirmation	Compassion
Individual confreres	Douceur	“Be united and God will bless you”
Acceptance	Debonair	“...after the manner of dear friends”
Respect	The five virtues	
Humility	Reverence	
Cordiality	Jim Tuohy	

Reflecting on our own experience of community, Jim posed the question; “When you think about community life in the past 25 years, what have you lost and what have you gained?”

*We have lost;*

- |                        |                            |                                       |
|------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| • Confidence           | community                  | • A ‘closed-inness’                   |
| • Predictability       | • Houses                   | • Expectations of community           |
| • Like-minded people   | • Slack                    | • Community as a given                |
| • Focus                | • Confreres                | • Contemplative sense of our vocation |
| • Repair of friendship | • Numbers                  |                                       |
| • A broad age-range    | • Sense of common mission  |                                       |
| • Programmatic         | • Students and seminarians |                                       |

*We have gained;*

- |                       |                                       |   |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| • Necessity           | • Dysfunctionality                    | interior  |
| • Appreciation        | • More realistic                      | • Collaboration (Vincentian Family)                   |
| • Diversity           | • Greater sense of belonging          | • Built up in adversity                               |
| • No shop-talk        | • Sense of thrusting towards the poor | • Danger of celebration of community as extraordinary |
| • Affective community | • Can relate at a personal level      |   |
| • Celebration         | • Has to be intentional and           |   |
| • Humility            |                                       |   |
| • Closeness           |                                       |   |
| • Mistrust            |                                       |   |

Where do we find hope and challenge for the coming 25 years?

*Hope*

- Desire for community
- People who possess vincen-tian charism
- Openness to new ideas
- Growing old gracefully
- Nurture dreams
- Jesus Christ
- God’s call
- Holy Spirit
- New vision of Church
- Disengaging gracefully
- Who we are is more important than what we do
- Small numbers mean we need each other
- Nature tends to maximum disorder
- Joy of the group
- It is in our hands
- Diversity

*Challenge*

- Not knowing
- Sacrifice
- Falling numbers
- What’s happening ‘outside’
- Being open to hear the word of God
- To listen to the ‘nitty-gritty’ of the Holy Spirit
- Make each feel accepted
- Build up the vision
- ‘Duc in Altam’
- Continue to be flexible
- Diversity
- Get into the depth experiences of the poor
- Find God in our own situation

Each confrere was then asked to imagine that he was the Superior General and that everyone would then have to do as he said; this being the case, what would be his three-point plan to build community life in the Congregation?

- Pray well for two-hours every day (one point only)
- Be baptised in the Spirit
- Read and share on the Gospel
- Pray for gift of desiring community
- Personal prayer
- Ideally; common work
- Take Community Plan seriously
- Build community on doing political charity
- Pray for gift of forgiveness
- Prayer in common
- Really; common prayer
- Have ‘hands-on’ contact with the poor
- Grow old graciously and let go
- Pray for gift of appreciation of diversity
- Fulfilling community plan; covenanting
- Absolutely; common time

- Move some confreres to have experience in other provinces
- Deepen knowledge of scripture
- Deeper knowledge of history of CM and of the confreres

Concluding this section, Jim then asked the confreres to name what had struck them in this exercise?

- Missing any reference to Priesthood
- Missing reference to Vincentian Family
- No mention of Eucharist
- The essential quality of prayer
- It's do-able but we don't do it
- It's all gift
- It all presumes conversion

Myles Rearden spoke to the group about developments in the Vincentian Partnership for Justice and the confreres were informed that Joe Cunningham will replace Harry Slowey as the CM representative on the VPJ.

The afternoon session began with a reading by Eileen Glancy and a reflection led by Sean Farrell. Sean's input was principally a reflection on the experiences which had led him to write the following poem;

### *The Land of Tomorrow*

Wrestling  
 In the darkest silence,  
 The embryonic life  
 Erupts,  
 Stirred by the first shaft of light,  
 Pulsing to the beat of the winter solstice.

Come  
 Somnambulant man;  
 Come with me  
 To the land of tomorrow;  
 A place of shadow and drifting fog,  
 With meandering roads and crispin frost.  
 A world so vast,  
 Blistering with promise.

Come adventurous spirit,  
 Listen to your bursting heart.

The God you crave  
Grips your hand,  
Encouraging you to be bold,  
Daring you to risk,  
That life might come to birth.

Listen, your love is calling;  
“Step out into the mist”.  
“But I shall die!”  
“Only if you panic,” said he,  
reassuringly.

“Place your trust in me,”  
says God.  
All shall be well,  
All shall be well.

Settle not for what you have.  
Climb with me to the highest point;  
Only there shall you see the vision that you seek,  
Soaring the sky, skipping in between the blustering winds,  
Turning this way and that,  
Overcoming all obstacles in your path.

As he told of his experience on the island of Barra, in which he climbed the hills climbed centuries ago by our confrere, Dermot Duggan, and remembered his time sitting by Duggan’s well, and recalled for us that Duggan’s memory is still vibrant on this Hebridean island, Sean also quoted from Cardinal Ratzinger’s book *Without Him Everything is Vain*;

Rarely in a biblical passage can one detect the Easter Joy of Jesus’ disciples so directly as in the gospel of Christ’s appearance by the lake of Tiberias. The freshness of the morning by the Sea of Galilee gives us some inkling of the morning joy of the emerging church in which everything is a matter of DEPARTURE, BEGINNING and HOPE. The lake, with the broad expanse of its waters merging at the horizon with the blue sky, becomes an image for the church’s open future in which, in the distance, heaven and earth come into contact: it is with confidence and full of hope that one dares to set sail on the sea of time that is to come, because Jesus is standing on the bank and because his work accompanies the journey.

Again, confreres were asked to share in small groups.

The large group began with the question; “What is a synonym for Mission?”

Evangelisation Sent	Project Task	Objective Focus	Role Journey	Work
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Some questions were then posed;

*“How does life in mission shape life in community?”*

It interferes

Faith experience is brought back to community

Community rescues us from life in mission

Bell always goes at the wrong time

*How does life in vocation inform life in mission?*

It gives it the ‘why’

It gives focus

It colours it

It calls us to mission

*How does life in mission shape life in vocation?*

It sometimes gives life

It shape it

It challenges

It confirms

It distorts

It reflects

By its ethos

*How does life in the spirit inform life in mission?*

It energises

It motivates

It gives it spirit

*How does life in mission inform life in the spirit?*

The good example of people

It humbles

It awakens need to live in the spirit

It informs prayer life

It highlights the need to reflect

We are evangelised by the poor

Citing Niebuhr (“The Church does not have a mission, it is Mission”),

Jim asked what it means to be mission and what other words or people communicate the radicality of mission.

“I live not now I but Christ lives in me.”

Simplicity – what we do and who we are are one.

Have to be free

Sent; both to be ‘sent out’ and to be ‘enthused’

A job I do for the love of God

Compassion; affective love leading to effective action.

We were then asked to name a shift in Society and its impact on the mission;

- Parish missions have been affected by the lengthening work day
- Travel and communications have affected the sense of bonding
- People move with work and lose sense of community
- Rigidity has given way to humanity in our relationships
- There is both an absence from and an antipathy to God
- We ask more often; “How am I going to survive in this as a priest?”
- People are more aware of choices, in religion as much as anything else
- The shift in understanding of ‘Authority’ may have undermined mission
- Respect for other religions has removed respect for ‘Foreign Missions’
- The notion of the Family of God has fuelled the notion of the Vincentian Family
- Relativism; the notion of objective truth is diminished.
- People talk more in experiential terms.
- There is more consultation today.

What does this theme ‘His Will, Our Call’ say to us today?

- His will is that we belong, our call is to create that
- We need to develop a real sense of the presence of the Spirit
- We have previously worked out of received models of both His will and our call; now we have to discern both
- His will is that we accept Jesus as the way, the truth and the life
- It was chosen from the writings of St Vincent and was important to him
- Applies to a group committed to Christ in the Vincentian tradition but we are in a world where those words may be meaningless
- God is leading people on everywhere and always
- The language we use is not understood by many today
- We need to be as authentic as possible, bearing silent witness

- Our call is to will and that will change and develop
- The difficulty of knowing the will of God; we may project a human way of thinking
- Are we disposed to receive blessings and dispose of those things which may be obstacles?

Concluding this section, Jim cited Niebuhr's contention that mission consists of discerning new dimensions of the will of God in history. The example he gave was of the growing awareness that slavery, which had for long been accepted, was gradually seen to be against the will of God. The question that raises for us is; where are we discerning new dimensions of the will of God?

In helping us to reflect on the two days, Jim asked a number of questions.

*What did we do during these days?;*

We came together

We remembered

We prayed

We talked

We floated words

We listened

We reflected

We answered questions

*Who did we mention?*

Superior General

Vincent

Jesus

Teresa of Avila

Charlie Hollywood

Oscar Romero

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Patrick Kavanagh

The Holy Spirit

Helder Camara

Dermot Duggan

*What images stay with us?;*

Touching Duggan's Well

Frontiers

Loving the building of the Temple

Toppling of the Temple  
Pulling the boat to shore  
Young mother and baby  
Simon and Peter  
Disasters of the Chosen People  
Jesus making breakfast  
The Wall of Wonder  
Tangled nets  
Recognising the Risen Lord  
Con Curtin saying Mass at 88  
Being 'wheelchaired up' to say Mass

How do we manifest our commitment to spirituality, vocation and community life?

*What has encouraged us from these two days?;*

Our ability to share  
The degree of reflection  
The call to faithful waiting  
Good listening  
Expressed desire for community  
The three meditations  
Lack of cynicism  
Sense of shared vocation  
Openness to one another  
Hope in fulfilment  
Graciousness  
Bloodied but unbowed  
From illusion to reality  
Not having answers but ready to listen

*What challenged us in the two days?*

Our declining numbers  
The quality of our community life  
Facing my own fears  
Making words a reality  
Readiness to practise what we say is mission  
The understand the circumstances of society today and our response

We were then asked to sum up the journey of the two days in one sentence;

- After two days we came to the shore – to find we were heading out to sea again
- From doubts to hopes
- An experience of renewal of the vincentian spirit
- Rowing the Atlantic together
- Sense of presence of Jesus in our lives
- An effort to find life in captivity

*What happened there?*

Great openness

Freedom of speech

Animated by one another

Deepening of our own commitment

People willing to face challenges with courage

Vincent jumped off the wall

Sense of acceptance rather than resignation

A mood of quiet hope

Two disciples on the way back from Emmaus

Allowed the spirit to energise us

Lack of impact of the negativity around us

Old guard did not cling to power

No discouragement

*How is life going to be different for you because of these two days?*

No option but to ask some questions

We need to talk to one another

The perplexity of Mary;

We need to ‘ponder in our hearts’

Transfiguration;

‘It is good for us to be here’

Process led to good talk;

and not out of our head

Point of departure and beginning;

no staying put

Call to conversion;

Requires structural change

Cockpit is the Community Plan

*What would you call this Provincial Assembly?*

Inspiring

Revitalising our vocation

Explosion of Inspiration

Just a song at Twilight

Twilight of the Gods  
Candle in the dark  
Singing in the Rain  
Let us awake the dawn  
Each age is one age dying and another coming to birth

After concluding with a poem by Hermann Hesse, we broke into local community groups before meeting for Evening Prayer. This was followed by a celebratory dinner at which some guests joined us.

*As every blossom fades*

As every blossom fades and all youth sinks  
into old age, so every life's design,  
each flower of wisdom, ever good, attains  
its prime and cannot last forever.  
At life's each call the heart must be prepared  
to take its leave and with no hint of grief  
submit itself to other, newer ties.  
A magic dwells in each beginning and  
protecting us it tells us how to live.  
High-purposed we must traverse realm on realm,  
cleaving to none as to a home. The world  
of spirit wishes not to fetter us  
but raise us higher, further, step by step.  
Scarce in some safe, accustomed sphere of life  
have we established house, than we grow lax:  
He only who is ready to expand  
and journey forth can throw old habits off.  
Maybe death's hour too will send us out  
new-born toward undreamed of lands, maybe  
life's call to us will never find an end...  
Courage my heart, take leave and fare thee well!

*Herman Hesse*

## St. Vincent de Paul...on the Motorway

Richard McCullen CM

*This is the text of a talk given by Fr McCullen to a group of Daughters of Charity at a Vincentian Month in Paris in September 2001. It was found among the papers of the translator, Sr Marie Madeleine Castelnau, who died some years ago. It is given as an imagined and imaginative journey with Vincent along the motorways of France. Ed.*

Almost forty years ago now a very devout woman – a member of the small *Equipe Vincentien* in Dublin – wrote an interesting book which she entitled *The World of Monsieur Vincent*. Her name was Mary Purcell and she had written over her lifetime some interesting biographies of saints – and near saints. Being a member of the Vincentian family she had long cherished the ambition to write a biography of M Vincent. She devoted a considerable amount of time to studying St Vincent's writings, and she finally decided that she would paint the background in some detail of the society in which M Vincent had lived out his life in order that he could be understood more fully and deeply. So the strokes of her pen were broad and she did not go into the finer details of St Vincent's psychology and spirituality. Her work was nonetheless a valuable contribution to the understanding of our Founder, and the book – to judge from its sales – proved to be very popular in the English-speaking world.

In her introduction to her book, published in 1963, Mary Purcell wrote these lines when motorways – at least in my part of the world – were still to be constructed.

If he lived today he would surely take the fullest advantage of jet travel, intercontinental telephones and other modern inventions to help him solve the problems that beset mankind. He would be in the vanguard of those trying to cope with such global problems as the rehabilitation of refugees and the food-for-the-hungry and aid-to-underdeveloped countries campaigns. He would be dispatching priests to Latin America, training them to slip through slits in Iron and Bamboo Curtains, encouraging Africa's native clergy to lead their emergent peoples on the way to God. With his vision, his genius for organization, his intense spiritual life, he would look at our world as he looked at his

own, locate its needs and plan the best means of relieving them. (1)

If some forty years ago M Vincent would not have hesitated to use jet planes, he would not demur to use our present-day motorways, even if he showed a little apprehension on learning who was to be his chauffeur on this occasion. After what I presume was a quiet recalling of his own personal devotion to and confidence in Divine Providence and with a silent appeal to his Guardian Angel - we set off.

*A Pilgrimage of Life*

Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* remarked

The whole of the Christian life is like a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father, whose unconditional love for every human creature, and in particular for the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) we discover anew everyday. This pilgrimage takes place in the heart of each person, extends to the believing community and then reaches the whole of humanity. (n49)

So we were making a pilgrimage. There was a purpose to our journey on one of France's modern motorways. The phrase 'the whole of humanity' appealed immensely to my passenger, for it conjured up those great missionary thrusts he had made when he was on the earth. Close to his heart was the mission of Madagascar, and so it was that he expressed a preference to head west towards that port from which he had organized and arranged that a number of his missionaries would reach out *to the whole of humanity*.

It was while we were moving out of the city of Paris that M Vincent, holding a letter in his hand, politely asked that, if I saw a convenient post box, I could stop so that he could mail the letter. He told me that it was a reply to a man – he did not give me his name – who had spent a short time in St Lazare, had left the community, but who now wished to return to it. He quoted part of the letter to me.

Je n'ai point de peine à croire que vous affectionnez toujours notre compagnie et ses emplois; vos deportements passés me l'ont trop persuadé. Je respecte aussi le sentiment du religieux qui vous a dit que ce serait tentation si, pour les difficultés que vous avez a l'oraison, vous désistiez d'être missionnaire; car il est vrai que dans toutes les communautés il se trouve plusieurs personnes, et souvent les meilleures, qui ne se peuvent appliquer à la méditation, où

l'on se sert de l'imagination ou du raisonnement, parce que cela les incommode. Mais le bienheureux évêque de Genève a enseigné a ses religieuses une autre sorte d'oraison, que les malades mêmes peuvent faire: c'est de se tenir doucement devant Dieu et lui montrer ses besoins, sans autre application d'esprit, comme un pauvre qui découvre ses ulcères et qui, par ce moyen, excite plus puissamment les passants à lui faire du bien que s'il se rompait la tête a force de leur persuader sa nécessité. On fait donc une bonne oraison se tenant ainsi en la présence de Dieu, sans aucun effort de l'entendement ni de la volonté; et selon cela, vous ferez bien d'écouter Dieu sur le mouvement que vous sentez de revenir. Je voudrais seulement savoir comment vous vous trouvez des prédications et catéchismes que vous faites et des confessions que vous entendez; d'autant que, si vous n'en êtes pas incommodé, c'est un fort bon signe. Demandez à Dieu, s'il vous plait, Monsieur, qu'il vous fasse connaître ce qu'il désire de vous; entreprenez quelque dévotion particulière pour cela et tâchez de vous mettre dans la plus grande indifférence que vous pourrez, afin d'être plus prêt à suivre son attrait et sa volonté dans une action tant importante; et après la Nôtre-Dame d'août prochain vous me manderez en quelle disposition vous serez, afin que nous avisions s'il sera expédient pour vous et pour la compagnie que vous y retourniez. (2)

M Vincent's observations which he made in the letter were, I could see, simple, straightforward and practical. Prayer for him was, firstly, a gift of God. "Therefore I want you to understand that... no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." (1 Cor 12:3)

Since prayer was a gift from God, an attitude of waiting on the Lord to which the psalmist so frequently referred revealed was to be cultivated. "My soul is waiting on the Lord. I count on the his word." (Ps 129) Rather like the paralytic of St John's gospel, one must wait for the moving of the Holy Spirit. Was this conviction, one might ask, the basis of M Vincent's sensitive and deep devotion to following, rather than anticipating, Divine Providence? Overstraining and forcing could be a too human approach to establishing dialogue with the Incarnate Word of God. Undoubtedly there are conditions that depend on us for the moving of the waters of the Spirit. We must, so to speak, position ourselves around the pool of God's healing waters – and so St Vincent will stress the importance of recalling the presence of God at the beginning of a period of prayer or meditation. Hence the very basic and practical

advice offered to the priest is “to remain in the presence of God, with no exertion of the understanding or will.” It was a point that would be touched upon on a number of occasions when in the course of his conferences with the first Sisters he initiated them into the practice of mental prayer. And to facilitate that awareness of God’s loving presence at the beginning of meditation, the Sisters were frequently encouraged to develop the habit of letting their minds dwell on God at different moments of the day. When the time came for meditation they would gather in their senses and open themselves out to the Lord.

...d’abord se mettre en la présence de Dieu, en le considérant soit comme il est dans les cieux, assis sur le trône de sa Majesté, d’où il a les yeux sur nous et contemple toutes choses; soit dans son immensité, présent partout, ici et ailleurs, au plus haut des cieux et dans le plus bas des abîmes, voyant nos coeurs et pénétrant jusqu’aux plus secrets replis de notre conscience; soit dans sa présence au Saint Sacrement de l’autel: ô Sauveur, me voici, chétif et misérable pécheur, me voici au pied des autels o vous reposez; ô Sauveur, que je ne fasse rien d’indigne de cette sainte prsence; soit enfin en nous-memes, nous pénétrant tout entiers et logeant au fond de nos coeurs...Il est très important de bien faire ce point, de se bien mettre en la présence de Dieu, car de là dépend tout le corps de l’oraison; cela fait, le reste va de soi-même.

Prions Dieu de nous donner sa grâce, afin que nous puissions bien nous entretenir avec sa divine Majesté, reconnaissant que de nous-mêmes nous ne pouvons rien, le conjurant par son grand amour envers nous, par ses mérites infinis, par l’intercession de la sainte Vierge et des saints.(3)

All this was to be done quietly and not agitatedly ...pour le tenir en la présence de Dieu, sans pourtant faire un trop grand effort, car l’excès est toujours nuisible. (ibid 404) Making the effort to keep oneself in the presence of God was in effect trying to discipline what St Teresa of Avila liked to call the fool of the house – the imagination- which St Vincent in his turn described as a wandering vagabond. (ibid 404).

#### *Discipline and Method in prayer*

Perhaps it was because the imagination was a wandering vagabond that St Vincent insisted much on following a method of prayer. It must be noted, too, that for St Vincent prayer was a discipline, which had to be matched with a measure of discipline in one’s general life outside

prayer. He invoked the authority of spiritual writers in general for saying that interior and exterior mortification of the senses was necessary if one was to make progress in the way of prayer. (4)

Following a method in mental prayer ensured a measure of discipline, and the method of prayer he explicitly recommended to his communities was that of St Francis de Sales as proposed in his book *The Introduction to the Devout Life*. On occasion Vincent outlined the method when he spoke on prayer. Indeed, it might have been that he had touched on the point so often that one detects a note of apology when, during his conference to the Sisters on 17 November 1658, he alludes to the place of method in prayer:

You know how to make meditation because you have often been told about it and learned it by rote; perhaps it is not much use for me to tell you of the method of the Blessed Francis de Sales; nevertheless, as it is the easiest, I will do so...(5)

By this point we had stopped at the Toll Gate of the motorway and, as I explained to my passenger that one had to pay a fee to use the motorway and that at times it could be costly, particularly if one had to travel a long distance on it, he mused that it was the same with the journey into the mystery of God on the route of prayer.

Je pensais en moi-même d'où pouvait provenir que quelques-uns fissent si peu de progrès en ce saint exercice de la méditation. Il y a sujet de craindre que la cause de ce mal ne soit qu'ils ne s'exercent pas assez en la mortification, et qu'ils donnent trop de liberté à leurs sens. Qu'on lise ce que les plus habiles maîtres de la vie spirituelle ont laissé par écrit touchant l'oraison. et on verra que tous unanimement ont tenu que la pratique de la mortification était absolument nécessaire pour bien faire ses oraisons, et que, pour s'y bien disposer il faut non seulement mortifier ses yeux, sa langue, ses oreilles mais, autres sens extérieurs, mais aussi les facultés de son âme, l'entendement, la mémoire et la volonté; par ce moyen, la mortification disposera à bien faire l'oraison, et réciproquement l'oraison aidera à bien pratiquer la mortification. (6)

Methods of prayer, however, are not prayer, and to adhere slavishly to a particular method, when one's will has already been inflamed to action, would be to constrain the Holy Spirit. M Vincent had noticed that I had not switched off the engine of the car as I took my ticket at the toll gate. Rather like the life of prayer, I thought I heard him say.

Quand on veut avoir du feu, l'on se sert d'un fusil; on le bat, et aussitôt que le feu a pris à la matière disposée, on allume de la chandelle; et celui-là se rendrait ridicule qui, ayant allumé sa chandelle, continuerait de battre le fusil. De même, quand une âme est assez éclairée par les considérations, qu'est-il besoin d'en chercher d'autres et de battre et rebattre notre esprit pour multiplier les raisons et les pensées? Ne voyez-vous pas que c'est perdre le temps et qu'alors il faut s'appliquer à enflammer la volonté et à exciter ses affections par la beauté de la vertu et par la laideur du vice contraire? Ce qui n'est pas malaisé, puisque la volonté suit la lumière de l'entendement et se porte à ce qui lui est proposé comme bon et désirable. (7)

### *Speeding On*

As we moved away from the toll gate the multiplicity of road signs excited M Vincent's curiosity. He asked what was the meaning of those numbers, which were on posts at the side of the road, and as we were on a French autoroute – at times the little single word *Rappel* was added to the number. I explained that the numbers indicated the speed limits which one was required to observe on different stretches of the motorway – and that many drivers had to be reminded of them. Hence the 'Slow Down'. When two or three cars passed us well in excess of the speed limit, M Vincent fell to reflecting on the speed with which life seemed to be lived in the present century, and that people seemed to be rushing in all directions and seemed to be ever in a hurry. Whatever about commercial business, he was convinced that in the work for the Kingdom of God haste and frenzied activity were to be considered hostile forces.

On gâte souvent les bonnes oeuvres pour aller trop vite, pource que l'on agit selon ses inclinations, qui emportent l'esprit et la raison, et font penser que le bien que l'on voit à faire est faisable et de saison; ce qui n'est pas; et on le reconnaît dans la suite par le mauvais succès. Le bien que Dieu veut se fait quasi de lui-même, sans qu'on y pense; c'est comme cela que notre congrégation a pris naissance, que les exercices des missions et des ordinands ont commencé, que la compagnie des Filles de la Charité a été faite, que celle des dames pour l'assistance des pauvres de l'Hôtel-Dieu de Paris et des malades des paroisses s'est établie, que l'on a pris soin des enfants trouvés et qu'enfin toutes les oeuvres dont nous nous trouvons à présent chargés ont été mises au

jour. Et rien de tout cela n'a été entrepris avec dessein de notre part; mais Dieu, qui voulait être servi en telles occasions, les a lui-même suscitées insensiblement; et s'il s'est servi de nous, nous ne savions pourtant où cela allait. C'est pourquoi nous le laissons faire, bien loin de nous empresser dans le progrès, non plus que dans le commencement de ces oeuvres. Mon Dieu! Monsieur, que je souhaite que vous moderiez votre ardeur ( I think he had glanced surreptitiously at the speedometer at this point, so I reduced my speed.) et pesiez mûrement les choses au poids du sanctuaire devant que de les résoudre! Soyez plutôt pâtissant qu'agissant; et ainsi Dieu fera par vous seul ce que tous les hommes ensemble ne sauraient faire sans lui. (8)

To weigh things maturely in the scales of the Sanctuary... (the phrase is translated colourlessly in the English Volume) is surely a very revealing commentary of Vincent's own practice, and if such was his practice we may be looking at the one of the foundation stones not only of his prayer life but at one of the foundation stones of his spirituality, namely, his devotion to following step by step the direction which Divine Providence indicated. For Vincent the Incarnation took place in the fullness of time and since the Risen Christ is always with us and the Incarnation is continued today in and through us – there will always be this mysterious fullness of time – the *kairos* of God to be respected in everything that concerns the coming of the Kingdom of God and our collaboration with it. Hence the principle enunciated to M Blatiron in Rome (who had a propensity to act first and then reflect).

Les oeuvres de Dieu ont leur moment; sa Providence les fait pour lors, et non plus tôt ni plus tard. Le Fils de Dieu voyait la perte des âmes, et néanmoins il ne prévint point l'heure qui était ordonnée pour sa venue. Attendons patiemment mais agissons, et, par manière de dire, hâtons-nous lentement en la négociation d'une des plus grandes affaires que la congrégation aura jamais. (9)

### *Simplicity*

It had started to rain heavily, and visibility on the road was reduced considerably, so I turned on the screen wipers. It prompted M Vincent to speak about the necessity of vision in life, and particularly acquiring the vision of Christ. Indeed prayer performed the function somewhat similar to what the windscreen wipers were presently doing for us as we drove along the rain drenched motorway. Because in the spiritual

order the power of vision was related to faith, and because our Lord has assured us that the pure of heart will see God, Vincent found in the virtue of evangelical simplicity a means to keep the faculty of spiritual vision clear, in the same way as the wipers of the windscreen enabled the driver to see clearly the road ahead. In the celebrated three conferences on the Spirit of the Company, the virtue of simplicity is mentioned almost as many times as the virtue of charity. Along with the virtue of charity and humility, the virtue of simplicity is to be prayed for every day.

Mes soeurs, je vous recommande deux choses: la première, tous les jours le demander à Dieu en l'oraison du matin, à la sainte messe, à midi, le long du jour, notamment au commencement des principales actions, vous disant en vous mmes: ai-fais-je cette action par charité, pour l'amour de Dieu? N'est-ce point par humeur, par vaine complaisance? Par exemple, je viens ici dire mes fautes à Mademoiselle; ai-je assez d'humilité pour cela? Suis je simple? Si j'use d'équivoque, si je dis les choses autrement qu'elles ne sont, je n'ai point de simplicité. (10)

It is not difficult for us to see the importance of evangelical simplicity in the life of a Daughter of Charity. To Vincent was given the charism of seeing beneath the broken bodies and disturbed minds of the Poor the features and person of Jesus Christ, appealing for service and often for so much more than a cup of cold water. For those who were called to share with him this charism, purity of heart and of intention was of cardinal importance. The French writer George Bernanos said on one occasion "Ask for the only thing you need – a star and a pure heart." M Vincent, one presumes, spent much time in prayer asking for purity of heart or, in his own terminology, evangelical simplicity and looking at that Star who is the Light of the world. And the more he came to see the star of the humanity of Christ, the more he could make effective and continue the presence and power of the Incarnation among the Poor.

Si Elie, avec son double esprit, faisait tant de merveilles, que ne fera point la personne qui a Dieu en soi, qui est remplie de Dieu! Elle ne fera pas ses actions, elle fera les actions de Jésus-Christ, elle servira les malades avec la charité de Jésus-Christ elle aura dans sa conversation la douceur de Jésus-Christ elle aura dans ses contradictions la patience de Jésus-Christ; elle aura l'obéissance de Jésus-Christ. Bref, mes filles, toutes ses actions ne seront point les actions d'une pure créature, ce seront les actions de Jésus-Christ. (11)

In these few lines one finds the revelation of Vincent's vision of prayer and the effects he hoped would be reproduced in his life when he rose from prayer.

We had come off the motorway, we had to negotiate one of those intricate roundabouts that are a feature of our roadways today. One had a multiple choice of routes. A little unsure of my exit from the roundabout, I went round it twice. I think my passenger was puzzled and concluded that I had lost my way and sense of direction. In a word, that I lacked resolution. Be that as it may, Vincent continued talking, saying that prayer was not a just simple placing of oneself in the presence of God. The Lord was to be loved with the strength of one's arms and the sweat of one's brow. God was not to be loved in a cupboard, as it were. Otherwise one kept going round and round in prayer as if on a roundabout - going nowhere. Hence the importance of resolutions, he added. (I had by this time found the proper exit.) It was a point he had always stressed when speaking to his communities about prayer, and presumably it was his own practice.

Vos resolutions doivent donc être ainsi: "Je m'en irai servir les pauvres; j'essaierai d'y aller d'une façon modestement gaie pour les consoler et édifier; je leur parlerai comme à mes seigneurs. Il en est qui me parlent rarement; je le souffrirai. J'ai accoutumé de contrister ma soeur en telle ou telle occasion; je m'en abstiendrai. Elle me donne mécontentement quelquefois en ce sujet; je le supporterai. Telle dame me gronde, une autre me blâme; j'essaierai de ne point sortir de mon devoir et lui rendrai le respect et honneur auquel je suis obligée. Quand je suis avec telle personne, j'en reçois presque toujours quelque dommage pour ma perfection; j'en éviterai, autant que possible, l'occasion". C'est ainsi, ce me semble, mes filles, que vous devez faire vos oraisons. Cette méthode ne vous semble-t-elle pas utile et facile? (12)

### *Mission*

We were now in the suburbs of Nantes, and Vincent began to speak about the experience of St. Paul as he approached the city of Damascus so many centuries ago. The feast of the conversion of St. Paul had for decades been a day of special devotion for him. Perhaps it was the fact that Nantes had been the port from which so many of his missionaries had departed for Madagascar, and where the Sisters also had a hospital established by Mademoiselle le Gras and himself, that the association of ideas had prompted him to speak of conversion and mission. Nantes

spelt mission for M Vincent and to be an authentic missionary of Jesus one needed continual conversion – conversion such as had been given to St Paul as he lay on the road bathed in a light that was not of this world. And for continual conversion one needed continual vision of Jesus Christ with his intense love for the Poor.

Mission was one of M Vincent's favourite words. He had placed the word at the very heart of the Community which the Spirit of God had so mysteriously raised up through him. His priests were to be ever on mission, wherever divine Providence led them. He had married the word Mission to the word Poor. His Congregation was to be ever on the motorway that would bring them to the Poor, bearing in their hearts the sufferings of the poor as well as the encouraging words and practical service which the Crucified and Risen Lord had entrusted to them for dispensation .

Referring to the meeting of the Cardinals that had taken in place in Rome last May M Vincent remarked that he had been impressed by the references that Cardinal Etchegaray (almost a neighbour of his, he added, of the Landes region in France with which he was so familiar), had made in the opening intervention of that meeting. *The Church of Jesus Christ was called, the Cardinal had remarked, to give testimony to Christian poverty, and to pass from being a church for the poor to being a church entirely poor.* That, the Cardinal had continued “*is perhaps the most challenging and the most urgent question for the evangelization of the world in the new millennium. Only a Church that is poor can be converted into a missionary Church*”

M Vincent went on to say that he had been impressed, too, by the frequent references the Cardinals had made to the urgency and importance of personal holiness in any programme of evangelization to day. The Czech Cardinal Tomko had spoken about the importance of what he called *the globalization of holiness*, while the Cardinal of Cuba proposed what he called *a pastoral programme of holiness*. It all evoked for him, M Vincent said, what he had urged at the end of his life to his missionaries, and indeed many times to both communities, the necessity of *a genuine commitment to grow in holiness, patterning ourselves as far as possible on the virtues which the great Master himself graciously taught us in what he said and did.*

It had brought back to his mind what he had said to the Sisters on the feast day of the conversion of St. Paul in January 1643

...ne pas vous soucier de l'avenir; faire votre dépense, toute l'année, selon votre coutume, et, si vous avez de reste, l'apporter à la maison, et cela afin d'aider à élever des sœurs pour servir les pauvres. Vous n'avez droit que de

vivre et vous vêtir; le surplus appartient au service des pauvres. O mes filles, avez-vous jamais ouï dire que Dieu ait choisi les pauvres pour les faire riches en foi?... Que savez-vous, dis-je, mes filles, si, Dieu vous appelant pour sa gloire au service des pauvres, sa bonté ne veut point faire un essai de votre fidélité pour montrer cette vérité, que Dieu a choisi les pauvres pour les rendre riches en foi?... O mes filles, si vous êtes véritablement pauvres vous êtes plus véritablement riches, puisque Dieu est votre tout. Fiez-vous à lui, mes chères soeurs. Qui a jamais ouï dire que ceux qui se sont fié aux promesses de Dieu aient été trompés ? Cela ne s'est jamais vu et ne se verra jamais. Oui, mes filles, Dieu est fidèle en ses promesses, et il est très bon de s'y confier, et cette confiance est toute la richesse des Filles de la Charité et leur assurance. Que vous serez heureuses, mes filles, si cette confiance ne vous manque jamais! (13)

*Pour servir les pauvres... Pour servir les pauvres... Pour servir les pauvres...* M Vincent kept repeating the phrase, because we were passing through one of the poorer quarters of the city of Nantes where he was quick to note the number of African, and Asiatic refugees on the streets of city. Recalling the words of encouragement he had once written to Sister Anne Hardemont, he said

C'est pour la charité, c'est pour Dieu, c'est pour les pauvres. Si vous connaissiez votre bonheur, en vérité, ma Soeur, vous seriez ravie de joie; car, en faisant ce que vous faites, vous accomplissez la loi et les prophètes, qui nous commandent d'aimer Dieu de tout notre coeur, et notre prochain comme nous-mêmes. Et quel plus grand acte d'amour peut-on faire que de se donner soi-même tout entier, d'état et d'office, pour le salut et le soulagement des affligés! Voilà toute notre perfection. Reste à joindre l'affection à l'action et de vous conformer au bon plaisir de Dieu, faisant et souffrant toutes choses pour les mêmes intentions que Notre Seigneur en a fait et souffert de semblables. Je le prie qu'il nous fasse à tous cette grâce. (14)

As the rush hour evening traffic got denser and demanded more concentration, my passenger seemed to fall silent, no doubt, I concluded, out of consideration for his driver. Glancing across at him from time to time, I noted his lips moving in prayer. But whether his prayers were for the suffering poor whom he had been noticing on the streets and was now carrying in his heart or whether he was beseeching God that his driver

would not take any imprudent risks when reaching traffic lights that were in the process of changing – I do not know. In the end I concluded that a man with a heart so large as that of M Vincent, would have found room for both intentions – and indeed for many, many more...

In the silence that had fallen on both of us within the car, while the traffic roared outside, I felt it was a moment to recall the presence of God, and the conviction of Monsignor Helder Camara that we humans can so exhaust ourselves in words that we can no longer hear the silence of God.

### *Globalisation of Charity*

It was while we were still on the motorway that M Vincent again drew my attention to a clump of symbols or signs on large steel boards at the edge of the road that told travellers of what facilities lay ahead and the distance that one yet had to cover before reaching them. Looking at two of them he saw a drawing of a plate and on each side of the plate a knife and a fork. Another was the drawing of a modern bed. His quick intelligence told him that within some kilometers we would find a restaurant and a hotel, where travellers could stop and have a meal and if they wished spend the night. As he had been talking about the poor of his day, he momentarily seemed pleased, for he concluded that these two signs indicated places where poor people could have a free meal and spend a night in a comfortable bed at little or no cost. He had reached this conclusion – as he remarked to me later – because the large signs bore no names of their respective proprietors. Sadly, I said, that was not the case. He was of course aware that about 24,000 people die daily from hunger or hunger-related causes, and that the majority of these were children under the age of five. He knew, too, that the problem lay not so much in the production of food, but in its distribution.

Always appreciative and grateful for the least of acts done to alleviate the hunger and sufferings of the poor, he expressed admiration and encouragement for the initiatives recently launched by the members of the world-wide Vincentian Family that had been entitled *The Globalization of Charity: the Fight Against Hunger*. The words of Pope John Paul II addressed to his Community's General Assembly in 1998 had rejoiced his heart.

Dear Sons and Daughters of St Vincent search out more than ever, with boldness, humility and skill, the causes of poverty and encourage short and long-term solutions, adaptable and effective concrete solutions. By doing so you will work for the credibility of the gospel and of the Church.

Of course for M Vincent the word hunger was a multi-dimensional

one. Much as the physical hunger of the poor – (or would it be more accurate to speak of the starvation of the poor rather than of hunger?) – had preoccupied M Vincent’s mind and heart, he recognized there was a still more acute hunger from which the human heart suffered, namely, the hunger for God. That truth and fact was the foundation stone that lay beneath the edifice of all evangelization – and of the stone which he had laid on that January day at Folleville in 1617. The urgency of the Pauline *Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!* pressed heavily upon him – and his heart went out to those people who were most likely never to have an opportunity of hearing of those essential truths of the faith without which – as he saw it – there could be no salvation.

The pain and the pangs of physical hunger suffered by the poor, however, pulled strongly on his heart. The tension that he experienced between the hunger of the human heart for God and the physical hunger of the starving human body was strong indeed. It found expression in his constant marrying of the two adverbs *spiritually and corporally* whenever he planned to bring relief to the sufferings of the poor.

Of course M Vincent had devoted time and reflective prayer to many other forms of hunger that lie unfulfilled in the human heart, especially from the moment that the Spirit of God had enlightened him on the mission of Christ as expressed in the fourth chapter of St Luke’s gospel. *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free...”*

*The oppressed go free...* He was keenly aware of how acute the hunger for justice must be among the oppressed peoples of the world, especially when he saw them so powerless to change their conditions of life. He could share the conviction of the modern theologian Jürgen Moltmann that the Church can discover its identity only to the extent that it associates and identifies with the God-forsaken of the world, whose exemplar is the Godforsaken man of Golgotha. *“The glory of God does not shine on the crowns of the mighty, but on the face of the crucified Christ.”* (15) Or to express the idea poetically

*...Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.*(16)

#### *Refreshment for the soul*

Perhaps it was because he noticed that the driver was showing signs of some tiredness and fearing that he might nod off to sleep while at the wheel, M Vincent gently suggested that we both might have need of some physical refreshments. The word refreshment recalled the day

when in a conference to the Sisters he likened prayer to refreshment.

Les philosophes disent qu'entre les secrets de la nature il y a une fontaine qu'ils appellent de jouvence, où les vieillards qui boivent de l'eau rajeunissent. Quoi qu'il en soit de celle-là, nous savons qu'il y en a d'autres dont les eaux sont fort souveraines pour la santé. Mais l'oraison rajeunit l'âme bien plus véritablement que la fontaine de jouvence, au dire des philosophes, ne rajeunissait les corps. C'est là que votre âme, alentie par les mauvaises habitudes, devient toute vigoureuse, c'est là qu'elle recouvre la vue quand auparavant elle était tombée dans l'aveuglement; ses oreilles, auparavant étouffées à la voix de Dieu, sont ouvertes aux bonnes inspirations, et son coeur reçoit une nouvelle force et se sent animé d'un courage qu'il n'avait point encore senti.... Et qu'est-ce qui fait cela sinon l'oraison ? C'est une fontaine de jouvence où elle a rajeuni; c'est là qu'elle a puisé les grâces qui paraissent en elle et qui la font ce que vous la voyez...(17)

Soaftersomefurtherkilometersofdriving,wecameuponacomplex of buildings where travellers could refresh themselves. As we entered a rather crowded motorway restaurant, M Vincent looked around at the variety of faces, he began to reflect again on the words of Pope John Paul II about the great pilgrimage that is the history of humanity.

The whole of the Christian life is like a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father, whose unconditional love for every human creature, and in particular for the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) we discover anew every day. This pilgrimage takes place in the heart of each person, extends to the believing community and then reaches the whole of humanity.(18)

*Food for the journey;*

Pilgrims who are journeying toward the New Jerusalem have need of sustaining food. With characteristic thoughtfulness the Good Samaritan has paid beforehand for food and lodging for poor wounded humanity, that so often is found lying on the road – half-dead. The marvel of it! *Living Bread come down from heaven* – is ever at hand, available on a 24 hour basis, 365 days of the year, for pauper, *servus et humilis*. (19)

Perhaps it is on the last stages of the pilgrimage, when one is foot-weary and tired and already within sight of the New Jerusalem that one has most need of nourishment, most in need of Viaticum. Associating

the end of life's pilgrimage with Viaticum, M. Vincent recalled the day, when having been called to the Infirmary in Saint Lazare to assist a Brother who was dying, he had reminded him that *l'amour est inventif jusqu'à l'infini* (20) In the marvelous divine inventiveness that is the Incarnation where does that inventiveness shine forth with such brilliance than in that Mystery of Faith which we know as the Eucharist?

Glancing around at the crowded restaurant with its variety of nationalities, of diverse social strata, and of elderly and young people – M Vincent projected the whole ensemble into a Eucharistic context. The Synod of Bishops in 1974, he recalled, had noted that a Eucharistic celebration, which leaves the world with the same social, economic and political injustices, has not realized its potential. The same is true of any community, however small, that gathers in the name of risen Christ to fulfill his command *to proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*. (21) Every local community is a more or less perfect microcosm of that unity which was Christ's parting gift to his Church. Although there may be no explicit reference to the Eucharist as a sacrament of unity in his writings, - there are abundant references to the need of cultivating what can be described as the practical fruits of Holy Communion – which are the fruits of the Spirit, mentioned by St. Paul. They are *love, joy peace, patience kindness, goodness gentleness, fidelity and self-control* (22)

The Viaticum of the Eucharist was food to be shared, and M Vincent was led on to reflect on the importance of Sisters not limiting their horizons to thinking only of providing material food for the Poor. As he gratefully and contentedly eat his food M Vincent ruminated on what he had said to the Sisters when he spoke to them on the topic of Holy Communion on 22nd January 1646:

Pensez-vous, mes filles, que Dieu attende de vous seulement que vous portiez à ses pauvres un morceau de pain un peu de viande et de potage et des remèdes? Oh ! nenni, mes filles, ce n'a pas été là son dessein en vous choisissant pour lui rendre le service que vous lui rendez en la personne des pauvres, il attend de vous que vous pourvoyiez à leurs besoins spirituels, aussi bien qu'aux corporels. Il leur faut la manne spirituelle, il leur faut l'esprit de Dieu; et où le prendrez-vous pour le leur communiquer? C'est, mes filles, en la sainte communion. Les grands et les petits, mes filles, en ont besoin. C'est pourquoi il faut que vous ayez un soin particulier de vous préparer à recevoir ce divin esprit abondamment (23)

It was while I was paying at the cash desk for our modest meal that I realized that M Vincent was not so ecstatic about the food that is the

Eucharist as to overlook the practicalities of daily living, and the need always to preserve a sense of proportion in all things. Sisters were encouraged to participate daily in the celebration of the Eucharistic mysteries, but should the needs of the community or the poor require it, they should not be troubled if they could not do so. (24) Apropos of the practicalities of life and the importance of preserving in all things a sense of proportion M Vincent cannot but have noticed the cost of our meal.. The figure on the cash register had not reached the sum of twelve hundred écus as it had on one occasion for Jean Le Vacher to whom M Vincent felt obliged to address the following remarks:

Et la table seule, pour deux personnes que vous êtes, monte à près de douze cents écus. C'est ce qui m'effraye. Je sais bien que vous avez des serviteurs; mais pourquoi plusieurs? Un ne vous peut-il pas suffire? Je sais aussi que vous avez des survenants à qui vous ne pouvez pas refuser-quelque repas; mais de tenir ouverte à tout le monde, et nourrir des personnes chez vous et les loger, sans qu'ils vous payent pension, c'est ce que vous ne devez pas faire, soit qu'ils soient français ou étrangers, pauvres ou riches, recommandés ou non recommandés, surtout quand vous ne pouvez pas soutenir cette dépense par vos propres forces. Car, en conscience, vous ne pouvez pas emprunter pour paraître splendide et libéral, non pas même pour faire la charité, depuis que je vous ai prié de ne le pas faire. Vous me direz qu'il est difficile, ayant les emplois que vous avez, de vous en empêcher; et moi je répons qu'il nous sera encore plus difficile de vous envoyer de l'argent pour payer, et que, si vous saviez notre pauvreté, vous n'auriez pas peine de faire connaître la vôtre à ceux qui vous demandent, ainsi qu'il est nécessaire pour régler et égaliser votre mise à votre recette. Au nom de Dieu, Monsieur, tenez à l'avenir cette mesure. Dieu ne demande pas de vous que vous alliez au delà des moyens qu'il vous donne. (25)

M Vincent when speaking to the Sisters usually concentrated on the dispositions that they should have in order to draw the maximum strength from living bread of the Eucharist. He did not develop for them any elaborate theology of the Eucharist. Of his own celebration of the Eucharist Mgr Abelly quotes him as saying to one of his priests

Ce n'est pas assez, ... que nous célébrions la Messe, mais nous devons aussi offrir ce sacrifice avec le plus de dévotion qu'il nous sera possible, selon la volonté de Dieu, nous

conformant, autant qu'il est en nous, avec sa grâce, à Jésus-Christ s'offrant lui-même, lorsqu'il était sur la terre, en sacrifice à son Père éternel. Efforçons-nous donc, Messieurs, d'offrir nos sacrifices à Dieu dans le même esprit que Notre-Seigneur a offert le sien, et autant parfaitement que notre pauvre et misérable nature le peut permettre. (26)

Vincent's marvelous sensitivity to the presence of Christ in the person of the poor found its source – and sustenance – in his highly sensitive awareness of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist both as sacrifice and sacrament. The often-quoted assertion in the texts of the Second Vatican Council and the official post-conciliar documents that the Eucharist is *the source and summit of all evangelization* (27) was for St. Vincent a truth and teaching that was to be lived.

Quand il sortait de la maison de Saint-Lazare, il allait premièrement se prosterner devant Notre-Seigneur en ce très Saint-Sacrement, pour demander sa bénédiction; et aussitôt qu'il était de retour, il allait derechef se présenter devant lui, comme pour lui rendre compte de ce qu'il avait fait à la ville, le remercier des grâces qu'il avait reçues, et s'humilier des manquements qu'il pouvait avoir commis: ce qu'il faisait non par manière d'acquit, mais avec un véritable sentiment de religion et de piété, se tenant chaque fois un temps assez long devant le très Saint-Sacrement avec une posture fort humble et dévote. Il a mis les siens dans cette pratique, disant qu'il était bien juste qu'on rendît ce devoir au maître de la maison. (28)

#### *A Yielding Spirit;*

Wending our way through the suburbs of Nantes M. Vincent noted how repeatedly I stopped at a sign that bore a single word *CEDEZ* or *YIELD* or *GIVE WAY*. It seemed to rejoice his heart for the word or phrase summed up for him the condition of all progress in union with Christ in prayer or through the Eucharist or through service of him in the poor. It was within two years of his death that he had expressed one of his most profound convictions of his mature years when he penned into his rule for his missionaries that:

Et c'est ici le fondement de la perfection évangélique, et le nœud de toute la vie spirituelle. Qui aura cette vertu obtiendra facilement toutes les autres; mais celui qui ne l'aura point sera dépouillé du bien même qui est en lui, et vivra dans des inquiétudes continuelles. (29)

Two years earlier of so he had at the end of a repetition of prayer thrown a glance back on his long life and then exclaimed.

Hélas! soixante et seize ans de vie que j'ai passés ne me paraissent à présent qu'un songe et qu'un moment; et il ne m'en reste plus rien, sinon le regret d'avoir si mal employé ce moment. Pensons quel déplaisir nous aurons à la mort, si nous ne nous servons de ce moment pour faire miséricorde. Soyons donc miséricordieux, mes frères, exerçons la miséricorde envers tous, en sorte que nous ne trouvions plus jamais un pauvre sans le consoler, si nous le pouvons, ni un homme ignorant sans lui apprendre en peu de mots les choses qu'il faut qu'il croie et qu'il fasse pour son salut. O Sauveur, ne permettez pas que nous abusions de notre vocation, et n'ôtez pas de cette Compagnie l'esprit de miséricorde; car que serait-ce de nous, si vous en retiriez votre miséricorde? Donnez-nous la donc, avec l'esprit de douceur et d'humilité. (30)

*Towards journey's end;*

When rounding a corner in one of the streets of Nantes I saw a large letter *H* on a street sign, I knew our journey was at an end, but in M Vincent's mind the at the beginning of another. The Sisters had been working not without difficulties in the local hospital. Nearby was the port of Nantes – a city that in M Vincent's mind was twinned with the island of Madagascar. Indeed the Sister Servant of the Hospital – Soeur Nicole Haran – was not only in frequent contact by letter with him and he with her so much so that a desire to go Madagascar had grown in her soul, and she had shared her desire with M Vincent. His reply to her reads like a summary of the fruits of his meditation that he had made before the Lord on her proposal – a true repetition of his prayer.

...je rends grâce à Dieu, particulièrement du mouvement que vous avez d'aller servir Dieu à Madagascar. Je ne sais pas s'il vous prendra au mot, mais je sais bien que ce zèle ne lui est pas désagréable et que vous ferez bien de continuer à vous offrir à lui pour aller et pour demeurer, et généralement pour faire ce qu'il ordonnera, puisque vous voulez tout ce qu'il veut et rien hors de sa volonté, à laquelle je vous offre souvent avec toutes vos soeurs, afin que vous lui soyez bien soumises partout et toujours, comme filles que Notre-Seigneur a choisies et appelées à son service pour être à bon exemple et à consolation au public. Je remercie

sa divine bonté de ce que, en effet, vous tâchez de satisfaire à vos petits devoirs et surtout de vous maintenir en paix et dedans et dehors. Comme vous contribuez beaucoup à l'union des soeurs, vous serez cause aussi de beaucoup de grâces que Dieu leur fera, tandis qu'elles seront bien unies avec vous et entre elles-mêmes, et qu'elles seront bien fidèles à leurs exercices. Je vous salue toutes dans ce souhait, et je prie Notre-Seigneur qu'il vous fortifie en vos grands travaux.(31)

As I ushered M Vincent into the hospital where he was greeted by the entire community, I withdrew but not before hearing him greet them in the very words which he had written on 27th September 1656 to Sister Nicole Haran exactly four years before he left this life.

Comment vous portez-vous, ma Soeur, et comment se portent nos soeur? Avez-vous beaucoup de malades? Vous plaisez-vous à les bien servir pour l'amour de Dieu? Êtes-vous en paix pour le dehors et pour le dedans, et surtout êtes-vous bien unies ensemble? Vous entr'aimez-vous bien? Avez-vous du support les unes pour les autres? Le petit règlement s'observe-t-il? Bref, ma chère Fille, êtes-vous toutes de bonnes Filles de la Charité, agréables aux yeux de Dieu et à édification à tout le monde? Si cela est, comme je le veux croire, oh! quel sujet de consolation! oh! que de bon coeur j'en rends grâces à sa divine bonté! Car c'est un bonheur des plus grands que l'on puisse posséder sur la terre; mais, si cela n'était pas, aussi ce serait un sujet d'affliction. Je vous prie de m'en mander ce qu'il vous en semble, et de continuer de votre côté, ma Soeur, d'avoir bien soin des autres, pour les porter à Dieu et à bien faire leurs exercices, de les traiter avec respect, douceur et affection, et enfin leur donnant l'exemple des vertus que vous voulez qu'elles pratiquent. Je prie Notre-Seigneur, qui en est la source et qui les a pratiquées le premier pour notre instruction, qu'il vous les donne à vous et à elles. (32)

As I strolled along the quays of the old port from which so many of St. Vincent's first missionaries had left for Madagascar and were never to return, the words of Pope John Paul II seemed to echo round the harbour

The whole of the Christian life is like a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father, whose unconditional love for every human creature, and in particular for the prodigal

son (Luke 15:11-32) we discover anew every day. This pilgrimage takes place in the heart of each person, extends to the believing community and then reaches the whole of humanity. (33)

## NOTES

- 1 *The World of Monsieur Vincent* p. 14 Dublin 1963 - n. 49
- 2 SV 4:390-39: I have no trouble believing that you are still attached to our Company and its works; your past behavior has convinced me only too well of this. I also respect the opinion of the monk who told you that it would be a temptation if, because of your difficulties in prayer, you stopped being a Missionary, for it is true that in every Community there are many persons Often the best-who cannot apply themselves to meditation, where the imagination or reasoning play a part, because that hinders them. But the blessed Bishop of Geneva taught his nuns another kind of prayer, which even the sick can make: to remain peacefully in the presence of God, manifesting our needs to Him with no other mental effort, like a poor person who uncovers his sores and by this means is more effective in inciting passers-by to do him some good than if he wore himself out trying to convince them of his need. So, we pray well when we remain in this way in the presence of God, with no exertion of the understanding or will. Therefore, you will do well to listen to God in the urge you feel to return to us. I would simply like to know how you are doing with preaching teaching catechism, and hearing confessions, especially .since it is a good sign if you are not upset by them. Please ask God, Monsieur, to make known to you what He wants of you. Begin some special devotion for this purpose, and try to place your-self in the greatest possible indifference so as to be more ready to follow His attraction and His Will in such an important matter. Then, after the feast of Our Lady next August, let me know your dispositions so that we can reflect on whether it is advisable for you and for the Company for you to come back to it.
- 3 SV 11:404-406
- 4 SV 10; 586-567
- 5 SV 4: 122-123; Good works are often spoiled by moving too quickly. We act according to our own inclinations, which bypass mind and make us think that the good we see to be done is feasible and timely, which is not the case. We recognize this subsequently by our failure. The good which God desires is accomplished almost by itself, without our even thinking of it. That is how our Congregation came into being, that missions and retreats for the ordinands began, that the Company of the Daughters of Charity was formed, that the Ladies of Charity for the assistance of the poor at the Hotel Dieu of Paris and the sick in the parishes were established. That is also how the care of the foundlings began and, in a word, how all the works for which we are now responsible came into existence...None of the above was deliberately undertaken by us, but God Himself, who wanted to be served in such circumstances, brought them imperceptibly into being. If He

made use of us, we had no idea, however, where that was leading. That is why we allow Him to act, far from busying ourselves with the development of these works, anymore than we did when they were just beginning. Mon Die u! Monsieur, how I wish you would moderate your ardor and examine matters thoroughly, before making any decision on them.! Be acted upon rather than active. In this way God will do through you alone what all men put together could not do without Him. Letter 1297

- 6 SV 5:396; The works of God have their moment; His Providence brings them about at that time and neither sooner nor later. The Son of God saw the loss of souls; yet, He did not advance the hour ordained for His coming. Let us wait patiently but let us act, and, so to speak, let us make haste slowly in the negotiation of one of the most important affairs the Congregation will ever have.
- 7 SV 9:596-597; Sisters, I recommend two things to you: the first to ask God for it every day at your morning mental prayer, at Holy Mass, at midday, in the course of the day, especially t the at the beginning of your principal actions, saying interiorly: 'Am I doing this out of charity, for the love of / god? Am I not doing it from vain complacency, form natural temperament? For instance, I have come here to mention my, faults to Mademoiselle; have I sufficient humility to do it? Am I simple? If I use ambiguous language, if I speak of something other than they are really are, have I any simplicity at all?
- 8 SV 9:332-333;...A person, who has made a good Communion, does every-thing else well. If Elias endowed with a twofold spirit, wrought such wonders, what will not a person do who has God within her, who is filled with God? She will not be acting of herself she will be doing the actions of Jesus Christ: she will tend the sick with the charity of Jesus Christ; she will have the sweetness of Jesus Christ in all her life and conversation; she will have the patience of Jesus Christ under trials; will have the obedience of Jesus Christ. In short, my daughters, all her actions will no longer be those of a mere creature, they will be the actions of Jesus Christ.
- 9 SV 9:30; Your resolutions might be like this: "I am going to serve the poor. I will try to go to them in a pleasant way, to console and edify them. I will speak to them as if they were my, masters. There is one of them who only rarely, speaks to me. I'll put up with it. I usually wound a Sister on such and such an occasion. I'll refrain from doing so. She annoys me sometimes on this subject. I'll bear it. That woman scolds me; another blames me. I'll try not to deviate from my duty, and give her the respect and honour I'm bound to give. When I am with So-and-so I almost always suffer spiritual damage. I'll avoid the occasion as much as possible". That is how it seems to me, my Sisters, you ought to make your prayer. Do you not think this method useful and easy?
- 10 SV 9: 89-90; Do not worry about the future; spend what you are accustomed to spend throughout the year and, if anything remains over, bring it to the Mother-House with the idea of assisting to train Sisters for the service of the poor. You have a right only to food and clothing; the surplus belongs to the service of the poor. O my daughters, have you ever heard

that God chooses the poor in order to make them rich in faith ? .....How do you know, I repeat, my daughters, whether God, by calling you for His glory and the service of the poor, does not mean to try your loyalty in order to show forth this truth-that God has chosen the poor to make them rich in faith. Faith is indeed a great possession for the poor, because a lively faith draws down from God all that we may reasonably hope for. O my daughters, if you are really and truly poor, you are really and truly rich, for God is your all. Trust in Him, my dear Sisters. Who has ever heard it said that those who relied on God's promises are deceived ? That has never been seen, and never will be. Yes, my daughters, God is faithful to His promises and He is very, very good to those who trust in Him, and this trust is the entire wealth of the Daughters of Charity and their whole assurance. How happy you shall be, my daughters, if this confidence never fails you, for you will then be true Daughters of Charity

- 11 SV 7: 382-383: (to) have consumed your life for the same reason for which Jesus Christ gave His for charity,, for God, for the poor! If you only knew your good fortune, sister, you would truly be overjoyed; for, in doing what you do, you are fulfilling the law and the He suffered similar things. I pray that He will grant all of us this grace. prophets, commanding us to love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. And what greater act of love can one make than to give oneself, wholly and entirely, in one's state of life and in one's duty, for the salvation and relief of the afflicted! Our entire perfection consists in this. It remains for you only to join zeal to action and to conform yourself to God's good pleasure, doing and bearing with all things for the same intentions Our Lord had and for which He suffered similar things. I pray that He will grant all of us his grace. SY. 7. Letter 2734
- 12 SV 9.30 Your resolutions might be like this; "I am going to serve the poor. I will try to go to them in a pleasant way, to console and edify them. I will speak to them as if they were my masters. There is one of them who only rarely speaks to me. I'll put up with it. I usually wound a Sister on such and such an occasion. I'll refrain from doing so. she annoys me sometimes on this subject. I'll bear it. That woman scolds me; another blames me. I'll try not to deviate from my duty, and give her the respect and honour I'm bound to give. When I am with So-and-so I almost always suffer from spiritual damage. I'll avoid the occasion as much as possible". That is how, it seems to me, my Sisters, you ought to make your prayer. Do you not think this method useful and easy?
- 13 ...do not worry about the future. Spend what you need, each year, according to your custom, and, if any remains, bring it to the house. It will serve to raise sisters to serve the poor. You need only what will feed and clothe you; the rest belongs to the service of the poor. Oh my sisters, have you not heard that God has chosen the poor to make them rich in faith?...What do you know, my sisters, I say, but, God having called you to the glory of serving the poor, his goodness may wish to test your fidelity to show forth this truth, that God has chosen the poor to make them rich in faith? O, my daughters, if you are truly poor, you are even

more truly rich, since God is your all. Cling to him, my dear sisters. Who has ever said that those who cling to the promises of God have ever been disappointed? Such a thing has never been, and will never be, seen. Yes, my daughters, God is faithful to his promises and it is good to trust in him, and that trust is all the wealth and security of the Daughters of Charity. May you be happy, my daughters, if you never lack this confidence!

- 14 It is for Charity, for God, for the poor. If you knew your happiness, in truth, Sister, you would be overcome with joy; for, in doing what you do, you fulfil the law and the prophets, which instruct us to love God with all our hearts, and our neighbours as ourselves. And what greater act of love can one offer that to give oneself entirely, by virtue of one's state and role, for the salvation and care of those who are afflicted? This is our whole perfection. Remain united in affection and action and be conformed to the good will of God, doing and enduring all things with the same intentions as Our Lord had, and undergoing the same sufferings. I pray that he will give us all this grace.
- 15 The Crucified God, p.327.
- 16 G.M.Hopkins in *The world is charged with the grandeur of God*.
- 17 SV 9:418 Philosophers say that amongst the secrets of nature there is a fountain of youth in which the soul grows young. However that may be, we know that there are mineral springs that are most beneficial to nature. But prayer rejuvenates the soul far more truly than the fountains of youth the philosophers speak of rejuvenate the body. In prayer your soul, weakened by bad habits, grows quite vigorous; in prayer it recovers the vision it lost when it went blind; ears formerly deaf to the voice of God are open to holy inspirations, and the heart receives new strength, is animated with a courage it never felt before. ... .And what is it but prayer that effects all that? It is a fountain of youth in, which she has grown young; from it she draws the graces apparent in her, which make her such as you now see her to be.
- 18 n. 49
- 19 Cf. Hymn *Lauda Sion* for the feast of Corpus Christi.
- 20 SV 11:146. Love is inventive to the point of infinity.
- 21 1 Cor 11:26.
- 22 Galatians 5:22-23.
- 23 SV 9:239 Do you think my daughters that God merely expect you to bring his poor a morsel of bread a scrap of meat, some soup and medicines? Oh no, no, no no, my daughters, that was not his design when he chose you from all eternity to render Him the services which you render Him in the person of the poor. He expects you to provide for the needs of the poor as well as for those of the body. They are in need of heavenly manna; and where will you find it so that you communicate it to them? In Holy Communion, my daughters. Little and great, big and small, all need it. And hence you should pay special attention to prepare well for the reception of this Divine Spirit which is given in abundance.
- 24 SV 9: 42

- 25 SV 7:505-506 Your food alone for just two persons comes to almost twelve hundred écus. This scares me. I am well aware that you have servants, but why several? Can you not do with one? I also know that you have unexpected guests to whom you cannot refuse a meal; but to keep open house for everyone, and to feed and lodge in your house people who pay you no room and board, is something you should not do, be they French or foreigners, poor or rich, recommended or not recommended, especially when you cannot cover this expense on your own. For you cannot in conscience borrow money to appear splendid and generous, not even to do acts of charity, since I have asked you not to do so. You tell me that in your position it is difficult to refrain from doing so. I reply that it will be even more difficult for us to send you the money to pay and that, if you knew how poor we are, you would have no trouble making your own poverty known to those who make demands on you, since your receipts and expenditures have to be regulated and balanced. In the name of God, Monsieur, take these measures in the future. God does not ask you to go beyond the means He gives you.
- 26 Abelly Book III p.72 He said one day to his priests on this subject:  
It is not enough for us merely to celebrate mass, for in keeping with God's will for us we should offer this sacrifice with as much devotion as is possible for us. With the help of his grace, we must conform ourselves as much as possible to Jesus Christ. While on earth he offered himself in sacrifice to his Eternal Father. We must do our best, gentlemen, as completely as our poor and miserable nature will allow, to offer our sacrifice to God in the same spirit as our Lord offered himself.
- 27 Cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* n.5
- 28 Abelly ib. p.76 When he was obliged to leave Saint Lazare on some business, before leaving he would go to prostrate himself before the Lord in the blessed sacrament to ask God's blessing upon his mission. Upon his return, he would again stop in the chapel, as though to give an account of his activities in the city. He would thank God for the graces he had received, and humble himself for any faults he may have committed. He did this, not in a formal or routine manner, but with a true spirit of worship and piety, remaining before the blessed sacrament in a humble and devout posture. He proposed this same practice to his community, saying it was only right for them to fulfill this duty to the master of the house.
- 29 R.C 2:7 That is the basis of all holiness in the Gospels and a bond of the entire spiritual life. If a person has this humility everything good will come along with it. If he does not have it, he will lose any good he may have and will always be anxious and worried
- 30 SV 11:342 All our life is but a moment which flies away – disappears quickly, the seventy-six years of my life which I have passed seem to me but a dream and a moment. Nothing remains of them but regret for having so badly employed this time. Let us think of the dissatisfaction we will have at our deaths if we do not use this time to be merciful. Let us, then, be merciful, my Brothers, and let us exercise mercy towards all in a way that we will never find a poor man without consoling him, if we can, nor an uneducated

man without teaching him in a few words those things which it is necessary to believe and which he must do for his salvation.

O Savior, do not permit that we abuse our vocation. Do not take away from this Company the spirit of mercy, because what would become of us if You if You should withdraw Your mercy from it? Give us, then, that mercy, along with the spirit of gentleness and humility spirit of gentleness and humility.

- 31 SV 6:251-252. I thank God for this, especially for your desire to go to serve God in Madagascar. I did not know if He will take you at your word, but I do know that this zeal is not displeasing to Him. You will do well to continue to offer yourself to Him to go or to remain and, in general, to do whatever He may ordain, since you will all that He wills and nothing apart from His Will. I frequently offer you and all your Sisters to Him so that you may be truly submissive to His Will always and everywhere, as Daughters whom our Lord has chosen and called to His service to serve as a good example and consolation to the people.

I thank the Divine Goodness that you are indeed striving to carry out your little duties and, above all, to maintain yourself in peace, both at home and abroad. Because you contribute so much to union among the Sisters, you will also be the cause of the many graces God will give them, as long as they are closely united with you and one another and are very faithful to their exercises. I greet you all in this desire, asking our Lord to strengthen you in your hard work.

- 32 SV 6:95 How are you Sister, and how are your Sisters? Do you have many patients? Are you happy to serve them well for the love of God? Are you at peace in the house and with people outside; above all, are you closely united among yourselves? Do you love one another? Do you support one another? Is the little Rule observed? In a word, my dear Daughter, are you all good Daughters of Charity, pleasing in the eyes of God and edifying to everyone? If that is so, as I would like to hope, oh, what a source of consolation that is, and how I thank His Divine Goodness for it, because it is one of the greatest joys one can have on earth! If, however, that were not the case, it would give cause for great sadness... Continue, for your part, Sister, to take good care of the others so as to draw them to God and be faithful to their exercises; treat them with respect, gentleness and affection. Lastly, give them the example of the virtues you want them to practise. I ask our Lord, who is their source and who practised them first in order to teach us, to grant them to you and to them.

- 33 *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* n. 49

# Lectio Divina

## Praying the Scriptures

“Your word is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path.”

Psalm 118:105

Con Curtin CM

One of the encouraging features of the church after Vatican II is the spread of prayer groups throughout the world. In spite of the many distractions of a technological age, people still have a thirst for God: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4.4). People are practicing many forms of mental prayer according to their tastes e.g. contemplative meditation, charismatic prayer and Lectio Divina.

There are times, due to a variety of different causes when contemplative meditation does not seem to work for us; in these times, I suggest you use a different method of prayer known as *Lectio Divina* which in english means Divine Reading – Sacred Reading. At prayer, Bishop McMahan (Brentwood) advised his priests to vary their tactics, but never to give up because we are suffering from distractions or spiritual dryness. God looks to our intentions. The very will to pray is to pray. What really matters is to give our time and attention to God, regardless of our feelings.

### *Lectio Divina*

It’s origin goes back to monastic life. In olden times, before the advent of printing, there may have been only one or two copies of the bible, in a monastery, and the monk would concentrate on meditating on one book of the bible for the whole year e.g. St. Luke’s gospel or the prophet Isaiah. The monk kept mulling over it night and day, not only in church, but also at work in the fields and in the workshop.

Nowadays, when we are swamped with reading matter, we get into the habit of reading very rapidly, e.g. just glancing over the headings of the newspapers.

Lectio Divina demands slow reading and re-reading of a passage from sacred scripture. We mull over a passage not just to find out what the passage means i.e. a technical exegesis of the passage as in scripture study but mulling over it, trying to savour it, to get a deeper insight into it, because it greatly helps to have some background to the passage and to have some exegesis of the passage. We pick out certain words or phrases that have touched us personally. We need silence between

the phrases. We ask ourselves, what does this passage say to me in my daily life? It pins me down to real life. It does not let my prayer become too much up in the air, and divided from daily life, very much like St. Vincent's direction always to form a practical resolution at prayer.

We have often heard the classic definition of prayer of "raising the heart and mind to God" but, in fact, it is a response to the word of God who has first spoken to us through revelation of sacred scripture and because it is the word of God, it has a unique power. The Holy Spirit in us, reacts to the Holy Spirit speaking through the divine word and the result is prayer.

It is extraordinary what riches the sacred scripture yields up when we ponder over it in prayer. There are passages in scripture which we have heard again and again, and we are inclined to dismiss when we hear them on Sunday, and close down. If we meditate on them, we get a deeper insight, and this can touch us very deeply and affect our lives.

The exercise consists of Three Steps: Reading, Meditation and Prayer. It can take place anywhere, in a church, a hall or at home. It can teach us to live in His presence in all the ordinary activities of life.

#### *1st STEP; A slow reverential reading of the text*

We read it several times – if with a group, get different readers to read. It is very helpful to structure the text – Old or New Testament? What stage in the history of God's people? The life of Jesus? The young church? To what literary genre does the passage belong? Is it history, poetry, parable, proverb, allegory? A certain amount of biblical knowledge is always a help, whether we get it from attending a bible class or using a bible commentary. There are many good bible commentaries readily available nowadays.

#### *2nd STEP; Meditation*

We ask ourselves, has this anything to say to me? We "recognise" the passage e.g. Visitation of Our Lady to St Elizabeth. In Our Lady's great charity in helping St Elizabeth an elderly woman about to give birth to a child, even though she was with child herself, and given the role of Mother of God. When I was on retreat, I was given the passage where Our Lord visits Zaccheus. Our Lord alone had time for Zaccheus. I got an insight into Our Lord's great love for sinners, for social outcasts. No one in the town of Jericho had any time for Zaccheus – a dishonest tax collector – a sinner in every one's eyes. How do I react to sinners and to outcasts? See the passage where Our Lord forgives the good thief, in His last dying moments on the cross. His great mercy – His love for sinners. He seeks them out in His last moments on earth etc even though He was Himself in great agony.

*3rd STEP; Prayer*

Our reflection will spontaneously lead us into prayer e.g. into sentiments of Thanksgiving, Love of God, Humility and Petition. We must make sure that Thanksgiving is part of our Prayer.

We need not ask the question, “Will I be able to find myself in this passage?” I certainly will. The only question is, whether we open ourselves to meeting Him there. When we have done a good *Lectio* we have the feeling that the passage was written especially for us, and that our whole life lives in it.

We repeat the three steps, going deeper each time, deepening also moves towards communion with other people.

Lectio Divina leads us often into centering prayer and contemplation, where we “Rest in The Lord.” Our prayer often a mixture of Lectio Divina and Contemplation.

This is an outline of how to conduct a prayer group meeting using Lectio Divina. It will also serve as a rough guide to private prayer using Lectio Divina.

*Lectio Divina and Centering Prayer*

Take the Gospel of the coming Sunday

- 1) Read the Gospel out loud. Pause for a few moments.
- 2) Read the Gospel a second time and try to picture the scene. Pause for a minute or two.
- 3) Read the Gospel a third time and give a short “homily” or insight or background to the passage. Encourage the group to share their insights or reflections. Take five, ten or fifteen minutes.
- 4) Read the Gospel a fourth time. Perhaps a word or phrase stands out for you. Say the word or phrase out loud, allow others in the group to do the same. It doesn’t matter if the same word or phrase is repeated a few times, but allow a little space between each word or phrase. Take five minutes.
- 5) Move into twenty minutes of Centering Prayer, or contemplation. Rest in the Lord.
- 6) Conclude with the “Our Father”.

# Three Cemeteries

Brian Magee CM

*What follows is the text of a reflection broadcast on radio by Brian, some years before his death in 2003. It was supplied by Mr Gerry Luccan, a long-time friend of Brian, and it is poignant that, in his own family history, Brian held two sides of the 'northern situation'. Ed.*

July 1st 1916 is remembered in terms of loss of life as the most expensive day of the First World War.

21,040 British soldiers died, 35,000 were wounded and more than 600 taken prisoner in the Battle of the Somme.

High in the ranks of losses was the 36th Ulster Division, and in the July days that followed, the news of these deaths brought grief to the towns and villages across Ulster. It took nearly ten days before the extent of the tragedy was known. It left a mark that still remains.

Each July, as the pictures of Drumcree Church appear on TV screens across the world, I remember my Protestant grandmother laid to rest in that church cemetery. Widowed on that day in 1916, and left to bring up a large family of eight children in poor circumstances, the Somme was for her an ever-present memory. She had been told of her husband's death by the local Catholic parish priest, one of those then in Tanderagee who could afford, or read, the Belfast Telegraph with its seemingly never ending lists of dead and wounded.

And I remember that behind the cameraman with his sights on the Drumcree church there is the other Drumcree churchyard, the Catholic one, in which my Catholic grandparents lie. That grandfather was the local postman, who not only delivered but also wrote and read letters. That July 1916 his task was a sad and sorrowful one.

What I know about him comes from my mother's memories. But I can identify his handwriting, for I have seen it in numerous Census returns of 1911, as he had to fill in many forms for those unable to read and write. He was awarded the British Empire Medal for his lifetime services.

I have a particular reason to remember the fields of Picardy and the military cemetery in Beaumont Hamel that contains the graves of two and a half thousand casualties of the Somme battles. On a wet spring day I stood there among the neat lines of graves and read the inscription to my Protestant grandfather, Sergeant Robert Magee, 9th Battalion,

Royal Irish Fusiliers, aged 38.

What had motivated him, at that age, to be out leading young recruits, most of whom were there just for the adventure away from home? His leadership qualities in Colonel Blacker's men - the best battalion in the 36th - must have been appreciated.

How far did he lead them on that morning as the 36th Division moved out of Thierval Wood? The myth is of Protestant Ulstermen in their orange sashes shouting "No Surrender" as they ran to the enemy lines. The reality is more of frightened youngsters, hugely weighed down with equipment, ordered to walk and not run, only to be caught in barbed wire which was supposed to have been destroyed. And there the murderous fire of the German machine guns cut them down.

As I stood very much alone in that cemetery looking towards their memorial, the Ulster Tower, I offered prayers for their eternal rest and reward for the sacrifice they made. "For your tomorrow, we gave our today" is the message put in the mouths of those who died. My tale of three cemeteries reminds me that that tomorrow is still in the making.

## Fr Sean Murphy CM

*This is the text of the homily given at Sean's funeral mass.*

On Pentecost Sunday 1950, seven of us Vincentians were ordained priest. Fifty years later, remarkably, we were all still alive and working, and celebrated Mass together. With Sean's death we have lost five in the short handful of years since 2000. I think it would be Sean's wish that we should remember today, in addition to himself, the names of Vinnie O'Brien, Gearoid O'Sullivan, Diarmuid O'Hegarty and Des O'Connell. Frank McMorrow, concelebrating this Mass, and myself are the two survivors of our class.

All the readings in the Mass today speak of the same thing, the astounding future that awaits us after death - transformation and transfiguration.

In the first reading from Isaiah: "He will remove the mourning veil that covers us during life and hides so much from us". In the second reading from the Letter to the Philippians: "God will transfigure these bodies of ours into his own glorious body" and, in the Gospel of St Mark, Transfiguration again, this time of Christ Himself on Mount Tabor.

But despite all this, we do strange things when we speak of death. We forever see it as something set over against life: death, we say, does nothing for life except take it away, it is the end of life, life's great enemy.

Not so! Death is an essential component of life, its' what we were born for, we are creatures 'unto death'. It is death that gives life its meaning, it's not the end of life, but rather its fulfillment, marking our passage over into our true life.

It's a startling thought that it's only at death that we will become and recognise our true selves. As St Paul puts it "we are all waiting to be set free, free from all the incompleteness of our present existence."

Today Sean has become and recognises his true self, today he has been set free. His time of waiting has come to an end. Death marks the end of our waiting; more, it marks the end of dying, the end of all those little deaths, the brothers of death that we undergo in life. They are the real deaths and life is full of them. The loss of youth and beauty, loss of health and strength, the onset of loneliness, fragility and a sense of failure – they are all the brothers and sisters of death.

When we view death in this light, against the failures and frustrations of life on earth, we may well ask with St Paul, "death, where is thy sting?" – why are we so afraid of it ?

A poet, Thomas Wolfe, captures well Paul's meaning. Addressing death he says, "because I have seen and known you so well, and have lived so long with loneliness, your brother, I do not fear you any longer - death, my friend". Death has come to Sean, as it will, hopefully, come to us all not as an enemy but as a friend.

The transfiguration that characterises death is the harvesting of our life. It sends a powerful message to our life today. It gives us a strong assurance of something we badly need to know - the work and relevance of our lives here and now. Yes, we do need assurance of the importance of what we make of ourselves in this life on earth.

There is a common saying, "You can't take it with you!" But that's not true, in fact, the opposite is true. We bring everything with us. All that we have loved in life, all that we have valued and indeed, created, will live on. Our relationship with God, family and friends, all this has an eternal significance. All that we have made of ourselves in this life goes with us Into eternity.

It's all put beautifully in a prayer said at the reception of the Remains, "the bonds of love and affection that we have formed in life, do not unravel at death". That's why family and friends are here today, to acknowledge all the bonds that Sean formed with them, and with the hosts of people he ministered to during 56 years of his life as a priest, in Lanark, Mill Hill, Sheffield, Phibsboro and Dunstable to name only a few. None of these bonds will ever unravel.

"Sean, today your time of waiting has ended, this day you have been set free. May the angels lead you into paradise, may the Saints and Martyrs welcome you at your coming and with Lazarus who once was poor may you have eternal rest"

## SEAN MURPHY CM

Born: Dublin, 30 March 1926  
Entered the CM: 7 September 1943  
Vows: 8 September 1945  
Ordained Priest: 28 May 1950 in Holy Cross College,  
Clonliffe, by John Charles McQuaid, Archbishop of  
Dublin

## APPOINTMENTS:

1950-'57: St Mary's, Lanark  
1957-'66: St Vincent's, Sheffield  
1966-'69: St Peter's, Phibsboro  
1969-'76: St Mary's, Lanark  
1976-'80: Edinburgh  
1980-'94: St Mary's, Lanark  
1994-'97: St Vincent's, Sheffield  
1997-'99: St Stephen's, Warrington  
1999-'02: Derby  
2002-'04: St Mary's, Dunstable  
2004-'05: Marillac Hospital, Warley

Buried: Glasnevin