Fidelity to founder under the Bourbon régime: the Congregation of the Mission, 1660-1736.

Seán Alexander Smith

A Thesis Submitted for the Award of Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Supervisor: Dr Alison Forrestal

Department of History
and
The Moore Institute

National University of Ireland, Galway

September 2012
# Table of Contents

Declaration ...........................................................................................................................................ii

Acknowledgements ..............................................................................................................................iii

List of Abbreviations ............................................................................................................................v

Notes ......................................................................................................................................................vi

Introduction ...........................................................................................................................................1

Chapter 1. Who were the Vincentians? Rhetoric and reality in the Congregation of the Mission ........................................................................................................21

Chapter 2. Fidelity and failure: the Congregation in Madagascar, 1648-1674 .................................62

Chapter 3. The Call of the Poor and the Call of the Prince: the Congregation at court, 1672-1704 ........................................................................................................................................95

Chapter 4. Masters and Servants: The Congregation and the Royal Chaplaincies of the Galleys, 1683-1703 ........................................................................................................................................142

Chapter 5. Re-establishing Madagascar: The Congregation in the Mascareignes, 1711-1736 ........................................................................................................................................189

Conclusion ...........................................................................................................................................238

Bibliography .......................................................................................................................................257
Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that I have not received a degree based on its contents from NUI Galway or any other university.

____________________
Seán A. Smith
Dr Alison Forrestal supervised this thesis, and I gratefully acknowledge her direction in bringing it to completion. I also thank her for sharing with me her immense store of knowledge on Vincent de Paul, and for her magnificent patience in steering me towards a finer writing style. In addition to my supervisor, I benefited from the counsel of many members of staff in the Department of History at NUI Galway, and my thanks go to all of them, past and present. Dr Lionel Pilkington was project leader of the Texts, Contexts Cultures strand ‘Globalisation, Culture and Empire’ and I wish to thank him for the support he gave me since the beginning of the programme, especially for making significant travel allowances available for my numerous trips to France and elsewhere. At the Moore Institute, the directors Prof Nicholas Canny and Prof Nicholas Allen, as well as the administrators Ms Martha O’ Shaughnessy, Ms Marie Kennedy and Ms Kate Thornhill have, through the years, provided invaluable assistance.

Without the support of several funding bodies, researching and writing this dissertation would have been impossible. I therefore thank the Higher Education Authority and the Mellon Foundation for their generous fellowships and travel bursaries.

This study is built on the extraordinary generosity of members of the Congregation of the Mission. Above all, the tireless and unending work of Père Claude Lautissier, who helped me locate a vast range of primary and secondary sources, will never be forgotten. His trust in allowing me to handle documents relating to members of the Congregation was slowly granted but unfailingly maintained. *Je le remercie de sa constante sollicitude.* Likewise, Vincentians based in the United States furnished me with sound advice and gave me the tremendous opportunity to spend an extended period at De Paul University in Chicago. I thank Frs Edward Udovic and John Rybolt especially. I also thank Dr Alex Papadopoulos for his help in nourishing my contacts with De Paul University.

My gratitude goes to Sheila Pratschke and her wonderful staff at the *Collège des Irlandais* in Paris, especially Mme Nathalie Gravière and M. Yann LeCadre. I also thank the staffs of the many repositories where I worked during research periods, which included the personnel of the Archives nationales, the Bibliothèque Mazarine, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Archives départementales des Yvelines, the Bibliothèque de la Société de l’histoire du Protestantisme français, the Archives des Affaires Etrangères, and the Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence.
Someone attempting to research and write a doctoral thesis relies on friends for much-needed diversion. I wish to thank my dearest friend Ms Lucie Langerova for her kindness and inimitable talent for making me laugh. My companions in the Moore Institute deserve special mention too. Ms Laura Vickers, Ms Sheila Walsh, Ms Joanne McEntee, and Ms Ann Keady have been the most delightful peers. I also wish to thank Mr James O’Donnell and Ms Ayla Zachary, my co-students on the Globalisation project, for their friendships. Of course, friends all over the world visited me and advised me throughout, and they must be remembered. To Ms Jeanette Healy, Ms Sarah Heald, Ms Catherine Bell, Mme Dolita Jeanroy, Ms Harriet Edwards and her family, Ms Molly McDonald, and Ms Jenny Thompson, I owe countless days and nights of truly strengthening amusement.

I thank Dr Mark Stansbury for teaching me the rudiments of reading early modern scripts, Dr Shelley Troupe and Dr Tomás Finn for their marvellous tips on surviving doctoral study, and Dr Patrick Ryan, my former guidance counsellor, for his mentorship.

It is customary to end these acknowledgements with expressions of gratitude to one’s family. Personally, I think having their names closest to the actual text of the thesis is as good a reason for this custom as any, for no others have been closer to its author than my darling parents Marian and Stephen. To both I owe debts which can never be repaid. I thank them for their emotional and financial support, as well as their great senses of humour. To my cherished sister Jacqueline go heartfelt thanks for giving me lifts, both the spiritual kind and ones in her car. Finally, I thank my Aunt Viola for her goodness in providing meals and solace to a poor early modernist when he needed them.
**List of Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACM</td>
<td>Archives de la Congrégation de la Mission, rue de Sèvres, Paris.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AN</td>
<td>Archives nationales, Paris.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AN MAR</td>
<td>Archives nationales, Marine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BNF</td>
<td>Bibliothèque nationale de France.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAOM</td>
<td>Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RT</td>
<td><em>Recueil trimestriel de documents et travaux inédits pour servir à l’histoire des Mascareignes françaises</em>, 1932-1949. 8 vols. Published by Albert Lougnon under the patronage of the Académie de l’Île de la Réunion. Saint-Denis (Réunion).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notes

Translations in the text are drawn from several sources. Where authorised English translations of original French texts exist, especially Vincent de Paul’s correspondence, they have been used. Unless specified, all other translations are the author’s.

The members of the Congregation of the Mission have collectively been called ‘Priests of the Mission’, ‘Lazarists’, ‘Vincentians’ or even ‘sons of Monsieur Vincent’. In this thesis, I refer to them as Vincentians, because they are generally known as such in the English-speaking world. Furthermore, the name Vincentian more properly signifies the missionaries’ identity as followers of Vincent de Paul.
Among those who passed comment on the life of Vincent de Paul after his death, his first biographer, Louis Abelly, made robust claims that de Paul had helped restore the French church to what he christened its ‘first splendour.’ In Abelly’s account, one of the defining features of lost splendour was the infidelity into which the church, and indeed the realm, had sunk. He depicted the church which greeted de Paul’s birth in 1581 as a body reeling from the effects of the Protestant Reformation and then the tumultuous religious wars of the century’s closing decades. In language typical of the period, he denounced these ‘horrible storms’ and ‘plagues’ because they had driven significant numbers of the French population to first break their fidelity to the pope, and then sent them into what he called ‘open rebellion against their King.’\(^1\) To make matters worse, the clergy were corrupt and their flocks were ignorant of the faith. In stark contrast, Abelly described de Paul as God’s ‘faithful servant’, who doubly ‘made profession of constant fidelity towards the King.’\(^2\)

When he explained why he founded his apostolic society, the Congregation of the Mission, in 1625, de Paul himself was more specific about the kind of fidelity he sought to embody. In the 1658 Rule he prepared for it, he declared that his wish was to place rediscovery of and fidelity to Christ’s original mission – evangelisation of the poor – at the heart of his and his followers’ ministry in the European countryside.\(^3\) After his death, de Paul’s brethren would take up this theme, repeatedly announcing fidelity to their founder’s ethos. However, pledges to return the church to its primitive glory were not sufficient to banish the forces which had previously caused decadence in it and its religious associations. De Paul and other founders of clerical bodies in seventeenth-century France, such as Pierre Bérulle, Jean Eudes, and Jean-Jacques Olier, conceived their institutional projects as solutions to the infidelities of the past, but the dangers which earthly dignities,

---

2 Ibid, 2-4 and Preface: ‘fidèle serviteur’; ‘…fait profession d’une constante fidélité envers le Roi.’
3 CCD, 13a: 431, 17 May 1658.
wealth and power posed to their ideals remained perennially potent. They had corrupted ecclesiastical institutions and personnel in the past, and they were just as capable of tainting the small groups of committed reformers that appeared in the *époque missionnaire*. The Congregation of the Mission was no exception.

Historically, there has been much greater interest in de Paul than in his followers in the Congregation. John Rybolt’s bibliography of works on de Paul lists hundreds of titles, books, magazine articles, scholarly studies and devotional manuals, which range from Abelly’s 1664 biography to twentieth-century monographs. In contrast, expositions on the group of missionaries that was charged with perpetuating his ethos and work have been surprisingly limited. The main source of information on the Congregation is still a small pool of internal histories compiled by Vincentians. The principal purpose of these works has been to provide members of the Congregation with edifying accounts of their organisation. In 1720, Claude Joseph Lacour confessed that his history of the Congregation was designed to ‘bring those who will read [it] to give thanks to God for all the blessings which his goodness has spread over the little Congregation up to now…’ 253 years later, Stafford Poole describes his 1973 history of the Congregation ‘as a kind of handy guide for the average Vincentian in learning something of his background and history.’ Naturally, the pressures of guide-writing on internal historians heavily tilt the balance away from objective analysis. Pierre Coste’s brief history of the Congregation, published in 1927, begins and ends with direct references to the

---

4 In 1611, Cardinal Bérulle founded the Congregation of the Oratory to advance his programme for priestly living. Two of his protégés also started religious congregations. In 1643, Jean Eudes created the Congregation of Jesus and Mary (Eudists) in Caen and in 1645 Jean-Jacques Olier gathered his followers in the extremely influential Company of priests of Saint-Sulpice: Alison Forrestal, *Fathers, Pastors and Kings: Visions of episcopacy in seventeenth century France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), chap.2.


7 Stafford Poole, *A History of the Congregation of the Mission* (n.p., 1973), xvi. José Herrera also states that his history was written for members of the Congregation: *Historia de la Congregación de la Misión* (Madrid, 1949), 8.
providential actions of God to explain its creation and subsequent evolution. Recent studies are similarly infused with this language. Mezzadri and Román’s 1992 history of the Vincentians, a lengthy investigation which, unlike Poole’s, makes significant use of previously hidden primary sources, still contains the kind of homiletic language common in inspirational literature. Given the edifying remit of Vincentian historians, their approach is not astonishing, but it leads to a tendency among them to treat the Vincentians’ fidelity to de Paul after his death as a finished artefact rather than an aspiration. For instance, in describing the missionaries on one of the projects covered in this thesis, the mission to Madagascar, Poole pronounces on what he deems the ‘heroism, self-sacrifice, and total dedication’ of the Congregation’s members without significant justification.

The most crippling weakness among internally written histories of the Congregation is insufficient contextualisation. Because they are designed as hagiographic manuals, these works are largely inward-looking and either skim over the impact of external forces, such as socio-political trends and wider ecclesiastical movements, or ignore them outright. Mezzadri and Román’s work is exceptional in this regard. The authors give some attention to the political and social history of both early modern France and Europe, although treatment of these subjects is often too generalised and relegated to separate chapters in their book. As a result, little sense emerges of the dynamic relationships that existed between members of the Congregation and outsiders, especially patrons. Discussion of the Vincentians’ private corporate efforts to remain faithful to de Paul cannot be divorced from assessing their development as a public institution under the Bourbon régime. An entirely neglected subject is the Congregation’s relationship with the sovereignty, an especially consequential theme given that de Paul’s direct influence as founder ceased at almost the same time Louis XIV began his personal rule in France. The king regularly engaged the Vincentians’ services, but he was driven by his own

---

10 Poole, A History, 262.
11 Mezzadri and Román, The Vincentians, chap.2.
motives, above all related to domestic and foreign policy. Because of this, he often sought results vastly divergent from those of missionaries he recruited in his service. Finally, his authority meant that he was in a unique position to override any objection, but these facts are rarely, if ever, confronted by Vincentian historians.

The consequence of ignoring the Congregation’s relations with outsiders is a highly reduced image of their status and importance in early modern France. In his history, Coste unveils the prevailing caricature of Vincentians when he states that the ‘priest of the Mission was and had to remain the priest of the countryside.’

Internally-created myths like this one would, of course, be harmless if strong indications did not exist that they lie at the root of the Congregation’s neglect by secular historians. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, histories of the Congregation were buried in voluminous biographical studies on Vincent de Paul, as if the activities of his followers began and ended with his more memorable career.

Twentieth-century historians of France continue to gloss over the Congregation’s enduring importance after de Paul’s death. One high-profile area of the Congregation’s ministry during Louis XIV’s reign serves to prove the point. Although the Vincentians were parish priests of Versailles from 1672, in his prize-winning study on Louis XIV François Bluche proceeds without a single mention of the Vincentians, although he refers to the Eudists, the Oratorians and the Jesuits in turn. It is small compensation that he makes but a single reference to de Paul.

Similarly, save for some brief allusions to de Paul, the Congregation is forgotten in Georges Minois’ study of the court clergy and confessors. One notable recent exception is Alexandre Maral’s work on the chapel at Versailles during Louis XIV’s reign, which makes some effort to rescue the Congregation’s place at court.

---

12 Coste, La Congrégation, 50: ‘Le prêtre de la Mission était et devait rester le prêtre de la campagne.’
However, Maral’s perspective is liturgical and musicological, and is thus too narrow to shed light on the Congregation’s development after de Paul’s death. This generally poor output when it comes to the Congregation stands in marked contrast to the production of recent studies of significant aspects of de Paul’s career, which explore his considerable influence and power.

There are compelling reasons for studying the phase of an ecclesiastical association’s history that coincides with the period of its founder’s life. By focusing on the early ministry of Ignatius of Loyola and his small band of disciples, John O’Malley’s study of the first Jesuits demonstrates how the founding generation of the Society of Jesus gave the order its fundamental shape, especially its distinctive spirituality and governmental structure. His conclusion that the reality of the Jesuits’ early work and identity does not correspond with the standard historical conceptions of the order is an instructive lesson for those who study a post-founder epoch.

Charles E. Williams’ monograph on the French Oratorians is more evenly weighted between founder and followers, although Williams devotes half of his work to examining the asceticism and theology of Pierre de Bérulle. The study underscores a fact about Bérulle which helpfully explains the disproportionate attention given to the creators of other religious institutes in seventeenth-century France: as well as being a founder, Bérulle sharply influenced wider currents in the church, particularly those promoting reform and superior clerical education. Thus, fame is by no means irrelevant to explaining the capacity of founders to attract historical interest. In her work on the foundation of the Daughters of Charity, Susan E. Dinan demonstrates how the Daughters became indispensable to the French church, but Dinan’s ability to show this hangs on examining the ingenuity of the Daughters’ charismatic...
founders, Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul, who deliberately misrepresented the order’s activities in order to creatively deliver services to the poor.\textsuperscript{20} Founders had the advantage of originating and developing the attention-grabbing ministries and networks later followed by others.

The founder’s death was, however, a critical moment, triggering a new era in the development of a religious order. This fact was in evidence long before the foundation of post-Tridentine reforming apostolates. The future direction of the Franciscan Order after Francis of Assisi’s death was riven by the confrontation of rival opinions about how best to preserve the spirit of Francis’ ministry.\textsuperscript{21} For the early modern traditions, James Brodrick calls the death of Ignatius Loyola in 1556 the ‘first crisis’ of many it confronted in the next twenty years.\textsuperscript{22} Similarly, Adolphe Perraud emphasises the ‘new phase’ of the French Oratory’s history that began with the death of Cardinal Bérulle in 1629.\textsuperscript{23} In several cases, death highlighted the urgency of making promises to retain practices and traditions originating in the founder’s lifetime. In the wake of Loyola’s death, the Jesuit leaders made a decree that no future alterations to Loyola’s Constitutions could be made.\textsuperscript{24} For their part, the priests of the Oratory were so concerned about the authenticity of their public ministry after their founder’s death that they declared Cardinal Bérulle to be the ‘perpetual superior general’ of the Congregation, thus making the earthly leaders who followed simply his spiritual lieutenants.\textsuperscript{25} Founders themselves were acutely aware of the pressures which their deaths created. In April 1657, Vincent de Paul addressed a group of priests from Saint-Sulpice after the death of their founder, Jean-Jacques Olier. He acknowledged that the followers were ‘plunged’ into grief, but reminded them to be faithful to their founder’s ethos, declaring that ‘[Olier] will have gladly left his body, provided his spirit dwell in you. That was his greatest

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Perraud} Adolphe Perraud, \textit{L’Oratoire de France au XVIIe et au XIXe siècle}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Paris: Ch. Douniol, 1866), 227.
\bibitem{Brodrick3} Brodrick, \textit{Progress of the Jesuits}, 27.
\bibitem{Williams} Williams, \textit{The French Oratorians}, 261.
\end{thebibliography}
desire and wish during his life; now you can make him happy.”

However, de Paul’s allocution offered few clues to Olier’s grief-stricken disciples about what fidelity entailed.

Rooted in the Latin word *fidelis*, in its common usage fidelity is the quality of being faithful, loyal, or showing unswerving allegiance, usually to a person, party or bond. Fidelity can also mean the degree to which a description resembles or corresponds with the original. The concept of fidelity is a fundamentally religious one, for the word *fides* conveys the soul’s trust in and obedience to God and his word. In the history of Christianity, allusions to fidelity began with the biblical record, and normally signified belonging to the religious community. In the Old Testament, for instance, the scribe of Deuteronomy made fidelity to the decrees and statutes given to Moses on Mount Sinai the gateway to the Israelites’ possession of the Promised Land. In the apostolic era, fellowship in Christ, and exclusion from it, were premised on imitation of his life and fidelity to his commandments. Later, early modern notions of fidelity rested on key Augustinian ideas such as the *pactum societatis*, where all members of the Christian community were united in bonds of love.

Fidelity is also closely related to the term fealty (from the Old French *feauté*), which dates from feudal times, and signified the homage and obedience due an over-lord by his vassal. This last definition has largely influenced use of the concept of fidelity in historical studies. In his seminal work on absolutist institutions in early modern France, Roland Mousnier in 1974 used the term *fidélité* to describe the mechanism of trust and devotion which was the engine of social and political relationships in the *ancien régime*. Twenty-one of Mousnier’s former colleagues

---

26 *CCD*, 13a: 184.
and students explore the notion of *fidélité* in their 1981 *Hommage* to him. In his introductory essay to this volume, Yves Durand stresses that the sentiment lay at the heart of a society based on orders, honour, dignity and esteem. Other essayists emphasise the term’s relevance in understanding systems of patronage, in particular the affective and moral ligatures which bound patrons and their clients or *créatures* in the pre-Louisquatorzian era. More recently, Sharon Kettering adds significant caveats to Mousnier’s proposed frameworks of fidelity by insisting that they were far more complicated, unstable and pecuniary than Mousnier allows.

Of course, the mechanisms which apply in these secular conceptions of fidelity are not wholly instructive when it comes to examining the operation of bonds of obedience in a religious context, and this is especially true for religious orders. If, as Arthur Herman argues, fidelity worked as a ‘language game,’ a means to obtain gifts, benefits or power in *ancien régime* France, it was an end in itself according to the rules of clerical companies. Because of this, and in contrast to the semi-official or unofficial ties connecting actors in Mousnier’s *société des fidèles*, members of religious orders (and then societies of apostolic life) created much stronger enforcement frameworks to ensure fidelity to their institute’s charismatic leader, code of values or traditions. The sacred vows of chastity, poverty and obedience are central to religious profession, because they are solemnized promises of fidelity which hold the association together. Furthermore, their scrupulous observance is regularly monitored by internal visitations conducted by senior members of the order, and often sanctioned by high external authorities such as ecumenical councils. In its decree on the religious life, the Council of Trent in 1563 enjoined all male and female regulars to ‘order and arrange their lives according to the provision of the rule they profess and…faithfully observe what belongs to the

---

perfection of their profession, such as the vows of obedience, poverty and chastity.\textsuperscript{36}

In her study of Catholic religious orders, Patricia Wittberg points out that fidelity and infidelity are intrinsic to the history of most religious orders.\textsuperscript{37} The differing approaches to the subject offered by early modern historians testify that this is true whatever stage of development is inspected. O’Malley’s study of the Jesuits addresses the early construction of Jesuit fidelity by charting the evolution of the Society’s schema of values and range of work over its first twenty-five years. However, despite some analysis of certain Jesuits’ dissatisfaction with the direction of the Society’s evolution after Loyola’s death, O’Malley’s study ends soon after this event, and thus offers only a few insights into the long-term fate of the founder’s projects.\textsuperscript{38} Mary Kathryn Robinson, in her recent study of the Benedictine Congregation of Saint-Maur in eighteenth-century France, demonstrates how the Maurists evinced fidelity by clinging onto elements of their monastic identity in the face of secular encroachments during a hostile Revolutionary era, although she does not explore fidelity in the wake of the founder’s death, a theme central to this study of the Congregation of the Mission.\textsuperscript{39} In other works, the fidelity of followers again emerges only obliquely. In her investigation of the Observant Franciscans during the French religious wars of the late sixteenth century, Megan Armstrong demonstrates how the coalition of the Franciscans’ corporate values and politics galvanised Catholic opposition to French Protestants.\textsuperscript{40} In places, she addresses the Franciscans’ fidelity to the original intention of their founder, such as their adaptation of strict Franciscan ideals of poverty to the cultural climate of the \textit{ancien régime}, but little emerges of the effects this had on the Franciscans’ self-conscious identity as

\textsuperscript{37} Patricia Wittberg, \textit{The Rise And Fall Of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 188. Wittberg’s version of infidelity is ‘ideological de-alignment.’
\textsuperscript{38} O’Malley, \textit{First Jesuits}, 308-309, 533-535.
\textsuperscript{39} Mary Kathryn Robinson, \textit{Regulars and the Secular Realm} (Scranton and London: University of Scranton Press, 2009), chap. 4.
\textsuperscript{40} Megan Armstrong, \textit{The Politics of Piety: Franciscan Preachers during the Wars of Religion} 1500-1600 (Rochester: University of Rochester, 2004).
adherents of Francis of Assisi’s ethos. Of course, the activities of Armstrong’s group of Franciscans are examined centuries after Assisi’s death, and the author concedes that certain core traditions had long since given way to new orthodoxies by dint of circumstance. But a study based on the immediate post-founder period of an order provides an excellent vantage point, because it permits us to chart threats and changes to a founder’s ideals when his memory was fresh in the minds of followers and observers.

II

Studies on the life of Vincent de Paul and the early development of his Congregation rightly acknowledge the central role his ethos of service to the poor played in orientating his work and that of his followers. However, current studies do not adequately address the fate of this ethos between his death in 1660 and his canonisation. The experience of the Vincentians reveals that the history of their Congregation after de Paul’s death was dominated by judgements made concerning their fidelity or lack thereof. In recognition of this fact, this thesis does not offer a general history of the Congregation in the ancien régime, but instead assesses how the evolution of the Congregation affected the Vincentians’ fidelity to their original mission, as well as the formative role that key events had in causing shifts in their core identity in the period from de Paul’s death in 1660 up to 1736, the year prior to his canonisation. But because the basic foundations of the Vincentians’ fidelity lie in the history and values which animated their founder’s life, it is necessary to commence long before these dates. Wittberg argues that ideological frames are central to the existence of religious communal groups, whose common vision and actions draw on them and from which they retain their meaning for individual members. In the Congregation of the Mission, these ideological frames were deeply connected to the major steps of de Paul’s early ministry. Consequently, the Vincentians’ individual and collective identity became focused on a degree of

---

41 Armstrong, Politics of Piety, 88-94. Armstrong’s work no doubts relies on David Burr’s masterful study The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century after Saint Francis (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001). While Burr’s work is exemplar, it mainly focuses on the internal theological differences of post-Francis Franciscanism rather than notions of fidelity per se.

42 Wittberg, The Rise and Fall, 197.
faithfulness to this ministry which would allow them to be called *fils de Monsieur Vincent*. The first chapter allows the reader to grasp the Congregation’s core institutional values and rhetoric of fidelity by rooting them in de Paul’s key accomplishments as a missionary priest. It begins with a discussion of the inspiration behind his early missions in the French countryside, and will answer threshold questions: what was de Paul’s original vision for his small band of followers? What needs did they initially seek to fulfil in the French Church? Analysis of this embryonic phase is vital because it reveals that myths about the Congregation which later became pervasive, especially the notion that it was a lowly and unimportant organisation, in fact originated in the writings and teachings of its founder and his other influential collaborators.

Measurement of fidelity relies on the existence of visible and concrete standards left for followers to observe. De Paul’s early work laid the cornerstone of Vincentian identity, but it took place before any official act gave this identity solid construction. Chapter One also assesses how de Paul built on his initial foray into missionary work by steering a small fellowship towards maturity as a canonical institute with unique objectives. In order for followers to faithfully observe a defined apostolic programme, the new Congregation had to be consistent in laying out its missionary goals during de Paul’s generalate from 1625 to 1660. The canonical process which established the Congregation, and its related legal documents, such as the foundation contract in 1625, the missionaries’ first act of association, successive papal bulls, and the 1658 common Rules, furnish key information in establishing if this consistency was achieved. Success in this matter also depended on de Paul’s ability to create structures and frameworks to support his mission, such as the internal seminary. By institutionalising his ethos of service to the poor, de Paul cleverly permitted it to transcend his personal presence and become permanently instilled among succeeding generations of followers.

In his study of the language of fidelity, Arthur Herman argues that contemporary expressions of devotion are not a reliable guide to actual behaviour.\(^{43}\) For the Jesuits, O’Malley identifies the same problem in regard to ideas and values.

\(^{43}\) Herman, “The Language of Fidelity,” 3.
that became central to defining their religious institute. These values were simply ideals, hopes and aims which ‘are never the same thing as the lived reality.’\textsuperscript{44} Accusations of failed allegiance, evidence of divided loyalty, and trends leading to drift attach themselves to any assessment of fidelity. The first chapter therefore identifies the major sources of drift in the Congregation’s early evolution. Alterations in the Congregation’s size, visibility, or prestige had the potential to derail the Vincentians’ objectives to remain ‘priests of the poor’ but the confidence with which de Paul oversaw cumulative changes in the Congregation’s ministries and public presence illustrates the unique role played by the founder in handling discrepancies between rhetoric and reality. However, because de Paul’s capacity for managing drift was exclusively exercised during his tenure as superior general, his death left large spaces into which other actors presumed to enter, including rival clerical organisations who were far less qualified to measure the Vincentians’ fidelity than de Paul had been.

Fidelity presupposes that deeds be conformed to promissory commitments. The history of the Congregation after de Paul’s death hinges not simply on the ideas that gave birth to and sustained Vincentian ethos and identity, but on the pastoral action which was supposed to give effect to them at their many bases. The Vincentians possessed twenty-six houses on de Paul’s death in 1660; by the end of the century, they controlled over fifty establishments, and by the Revolution in 1789, this number had trebled. Of course, any meaningful excursus on activities at 157 establishments is impossible, so a selection has to be made. By 1660 the Congregation’s remit was divided into two principal zones of activity, missions to the people and the operation of seminaries. After de Paul’s death, the Congregation became an influential player in the provision of seminary education to generations of French clergy. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Vincentians administered almost half of French diocesan seminaries, and of the forty-eight houses opened under de Paul’s two immediate successors, twenty-seven were seminaries. Seminary work was an increasingly significant aspect of the Congregation’s work, but this study excludes these establishments from direct analysis. Instead, a mission in

\textsuperscript{44} O’Malley, \textit{First Jesuits}, 372.
Madagascar, a group of court appointments, the royal naval chaplaincies at Marseille and Rochefort, and a mission to the Mascareignes form the basis of this study, and the subjects of Chapters Two to Five.

There are persuasive reasons why these missions warrant case studies over others. Firstly, unlike many of the Congregation’s seminaries, they shared the important characteristics of Vincent de Paul’s original exercise in the French countryside: they were all sponsored by lay patrons, either individual or commercial, and involved giving traditional missions. As such, the Congregation was able to place them firmly on a ‘continuum of fidelity.’ At the same time, however, these projects also represented new departures for the Congregation because they included variations on or additions to de Paul’s original mission. At three of the sites, the Congregation’s traditional target, the European poor, were replaced by seemingly functional equivalents, the ‘poor infidels’ of Madagascar, the Protestant oarsmen of Marseille, and the ‘poor slaves’ of the Mascareignes. Furthermore, at all of these locations, the Vincentians tested the boundaries of their traditional responsibilities by adding other functions to their missionary remit, most of which were parochial – and therefore permanent – activities. Finally, these houses demanded either close interaction with royal authority or direct Vincentian participation in the crown’s political agendas. All the bases were founded during the reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715) and his régime’s policies posed significant challenges to the accomplishment of the Vincentians’ core missionary objective, either directly in the case of Versailles, or indirectly through the crown’s agents at the two island missions and Marseille. The powerful combination of these factors meant that the sites chosen for this study were the key battlegrounds where the most consequential and lengthy debates on fidelity to de Paul took place.

Robinson’s study of the Maurists offers glimpses into the ways in which they actualised the ethos of their institute, but her examples of fidelity are too oblique to provide information on the exact processes which underpinned the search for fidelity and allowed it to be sustained. Armstrong, on the other hand, usefully portrays the critical role of outsiders in nurturing ethos.\footnote{Armstrong, \textit{Politics of Piety}, chaps. 3 and 4.} After the largely theoretical discussions
at the heart of Chapter One, Chapter Two examines how the Congregation’s principles of fidelity fared in a missionary venture inextricably tied to the activities of non-Vincentians. The Congregation’s small mission in the French colony of Fort Dauphin, Madagascar, in operation from 1648 to 1671, will be its focus. The missionaries in Madagascar were auxiliaries of the Compagnie des Indes, and their work there intersected with imperial and commercial agendas. However, the focus of this chapter is the superior weight allotted by Vincentians to the Congregation’s ethos and their duty of fidelity to it. The aim of this chapter is to show how the Congregation’s mission to the poor was applied in a vastly different scenario to that in which it originally took shape in France. As we shall see, fidelity to the Congregation’s ethos was not fulfilled by once-off verbal courtesies, but was rather a demanding and continual process exposed to external and internal forces, which either helped or hindered its accomplishment. The Madagascar mission constitutes an important barometer for the study as a whole, because it showcased perennial factors influencing survival of the Congregation’s core identity, such as the powerful role of patrons and Congregation leaders. Moreover, when it ended in tragedy the Congregation’s directors made a firm general resolution about the kind of work it would accept in the future, a ‘strategy for fidelity’ which signalled the belief of post-de Paul Vincentians that their identity was a settled matter.

The amount of control that the Vincentians possessed over their own activities on a given mission was critical in determining their ability to pursue fundamental corporate agendas, the most pressing of which remained fidelity to de Paul. But ecclesiastical associations were never free to pursue their own goals unencumbered. The experience of other clerical bodies revealed that the death of a founder left his disciples particularly vulnerable to the interference of rulers, some of whom were eager to impose their own vision of government and practices. In the aftermath of Loyola’s death, Pope Paul IV had famously attempted to alter the Society’s constitutions.46 Cardinal Richelieu was equally meddlesome, unsuccessfully manoeuvring to co-opt the superior generalship of the Oratory after

Bérulle’s demise.\(^{47}\) In the Vincentians’ case, one major power much closer to the French Vincentians than the pope in Rome and far more assertive than the cardinal minister sought to increase its sway over them in the decades after de Paul’s death: the gallican crown of Louis XIV. Scholars now are careful to stress the limitations of the absolutist model of government, but most still produce evidence of the crown’s widening embrace under the Sun-King.\(^{48}\) Nevertheless, historical interest in this subject is still weighted on the side of larger or traditionally powerful corporate bodies which felt the effects of Louis’ intrusion, such as the French episcopate, the provincial aristocracy, the magistrates of the parlements, and municipal governments.\(^{49}\) But the ‘monarchy’s ambition to establish the king’s spatial and temporal absoluteness’ extended to much smaller units.\(^{50}\)

By examining the monarchy’s increasing interest in and engagement with the Vincentians, Chapters Three and Four explore decisive tests to their resolution to remain faithful to the original ethos of de Paul in the wake of Madagascar. Chapter Three starts with Louis’ appointment of the Vincentians to the realm’s ultimate parish, the royal parish of Versailles in January 1672. Much more than the Madagascar exercise, the designation to Versailles determined the future direction of the Congregation in the post-de Paul era, for the Congregation’s leaders were thereafter instructed to accept a sweep of other royal foundations. However, as the Vincentians forged an ever-more intimate relationship with the monarch and his closest kin at court, they quickly discovered that the increased benefits of association did not come without sacrifice. Chapter Four covers another significant area of collaboration between the Congregation and the crown, this time at the Congregation’s houses at Marseille, with comparative analysis of a new house in

\(^{47}\) Williams, *The French Oratorians*, 253-256.
Rochefort founded in 1683. These two houses formed the nub of Vincentian operations in the crown’s department of the marine, which consisted mainly of supervising missions and conversions on the royal galleys. They offer a counterpoint to the bases studied in Chapter Three because they commanded much closer allegiance to and execution of Louis XIV’s political agendas, such as the highly sensitive repression of religious dissidence in the wake of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Further, both chapters build on the conclusions of Chapter Two by comparing the roles exercised by missionaries at the various locations. The Vincentians’ ability to give potency to fundamental elements of their corporate ethos, especially charity, depended on the type and degree of their interaction with the sovereignty and its delegated officials. This period in the Congregation’s history saw the priests of the countryside transform into prêtres de Bourbon, and the chapters weigh the diverse costs and effects of an emerging ‘double fidelity’ in the ministry of the fils de Monsieur Vincent. Ultimately, they sought to ensure that their founder’s spirit endured, and therefore made him ‘happy’ – to use de Paul’s phrase – but close proximity to the king taught them that his felicity as monarch and patron often had more immediate consequences for their Congregation’s well-being.

Chapter Five presents the last case study of the dissertation. The Congregation achieved unexpected eminence in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, but as it entered the new century one blemish still existed on its record: the dismal end of its mission in Madagascar. This chapter invites the reader to return to the Indian Ocean as the Congregation aimed to recover the lost hopes of Madagascar. In 1711 and 1721, opportunities arose to return to two islands neighbouring Madagascar, the Île de Bourbon and the Île de France, on another colonial enterprise. Just at the Madagascar mission provides a useful lens for judging the Congregation’s strengths and weaknesses in the immediate post-de Paul period, the missions to the Mascareignes are helpful in measuring its stature in the period prior to de Paul’s canonization in 1737. This era was a time of pride and confidence for the followers of de Paul, but they discovered that increased honour was not a guarantee of fidelity. By comparing the Madagascar mission with its successor in the Indian Ocean, the final chapter determines that the Vincentians avoided many of the
mistakes which blighted the previous mission, and even left behind the diffidence of the immediate post-de Paul period. However, the lessons learnt were not always those most beneficial to preserving de Paul’s ethos.

III

The materials at hand for a study of Vincentian development after de Paul’s death are wide-ranging. While many of their written histories have been poor, internal historians of the Congregation have made laudable efforts in excavating archival material, editing it, and preparing large pieces of it for publication. Coste’s monumental thirteen-volume collection of de Paul’s letters and conferences, which document the founder’s thoughts and teachings on myriad subjects, form an essential corpus, principally because a study of fidelity necessarily involves constant reference to precedents set in the de Paul era.\footnote{CCD, 13 vols.} Felix Contassot’s type-written collections of early modern manuscripts which relate to the Congregation’s houses, seminaries and missions, are significant one-stop compendia for the researcher. Since the nineteenth century, the Congregation has published yearly \textit{Annales de la Congrégation}, and these volumes contain rich and diverse information concerning particularly memorable missions, although they are often anecdotal and rarely cite original manuscript sources.\footnote{\textit{Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission et de la compagnie des filles de la Charité}. Paris:1833-1963.} In this respect, the \textit{Mémoires de la Congrégation} are more reliable, as they contain printed letters, contracts and other rare primary materials.\footnote{\textit{Mémoires de la Congrégation de la Mission}. Vols. 1 (Poland), 2 (Barbarie) and 9 (Madagascar) (Paris: Maison Mère de la Congrégation, 1863-1866).} Throughout, this thesis also makes use of the biographical and chronological information on individual missionaries and missions contained in the Congregation’s \textit{Catalogue du personnel} and the multi-volume \textit{Notices de la Congrégation}.\footnote{\textit{Notices sur les Prêtres, Clercs et Frères défunts de la Congrégation de la Mission. Première série: Compagnons de St. Vincent depuis la fondation de la Compagnie jusqu’à la fin du XVIII siècle} (Paris: 1881-1910); \textit{Catalogue du Personnel de la Congrégation de la Mission depuis l’origine (1625) jusqu’à la fin du siècle}. Supplément aux \textit{Annales de la Mission} (Paris: 1911).}
The evidence employed for the case studies is largely different in character from the regulatory documents central to arguments made in Chapter One. Every mission began with standard precatory literature, such as foundation contracts and their variants, and these are the natural starting point in assessing how the Vincentian ethos and apostolic programme was supposed to apply in a new context. They also provide valuable information regarding the intentions and obligations of various actors when it came to preserving Vincentian works and ethos, especially the lay patron and the Congregation’s leadership. However, Vincentian fidelity was not a top-rung issue alone. Conformity to the Rule, faithful allegiance to de Paul’s values, and avoidance of activities which might lead to drift were the fundamental objectives of individual missionaries working on a given mission site. The range of evidence used in this study reflects this fact. Many of the missionaries wrote letters or kept diaries and personal memoirs. For the cluster of missions studied here, most of the written correspondence remains in manuscript form, although the diaries of two prominent Vincentian court memorialists have been published. Where gaps emerge in a mission’s history, the circular letters addressed by the superior general to the Congregation are useful points of reference because several missions examined in this thesis, especially the colonial and court appointments, were the subject of significant and periodic commentary in them.

Internal documents like the circulars are not only helpful sources of data. They also shed light on the theme of this thesis, revealing that fidelity to de Paul was a negotiated process involving constant communication and dialogue between the mother house and missionaries on the ground. Of course, these sources often contain formulaic exhortations designed to encourage fidelity to de Paul and therefore require careful interpretation. For instance, the circulars were addressed by the superior general to all members of the Congregation, most of whom were not participants in the small number of significant projects mentioned in them. As a result, the objective was to edify and not to give a thorough, or even completely truthful, account of a particular mission’s progress. However, through careful comparison of the information provided and withheld in these letters with other evidence, it is possible to diagnose the leadership’s mind-set at different periods in a
mission’s development, as well as its capacity for absorbing and resolving frequently expressed concerns about remaining faithful to the founder.

Rather than attempting a complete census of Vincentian approaches to fidelity based on correspondence from a potentially unwieldy number of missionaries, this thesis extrapolates common themes from a restricted group who possessed convincing credentials as spokespersons for the Congregation’s general membership. Most of the missionaries examined here were well-seasoned Vincentians who had experience of the wide gamut of functions performed by their institute. Indeed, some were specifically chosen for experimental assignments because of this, and their knowledge only enhanced their ability to pass trustworthy judgements on emerging threats to Vincentian fidelity. The collective weight of their evidence increases further because it proceeded from all degrees and ranks in the Congregation’s membership. In examining fidelity, this study relies on testimony from Vincentian priests, brothers, superiors and ordinary confreres alike.

To offset the risks of relying on internally-generated evidence alone, this thesis also incorporates sources from outsiders who offered their judgements on the extent to which the Vincentians’ behaviour resembled their founder and retained his fundamental values. Legal documents written on behalf of rival clergy, correspondence of courtiers, and the regular reportings of prominent published circulars, such as the *Mercure galant* and the *Gazette de France*, reveal the level of interest which people of all ranks took in the Congregation’s development in the decades after de Paul’s demise. At the Congregation’s bases in Marseille and Rochefort, numerous crown officials were charged with scrutinising the Vincentians’ work and general conduct. Their missives and reports, largely conserved in the archives of the Marine in Paris, constitute an essential source for Chapter Four, as do the published letters and memoirs of prominent Huguenots with whom the Vincentians interacted on the crown’s galleys. Chapters Four and Five also make extensive use of the *ordres* and *dépêches* registers formerly kept by the crown’s ministers of the marine. Finally, a wide range of evidence remains for the Vincentians’ colonial engagements with successive Compagnies des Indes. The Congregation’s official dealings with the Compagnie des Indes through treaties and
contracts are extant, as are the communications of the commercial Company’s regional authorities in the Mascareignes, which have been meticulously gathered by the historian Albert Lougnon.\textsuperscript{55}

Given the depth and breadth of evidence regarding the Congregation, it may be argued that historians in the past have been too willing to accept as true the Vincentians’ self-representation as insignificant ‘priests of the countryside.’ As we shall see, de Paul’s death reigned his followers’ sense of identity and refocused their duty of fidelity to it, but it deprived them of the one person who was powerful enough to defend it and give it continued meaning. What follows is an investigation of roles and relationships which challenged their fidelity, competed with it, or made it less relevant. The study probes the gaps between the Vincentians’ hope-filled ambitions to be ‘priests of the poor’ and the realities of the mission site. Through a re-reading of old sources and recourse to new ones, it goes further by examining how those entrusted with perpetuating the mission of a famous reformer reacted to their unpredictable and fairly swift rise to prominence in France, and then determines if the steps taken by them led them away from his legacy.

Chapter 1. Who were the Vincentians? Rhetoric and reality in the Congregation of the Mission

On 15 January 1661, a general assembly opened at Saint-Lazare, the mother house of the Congregation of the Mission in Paris. Its purpose was to elect a successor to Vincent de Paul, leader of the Congregation since its inception in 1625. Nineteen of de Paul’s former counsellors and closest advisors were present. These included René Alméras and Edme Jolly, two future superiors general of the Congregation. Jean Dehorgny, one of de Paul’s original companions, was also present, as was Firmin Get, superior of the Marseille house, which ranked amongst the Congregation’s most important.

The mood of the Congregation was expressed by René Alméras in his circular letter to all superiors on 29 September 1660 announcing de Paul’s death. After recounting the events of de Paul’s last hours, Alméras said that ‘the loss is great for the Church, and incomparable for us, as we are in a state of affliction that you can well imagine.’ Alméras explained that the Congregation felt deprived of a ‘most good and most lovable father’ and referred to the members of the Congregation as de Paul’s ‘children.’ Alméras also asked the entire company to write down the virtues it had witnessed in de Paul and to pray for a worthy successor.

Accounts of the general assembly, which took place between 15 and 20 January 1661, are extremely sparse. The evidence remaining consists of some preparatory documents, the list of attendants and an announcement of the result. However, a remarkable eye-witness report came from the superior of the Congregation’s house in Cahors and visitor of the province of Aquitaine, Gilbert Cuissot, who made a sworn affidavit on 27 March 1678 concerning an event that took place on 17 January 1661, at the moment of balloting. Explaining that he had

---

56 RC, 1:31, 29 September 1661: ‘La perte en est grande pour l’Église, et incomparable pour nous, qui en sommes ici dans l’affliction que vous pouvez penser.’
57 Ibid. ‘…un si bon et si aimable père…’
58 Ibid., 28-29, 32-34.
Chapter 1: Who were the Vincentians?

been in doubt about giving his vote to de Paul's appointed vicar general René Alméras, whose poor health was universally known, Cuisot recounted the following events:

…believing myself obliged to rely on the sentiments of Monsieur Vincent, in the belief that God had given him some other insight on this matter than what the infirmity of Monsieur Alméras demonstrated, and balancing before God all the pros and cons in the best way I could, all of a sudden, a voice came to me: ‘

Quoy! Was the whole Church by the design of heaven not entrusted to the leadership of St Gregory the Great, and so happily increased and administered, notwithstanding the fact that he was a man full of bodily ailments? The Congregation [of the Mission] is much less than the universal Church.’ And when it was my turn to write down my choice, asking God once again for his help, I lifted my mind to the spirit of our very honoured father Monsieur Vincent, and raising my eyes at the same time to heaven, right up at the height of the floor he appeared to me, his hat on his head, dressed in his coat, his face serious and confident. He had the same features and lines that he had when his health was perfect, and he was not as old as he appears in his picture. His complexion was, to tell the truth, white, proceeding from a light that clung to his very face, but no aura around him that I could have noticed in this space. He was saying to me in a distinct but almost at the same time an interior voice, ‘If it is a crime, put me in irons; if it is an error, it is mine, so fear nothing; let this curse be on me, my son.’

59 ACM, Alméras Register, 2, fols.1726-7, 27 March 1678: ‘...croyant m’en devoir tenir au sentiment de Monsieur Vincent, dans la pensée que Dieu luy avoit donné sur cela d’autre veue que ce que l’infirmité dudit Monsieur Alméras demonstroit. Et balançant devant Dieu le pour et le contre le mieux que je pouvois. Tout d’un coup il me fut dit ou (illegible word) représenté. Quoy ! Toute l’Eglise par l’élection du Ciel ne fut-elle pas mise sous la conduite du grand St. Grégoire et si heureusement augmentée et conduite nonobstant que ce fust un homme plein d’infirmitez corporelles. La Congrégation est bien moindre de l’Eglise universelle. Et lorsqu’il fut à mon tour d’escrire mon suffrage demandant derechef à Dieu son secours j’elevay mon esprit à l’esprit de nostre très honoré Père Monsieur Vincent et levant en mesme temps les yeux au Ciel jusqu’au haut du plancher il m’apparut chapeau en Teste avec son manteau, d’un visage grave et assuré, dans les mesmes traits et linéamens qu’il avoit en sa santé parfaite, et non si âgé qu’il paroist en son tableau, d’un teint à la vérité blanc procedant de lumiére adhérente au visage mesme mais sans rayon au tour que j’eusse pu apercevoir dans cet espace, me disant d’une voix distincte et intérieur quasi en mesme temps ‘Si crimen, in me converte ferrum, si culpa, mea est, noli timere ; in me sit ista maledictio, fili mi.’
Cuisсот claimed that this mystical experience banished his doubts about Alméras’ suitability, and he voted for him. Of course, Cuisсот’s report has many defects, not least that it was written nearly twenty years after the event. However, whether or not its contents are reliable, the affidavit still deserves assessment. The symbolic value of the story, unfolding in a room where de Paul’s closest companions were gathered, lay in its similarities to the Pentecostal attendance of Christ’s apostles after the resurrection. Cuisсот echoed the uncertainty which characterized the scriptural event by admitting his own diffidence in choosing a successor to the Vincentians’ beloved father. The biblical comparisons were completed with the appearance of de Paul’s ‘spirit’ and the emboldening effects it had on Cuisсот.  

On the other hand, Cuisсот’s ghost consoled nothing more than his own individual dilemma during the Alméras election. As a result, his recollection sheds little light on the reaction of the wider group to de Paul’s death and raises far more questions than it answers. In the years following the death of the founder, what concrete resources could the Congregation draw on to remain close to his intentions? How did Vincentians construct their corporate identity without the constant guidance of their spiritual ‘father’? In his testimony, Cuisсот began by confessing his pressing desire to remain faithful ‘to the sentiments of Monsieur Vincent’ but he failed to elucidate what he meant by this. In his life-time, de Paul had engaged in a daunting range of works, written thousands of letters and given dozens of speeches; his ‘sentiments’ about particular questions were therefore open to selective interpretation. What did the Vincentians select from de Paul’s life and works that bound them together?

The Vincentians’ fidelity to de Paul was built first and foremost on their strict adherence to a set of core values: a corporate ethos often referred to as the ‘spirit of the Mission.’ In the decades after de Paul’s death, the Congregation’s vocation as an institute for the poor was at the heart of this corporate schema of values. Immediately upon his election, Alméras captured this succinctly, saying, ‘Let us give ourselves to God in charity to consume our lives in his service, and in the

---

60 Acts 1 and 2 (NAM).
salvation and relief of the poor. In the years that followed, this corporate objective became embedded in the Congregation’s self-understanding and self-projection, and acquired the sort of longevity which evaded Cuissot’s ephemeral wraith. It penetrated shared mental representations of the Congregation, collective rituals of remembrance, and circular letters of successive superiors general. Furthermore, the historical image of the Congregation as an institute of the rural poor drew on several concrete sources to bolster its case. Studying the impulses of de Paul’s early ministry, it can be judged that the major prescriptive documents of the Mission from 1625 to 1660, and finally the internal structures of the Congregation all guided the Vincentians’ self-presentation after de Paul’s death.

Reliance on the Congregation’s self-construction in piecing together its exact identity in the post-de Paul period is, however, inherently dangerous. The picture both of de Paul and the Congregation which emerged during this period was at best incomplete, at worst fictional. The inculcation and constant repetition of the Vincentians’ own image as servants of the poor was, after all, part of a commemorative, and often hagiographic, process which ultimately sought Church recognition, such as canonisation, for Vincent de Paul. All emphases of internal rhetoric about the Congregation’s destination were therefore stuck in time and ignored pressing questions about the continuing evolution of the institute. Even in de Paul’s time, Vincentian rhetoric did not consistently mirror reality, but the reasons for this remain unexplored.

The realisation that Vincentian rhetoric struggled to survive changing circumstances became more acute in the aftermath of 1660. The Congregation’s development after this date was not simply restricted to an inward-looking process of conservation, which emerges so clearly from the panic in Cuissot’s affidavit. On the contrary, after the death of their beloved father the Vincentians travelled far as a public institution and increasingly engaged with outsiders. These changes effected critical shifts in the way Vincentians saw themselves and were seen by the world, as increased engagement forced departure from the dearly held vision of the founder. In

---

61 RC, 1:35, 1 February 1661: ‘Donnons-nous à Dieu en charité pour consommer notre vie à son service, et au salut et soulagement des pauvres.’
response, a rival rhetoric emerged to scrutinise the course of fidelity pursued by de Paul’s followers, and repeatedly asked a searing question: were the sons of Monsieur Vincent remaining true?

I

The ethos at the heart of the Congregation of the Mission, often called the ‘spirit of the Mission,’ has been the object of significant commentary in Vincentian historiography. However, its exact meaning escapes clear determination. It can embrace a set of core institutional values, which in the Vincentian lexicon were five: simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification and zeal. But the spirit of the Mission had other interpretations. When called the esprit primitif, the ethos was also understood as the definition of the Congregation’s supreme objective: service of the poor through charity. Historians of the Congregation have called this ‘the communitarian projection’ of de Paul’s personal virtues of charity and service. The two meanings themselves often merged when Vincentian virtues were applied to catechetical ministry to the poor. For example, simplicity as a virtue was translated into a preaching style characterised by direct and accessible language for France’s peasants. Both meanings reveal a key fact about the Congregation’s core ethos: the spirit of the Mission emphasised unity of purpose in spiritual values and pastoral work. This fact owes much to the details of de Paul’s life, from his sermon at Folleville to the eulogy given at his funeral.

Vincent de Paul went to Folleville in late 1616. Folleville was a small village in the diocese of Amiens situated on one of the estates of his patron at the time, Françoise Marguerite de Silly, wife of Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi, general of the French galleys. Besides his duties as spiritual advisor to Madame de Gondi and preceptor to the children of the Gondi household, de Paul also carried out some pastoral work on the estate. During his 1616 visit, he was called to hear the confession of a peasant living in the neighbouring village of Gannes. According to

---


Chapter 1: Who were the Vincentians?

de Paul, the man had long neglected his conscience before he visited him and heard his confession. The reported words of Madame de Gondi when she learnt of the spiritual neglect of rural Catholics like de Paul’s penitent have passed into Vincentian lore:

Alas, Monsieur, what is this? What have we just heard? This is the way it must be with most of the people. Alas, if this man with his good reputation was really living in danger of damnation, what must we think of others who live less righteously? Alas, Monsieur, how many souls are lost? What shall we do about this? 

De Paul’s answer to his patroness was a mission given at Folleville on 25 January 1617, an event which lies at the origin of the Congregation of the Mission. It bore all the hall-marks of an early modern missionary enterprise, with preaching, confessions and catechism. This successful point of departure gave rise to further missions carried out in other rural villages belonging to Madame de Gondi in the years following.

The focus on rural people which lay at the heart of these early initiatives on the Gondi estates was in some senses unique. Although the mendicant orders and the Jesuits devoted some of their ministries to the spiritual and physical relief of rural people, no Catholic missionaries had adopted this as their central objective. De Paul asserted as much in a conference given on 6 December 1658, declaring that, while the Vincentians did not claim to be alone in serving the poor, ‘there [was] no Company in the Church which [had] the poor for its [specific] portion.’ This gap in

---


65 Abelly, *La vie du vénérable*, 47. De Paul’s first mission in the diocese of Paris was at Villepreux, part of the Gondi domain, in February 1618.


67 *CCD*, 12:73, 6 December 1658: ‘…aucune Compagnie qui ait pour son partage les pauvres…’
spiritual provision was startling given the enormous challenges presented by contemporary realities. France in the seventeenth century has been described as an ‘enormous rural world’ where five-sixths of the population dwelled in the countryside.\textsuperscript{68} Despite its numerical importance, however, the needs of this population were considered acute and neglected. As de Paul began his ministry, the spiritual welfare of France’s rural people had long been affected by the poor quality of their ecclesiastical servants, some of whom were found unable even to pronounce the formulae of the sacraments.\textsuperscript{69} To these spiritual disadvantages were added the pressures of a royal government which routinely loaded its financial burden on rural populations.\textsuperscript{70} And in the seventeenth century the yoke of taxes only became heavier as financial depression and famine brought crises of misery and starvation to swathes of the rural population.\textsuperscript{71}

Transforming the ad-hoc missions at Folleville into a canonical missionary institute was a decades-long task. Between 1625 and the publication of the 1633 papal bull recognising the Congregation’s establishment, the question of identifying the Congregation’s function both within the realm and the French Church became the subject of lengthy negotiations. The documents from this period obviously differ depending on their source, but their language converges on the core of de Paul’s early projects: responsibility to the poor. The Congregation was formally instituted by a foundation contract drawn up on 17 April 1625 between de Paul and the Gondis, and approved one year later by the archbishop of Paris.\textsuperscript{72} The Gondis identified the focus of the mission in this contract, which recognised that in France ‘only the poor people of the rural areas remain, as it were, abandoned.’\textsuperscript{73} The Congregation would therefore be established as a company of secular priests


\textsuperscript{69} Jeanne Ferté, \textit{La vie religieuse}, 170-171. Ferté assigns other deficiencies to the rural clergy: absenteeism, poor observance of clerical dress, and drunkenness.

\textsuperscript{70} Braudel and Labrousse, \textit{Histoire économique}, 90-91.


\textsuperscript{72} CCD, 13a:213, 224.

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Ibid.}, 213.
devoted to address this abandonment, both on the Gondi estates and among the ‘poor galley convicts’ of Marseille.\textsuperscript{74} Two years later, when this contract was revised, the Congregation’s double duties toward both the poor country people and poor galley convicts were described as the ‘fundamental clauses of the foundation.’\textsuperscript{75} Subsequent to the founding contract, de Paul and his first companions made their first pledge of association to the institute, in which they promised to obey these fundamental clauses.\textsuperscript{76} These provisions swiftly entered the minds of public agents who intervened on the Congregation’s behalf over the next decade. In 1628, Louis XIII wrote to Pope Urban VIII urging the latter to recognise the association, repeating the Congregation’s core function to ‘go from village to village…and catechise the poor common people.’\textsuperscript{77} At this gestational stage, the original source of de Paul’s personal mission – the work among the forgotten Catholics on the Gondi lands – was therefore ingrained in the legal and official literature of his Congregation, and became the key feature of the Vincentians’ self-defining rhetoric.

The emphasis placed on the Congregation’s destiny to serve the poor common people went hand-in-hand with its canonical exclusion from major towns.\textsuperscript{78} In his 1633 bull of recognition, Pope Urban reminded the Congregation that ‘those who live in the principal cities and towns have access to preachers, counsellors and directors,’ and that the Congregation’s fundamental clause destined it to the people of the estates, farms, hamlets and ‘more humble places.’\textsuperscript{79} However, despite this strict injunction, anxiety still emerged over the Congregation’s destiny in the realm and the French Church. In particular, the status of its members as secular missionary priests thrust it into potential conflict with diocesan structures, particularly the parishes. In 1627, Propaganda Fide foresaw some ‘objections and obstacles the local Ordinaries or others may present against this kind of mission…,’ because of its

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Ibid.}, 216. \\
\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Ibid.}, 225, 17 April 1627. \\
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Ibid.}, 222, 24 September 1626. \\
\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Ibid.}, 243, Louis XIII to Pope Urban VIII, 24 June 1628. \\
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Ibid.}, 215-216. The foundation contract specified by saying that the Vincentians ‘will bind themselves neither to preach nor to administer any sacrament in towns in which there is an archbishopric, bishopric or presidial court.’ \\
\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Ibid.}, 96, 12 January 1633.
exemption from normal juridictional frameworks within dioceses.\textsuperscript{80} Even at this early stage, the commands of the Congregation’s foundation contract were seen as potentially difficult to realise in reality. Prior to ratification of the Congregation’s establishment by the Paris parlement on 4 April 1631, the pastors of the diocese demanded that the Congregation ‘renounce any ministry in the parishes and churches of all the cities of the kingdom,’\textsuperscript{81} Alluding again to the original inspiration of the Folleville mission, the pastors of Paris feared that the ‘source of [the Congregation’s] first institution’ would be altered by avarice and ambition.\textsuperscript{82}

The Congregation’s foundation can be attributed in part to its founder’s participation in a wider movement aimed at combating the very clerical ambitions to which the pastors of Paris referred. The emergence of the Vincentians took place along a trajectory of improvements initiated by the leading lights of the ‘école française de spiritualité,’ which aimed to restore the French Catholic church at a time when it was seen as a source of scandal. These reformers forged close personalities and shared complementary ideas on the priesthood and the episcopate.\textsuperscript{83} Like his collaborators, de Paul focused heavily on abuses within the presbyterate, saying in 1655 that the Church was ‘heading for ruin in many places because of the bad life of priests.’\textsuperscript{84} He blamed what he called the ignorance of the poor people on the negligence of the clergy.\textsuperscript{85} His solicitude for the poor people of the countryside therefore intersected with concerns that their priests also required pastoral attention.

In this context, the Congregation of the Mission constituted, at least in the mind of the founder, part of a new and holistic approach to ecclesiastical reform. Indeed, the concerns behind the Folleville exercise later led de Paul to more practical involvement through the operation of seminaries.

But de Paul went further. He believed in the uniqueness of his Congregation, a courageous assertion from one living in the ‘époque missionnaire.’ He was jealous of both the name and the nature of his Congregation's work, as well as wary of any

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 229-230, 5 June 1627.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 254.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 255. 4 December 1630.
\textsuperscript{83} Forrestal, Fathers, Pastors and Kings, 51.
\textsuperscript{84} CCD, 11:279, September 1655.
\textsuperscript{85} For variations on this theme see CCD, 12:85-86; 5:350; 7:462.
potential encroachment. He confidently asserted the precedence of his own group in a letter to the vicar general of Lyon on 5 October 1657 when another body in this diocese attempted to call itself ‘Priests of the Mission.’ De Paul believed that forty years of precedence existed on the side of his Congregation and suggested that the rival group change its name.\(^{86}\) He had good reason to be protective over an institution which had developed an impressive range of associated partnerships. His first biographer claimed that, for de Paul, it was not enough for missionaries to revivify the spiritual life of the rural poor if communities could not simultaneously address their bodily deprivations through charity.\(^{87}\) In order to palliate the needs of the rural people in a durable way, de Paul advocated the creation of localised charity organisations. These structures were the confraternities of charity in parishes where his missionaries worked, the first of which sprung from de Paul’s early work at the parish of Chatillon.\(^{88}\) One of the most famous examples of these confraternities was the bureau of the Ladies of Charity set up at the Hôtel-Dieu in 1634, consisting of well-born women who catechized and tended to the sick.\(^{89}\) De Paul’s emphasis on service to the poor spawned another group, the Daughters of Charity, who were officially approved by the king in 1657 and later became France’s dominant female provider of poor relief.\(^{90}\) In this way, the focus of de Paul’s ministry inspired other groups and organisations.

Towards the end of his life, de Paul bequeathed one of the most important documents in the evolution of the spirit of the Mission with the promulgation of the Congregation’s common Rules in 1658. Published after a deliberately unhurried compilation process, the rules drew on both de Paul’s vision and the Congregation’s foundation documents and forever sealed the core components of its internal rhetoric.

---

Chapter 1: Who were the Vincentians?

of key values.\textsuperscript{91} In his preamble to the rules, de Paul declared that the Vincentians were called to ‘continue Christ’s mission, which [was] mainly preaching good news to the poor.’\textsuperscript{92} This fundamental objective was united to de Paul’s two equally important goals of searching for personal holiness and reforming the ecclesiastical state, but the substantive clauses of the rules still put particular emphasis on the original inspiration of the mission at Folleville, pronouncing that ‘the little Congregation of the Mission came into existence in the church to work for the salvation of people, especially the rural poor.’\textsuperscript{93}

When de Paul died in 1660, rhetoric underscoring his service to the poor lived on in those who passed initial judgements on his achievements. On 23 November, the bishop of Le Puy, Henri Cauchon de Maupas Du Tour, preached the eulogy at a solemn memorial service held in honour of de Paul at the church of Saint-Germain l’Auxerrois in Paris. Drawing attention to the major themes of de Paul’s life, Du Tour credited him with changing the face of the Church and re-establishing the glory of the clergy through his conferences and seminaries.\textsuperscript{94} However, it was de Paul’s charity to the poor of France that was singled out as the crowning achievement of his ministry. Declaring him ‘father of the poor’ Maupas du Tour recalled de Paul’s programmes of assistance in Lorraine, Champagne and Picardie.\textsuperscript{95} Moreover, he praised de Paul’s solicitude for other groups of poor people, such as the galley men of Marseille. And while he acknowledged in de Paul an all-embracing charity that knew no limits, he singled out his chief association with the poor, a link that has lasted to the present day:

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 13a:430. Introducing the rules thirty-three years after he founded the Mission, de Paul explained that he delayed publication in order to ensure they were practicable in reality.  
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 431.  
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 432, 439.  
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 42. The Vincentians distributed relief to a famine-striken Lorraine from 1635, operating from their house in Toul. They collaborated with the Ladies of Charity and with patrons such as Louis XIII. Throughout the 1650s, de Paul sent missionaries to Picardie and Champagne to alleviate suffering caused by war and famine, see Pierre Coste, \textit{Monsieur Vincent, Le grand saint du grand siècle} (Paris: Desclée, 1934), 2, chaps. 40 and 41.}
Chapter 1: Who were the Vincentians?

In examining the movements of his life and the feelings of his heart, you would say that God created him only to be poor and to serve the poor. ‘We belong to the poor’, he used to say, ‘and the poor belong to us.’

De Paul’s biography and the Congregation’s prescriptive literature confirm Du Tour’s judgement. De Paul had created an institute which sought over and over again to assert its primary vocation to the poor of France. Such was de Paul’s iconic association with the poor and charity that the history of his Congregation up to 1660 inevitably has become consubstantial with his personal achievements and virtues in this domain. However, de Paul’s work was fundamentally a group effort involving many other men in the Congregation. In his panegyric, the bishop of Le Puy spoke of a ‘living image’ of the founder. This living image was the priests and brothers, commonly called the sons of Monsieur Vincent, who were charged with reproducing his work and dispensing the spirit of the Mission.

II

After de Paul died, the Vincentians did not solely look to the major steps of his life to meet their central goal. Service of the poor was embedded in the group’s common values and practices so that it transcended his personal presence. The first and most important structure in perpetuating the Congregation’s goal of service was its internal seminary. In the early years of his institute’s existence, de Paul did not implement formal guidelines for training his followers, relying instead on the good disposition of applicants and the effects of spiritual retreats. It was only in 1637 that he created the internal seminary at Saint-Lazare, whose directorship he entrusted to one of his first companions in the Congregation, Jean de la Salle. Further internal seminaries were opened in Richelieu (1653), Lyon (1672), Saint-Méen (1674), Cahors (1689), Toul (1692) and Angers (1693).

---

96 Du Tour, Oraison funèbre, 32: ‘Vous eussiez dit, examinant les mouvements de sa conduite, et les sentiments de son cœur, que Dieu ne l’avait créé que pour être pauvre, et pour servir les pauvres; Nous sommes aux pauvres, disait-il, les pauvres sont à nous.’
97 Ibid., 2: ‘image vivante.’
98 Abelly, La vie du vénérable, 1:158.
99 For information on these seminaries see ACM, Contassot Dossier, ‘L’Etablissement des Lazaristes à Richelieu avant la Révolution, 1638-1792’, 161; AM, 64, pp.167 and 515 (Saint-Méen and Cahors
During his generalate de Paul came to regard the internal seminary as essential to cultivating the Congregation’s bed-rock virtues. In 1657, he wrote a letter to one of his confreres saying that ‘those who do not go through the seminary exercises rarely acquire the spirit of the Company.’ Moreover, the holiness found in the seminary was regarded as the motor of the Congregation’s spiritual life in general. The rules for the director of the internal seminary stated that ‘the greatest share of progress in saintliness by the Company comes from the good institution of the seminarians.’ One of de Paul’s seminary directors, his eventual successor René Alméras, buttressed this when he claimed that ‘the whole perfection of the Mission depends on the seminary.’ The role of the internal seminary in safeguarding the Congregation’s fundamental ethos as it was in de Paul’s time is evident in the sheer durability of its governing documents. The Règles du séminaire, which date from 1652, were unfailingly observed by de Paul’s successors and remained virtually unchanged until 1819.

The emphasis de Paul placed on the internal seminary found institutional pedigree in the teachings of the Council of Trent which had given necessary attention to the question of clerical formation. Improving the standards of clergy demanded a decree of the council in part because of the critical link between it and spiritual improvement among the lay Christians of Europe. The Congregation’s internal seminary expressed this link with a training programme that can properly be called a ‘cumulative building process,’ each stage of which remained orientated to

---

100 CCD, 6:321, de Paul to Firmin Get, 18 May 1657.
101 ACM, ‘Règles du directeur du séminaire,’ fol. 1: ‘…la plus grande partie des progrès à la sainteté de vie de la Compagnie, vient de la bonne institution des séminaristes.’ The text of the ‘Règles du directeur’ (RDS) accompanies the ‘Règles du séminaire interne’ (RS), which occur in manuscript copy. While only the RS are specifically dated (1652), it is probable that the two were compiled and approved together.
102 ACM, Alméras Register 2, fol.1880, ‘Conférences de Monsieur René Alméras sur différents sujets,’ n.d.: ‘…toute la perfection de la Mission dépend du séminaire.’
103 ACM, ‘Recueil des maximes, règles, pratiques, usages et coutumes qui composent le Règlement du séminaire interne de la Congrégation de la Mission,’ 1819.
Chapter 1: Who were the Vincentians?

The Congregation’s corporate objectives. After an exacting interview process, the candidate began a two-year probation period at Saint- Lazare, similar to the novitiate spent in most religious congregations. This period was an exclusively spiritual exercise during which the new entrants concentrated on the cultivation of virtue.

In particular, the seminarians were invited to study the common Rules and the 1633 bull of erection. Candidates proceeding to ordination were required to make a sustained period of reflection on these documents and every six months spent in the seminary ended with meditation on them.

The candidate’s introduction to prescriptive literature like the common Rules was his first encounter with the spirit of the Mission. The Rules summoned him to acquire the necessary ‘faculties of the soul’ that would guide him in his work:

We should follow, as far as possible, all the Gospel teaching...since it is so holy and very practical. But some of it, in fact, has more application to us, particularly when it emphasises simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification and zeal for souls. The Congregation should pay special attention to developing and living up to these five virtues...

De Paul often referred to his Congregation as the ‘little Company.’ The reason de Paul underscored the five virtues was because he believed that they were instrumental in helping a Vincentian become as ‘little’ as the poor they served. When he spoke of simplicity, for example, he lauded the quality because ‘true religion’ was to be found among the poor and simple. Later, he stated categorically that the Congregation could say ‘goodbye’ to its ethos if it did not

---

106 *CCD*, 1: 555, de Paul to Jeanne de Chantal, 14 July 1639.
107 *CCD*, 8:478, de Paul to Jacques Pesnelle, 4 April 1659.
108 ACM, RDS, fol 2.
109 Ibid., fol. 13.
110 *CCD*, 11: 80: ‘…il est impossible d’acquérir l’esprit de la Mission sans l’observance des règles, dans lesquelles il est contenu et enchâssé.’
111 *CCD*, 13a:438.
112 See *CCD*, 11:57, 258, 432, 439. The Rules also refer to the little Company or little Congregation several times, see *ibid.*, 13a:439, 454.
113 Ibid., 11:169-171, 20 February 1656.
possess simplicity. Because of the connection between these virtues and the goal of service to and assimilation with the poor, de Paul’s followers spoke of them in similarly laudatory terms. In two of his conferences to groups of the Congregation, René Alméras spoke of the importance of the five virtues as de Paul had done and stressed that the Congregation had to communicate the spirit of the Mission to ‘those who [will come] after us.’

The 1652 rules for the seminary sought to bring the Vincentian closer to the poor by inculcating certain virtues and practices. The virtue of mortification serves as an example of how core values were transmitted there:

The ethos of the Seminary consists in a perfect interior and exterior mortification that must appear on all occasions: notably during those that encourage freedom, such as in the refectory, house and field recreations and when one goes among externs.

The director of the seminary was encouraged to promote mortification by engaging the seminarians in lowly tasks. Mortification of the body was tested by service in the kitchen; dish-washing; wearing a canvas jersey; publicly kissing the feet of all in the seminary; or wearing an old and torn habit. More severe penalties included deposition from a special office held in the seminary. Vincentians were encouraged to mortify their bodies by living as close to the conditions of poor men as possible. Rooms at Saint-Lazare were sparsely furnished if not bare and temperatures were very low, except for the kitchen and a warming room to which

---

114 Ibid., 12:303, 22 August 1659: ‘Fi de la Mission, adieu à son esprit, si elle n’a celui de la simplicité.’ De Paul repeated in the common Rules that simplicity was the ‘principal and most characteristic virtue of Missioners’: Ibid., 13a:465.
115 ACM, Alméras Register 2, ‘Conference,’ fol.1902: ‘…afin que nous puissions le communiquer à ceux qui verront après nous…’ For separate exposés on other virtues see fols.1902-1904, 1907 and 1914.
116 ACM, RS, 1652, fol.7.
117 Ibid., ‘L’esprit du Séminaire consiste dans une parfaite mortification intérieure et extérieure qui doit paraître en toutes occasions: notamment en celles qui portent davantage à la liberté; comme sont le réfectoire, les récréations de la maison, et des champs et quand on paraît parmi les externes.’
118 ACM, RDS, fol. 4.
119 Ibid., fol. 5.
entry was restricted. The only three items of necessity specified for entry into the seminary were a soutane, a cloak, and a bed-robe. The search for mortification also involved embracing a defining feature of poverty: the end of personal liberty. There was therefore a rule enjoining the prospective Vincentian to abandon his own judgement ‘at the first signal of the Superior.’ In such a way, complementary exterior and interior mortifications would be a proper measure of progress in the spiritual life.

The other core virtues of the Mission were linked in a similar fashion to the ultimate purpose of Vincentian ministry. The virtue of simplicity was elemental to the Congregation’s unique style of preaching among the ‘poor people of the countryside,’ a style often characterized as the ‘little method.’ The little method involved a system of preaching that was simple in presentation and unaffected in language. Alméras adeptly explained the principle behind the method when he taught that ‘it is necessary that there be some relation between the person who acts and the person for whom we work: the missionary must operate for the people of the countryside with whom simplicity is absolutely necessary.

Use of the little method meant that the Vincentian missionary was not called to be, like one characterization of the Capuchin style, a ‘Demosthenes of the people.’ Neither was he summoned to espouse the songs, mnemonic devices or costume processions favoured by Jesuits like the famous Julien Maunoir. On the contrary, the common rules instructed him to reject an ostentatious rhetoric because ‘God…conceals the secrets of heaven from the wise and prudent, and reveals them

---

120 Mezzadri and Román, *The Vincentians*, 342.
121 ACM, RDS, fol. 3.
122 ACM, RS. fol. 7: ‘…au premier signal du supérieur.’
123 CCD, 11:70.
124 José María Román, *St Vincent de Paul, A Biography*, trans. Sr Joyce Howard (London: Melisende, 1999), 348-351. See also CCD, 11:258.
125 ACM, Alméras Register 2, ‘Conference,’ fol, 1903: ‘…il faut qu’il y ait quelque relation entre celui qui agit pour lequel on opère: le missionnaire doit opérer pour les personnes de la campagne avec lesquelles la simplicité est tout à fait nécessaire.’
to the little ones.\textsuperscript{128} Likewise, the virtues of kindness and humility would unlock these treasures.

The candidate’s first exposure to and use of the little method took place in the seminary, which introduced prospective Vincentians to the Congregation’s apostolic activities. During the first year of the seminary experience, and sometimes during the second, the seminarians were first trained in the art of speaking in public. They would give the catechism in the seminary and then to the poor, either at the seminary gates or another location. After these exercises, the seminarians were sent on mission. They would give minor catechism to the people, and priests among them were permitted to hear confessions. With the approval of the house superior, seminarians were also permitted to preach on particular missions.\textsuperscript{129}

Once the seminarian completed his two years in the seminary, the next major event in his formation was the pronouncement of vows. The adoption of vows in the Congregation’s life was unusual and initially had proved a contentious issue. Members of the institutes baptized by Bremond as ‘filiales oratorienes,’ which included the French Oratory, the Sulpicians and the Eudists, all eschewed corporate vows, although individual adoption of vows remained possible for members of the Oratory.\textsuperscript{130} Aversion to vows by these institutes was ostensibly based on the canonical status of these institutes as societies of apostolic life and not regular orders. However, in another instance of his unique vision, de Paul championed the vows’ role in the life of the Congregation and, after some disputes, they were finally approved in 1653.\textsuperscript{131} In pleading for the vows, de Paul sought to combine two distinct approaches to priestly life. Firstly, he aimed to unite the search for virtue common in regular orders to the kind of ecclesiastical state he favoured.\textsuperscript{132} In this he revealed the influence of figures like Bérulle, who had insisted on a maximum of

\textsuperscript{128} CCD, 13a:434.
\textsuperscript{129} ACM, RDS, fol. 4.
\textsuperscript{130} Henri Bremond, Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France: depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu’à nos jours, rev. ed. (Grenoble: J. Millon, 2006), 1: 1008.
\textsuperscript{131} Mezzadri and Román, The Vincentians, 38-40.
\textsuperscript{132} In a letter to one of his priests, Claude Dufour, who toyed with the idea of joining the Carthusian order, de Paul spelt out his veneration for the religious life, but claimed that such a life was not enough. According to de Paul, an apostolic life, as opposed to a life of solitary contemplation, was ‘more helpful to our neighbour’: CCD, 2: 344.
virtue in the priesthood. The missionaries therefore took traditional vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. However, de Paul’s thinking was not simply a distillation of previous formulae. To the need for sanctification he joined the separate apostolic programme of the little Company and added a fourth vow of stability, which bound its members to service of the poor.

De Paul’s core principles also guided the next stage of the formation process. In a 1658 speech to some seminarians on the cusp of their philosophical training, de Paul reminded them that study existed in ‘order to serve God better, and your neighbour more usefully’, and not to flatter the ego’s desire for success. He warned them that they would lose the spirit of the seminary by forgetting this.

Unlike Jesuits, Vincentians destined for ministry among the rural poor did not spend up to a decade in formal studies. In fact, the Vincentian scholasticate was never an absolute requirement and many Vincentians passed straight into missionary work after seminary. When the scholasticate was observed, certain subjects were regarded as more appropriate than others. For example, moral theology was often preferred to scholastic theology because of its utility in the hearing of confessions and in dealing with cases of conscience while on mission. When in September 1660 de Paul had compared the courses of studies at the seminaries of Saint-Sulpice and Saint-Nicolas-Du-Chardonnet in Paris, he sided with the kind of training provided at the latter, where ‘they never do scholastic theology, only moral theology and conferences on practical matters.’ He wanted his institute to imitate the seminary at Saint Nicolas and make it clear that the ‘great insights and lofty sentiments’ of complex dialectical theology were out of kilter with his pastorally-orientated vision.

The fully-fledged missionary who left the seminary and embarked on his career as a Vincentian had gone through a process of identity formation where de Paul’s teachings and personal charisma were paramount. The spirit of the Mission

---

133 Bremond, *Histoire littéraire*, 1:1009.
134 *CCD*, 12:63, 23 October 1658.
137 *CCD*, 13a: 201.
transmitted in the Congregation’s internal seminary was essentially the spirit of de Paul’s life, which created a powerful sense of dependence on him for his followers. This dependence meant that Vincentians considered themselves meaningless without him both before and after his death. Abelly recounts how de Paul’s major counsellors gathered with him in an assembly in 1641, during which he presented his resignation as superior general. This act caused consternation in his followers, who refused to allow him to leave. They promptly re-elected him superior general, saying ‘as long as God keeps you on earth, we will have no other.’\textsuperscript{138} Román characterises this as a moment of appropriation for the followers of de Paul, but it surely revealed their absolute reliance on him.\textsuperscript{139} On that occasion the Vincentians were able to retain their inspirational guide, but in 1660 de Paul’s death made his departure final and left the Congregation’s identity in a potentially perilous state.

III

The extent to which de Paul’s image, memory and instructions hung on the minds of his followers was clear by the language used in Cuissot’s affidavit. When its founder died, the Congregation lost the living source of its identity and values. However, de Paul was not simply the source of Vincentian identity; through his conferences and discourses he constantly nourished it beyond the seminary gates and throughout the missionaries’ terms of service. In order to ensure the stability of Vincentian identity after de Paul’s death his successors as leaders sought to make him present again. To achieve this, after 1661 they embarked on a systematic programme of remembrance for the Congregation, which frequently invoked de Paul’s name and example. The idea of de Paul’s ‘spirit’ thus transformed into much more than the unlikely white phantom of Cuissot’s testimony and became a powerful resource for corporate identity and its associated rhetoric. This rhetoric built on the major elements of de Paul’s ministry and remained a constant feature of the Congregation’s self-presentation until de Paul’s beatification in 1729.

\textsuperscript{138} Abelly, \textit{La vie du vénéréable}, 3:212: ‘…tant que Dieu vous conservera sur la terre, nous n’en aurons point d’autre.’

\textsuperscript{139} Román, \textit{St Vincent de Paul}, 310.
The Congregation’s first reaction to de Paul’s death was consolidation. René Alméras’ period of office as superior general (1660-1672) was almost exclusively aimed at strengthening Vincentian practices by linking them to de Paul’s era. Furthermore, even purely administrative acts became the handmaidens of this commemorative process. Alméras began with a series of decrees designed to enforce discipline and uniformity in the Congregation. In a memoir sent to all superiors in April 1661, just four months into his generalate, Alméras exhorted them to ensure the common Rules were faithfully applied in all establishments. This memoir invoked de Paul five times, and reminded superiors, among other things, that the travel expenses of visitors to Congregation houses were to be paid by those same houses, ‘having been ordered by our late Monsieur Vincent.’\(^{140}\) In 1662, Alméras ordered that all members of the Congregation maintain a uniform style in signing public and private acts (‘unworthy priest of the Congregation of the Mission’), because the formula had been used by Vincent de Paul and his first companions in the Mission.\(^{141}\) The general’s early work of conservation also applied to the missionary methods de Paul had encouraged. In 1666, he addressed a circular to the Congregation commending the retention of the Congregation’s simple manner of preaching, since it was in this that lay ‘the instruction and advantage of the people.’\(^{142}\)

This process of recalling de Paul was part of a new corporate idea which is central to any understanding of the Congregation post-1660: that of the *esprit primitif*. In order to maintain absolute fidelity to de Paul and merit the distinction of being ‘sons of Monsieur Vincent’ the Congregation’s leaders went back to the original inspiration of the mission at Folleville as the primary source of its corporate identity. When Alméras called the Vincentians to consume their lives in the salvation and relief of the poor in 1661 he made the first gesture in a decade-long effort to install the *esprit primitif* at the heart of the Congregation’s self-definition. On 15 July 1668, Alméras opened a general assembly at Saint-Lazare partly

\(^{140}\) *RC*, 1:36-39, April 1661: ‘…ayant été ordonné de la sorte par feu M. Vincent, notre très-digne instituteur.’
\(^{141}\) *Ibid.*, 51, 21 April 1662.
Chapter 1: Who were the Vincentians?

dedicated to the subject. Twenty-three representatives of the Congregation joined him in thirty sessions of this assembly, which closed on 1 September.\textsuperscript{143} The preamble to the assembly’s decrees repeated the members’ wish that the Congregation ‘should keep the esprit primitif that God gave it, since its preservation and the success of its functions depend on it.’\textsuperscript{144} The assembly’s decrees revealed how pervasive and durable the group’s sense of duty was toward their common goals, as they had been in de Paul’s time. The first recommended each Vincentian regularly recite a prayer asking God to fill the Congregation with de Paul’s spirit.\textsuperscript{145} The fourth decree emphasized the values of humility, simplicity and charity.\textsuperscript{146} Finally, the seventh decree repeated de Paul’s teaching that the Congregation’s internal seminary constituted the source of the esprit primitif and recommended that the practice of sending seminarians periodically on mission be kept, ‘so as to let them know by experience the principal function of our vocation.’\textsuperscript{147}

If, as John O’Malley argues, the life-story of Ignatius of Loyola was immensely important for the Jesuits’ ‘sense of location,’ the same was true of Vincent de Paul and his followers.\textsuperscript{148} One of the most important elements in the construction of Vincentian identity post-1660 was commissioning de Paul’s first biography. Vincent de Paul had been one of the most prolific correspondents of his age: it is estimated that 30,000 letters written in his hand or addressed to him were in the possession of the Congregation after his death.\textsuperscript{149} It fell to the former bishop of Rodez, Louis Abelly, assisted by de Paul’s former secretary, Bertrand Ducournau, to sort through this material and produce a synthesised volume, published in 1664. Abelly’s biography was a major symbol of the Congregation’s effort to perpetuate de Paul’s presence. His words and actions immortalized in the volume constituted an

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 96: ‘…[que la] Congrégation se maintienne dans l’esprit que Dieu lui a donné puisque sa conservation et le succès de ses fonctions en dépendent…’
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 97. The prayer was as follows: ‘Excita, Domine, in Congregatione nostra Spiritum cui famulus tuus Vincentius servivit, ut eodem nos repleti studeamus amare quod amavit, et opere exercere quod docuit…’
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., ‘…[pour leur faire connaître] par expérience cette fonction principale de notre vocation.’
\textsuperscript{148} O’Malley, First Jesuits, 65.
\textsuperscript{149} CCD, 1: xi.
Chapter 1: Who were the Vincentians?

oracle for the Congregation’s members, with Alméras likening the publication of the book to a rebirth of de Paul:

Finally this work that you have desired so ardently and waited so long for is complete: it is the Life of our deceased and very honoured Father, Monsieur Vincent, of whose life we were robbed four years ago. And now we find him through the grace of Our Lord as if he were resurrected; you can hear him speak, you can witness his acts as if he were still in the world. His words and his actions will teach you the original spirit of the Company...\textsuperscript{150}

The Abelly biography became elemental to reproducing the spirit of the Mission. Releasing the first edition, Alméras said that future members of the Congregation needed only three works in their personal libraries: the common rules of the Congregation, the Scriptures, and Abelly’s biography of de Paul.\textsuperscript{151} Later, the general assembly of 1668 recommended reading the work as a way to conserve the *esprit primitif*\textsuperscript{152}.

Although Alméras died in 1672 the idea of the *esprit primitif* that he nourished remained a constant feature of the Congregation’s common language thereafter. References to the *esprit primitif* became traditional post-election mantras for most leaders, right into the eighteenth century. When Edme Jolly was elected as Alméras’ successor in 1673, he stated in his first letter to the Congregation that ‘our common goal [is] to maintain the Company in its *esprit primitif*.\textsuperscript{153} Over thirty years later, Jean Bonnet, elected general in 1711, immediately claimed that he wished to conserve the Vincentians in their original fervour.\textsuperscript{154} General assemblies of the Congregation continued to issue legislation in support of this objective, particularly

\textsuperscript{150} ibid., 67, 16 September 1664: ‘Enfin voilà cet ouvrage que vous avez si ardemment désiré, et si longtemps attendu, achevé ; c’est la Vie de feu notre très honoré Père, M. Vincent, que la mort nous avait ravi depuis quatorze ans. Le voici par la grâce de Notre Seigneur comme ressuscité; vous l’allez entendre parler, vous l’allez voir agir comme s’il était encore au monde. Ses paroles et ses actions feront connaître le premier esprit de la Compagnie…’ In 1667, the Congregation introduced a second edition of the biography, shorter and more concise: \textit{RC}, 1:83.

\textsuperscript{151} \textit{RC}, 1:68.

\textsuperscript{152} ibid., 97.

\textsuperscript{153} ibid., 129, 18 January 1673: ‘…notre commune prétention étant de maintenir en la Compagnie son premier esprit…’

\textsuperscript{154} ibid., 255, 257.
when it came to retaining key Vincentian values.\(^\text{155}\) The 1685 assembly urged the Congregation to remain simple in its preaching; its counterpart in 1692 put similar emphasis on poverty.\(^\text{156}\) Alongside these initiatives, superiors general perpetuated the same images de Paul used to describe the Congregation, particularly the image of the ‘little company.’ Following themes long-established by his predecessors, Jean Bonnet reminded the Vincentians in 1711 that ‘[their] little Congregation… [was] one of the poorest and most insignificant limbs of’ Christ’s body on earth.\(^\text{157}\)

De Paul’s beatification process, undertaken largely in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, was perhaps the highlight of efforts to ‘resurrect’ de Paul and reaffirm the core elements of the Congregation’s esprit de corps. In 1697, Nicolas Pierron sought the Congregation’s assistance in researching the important facts of the founder’s life, particularly his heroic virtues and miracles.\(^\text{158}\) The beatification was seized as a way to bolster the unity of the Congregation around the founder’s life. Pierron declared later that the beatification process was ‘one of the biggest affairs’ that the Congregation had ever faced, and his successor Jean Watel (1703-1710) called it a ‘common cause’ for all Vincentians.\(^\text{159}\) Bonnet explained what the common cause meant in one of his circular letters by saying that the beatification was ‘for our spiritual renovation in the spirit and virtues of the Mission.’\(^\text{160}\) The cause was a lengthy process, the details of which cannot be explored here.\(^\text{161}\) It culminated in 1729 with the publication of the papal bull – a momentous document which, perhaps predictably, made few original reflections on the spirit of the Mission. Nonetheless, the bull recognised the newly-beatified de Paul’s record of
Chapter 1: Who were the Vincentians?

service to the ‘poor people of the countryside’ and reform of the clergy as worthy of his Congregation’s continued devotion.¹⁶²

The efforts of de Paul’s successors to perpetuate his vision of their Congregation were unwaivering. They consistently adopted his way of speaking, and picked up the themes he had promoted during his life. But the idea of the esprit primitif constructed at this time also had significant mythmaking qualities. One of its primary embodiments, the Abelly biography, constituted a prolix but still narrow exposition of de Paul’s work and talents. In his commentary on the biography, Dodin points out Abelly’s total fidelity to the demands of seventeenth-century hagiography. The figure that emerges of de Paul was consequently static in nature. Dodin remarks that ‘between Abelly’s text and reality there is a variable space, but this is always guided by edification.’¹⁶³ This comment raises equally valid questions for the Congregation’s rhetoric and self-presentation. Did these reflect reality in de Paul’s time and afterwards? If not, how did Vincentians react to emerging gulfs between rhetoric, self-presentation and reality?

IV

The historic perception of the Congregation of the Mission as the ‘little company of the poor’ drew on the legal terms of its foundation documents and the dominant interests of de Paul’s ministry. Structures like the internal seminary sought to create a corporate Vincentian identity for de Paul’s followers by generating and actualising its core component, the spirit of the Mission. The Vincentians’ identity emerged most clearly in the rhetoric that sprung from their leaders in the immediate decades after de Paul’s death, which, almost obsessively, sought to assert fidelity to de Paul’s original blue-print for the institute. However, even during de Paul’s lifetime, this rhetoric gave the impression of a static organisation when the Congregation as a public institution was constantly growing and changing. After de Paul died, this

¹⁶³ André Dodin, ‘Louis Abelly,’ Vincentiana, 4-5-6 (1984): 286: ‘…il y a entre le texte d’Abelly et la réalité un espace variable mais qui est toujours guidé par l’édification.’
corporate rhetoric reflected reality less and less, as the Congregation confronted ever more critical shifts in its work and uncomfortable challenges to its core identity.

The missions at Folleville and other locations on the Gondi estates were fundamental in establishing the Congregation’s central objective. However, early in de Paul’s era the Congregation went beyond ministry in the countryside and added important other responsibilities to its remit. The first area where the Congregation became a critical force was in clerical formation. Just a few years after the Mission was established, the bishop of Beauvais in 1628 invited the Vincentians to lead a retreat of ordinands in his diocese. In 1631, the archbishop of Paris made similar arrangements with de Paul for retreats in his diocese, which were initially held at the Vincentians’ property at Bon-Enfants. The papal bull of 1633 specifically recognised the Congregation’s instruction of ordinands as its second function in the church.

Its involvement in this short-term ministry (the retreats in Paris were limited to ten days) soon evolved into permanent administration of French diocesan seminaries. On 8 September 1641, the Congregation opened its first seminary in Annecy; by the end of de Paul’s generalate the Vincentians had accepted participation in at least fifteen establishments, and continued to run twelve.

In his history of the Congregation, Coste argues that de Paul hesitated in taking on the direction of ordinands’ retreats because it lay strictly outside the scope of his initial goals. Indeed, de Paul admitted in a conference he gave in 1658 that the ‘ministry of formation’ came to the Congregation by surprise, saying that Vincentians had thought only of their own salvation and that of the poor prior to this

---

166 CCD, 13a: 298.
167 Maurice A. Roche argues that all of the Vincentian-operated seminaries were a result of the retreats: ‘Saint Vincent de Paul and the formation of clerics.’ PhD diss., University of Freiburg, 1964, 46-48. This is probably an over-statement, although the Vincentians were offered the seminary in some dioceses (such as Cahors in 1643) where they had previously been invited to give ordinands’ retreats.
168 Pierre Coste, *Grand saint*, 1, chap. 30. Roche’s list of Vincentian seminaries is as follows: Annecy (1641), Alet (1641), Paris (Bons-Enfants, 1642), Cahors (1643), Saintes (1644), Saint Méen (1645), Le Mans (1645), Marseille (1648), Tréguier (1648), Agen (1650), Périgueux (1650), Montauban (1652), Troyes (1653), Agde (1654), Meaux (1658), Montpellier (1659) and Narbonne (1659). The seminaries of Alet, Périgueux and Montpellier closed in de Paul’s lifetime.
development.\textsuperscript{170} De Paul’s thoughts on the appropriateness of seminary work therefore betrayed some trepidation. In 1644, he wrote that seminaries should not be accepted without provision for missions to be carried out by Vincentian personnel.\textsuperscript{171} As late as 1650 he told the bishop of Périgueux ‘you have the seminary in mind, and we our obligation to give missions,’ and claimed that the ‘service we render to the ecclesiastical’ state was ‘merely accessory’ to this main duty.\textsuperscript{172} As more and more bishops gave their seminaries to Vincentian leadership, de Paul’s diffidence faded. In 1658 he expressed his belief that missions and seminary work were two equally important duties in the Mission because both were part of the ministry of Christ, who formed apostles after preaching the Gospel to the poor.\textsuperscript{173}

A similar tug between Vincentian values and work emerged in the Congregation’s growing number of parishes. In 1635, the Vincentians were appointed parish priests of Saint-Armand and Ecrouves in Toul, assignments which limited the missionaries’ activities to the town.\textsuperscript{174} The Congregation’s next parish was especially prestigious. In 1638, Cardinal Richelieu invited it to take up the cure of his eponymous town.\textsuperscript{175} Although the honour of the appointment was clear to all, it signaled the beginning of anxious comments about the suitability of this work. As the Richelieu appointment loomed, de Paul admitted to one of his confreres that the ‘huge parish’ frightened him.\textsuperscript{176} Later, he spoke negatively of the ‘long formalities’ in uniting parishes to the Congregation.\textsuperscript{177} However, the most dissuasive factor for de Paul in accepting parishes was the true vocation of the institute. Discussing the potential purchase of a Roman house with a parish attached to it in 1656, de Paul made his views clear:

…by serving [the parish], we would be acting absolutely contrary to our Rule, which prohibits us from doing such work in towns…That would serve

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{170} CCD, 12:83, 6 December 1658: ‘Au commencement, nous ne pensions à rien moins qu’à servir les ecclésiastiques, nous pensions à nous et aux pauvres.’
\item \textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 2:506, de Paul to Bernard Codoing, 13 May 1644.
\item \textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 4:48, same to Philibert de Brandon, 15 December 1650.
\item \textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 12:83.
\item \textsuperscript{174} Mezzadri and Román, The Vincentians, 218.
\item \textsuperscript{175} AN, MM/534, ‘Foundation contract,’ 4 January 1638.
\item \textsuperscript{176} CCD, 1:418, de Paul to Lambert aux Couteaux, n.d. (probably 1638).
\item \textsuperscript{177} CCD, 5:539, same to Louis Rivet, 30 January 1656.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
as pretext to do the same everywhere and to be content with this work alone, abandoning that of going in search of poor souls in the country…That would be a great pity and would tend to pervert the spirit Our Lord has bestowed on the Company.178

Of course, parish work did not mean that the Vincentians abandoned the poor of the countryside altogether. Even as its work diversified into areas strictly outside the vision of the common Rules and the tradition of the esprit primitif, de Paul took action to preserve the Congregation’s cornerstone ministries. For example, of the ten priests envisaged for the Richelieu house, only four were destined for parochial work; the rest were responsible for evangelization of the Poitou countryside.179 Equally, de Paul ensured that the hallmarks of Vincentian ministry accompanied the new establishment, and he insisted on the foundation of a confraternity of charity in the town.180 This showed that the rhetoric of fidelity was often accompanied by concrete action to preserve the fundamental clauses.

However, not everyone was convinced that this balance could be maintained. In 1659 de Paul had to write to a Vincentian based at the Congregation’s seminary in Annecy who refused to take up his duties teaching in the seminary because he preferred to go on mission. The missionary’s irritation perhaps reflected the reality of seminary operations, which sometimes did not accommodate the Vincentian emphasis on mission; in Cahors, for example, the Congregation’s residents ran the seminary without carrying out missions.181 De Paul answered these queries simply by decreeing that a Vincentian ‘who wants to do one but not the other is only half a missionary.’182 This comment revealed that his instructions to missionaries were a vital element in negotiating the narrow course between fidelity to values and change in the Congregation: what it meant to be a Vincentian was ultimately a question of his judgement as founder and guardian of the Congregation’s fundamental values.

178 Ibid., 465, same to Edme Jolly, 29 October 1655.
179 Coste, Grand saint, 2:78.
180 CCD, 1:458, de Paul to Lambert aux Couteaux, 22 March 1638.
181 Ibid., 4:49, same to Philibert de Brandon, 20 July 1650. De Paul explained in this letter that when the Vincentians took on the seminary at Cahors, the bishop there had already engaged another order to provide missions in his diocese.
Chapter 1: Who were the Vincentians?

No better evidence of this exists than his stern advice to one of his sons in 1641, which ended with de Paul saying ‘beware of adding, dropping or changing anything in our way of life without writing to me about it and receiving my reply.’

Despite de Paul’s sentinel-like awareness, the addition of seminaries and town parishes appears to cast some doubt on the Congregation’s rhetorical assertions to be France’s ‘little Company of the rural poor.’ The question of how little the Congregation actually was hinges firstly on numbers. Despite the warnings about parishes, by the end of de Paul’s generalate the Congregation possessed seven parishes in total, six of which were in France. Significant growth was registered throughout the realm, and thirty-one houses or mission bases were established between 1635 and 1659, mostly located in France. Beyond the French frontiers, the Congregation established missions in Tunis (1645), Algeria (1646), Ireland and Scotland (1646), and Poland (1651). Several establishments were also created on the Italian peninsula, at Rome (1642), Genoa (1645) and Turin (1652). Missionary activity expanded further when the Congregation added an ad gentes mission to its remit in Madagascar in 1648. This expansion into other territories and realms was accompanied by a growing diversification of the Congregation’s out-reach. To the ‘poor people of the countryside’ were added a diverse range of vocational groups, such as galley convicts, soldiers, and even courtiers. Given these developments, de Paul’s assertion during a conference that ‘God had destined [the Vincentians] at a particular time for certain souls and not for others’ appeared increasingly out of kilter with the fact that their ministries embraced more and more people.

The Congregation’s own development mirrored de Paul’s momentous journey from his days in the Gondi household. By 1660, the priest who began his missions on the private estates of the family had become one of the most prominent churchmen in the kingdom. It is not the intention of this chapter to examine the diversity of de Paul’s career in depth; suffice to say that his eulogist’s panegyric in

184 These were Toul (1635), Richelieu (1638), Cahors (1643), Sedan (1643), Le Mans (1645), St. Méen (1645) and Warsaw (1651).
185 Mezzadri and Román, *The Vincentians*, 33-34.
186 Abelly, *La vie du vénérable*, 1, chaps. 28 (galleys) and 33 (missions to the army); *AM*, 91: 987 (missions at court).
187 *CCD*, 11:121 (1643).
1660 was, at the very least, a narrow characterization which underscored his work with the poor to the detriment of other activities. Historians have only just begun to shed light on de Paul’s other major roles in the realm, such as his prominent position on the conseil de conscience from 1642-1653, particularly his influence on consistorial appointments. De Paul worked with the poor, but he also had major contacts with illustrious personages: Louis XIII, Anne of Austria and Louis XIV enjoyed the benefit of his opinion when it came to the quality of recruits to the episcopate, as did many prelates in the kingdom. Through the Tuesday conferences organized at Saint-Lazare, the Congregation’s mother-house became what Forrestal christens a ‘hub of formation’ for elite groups of clergy interested in improving their pious credentials. Forrestal demonstrates that contemporaries of de Paul, including famous names such as Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, saw his favour as a valuable asset in accelerating their promotion in the French Church. While de Paul had no doubt earned Du Tour’s ‘father of the poor’ epithet, his roles as manager, networker and even statesman were equally important. Despite its gaps, however, the emphases of Maupas du Tour’s eulogy were at least compatible with de Paul’s own rhetoric.

Why did de Paul hold fast to his rhetoric of the little Company? Firstly, it was largely accurate. While the Congregation grew and diversified its ministries between 1625 and 1660, there was, even by de Paul’s death, little basis for assertions that it had decisively moved away from its core goals. Dominique Julia points out that Vincentian functions were spread almost evenly between missions and seminaries in 1660. At de Paul’s death, the number of Vincentian houses was still dwarfed by that of their peers at comparable moments. Furthermore, the Congregation’s growth and expansion had not been so appreciable as to alter its

---

over-all weight in the French church. After all, Dodin estimates that in 1640 the Vincentians numbered 130 men in a vast clerical population of 360,000, and it was not substantially larger by 1660. Moreover, any change in the grandeur of the Congregation during de Paul’s life-time was largely coterm inous with increases in de Paul’s personal charisma and individual influence, fame which he expressly ordered not to be reproduced in a corporate sense: the common Rules of 1658 therefore strongly counseled Vincentians from seeking ‘appointments of distinction’ or ‘public acclaim.’

V

The trends after de Paul’s death in 1660 seriously altered the image of the ‘little Company.’ Between 1660 and 1697, the somewhat timid growth registered under de Paul was succeeded by a period of exponential expansion under René Alméras and Edme Jolly. Alméras’ generalate was brief compared to de Paul, but the Congregation in this period opened eight new houses and accepted 330 new members. Jolly’s period in office was truly remarkable in terms of numbers. Forty new Vincentian establishments were created, twenty-seven of which were located in France. The acute increase in houses was mirrored by similar augmentation in personnel, and numbers jumped significantly as 814 priests and 248 brothers swelled the Congregation’s ranks. Decisive shifts also took place in the kind of operations undertaken in the successive generalates. Mezzadri and Román argue that it was under Alméras and Jolly that the Congregation acquired a new reputation, not as the little Company of the poor but as a community principally engaged in the formation of clergy. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Vincentians administered almost half of French diocesan seminaries. Of the eight houses opened under

193 CCD, 13a: 467-468.
194 RC, 1:30.
195 Ibid., 124-126.
196 Mezzadri and Román, The Vincentians, 181.
Alméras, six were seminary establishments, as were twenty-one of the forty sites created by Jolly.\footnote{Ibid., 179.}

Other significant developments under Alméras and Jolly altered the course of the Congregation’s history in the post-de Paul period. It was under these two that the Congregation received the kind of ‘appointments of distinction’ of which de Paul had been so wary. The first signal that the Congregation as a body would take up some of de Paul’s weighty responsibilities in the realm was the foundation at Metz. In 1661, the queen mother, Anne of Austria (ostensibly impressed by the fruits of some Vincentian missions there) sponsored the establishment of Vincentians in the episcopal town.\footnote{AM, 62, 155-156.} Later, letters patent of February 1664 elevated the house to the status of royal foundation with the king and queen mother as co-founders.\footnote{ACM, Alméras Register, fol. 1962.} The Metz establishment prepared the way for the Congregation’s base at Fontainebleau, an assignment that catapulted the Vincentians into a new stratosphere entirely.

The appointment to Fontainebleau in 1661 was the first parish assignment accepted after de Paul’s death. Mezzadri and Román stress that fewer parishes were accepted under de Paul’s two immediate successors than under de Paul, but this argument hides the fact that the parishes accepted under Jolly and Alméras were of unparalleled importance.\footnote{Mezzadri and Román, The Vincentians, 217.} The parish of Fontainebleau was an ecclesiastical benefice covering the residence of the monarch, who usually moved his court there in the autumn.\footnote{E. Jamin, Fontainebleau ou notice historique et descriptive sur cette résidence royale (Fontainebleau: A. Huré, 1834), 21.} Negotiations for erecting the parish began when Anne of Austria wrote to the archbishop of Sens on 18 November 1660, saying she could not wait for its establishment and that ‘the king would take care [of everything] in a manner that all would be very secure and, for my part, I will bring everything necessary to the affair so that nothing obstructs such a good work, this being for no other end than for God.’\footnote{AN, S/6705, ‘Copy of letter from Anne of Austria to the archbishop of Sens,’ 16 November 1660: ‘Le Roy y pourvoit d’une façon que la chose sera très asseuré et de mon coste j’y aporteray tout ce qui sera nécessaire affin que rien n’empesche l’effort d’une si bonne œuvre, celle-ci n’estant autre fin que pour Dieu.’ The King also wrote a letter to the archbishop, dated 18 November 1661.} The appointment of the Vincentians as parish priests was soon finalised. On
Chapter 1: Who were the Vincentians?

31 October 1661, the queen mother established the cure of Fontainebleau, and Thomas Berthe, representing Alméras, took possession of the parish on 28 November 1661. In September 1663, letters patent were published, formally recognizing the establishment. 203

The Fontainebleau assignment was the first test of the Congregation’s ability to remain faithful to its core values. Initially, the Vincentians’ contemplation of the new assignment was marked by language and themes similar to those de Paul had used when confronted with Richelieu and some of the seminary establishments. In a circular letter addressed to his members in October 1661, Alméras declared that the Congregation feared the appointment and stated that parishes were not suitable to its esprit primitif. 204 In a subsequent meeting between Anne of Austria and Alméras, the latter described how he told the queen that ‘poor village priests are hardly appropriate for the court.’ 205 He went on to say that the appointment was capable of making them lose their ‘spirit of simplicity, humility, and disinterestedness.’ 206 The Fontainebleau appointment demonstrated the clear limits of these customary invocations, however. Parties entirely extraneous to internal debates about fidelity to ‘Monsieur Vincent’ were anxious to impose their own ideas on the Congregation and easily conquered this rhetoric. The Vincentians’ obedience to a corporate idea therefore gave way to external forces, in this instance the queen mother’s insistence that they obey the monarch. This interplay between outside forces and the esprit primitif rhetoric would become a prominent feature of the Congregation’s development in the future.

The Fontainebleau appointment dashed de Paul’s ideas that his followers would keep themselves well-hidden. The growth in numbers and houses under successive generals also gradually revealed that this was impossible, and in 1694

203 Théophile Lhuillier, Erection de la paroisse Saint Louis de Fontainebleau, une lettre inédite de Louis XIV (Fontainebleau: E. Bourges, 1893), 16-17.
204 RC, 1:40, October 1661: ‘…les cures ne nous sont pas propres…’
205 Antoine Durand., Journal de Antoine Durand, prêtre de la Mission et premier curé de Fontainebleau, 1661-1677, ed. Olivier Estournet (Fontainebleau: Librairie catholique, 1899), 59-60. René Alméras to Antoine Durand, 10 July 1664: ‘…de pauvres prêtres de village ne sont guère propres pour la Cour…’
206 Ibid., 60: ‘…leur faire perdre l’esprit de simplicité, d’humilité et de désintéressement [dont ils font profession].’
Jolly wrote to his members boasting that the ‘Company is becoming more and more known.’ The Vincentians’ increased visibility was matched by proportional increases in the institute’s prestige, particularly on the international stage. De Paul once described his followers as ‘the dregs, the sweepings, the rejects of the world,’ but a succession of appointments outside the realm revealed how little this image corresponded to reality. The Congregation’s stature in Italy was elevated by successive papal favours at the turn of the century and the beginning of the new: in the period between 1700 and 1710, the Congregation accepted nine new houses in its Rome and Lombardy provinces. In 1697, the pope gifted the lucrative abbey of Saints John and Paul in Rome to the Congregation. The general Watel informed the Congregation in 1704 that the pope and the grand-duke of Florence had established the Vincentians in the city to replace another group of clergy, an act which revealed the latter’s ‘great esteem’ for the Vincentians. The Congregation’s popularity in the eternal city continued apace, and in 1705 it received the directorship of the pontifical Academy of Noble Ecclesiastics, a special seminary for the training of papal ambassadors.

The tremendous growth registered under Alméras and Jolly slowed down in the eighteenth century, but the Congregation’s star nevertheless continued to rise. In particular, its presence in Poland was fortified by the opening of seven new houses in the second decade of the century, initiatives begun, almost without exception, under episcopal aegis. Five French houses were opened between 1720 and 1729. The Congregation’s continuing favour at this time stands out all the more compared with proceedings in other rival institutes: the Oratory, for example, lost rather than gained establishments at this time. Indications of the Congregation’s ever more elevated profile came in many forms, among which were several

207 RC, 1:164, 28 February 1694.
208 CCD, 11:1.
209 RC, 1:210, 234.
210 Ibid., 223. The bulls for this abbey were issued on 8 September 1697.
211 Ibid., 238, 1 January 1704.
212 Ibid., 241, 1 January 1705.
214 Ibid., 382.
Vincentian mitres. Once the enemy of the Congregation’s fundamental values, nominations to the episcopate were granted to three Vincentians at the beginning of the century. The geographical range of their appointments also revealed the steady implantation of the Congregation in diverse locations. François Hebert was appointed bishop of Agen in 1704; his confrere Barthélemy Gabriel Tarlo became bishop of Poznań in Poland in 1709; Jean Mullener became a missionary bishop in China in 1716. The obscurity sought by de Paul for his sons had evidently not been gained.

VI

When Edme Jolly died in 1697, the obituary which appeared in the court circular, the *Mercure gallant*, summed up the major achievements of his significant generalate. The *Mercure* article focused on the Congregation’s high profile parish appointments and the invitations extended to it by French and foreign prelates to establish seminaries in their dioceses. However, the obituary was not simply a numerical assessment of Jolly’s achievements. It claimed that Jolly had been the perfect follower of de Paul, and explained what was meant by this in asserting that Jolly had continued all the good works begun by the founder ‘for the sanctification of the clergy and of the people, and for the relief of the poor.’

Employing identical language to the Congregation’s key corporate documents, the obituary paid tribute to Jolly’s ‘profound humility’ and lauded the fact that ‘up to his death, he maintained the entire Congregation in that ‘spirit of piety, humility, zeal and disinterestedness which had made its founder so recommendable to the entire Church.”

According to the *Mercure*, therefore, perfect harmony had been maintained between the Congregation’s corporate values and the momentous changes in the Congregation at that time.

---

216 *MCM*, 1:69.
218 *MG*, April 1697, 249-252. The article also recognised the establishment of over fifty houses of the Daughters of Charity
220 *Ibid.*, 251-252: ‘Il a maintenu constamment jusques à la mort dans toute sa Congrégation, cet esprit de piété, d’humilité, de zèle et de désintéressement, qui avoit rendu son Instituteur très recommandable à toute l’Eglise.’

Chapter 1: Who were the Vincentians?

The Jolly obituary was misleading because it failed to grasp the fact that voices inside and outside the Congregation had already reached divergent conclusions about the Vincentians’ ability to maintain their corporate values. The possibility of failure in this task was identified by de Paul’s immediate successors who, even as they pursued their rhetoric of fidelity, revealed subtle anxieties about gradual drift from the institute’s ethos and working goals. In particular, the language emanating from the Congregation’s leaders, especially Alméras, betrayed acute self-awareness. Not only did the Vincentians have to strive to remain faithful to their ethos, Alméras believed they had to be seen to do so if they were to survive scrutiny:

If we do not have the spirit of the Mission, we are only hypocrites and impostors, who deceive the world and presume to cheat God and defraud the Church, the founders, and what is worse, ourselves…

Behind these comments lurked the realisation that while the Congregation could make strong rhetorical arguments about its fidelity, it was outsiders who would ultimately pass judgement. When he introduced the Abelly biography in 1664, Alméras warned that the exposition of de Paul’s words and actions would help the public distinguish ‘by our actions, the illegitimate from the legitimate children of such a worthy father.’ Later, when the general assembly of 1668 recommended spiritual conferences on the esprit primitif, it also encouraged meditation on the ‘signs by which people can know whether we [have] fallen.’ In this new rhetoric of drift, avoiding worldly pursuits and honour was identified as the key challenge to the sons of Monsieur Vincent. The decrees of the 1668 assembly therefore spoke out against what it called the ‘spirit of the world’ and declared ‘the more we shall flee

---

221 ACM, Alméras Register 2, ‘Conference,’ (undated), fol.1901: ‘…si nous n’avons pas l’esprit de la Mission, nous ne sommes que des hypocrites et des imposteurs, qui trompons le monde et présumons de tromper Dieu et défrauder l’Eglise, les fondateurs, et ce qui est pire, nous-mêmes…’
222 RC, 1:68, 16 September 1664: ‘…par nos déportements les enfants illégitimes d’avec les légitimes d’un si digne père.’
223 Ibid., 98: ‘…des marques par lesquelles on peut connaître si nous sommes déchus.’
the world outside the functions of our state, the easier it will be to preserve the spirit of our vocation.’

The Fontainebleau appointment constituted a watershed moment in the emerging rhetoric of drift, because it demonstrated that outsiders were ready to echo the Congregation’s internal concerns. Almost as soon as the Vincentians were installed at the court, the canons regular of the Holy Trinity, commonly called the Mathurins, raised objections to the Congregation’s entry into the parish of Fontainebleau. The Mathurins asserted that they were in possession of the neighbouring parish of Avon, embracing the château of Fontainebleau, and were therefore the legitimate curés of Fontainebleau. This claim allegedly dated as far back as 1259. When the Mathurins’ bid failed, they published a factum upbraiding the Vincentians’ establishment. The document itself is undated, but was mentioned in the journal of the first Vincentian parish priest of Fontainebleau, Antoine Durand, who called it ‘bloody’ in his entries for 1666. Durand’s comment was unsurprising given the tone of the document, in which the rhetoric surrounding the spirit of the Mission was used against its own protagonists. While recognizing the ardent zeal of the Vincentians in general, the gravamen of the Mathurins’ complaints laid betrayal at their feet:

A new fantasy of pious ambition occurred to the Priests of the Mission, and these good missionaries, instead of keeping themselves within the time-honoured limits of modest Charity, in order to assist the poor people of the countryside, under the direction of Bishops and with the permission of the curés, and also following the most holy rules of their vocation, they had the vanity to aspire to cures and to dignities against the fundamental laws of their establishment.’

---

224 Ibid., 100: ‘…plus nous fuirons le monde hors les fonctions de notre état, plus il nous sera facile de conserver l’esprit de notre vocation.’
226 Durand, Journal, 76. Durand was parish priest of Fontainebleau from 1661 to 1677.
227 Mémoire instructif sur le différent, part i, 16: ‘Il inspira aux Prestres de la Mission une fantaisie nouvelle d’une piété ambitieuse; et ces bons Missionnaires, au lieu de contenir dans les bornes anciennes d’une Charité modeste, pour assister les pauvres Gens de la Campagne, sous la Mission des
Chapter 1: Who were the Vincentians?

The factum employed a clear Vincentian lexicon against the Congregation, and echoed the concerns that the Paris pastors expressed back in 1630. Knowing full well the power of de Paul’s legacy, the Mathurins’ seized on his words to attack his so-called heirs, even quoting Abelly’s biography to remind the Vincentians that ‘the founders of their Congregation never had the design to erect them as curés.’\footnote{Ibid., part ii, 19. The Mémoire quotes Abelly, La vie du vénérable, 1:66-68: ‘…les Fondateurs de leur Congrégation, n’ont point eu dessein de les ériger en Curez…’} They warned the Vincentians to avoid ‘tabernacles close to the palaces of the mighty or in the Louvres of Kings,’ when they were called to ‘fight in the countryside.’\footnote{Ibid., 20: ‘…des Tabernacles proche les Palais des Grands, ou dans les Louvres des Roys…,’ ‘…battre toujours la Campagne…’}

These external warnings soon gave way to serious internal apprehension about a general betrayal of the fundamental ethos throughout the Congregation. In 1675, Jolly wrote to the Congregation on the subject of its rapid growth and ended his letter beseeching that ‘the multiplication [in the Congregation’s houses] does not diminish our fidelity to conserve the esprit primitif.’\footnote{Ibid., 165, 14 October 1675: ‘…que la multiplication ne diminue pas notre fidélité à conserver l’esprit primitif de la même Congrégation…’} Despite this prayer, official documents issued between de Paul’s death in 1660 and his canonisation in 1737 were striking for their increasing concern with decadence in the ranks. In 1673, in one of his first letters as superior general, Jolly called attention to poor observance of the vow of poverty in the Congregation.\footnote{RC, 1:131, 27 August 1673.} The general assembly of 1685 targeted in its decrees what it identified as the relaxation of simplicity in some of the Congregation’s houses, and warned against emerging ostentation in living quarters and styles of dress.\footnote{Ibid., 184, 1 July 1685.} In 1687, Jolly wrote to the superior of the Poitiers house regarding complaints about excess at table, including the frequency of dessert! Jolly warned the superior to correct these abuses, following the ‘conduct and examples of our venerable founder…’\footnote{Archives départementales de la Vienne, G/444, Edme Jolly to Monsieur Grisard, 15 September 1687.} For its part, the 1692 assembly railed once again against abuses of the vow of poverty. For example, the assembly attacked some Vincentians
for purchasing forbidden items such as books and clothes, and for wearing bodily
scents.\footnote{Ibid., 190-191, 23 May 1692.}

Analysis of the first quarter of the eighteenth century yields few signals that
the Congregation’s obsession with fidelity and complaints about drift abated. One of
the first circulars of Jean Watel noted that the ‘esprit primitif of the Congregation is
much weakened,’ and bemoaned the fact that some Vincentians had abandoned
‘practices introduced from the time of our venerable father Monsieur Vincent.’\footnote{Ibid.,
234, 10 September 1704, ‘...l’esprit primitif de la Congrégation est fort affaibli...’}
Confronted with reams of complaints of this nature, and mounting evidence that the
Vincentians were struggling to fulfil the ideals of their formation, Saint-Lazare
pursued several concrete projects designed to bolster the community’s values. The
generalate of Jean Bonnet (1711-1735) was the most significant in this respect. In
1712, Bonnet announced the opening of a seminary of recollection for the
Congregation, an idea first proposed in 1642 by de Paul. The seminary was designed
to allow professed missionaries to reconnect with the ethos of the Congregation.
Explaining that the need for the establishment ‘was more necessary at present than
ever’, Bonnet expressed his hope that those who entered would ‘renew themselves in
spirit.’\footnote{Ibid., 275: ‘...était plus nécessaire à présent que jamais...’; ‘se renouveler en esprit.’}
Bonnet conjointly announced the compilation of model sermons for some
of the Congregation’s young priests, whose methods of preaching were ill-suited to
the ‘people of the fields.’\footnote{Ibid.}

By the time that the eighteenth century dawned, the rhetoric of drift had
become a perennial feature of the generals’ yearly circulars and general assembly
documents. Its appearance signalled an important change to internal discussions
about Vincentian ethos. In de Paul’s time, references to the spirit of the Mission
were employed in a wide variety of documents and presentations in order to teach
the Vincentians about their core values. After de Paul’s death, core elements of the
esprit primitif became increasingly mentioned in a negative, often prescriptive
context, especially in official communications. In terms of missionary projects,
themes and formulations like ‘the spirit of the Mission,’ the ‘spirit of de Paul,’ and

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 275: ‘...était plus nécessaire à présent que jamais...’; ‘se renouveler en esprit.’}
Chapter 1: Who were the Vincentians?

the image of the missionaries as ‘priests of the poor’ cropped up when the Congregation’s most ambitious or exotic exercises failed or led them into dangerous territory.

VII

The alleged appearance of de Paul’s ghost during Alméras’ election was a powerful symbol of the enormous bereavement felt by his sons. When de Paul passed away, the Congregation he had led for thirty-five years lost its father, its steward and its principal teacher. The psychological drama of de Paul’s absence was given clear exhibition in Cuissot’s near-paralysis at the thought of making decisions without the guidance of the founder. For the first time, the Vincentians in 1660 entered an era where they could not, as de Paul insisted, write to him if they desired to add, drop or change ‘anything in our way of life.’ The presence of the phantom in Cuissot’s mind revealed the searing pressures on those who followed de Paul and stood as the emblem of a compulsive rhetoric that emphasised two central and related objectives: the first commanded absolute fidelity to de Paul; the second translated the first by insisting that fidelity to de Paul meant obedience to the Congregation’s original ethos.

In truth, this language drew on deep-seated history. Since Folleville, reaching out to the poor and marginalised was the constitutive thread of de Paul’s apostolic programme, and the missions born on the Gondi estates subsequently took their place in the fundamental clauses of the Congregation. The Congregation’s destiny to serve the poor thereafter became a fixture of papal bulls, letters patent and eventually the common Rules. De Paul’s intimate connection with the poor reached its rhetorical summit in the eulogy given at his funeral, where he was remembered as their father. But de Paul was not a lone labourer and the internal structures of his institute were specifically designed to create and train servants whose values and working ethos would repeat his commitment to the poor. The internal seminary of the Congregation and de Paul’s teachings therefore sought to give concrete reality to the image of the ‘little company’ created in prescriptive literature.
The image of the ‘little company’ remained extremely durable. When de Paul died, his successors immediately went to extraordinary lengths to preserve the original purpose of the Congregation. The most critical element in the conservation process was the identification and repeated use of the rhetoric of the *esprit primitif* which sought to buttress the Congregation’s eternal image as the company of Folleville. For its part, the Abelly project in 1664 was not only the first biography of de Paul, but was equally a symptom of the contemporary Congregation and its anxieties. Dodin’s remark that the figure of de Paul was stuck in time is equally applicable to Vincentian rhetoric after 1660. In the collective grief of the post-de Paul period, the Congregation’s leaders clearly believed that if they projected over and over again their faithful adherence to the *esprit primitif* they too would share in de Paul’s permanent saintliness. By this, all Vincentians might retain their lauded qualification as the ‘sons of Monsieur Vincent.’

At de Paul’s death, the core elements of Vincentian identity appeared settled. To recall Coste’s phrase, ‘the priest of the Mission was and must remain a priest of the countryside.’²³⁸ However, the reality of the Congregation’s development during and especially after de Paul’s death revealed another feature of the Congregation’s corporate rhetoric: its narrow construction of de Paul’s life and work. The exclusive ken of the 1625 foundation contract, so important to the Folleville-orientated narrative, did not last long and swiftly gave way to expanding ministries, such as the direction of diocesan seminaries and the administration of parishes. During de Paul’s generalate, the Vincentians’ widening pastoral remit had a profound impact on the original idea of the Folleville mission as the Congregation’s definition of the poor expanded to accommodate changing realities: whether it was the galley slaves of Marseille, the slaves of northern Africa, or the ignorant clergy of France’s presbyterate, all joined the poor rural people of the countryside as ‘poor’ spiritual objects in need of the Vincentians’ edification and charity. Post-1660 the gulf between rhetoric and reality only became wider as the Congregation fast became one of the most important institutes in the realm and outside.

²³⁸ Coste, *La Congrégation*, 50: ‘Le prêtre de la Mission était et devait rester le prêtre de la campagne.’
Of course, the crucial difference in the acceptability of gaps between rhetoric and reality in the pre- and post-de Paul eras was de Paul’s presence as ultimate judge and arbiter. As long as de Paul was alive to scrutinise and give counsel to his followers, a chasm was permissible. But in the obsessive atmosphere created by his successors’ rhetoric of unwavering fidelity to the *esprit primitif*, any such gulf became a dangerous affair. In his history of the Congregation, Poole asks, with a little exaggeration, if the Congregation experienced a ‘catastrophic falling-off’ in its fundamental values in the post-de Paul period. Poole declines to provide any substantial response to his question, but what is certain is that fear of serious, long-lasting drift from the *esprit primitif* dominated the Congregation’s internal debates post-1660. Outsiders were also bold enough to hold the Congregation to account and identify contradictions in Vincentian identity when they saw them, as the Mathurins did in the 1660s. The Fontainebleau case constituted, however, just a single incident. It remains to be judged whether the questions raised by the Mathurins went to the heart of Vincentian development in the post-de Paul period.

---

239 Poole. *A History*, 98.
Chapter 2: Fidelity and failure: the Congregation in Madagascar, 1648-1674

From the conception of the Mission, the single biggest challenge for Vincentians lay in preserving their *esprit primitif* while they tackled growth and expanded their institute’s ministries. This issue of preservation had accompanied the Congregation’s acceptance of seminaries and prefaced its hesitant agreement to participate in parish work. The Mathurins’ deposition in the Fontainebleau case offered an interesting, and in some ways, unique judgement about the Congregation’s fidelity to its *esprit primitif* in the post-de Paul era. On the other hand, however, the Fontainebleau case has limited value in assessing the relationship between Vincentian ideals and the reality of missionary life. After all, when the appointment was accepted de Paul was not alive to determine its value and make his all-important judgement as to its suitability. Furthermore, the long-term consequences of the Fontainebleau nomination were, in 1661, as yet unknowable. This chapter will assess how the rhetorical discourse that promoted the Congregation’s exclusive destination to the poor was employed on a specific missionary site which de Paul himself organised, the results of which became concrete soon after his death. It does so by looking at the crucial test case of Madagascar.

The commercial Compagnie de l’Orient secured rights to trade on Madagascar in January 1642 for ten years. Previously, Cardinal Richelieu had identified Madagascar as a potentially important outpost in the Indian Ocean. Between 1642 and 1648, there were few Catholic missionaries on the island, but the Compagnie de l’Orient later sought an official arrangement for the provision of religious rites. In the search for appropriate missionary institutes to provide these services, the apostolic nuncio to France, Niccolò Bagni, recommended the

---

1 Arthur Malotet, *Etienne Flacourt, ou les origines de la colonisation française à Madagascar 1648-1661* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1898), 40. The Company, founded in 1642, had been accorded a commercial monopoly in the region by Cardinal Richelieu on the condition that the territory be claimed on behalf of the French king.
Congregation of the Mission.\textsuperscript{2} Pressed thereafter by both the nuncio and the Company, Vincent de Paul accepted the mission.

The Fontainebleau case may have been the first major test of Vincentian institutional identity in the post-de Paul period, but Madagascar was by far the most important. Much of the mission’s symbolic weight came from the fact that it was planned by the founder. De Paul had not expressed clear opinions on foreign mission until the 1640s and even then, his decision to enter the global mission arena came about only after significant reflection. At least at the beginning, his hesitation seemed to rule out any other vocation for his institute than its work among French Catholics. On a practical level, he was also concerned that missions outside Europe might limit the Congregation’s independence, and he resisted a request by Propaganda Fide to submit the Congregation to its authority.\textsuperscript{3} However, later on his letters made overtly supportive statements on evangelical work outside Europe, a continent he saw blighted by the double scourge of Protestantism and Jansenism.\textsuperscript{4} It was therefore in the 1640s that potential projects for the Congregation outside Europe were discussed seriously, although all were unfulfilled until the appointment to Madagascar in 1648.\textsuperscript{5}

Unlike the Congregation’s parishes, and, to a lesser extent, its seminaries, it soon became clear that de Paul regarded foreign mission as a magnified version of the Congregation’s original calling. Informing Charles Nacquart of his selection for the first Madagascar contingent, de Paul asked whether he was prepared for ‘a vocation as lofty and adorable as that of the greatest Apostles and saints of the Church of God…’\textsuperscript{6} For de Paul, the acme of the Vincentian missionary vocation – indeed of all missionary vocations – consisted in following the example of the apostles who had cooperated in Christ's command by heading to myriad places

\textsuperscript{2} Coste, Grand Saint, 2:228.
\textsuperscript{4} \textit{CCD}, 3:164, de Paul to Jean Dehorgny, March 1647: ‘How do we know, I say, whether God does not wish to transfer the Church to the lands of unbelievers, who perhaps preserve greater innocence in their morals than the majority of Christians…?’
\textsuperscript{5} \textit{MCM}, 9:6-7. The Congregation was mooted for two projects in Babylon and Brazil, both of which came to nothing.
\textsuperscript{6} \textit{CCD}, 3:278, de Paul to Charles Nacquart, 22 March 1648.
across the world. In a 1658 conference on the subject, de Paul revealed his ambitions:

What does missionary mean? It means to be sent. Yes, my brothers, missionary means sent from God, and it was to you that Our Lord said:

_Euntes in mundum universum praedicate Evangelium omni creaturae._\(^7\)

In thinking about Madagascar, de Paul and his missionaries alluded to themselves as successors of famous Jesuits like Francis Xavier, whose letters were staple reading material on the long journey to the island.\(^8\) But once the buoyant hopes were expressed and allusions to celebrated saints made, the strategy of the little Company in what was very much _terra incognita_ had to be laid out.

On the practical level de Paul situated global and internal missions in the same category. Global missionary activity simply consisted of the direct translation of an already-tested French model into a foreign landscape.\(^9\) The first Madagascar missionaries were therefore enjoined to ‘follow in everything the practice of the Council of Trent and use the Roman Ritual’ and not ‘permit any other custom to be introduced.’\(^10\) This unity smoothed the way for fulfilment of the Congregation’s corporate goals, and de Paul’s remarks indicated a firm belief that the fundamental clauses of the Congregation and foreign missionary work were totally compatible: the un-baptized indigenous of Madagascar simply took the place of poor French Catholics of the countryside. The official authorization for the Madagascar mission, dated 30 March 1648, strongly reminded the missionaries that their work abroad took place in the context of the Congregation’s core institutional purpose:

---

\(^7\) _Ibid._, 12:26, 9 June 1658, ‘Go you into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.’

\(^8\) In his first letter to Nacquart, de Paul mentioned Xavier three times, see _CCD_, 3:279. In his first letter to de Paul from the island, Nacquart said: ‘I realise [that] I am obliged to walk in [Xavier’s] footsteps, since he was my predecessor, not in actual fact but in desire…,’ and also explained that the missionaries read Xavier’s letters en route to Madagascar: ibid., 3:539, 543.

\(^9\) For comparatives discussions on the unity of metropolitan and far-off missions see Deslandres, _Croire et faire croire_, 61-64 and especially chap.21; Luke Clossey, _Salvation and Globalisation in the early Jesuit missions_ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 8, 15.

\(^10\) _CCD_, 3:280.
Chapter 2: Fidelity and failure

According to our Institute, we are bound to devote ourselves to procuring the salvation of souls wherever God has called us…chiefly in places where the need is greater and other evangelical workers are lacking…11

Recalling the institute’s collective obligations was critical in this adventurous enterprise. It notified Vincentians of de Paul’s perennial conviction that the missionaries were not free-roaming secular clergy but members of an apostolic community with a precious identity to be retained.12 Key elements of this identity would therefore be transported to the new mission site. For example, as with the European poor, de Paul told the first Vincentians that they should avoid using ‘subtle theological reasoning,’ and focus instead on their traditionally simple approach, which in this case recommended ‘arguments taken from nature.’13

How sensitive these ideals would prove to new contexts was a question whose answer was as yet unclear. As a missionary project, the enterprise offered unprecedented conditions for the Congregation. On a practical level, this was the Vincentians’ first mission whose patron was a private commercial company and the practical consequences of this alliance were immense.14 From the time they stepped on the beaches of Madagascar, the missionaries were considered as auxiliaries to imperial conquest, which discomfited many of them. Madagascar provided the Vincentians with their first introduction to a social complex where a ‘line of colour’ divided their flock, as Malagasy whites, Malagasy noirs, and French Catholics formed a society characterised by what Galibert calls a ‘clivage Blancs-Noirs.’15 This divide was even wider due to the religious and cultural diversity of the indigenous population: a contemporary observer claimed that, although the Malagasy spoke the same tongue, some practised ‘superstitions of Mohammed’

11 Ibid., 13a: 358-359.
12 Ibid., 11:73, de Paul said during an undated conference that ‘…we are called to the Mission only to live in it conformably to the Rules; it is their observance, and not the habit, that makes us Missioners.’
13 Ibid., 3:280, de Paul to Charles Nacquart, 22 March 1648.
14 Coste, Grand Saint, 2:228-229. The missionary work had originally been entrusted by Propaganda Fide to the Discalced Carmelites, who in the end did not go to Madagascar. The nuncio to France, Niccolo Bagni, nominated the Congregation of the Mission instead.
while others even observed ‘customs of Judaism.’ As a result, a decisive split emerged in the Vincentians’ pastoral roles on the island as their duties to the French colonial contingent became entirely separate from and even competed with their deeply-felt vocation to carry out missions to a diverse group of unevangelised non-Europeans.

Analysis of this split gives rise to context-specific questions about the Vincentians’ ability to remain faithful to their *esprit primitif* on a mission which de Paul himself rubber-stamped. How would the goals of their institute be fulfilled on a mission site where indigenous responses to missionaries were regularly coloured by the violent nature of colonial enterprise? Furthermore, did their double roles allow the Vincentians to maintain their community life in a coherent and fruitful way? De Paul once said that the Congregation’s vows provided the kind of security ‘whereby it is no problem sending a man fifty leagues from here for a seminary or to go to the Indies,’ but the founder’s words were uttered from the safety of Saint-Lazare. The Madagascar case reveals that de Paul’s ideals encountered more and more obstacles in the painful, and often bloody, reality that awaited missionaries working on the ground.

It is worth recalling that accusations of drift which emerged over the parish at Fontainebleau came largely from outsiders. In comparison, Madagascar’s superior value as a test case lies in the fact that the project allowed missionaries to test for themselves the boundaries of their corporate identity and furnish informed opinions on this subject for Saint-Lazare. To boot, these judgements came from all levels of the Congregation. Chapter One called attention to the fact that the Congregation’s leadership remained highly attentive to the commands of their original institution, but this sensitivity was not solely a top-down phenomenon. The Madagascar mission exhibits how deeply the fear of drift from corporate values penetrated the ordinary membership of the Congregation. De Paul’s belief that the Madagascar mission fulfilled the commands of the Congregation’s *esprit primitif* in the same way as missions to the poor in Europe was based on his (seemingly naïve) understanding

---

17 *CCD*, 13a: 393.
that the project was first and foremost a mission *ad gentes*. However, missionaries on site increasingly dispelled this assumption by pointing to the hazards of their responsibilities as parish priests and public officials of the colony. The fact that they routinely did so indicated that they were constantly vigilant about their institute’s identity and openly attacked inconsistencies in their apostolate long before the Mathurins produced their deposition in the 1660s.

The contributions that individual Vincentians made eventually led to a conclusion which previous anxiety over acceptance of seminaries and parishes had failed to produce. The Madagascar assignment was the Congregation’s first major mission to be abandoned after de Paul’s demise. The failure signaled by the Congregation’s termination of the mission in 1671 was therefore particularly pertinent to the ongoing debate about the Congregation’s fidelity to the founder. In the face of increasing tension between the Congregation’s missionary goals and adverse conditions on the island, de Paul’s followers remained reluctant to pull out of a project so dearly held by him. Doing so may have compounded fears of drift in a Congregation already facing accusations of betrayal. However, the way in which the Vincentians grappled with the failure sheds light on the important role of the *esprit primitif* rhetoric after de Paul’s death. The power of this rhetoric allowed his followers to convert disappointment into affirmation and re-cast abandonment as loyal obedience. Once this was accomplished, they then picked instructive lessons from the embers of the mission. In the end, the termination of the mission became one of the key steps in the Vincentians’ lengthy commemorative process after de Paul’s death as they sought to consolidate their original identity as a religious institute.

I

A history of the Vincentian mission to Madagascar must confront gaps in the written evidence. Between May 1650 and August 1654 there were no Vincentians on the island. The same applies for the period between June 1657 and September 1663. Thus, while technically committed to Madagascar, the Congregation’s history on the island remained blank for more than ten years. The evidence for the phase of the
mission during de Paul’s life (covering the 1650s) relies on substantial evidence from three missionaries, Charles Nacquart, Jean François Mousnier and Toussaint Bourdaisie. The history after de Paul’s death was dominated by Nicolas Etienne, for whom three letters survive. Evidence for the 1660s is fragmentary as there was no news from Madagascar between 1663 and 1667, the year when Louis Bourot wrote an important missive. Similarly, the extant correspondence between one of the island’s last Vincentian missionaries, Marin Roguet, and Saint-Lazare in the early 1670s is slim. However, despite evidentiary shortcomings the correspondence reveals most of the decisive developments of the mission: the evolution of missionary and leadership responses to it, the movement toward failure, and the mission’s all-important aftermath.

The planning phase of the Congregation’s first global sortie was both hasty and poorly organised. In his 1648 letter to Nacquart, de Paul implied that the Vincentians appointment came with the approval of Propaganda Fide in Rome, but his knowledge at the time was faulty.  

By the time the Congregation was approached by the nuncio in France, Propaganda had already given another order, the Discalced Carmelites, charge of Madagascar’s future evangelisation. Nevertheless, within weeks of de Paul’s letter, Nacquart and another missionary, Nicolas Gondréé, were swiftly dispatched on a merchant vessel to the island. Even while the missionaries were en route, their position seemed uncertain as Propaganda proceeded to revoke the two missionaries’ faculties by decree of 20 July 1648 until the Carmelite question was settled. Adding to this initial confusion was the absence of any special contract detailing the commercial Company’s future obligations to the missionaries, although de Paul indicated that the Company would provide money ‘for any necessity that may arise.’

---

18 CCD, 3:278: ‘For behold, by authority of the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith…the Nuncio has chosen the Company to go and serve God on Saint-Laurent island, also called Madagascar.’
19 Ibid., 13a: 361.
20 MCM, 9:50. The two set sail on 21 May 1648.
21 CCD, 13a:361. The Carmelites later renounced the mission and the Vincentians received full powers from Propaganda.
22 Ibid., 3:282, 284. De Paul told Nacquart that the king’s governor would ‘pay all your expenses on board and when you land.’
The two missionaries were part of a contingent of seventy-six men led by the governor and historian, Etienne Flacourt, whose expedition arrived in Madagascar on 4 December 1648.\(^{23}\) The background to European presence there offered a bleak picture to these new settlers, missionaries or otherwise. Like most major European colonial projects of the period, domination by violence was a recurrent theme and the first groups of Europeans who arrived there in the sixteenth century have been accused of cruelty toward the indigenous inhabitants, who soon became their enemies.\(^{24}\) Concurrent missionary efforts were affected by these tactics and individual missionaries occasionally became victims of ongoing hostilities.\(^{25}\) Later, seventeenth-century efforts by groups of Portuguese Jesuits fared no better as missionaries were unable to cast off their disdain for the indigenous population, one calling them ‘more animal than the beasts themselves.’\(^{26}\) Similar feelings of religious superiority persisted into the period of French occupation, when Flacourt described some of the island’s inhabitants as ‘stained by Mohammadism.’\(^{27}\) For their part, the French colonists have earned a poor review from previous historians of the mission, particularly concerning their moral conduct. For example, Pierre Coste claims that once they arrived the colonists threw off the shackles of moral order and gave in to carnal desire, a characterization of embryonic colonial society that was reputedly repeated in many other settings.\(^{28}\) According to Coste, the colonial population consisted mainly of disillusioned young men who soon realized that ‘Madagascar was not the earthly paradise of which they had dreamed and which had been promised them.’\(^{29}\)


\(^{25}\) Coste, *Grand Saint*, 2:221. Coste claimed that a Dominican was poisoned in 1584 after working on the island.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 224: “…plus brutes que des bêtes sauvages.”

\(^{27}\) Preface to Flacourt, *Histoire de la grande isle*, vi: ‘…entachez de Mahométisme…’


\(^{29}\) Coste, *Grand saint*, 2:231: ‘Madagascar n’était pas le paradis terrestre qu’ils avaient rêvé et qu’on leur avait promis.’ Nacquart described the colonists as ‘…undisciplined people who have been thrown together, most of them sent to this country by their parents, who do not know what do with them, or who came here on their own because of dissolute living or curiosity’: *CCD*, 3:576.
Despite this unattractive setting, as a mission site Madagascar seemed to be a ‘perfect fit’ for the Congregation. Echoes of the Folleville story emerged in the first few lines of de Paul’s description of the island to Nacquart, where he said that ‘[t]here are poor people there who do not know there is a God.’ He went on to instruct Nacquart to ‘help these poor people’ by simple preaching, and to win ‘an abundant harvest for the Company.’

Furthermore, considerable harmony appeared to exist between this Vincentian rhetoric and the language used by colonial officials. Flacourt made numerous public references to the importance of evangelisation on the island. Dedicating his first history of Madagascar to Louis XIV’s superintendent of finance Nicolas Fouquet, Flacourt claimed that the ‘most precious’ demand of Madagascar was for priests, ecclesiastics and preachers. Flacourt also revealed that in letters addressed to him, Fouquet had prioritised the conversion of the island above temporal concerns. During his governorship, he went to great lengths to laud Vincent de Paul and the work of his missionaries. In 1658, he dedicated another work to de Paul, saying ‘[t]he poor islanders of Madagascar will be forever obliged for their conversion…to your house alone.’ Flacourt finally echoed de Paul’s comparison by likening the Vincentians’ work to Jesuits like Xavier and Ignatius Loyola.

Early assessments of life and work on the island suggested that the mission would be successful. In one of his first letters, Nacquart told de Paul that he had baptized two Malagasy women, and he is credited with baptising seventy-seven in total during his brief apostolate. He remained positive and claimed that the missionaries ‘could not wish for any greater openness to the reception of the Gospel.’ His feelings seem to have been shared by other missionaries, and Nacquart reported that his companion, Nicolas Gondrée, had said on his death-bed...
that the ‘poor people’ were ‘so well disposed.’ Nacquart later composed the first catechism in Malagasy, perhaps the outstanding achievement in the mission’s early history. Even after these first two Vincentians had died, missionaries were still exuberant about the fulfilment that the Malagasy mission brought them. In 1655, Jean-François Mousnier told de Paul that the ‘negroes are good-natured and easy to convert.’ In a further appraisal, dated 19 February 1657, the missionary Toussaint Bourdaise claimed there was good reason to hope that the entire island would be converted and baptised.

There were early clues, however, that the Vincentian mission would follow the pattern of previous efforts to evangelise Madagascar. The fulfilment of the Vincentians’ pastoral goals toward the ‘poor people’ of the island rested on the disposition of an indigenous community that remained hostile to the French colonists as a whole. Stable conditions for missionary work were hard to establish and references to fighting were pervasive in the Vincentians’ early correspondence. In one of his letters, Nacquart referred to ‘wretched wars…capable of destroying the work of God.’ The missionaries depended on a high level of trust between the two communities in order to carry out their apostolic works. Bourdaise revealed in 1657 how much of their evangelical efforts depended on brittle political relations between indigenous leaders and French colonists. He claimed that ‘our religion is promoted more by the baptism of one noble chief’ than by a ‘hundred common people.’ However, ongoing skirmishes between the natives and the French thwarted the Vincentians’ access to both the local lords and the ‘poor common people.’ Even as he expressed hope for island-wide conversions, Bourdaise related in his letter that the French governor, Guelton, had moved Fort Dauphin ‘out of musket range,’ fearing an attack from the nearest native village. These troubling events in the mission’s first phase were portentous of the worsening conditions to follow.

36 Ibid., 438, Nacquart to de Paul, 27 May 1649.
38 Jean-François Mousnier to de Paul, 6 February 1655, printed in MCM, 9:187.
39 CCD, 6:246. Toussaint Bourdaise to same, 19 February 1657.
40 Ibid., 3:571. Nacquart to same, undated seventeenth-century copy.
41 Ibid., 6:250.
42 Ibid., 6:235.
In addition to the vexations of warfare, the missionaries were also frustrated by their duties toward the French colonists. The weight and distraction of these duties were a source of disappointment to them because the colonists showed little interest in religion. In Nacquart’s second major letter from the mission he complained about the nature of colonial society, saying that ‘the conversations of people of the world are all too often about things that should not be heard by a priest.’

He also complained that he was ‘considered as someone who wanted to lay down the law’ in a society that thought of ‘nothing but temporalities.’ Nacquart responded to this growing sense of uselessness by suggesting to de Paul that ordinary secular priests take up the parish of Fort Dauphin. In a bold reference to the Congregation’s core functions, he said ‘I do not think we can do anything much for the natives unless we are completely disengaged from these Gentlemen [of the commercial Company] in order to work only at giving missions…it is against our rule to have parishes.’

In another, slightly less reverent, letter to a confrere Nacquart stated:

It is not the job of Missionaries to govern people…they would need accommodating priests [for that]…It would be an unequalled pleasure to have only one habitation where we could see solely to our salvation and that of the poor inhabitants of this country, according to the spirit of our institute.

Nacquart’s invocation of the Congregation’s rule against work in parishes was prefaced on a claim that Fort Dauphin qualified as a town and therefore lay outside the missionaries’ ken. Nacquart reminded de Paul that ‘towns are forbidden to us, and here [we have] a fortress where the walls are a hedge, and the houses little huts,

---

43 Ibid., 3:570.
44 Ibid., 571.
46 MCM, 9: 99, Nacquart to Monsieur Lambert, 10 February 1650: ‘…ce n’est pas le fait des Missionnaires de gouverner des gens, parmi lesquels il y a tant de désordres auxquels on ne peut remédier…Ce serait un plaisir sans pareil que d’avoir une habitation pour ne vaquer qu’à son salut et à celui des pauvres habitants de ce pays, selon l’esprit de notre institut.’ This letter was seemingly addressed to Lambert aux Couteaux, one of the Congregation’s senior members.
covered with leaves.’ However, while Nacquart’s assertion was made in the most animated language, there are factual problems with his testimony. Firstly, he was well aware that the Congregation had, in fact, accepted some parish work in France, and he himself had worked at its parish in Richelieu town directly before his assignment to Madagascar. Furthermore, his arguments promoting the ramshackle settlement at Fort Dauphin to the status of a town are hardly convincing. Nevertheless, his invocation of the ‘spirit of our institute’ is highly important, as is the fact that he offered the first judgement about the suitability of Madagascar’s parish work to the Congregation’s ethos and collective identity.

Throughout the mission’s history, the Vincentians sought to cement their community life in Madagascar. In their letters, they frequently referred to themselves as the ‘sons of Monsieur Vincent’ and expressed anxiety about how their community life would survive transplantation on ships and on the mission site. They made requests for the common Rules or Abelly’s biography to accompany them on the journey. The missionaries also sought to integrate their work in Madagascar with that of the wider community membership. Once on site, their letters often referred to events elsewhere in the Congregation or ended with renewed statements of loyalty to Saint-Lazare and appeals for prayers by the community in France. However, the colonial environment thrust great difficulties in the way of maintaining this sense of community. Once again, Nacquart captured this succinctly when he described life at Fort Dauphin:

---

47 Ibid. ‘Les villes nous sont défendues, et c’est ici une forteresse dont les murailles sont une haie, et les maisons de petites granges, couvertes de feuilles…’
48 CCD, 3:77, n.6.
49 In 1648 Nacquart asked whether the missionaries would ‘be free to follow the order of the day for Missionaries while we are travelling, and to give conferences among ourselves’: CCD, 3:288. Later he reported ‘from the day we embarked until we landed in Madagascar, we said Mass and had morning prayer publicly...in the way our Congregation does during Missions’: Ibid., 3:542. On another occasion, the missionary Louis Bourot prayed that God ‘would make us true sons of Monsieur Vincent’: ACM, Madagascar Register (MR) 1502 (unpaginated), Bourot to Alméras, 4 February 1667.
50 Ibid., 3:287. See also ACM, MR 1502, ‘Mémoire des livres qui sont nécessaires pour le voyage de Madagascar outre ceux qu’on a envoyé,’ n.d., which mentions the Rules and the ‘Vie de Monsieur Vincent.’
51 See CCD, 6:253 for Bourdaise and ibid., 3:331 for Nacquart. Later, Marin Roguet appealed: ‘Je vous prie très humblement de me recommander aux prières de la Compagnie à ce qu’elle m’obtienne de Dieu cette grâce qui m’est si nécessaire pour devenir bon missionnaire’: ACM, MR 1502, Roguet to Alméras, 26 October 1671.
You cannot talk about the Rules of the Mission or about recollection to one lone priest – or even if there were two of us – in a settlement where the French make a racket of drunken brawls, songs and their work, and with all the misunderstandings that arise in our life and conversation with lay persons.\textsuperscript{52}

Nacquart’s successive references to the spirit of the institute and to the rules of the Mission demonstrated how much de Paul’s common rhetoric filtered down into the thinking of his followers. Missionaries like Nacquart expected a high degree of harmony between the vision of the Congregation and the reality they lived. Nacquart was therefore unafraid to call out the contradictions he identified in the Madagascar landscape and his remarks constituted the first signal that de Paul’s hopes for the mission were naive.

Besides Nacquart’s testimony, which stands out as the most prescient of the missionaries’ early correspondence, the two defining features of correspondence from the first decade were death and disaster. Nacquart’s companion, Nicolas Gondrée, died in May 1649, less than six months after arrival. Nacquart himself died a year later. The 1650s saw three more contingents sent to Madagascar, but a series of accidents wrecked their hopes of success. In his February 1657 letter, Bourdaise detailed the deaths of three of his companions shortly after their arrival in Madagascar.\textsuperscript{53} Later in 1661, another missionary, Nicolas Etienne, told how two further contingents of missionaries had failed to arrive.\textsuperscript{54} The frequency of failure

\textsuperscript{52} Because of adjustments necessary to make sense of the English rendering, my translation differs slightly from that found in \textit{CCD}, 3:573. The French text can be found in \textit{CED}, 3: 583: ‘…il ne faut point parler des règles de la Mission ni de récollection à un prêtre seul, et, quand on serait deux avec les Français d’une habitation qui font un tintamarre d’ivrogneries, de chansons, de leur travail, et des brouillements qui surviennent dans le soin qu’il faut avoir pour la vie et la conversation avec les séculiers.’

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid.}, 6:214-216. The missionaries in question were Claude Dufour, Nicolas Prévost and Mathurin de Belleville.

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}, 8:553-554, Nicolas Etienne to de Paul, 1 March 1661. Etienne mistakenly claimed these were the 1658 and 1659 contingents. The two prior departures were actually in November 1656, with three missionaries; the second took place in March 1658, with 5 Vincentians and two young Malagasy on board. The first mission encountered problems on route due to poor weather and never reached Madagascar. The 1658 ship was captured by Spanish and the missionaries dispersed: Henri Froideveaux, \textit{Les Lazaristes à Madagascar au XVII siècle} (Paris: Poussielgue, 1902), 175-180.
and the short life-expectancy of missionaries once on the island explain regular complaints about personnel shortage from the missionaries who remained alive.\footnote{See the complaints of Nacquart in \textit{ibid.}, 3:573 and Bourdaise in \textit{ibid.}, 6:253.}

Despite the tragedies that beset the first decade of the mission, the responses of the Congregation’s leadership were firm. Vincent de Paul rejected any notion of pulling out, even in the face of internal rumours that the Madagascar mission was a source of unnecessary suffering and should be abandoned.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 11:372. De Paul seemed to allude to such rumours when he said during his conference ‘someone in the Company may say perhaps that Madagascar should be abandoned; flesh and blood will use that language and say that no more men should be sent there, but I am certain that the Spirit says otherwise.’} He tersely addressed these concerns during a conference of his priests on 30 August 1657:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Et quoi, my dear confreres!...could we possibly be so base and unmanly as to abandon this vineyard of the Lord to which His Divine Majesty has called us merely because four, five or six men have died?}
\end{quote}

It is clear that de Paul believed success would eventually follow disaster.\footnote{See for example, \textit{ibid.}, 8:182, de Paul to Bourdaise, November 1659: ‘God seems to be treating you, Monsieur, as He treated His own Son; He sent Him into the world to establish His Church by His Passion, and it seems as if He is trying to introduce the faith in Madagascar only by your sufferings.’} Therefore, while he conveyed his concern with more admonitions to missionaries to take care of their health, he continued planning for the future. One of his last letters relating to Madagascar, written to Flacourt on 18 August 1659, revealed plans to send Nicolas Etienne and others on a new expedition.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 8:95-96.} A few days later, he stated to another missionary that the ‘poor people’ of Madagascar were still ‘so disposed to embrace our holy faith.’\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 103, de Paul to Francois Feydin, 24 August 1659.} More importantly, de Paul still believed in the collective value of his Congregation’s participation in the mission, saying to Bourdaise in November 1659 that the ‘whole company’ was committed to his work.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 184, same to Bourdaise, November 1659.} However, despite this familiar rhetoric, between 1658 and 1663 no Vincentian reached the island, and de Paul’s oversight of the mission came to an end during this hiatus with his own death in 1660. Shortly afterward, an event in 1664 involving Etienne...
seriously altered the tone of the mission and heralded a sharp break with the policies of the de Paul era.

II

In the history of French settlement of Madagascar, the year 1664 was dramatic for two reasons. The first was the creation of a new sovereign company, the Compagnie des Indes. On 26 May 1664, a group of merchants petitioned the king for the establishment of a commercial monopoly on the eastern trade routes. In August, Louis XIV created the Compagnie to succeed the 1642 corporation. While the vision of this company went beyond settlement of any particular area, it became clear that Louis XIV wished to promote a more powerful company to create a stable and profitable colony in Madagascar. Part of this stability was to be drawn from continued evangelization, a goal reaffirmed by Jean-Baptiste Colbert on 20 November 1664 in a circular letter to France’s regional trésoriers généraux to encourage investment in the new venture. Colbert wrote that the ‘principal design of such a great establishment [is] to bring the light of the Gospel to the foreign lands.’

The new company itself petitioned Alméras for missionaries in 1665, a petition Alméras called ‘very important for the Congregation.’

No contract between the Vincentians and this new Company remains, but letters patent published on 26 May 1664 included articles for the island’s religious service. When these letters were registered in parlement on 16 September, the terms of this service were embellished. The letters stipulated that ‘divine service and the administration of the sacraments shall be assured, and for this purpose, shall be given the necessary institutions.’ As far as the Company’s obligations to the

63 RC, 1:54, April 1665.
64 Article 37 stated: ‘Sa Majesté permettra à ladite Compagnie d’établir des ecclésiastiques édites îles de Madagascar et autres lieux, où ils feront habitation, en tel nombre et de telle qualité que ladite Compagnie le jugera à propos’: MCM, 9:500.
65 Ibid., 501: ‘Le service divin et l’administration des sacrements seront assurés, et, pour cet effet, seront donnés les institutions nécessaires.’
missionaries were concerned, the decree promised the latter would be cared for ‘honestly and decently until such time as the Company can furnish them revenues for their subsistence.’ Every indication existed that a new, steadier period for the colony and mission would begin in 1664.

This hope was quickly vanquished by the second major event of 1664: the murder of Nicolas Etienne in Madagascar. In many ways, his career encapsulated the principal features of the colony as a whole. Born in Paris to a wealthy family, Etienne took vows in the Congregation on 9 August 1655. Designated for foreign mission, he was part of the contingent that set sail on 18 January 1660, but rough winds blew his ship off course and his party spent ten months in South Africa, before returning without success to France. Etienne made his second attempt to reach the island two years later, and arrived there finally on 29 September 1663. The repeated obstacles to arrival on the island did not shake his desire to go, and even to die there. On several occasions before he arrived in Madagascar, Etienne expressed to de Paul his prayers for martyrdom, saying ‘my most heartfelt desire is to die for Our Lord Jesus Christ in a foreign land. I ask this very often of Him every day….’

If Etienne sought suffering, he was not disappointed. On his arrival, he reported on the ‘excess’ of the French, claiming that the ‘work of Monsieur Bourdaise and all his predecessors has been ruined, destroyed; we shall have to start all over again.’ He arrived at a time of worsening conflict between the French colony and Malagasy tribes. According to one historical account, pillaging of indigenous settlements by French colonists had led to 12,000 casualties, including sixty neophytes. Etienne soon became a casualty of this on-going conflict. In March 1664, he set off with another Vincentian brother, Philippe Patte, and a servant...
with the intention of baptizing a local lord, named Dian Mananga. However, the mission ended in tragedy when Etienne’s entire party was first poisoned by their Malagasy hosts and then shot brutally.\(^{73}\)

The circumstances of Etienne’s death have since attracted significant critical commentary. A *relation* published in 1668 by the secretary of the Company claimed that Etienne had at first threatened Dian Mananga with war if he did not convert, a threat fiercely resisted by the Malagasy chief. The *relation* also claimed that Etienne’s zeal ‘overrode human prudence.’\(^{74}\) Another contemporary testimonial suggested it was Etienne’s ‘violent zeal that made him run to his death.’\(^{75}\) Later historians have reviewed Etienne’s actions negatively, one stating that the colonists’ affairs were ruined by his ‘intemperate proselytism.’\(^{76}\) Some of these depictions reflected reality. The early missionaries were often unable to escape their co-status as European colonists in their pastoral approaches and while they remained critical of physical violence towards the indigenous people, combative language sometimes filtered into their own attitudes to the people’s beliefs.\(^{77}\)

However, the principal result of Etienne’s demise is as important as its cause. In the wake of Etienne’s murder, de Paul’s ambitions toward the ‘poor inhabitants’ of Madagascar all but collapsed. In 1667, Louis Bourot wrote a letter about the situation to the superior general which betrayed the missionaries’ growing siege mentality. Although his personal outlook was positive, he detailed how the community lived under an increasing spectre of attack and said he had great difficulty in persuading the missionaries to ‘flee melancholy.’\(^{78}\)

---


\(^{74}\) Souchu de Rennefort, *Relation*, 88.

\(^{75}\) CAOM, C/5/a, ‘Mémoire sur l’estat present de l’île Dauphine,’ fol.19, 10 February 1668.


\(^{77}\) For example, this is how Nacquart had described an element of local custom: ‘What is more directly contrary to the honour of God, and which will be more difficult for us to eradicate, is an equally ridiculous and damnable kind of cult that the chiefs of the country and their subjects render to certain idols’: *CCD*, 3:549.

\(^{78}\) ACM, MR 1502, Louis Bourot to Alméras, 4 February 1667: ‘…la melancholie ne vaut rien en ce pais c’est pourquoi je la fuie le plus que je puis, et fais ce que je puis pour que nostre monde vive de mesme, à quoy j’ai bien de la peine…’
dated 26 October 1671, Marin Roguet revealed the sense of fear that reigned amidst the French, and wondered how ‘…a handful of Frenchmen, who number perhaps not even eighty to a hundred men, weak and riddled with disease, unarmed for the most part, and separated from each other…can live among such an innumerable number of enemies, I say enemies because the blacks of Anosy are the most to fear of those whom we must distrust anyway, as we have seen in the treachery and murder they have brought on some of the French their masters…we only wait for the hour when they will flatten the rest…’  

In the same missive, Roguet revealed how three Vincentians and some French colonists kept constant watch against attack.  

The information from missionaries came in a long line of reports deploring the general state of the colony. Dispatches from the civil governors of Madagascar were equally negative. A memoir for the Company compiled in 1668 already asserted that the island colony was in a ‘bad state’ and plagued by war, famine and disease. The memoir painted a picture of a wasteland, claiming Fort Dauphin’s armoury lay half-buried in the sands. Moreover, there was no church, just a ‘small, very insignificant building, covered with leaves.’ A colonist lamented in the same year that he found ‘everything here so far from what we were led to believe.’ Such was the place where the missionaries had to live as a community. As time went on, and war conspired against evangelisation of the indigenous, the missionaries’ restriction to Fort Dauphin continued to be a source of deep discontent. 

The dismal progress of the ad gentes mission was once again blamed on the nuisances of the colonial parish. In his very first instruction to the first missionaries, de Paul had said they would have to get along ‘amicably’ with their lay patrons in
the colonial company. But myriad bones of contention emerged because of the missionaries’ material dependence on the colonial officials. The Vincentians were effectively employees of the Compagnie des Indes, whose agents in Madagascar were frequently accused of failing to support either the missionaries’ survival or their ministry. In his 1667 report on the mission, Louis Bourot described the deterioration in relations between the missionaries and ‘gentlemen of the Company.’ The principal sticking point was provision of the missionaries’ victuals and clothes. In a depressing revelation of how little things had changed since Nacquart’s time, Bourot accused the Company officials of treating the missionaries ‘worse than the slaves,’ and complained that they received fewer meat rations than the soldiers. He also admitted that the missionaries were wearing the clothes of their dead confreres, Bourdaise and Etienne. More seriously, their dependence on the Company impeded their pastoral work:

We have been so badly treated by these gentlemen that we have not had any wine to say mass, with the result that for the last eight months we have been able to say mass only on Sundays and feast days, unless something happens which obliges us, and we do not even have a pint of it…if some ships do not come soon…we will be forced to abandon the mass altogether.

Bourot’s sketch cast the Company officials as highly disdainful of the Vincentians’ ecclesiastical dignities and rights. In a further accusation, he claimed that the merchants of the Company refused to acknowledge the missionaries ‘curial rights’ when members of the colony died, alleging that ‘they take what is there, sell it without even saying a word to us…and do this even with those… who leave us something so that we might pray to God for them.’

---

83 CCD, 3:280.
84 ACM, MR 1502, Bourot to Alméras, 4 February 1667: ‘Je vous diray que depuis que Monsieur Cuveron [another missionary] est parti pour ce qui est de la nourriture ils nous l'ont donnée moindre qu'aux soldats…’
85 Ibid. ‘…nous avons tellement esté mal traités de ces messieurs que nous n'avons pu avoir de vin pour dire la sainte messe de sorte qu'il y a plus de huit mois que nous ne disons que les festes et dimanches la messe, si ce n'est qu'il y arrive quelque chose qui nous y oblige, et nous n'en avons pas (une) pinte... s'il n'y vient tost quelques navires…nous serons contraints de cesser tout à fait de la
This particular son of Monsieur Vincent was not so easily abused. In the same letter, he recounted to his superior general an altercation he had had with a Company merchant, who had an odious reputation in the colony and reportedly told some members of the colony to ‘go to hell.’ When this merchant threatened to chain up another priest on the island when addressed for necessities, Bourot pointedly told him that he had no authority over priests.\textsuperscript{86} It was in the context of these on-going problems with the Vincentians’ Madagascar parish that Bourot advised Alméras to take account of the special conditions of the Madagascar mission when selecting future missionaries. In particular, Bourot complained in bothered terms about the missionaries’ responsibilities as parish priests:

\begin{quote}
I ask you humbly my dear father, if you send us more Missionaries, be they brothers or priests, send the most you can, and make sure that they know what it is to live among the world, as we are not only persons of a community here. We are obliged to converse with our parishioners as \textit{curés} and as public persons…\textsuperscript{87}
\end{quote}

In this frank missive, Bourot underscored the novelty that the Madagascar mission represented to Vincentian missionaries whose seminary formation had not destined them for permanent presence ‘among the world.’ A striking fact about his remarks is how much they harked back to Nacquart’s earlier complaints about ‘governing people,’ although he expressed himself in more veiled terms than Nacquart. The tension Bourot identified between the missionaries’ roles as ‘persons of a community’ and as ‘public persons’ resonated with earlier warnings that the Vincentians were caught between two distinct objectives, only one of which was truly worthy. The decisive point for Bourot was that their role as ‘public persons’ often undermined the Vincentians in the eyes of their principal target, the ‘poor

\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Ibid.} ‘… va-t-en au diable ou semblables…’; ‘Je luy fis connoistre devant le monde qu'il n'avoit pas l'autorité sur les prestres comme il le prétendait.’

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Ibid.} ‘Je vous supplie très humblement mon cher père si vous nous envoiez des Missionnaires soit frères soit prestres, d'en envoyer tout le plus que vous pouriez, et des gens qui scachent ce que c'est de vivre parmy le monde comme nous ne sommes pas ici seulement comme personnes de communauté, nous sommes obligés de converser avec nos paroissiens comme curez et personnes publiques…’
inhabitants’ of Madagascar. In the incident described above, Bourot made a point of saying that it ‘scandalised even the blacks.’

In an admission of the effects these unpleasant conditions had on the community, Bourot asked his superior general not to send ‘scrupulous’ missionaries to Madagascar. His comment about scruples was recognition that community life had undergone immense change at Fort Dauphin. For a start, the shortage of personnel greatly affected the Vincentians’ sense of community, even removing it altogether sometimes. The theme of solitude was of recurring importance to individual missionaries because, in the hostile colonial environment, fellow Vincentians were precious allies and friends. Lack of companion priests also regularly deprived lone Vincentians of certain sacraments like confession. Neither were conditions conducive to key elements of Vincentian formation, evident when Bourot said in February 1667 that he did not have the time to complete an eight-day retreat, and that he could not pronounce his vows, ostensibly because there was no superior around to hear them. Close to the mission’s end, it became evident that many in the community struggled to keep their sang-froid in the unusual environment of the colony. In October 1671, the superior of the mission, Marin Roguet, had to recount what he called an ‘unfortunate incident’ to Saint-Lazare. One of the Vincentian brothers on the island, Guillaume Le Brun, had killed a French colonist who seized a boat containing children. Roguet explained the events:

A cry came out firstly and the Frenchman, having seized the boat, was taking him [the child] away. Our brother who heard the noise came to the river-side with a gun and, learning what had happened, called out to the

---

88 Ibid. ‘… mesme scandalisa les noirs…’
89 Ibid. ‘…surtout mon cher père les personnes que vous envoirez en ce pais il faut qu'ils ne soient ny scrupuleux ny melancholiques…’
90 The letters of the Vincentians over the course of the mission convey a deep sense of fraternity among the missionaries. When Bourdaisé was finally joined by Dufour after years on the island alone, he told how they ‘fell to our knees and embraced one another’: CCD, 6:232. When fellow Vincentians died, their confreres revealed in the strongest terms the degree of friendship that existed between them. After Gondréé’s death, Nacquart referred to him as ‘my sole consolation in this country’: ibid., 3:560.
91 Nacquart complained of being unable to receive any sacraments except the Eucharist, as did Bourdaisé, see ibid., 3:567; 6:253.
92 ACM, MR 1502, Bourot to Alméras 4 February 1667.
Chapter 2: Fidelity and failure

Frenchman and told him to bring the boat back, but he only mocked him. Our brother, after reiterating several times that this man leave the boat, [and] the latter not obeying him, our brother shot him, believing he was aiming at the man’s legs but…got him in the head and pierced his skull.”

The ‘pain’ this disaster had caused was expunged by a general amnesty given by the governor to all parties. But Le Brun was not the only source of stress to the community. Roguet went on to criticise the insolence of another member, brother Gerard Minser, who reportedly had an ‘incorrigible mind’ and ‘had no scruples offending the most essential rules.’ Minser’s response when reproached for his conduct, Roguet reported, was that ‘if virtue cost two liards in Saint-Lazare, it would cost one hundred here.’ Evidently, even the pursuit of holiness by the Vincentian community in the late 1660s had become a difficult task.

III

In 1657, nearly ten years into the mission, Toussaint Bourdaise wondered whether the disasters of the mission would cause de Paul ‘to doubt…the vocation of our Company to do this work…’ In the final phase of the mission, the increasing embattlement of the Vincentians meant these doubts were more frequently expressed, eventually reaching the highest levels of the Congregation. In a letter to Marin Roguet dated 1 March 1670, Alméras noted the state of religion in Madagascar and referred to the ‘obstacles to the progress of the Gospel.’ However,

---

93 ACM, MR 1502, Marin Roguet to Alméras, 26 October 1671: ‘Un cry s'esleva d'abord et le françois s'estant saisy du canot l'emmenoit. Notre frère qui entendit ce bruit vint sur le bord de la rivière avec un fusil et ayant appris ce qui s'estoit passé appela ce françois et luy dit de ramener le bateau mais il se moqua de lui, l'entrainant toujours plus loin. Le frère, après lui avoir réitéré plusieurs fois qu'il laissât le canot et celuy-la n'en ayant rien voulu faire il lui lacha un coup de fusil croyant lui donner dans les jambes, mais comme le fusil n'estoit pas droit, ne porta pas jusqu'à lui et tombant dans l'eau se releva de sorte qu'elle lui donnât dans la teste et lui perçât la cervelle.’

94 Ibid. Roguet explained that justices of the peace were investigating the incident when the fleet bearing the Admiral arrived, who imparted a general pardon for everything that had happened. Roguet said the incident, which he called a ‘disaster,’ had caused him personal pain.

95 Ibid. ‘esprit incorrigible’; ‘…il ne fait pas de scrupule d'enfreindre les règles les plus essentielles…’

96 Ibid. ‘…s'il falloit pour deux liards de vertu à St. Lazare, il en falloit icy cent fois,’

97 CCD, 6:251-252.

98 ACM, MR 1502, Alméras to Roguet (duplicata), 1 March 1670: ‘…des empeschemens au progrès de l’Evangile…’
Alméras admitted to conflicting emotions when confronted with testimony emanating from Madagascar. On one hand, he sympathized with what he called ‘various subjects of grief that surround you, of which the greatest is the loss of souls, as much among the Christians as the infidels.’ On the other hand, Alméras praised Roguet for his ‘judicious spirit’, his ‘wise conduct’ and his ‘ardent and discreet zeal.’ He hoped that in the future, after certain changes, the missionaries ‘[would] be supported and aided in working for God with more freedom and success.’

Actually, there was little real consolation in these words of Alméras, whose further remarks revealed a clear change in policy compared with de Paul. In the same letter, Alméras informed Roguet that the Congregation would not send more missionaries to the island because, ‘…knowing by your own testimony the strange confusion that Christianity finds itself in over there…it would be unwise to send new priests so far without being assured that you will be able to work there freely and usefully.’ In declaring the new judgement on old problems in Madagascar, Alméras also revealed how the poor results in Madagascar had affected its comparative value in the Congregation’s spectrum of assignments. He told Roguet that ‘few workers are presenting themselves to go so far,’ and announced that it was ‘not expedient to always send over there those who offer themselves.’ In a telling revelation of how Madagascar had been reduced in the eyes of the leadership, Alméras declared that those who did offer themselves were sometimes ‘too necessary over here, where we have to take care of the new establishments, and are strongly pressed to take over [other] new ones.’

Roguet’s response to Alméras’ 1670 letter has been lost, but Alméras referred to its contents in another letter dated 25 February 1671, his last recorded letter to Roguet. He wrote: ‘…les divers sujets d’affliction qui vous environnent dont le plus grand est la perte des âmes tant des Chrétiens que des Infidels…’

99 *Ibid.* ‘…par quelques changements faits ou à faire de delà; par lesquels aussi vous serez appuyé et aidé à travailler pour Dieu avec plus de liberté et de succès.’

100 *Ibid.* ‘…par quelques changements faits ou à faire de delà; par lesquels aussi vous serez appuyé et aidé à travailler pour Dieu avec plus de liberté et de succès.’

101 *Ibid.* ‘Parce que sachant par vostre propre témoignage l’estrange confusion où se trouve le Christianisme de deçà…ce seroit une imprudence d'envoyer si loin de nouveaux prestres avant d'estre asserez que vous y pourrez travailler librement et utilement.’

102 *Ibid.* ‘…il se présente très peu d'Ouvriers pour aller si loin… il n'est pas expédient d'y envoyer toujours ceux qui s'offrent, ou parce qu'ils n'ont pas les qualités requises, ou parce qu'ils sont trop nécessaires de deçà, ou nous avons à entretenir les nouveaux établissements, et sommes fort pressez d'en accepter de nouveaux.’
exchange with a Madagascar missionary. He first noted the poor state of the Congregation’s personnel on the island: Roguet and Michel Montmasson had been ill, Louis Bourot had died, another missionary, Jean Jourdié, was incapacitated on Île de Bourbon, and Brother Jean Boucher had drowned. To crown these misfortunes, Alméras acknowledged that ‘among the other brothers there are some who are cowardly, disobedient and little attached to their vocation.’ Faced with such a tally, Alméras had little good news to report. He informed Roguet that the Compagnie des Indes had effectively abandoned Madagascar as a future commercial outpost and that ‘ships [would] hardly go anymore’ to the island. This meant that no new personnel would be able to replace the ‘ill and incorrigible persons’ who were on mission there. At this point, it became clear that, for the first time since the beginning of the mission, the Congregation’s leadership contemplated its final resolution:

But the missionaries of Madagascar being so few and so far…cannot it seems be kept there for much longer without a miracle, and will draw consequently little or no fruit. Whereas here [in France] they would be assisted spiritually and would be usefully employed…Monsieur, I pray you contemplate before God whether it is not more expedient for all of you to come home rather than languishing and consuming yourselves uselessly over there…

Alméras did not wait for Roguet’s answer, or if he made one it is lost. Later that year, in December 1671, Alméras, in counsel with his highest-ranking assistants, decided to officially withdraw the Congregation from Madagascar. Writing this time to the entire institute, Alméras made a lengthy appeal to the history of delays, shipwrecks and death which defined the mission, but he also referred to the moral

---

103 Ibid. Alméras to Roguet, 25 February 1671: ‘…qu'entre les autres frères il y en a quelques-uns de lâches, désobéissans et peu attachez à leur vocation.’
104 Ibid. ‘…les vaisseaux n'iront plus guère à Madagascar…’
105 Ibid. ‘Mais les missionnaires de Madagascar estant si peu et si éloignez… ne peuvent ce semble se maintenir longtemps sans miracle, et ne feront par conséquent que peu ou point de fruit. Au lieu que de deçâ, ils seroient assistez spirituellement, et très utilement employez…Monsieur, je vous prie de penser devant Dieu s'il n'est plus expédient de vous en revenir tous que de languir et vous consommer inutilement de delâ…’
impossibility of continuing.\textsuperscript{106} The reasons given were a reminder of de Paul’s old hopes as Alméras recalled that the principal reason for de Paul’s decision to send missionaries to the island had been the ‘conversion of the infidels,’ and the results on this front were outrageously poor.\textsuperscript{107} Alméras claimed that ‘of all the converted islanders, there remains only three or four.’\textsuperscript{108} This number was ostensibly based on a report from Roguet, but even if it was arbitrary, the fact that it was considered so low was an overdue admission that application of the Vincentians’ mission to the ‘poor people’ of Madagascar had failed.

Subsequent events revealed the wisdom of this long-delayed decision. Even after the official dissolution of the mission, disaster continued to plague missionaries in Madagascar. The final tragedies came in August 1674, when two brothers of the Congregation were killed in a massacre by indigenous. Furthermore, on the return journey to France, two more succumbed to death.\textsuperscript{109} The Madagascar mission had indeed been, as Nicolas Etienne put it, a ‘cemetry’ for de Paul’s dear children.\textsuperscript{110}

Two missionaries escaped the fate of many confreres, arriving on the coast of Brittany on 26 June 1676.\textsuperscript{111} By the time the mission ended, however, approximately thirty-one priests and ten brothers had fallen to Madagascar.\textsuperscript{112}

IV

In their letters to Vincentian missionaries, successive superiors general frequently employed the term ‘success.’ Positive results were an important feature of the missionary agenda, and allusions to their pursuit were found in general mission
Chapter 2: Fidelity and failure

guidelines. The Madagascar project was no different. In explaining the origin of the Congregation’s participation in Madagascar, de Paul recounted how the nuncio in France had recommended the Vincentians, saying they would ‘make a success of it.’ Eleven years into the mission, in a letter to Bourdaise in November 1659, Vincent de Paul claimed that the missionary’s reports ‘cause us to hope for extraordinary success from your labours.’ In 1665, Almeras told his members that God would make a success of the missionaries’ tests. Against this rhetoric of success the dissolution of the mission became highly symbolic.

Decisions to avoid cancelling the mission were ostensibly based on some positive information that occasionally trickled from the island. Bourot’s 1667 letter pointed to the fact that thirty-three people were involved in the mission, including the budding seminary. The sacramental life of the community sometimes benefited from Madagascar’s position as a stopover for senior clergy en route to the Orient, as with a visit by the famous bishop of Heliopolis, François Pallu, in 1671; he administered the sacrament of confirmation to the mission’s neophytes. Other missionaries provided resources for the mission, such as Nicolas Etienne, who designated 1,500 livres of his private income per year for use in Madagascar, as did prominent aristocrats like the duchesse d’Aiguillon. This clutch of facts doubtlessly persuaded the Congregation to send further contingents of missionaries well into the 1660s: nine new missionaries were commissioned in a final batch in May 1666.

---

113 The 1668 Directoire des Missions for metropolitan missions contained the following injunction to the missionary team: ‘The day that we set out, we shall all receive together the blessing of the house superior and we shall then visit the Holy Sacrament, so that God may grant us safe travel and success to the missions we shall undertake’: ACM, ‘Directoire pour les Confréries de Charité, la prédication, missions, exercitants etc.,’ n.632, 1.
114 CCD, 11:373.
115 CCD, 8:180, de Paul to Bourdaise, November 1659.
116 RC, 1:71, 10 January 1665.
117 ACM, MR 1052, Bourot to Alméras, 4 February 1667.
118 Ibid., Roguet to Alméras, 26 October 1671.
119 AN, MM/535 fol.21, 20 September 1659.
120 This party consisted of missionaries Roguet, Brisjone, Jourdié, Leroy, and Grohan, accompanied by brothers Pilliers, Minsser, Galot, and Bourgoing. Brisjone never made it to Madagascar and disembarked in the Canaries due to ill-health en route. Leroy and Grohan died at sea. The rest of the group arrived in Madagascar on 14 March 1667.
Why then did Madagascar fail? Despite irregular successes, it was the continuing elusiveness of real progress that defined the mission. Behind the failure lie several interconnecting sources of weakness, beginning with the mission’s association with and dependence on various patrons in commercial companies. Even cursory analysis of the successive commercial operations on the island, and particularly the 1664 Compagnie des Indes, illustrates the error of such dependence. The letters of Nacquart, Bourot and Roguet informed three successive superiors general that Company officials were derelict in their care of the missionaries and refused to supply the basics for a local mission infrastructure, including chalices, ornaments and wine. The testimony of missionaries in the final phase tallies with internal documentation of the Company between 1665 and 1670, pointing to a constantly changing civil administration wrought with internal divisions. By this time, the Company lay in disarray and bankruptcy. A more disturbing indication that the missionaries’ relationship with their colonist partners was dysfunctional came with the tragic incident involving Lebrun. If this was not enough, near the end certain missionaries made their desperation quite clear by appealing for their survival as well as seeking support for their work. For example, in 1667 Bourot requested fishing rods from his superior general so the missionaries could catch fish to eat. These requests were made right up to February 1673, when Alméras’ successor, Edme Jolly, recognised that the colony stood ‘abandoned’ and the missionaries were ‘stripped of so many things necessary for life.’

The problems that emerged on the ground between the commercial companies and missionaries also uncovered institutional fragility on a wider level as the Congregation realised its destiny as an institute fit for global mission was insecure. Faced with clear evidence that missionaries on the ground were suffering, the Congregation admitted powerlessness to remedy the causes of concern. In his March 1670 letter, Alméras sheepishly told the Madagascar superior that he was

---

121 CAOM, C/5a 1-20.
122 ACM, MR 1502, Bourot to Almeras, 4 February 1667.
123 Ibid. Jolly to Roguet, 24 June 1674: ‘...voyant vostre isle abandonnée et...vous destitez de quantité de chose nécessaires à la vie.’
unable to agree terms with the Company concerning the missionaries’ subsistence.\textsuperscript{124} In the same missive, Alméras confessed that the Congregation had not even signed a written contract binding the Company to such care, saying only that the missionaries’ request for ‘chalices, ornaments and other such needs’ had to be met by the Company, as it was ‘their parish.’\textsuperscript{125}

The Congregation was not unique in its colonial experience of suffering: French missionaries in Canada had made similar complaints about abuses and neglect long before.\textsuperscript{126} But behind Alméras’ advice lurked a keen sense that the Vincentians faced unique handicaps in dealing with these conditions. On at least two occasions he compared the Congregation to bigger and better equipped institutes, particularly the Jesuits, upon whom de Paul had modeled the Congregation’s early forays in Madagascar. In his final letter to the mission in 1671, Alméras blamed failure on the fact that, unlike the Jesuits, the Vincentians did not have teams of support staff on their foreign missions:

> The Jesuits in the East Indies have various houses that help each other and even provincials who visit these, who listen and talk to every missionary, and restore everything, and who change persons from one place to another; all this serves in keeping the Rule and good order among them.\textsuperscript{127}

The importance of Alméras’ remark lies in the fact that the absence of such networks affected the Congregation’s capacity to support missionary efforts, or at least alleviate suffering, independently of secular authorities. Later in 1671, Alméras again pointed out that the Jesuits were not subject to the ‘inconveniences’ of a mission like Madagascar. Among other things, he claimed that ‘it was much easier

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid. Alméras to Roguet, 1 March 1670, ‘Nous ne pouvons non plus présentement convenir avec Messieurs de la Compagnie des Indes ou avec le Roy de l'entretien de vos personnes, et des autres choses sur lesquelles on vous a fait difficulté par le passé…’

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid. ‘Pour ce qui est des calices, ornemens et autres tels besoins, c'est à Messieurs de pourvoir votre eglise de tout, puisque c'est leur paroisse.’

\textsuperscript{126} Deslandres, \textit{Croire et faire croire}, 275.

\textsuperscript{127} ACM, MR 1502, Alméras to Roguet, 25 February 1671: ‘Les Jésuites ont dans les Indes Orientales diverses maisons qui s'entraident, et mesme des provinciaux qui les visitent, qui écoutent et parlent à chaque particulier, qui redressent tout, et qui changent les personnes d'un lieu à un autre, tout cela sert à conserver la Règle et le bon ordre parmy eux.’
for them to support their foreign missions because their Company is composed of thirty thousand men,’ and because ‘the posts where they live are much more comfortable and advantageous than this poor island of Madagascar.’\footnote{RC, 1:118: ‘Les RR. PP. Jésuites ne sont pas sujets à ces inconvénients, et il leur est bien plus aisé de soutenir leurs missions étrangères : 1° parce que leur Compagnie est composée de 30,000 hommes, entre lesquels ils ont à choisir ; 2° les villes et les postes qu’ils habitent sont bien plus commodes et avantageux que cette pauvre île de Madagascar…’} It is clear from these comments Alméras believed the Congregation had drawn the proverbial short straw in its participation in global missionary Catholicism when it went to Madagascar.

What impact did Alméras’ acknowledgement of failure have on the debate about fidelity? The Congregation's continued commitment to Madagascar after de Paul’s death had been based on the hope he always maintained for its eventual success. His secretary wrote after his death that de Paul's determination and spirit had never broken because of the losses, and his successor was uneasy about abandoning the mission.\footnote{ACM, ‘Cahiers du Frère Louis Robineau: remarques sur les actes et paroles de feu Monsieur Vincent de Paul,’ fols. 184-185, n.d. Some of de Paul’s successors were doubtless present at his funeral service where Henri de Maupas du Tour made lengthy reference to de Paul’s management of the Madagascar mission and of the losses too. Du Tour asked: ‘Who would not have lost all courage after all the deaths, after all the lack of success, after all the sinkings? But he was so different, he had an apostolic zeal…he was assured besides that [the Malagasy] were ready to receive the light of the Gospel…’: Oraison funèbre, 42.} However, any idea that the abandonment showed disloyalty to de Paul was conquered by helpful references to the \textit{esprit primitif}. Alméras noted in his 1671 letter that the Madagascar missionaries believed ‘a single mission in France, where there are enough spiritual needs, would be more useful than everything we have done [in Madagascar] in twenty-four years.’\footnote{RC, 1:119: ‘… une seule mission de France, où il y a assez de besoins spirituels, y serait plus utile que tout ce qu'on a fait de delà en vingt-quatre années.’} The superior general also relied on the persuasive arguments of numerous missionaries that the attachment of parishes to missionary work proved a hazardous distraction, declaring that the Vincentians ‘had difficulty taking on parishes in France, and here we find ourselves reduced to serving one 4,500 leagues away, with so little success…’\footnote{\textit{Ibid.} ‘La Compagnie fait difficulté de prendre des paroisses en France, et il se trouve que nous sommes réduits à en aller servir une à 4,500 lieues d'ici…’} Phrased in this way, the decision to abandon de Paul’s \textit{ad gentes} mission was recast as an endorsement of the founder’s very thinking on the suitability of parish work.
The significance of Alméras’ references to France and parishes cannot be lost. Just like Nacquart, Alméras knew full well the Congregation had previously and concurrently taken on many functions outside its ken, which included parish assignments. Therefore, the veracity of his statements on the Congregation’s supposed aversion to parish appointments easily fails to survive scrutiny. It was not Madagascar’s status as a parish ministry that was decisive; rather its history as a particularly unsuccessful parish and colony influenced the terms of the Congregation’s post-mortem analysis. The Madagascar mission had been an ambitious project for the ‘little Company’ and, adequately supported, should have survived. Missionaries on the ground understood this fact more than anyone else. Asked by Louis XIV’s representative in 1671 whether he or the other missionaries wished to leave the island, Marin Roguet still claimed that ‘there were things for [them] to do here.’ However, in words which constituted a perfect summation of the mission, Roguet said the missionaries ‘live[d] in incertitude.’

The key to understanding Alméras’ assessment of the Fort Dauphin parish lies in the wider priorities of his generalate. At a time when the Vincentians as a group sought solid identity as a missionary institute, the uncertainty Madagascar brought to their remit could no longer be ignored. To boot, the Congregation was able to contemplate the end of the mission with the bruising assault of the Mathurins’ in mind, which, after all, had sought the Vincentians’ total rejection of parish assignments in favour of de Paul’s original formula. In the end, the language chosen by Alméras made precisely the same point as their Fontainebleau foes: fidelity to de Paul meant fidelity to the Congregation’s original mission, a conclusion which also tallied perfectly with the commemorations of Vincentian missionary identity found in the legislation of the 1660s. The emphasis these theoretical constructions placed on the Congregation’s principal duty towards the rural poor of Europe, rather than evangelisation elsewhere, finally appeared vindicated.

---

132 ACM, MR 1502, Roguet to Alméras, 26 October 1671: ‘…il y avoit de quoit nous employer ici…’; ‘…nous vivons dans l’incertitude.’
The end of the Madagascar mission yielded an unhelpful truth to a Congregation already wrestling with the question of fidelity to its founder: certain species of mission previously understood as fulfilling were, in fact, based on incorrect assumptions. The first assumption de Paul made was equating ministry to the French rural poor with evangelisation of non-Christians in Madagascar. Missionaries on the ground soon discovered that work in France did not prepare them for Fort Dauphin, a colony constantly at odds with the local population. Their early preference for missionary work among the Malagasy became impossible as war obstructed this goal. Ongoing conflict in Madagascar revealed the precarious status of the missionaries’ activities as an off-shoot of European colonialism. While the correspondence of successive missionaries identified violence as incompatible with Vincentian out-reach to the indigenous, Etienne’s death was a stark reminder of the missionaries’ own identification with colonial aggression in the minds of the Malagasy. The fact that Etienne’s zeal has been characterised as the product of contempt for the ‘ridiculous’ religion of Dian Mananga further aligns the missionary effort with theories of cultural superiority. Ultimately, the missionaries failed to erase the ‘line of colour’ in Madagascar, with the result that evangelisation of what Bourdaise often called the ‘poor uncivilised people’ of Madagascar never got off the ground.

The prevailing conditions in Madagascar also cast doubt on de Paul’s second major assumption: the notion that the common Rules of the mission would provide stability to the community in different contexts. Two missionaries we have met, Nacquart and Bourot, identified the gulf between life in a colony and life in France. Both their judgements revealed that life as a member of an apostolic society, which meant observance of a particular code of conduct distinct from the laity and the parish clergy, was not context-neutral. Altered living arrangements, few or no Vincentian co-workers, and above all, poor society, heavily skewed corporate standards. These conditions were finally recognised as unsuitable for Vincentians

---

by Alméras when he ended the mission. Echoing the suggestion Nacquart had made twenty years previously, Alméras claimed that while Madagascar ‘[would not] be lacking secular or regular priests who [would be] very happy to go there,’ his missionaries had to be recalled.135

In the long-term development of the Congregation, the mission’s end involved injury and defeat. The repudiation of Madagascar symbolised the opening of the post-de Paul period as the Congregation officially pulled out of a dearly-held project, an action that had major implications for the Congregation’s participation in French colonial discovery. Contrary to claims presented elsewhere that the failure was not inhibitive, French Vincentians only returned to the Indian Ocean thirty years later, when the Congregation accepted a mission on the Île de Bourbon in 1711.136 They only returned to Madagascar in 1896.137 The Madagascar sorties left its leadership bruised and diffident about the future. When a priest of the Société des Missions étrangères paid a visit to the general, Edme Jolly, in the aftermath of the Madagascar mission to enquire about the Congregation's participation in a potential mission in Siam, a report of the meeting suggests Jolly replied coldly. His reticence was ostensibly based on Alméras’ disappointment at the disgraces of the Madagascar mission. The report of the encounter concluded by stating that ‘some people conjectured by (Jolly's attitude) that the Congregation was little inclined to participate in foreign mission.’138

On the other hand, judged with the narrow objectives of the 1660s in mind, the mission’s end can also be seen as palliative. The failure may have uncovered the frailty of de Paul’s ideas on the Madagascar mission per se, but it bolstered more general images of the Congregation long-nourished by the founder and taken up with enthusiasm by his followers. The rhetorical image of the ‘little Company’ was backed up fully by the Madagascar experience, particularly when its leaders

135 RC, 1:119: ‘…on ne manquera pas de prêtres séculiers ou réguliers qui seront bien aises d'aller en ce pays-là…’
136 Galibert, A l’angle de la grande maison, 448.
137 By papal brief of 16 January 1896, the meridional vicariate of Madagascar was entrusted to the Vincentians.
138 ACM, Jolly Register (unpaginated), ‘Extract from the Journal des Missions étrangères, January 1677’: ‘…d'où l'on conjecture que cette Congrégation a peu d'inclination pour les missions étrangères.’
appealed to the institute’s limited human resources and organisational unfitness for ambitious projects. In this way, Alméras’ termination letter for this particular mission drew broader lessons for the institute’s future, as he sought to refocus a humbled Congregation on the most precious source of its identity – missions to the poor of the countryside. Certainly the thrust of Alméras’ reflections suggested further challenges to the Congregation’s core identity would be scrupulously avoided in the future. However, barely a month after the dissolution of the mission, Alméras announced parish appointments that heralded a major new shift in the Congregation’s work and identity in the years after de Paul’s death, a shift which fundamentally challenged the conclusions made when Madagascar failed.
Chapter 3. The Call of the Poor and the Call of the Prince: the Congregation at court, 1672-1704

In his traditional New Year’s circular from Saint-Lazare in January 1672, Alméras announced momentous news to a Congregation still in recovery after the Madagascar débâcle: the Vincentians had been appointed as parish priests to Louis XIV’s parish in Versailles. This appointment heralded the beginning of an entirely new phase for the Congregation, as a string of similar honours followed in the next decade. In 1675, Louis appointed the Congregation to administer his new royal foundation for veteran soldiers, the *Hôtel des Invalides* in Paris. In 1682, the Vincentians moved into staff the private chapel at Versailles, and then were selected in 1688 to serve the private chapel at Saint-Cloud, residence of Philippe d’Orléans. Finally, in 1690 Louis XIV’s morganatic wife Madame de Maintenon nominated the missionaries as spiritual directors for the house Louis created for her at Saint-Cyr, in the vicinity of Versailles. A more surprising turn-around could scarcely have been imagined after the gloom occasioned by Madagascar. In ending that mission, Alméras had appealed to the Congregation’s weakness relative to rivals like the Society of Jesus, and echoed one of de Paul’s previous characterisations of his missionaries as ‘a fistful of men of lowly birth, learning and virtue, the dregs, the sweepings, the rejects of the world.’¹ By the end of the seventeenth century, this ‘fistful’ became favourites of the court and inextricably tied to the monarch’s political machinations.

Perhaps surprisingly, the history of Vincentians and royalty begins with Vincent de Paul himself, who, although acclaimed as ‘father of the poor’ was also friend and counsellor to the rich and powerful. Early on in his career, and even before the missions at Gannes and Folleville, de Paul had gained employment as almoner in the household of Marguerite de Valois, first wife of King Henry IV.² De Paul succeeded in procuring further offices which brought him into the homes of France’s aristocracy, although Abelly’s hagiographic motives led him to claim de

¹ *CCD*, 6:1.  
Paul disliked the honours which flowed from such assignments. Describing de Paul’s exit from the Gondi household in 1617, Abelly stated that de Paul left because affection and esteem in a courtly environment constituted ‘an agony to his humility.’ Nevertheless, he continued to be welcomed into the palaces of grandees and during his lifetime both he and missionaries from the Congregation visited the king’s court occasionally. For example, the Vincentians participated in well-publicised missions with members of the Tuesday conferences at the court of Saint-Germain-en Laye in 1638 and 1641, which were requested by Louis XIII and given under the directorship of the famous bishop of Alet, Nicolas Pavillon. It is unknown whether de Paul himself went to court for these exercises, but he was invited to the bed-side of Louis XIII in 1643, and his subsequent membership of the conseil de conscience certainly made him a regular visitor to court thereafter.

Despite the precedential value of de Paul’s experiences with royalty, the Congregation greeted the Versailles appointment with great trepidation and a real sense of unpreparedness. In his letter conveying the news, Alméras admitted his anxiety about accepting such a charge and notified the Vincentians that the establishment was being erected ‘against our inclination and notwithstanding our resistance.’ Of course, the first major question was the Congregation’s willingness to take on another parish assignment. When approached over the plan by the archbishop of Paris, Alméras admitted that the Vincentians were ‘embarrassed…particularly because of the parish that [the king] wants us to have.’ Alméras’ timidity was also consistent with values invoked when the Congregation had first been appointed to Fontainebleau and he confessed his sense of unworthiness for the role by revealing that ‘we in no way thought that we would be asked.’ Alméras’ expression of concerns to the prelate was followed by a direct

---

3 Ibid., 35: ‘…un supplice à son humilité…’
5 RC, 1 :120, January 1672: ‘…contre notre inclination et nonobstant notre résistance…’
6 Ibid. ‘…nous nous sommes trouvés embarrassés…particulièrement à cause de la paroisse qu’il veut que nous ayons.’

96
written appeal to Louis XIV, in which the Vincentians revealed the reasons behind their discomfort.\(^7\)

The Vincentians’ qualms about accepting this assignment were no doubt influenced by the fact that their Congregation’s history with grandees of the realm had often been riven with controversy. The Vincentians’ first foray at Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1638 had pitted elements of libertine court culture against the missionaires’ Christian code, especially modesty. For example, in a letter to one of his confreres de Paul revealed that there was ‘a little trouble at that mission because of the low necklines’ of the court ladies.\(^8\) Later, it was the established clerical interests at Fontainebleau which caused serious problems. When the Vincentians were appointed to Versailles in 1672, the Fontainebleau establishment had existed for a decade but they were still no closer to being regarded as equals by rival clergy there. According to Antoine Durand, chaplains and confessors at Fontainebleau were less than pleased about admitting Vincentian competitors to the ring and he claimed that the court almoners were jealous when he confessed two noblewomen, Madame de Navaille and the comtesse de Béthune.\(^9\) As late as May 1664, Durand alleged that, during interviews with court confessors Annat and Leroy, these two clergymen still treated him with frosty contempt.\(^10\) In fact, intra-clerical disputes stimulated by the Fontainebleau appointment pervaded the 1660s; by the time Alméras wrote his 1672 circular the case had exposed the Congregation to so much litigation, public abuse and malicious gossip that they almost withdrew from the parish altogether.\(^11\)

Of course, neither the Vincentians’ demurs nor this unfortunate history entered the mind of Louis XIV, who swiftly reminded them that because they had accepted the Fontainebleau appointment they could have no scruples that would lead them to reject Versailles.\(^12\) Later, when Alméras sent his representative, Thomas

---

\(^7\) *Ibid.* ‘…nous ne pensions nullement qu’on s’adressât à nous…’

\(^8\) *CCD*, 1:439, de Paul to Lambert aux Couteaux, 20 February 1638.


\(^11\) *Ibid.*, 15-17. One of the first incidents Durand described involved a physical scuffle between the Vincentians and the Mathurins over rights to preside at the funeral of a court governess.

\(^12\) *RC*, 1:120: ‘…[le roi] ne pensait que nous dussions moins faire pour lui que pour la feue reine mère, en considération de laquelle nous avions accepté la cure de Fontainebleau…’
Chapter 3: The Call of the Poor and the Call of the Prince

Berthe, for an audience with the monarch, the prospect of any further resistance vanished:

Monsieur Berthe went to assure [the king] of our submission, and told him that since, notwithstanding all that we have represented to him, His Majesty persists in wanting us to take the parish, we considered that the will of God is signalled to us through his will, which made him very content. Among other things, [the king] said in proper terms that he loved our Congregation, and since then he has said in the presence of several people that he was very glad that we acquiesced with good manners to his will. [The king] loves this place, he wants to make it bigger and put it in good order, as much for the spiritual as for the material.\(^1\)

This report of Berthe’s interview with Louis XIV offered vital clues about life, patronage and especially survival at Versailles in this era. The ego of the monarch always emerged as the strongest force in the compound. Berthe’s adroite compliment comparing the king’s injunction to the will of God constituted sure evidence that the Congregation appreciated this rule from the very beginning. Faced with such a formidable protagonist as the king, Alméras decided that continued resistance was futile, and his report of the meeting recognised the fundamental basis of cordial relations with the crown – absolute submission to the king’s will. In addition, the system of reward in place for judicious actors at Versailles was also clearly visible in this encounter. Alméras’ references to the king’s subsequent praise of the Congregation and particularly his declaration of love (‘in the presence of several people’) were significant. At a court where the king’s public recommendation and acknowledgement constituted the major currency of prestige,

\(^{13}\) Ibid. ‘M. Berthe l'est allé assurer de notre soumission, et que puisque, nonobstant tout ce que nous lui avions représenté, Sa Majesté persiste à vouloir que nous prenions la cure, nous estimons que la volonté de Dieu nous est signifiée par la sienne, ce qui l’a fort contenté; et, entre autres choses, il dit en propres termes qu’il aimait notre Congrégation, et il témoigna encore depuis, en présence de plusieurs personnes, qu’il était fort aise de ce que nous acquiescions de la bonne manière à sa volonté. Il aime ce lieu, il le veut agrandir et le mettre en bon ordre, aussi bien pour le spirituel que pour le matériel.’
Louis XIV’s words instantly elevated the Congregation’s status. The episode bode well for the future.

Historians of the Congregation have latched on to the general implications of Berthe’s outing, particularly the glaring contradiction between a wily court culture and the humble ethos of the *esprit primitif*. The Mathurins’, Fontainebleau deposition in the 1660s appears to have influenced the thrust of most subsequent historical inquiries, which generally evoke the Vincentians’ primary role as ‘priests of the countryside’ who had no licit business among Versailles’ politicians, schemers and hangers-on. Lacour establishes the narrative’s trend by setting up an opposition between the iron will of Louis XIV and the leaders of a feeble Congregation forced to obey him whatever the cost. Addressing the question of whether the Congregation betrayed its *esprit primitif* by doing this, Lacour argues that it maintained its missions to the poor near the royal foundations in order to ease any discomfort caused.¹⁴ Coste follows in Lacour’s footsteps, employing a typically Vincentian vocabulary when he claims that the ‘priests of the mission were able to win and keep the favours of the court without however searching for them.’¹⁵ Stafford Poole simply repeats Coste’s assessment without major amendment and acknowledges as ‘one of the greatest ironies of Vincentian history’ the fact that the little Company reached such heights after de Paul’s death.¹⁶

The traditional history is not entirely inaccurate in its presentation of the facts. It is true that the Congregation consistently responded with anxiety and protests when offered Versailles and successive royal foundations. Its reluctance was ostensibly based on fears that court appointments would cause drift from its essential mission to the poor and that the spirit of the institute would dissolve as they became priests of the court. It is also apparent that the guilt articulated both by the Congregation and subsequent historians intersected with fears about betrayal of de Paul’s teachings on humility and simplicity. However, to date accounts of the

---

¹⁶ Poole, *A History*, 108.
Congregation’s major role at court have been too simplistic because they fail to ask if the Congregation’s doubts were justified. This chapter will address these issues firstly by examining the Congregation’s key appointments at Versailles, to the parish in 1672 and the chapel royal in 1682. It was these two appointments, and not Fontainebleau, that raise the critical questions about the Vincentians’ place at court. How did the Vincentians negotiate their roles in a court environment where religious rites have been characterised as decorative additions to Louis XIV’s public glory? Did the Congregation’s personnel, especially the curé of Versailles, the ranking Vincentian on the compound, succeed in maintaining their distinct rhetoric and values in a court described by Pierre Goubert as a ‘gilded ghetto’?\(^\text{17}\)

The question of an apparent contradiction in ethos between the Congregation and the court is the starting, but not the ending, point of the Vincentians’ history at Versailles. Historical focus on the (supposedly dangerous) effects that exposure to the court had on the Congregation is doubtless based on the initial circulars of the superiors general expressing their discomfort and anxiety about preserving the spirit of the Mission. However, the debate is confined to merely stating the problématique without further analysis or sufficiently contextualised explanation. Why might the Congregation’s ethos and reputation as a relatively apolitical ‘company of the poor’ have made it an attractive choice to royal patrons like Louis XIV, whose own personal piety was increasing at the time? Furthermore, how might this attraction have been heightened amid the tumultuous spats between sections of the Church and the crown in the last quarter of the seventeenth century? The answers to these questions reveal that core ingredients of the Congregation’s identity, such as its special call to provide charity to the poor, were deliberately harnessed by the crown and successfully survived transplantation at court. The foundation of Saint-Cyr, an establishment for the education of 250 French noblewomen in reduced financial circumstances, will be an excellent example in demonstrating this.\(^\text{18}\) Under Vincentian spiritual direction, the house and its mistresses, a group of nuns called


\(^\text{18}\) \textit{AM}, 92:73
the Dames de Saint-Louis, became vital to charitable provision on the royal compound.

Finally, over-concentration on the seeming contradiction between the Congregation’s ethos and court culture has obscured the practical consequences of alliance with the crown. These consequences had less to do with loss of immeasurable qualities such as simplicity or humility and more to do with the institute’s self-government and jealously-guarded independence. When Louis XIV declared his love for the Congregation during Berthe’s interview, he did so only after the Congregation’s mannerly submission to his will. Over the next thirty years, the Congregation came to appreciate the intimate connection between submission and reward at Louis’ court. Its consistent obedience to the king no doubt ‘made him very content’ and increased his love, but this affection could not be carried too far. Royal patronage during Louis XIV’s monarchy was a cynical, politically-driven commodity which often served no more than the king’s own interests. This was a lesson the Vincentians eventually discovered to their chagrin.

I
The Congregation’s initial hesitation over Versailles appears entirely reasonable given that historical images of the court rarely foster pious thoughts. At least during the early decades of his majority, the king sought to signify his power and glory, not his devout Catholicism. His entrance into Paris with the queen in 1660 and the grand carrousel at the Tuileries in 1662 were important early steps in this quest. As for Louis’ court, the reigning atmosphere was famous for its lavish balls such as the gala of the enchanted island in 1664. Bluche argues that the gala summarized best the interests and priorities of the Roi-Soleil at this time: a week of lavish entertainments, shows, games, lotteries and dinners all designed to offer a picture of Louis’ monarchy that instilled envy, admiration and love.19 In this often ostentatious atmosphere, religion might have struggled to find any definite role, yet it was not forgotten at Versailles. Louis XIV and his court moved definitively to the new château at Versailles on 6 May 1682 but the compound had long been the object of

19 Bluche, Louis XIV, 264-265.
detailed planning, which included organization of satisfactory religious infrastructure.\textsuperscript{20} The appointment of the Vincentians to serve two key sites in the compound, firstly the local parish and then the château’s chapel, figured in this ongoing organisation.

René Alméras died shortly after his 1672 announcement and it fell to his successor, Edme Jolly, to supervise the early phase of the Congregation’s arrival at court. Information on this initial period at Versailles is patchy and is largely concerned with practical matters. In October 1676, the Congregation received the Abbey of Saint-Rémy to pay for its activities at Versailles.\textsuperscript{21} The original parish church of Saint-Julien at Versailles was shortly after replaced by another structure of the same name in 1679. However, to meet the growing needs of the Versailles population, the first stone of a new structure was laid on 10 March 1684. On 30 October 1686, the new parish church, Notre-Dame de Versailles, was consecrated in the presence of Jolly, about forty members of the Congregation, and the court.\textsuperscript{22} The same year, the Vincentians took up residence at a purpose built dwelling for them, the Maison de la Mission de Notre-Dame.\textsuperscript{23} These were the fundamental stages of the Congregation’s early period, which preceded the court’s official removal to Versailles in 1682. More substantial accounts of Vincentian-related activities only then became regular.

While practical planning continued, the foundation contracts approved in 1674 and confirmed later in 1679 by Louis XIV for the pastoral orientation of the new parish clergy spotlighted more substantive questions surrounding the Vincentian presence at court. The first of these was the appropriate balance between their parish duties and the Congregation’s core missionary function. Explaining that the growth of Versailles’ ordinary and court populations motivated the king’s solicitations, the contract stipulated that the missionaries ‘[would] carry out their parish functions in the said parish, preach the word of God, teach piety, catechize the

\textsuperscript{20} Louis Dussieux, \textit{Le Château de Versailles, histoire et description} (Versailles: L.Bernard, 1881), vol.1, chap.3.
\textsuperscript{21} AN, MM/537, fols. 108v – 111r, 4 October 1676.
\textsuperscript{22} AM, 84:1147.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 1151. The house was constructed for them in 1686 by Louis XIV near the old parish church of Saint Julien, rue de la Paroisse.
This last concession revealed that Louis XIV was clearly sensitive to the Congregation’s anxiety about maintaining its normal activities, but this was less of a royal compromise than has been asserted elsewhere.\textsuperscript{25} Attached to this clause, the king clearly instructed that missions to the countryside were to be undertaken only ‘when the service of the said parish allowed,’ a detail which may have caused concern at Saint-Lazare.\textsuperscript{26} When the priests first took up residence on 21 November 1674, Jolly sought to allay fears that the Congregation’s missionary functions were in jeopardy in the new environment. Remarking first that the king had persisted in his intentions even though the Congregation was ‘…no longer thinking about this business,’ Jolly informed the Company that the house was modelled on Fontainebleau and consisted of nine priests and one coadjutor brother, who carried out their first mission shortly after their arrival.\textsuperscript{27} The inclusion of this piece of information in Jolly’s letter was significant. At this early stage of their life at court, the superior general reminded the Congregation at large that the Vincentians in Versailles were still missionaries.

Besides the parish appointment, wealthier evidence exists for the other focus of Vincentian activity at Versailles – the chapel of the château, in particular the chapel in use from 1682 to 1710.\textsuperscript{28} In many respects, the chapel appointment constituted the Vincentians’ most important role in ancien régime France. Their appointment to Versailles parish in 1674 had indicated growing favour with the king, but the Vincentians’ arrival at the chapel royal signaled a special kind of endorsement from him, almost akin to the prestige of the Jesuits’ roles in the royal confessional. The chapel appointment acquired further importance because, unlike the Vincentians’ appointment to the parish, it did not buttress Jolly’s assertion that it

\textsuperscript{24}AN, MM/537, fol.107r, ‘Foundation contract for Priests of the Mission at Versailles,’ 6 October 1674: ‘…feront les fonctions curiales en ladite paroisse, prescheront la parole de Dieu, instruiront en la piété, et catéchiseront la jeunesse dudit lieu, et feront des missions aux villages circonvoisins…’ The confirmation briefs, signed December 1679, are at \textit{ibid.}, fols.111v-112v.
\textsuperscript{25} Maral, \textit{La Chapelle Royale}, 85.
\textsuperscript{26} AN, MM/537, fol. 107r: ‘…lorsque le service de la paroisse le pourra permettre.’
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{RC}, 1:120, 21 November 1674: ‘…nous ne pensions plus à cette affaire…’
\textsuperscript{28} Maral, \textit{La Chapelle Royale}, 17-51. There were five successive replacements of the chapel at Versailles between 1661 and 1710, when the current chapel was inaugurated.
was ‘business as usual’ for the missionaries of the countryside. On the contrary, the founding documents provided for a large group of Vincentians, including six priests, six clerics and two brothers, to ‘administer the sacraments to the people of [the] court.’ Thereafter, the Vincentians of the chapel enjoyed daily, intimate relations with the highest personages of the realm, and the illustrious new appointment became the object of some discussion among court commentators. The May issue of the Mercure galant announced to the court that, although the choice of the missionaries would surprise everyone, they deserved praise as ‘persons whose intelligence equals their zeal.’

However, because of close ties between the clerics who worked there and the royal household, the chapel has attracted criticism. In his study of the king’s confessors, the historian George Minois assigns to the chapel at Versailles a completely decorative role, claiming that Louis XIV’s attendance at specific rites – Te Deums, vespers and masses – was ‘nothing more than the prolongation of court ceremonies, where people honoured more God’s lieutenant than God himself.’ At first glance, the publicity that accompanied the Vincentians’ arrival confirms Minois’ judgements. The Mercure galant’s report, in particular, highlighted the chapel’s place in Louis’ ordered scheme of self-adulation:

If the King, in inheriting the most flourishing Kingdom in the world, did not find the title ‘Most Christian’ attached to his crown, all the things his pious zeal makes him undertake everyday would nevertheless have helped him acquire this glorious quality …the plan of this monarch has always been that the Chapel of Versailles be the most magnificent place of this sumptuous and brilliant palace…nothing is costly to him when it has to do with showing off his piety.

---

29 AN, MM/537, fol.113v, ‘Act of establishment of the priests of the mission at the château of Versailles,’ April 1682: ‘…y administrer les sacrements aux personnes de notre cour…’
30 MG, May 1682, 4.
31 Minois, Le confesseur du roi, 405: ‘…n’étaient plus qu’une prolongation des cérémonies de la cour, ou l’on honorait davantage le lieutenant de Dieu que Dieu lui-même.’ See also Goubert, Le Siècle, 215.
32 MG, May 1685, 1-5: ‘Quand le roy, en héritant du plus florissant Royaume du monde, n’auroit pas trouvé le titre de Très Chretien attaché à sa couronne, ce qu’un pieux zèle luy fait entreprendre tous les jours ne luy aurroit pas moins acquis cette glorieuse qualité…le dessein de ce monarque a toujours
Chapter 3: The Call of the Poor and the Call of the Prince

The fact that Louis’ piety was the object of ‘éclat’ tends to confirm Judge’s contention that ‘Versailles was in some sense the church of Louis XIV, and the king was himself a religion.’ These blurred distinctions between sacred and profane were in further evidence in the organization of the chapel royal, which embraced chaplains, almoners and clerics who acted more as appendages to the royal household or benefice-hunting churchmen than providers of religious rites. At the summit of this spiritual court was the grand almoner, an often absentee cardinal who lived in apartments at the château worthy of a prince du sang, and whose annual emoluments exceeded 14,000 livres. In such an environment, there was every possibility that the Congregation would be considered one of many props in Louis’ deployment of Catholic rituals to support his rule.

The missionaries of the Versailles chapel were by no means insulated from this Louisquatorzian cult. While Louis was in residence at Versailles, the liturgies in the chapel were above all concerned with the edification of the king’s soul. In addition to low masses, morning prayers and litanies, Louis stipulated that a high mass be said at ten o’clock every morning and as befitted his private place of worship, the intentions of the day’s most important celebration were orientated to supporting the majesty of his office. The Vincentians were therefore ordered to pray for the king’s justice, his royal house and the states under his obedience. The high morning mass also concluded with the traditional chant in honour of the king, the Domine Salvum fac Regem. After evening prayer, an Exaudiat was sung during the king’s life, and replaced by a De Profundis for the repose of his soul upon his death. Louis also stipulated that a low Requiem mass be celebrated every morning at 8

---

34 Minois contends that the venality of these positions led to there being 130 almoners at court in 1657: Le Confesseur, 406. According to Armengol de Laverny, between 1661 and 1715, there were approximately sixty ecclesiastics in receipt of emoluments at the chapel. See Sophie Armengol de Laverny, Les Domestiques commensaux du roi au XVIIe siècle (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris-Sorbonne, 2002), 203.
36 AN, MM/537, fol. 113v.
Besides these celebrations of the Eucharist, the foundation contract also instructed the Vincentians to ensure exposition of the sacrament on Thursdays and Sundays, in order to ‘satisfy the devotion that we and our dear spouse the Queen have for it.’ The missionaries’ primary service to the king and his household was perhaps no more evident than when Louis stipulated that two Vincentians were to live in apartments close to the chapel and be available at all times.

As far as their counterparts at the nearby parish were concerned, evidence from the 1680s indicated that these Vincentians were also heavily engaged in court functions. They soon became popular with the court population, particularly as confessors, and internal Congregation histories claimed that one of them, Michel Montmasson, was ‘bombarded with dukes, maréchaux of France, ladies and duchesses…’ In addition, the Vincentian curé of the parish was normally in attendance at ritual dynastic occasions in the château, such as births, baptisms and marriages. The Vincentians of the parish were often summoned to the chapel royal, a practice in evidence at the birth of the duke of Burgundy, Louis de France on the 16 August 1682:

The Princess [Maria Anna of Bavaria] had only been delivered for a moment, and already the fireworks were lit everywhere. They acted as a signal for the Missionaries from the parish of Versailles, and established by the King in the château. These missionaries came immediately to the Chapel and sung the Te Deum...In the Chamber of Madame the Dauphine, Monseigneur the Duke of Burgundy was anointed by the Cardinal de Bouillon, grand almoner of France...[And] the ceremony took

---

37 Ibid., fol.114r.
38 Ibid. ‘…satisfaire la dévotion que Nous et la reine notre très chère épouse y avons…’
39 Ibid.
40 MCM, 2:433: ‘…assiégé de ducs, de maréchaux de France, de dames et de duchesses...’ Hébert claimed, with some exaggeration, that another Vincentian, Antoine Jassault, was confessor to Maintenon and ‘most of the ladies at court’: Mémoires, 221.
41 Maral, La Chapelle Royale, 55.
place in the presence of Monsieur the curé of the parish of Versailles.\textsuperscript{42}

On this occasion the missionaries of the parish were summoned to the king, but the court often returned visits to the parish on solemn feasts. The king and queen were called to fulfill their paschal functions at their local parish church, according to the decrees of the council of Trent.\textsuperscript{43} In June 1682, the \textit{Gazette de France} reported the participation of the royal family in a Pentecost procession the previous month, which ended at the parish church, where they heard Mass.\textsuperscript{44} Other important events at court took place at the parish church, such as the funeral of the queen, Marie-Thérèse, on 2 August 1683.

The Vincentians of the Versailles compound may have devoted much of their time to religious celebrations at court, but Minois’ implication that their service was necessarily decorative because of this is incorrect. Reports published at the time situated their arrival in a new era: that of the ‘holy court.’ In May 1682, when it announced the Vincentians’ arrival at the court chapel, the \textit{Mercure galant} claimed that Versailles was unlike any other court in Europe in terms of its religious life. Here, it went on, ‘where people found only occasions to damn themselves, [they] will find occasions to be converted.’\textsuperscript{45} In the foundation contract for the chapel, Louis echoed these expectations, saying he wanted the Vincentians ‘to spread among our court the good odour of example and of Christian piety.’\textsuperscript{46} This duty to set an example of piety clearly separated them from holders of sinecures in the chapel royal – men such as François Morel, an almoner from 1694, and known for his love.

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{MG}, August 1682, 47-48: ‘Il n’y avoit qu’un moment que cette Princesse étoit délivrée, et déjà les feux estoient allumés de toutes parts. Ils furent comme un signal pour les Missionnaires tirez de la Paroisse de Versailles, et établis par le Roy dans le Château. Ces Missionnaires se rendirent aussitôt dans la Chapelle, et ils y chantèrent le Te Deum…à la Chambre de Madame la Dauphine, Monseigneur le Duc de Bourgogne y fut ondoyé par Mr le Cardinal de Bouillon, Grand aumônier de France…La cérémonie se fit en présence de Mr le curé de la paroisse de Versailles.’

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Maral, La Chapelle Royale}, 55. \textit{Tanner, Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils}, 2:698, session 13 (11 October 1551), canon 9.

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Gazette de France}, June 1682, 12.

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{MG}, May 1682, 4: ‘...où l’on ne trouvait qu’occasions de se perdre, on en trouvera de se convertir…’

\textsuperscript{46} AM, MM/537, fol.113v: ‘…répandre dans notre cour la bonne odeur de l’exemple et de la piété chrétienne.’
of wine; or those who used their offices as a springboard to the episcopate, like Charles Maurice Le Tellier, one-time master of the chapel musical who rose to become coadjutor of Langres and archbishop of Reims.\textsuperscript{47} Olivier Chalines argues that the introduction of missionaries at the chapel invited competition from these court officers, but the two groups were hardly comparable.\textsuperscript{48} Firstly, the Vincentians avoid classification alongside decorative court clergy precisely because their roles at religious events differentiated them as local parish priests rather than masters of ceremonies. For example, at the wedding of Anne d’Orléans to Victor Amadeus of Savoy in April 1684, the principal celebrant was Cardinal de Bouillon, the grand almoner, but the duty of signing and notarizing the act fell to the \textit{curé} of Versailles, the Vincentian Nicolas Thibault.\textsuperscript{49} In a second vein, the missionaries were full-time staff of the chapel, holding positions which stood in contrast to the \textit{aumôniers par quartier}, most of whom bought their offices and were obliged to serve the king only one trimester a year.\textsuperscript{50}

The Vincentians’ difference from clerical courtiers shone most brightly in the fact that, despite the significant overlap between personnel at the parish and the chapel, their ministry at Notre-Dame de Versailles regularly extended beyond the elite. After all, the parish of Versailles did not simply embrace the rich and powerful. In addition to the properties of aristocrats and seigneurs that fell within the parish, there was also a significant population of \textit{petits commerçants} charged with the service and upkeep of the court. The kitchens, wardrobe, stables and other services of the royal households listed over five thousand people in titled offices and thousands more in subordinate positions.\textsuperscript{51} Therefore, while the death notice for Montmasson pointed to the duchesses that had flocked to his confessional, it also mentioned ‘bourgeois, craftsmen, lackeys and servants.’\textsuperscript{52} Surviving parish registers

\textsuperscript{47} Minois, \textit{Le Confesseur}, 407.
\textsuperscript{49} ADY, BMS 1684-1685, fol.7, ‘Record of marriage,’ 10 April 1684.
\textsuperscript{50} Armengol de Laverny, \textit{Les Domestiques}, 31, n.67.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{MCM}, 2, 433: ‘…de bourgeois et de bourgeoisie, de manoeuvres, de laquais et de servantes…’
from the 1680s and 1690s exhibit the diversity of the parish population served by the Vincentians. Most of the sacramental celebrations recorded in the registers of the parish involved lower-order staff such as millers, concierges and domestics of the king or other high aristocrats. For example, on 26 January 1685, Joseph du Bois, son of a bag-maker was baptized in the parish.\textsuperscript{53} On 1 February, a Vincentian presided over the baptism of Choinette Monton, daughter of a concierge in the household of the duc de Choiseul.\textsuperscript{54} The Vincentians of the parish were therefore as much servants of the court’s servants as servants of the court.

It should now be clear that, for both groups of Vincentians at Versailles, their ministry was neither decorative nor limited to the nobility there. The historical debate, however, has focused on the fact that both internal Congregation voices and certain external commentators were ceaselessly conflicted by this work, which suggested a new era of power and prominence for the erstwhile little Company. In some respects, this was an accurate assessment. Before the Versailles appointments, the relationship between the Congregation and grandees had been defined by two characteristics. Firstly, it was largely restricted to patronage arrangements. As we have seen, the co-founders of the Congregation had been lay aristocrats who financed the early missions, as had figures such as the duchesse d’Aiguillon. At Versailles, this relationship shifted as large numbers of aristocrats and working members of their households also became their parishioners. Secondly, the intimacy the Congregation enjoyed with royalty during the period from 1625 to 1660 had been, for the most part, limited to the personal relationships Vincent de Paul had nourished with grandees. These relationships were rarely formalised, and never extended to a permanent place at court. Under Louis XIV, this situation radically changed. Beginning with Fontainebleau, but especially in 1672 and 1682 with the Versailles appointments, the Congregation entered into a broader institutional assimilation with the monarchy and elites. The strong presence of Vincentians at court owed to and depended upon Louis XIV’s personal affection for their work as a patron, and the king expressed his desire to be the ‘special and immediate protector

\textsuperscript{53} ADY, BMS 1685-1686, fol.6, ‘Baptismal record,’ 26 January 1685.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., fol.9.
of the priests of the Congregation of the mission’ when they first arrived at Versailles.\textsuperscript{55} However, this relationship soon transcended the king’s individual interest as multiple Vincentian sites wove a strong corporate attachment between the Congregation and the monarchy.

Fear of this transformation drew further on the belief that the priests of Louis XIV could not continue to be prêtres de mission at court. By the 1680s the leadership was well aware that multiplication of its parish assignments had to accommodate the Congregation’s fundamental ethos. The resolutions of the 1685 general assembly therefore included an admission that ‘it would be good to do some missions, from time to time, in the parishes of which the Congregation has the care.’\textsuperscript{56} Later in 1690, when the Versailles appointments led to the directorship of Saint-Cyr, Jolly insisted that the foundation contract include a provision for missions in the surrounding areas.\textsuperscript{57} In reality, however, balancing these demands with those of new patrons was an onerous task. In 1698, the revision of Saint-Cyr’s contract with the Vincentians noted that the obligation to direct missions on the Saint-Cyr lands diverted the priests’ attentions and deprived the Dames de Saint-Louis of sufficient spiritual direction.\textsuperscript{58}

The rhetoric sounding betrayal of de Paul’s original mission did not die easily. When Alméras accepted the king’s proposition in 1672, he remained hopeful that God would maintain the Congregation’s ‘simplicity and humility in the court’s milieu,’ but certain onlookers disbelieved the Vincentians’ commitment to remain true to their vocation.\textsuperscript{59} For example, in his famous memoirs on Louis XIV’s court

\textsuperscript{55} AN, MM/537, fol.112v, ‘Confirmation of the Versailles establishments,’ December 1679: ‘…nous voulons aussi être le protecteur spécial et immédiat desdits prêtres de la Mission comme leur fondateur.’
\textsuperscript{56} RC, 1:136, 1 July 1685: ‘On a jugé qu’il serait bon de faire quelque mission, de temps en temps, dans les paroisses dont notre Congrégation a le soin.’
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 139, 21 January 1690. Jolly stated at the time: ‘Ne pouvant donc pas refuser, nous avons demandé, qu’outre le service de cette communauté, nous puissions faire des missions, afin que les ouvriers qui seront là s’exerçassent de temps en temps à une fonction propre à notre institut, et le roi l’a agréé.’
\textsuperscript{58} ADY, 2 MI 262, fol.214, ‘Treaty between the Dames de Saint-Louis and the Congregation of the Mission’, 26 June 1698.
\textsuperscript{59} RC, 1:121: ‘…simplicité et humilité au milieu de la cour.’
the duc de Saint-Simon called the Vincentians of Versailles hypocrites. His comments implied that the Vincentians nourished an image of simplicity which jarred with indications that missionaries, such as Montmasson, appeared to welcome the honours of the court and the company of courtiers. Perhaps more seriously, his remarks insinuate that they enjoyed the court’s luxuries despite their vow of poverty. Saint-Simon’s comments must always be treated with care, but in this instance his judgement was seriously flawed. The Vincentians may have been priests of the court, but their ministry was not decorative and was not limited solely to the elites. The career of one prominent Vincentian in particular fully contradicts Saint-Simon’s assertions that they were hypocrites.

II

In the eyes of the ‘world’, the sovereign’s favour was a glorious possession. The royal appointments raised the profile of the Congregation and set it up as a rival to other prominent religious institutes. However, the Congregation never fully adjusted to the kind of proximity to power which the parish and chapel appointments created. The career of the curé of Versailles, François Hébert, who was parish priest there from 1686 to 1704, cast into sharp relief the impact of these contradictory forces. After Vincent de Paul, Hébert stands out as one of the most famous Vincentian figures of the seventeenth century, not least because his time at Versailles coincided with the glory years of the Roi-Soleil. However, unlike de Paul, his career has rarely attracted the attention of scholars. Despite this oversight, Hébert’s service at court is important for several reasons. It revealed the monarch’s enduring favour of the Vincentians; at the end of his ministry at Versailles Hébert was appointed the Congregation’s first bishop. The hallmarks of his career and writings also indicated how much the Vincentians sought to ensure that their actions did not fulfil their fears and anxieties. They may have been part of the court, but they were removed from it in critical ways.

Hébert was born to well-to-do parents in Tours on 13 September 1651. His connection to the Congregation appears to have been established at an early age.

---

One of his biographers claimed that his parents were intimates of Louis Abelly, who undertook the education of the young François. Hébert’s ecclesiastical career was wide-ranging. He was received at the Congregation’s major seminary at Saint-Lazare on 21 October 1667, and made his vows two years later, on 22 October 1669. He was subsequently called to work in several of the Congregation’s houses and distinguished himself in diocesan seminaries under its control. He was chair of theology at the seminary at Sens from 1674-1677, when he was sent to the seminary at Aleth. He was thereafter appointed superior of the royal foundation at Invalides in 1686, but his stay there was brief, for in the same year he was called to the parish of Versailles. Thus began his career in what Michel Chamillart called the ‘biggest and most burdensome parish in the world.’ Hébert was consecrated bishop of Agen in the chapel of Versailles by the archbishop of Paris and the bishops of Senlis and Châlons on 6 April 1704. He died on 20 August 1728.

Hébert’s ministry at Versailles attracted the observations of several eighteenth and nineteenth-century diarists and historians. In his memoirs, the duc de Saint-Simon referred to the great reputation Hébert had won as curé of Versailles. The secretary of Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, François Le Dieu, called Hébert ‘perhaps the most capable priest of the Congregation of the Mission’ in 1703. Hébert’s nineteenth-century biographer, Antoine Durengues, is even more flattering in his assessment, calling him the ‘ornament of the Company.’ Durengues’s study of Hébert is largely hagiographical and affirms that Hébert sought no distinction in his new role; for example he claims that Hébert confided the more solemn aspects of his function as premier curé de France, such as preaching sermons on important feasts, to clerics of more illustrious pedigree. Henri Bremond declares him to have been a

---

62 *Catalogue du personnel*, 299.
63 Durengues, *Vie de Hébert*, 10.
65 Durengues, *Vie de Hébert*, 37.
69 *Ibid.*, 14. The title premier curé de France, was, of course, not an official one.
‘new type of courtier’ with an inflexible conscience and independent mind.\textsuperscript{70} Lastly, Hébert’s memoirs themselves remain a vital source for his life and work and, although understudied, add a unique perspective on both court and Congregation under Louis XIV.

The precise range of Hebert’s influence with Louis XIV is difficult to determine. In his memoirs, he never mentioned attending either the King’s \textit{lever} or \textit{coucher}, although as court clergy were often present, he may very well have attended these ceremonies. What is certain is that the Congregation’s leaders made use of Hebert’s proximity to the sovereign in order to arrange certain assignments. During negotiations over the Congregation’s acceptance of the parish of Rochefort in the diocese of La Rochelle in 1687, Jolly wrote to the minister of the marine, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, informing him that Hébert was being sent to receive the minister’s instructions regarding the contracts.\textsuperscript{71} Hébert was also used to obtain various kinds of relief from Louis XIV, particularly in disputes over benefices. When Jolly later decided to replace the parish priest of Rochefort with another Vincentian, the bishop of La Rochelle refused to consent to his candidate. Unable to go to Versailles himself, Jolly sent Hébert to beg for the king’s intercession in the matter. The king promptly agreed with the Congregation that appointment to this benefice was exempt from episcopal jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{72}

Painting a picture of the \textit{curé}’s position with courtiers relies on a few incidents. His moral authority as parish priest of Versailles often made him a point of appeal for disgruntled courtiers. In his memoirs, Hébert described how a provincial noble had sought his intervention with a lady at court who owed the noble a large sum of money.\textsuperscript{73} More specific evidence exists for the relationship between Hébert and one of Louis’ favourite courtesans, Françoise d’Aubigné, marquise de Maintenon. Madame de Maintenon became Louis XIV’s second wife in a famously secretive ceremony sometime between 1684 and 1686. It was then through the establishment of Saint-Cyr in 1686 that the \textit{curé} and Maintenon solidified their

\textsuperscript{70} Bremond, preface to \textit{Mémoires}, viii.
\textsuperscript{71} AN MAR, B/3/44, fol. 314r, 26 Jan 1687.
\textsuperscript{72} AM, 61:161; Lacour, \textit{Histoire générale}, 126.
\textsuperscript{73} Hébert, \textit{Mémoires}, 27.
collaboration. Saint-Cyr was located at the rear end of the *Grand parc* of Versailles, and was very close to Hébert’s parish; from its inception Hébert was a regular visitor to the establishment. When the Vincentians were appointed spiritual directors there in 1690, Hébert and Jolly visited the site to oversee the construction of the new Vincentian residence. On 1 February 1690, Madame de Maintenon wrote a letter to one of the Vincentian priests based at Versailles expressing her hope that Hébert would be added to the list of Saint-Cyr’s approved confessors. It is evident from Maintenon’s letters that he also gave regular spiritual retreats to the house’s mistresses, the Dames de Saint-Louis. On 26 September 1692, in a letter to Madame de Vancy, Maintenon referred to a retreat Hébert had given at Saint-Cyr. One of the items discussed, we are told, was simplicity, an unsurprising theme for a Vincentian.

The relationship between the curé of Versailles and Maintenon was not uniquely spiritual. Hébert revealed that he discussed matters of state with her, such as the conflict between France and Orange. But Maintenon reserved her judgement on his understanding of court politics on at least one occasion. In a somewhat cryptic letter to the archbishop of Paris possibly dated 21 February 1696, Maintenon counseled him to ‘not always believe Monsieur the curé of Versailles; he is full of the right intentions, but he does not know this place and wants impossible things.’ This was a curious remark on Hébert’s disposition at a time when he had been parish priest at court for ten years, but it reconfirmed how pervasive and durable the idea was that a Vincentian was innately foreign to the world of power and politics. Hébert’s own testimony seemed to confirm this, pointing to a position more as confidant than political advisor. For example, on one occasion Hébert recounted how the king, who was well aware of his intimacy with Maintenon, had inquired

77 *Hébert, Mémoires*, 89.
78 Maintenon to Noailles, 21 February 1696, 655, ‘Ne croyez pas toujours M. le curé de Versailles, il est rempli de droites intentions, mais il ne connaît pas ce pays-ci et voudrait des choses impossibles.’
Chapter 3: The Call of the Poor and the Call of the Prince

through the *curé* about a certain secret concerning his wife, the details of which Hébert did not reveal in his memoirs.\(^79\)

Despite the intimacy he enjoyed with both the monarch and Maintenon, the over-arching sentiments from Hébert’s testimony cast him as an outsider at Versailles. His account of life there revealed the original source of the Congregation’s discomfort with the appointments: honours, excess and certain corruption. The first chapter of his memoirs is a litany of complaints about the excessive opulence of the court:

…what in the past would have been regarded as damnable profusion by our parents had become at this time a sort of praiseworthy moderation, so much had vanity conquered the hearts of the French and caused them to forget what modesty ought to inspire.\(^80\)

Besides the extravagance of court, Hébert was appalled by the conduct of certain courtiers. He described one interview with Maintenon during which he appealed to her to speak to the king about the prevalence of homosexual behaviour at court, ‘a disorder…that [the king] should correct in his own brother as in all the other subjects.’\(^81\) After calling Versailles ‘a pit of self-love,’ Hébert broadened his attack by claiming that the moral decay propping up the search for sensual pleasure could be traced to Louis XIV, whom Hébert criticized for setting a bad example.\(^82\) The culture of excess flowing from the sovereign himself had led to corruption in the Church, a state of affairs that earned some of Hébert’s strongest words:

But what was really deplorable was to see the very people who should have opposed most strongly this torrent of worldly maxims let themselves be

---

\(^79\) Hébert, *Mémoires*, 41-42.

\(^80\) Ibid., 19: ‘…ce qui autrefois chez nos pères aurait été regardé comme une profusion condamnable était devenu en ce temps-ci une modération louable, tant la vanité s’était emparée de tous les cœurs des Français et leur avait fait oublier ce que la modestie doit inspirer.’


\(^82\) Ibid., 17.
Hébert was fiercely critical of the culture of patronage and reward prevalent among some of the clergy at court. Employing characteristically Vincentian language, he railed against the clerics who sought riches and benefices for vain purposes, when these were properly ‘destined for the relief of the poor.’ Moreover, in an observation that clearly revealed some disapproving sentiments of the role certain Jesuits played at court, Hébert lambasted the way prelates ‘obsequiously courted the Father confessor and even some other courtiers whom they knew to be in favour’ in order to obtain their prizes.\footnote{Ibid., 20: ‘…faire bassement leur cour au Père confesseur ou même à des courtisans qu’ils savaient être en faveur.’}

One of the most famous incidents at the Versailles compound during Hébert’s ministry further demonstrated his separation from other clergy at court. On 26 January 1689, the French dramatist Racine staged his biblically-inspired comedy \textit{Esther} at Saint-Cyr, at Maintenon’s request. The play was performed by the noble young ladies who resided at court. Hébert’s discussion of this performance took place in the context of the re-emerging Jansenist threat, for Racine had been educated at Port-Royal, a major Jansenist stronghold.\footnote{Brian E. Strayer, \textit{Suffering Saints, Jansenists and Convulsionnaires in France, 1640-1799} (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2008), 45-46.} However, Hébert’s displeasure with the event had more to do with a deep conviction of the impropriety of theatre than a suspicion of heterodoxy in Racine. He stated at the beginning of his account:

\begin{quote}
I do not know what could inspire in this illustrious lady [Maintenon] the desire to stage works of theatre before the young ladies who were educated there. But I am persuaded that she did not undertake it without consulting the bishop of Chartres and Messieurs Tiberge and Brisacier, directors of
\end{quote}
Chapter 3: The Call of the Poor and the Call of the Prince

the Séminaire des missions étrangères, who enjoyed at that time all her confidence.⁸⁷

If Hébert was convinced of the influence of these clergymen, he was more circumspect regarding his own. He claimed that ‘although Madame de Maintenon had confidence in me, she did not do me the honour of speaking about it with me’, foreseeing ‘that I would have dissuaded her, which I subsequently tried to do.’ ⁸⁸

Esther was acclaimed by the entire court. Louis XIV attended several times, as did many senior ecclesiastics.⁹⁰ Hébert reported that many bishops applied to Maintenon for admittance into Saint-Cyr to see the play, and that ‘religious, several abbots, a great number of Oratorian Fathers, some Jesuits were as carried away as the others in desiring to be admitted.’⁹⁰ Hébert, however, was a lone voice of disapproval. He expressed his displeasure at a monthly meeting of a confraternity of charity recently established at court, where he claimed the most distinguished ladies of the place were present. He reported that Maintenon, after naming the list of regular and secular clergy who had come to see the production, pointed out to Hébert that he was the only one who had not yet attended. Furthermore, she inquired whether he would yet come, an invitation he flatly rejected.⁹¹ Hébert maintained his position in the face of further pressure from Maintenon and criticism from those in her entourage, such as the duchesses of Beauvilliers and Chevreuse, who told him to ‘reflect, get over your scruples and attend the [play] like the other persons of the clergy.’⁹² When asked to defend his stance, he explained to the ladies:

⁸⁷ Hébert, Mémoires, 116: ‘Je ne sais qui put inspirer à cette illustre dame l’envie de faire représenter des pièces de théâtre à ces jeunes demoiselles qui y étaient élevées. Mais je suis persuadé qu’elle ne l’entreprit sans en avoir parlé à M. l’évêque de Chartres et à MM. Tiberge et Brisacier, directeur du Séminaire des Missions étrangères, qui avaient pour lors toute sa confiance.’
⁸⁸ Ibid. ‘Quoiqu’en ce temps-là, elle en eût en moi, elle ne me fit pas l’honneur de m’en parler: peut-être prévoyait-elle que je l’en aurais détournée, comme je travaillai ensuite à le faire.’
⁹⁰ Saint-Simon, Historical Memoirs, 2:124. Saint-Simon wrote that performances were given in Maintenon’s private apartments before a ‘very small and exclusive audience.’
⁹¹ Hébert, Mémoires, 117: ‘…religieux, plusieurs abbés, grand nombre de Pères de l’Oratoire, des jésuites furent aussi emportés que les autres à y être reçus.’
⁹² Ibid., 118-119.
Chapter 3: The Call of the Poor and the Call of the Prince

You must know, since you are so assiduous in attending my preaching, that I often speak out against plays, which I also do in our meetings of the Ladies of Charity…if I attend this [play] in Saint-Cyr, would the people who have so often heard me preach against these comedies not have occasion to be poorly edified by my conduct?...people will then believe more from my actions than from my words, or people will even have a reason to say that I approve by my actions what I condemn in my speeches.93

The Esther incident demonstrated that the teaching functions associated with Hébert’s ministry demanded corresponding action, something which in this instance set him apart from other clergy, but not from his founder. The stance Hébert adopted regarding worldly activities was remarkably similar to de Paul’s vocabulary during his life-time. Furthermore, the seriousness with which Hébert approached his ministry at court conquered both Alméras’ and Jolly’s prior concerns about the potential loss of the Congregation’s distinctive identity at Fontainebleau and Versailles.

It was Hébert’s exit from Versailles that raised once again contradictions between the Congregation’s image and the culture of patronage and reward prevalent at Louis’ court. Just before Christmas 1703, the diocese of Agen fell vacant by the death of the incumbent, Jules Mascaron. To replace Mascaron, the king nominated the curé of Versailles. The French journalist and royal historian Jean Donneau de Visé wrote a piece about the appointment in his Mercure galant. Pointing out that Hébert was the first member of the Congregation to be elevated to the episcopate, de Visé claimed that the whole court was overjoyed by the nomination and shared in congratulating the long-serving curé. However, de Visé also reported that Hébert had done all in his power to resist the appointment, and

93 Ibid., 122: ‘Vous n’ignorez pas, puisque vous êtes si exactes à assister à mes prônes, que je déclame souvent contre les spectacles, ce que je fais aussi dans nos assemblées des Dames de la Charité…si j’assiste à cette tragédie de Saint-Cyr, le peuple qui m’a entendu si souvent prêcher contre les comédies n’aurait-il pas sujet d’être très mal édifié de ma conduite ?…on croira pour lors beaucoup plus à mes actions qu’à mes paroles, ou bien on aura sujet de dire que j’approuve par mes actions ce que je condamne dans mes discours.’
accepted it only after ‘repeated orders from the king.’

Another commentary came from the abbé Grimaud, preacher of the 1703 advent sermon at Versailles, who chose to employ language that helpfully explains Hébert’s discomfort with the mitre:

It is glorious for him to bring away the love of the people, the confidence of the mighty, the veneration of Princes, the esteem of the king. But it is infinitely more glorious that he merited all this.

After lauding Hébert, Grimaud addressed Hébert’s former parishioners at Versailles with some striking words. Saying that he felt their loss, Grimaud added that the loss was felt even more by the Congregation. By being elevated to the episcopal throne, Hébert effectively ceased to be a Vincentian. In his closing remarks, Grimaud predicted that the world would soon owe to the Congregation more ‘holy prelates, as for a long time we have owed to it holy priests.’

Of course, the flourishes of Grimaud and de Visé were largely formulaic, but for the Congregation at least, they represented serious threats. It soon became clear that the Vincentians were unhappy either with Hébert being ‘the ornament of the Company’ or with the idea of further Vincentian bishops. Confronted as they had been in 1672 with the king’s will, they responded with firmer resistance than they had shown on that occasion. In his 1704 New Year’s circular, the superior general François Watel informed the entire Company of Hébert’s appointment. The letter revealed that Watel took his role as guardian of the Congregation’s core ethos very seriously. Watel began by admitting that the nomination ‘honours our little Congregation,’ and added that he had initially thanked Louis XIV for his decision. However, it is clear from his succeeding remarks that the appointment caused him more woe than joy:

94 MG, January 1704, 123: ‘...il a fait ce qu’il a pu pour n’estre pas le premier qui y monta, puisqu’il a fallu des ordres réitérés du Roy pour lui faire accepter cette dignité.’
95 Ibid., 145-146: ‘...qu’il lui est glorieux d’emporter l’amour des peoples, la confiance des grands, la vénération des Princes, l’estime du Roy. Mais infiniment plus glorieux de l’avoir méritée.’
96 Ibid., 147-148: ‘...je sens votre perte : que sa Congrégation ressent encore plus vivement que nous...[une] Congrégation à qui nous allons devoir de saints prélats comme depuis longtemps nous lui devons de saints prêtres...’
97 RC, 1:240, 1 January 1704: ‘...honore notre petite Congrégation...’
Chapter 3: The Call of the Poor and the Call of the Prince

I took the liberty of representing [to the king] that if dignities and benefices were given in like manner to our priests who may have the honour of serving in His Majesty’s chapel or in his parish, it would be very dangerous, as it would above all open the door to ambition among us etc.\(^98\)

Watel reminded the Congregation that it was the very fear of such promotion that had brought Alméras and Jolly to resist the royal parishes in the first instance, repeating that the previous leaders ‘desired to keep us in the holy simplicity taught to us by our venerable founder.’\(^99\) After addressing these sentiments to the king, Watel announced that Louis had granted him an audience during which the king sympathised with the general’s anxiety about the effect of Hébert’s appointment. As a result, Watel reported the king’s promise that ‘during his lifetime, [he] would never again do something similar regarding us; that [he] would even declare [this intention] to his court, and ordered me to inform all our houses.’\(^100\) Louis XIV kept his promise. Despite Grimaud’s prediction of more Vincentian prelates of the realm, Watel’s injunction ensured that no French Vincentian was elevated to such dignities again during Louis’ reign. In fact, no Vincentian has ever held a French diocese since.

III

The king’s insistence that the Congregation staff his new foundations at Versailles is all the more striking given the Vincentians’ consistently negative reactions to elements of court culture. Hébert’s career in particular revealed the Congregation’s revulsion – not too strong a word – for the power and privilege that accompanied life there. The Congregation’s dominance of the new royal establishments stands out given that there were other clerical groups with more illustrious pedigrees at court. As we have seen, the Mathurins were already ministers at Fontainebleau when the

\(^98\) Ibid. ‘...je pris la liberté de lui représenter que, si on donnait ainsi des dignités ou bénéfices à nos prêtres qui auraient l'honneur de servir en sa chapelle ou en sa paroisse, cela nous serait fort préjudiciable, en ce que, principalement, on ouvrirait la porte parmi nous à l'ambition, etc.’

\(^99\) Ibid. ‘...souhaitaient de nous maintenir dans la sainte simplicité que notre vénérable Instituteur nous a enseignée...’

\(^100\) Ibid. ‘...de sa vie, Elle ne ferait plus rien de semblable à notre égard ; qu'Elle le dirait Elle-même en sa cour, et m'ordonna de l'écrire par toutes nos maisons.’
Vincentians replaced them. For their part, the Jesuits had a seemingly solid and unrivalled base for further assignments at court through their monopoly of high-profile confessorial roles. Elsewhere on the Versailles compound, Louis XIV continued to invite groups of clergy other than the Vincentians. For example, in December 1685, the king established a community of Recollects to work alongside the Vincentians on the *domaine du roi*, saying mass at the Trianon palace and Menagerie. However, the king passed over rival institutes to staff the foundations at court, and selected the Vincentians instead, which underlines their growing pre-eminence. What lay behind this royal favour? How did the Congregation surpass other orders in the realm, most of whom would have received the attentions of the monarch without protest?

The Congregation’s arrival at court coincided with a period of gradual change in the religious habits of the Roi-Soleil. The major period concerned here, the 1680s and 1690s, is generally considered a time when Louis XIV began to display growing personal piety. Dates supporting the king’s so-called conversion embrace a period from the early 1680s up to the 1690s, depending on the evidence employed. For example, in terms of patronage of the arts, 1690 is offered. After this date, the king no longer commissioned profane art, and his only projects were the decoration of two establishments assigned to the Vincentians, the *Hôtel des Invalides* and the Versailles chapel. Whatever the exact date of the king’s spiritual renewal, Maintenon’s influence seems to have been pivotal. In 1686, the papal secretary acknowledged that Maintenon was a key player in the newly reinvigorated religious life at court, a role later lauded in a papal brief specially addressed to her in 1690. By the end of the century, the king’s worldlier tastes had been tamed significantly and some of Hébert’s previous complaints had been soothed. For example, in 1696 Maintenon could boast that ‘the taste for pleasure is extinguished

---

in the king’s heart,’ and that he attended fêtes and theatre shows only with repugnance.\(^\text{104}\)

On the other hand, if Louis’ personal faith was deepening, yawning cracks emerged in his institutional relationship with the Church. Firstly, the bitter and drawn-out rift over the droit de régale had, by the time the controversy ended in 1693, earned the crown stiff rebukes by the papacy for its interference in ecclesiastical jurisdiction.\(^\text{105}\) In other quarters, the previously close relationship between the crown and some prominent French religious institutes fissured because of accusations of creeping Jansenism.\(^\text{106}\) For example, the priests of the Oratory, long favourites of the royal family, were among the most heavily affected by taints of heterodox opinion in this period. In the 1660s and 1670s, several high-ranking members of the Oratory were struck with royal lettres de cachet for their tepid reaction to the anti-Jansenist formulary of 1661. Once their reputation was stained, it proved difficult to recover totally and the Oratorians remained theologically and therefore politically suspect for the rest of Louis’ reign.\(^\text{107}\) Added to these ongoing Jansenist-related controversies, another ‘terror of Catholic religious conscience’ appeared in the 1680s with the entry of Quietism into the crown’s orbit. Quietism was an extreme form of Catholic mysticism that promoted spiritual perfection through annihilation of the will, which would deliver the soul entirely to the interior action of God, even to the point of passivity. The history of the heresy’s implantation at the court has been explored in detail elsewhere. It suffices to note that this controversy, like the others, pitted the crown against previously popular court clerics who became identified with Quietism, such as François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, as well as rallying more enemies against some of his clerical supporters, chiefly in the Society of Jesus.\(^\text{108}\)

---


\(^{\text{106}}\) Minois, 412.


Chapter 3: The Call of the Poor and the Call of the Prince

Against this background, the Vincentians’ past and present record could scarcely have been more reassuring to the crown. During his generalate, de Paul had consistently condemned heresy when it arose and he simultaneously counseled his missionaries to avoid entering fractious debates. After his death, and at precisely the same time as the good standing of many clerics tumbled, the Vincentians followed the advice of their founder. When members of the Oratory felt the sting for their disobedience, Vincentian voices were entirely absent from the turbulent discussions over the Jansenist formulary. Under Alméras, the Congregation largely appears to have followed a policy of non-belligerence when it came to doctrinal disputes; the rare stand the Vincentians did take was always on the conservative side. For example, in 1668, a general assembly of the Congregation ordered all books containing ‘heretical doctrine, or [those] suspect of error’ to be locked away in its houses. This near silence of the Vincentians, which betrayed an admirable discretion, if not passivity, at such sensitive moments, doubtless factored in the king’s decision to recruit them for Versailles in 1672.

After their appointment, the Congregation’s leaders made good on the trust placed in them. In 1684 and 1687, Jolly addressed circular letters to his members warning them about innovations in prayer and the dangers posed by Quietism. For Jolly, keeping the Congregation free from doctrinal error was linked to maintaining its esprit primitif and following de Paul’s path-making example. Jolly’s successor Nicolas Pierron was equally, if not more, swift in condemning dangerous trends. On 29 March 1699, he passed on the pope’s condemnation of Fénelon’s Maximes des saints, barely three weeks after the Roman bull’s publication. But the Congregation’s reliability was not based on theology alone. Some important features of the two heresies which have been highlighted by historians, such as Jansenism’s

---

109 For a lengthy summary of de Paul’s dealings with Jansenists, particularly Saint-Cyran, see Coste, Grand Saint, iii, chaps. 49, 50, 51. In a letter to his representative in Rome, de Paul strongly condemned Jansenist doctrine, but he advised his missionary about the Vincentians’ strategy: ‘…we never debate these matters, we never preach on them, we never bring them up in Companies if others do not mention them to us. However, if they do we try to speak about them with the greatest possible discretion’: CCD, 3:327, 25 June 1648.
110 RC, 1:96.
111 RC, 1:182, 18 October 1684 and ibid., 187, 19 April 1687. In his 1687 letter, Jolly passed on cardinal Cybo’s February condemnation of Molinos.
112 Ibid., 217. The papal bull Cum alias had been published on 12 March 1699.
subtle elitism or Quietism’s passivity, were inimical to the Vincentians’ central ethos and active apostolate, but it was also the two movements’ clear defiance of temporal and sacred authorities that irked the Congregation. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Pierron’s circular letters revealed Saint-Lazare’s deep commitment to preserving the unity of the Church and the realm, which could only be achieved through obedience to the Church, the Holy See, and what Pierron called the *via regia*.

The Vincentians thus proved to be a safe choice in these tempestuous times, but to characterize their appointment as motivated by bald political concerns would be mistaken. On the contrary, the history of their presence at court demonstrates that their selection was preferable not simply because of an absence of objectionable opinion among their members, but because they offered attractive pious distractions, especially charitable initiatives, to a court convulsed by these tricky doctrinal debates. The main door of the royal parish at Notre-Dame de Versailles was crowned by two statues, representations of Religion and Charity, and the latter is of great significance when assessing the Vincentians’ invitation to the demesne. As early as 1664, Alméras had boasted that a priest of the royal foundation at Fontainebleau had distributed alms in the Gâtinais during famine. At that stage, however, such information did not imply that court elites envisaged expansive collaboration with the Congregation in works of mercy. It was only in 1686, when Hébert arrived at Versailles, that this design became clear. Reporting on his first audience with Louis XIV, at which he was accompanied by the archbishop of Paris and the king’s Jesuit confessor, Hébert claimed that Louis ended his audience with a personal address, stating ‘I am even assured that you will teach the whole court and

---


114 *RC*, 1: 218, ‘Tenons-nous donc aux décisions de l’Église et du Saint-Siège, aux maximes de la vie intérieure que nous a laissées notre vénérable instituteur, qui nous a si souvent recommandé et ordonné de suivre le chemin royal et commun, *via regia*.’ Commenting on the much-publicised *cas du conscience* on 20 March 1703, Pierron urged complete conformity to king and church, both of which condemned it as Jansenist: *ibid.*, 230.

115 *AM*, 84:1148.

myself what must be done to save ourselves.'\textsuperscript{117} The king mentioned neither Quietism nor Jansenism in this interview; above all his words indicated that the new piety envisaged by the Vincentians’ presence was not overtly political, but rather linked to positive pastoral action and clear results.

The fact that charity was at the heart of the Vincentians’ work at court can readily be seen in the example of Saint-Cyr, even if the Congregation was initially unsure about taking on the establishment. Announcing their appointment to Saint-Cyr after initially refusing, Jolly admitted that ‘we have just been obliged to accept an establishment that ill-suits our Institute.’\textsuperscript{118} This comment was ostensibly based on the fact that, as another permanent ministry, Saint-Cyr potentially stored up further disruptions to the Congregation’s core missionary calling and \textit{esprit primitif}. The residents of Saint-Cyr could in no way be analogised with the rural poor: they were noblewomen whose claims to poverty were based on their status as young daughters of minor aristocrats who had fallen on hard times due to ongoing wars. Further, behind the establishment’s creation lurked the monarchy’s self-serving political concerns. Ramière de Fortanier, a historian of Saint-Cyr, argues that the impoverished noblewomen fed and educated there, as mothers of future generations of noblemen, were expected to transmit to a new generation of warriors a deep sense of ‘gratitude toward the state and fidelity to the king.’\textsuperscript{119} According to this interpretation, Saint-Cyr was less an institute of charity and more a reflection of the king’s well-documented desire to control certain groups and reinforce his own power.\textsuperscript{120}

The apparent dichotomy between charity and politics is, however, not altogether convincing given the blurred frontier between crown and church in this period. First of all, Saint-Cyr may have been a royal foundation, but it had persuasive religious credentials. When the house was established in 1686, the prestigious abbey of Saint-Denis was united to the property and on 1 December

\textsuperscript{117} Hébert, \textit{Mémoires}, 11: ‘Je suis même assuré que vous apprendrez à toute la Cour et à moi en particulier ce que nous devons faire pour nous sauver.’

\textsuperscript{118} \textit{RC}, 1, 188, 21 January 1690: ‘Nous venons d’être obligés d’accepter un établissement qui convient peu à notre Institut...’

\textsuperscript{119} Arnaud Ramière de Fortanier, \textit{Les demoiselles de Saint-Cyr, Maison royale d’éducation 1686-1793} (Versailles: Archives départementales des Yvelines; Paris: Somogy, 1999), 21.

\textsuperscript{120} Collins, \textit{The State}, 155.
1692 the Dames de Saint-Louis were officially recognised as an order of regulars of the rule of Saint Augustine. Furthermore, fundamentally religious impulses like charity were at the heart of Saint-Cyr’s educational purpose. In a 1701 speech to the court, the grand vicaire of Saint-Paul, Du Gayet, declared that the purpose of Saint-Cyr was to form holy spouses for Christ ‘who, filled with his Spirit and his Charity, will go serve as models’ to communities and people of the world. In the foundation contract itself, the king had made clear his hope that the monarchy’s initial act of charity in supporting the noblewomen would inspire similar acts of virtue by them throughout his kingdom.

Against this background, the appointment of the Vincentians made perfect sense. Because of its connections with Louis XIV and Maintenon, as well as its physical location close to Versailles, Saint-Cyr was never likely to shake off close association with the court, but in ethic at least Maintenon desired separation from the court proper. When it came to choosing the spiritual guides for Saint-Cyr, she deliberately passed over wily court favourites. Clues as to the identity of those rejected by Maintenon can be found in a February 1690 edition of the Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques, which suggested that the Jesuits in particular had taken ‘umbrage’ over the Vincentians’ appointment. While the Jesuits were far from being personae non gratae in court, Mezzadri points out that they were often regarded as over-zealous doctrinaires, and this appears to have counted against them. Selection of the Vincentians, on the other hand, whose self-professed distinction from court culture was embodied in Hébert’s discreet ministry, promised a simpler and humbler model of spirituality at a time when Maintenon was eager to avoid the

121 ADY, D/93 and 94, ‘Brevet uniting the mense abbatiale of Saint-Denis to the Maison de Saint-Louis,’ 2 May 1686; ibid., D/106, ‘Titres concernant l’érection de la Communauté des dames de la Royalle Maison de St Louis en monastère 1692-1694.’
122 MG, September 1701, 256: ‘…qui remplies de son Esprit et de sa Charité, vont server de modèle aux Communautez les plus saintes…’
124 BNF/NAF, 23500, fol. 55v: ‘Comme les missionnaires de St. Lazare sont déjà établis curez de Versailles et de Fontainebleau, la Société en prend de plus en plus ombrage.’
Equally, prior to the Vincentians’ arrival, Quietist doctrines had made some well-known in-roads among Saint-Cyr’s residents, who became influenced during the visits of Jeanne Guyon, one of the luminaries of French Quietism. In this light, Armogathe suggests that the Vincentians were appointed because Maintenon needed a clean pair of hands at a time when any accusation of Quietism might have fatally wounded her prominence at court. This assessment is undoubtedly correct. Yet there were other powerful inducements. The ethos of Saint-Lazare, with its famous apostolate of active engagement through charity, heartily fulfilled Maintenon’s dévot leanings.

In March 1692, shortly after the Vincentians’ arrival at Saint-Cyr, Maintenon wrote to a correspondent stating that the king’s charity had brought the house into existence and explained that ‘it is necessary that all which is done in this house shows the effects of this motive of charity.’ Maintenon’s charitable initiatives had initially begun in Versailles when the parish’s first Vincentian curé, Nicolas Thibault, convened a branch of the confraternity in 1682. In 1684, Maintenon wrote to her spiritual director, François Gobelin, reporting that the Versailles Charity had been founded with the king’s blessing in order to ‘take care of the poor in the same fashion as in the parishes of Paris.’ It was composed of noblewomen based at court and, according to Maintenon, its first head was the duchess of Richelieu. The bureau’s early activities were recorded in a 1685 edition of the *Mercur*:

These Ladies, who meet together every Monday, impose a tax on each other every week. They have elected a treasurer, and other officers, and have been working these last months at the relief of the unfortunate with great success; their birth, their

---

127 Hébert, *Mémoires*, 221-224; Armogathe, *Quietisme*, 65-67. Jeanne Guyon, one of the leading French protagonists of Quietism, visited Saint-Cyr on several occasions and was influential among its residents.
129 Maintenon to Madame de Fontaines, 2 March 1692, 190: ‘…il faut que tout ce qui se fait dans cette Maison se ressente de ce motif de charité qui l’a établie…’
130 AM, 84:1145.
131 Ibid., 1153, citing letter from Maintenon to Gobelin, 8 March 1684: ‘…pour y prendre le même soin des pauvres que dans les paroisses de Paris.’
132 Ibid.
beauty and the delicacy of their temperament not impeding them from giving their utmost...  

Following Maintenon’s personal participation in the Versailles bureau of charity, the community at Saint-Cyr supported a branch of the Ladies of Charity in Rueil (the châtellenie of Rueil belonged to Saint-Cyr), and then set up its own charity in 1692. The resources and expenditure of these confraternities are little known due to scant surviving evidence, but the financial registers of Saint-Cyr are a useful source of information which point to generous almsgiving. In December 1692, the Dames de Saint-Louis earmarked 1,000 écus for the poor on their extensive lands. The expenses indicate that although monies were given to the curé of Saint-Cyr or clerical friends of Maintenon such as Brisacier, they were generally given to the superior of Saint-Cyr’s Vincentian confessors, Gabriel Savoye. For example, on 17 December 1692, Maintenon paid 400 livres to Savoye to distribute as alms for the celebration of a Jubilee. During 1693, a year of acute famine, Saint-Cyr was particularly generous. On 11 April 1693 the Dames paid 600 livres to Savoie to distribute in parishes dependent on the house and on 26 April another 300 livres were paid for the same purpose. In December 1695, the staggering sum of 2,675 livres was given to Savoie for disbursement. The fact that the Vincentians carried out missions in the estate’s parishes, including the lands of Saint-Denis, made them uniquely placed to gauge the changing needs of the poor. Later, the house treasurer indicated that alms were paid to the Vincentian superior based on awareness of needs the superior learned either from local curés or through missions carried out by the Vincentians in certain parishes.

---

133 MG, April 1685, 4-5.
134 ADY, D/243. In June 1692, the expenses showed 72 livres given to the Rueil Ladies (fol. 26). In January 1692, 125 livres were earmarked to start off the charity of Saint-Cyr (fol. 8).
135 ADY, D/243, ‘Extraordinaire de la Maison,’ 1692, fol. 46v.
136 Ibid., fol.46r.
137 ADY, D/244, ‘Extraordinaire de la Maison,’ 1693, fols.15r and 15v.
138 Ibid., ‘Extraordinaire de la Maison,’ 1695, fol. 24v.
139 ADY, D/173, ‘Livre pour escrire les aumosnes que la Dépositaire fait faire dans les paroisses où la Maison a du bien par ordre de la Supérieur et du Conseil, non compris celles qui passent par l’oeconome,’ 1715-1781, fols. 2-3.
The charitable work embraced by Maintenon at Versailles and Saint-Cyr led to similar activities at other court locations. At Fontainebleau, a hospital called the *Charité des femmes* was founded with the active participation of Maintenon, who secured private funding for it in 1689. Later, Louis XIV provided additional revenues for the hospital. The Vincentian *curé* of Fontainebleau acted as director of the hospital, which provided fifteen beds on site and care for the sick in their homes. Further charitable projects involving Louis’ closest kin followed. When the Vincentians became chaplains to Philippe d’Orleans in 1688, the *Hôpital de la charité* was founded near his palace at Saint-Cloud. The founding contract of the hospital resonated with Louis’ words during his audience with Hébert, noting that ‘of all the actions of piety that are deserving before God, there is none more agreeable to his divine majesty than those undertaken for the assistance of the poor…’ Three Daughters of Charity were given charge of caring for the poor at Saint-Cloud, while the Vincentian priests were appointed spiritual directors of the hospital. Among the priests’ duties was the distribution of the viaticum to the sick that came there and burial of those that died. Similar institutions soon became popular outside Louis’ immediate family circle, and ministers such as Louis de Pontchartrain, whose large estates abutted Versailles, also established hospitals staffed by the Daughters.

These charitable endeavours produced positive stories at a time when Louis XIV’s court proved extremely perilous to clerical reputations. The atmosphere created by the king’s extension of the *régale*, and especially the Quietist and Jansenist controversies, partially explains the Congregation’s reluctance to enter this world of rapid ascents and equally swift disgraces. The irony, however, lies in the

---

141 AN, S/6705, ‘Extract from the registers of the Conseil d’état,’ 21 June 1701. The registers refer to orders issued on 15 April 1695, uniting the revenues of the *maladreries* of Grez and Bailly to the hospital.
143 AN, S/6699, 11 April 1689.
145 Patrice Berger, “‘Rural Charity in Late Seventeenth Century France: the Pontchartrain Case,’” *French Historical Studies* 10, 3 (Spring, 1978), 393-415.
fact that the Congregation’s very resistance made it the ideal candidate. The Congregation’s preference for its work among the poor was succinctly captured in Pierron’s 1699 letter condemning Fénelon’s *Maximes*, in which he stated that the Vincentians, instead of embracing ‘dangerous novelties,’ or reading ‘books more curious than useful,’ would do well to ‘acquit ourselves of our functions.’ At Versailles and Saint-Cyr, the king and other elites deployed this conservative instinct to good use and not without benefit to both crown and Congregation.

When the Congregation was appointed to Versailles, it was clear from Louis’ comments to Hébert that the king envisaged more from the Vincentians’ roles than their simply being carriers of orthodox doctrinal opinion or dispensers of sacraments at court. By the 1680s, Louis and his closest kin had come to the conclusion, aptly described in Saint-Cloud’s hospital contract, that ‘…the solid piety of Princes [does not] consist solely in rendering worship to God…’ Piety was increasingly rooted in action, and the Vincentians’ reputation both as servants of the neediest and as the least worldly of religious institutes led to partnerships which ultimately satisfied the increasingly devout instincts of court elites. As we have seen, Maintenon was at the heart of this new devotion and harnessed the Vincentian presence with enthusiasm. As far as the Congregation was concerned, its charitable initiatives helped it develop from its original position as outsider at court. By collaborating with the elites through confraternities and hospitals for the poor, the Vincentians managed to carve out their own place in the competitive environment of Versailles. More importantly, the Congregation succeeded in retaining and nourishing one of the core components of its ethos.

IV

The Vincentians safely defeated any idea that they were decorative additions to Louis XIV’s court. Furthermore, they could be justifiably proud of their achievements in the charitable domain. However, it remains true that in the thirty

---

146 RC, 1:217: ‘…un chacun se doit précautionner… ce que nous ferons en ôtant et rejetant les nouveautés dangereuses, et évitant la lecture des livres plus curieux qu’utiles, pour nous acquitter de nos fonctions.’
147 AN, S/6699: ‘…ayant considéré que la solide piété des Princes ne consistant pas seulement à rendre à Dieu le culte…’
year period between 1674 and 1704 the Congregation’s evolution as *prêtres de Bourbon* was a source of real concern to its government and members. For example, the record of the 1692 general assembly of the Congregation included a set of miscellaneous questions on certain aspects of the Congregation’s current work. Among the questions figured the following: ‘Could we not abstain from accepting establishments that do not appear quite conformed to our functions?’ While the response chose not to name specific patrons, it is clear from the language that the Congregation’s leaders regarded these types of establishments as unavoidable millstones: ‘We accept them only in a sense as violence, from persons whom we cannot resist.’¹⁴⁸ Both the question and the response indicated that voices in the Congregation continued to wonder about the price that would ultimately be paid for its close relationship with Louis XIV.

The Congregation was not alone in being unable to resist the ‘violence’ of the monarchy in this period. Town councils previously jealous of their privileges, military officials with long-standing rights of recruitment in their regiments, the provincial estates of Languedoc and the *parlement* of Paris – whether large or small, social and political entities throughout the kingdom all saw their individual autonomies stung by the creeping tentacles of royal power.¹⁴⁹ Louis XIV’s quest to procure docile assemblies where he encountered trenchant ones also extended to the church. Alison Forrestal has demonstrated how the power of an increasingly incursive monarchy dented the strength of the French episcopate in the seventeenth century, weakening its jurisdictional rights and sometimes even its ideals.¹⁵⁰ Of course, as Lavisse argues, the ‘reduction to obedience’ of these secular and sacred bodies was often tempered with gifts and graces. For example, when the Paris *parlement* swiftly registered the fiscal edict in support of the war against the Dutch in 1672, the *rapporteurs* who had smoothed the king’s path were rewarded with presents. The king’s officials often used monetary rewards, titles and even favourable judgements in the *Conseil du roi* to sweep away opposition to royal

¹⁴⁸ *RC*, 1 : 193: ‘Question : Ne pourrait-on pas s'abstenir d'accepter des établissements qui ne paraissent pas assez conformes à nos fonctions ? Réponse: On ne les accepte que comme violentés par des personnes à qui l'on ne peut résister.’
¹⁵⁰ Forrestal, *Fathers, Pastors and Kings*, especially chap.5.
policy. And even French bishops were not averse to thinking of future profit when they yielded to the king’s authority. Nevertheless, the long-term consequences of these trade-offs were often bittersweet: the crown’s tactics were, after all, aimed at keeping groups indebted, a maxim of Louis XIV’s government the Vincentians were yet to discover.

At least during the early phases of the Congregation’s life at court, Louis XIV’s sense of parenthood toward the Vincentians yielded material benefits. It is worth recalling that in his 1672 letter, Alméras spoke of the king’s love for the Congregation, and over time the successive contracts for the royal foundations repeated Louis’ desire to be the Congregation’s special protector. The Congregation’s need for a powerful protector in the post-de Paul period was acute because its finances remained in a precarious state. Its problems worsened in the mid-1670s when it became involved in a legal dispute that threatened its possession of Saint-Lazare. However, friends in high places were far from useless to the Congregation in this moment of crisis. On 14 October 1675, Jolly was able to report the resolution of the short-lived quarrel over Saint-Lazare, due solely to the ‘bounty of the king,’ and asked his members to ‘thank God for his [the king’s] paternal protection.’ Revealing once again the system of obligation and reward that pervaded Louis’ government, Jolly attributed the settlement to the Congregation’s recent acceptance of another royal foundation, the curacy of the Hôtel des Invalides.

As time passed, however, it became clear that the Vincentians’ gains in protecting and securing their material resources were not matched in terms of their institutional independence, a commodity they had always been eager to protect. At various stages of the Congregation’s presence at court, successive superiors general had to assert their authority in the face of pressure exerted from outsiders. As we saw above, Jolly did not baulk at switching the parish priest at Rochefort when he

*RC*, 1:164: ‘…remercier Dieu de sa paternelle protection…’
*Ibid.*, 165: ‘Notre établissement en l’hôtel des invalides, qui est maintenant consommé, a beaucoup contribué à nous rendre le roi favorable…’
wished, and in 1686 he insisted on moving the parish priest of Versailles amid stiff protests from some courtiers. This tight control over personnel changes at the royal foundations was one way of counteracting accusations that the Vincentians were prêtres de Bourbon. However, until 1697 no major interference in the Congregation’s internal affairs issued from the monarch himself. The occasion for such a move came in March of that year when, after a generalate of over twenty-four years, Jolly died. As procedure dictated, Jolly’s designated vicar general, Maurice Faure, convoked a general assembly of the Congregation. Twenty-five delegates, including Vincentians from Poland and Italy, met on 1 August 1697, and the assembly finished its business on 20 August. However, unlike Alméras and Jolly, themselves vicars general before election, Faure did not emerge from the assembly with the top job. Instead, Nicolas Pierron succeeded amid circumstances that threatened the unity and autonomy of the Congregation.

At the time of Jolly’s death, Faure held one of the Congregation’s most influential positions, the parish of Fontainebleau, but he was also Savoyard and therefore not a naturally born subject of Louis XIV. While the Congregation was not bound to elect the vicar general, the probability of Faure’s election was strong enough for Louis XIV to present a veto on his candidacy. One account of the incident claims that Faure went to the monarch to beg him to retreat from such a direct intervention in the affairs of the institute. It is impossible to determine whether this conversation took place or not; the important fact is that Louis’ intervention worked. Half-way through the assembly’s business, Pierron wrote to the Congregation announcing his election instead of Faure, saying that ‘the success of the election of superior of our Congregation has not been such as we could expect, by the choice the assembly has made of my person.’ This ought to have been the end of the matter.

156 According to Hébert, the king expressed his pain at losing the previous curé of Versailles, le Sieur de Jouhé: Mémoires, 11. Jolly had previously refused to accept the seminaries at Reims and Grenoble over disagreements with the bishops about the general’s power to move personnel: AM, 63: 620-621.
157 RC, 1:209.
158 See ibid., 208.
159 Ibid., 211, 10 August 1697: ‘...le succès de l’élection du supérieur de notre Congrégation n’a pas été tel qu’on pouvait attendre, par le choix que l’Assemblée a fait de ma personne.’ Pierron was elected by a method similar to the papal conclave’s election by compromise: a representative
Soon after the election, however, voices in the Congregation began questioning the legitimacy of Louis XIV’s action. In particular, members of the Vincentians’ foreign provinces in Poland and Italy expressed their alarm at the king’s presumption and even questioned Pierron’s election. The king himself began a lengthy correspondence over the issue with his representative in Rome, Cardinal Bouillon, and matter-of-factly announced in a letter dated 26 May 1698 that Pierron had been elected ‘freely and unanimously,’ adding only that ‘some Italian and Polish priests who were there for the election claimed to put it into doubt on returning to their countries…’

According to Louis, the Polish and Italian confreres believed there had been insufficient freedom during the election and refused to submit to Pierron until the pope had confirmed the election. He told Bouillon that it was important to find out whether the foreign provinces sought to ‘annul the election or extract themselves from the obedience of the general who is in my kingdom.’

However, Bouillon’s response in June 1698 made no mention of any Polish or Italian threats to secede. Relating that he had spoken to the Vincentian superior in Rome, Bouillon informed Louis that his veto had indeed troubled the foreign provinces, and even some of the French delegates, because ‘they regarded it as something contrary to their rules and the intention of [Monsieur] Jolly who, as he lay dying, had nominated [Faure]…’ However, at this stage, the good of the Congregation had dissuaded them from making a direct appeal to the papacy.

Louis’ veto was aimed at protecting an institute he had embraced and regarded as completely trustworthy, and which had avoided the controversial disgraces of other ecclesiastics in the kingdom. The king revealed how vital the committee of five voted for Pierron in place of the entire assembly, with Pierron obtaining four votes:

---

160 Emmanuel Théodose de La Tour d’Auvergne, cardinal de Bouillon (1643-1715).
161 AAE, Rome, vol. 388, fol.19r, Louis XIV to cardinal Bouillon, 26 May 1698: ‘…[ils élurent] librement et unanimement le Sr. Pierron…quelques prestres Italiens et Polonais qui s’estoient trouvez à cette élection prétendent la révoquer en doute depuis leur retour en leurs pays…’
162 Ibid., fols.19v -20r: ‘…pour infirmer l’élection ou pour se soustraire à l’obéissance du général qui est dans mon Royaume.’
163 Ibid., fol. 109r, Bouillon to Louis XIV, 10 June 1698 : ‘…ils regardoient comme une chose contraire à leurs Constitutions et à l’intention même de M. Jolly qui en mourant avoit nommé le Curé de Fontainebleau…’
164 Ibid., fol. 109v.
protection of this status quo was in his May 1698 missive, when he stated that the Congregation had been ‘so peaceful’ in the past and that it was ‘very important, in order to conserve this same tranquillity, to stop at the earliest [moment] the start of troubles whose consequences could be unfortunate…’ Clearly, the most unfortunate consequence for Louis XIV would be a change in the Congregation’s status as totally loyal to him, and the defining symbols of this loyalty were the royal parishes. In August 1698, the general fear that the controversy would lead to the separation of the Congregation’s provinces was still alive. In a letter written that month, Louis emphatically spelt out the obligations of his French Vincentians in response to this:

Firstly, it is my wish that the foreigners do not separate from the obedience of the general elected in my kingdom…but at the same time one has to be wary about the conditions the foreign missionaries might demand in order to maintain this union. If they claim that, in order to agree to it, elections must hereinafter be carried out indifferently toward one of my subjects or toward a foreigner, I will never permit this condition to be accepted by my subjects; not only is the greatest number of their houses located in my kingdom, but they have as well the running of parishes in places where I make my principal residence, they look after the chapels of my châteaux of Versailles and Saint-Germain, and you can well judge that it would not suit to have priests there subordinated to a foreign general.

---

165 Ibid., 388, fol. 19v: ‘Cette Congrégation a esté jusqu’à present si paisible qu’il est tres important pour y conserver la mesme tranquilité d’arrester au plustost les commencemens de troubles dont les suites pourroient estre fascheuses…’

166 Ibid., fol. 351v-352r, Louis XIV to Bouillon, 27 August 1698: ‘Premièrement que je souhaite que les Estrangers ne se séparent point de l’obéissance du général élu dans mon Royaume…Mais il faut en mesme temps prendre garde aux conditions que les missionnaires estrangers pourraient demander pour maintenir cette union. S’ils prétendent que pour y consentir, les élections doivent désormais estre faites indifféremment en faveur d’un de mes sujets ou d’un estranger, je ne permettray jamais que cette condition soit acceptée par mes sujets ; non seulement le plus grand nombre de leurs maisons sont est dans mon Royaume, mais ils ont encore la conduite des paroisses des lieux où je fais mon principal séjour, ils desservent les chapelles de mes châteaux de Versailles et de Saint-Germain, et vous jugerez bien qu’il ne conviendrait pas que les prestres qu’on y emploie fussent soumis à un général estranger.’ Louis XIV did make an incorrect assertion in this letter: the Vincentians were never parish priests at Saint-Germain.
An observer could be forgiven for thinking that it was Louis XIV, and not Pierron or the pope, who governed the Vincentians at this moment. Louis’ language certainly suggests he believed his rights as patron or protector overrode all other concerns. Indeed, as is clear from his threats, the king contemplated with equanimity the break-up of the institute in order to defend them.

In this instance, however, the relatively narrow interests of personal patronage mingled with the high-stakes of international politics. Louis’ decision to intervene in the election was heavily influenced by the fact that, while the Congregation’s delegates met to elect Jolly’s successor in August 1697, France was engaged in serious conflict abroad. The Nine Years’ War, which had begun in 1688, pitted the French crown against a ‘Great Alliance’ of German princes and other European monarchs, including William of Orange, the holy Roman Emperor, and Victor-Amadeus of Savoy. Some of the war’s terminal moments, such as the costly siege of Barcelona, also came in August 1697 and the conflict only ended with the signing of the Treaty of Ryswick a month later, on 20 September. The settlement itself was barely concluded when other domestic and international questions caused further distraction to Louis XIV. In the same letters in which he discussed Pierron’s election, Cardinal Bouillon in Rome gave significant attention to the most important diplomatic concern to Louis after the Treaty of Ryswick: a looming war for the Spanish throne. If this was not enough, the Vincentian controversy also competed in Rome with the condemnation of Quietism and even outstanding issues over the régale. It was therefore because and not in spite of these seemingly more important events that the Congregation’s election assembly became a battle-ground for the defence of Louis XIV’s interests. The recent termination of the Nine Years’ War had, in fact, been precipitated by Savoy’s late alliance with France, but its ruler Victor-Amadeus was an unreliable ally who

167 John A. Lynn, The Wars of Louis XIV 1667-1714 (Longman: London and New York, 1999), chap.6. Among the German forces Louis faced were those of Brandenburg, Hanover, Hesse-Kassel, Saxony, and Bavaria.
168 Ibid., 260-262.
169 AAE, Rome, vol.388, fols.107v-108r; ibid., 389, fol.143v-144r.
170 Ibid., 388, fols.107v-108r; ibid., 389, fol. 71r.
constantly shifted position in the succeeding years.\textsuperscript{171} Foreign policy therefore dictated that the crown move to block Faure – subject of a foreign, sometimes enemy prince – from holding the reins of one of France’s most important religious institutes. In this light, Louis’ intervention was a rational decision based on both recent history and a fair prediction of future problems with Savoyard foes.

The final months of 1698 were devoted to restoring calm in the Congregation. Informing the Congregation in September that there was a general desire ‘to have some French missionaries in our Roman house,’ Pierron decided to send two senior Vincentians to ‘watch over and tend to our affairs there.’\textsuperscript{172} A month later, Bouillon informed the king that the pope had been apprised of Louis’ exclusion of foreigners from election as superior general and had promised to change nothing in the Congregation’s current government.\textsuperscript{173} The pope kept his word and the by then lengthy controversy was finally settled by a brief issued on 17 March 1699. Despite Louis XIV high-handed intervention, Pope Clement XI declared Pierron’s election legitimate and irreversible. But the monarch’s victory was only partial. While he did not invalidate the election, the pope attacked the principle behind Louis XIV’s veto, decreeing that it was ‘alien’ to the constitutions of the Congregation that the superior general should be elected from a specific nation.\textsuperscript{174}

What did this event reveal about the real price of closer alliance with the monarchy? At first glance, internal reaction to the crisis, most importantly from the French Vincentians, seemed to reveal the absolute subjection of the Congregation in the face of Louis XIV’s monarchy. The Congregation’s submissive attitude during the crisis jarred acutely both with its previously animated appeals to avoid the royal

\textsuperscript{171} Lynn, The Wars, 255; Derek McKay, Prince Eugene of Savoy (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 32 and chap.7. Victor Amadeus would subsequently desert France during the War of Spanish Succession.

\textsuperscript{172} ACM, Pierron register (unpaginated), 17 September 1698: ‘…qu’il y ait quelques prêtres missionnaires français en notre maison de Rome… pour y veiller et vaquer à nos affaires.’ The Rome correspondence indicates that these two were Jean Watel, a future superior general, and François-Joseph Denay, who was superior of the Saint-Cloud house, but it seems only Watel made the journey, see AAE, Rome, vol.389, fol. 167v.

\textsuperscript{173} AAE, Rome, vol.389, fol.145v, Bouillon to Louis, 21 October 1698.

\textsuperscript{174} Acta apostolica bullae, brevia et rescripta in gratiam congregationis missionis (Paris: Chamerot, 1876), 71-72.
parishes and later with its spirited objection when Louis appointed Hébert bishop of Agen in 1704. It was clearly evident in Pierron’s election announcement, which made no reference to the king’s bold move at all. Seen in this light, the incident might be used to show the Vincentians as sycophantic yes-men whose traditions were easily conquered in the ‘air of the court.’ If this argument were accepted, fuel might be added to the general debate over alleged infidelity to the *esprit primitif.* There is, however, little evidence for such an assertion. The intervention in Pierron’s election disclosed important consequences of the Congregation’s acceptance of royal parishes. These ramifications had little to do with its values and internal ethos and everything to do with its internal politics.

It is clear from the evidence during the affair that Louis regarded the French identity of the Congregation as not only cemented by the Vincentians’ acceptance of the royal foundations, but as irrevocable in the future. From the beginning, his letters to Bouillon made clear that the individual exclusion of Maurice Faure should apply to all future foreign aspirants to Saint-Lazare’s leadership.175 This uncompromising intrusion into the Congregation’s internal government created political divisions in its membership which outlived the 1697 assembly. The Congregation’s foreign provinces seem to have grasped the depth of their French confreres’ obedience to the crown, and in 1705 they unsuccessfully petitioned the pope for secession from the jurisdiction of the French superior general.176

The second major result was a curbing of the Congregation’s institutional autonomy. Since the appointment to Versailles, the Congregation’s moorings at court had been secured solely by Louis’ personal patronage. This was because the familiar points of access to prestige at Versailles – for instance, family ties or strategic marriages – were mostly closed off to consecrated men like the Vincentians. It therefore stands to reason that any significant interference in their internal affairs, or limitation of their actions, was most likely to come from the king himself. Moreover, their physically close presence to the king’s residences allowed him to

175 AAE, Rome, 389, fols.352r-352v, 69r-69v.
enforce their deference to great effect. The Faure case reminded the Vincentians that accepting the king’s favour implied a necessary loss of independence on the same basis that spiritual gains were made at court. In the end, just as their ability to retain vital elements of the Congregation’s *esprit primitif* at court depended on pleasing the monarch’s piety, so their loss of self-government dovetailed with the needs of his politics.

V

The mission to Madagascar had ended with assertions that the Congregation was a feeble religious institute inferior to grander bodies like the Jesuits. Therefore, when Louis XIV offered the prestigious parish of Versailles to Alméras a month after the ill-fated Indian Ocean mission collapsed, the superior general reacted with understandable embarrassment. Given what we know about the strength of Vincentian values in the immediate post-de Paul period, his unease was not petty cavil. On the contrary, Alméras’ anxiety flowed from the Vincentians’ deep sense of corporate identity, which consistently sought to separate the Congregation from worldly fame and honour. The notion that the spiritual sons of Vincent de Paul, whose response to the call of the European poor and flight from the world they emphasized above all, should be asked to participate in a prince’s world of self-glorification seemed absurd, especially given Louis’ own proud assertion that ‘[p]rinces, in all their counsels, must consider in first sight, what might bestow or strip away the public’s applause.’177 Dominion and service, egoism and altruism, self-interest and charity – these stark dichotomies between Louisquatorzian and Vincentian ethics augured badly for closer ties between crown and Congregation.

Thirty years later, major investment of Vincentian personnel at court suggested these concerns had been dispelled. Through the royal houses of Fontainebleau, Versailles and Saint-Cyr, the full complement of Vincentians at court went up to fifty. At the Hôtel des Invalides in Paris, the Vincentian community numbered twenty at its maximum. In total, all the establishments under direct royal patronage demanded seventy men, almost a tenth of the priest members admitted

under Jolly. By the end of Jolly’s generalate, what started as exceptional appointments had become an important part of the Congregation’s duties and significantly altered the coloration of church life at court. The curé of Versailles became an established officer of the sovereignty alongside the traditional Jesuit confessor and the cardinal almoner. Finally, the king’s favour brought the Congregation its first bishop in François Hébert in 1704. After this event, the idea that the company was an off-the-radar missionary institute of little importance, one of the major prongs of the Congregation’s self-projection before, and especially after Madagascar, seemed out of touch with reality.

If the Congregation’s invitation to court called into question the first conclusion of the Madagascar experience, it did not dent the second: the Vincentians’ strong determination to remain practitioners of the *esprit primitif*. At first glance, however, the fact that the Congregation’s new project came in the guise of another parish – work specifically rejected after Madagascar – seemed to contradict their resolve on this score. Both the ostentation of Versailles and the poor reputation of court clergy seemed to support Alméras’ fear that elements of the company’s original values would be lost. But the Congregation worked actively to combat such a fate. The Vincentians did not become decorative additions to ecclesiastical pomp at Versailles because they were working members of the royal household. Moreover, the Congregation’s work in the parish was never exclusive because it embraced the entire population, which included the lower levels. Lastly, one of the prominent early leaders of the Vincentian community at court, François Hébert, deliberately sought to protect their identity at court. The fierceness with which Saint-Lazare greeted his nomination to the episcopate ultimately revealed how serious the Vincentians still viewed their obligations to their ethos decades after their arrival.

Part of the reason why the Vincentians’ unique identity survived transplantation at court was because this very identity lay behind their selection by the king. Indeed, their declared concentration on pastoral tasks, as opposed to

---

178 *RC*, 1, 90. 814 priests and clerics were admitted in this period. The figure of seventy excludes the royal foundation of Rochefort.
meddlesome involvement in church or state politics, was immensely attractive to Louis at a time when he battled numerous ecclesiastical controversies. To boot, by the 1680s the court’s eagerness to support pious initiatives was increasing, and the selection of the most famous charitable organisation in France yielded creative partnerships between the crown and the Congregation in the provision of relief which outlasted Louis XIV’s reign. Institutes of the ‘Vincentian family’ continued to provide the crown’s personnel of choice in relief efforts on the royal estate. In 1720 for example, Louis XV appointed the curé of Versailles director of the new Hôtel de Versailles and the Daughters of Charity as its nursing staff.\footnote{ADY, 1 H Dépôt/A2.}

These developments revealed that the Congregation’s alliance with the crown turned out to be far less damaging to its values than Alméras originally predicted. However, by the century’s end it became evident that the number and swift succession of Vincentian appointments at court could not halt wider corporate identification with the monarchy, and the practical costs of this were high. In this sense, the Congregation’s unrelenting focus on ethical questions and preserving its esprit primitif distracted it from the clear loss of independence which proximity to the crown entailed. Louis’ intervention at Pierron’s election in 1697 demonstrated that the king believed the royal appointments had given him extensive proprietorial rights over the Congregation, subjecting it to a species of royal inspection and control unknown in de Paul’s era. However, the real question for future engagement between crown and Congregation was whether, in a possible confrontation between the esprit primitif and Louis’ raison d’état, the Congregation would lose more than simply its independence.
Chapter 4. Masters and Servants: The Congregation and the Royal Chaplaincies of the Galleys, 1683-1703

The Versailles appointment raised the national profile of the Vincentians and facilitated a high level of constructive collaboration between the Congregation and court figures, especially in the charitable domain. The Vincentians’ selection for the royal parishes was made on the basis that their history and ethos made them trustworthy agents in a court climate dominated by struggles for power and domination. Because they were largely separated from direct involvement in these jousts, the Vincentians were able to pursue the functions of their institute. Of course, the proximity between king and Congregation did not always create the conditions for good understanding: Louis XIV’s intervention in Pierron’s election was a signal reminder that the Congregation’s place at court involved it, however unwittingly, in some of Louis’ political concerns. Yet the episode illustrated that the Vincentians at court were, at best, only occasional instruments of wider crown policy. More importantly, the effects of applying that policy during the election did not jeopardise the Congregation’s ability to remain the corporate embodiment of de Paul.

In the 1680s, however, two key developments changed the overall colouring of the Vincentians’ royal establishments. Firstly, their house in Marseille, long one of their most important bases, became the focus of increasing attention, specifically as regards the Vincentians’ responsibilities to the corps de galères. The corps de galères was a renowned fleet of manually-propelled vessels which dated to the fifteenth century and performed numerous functions for the crown. At once a branch of the king’s armed forces and a projection of his might, the galleys fulfilled critical roles in the penal system. By the late 1690s, at the corps’ apogee, its galleys were home to an increasingly diverse community of men. 11,000 men worked on the ships as part of the chiourme du roi, consisting mainly of penal convicts sent to the galleys for a wide range of civil and moral offenses. There were groups of volunteer

rowers called benevoglies and groups of slaves (turcs) from a wide variety of locations.\(^3\) In addition, the corps was also home to thousands of officers and soldiers, drawn from aristocrats, Knights of Malta and professional seamen.\(^4\) The spiritual care of this entire population was entrusted to the Congregation.

At its height between 1695 and 1700, the arsenal in Marseille comprised forty galleys, for which the Congregation was in charge of recruiting chaplains and supervising their work. In addition, its remit extended to two critical establishments connected with the Marseille marine, the hôpital des forçats and the bagne. The arsenal at Marseille was a hive of sick and invalid galleymen, and by the end of the century officials claimed there were almost two thousand in the whole corps.\(^5\) In order to address the pastoral care of the infirm, in July 1685 the king reconfirmed the Vincentians’ spiritual direction of the hospital at Marseille, and recommended to their superior the importance of consoling of the sick, morning and evening prayers, spiritual readings and administration of the sacraments.\(^6\) In 1686, the Congregation’s duties were extended when the king applied its spiritual directorship to the new hospital for marine crew, the Hôpital Royal des Equipages.\(^7\) Finally, in 1702 the government set up the Marseille bagne to provide employment for up to two thousand prisoners unable to serve on the galleys, and their spiritual care also fell under the Vincentians’ purview.\(^8\)

The second major development of the 1680s was the Congregation’s appointment to a new royal establishment in Rochefort. Rochefort was one of three sites for royal seminaries dedicated to marine chaplains planned in the 1680s by the king and his secretaries of state.\(^9\)

---

\(^3\) *Ibid.*, “Marseille cité des galeres à l’âge classique,” *Marseille: Revue trimestrielle municipale*, 122 (1980): 82. The slaves were often from Northern Africa, Greece, Asia Minor and even Central Europe.


\(^5\) AN MAR, B/6/92, fol. 350.

\(^6\) AN MAR, A/2/5, fol. 3, ‘Ordonnance ou Règlement que le Roy veut et ordonne être observé dans le port de Marseille pour la direction et administration de l’hôpital des forçats,’ art. 35. The Vincentians had been in charge of the hôpital des forçats at Marseille since the 1650s: *AM* 53:30.

\(^7\) AN MAR, A/2/5, fol. 200, 11 September 1686.

\(^8\) Vigié, *Les galériens*, 248.

company in a circular letter that the king had solicited the Congregation’s participation in one of these new establishments, situated on France’s south-westerly seaboard in the diocese of La Rochelle. Few other details of the appointment were supplied, with the superior general saying only that the existence of a good number of Vincentians at Saint-Lazare meant that there was sufficient personnel to staff the house. However, at the time of Jolly’s writing no definite treaty had yet been concluded.\textsuperscript{10} Contracts finally signed in October 1683 between the Congregation and the crown established a community of eight priests and four brothers in the town.\textsuperscript{11}

The effect of these developments was to make Marseille and Rochefort two of the most important Vincentian houses after Saint-Lazare and Rome in the post-de Paul period. This importance is not, however, reflected in the historiography and internal historians of the Congregation have declined to give the Marseille and Rochefort houses special treatment. There are two possible reasons for this. Firstly, Marseille had long been an important base in the Congregation’s history. In 1619, long before the institutional creation of the Congregation, de Paul was appointed royal chaplain of the galleys by Louis XIII. This office was a crown appointment and entrusted de Paul with responsibility to help the \textit{chiourme} (the prisoners who rowed on the galleys) ‘make the best use spiritually of their physical sufferings’; but at this stage his functions were simply personal.\textsuperscript{12} In 1625, the foundation contract of the Congregation bound its members to assist the galley convicts in addition to their duties to the poor of the countryside.\textsuperscript{13} Later, in 1643, the Congregation achieved stable institutional presence at Marseilles when the duchesse d’Aiguillon sponsored the establishment of a small house there (only four priests) to administer the sacraments, supervise catechesis and instruct the galleymen.\textsuperscript{14} Although the base was small, the office of royal chaplain gave the Vincentian who held it firm control over the clergy on the ships, with power to dismiss chaplains both at Marseilles and

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{ Ministère de l’éducation nationale, 1985}, vol.1, part 2: 11-13. The other two sites were Toulon and Brest.
\bibitem{10} \textit{RC}. 1:179.
\bibitem{11} The Daughters of Charity were also sent to staff the marine hospital in 1685: Lacour, \textit{Histoire générale}, 194.
\bibitem{12} \textit{CCD}. 13a: 58, 8 February, 1619.
\bibitem{13} \textit{Ibid.}, 216.
\bibitem{14} \textit{Ibid.}, 335, 25 July 1643. 14, 000 livres were given by the duchess for this house.
\end{thebibliography}
other ports of the kingdom.\textsuperscript{15} In 1644, the Congregation’s association with the \textit{corps de galères} transcended de Paul’s personal title when the royal chaplaincy became perpetually united to future superiors general of the institute, who customarily delegated their powers to the superior of the Marseille house.\textsuperscript{16} Given this history, the developments of the 1680s might appear as simply an extension of the trail left by Vincent de Paul.

The significant changes of the 1680s have also been set in the wider context both of the Congregation’s rise to prominence at court and its general growth throughout the realm. In their history of the Congregation, Mezzadri and Román situate their discussion of the Rochefort and Marseille houses alongside other critical developments in the post-de Paul period, such as additions to the Congregation’s parish assignments and, somewhat inexplicably, even the failure in Madagascar.\textsuperscript{17} For his part, Coste presents Marseille in the line of royal appointments beginning with Versailles and ending with Saint-Cyr.\textsuperscript{18} Doubtless, the marine bases were the peers of other crown-sponsored sites, especially those with strong connections to the king’s arms, such as the \textit{Hôtel des Invalides} and the \textit{Maison de Saint-Louis} at Saint-Cyr. This clutch of appointments came in the middle of incredible growth for the Congregation; for example, thirteen seminaries were founded in the 1680s alone.\textsuperscript{19}

There is, therefore, some temptation to see the expansion of the Congregation’s roles in the marine as part of more general trends. However, the emergence of specific and innovative crown policy under Louis XIV counsels in favour of treating Marseille and Rochefort apart from the other royal establishments.

When Louis commenced his personal rule in 1661, the realm’s naval forces were characterized by low-quality vessels, deserted arsenals and empty magazines. In addition, both the officer corps and administrative personnel were few in number and ill-disciplined.\textsuperscript{20} The appointment of Jean-Baptiste Colbert as minister of the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[Ibid., 336.]
\item[Ibid., 338, 16 January 1644.]
\item[Mezzadri and Román, \textit{The Vincentians}, chap.10, especially 224-230.]
\item[Coste, \textit{La Congrégation}, 132-133.]
\item[Mezzadri and Román, \textit{The Vincentians}, 181.]
\item[René Mémain. \textit{La Marine de guerre sous Louis XIV. Le Matériel, Rochefort arsenal, modède de Colbert}. (Poitiers: Société française d’imprimerie et de librairie; Paris: Hachette, 1937), 4-14]
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
marine in 1669, however, signaled a period of exponential investment in the navy’s material resources, which led to the creation of new ports, the construction and support of domestic marine manufacturers, and the enhancement of existing fleets, such as the corps des galères. These improvements soon extended to the navy’s human resources, and especially to growing regulation of its chaplain corps. Thereafter, provision of religious instruction and the organisation of pastoral care in the marine were codified in new legislation issued in the 1680s. Two major general ordinances of the marine, published in 1681 and 1689, united piecemeal decrees issued previously and re-affirmed the importance of spiritual life in the navy. The crown policed the implementation of these ordinances by repeating instructions to provide religious services on merchant and navy vessels in separate ordinances issued in 1694, 1701, 1702, 1705 and beyond.

Needless to say, this legislation empowered the agents of the Church greatly, specifically naval chaplains. While ship chaplains were part of the group commonly called bas-officiers, whether they operated on merchant vessels or on the royal marine, their status was especially protected by the 1681 and 1689 ordinances. Article 4 of the 1681 ordinance commanded all owners, passengers and officers of ships to reserve ‘honor and reverence to the chaplain, under pain of exemplary punishment.’ As far as the regulation of religious life on particular fleets like the corps des galères was concerned, the king was equally attentive. For example, in 1685 Louis issued an

---

21 This chapter embraces the periods of office of four ministers of the marine. Jean-Baptiste Colbert was minister from 1669 to 1683. Colbert’s son, the Marquis de Seignelay, succeeded his father on 6 September 1683 and remained in office until 1690. Louis Phélypeaux, first comte de Pontchartrain, was officially secretary of state for the marine from 1690 to 1699. However, from 1694, his son Jérôme was the effective head of the naval administration, although he remained under the guidance of his father: Sara E. Chapman, Private Ambition and Political Alliances. The Phélypeaux de Pontchartrain Family and Louis XIV’s Government, 1650-1715 (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 120. Because it is clear that he made the day-to-day decisions, for convenience I refer to Jérôme, and not his father, as minister of the marine during the 1690s.

22 Marc Vigié, Les galériens, chap. 1. The corps de galères constituted only one element of the royal marine’s resources. For a larger picture of the royal fleets under Louis XIV see Daniel Dessert, La Royale, vaisseaux et marins du Roi-Soleil (Paris: Fayard, 1996), especially chap. 9. For analysis of marine manufacturers in this period see Jean Peter, Les Manufactures de la Marine sous Louis XIV, la naissance d’une industrie de l’armement (Paris: Economica, 1997).


24 This group also included the navy’s writers and surgeons.

25 Valin, Nouveau commentaire, 1:474.
ordinance regulating the conduct of galley chaplains and the following year prescribed punishments for prisoners who blasphemed on the galleys.26

The crown’s increasing interest in and organisation of the marine in the 1680s had major implications for the Congregation’s pastoral roles at the two ports, but the precise nature of these roles remains unclear. Although the Marseille and Rochefort houses were crown establishments, the tasks of the Vincentians based there were enormously different to those studied in Chapter Three. The 1680s saw the Congregation endowed with great responsibilities, as key events in Louis XIV’s reign, particularly the revocation of the edict of Nantes in 1685, converted its long-held office of royal chaplain at Marseille into a powerful tool of far-reaching crown policy. Long-standing spiritual authority over officers, sailors and soldiers would now embrace the realm’s most important religious dissidents. This action, coupled with the creation of another Vincentian royal chaplaincy at Rochefort, set up the conditions for a higher degree of alliance between crown and Congregation.

How did the Vincentians react to these momentous developments? Did they raise similar questions about betrayal of the esprit primitif as Fontainebleau or Versailles had done previously? Louis XIV’s spate of decrees envisioned a seemingly-ordered system of religious life in the royal marine at this time. Moreover, his trust and confidence in the Congregation seemed to place its powers in this system beyond the reach of local crown bureaucrats. This, however, was an illusion. Unlike the courtly environment at Versailles, the administration of the marine harboured a maze of competing interests and hierarchies, a fact which altered the dimensions of the Congregation’s control. To what extent were the Vincentians able to assert their authority as royal chaplains and overcome the power-struggles which beset their involvement in the marine?

The parish appointment at Versailles demonstrated that there were unpredictable consequences to the expansion and diversification of the Congregation’s ministries. However, the unpleasant results of the assignment were limited to intrusions on the Congregation’s independence: it did not, in the end,

26 See the ‘Ordonnance sur le service des aumôniers et des chirurgiens établis sur les galères,’ 11 November 1685 and the ‘Ordonnance contre les forçats blasphémateurs,’ 6 November 1686 and 9 January 1687: AN MAR B/2/5, fols. 229 and 251.
affect the Congregation’s ethos of charity. The port assignments, on the contrary, presented an entirely different scenario. There, the Vincentians’ objectives as servants to Christ’s faithful and purveyors of charity seemed likely to collide with the often dark priorities of Louisquatorzian justice and punishment. In this volatile environment, moreover, the fall-out of a potential clash between Congregation and crown was far from clear. By the 1690s, when controversies over methods used to convert the Huguenots raged on the galleys, the Vincentians were darlings of the court, whose piety and moderation were admired by all. Would this reputation survive unblemished?

I

Changes in the navy took place in the context of Louis XIV’s wider political objectives. Investment in the arsenal at Marseille, and especially the corps de galères, furthered the objective of foreign conquest, and the fleet was chosen to be a means by which the king would become, in the words of Colbert, ‘master of the Mediterranean.’

This comment perhaps exaggerated the naval value of the galleys, which was inferior to that of other types of vessel, but the galleys still fulfilled important roles. During the war of the Spanish succession, they proved useful in projecting the king’s prestige, power and glory in Mediterranean sea-towns and ports. The galleys acquired new statutory importance after the revocation of the edict of Nantes in 1685, a measure which heavily tilted the activity of chaplains on the corps de galères towards the conversion of increasing numbers of Huguenots convicted for religious dissidence and sentenced to row on the ships. As superior of the chaplains on the king’s galleys, the Congregation’s designated royal chaplain at Marseille wielded great authority and played a crucial role in implementing crown policy.

---

27 AN MAR, B/6/94, fol. 584.
28 Zysberg. Les galériens, chap.10. Increasing the king’s gloire was an important objective of wider naval policy at this time. See Dessert, La Royale, 21.
29 The edict of Fontainebleau mentions the peine de galères in two articles (IV and X) for infractions committed by Huguenots. Exact figures for the Huguenots sent to the galleys are uncertain. In his momentous study, Charles de la Roncière claimed that 2, 224 were sentenced: Histoire de la Marine française (Paris: Plon Nourrit et Cie, 1899-1932), 6:18. Zysberg presents a more conservative figure of 1,550: Les galériens, vies et destins, 102.
At first, however, the Congregation’s exact role in implementing the edict of Fontainebleau seemed unclear. The edict revealed very little either about the crown’s wider concern for controlling the Huguenot population’s conversion or how this would be carried out on the king’s galleys. It was the marine legislation of the later 1680s that set the rules for both the Huguenots’ treatment on these sites and the specific engagements of religious personnel there. For example, the marine ordinance of 1689 embraced the tone of the revocation by affirming the idea that the navy, like the realm itself, was a ‘Catholic space,’ and went on to sanction persons who brought ‘any trouble to the exercise of the Catholic religion’ on the king’s ships.30 The application of this legislation to the corps de galères in Marseille meant that participation in the religious rites of the Catholic Church on any of the king’s ships was made obligatory, save for grave reasons, which had serious implications for Protestants and Turks in the king’s chiourme. Marine legislation had in the past allowed these non-Catholics to repair to another area of the ship and say private prayers during the celebration of Mass, but the 1689 ordinance dropped this accommodation in line with the edict of Fontainebleau.31 Together, all these measures were in harmony with the crown’s efforts to destroy heterodox religious belief in the realm, and as ultimate overseer of religious life on the galleys at Marseille the Congregation was enlisted to lead the conversion effort.

From 1685, the subject of conversion, especially Huguenot conversion, became the principal node of intersection between the Congregation, its appointed chaplains and the crown. Indeed, the conversion of Huguenots was an important reason for the crown’s development of national almoneries in the marine.32 In order to achieve maximum conversions, the central administration issued multiple instructions in the 1680s to control and monitor the presence of chaplains on the ships. In November 1685, the king instructed all galley chaplains to stay permanently on the vessels, reminding them they were ‘…obliged to remain continuously on duty one after another’ in consecutive shifts on one of the most important galleys, the Grande Réal. Other chaplains were duty-bound to visit their

30 Valin, Nouveau commentaire, 1:474 : ‘…aucun trouble à l’exercice de la religion catholique…’
31 Ibid., 473.
32 Richard, Les séminaires royaux, 11.
galleys every day ‘in order to console and instruct the galleymen in need…’

33 This permanent supervision applied at the other sites in Marseille. In 1702, the guardian of the bagne reported to Versailles that rooms had been built specially for chaplains to stay there, where they were encouraged to preach, give catechism and other instructions.34 These emphatic decrees which made the chaplains permanent ‘watchers’ also revealed the dual allegiance of ecclesiastical chaplains on these gaol-ships: not only were they ordained ministers in the service of the Church and its sacraments, they were also clearly in the service of the king.35

The Congregation was in charge of one of the major prongs of the conversion effort at Marseille: on-site missions. In general, missions on the marine were the preserve of religious institutes entrusted with supervising the work of chaplains. For example, at the Jesuit-controlled royal marine seminary in Brest, the Society of Jesus kept a team of three missionaries for the ships.36 The crown took particular interest in promoting and supporting this aspect of church life on the galleys. In 1685, Seignelay claimed Louis XIV ‘[was] disposed to meet every expense which will be necessary…for the missions on his galleys.’37 After the revocation, the crown integrated missions and the rehabilitation of dissidents by granting pardons to Huguenots who converted during these temporary, but highly intensive, exercises.38

The major sources for galley missions at Marseille in this period remain the testimonies of a few prominent Huguenot prisoners, which give some clues to the power structure that lay behind them. In 1693, the Protestant prisoner de la Cantinière-Baraut wrote to a correspondent in Rotterdam about a mission on board his galley which had been ‘… [solicited] by the captain, who is a perfectly honest man…and very zealous for his religion, [and who] would wish that all those under his command be good men like him. [The missionaries] preached to us three times a

33 AN MAR, A/2/5, fols. 129-130, ‘Règlement sur les fonctions des Aumôniers des galères,’ arts. 1 and 5.
34 AN MAR, B/6/96, fol.386, M. Boeuf to Pontchartrain, 25 February 1703; AN MAR, B/6/97 fol.365-366.
35 Bamford, Fighting Ships, 28.
36 AN MAR, B/3/119, fol. 323.
37 AN MAR, B/6/17, fol. 54, Colbert to the abbé du Luc, 23 February 1685.
38 See for example AN, MAR, B/6/32, fol. 135, Pontchartrain to Père Maisontier, 25 March 1699.
day, and these Messieurs the preachers did not lose a moment so as to lead their listeners to make a great confession and penitence. We were not spared from being attacked during the mission and me in particular by one of the most illustrious [missionaries]…

While the Congregation was the central participant in missions, they were exercises that involved multiple collaborators, all under the authority of the crown. It is clear from Cantinière-Baraut’s letter that galley captains, themselves crown appointees, often instigated the missions, and they were sometimes congratulated by the minister in Versailles for successful exercises undertaken under their command. Individual bishops were also encouraged to cooperate in the missionary effort. In 1698, Jérôme Théophile de Pontchartrain informed Bishop Charles Vintimille Du Luc of Marseille that ‘missions on the galleys are very useful and even necessary for the instruction of the prisoners, and I have exhorted [the Vincentian superior] to do as many of them as circumstances will permit…’ Other bishops wrote to the minister to report successful galley missions, as did the archbishop of Bordeaux in 1699. In his response, Pontchartrain revealed what the crown’s ultimate expectation was for a successful mission, referring to the ‘disposition you have noticed in the newly converted to do their duty.’

The Congregation’s royal chaplain claimed responsibility for judging whether the newly converted performed their duty, a determination which often resulted in the issuance of certificats de catholicité. These were issued to prisoners who had fulfilled the obligations of a true and sincere conversion to the Catholic

---

39 M. de la Cantinière-Baraut to M. de la Sauvagerie de la Place, 25 May 1693, printed in Bulletin de la Société d’histoire du protestantisme français (hereinafter BSHPF), 15 (1866), 530-531: ‘…à la solicitation de notre capitaine qui est un parfaitement honnête homme, qui estant je pense dans la bonne foy et très zélé pour sa religion, souhaiteroit que tous ceux qui sont sous ces commandements fussent aussi gens de bien que lui. On nous preschoit trois fois le jour, et ces messieurs les prédicateurs ne perdirent pas un moment pour porter leurs auditeurs à faire grande confession et pénitence. Nous n’avons pas manqué d’y être attaqué et moi en particulier par un des plus illustres…’

40 See for example AN MAR, B/6/32, fol.130.

41 AN MAR, B/6/31, fol. 663, Pontchartrain to Charles Gaspard Guillaume Vintimille Du Luc, 10 December 1698: ‘Les missions sur les galères sont très utiles et mesme nécessaires pour l’instruction des forçats, et j’ay exhorté le sieur Boulenger à en faire aussi souvent que les conjonctures le permettront…’ Josse Boulenger was royal chaplain in Marseille from 1695-1700. Du Luc was bishop of Marseille from 1692-1708.

42 AN MAR, B/6/32, fol. 212-215, Pontchartrain to Armand Bazin de Bezons, 6 May 1699: ‘…la disposition qu’on a remarqué dans plusieurs nouveaux convertis à faire leur devoir…’
faith. The issuance of certificates was a source of real authority on the galleys because they often granted freedom from the *corps de galères*. The primary duty of assessing the authenticity of conversions was entrusted to individual chaplains, who had first contact with the prisoners. In July 1695, an internal marine memoir recommended that the chaplains keep an exact roll of the Huguenots and newly converted prisoners on the galleys, ‘in order to give a secret account to the *intendant* of the progress of these people...and of their behaviour.’ Final responsibility for ensuring durable conversions then passed to the Vincentian royal chaplain. In 1698, the minister for the marine received a list of prisoners and newly converted from the local Vincentian superior at Marseille, Josse Boulenger. In his reply, Pontchartrain described the role of the royal chaplain in supervising the rehabilitation of the Huguenots:

> The behaviour of some *religionnaires* at present perhaps will engage His Majesty to refrain from pardoning [them] for a while, however you must continue to leave them hopeful of obtaining [pardon], so that by continuing to live in good behaviour, they might be confirmed [in their faith], and that we might be sure...of the sincerity of their conversion when they are free..."

The crown’s instructions in this missive revealed the high level of trust placed in the Congregation as the government’s prime interlocutor with the realm’s dissidents on the galleys. This confidence was displayed once more when, in August 1699, the minister of the marine suggested to the bishop of Marseille that the royal chaplain be created a *grand vicaire* of the bishop, a post which conferred authority to examine

---

43 AN MAR, B/6/90, fol.461, ‘Mémoire concernant plusieurs matières au sujet du fait des galères, sur lesquelles il seroit nécessaire de rendre des ordonnances,’ 4 July 1695: ‘...afin de rendre compte secrètement à l’intendant des progres de ces gens-là...et de la conduite qu’ils tiennent.’

44 AN MAR, B/6/30, fol.119, Pontchartrain to Boulenger, 12 March 1698: ‘Les mouvements que se donnent quelques religionnaires à présent engageront peut estre Sa Majesté à estre réservée pendant quelque temps à faire grâce aux derniers auxquels cependant vous devez toujours laisser l’espérance de l’obtenir afin que continuant de vivre dans la bonne conduite qu’ils tiennent, ils y soient confirmez et qu’on soit plus seur...de la sincérité de leur conversion lorsqu’ils seront libres...’
the faith of newly converted prisoners before certificates were issued during the bishop’s absence.45

The original Marseille contract had envisaged expansion of Vincentian involvement on the galleys into ‘other ports of the kingdom’ and the Rochefort appointment in 1683 constituted a natural fulfilment of this clause. This entirely new house confirmed the crown’s preference for the Vincentians as its ecclesiastical agents in this domain, and the preamble to the foundation contract stated that there were no better candidates than the Vincentians.46 As far as the treaty’s clauses were concerned, the type and range of powers given to the Congregation at the new port base mirrored those of the royal chaplaincy in Marseille. For example, the local Vincentian superior was entrusted with finding and training suitable chaplains for each ship, as well as dismissing and replacing poor candidates. In addition, the Vincentians were supposed to carry out missions on the ships as they did in Marseille.47 The crown showed further favour to the Vincentians by giving them the direction of the Hôpital des Matelots in Rochefort, simultaneously displacing another group of clergy, the Brothers of Charity.48 As with the seminary, the Congregation was in charge of the formation of chaplains for this hospital. One major difference at the Rochefort base was that, in 1687, the Congregation’s members became parish priests of the town, with an added ten personnel.49 The Congregation’s powers at the base therefore appeared unfettered at a local level: the contract stipulated that neither regional intendants nor officers of the marine would have ‘oversight or authority’ over the Vincentian community, and that this community was answerable to the king alone.50

45 AN MAR, B/6/32, fol. 399-400, Pontchartrain to Boulenger, 5 August 1699. The bishop of Marseille had insisted on examining candidates in person before certificates were issued.
46 AN MAR, B3/53, fol.346, ‘Foundation contract for priests of the Mission at Rochefort,’ 15 October 1683: ‘…aucuns ne s’en pouvoient mieux acquitter que lesdits Prestres de la Mission.’
47 Ibid.
48 BNF, NAF/21329, fol. 180, Colbert to Arnoul, 9 March 1683. The Daughters of Charity were also sent to staff the marine hospital in 1685: Lacour, Histoire générale, 194.
49 AN MAR, B/3/53, fol. 346r-347, ‘Union of the cure of Rochefort to the Congregation of the Mission,’ 10 March 1687.
50 Ibid., Foundation contract, 1683, fol.346 recto “…demeureront sous la protection spéciale du Roy, sans que les Intendants de la Province & Officiers, tant de la Marine que dudit Hôpital, ayent vue ny autorité sur eux…”
Chapter 4: Masters and Servants

at Marseille, the conditions of the Rochefort house catapulted the Congregation into pole position in the royal marine’s chaplaincy service.\textsuperscript{51}

II

It is worth recalling that the Congregation’s relationship with the marine from 1619 to 1660 had been defined by its house at Marseille and was largely indissociable from the Congregation’s core work among the poor of the countryside.\textsuperscript{52} De Paul’s work with the galley-slaves was one of the bases for approving the Congregation’s very existence back in 1625.\textsuperscript{53} However, while the Marseille base remained one of the most important sites of interaction between the crown and the Congregation under de Paul, the depth of engagement increased immensely after his death. From 1685, and especially in the 1690s, the ‘sons of Monsieur Vincent,’ through their old house at Marseille and their new base at Rochefort, were endowed with roles of greater political immediacy in light of the priorities of Louis XIV’s monarchy.

At first glance, the new powers and responsibilities the Congregation came to enjoy at the two ports seem to sit uncomfortably with de Paul’s teachings on involvement with secular authority. Besides emphasising the Vincentians’ image as the ‘dregs’ of the realm, de Paul also enunciated ideals concerning positions of power. To Louis Lebreton in 1640 he had explained, ‘we have a rule, and by the mercy of God, are exact in the practice of never getting mixed up in the affairs of State, or even discussing them.’\textsuperscript{54} This maxim was later enshrined in the published common Rules in 1658.\textsuperscript{55} De Paul was always anxious that his priests would become

\textsuperscript{51}Several historians of the Mission suggest that parallel attempts were made to install the Vincentians at the ports of Brest and Toulon. See Mezzadri and Román, \textit{The Vincentians}, 224, and H.Simard, \textit{Saint Vincent de Paul et ses œuvres à Marseille} (Lyon: E.Vitte, 1894), 191. The bishop of Saint-Pol-de-Léon apparently planned to have the Vincentians direct the Brest establishment, but this fell through and the Jesuits were selected: Richard, \textit{Séminaires royaux}, 12-13. Given the king’s preference for the Congregation at Rochefort, these claims seem plausible, although there is little evidence to support them.

\textsuperscript{52} In discussions of chaplaincy on the French royal marine, references to the Vincentians almost exclusively mention the Congregation’s role on the galleys under Vincent de Paul. Roles fulfilled elsewhere or after 1660 rarely receive attention. See Alain Cabantous, \textit{Le Ciel dans la mer: christianisme et civilisation maritime, XV-XIV siècles} (Paris: Fayard, 1990), 216.

\textsuperscript{53} Coste, \textit{Grand Saint}, 2:315.

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{CCD}, 2:38, de Paul to Louis Lebreton, 1640.

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid.}, 13a: 452, ‘Each one should keep well away from discussions about national or international affairs and other political matters…’

154
distracted from the spiritual aspects of their vocation by dabbling in what he referred to as the ‘affairs of Princes.’ This rhetoric fit well with de Paul’s vision for his little Company and was given the stamp of approval by the Congregation after his death in Abelly’s biography. In it, de Paul was lauded for having closed his eyes to all natural influences and all worldly prospects.\footnote{Abelly, \textit{La vie du vénérable}, 1: 63.}

The lines, however, were blurred. De Paul’s claim about Vincentian exactness in avoiding the affairs of Princes was not entirely true. After all, de Paul himself had fulfilled roles of great import in the realm, as had some of his priests. Later, the Congregation’s acceptance of the royal parishes at Fontainebleau and Versailles, as well as the foundation at Saint-Cyr, was further proof that rules forbidding proximity to power were not sacred. In reality, de Paul’s guiding principles simply established some boundaries which influenced the Congregation’s contemplation of new responsibilities. Clearly, the crucial task for the Vincentians was assessing the degree of involvement with secular power and weighing the potential costs of closer ties. In the case of the royal parishes, two concerns had accompanied the Vincentians’ approach to the new appointments. The first was their will to remain pastors and missionaries in conformity with their \textit{esprit primitif} and Rule, and the second was their desire to safeguard the Congregation’s independence.

At Marseille and Rochefort, it is easy to see how these two objectives might be skewed. The guiding light for the Congregation’s activity at the ports was Louis XIV’s \textit{raison d’état}, and not the Vincentian \textit{esprit primitif}. In their history of the Congregation, Mezzadri and Román suggest that the Congregation’s expanded role in the marine transformed it into a ‘government organisation’ at this time.\footnote{Mezzadri and Román, \textit{The Vincentians}, 224.} They do not define what they mean by this terminology, and it is therefore too vague. What can be said is that the Vincentians’ roles as pastors and missionaries at the two ports did not obey the same logic as those in evidence at the other royal establishments. The major difference lay in the fact that the Vincentians’ core missionary activities, such as dispensing the sacraments, and ministering to the poor and sick, were now direct parts of wider policy decisions affecting the entire realm and its security.
Moreover, the Vincentians’ relationship with the crown moved from dynamics which had allowed the Congregation to freely pursue its apostolic agenda to a much stricter working arrangement. The Vincentians at the two ports could not expect a visit from the king, his wife, or any other beneficent intimate of the monarch, either to flatter them before rivals or promote their corporate causes à la Hébert. Instead, the primary interests of the monarch lay in scrutinising Vincentian ministry and ensuring that this pastorate delivered results consistent with government policies.

Given this scenario, the Congregation’s reaction to the developments of the 1680s might have mirrored, if not exceeded, its previous unease with the court assignments. However, little if no anxiety emerged over Marseille’s growing stature. The Marseille house had always involved high-level collaborative efforts with the crown and other secular figures. In just one area of cooperation, the Marseille establishment served as the critical centre for secular officials and Vincentians working in northern Africa to release captured European slaves.58 In terms of the momentous effects of the 1685 revocation on the Congregation’s work at Marseille, the Vincentians of this era also followed precedents set by previous generations of missionaries. For example, the Congregation’s longstanding house at Richelieu lay in a territory populated by sizeable Protestant communities, and from 1636 Vincentians based there were involved in conversion efforts.59 In 1648, the superior at Richelieu wrote that two missions led by the Vincentians in Bas-Poitou had produced conversions among ‘prominent heretics.’60 Also in the 1640s, Louis XIII bequeathed a substantial sum in his will for Vincentian missions in Sedan, a heavily Protestant town.61 The 1644 establishment contract for the house in Sedan summoned the missionaries ‘to bring back to the bosom of the church so many souls whom heresy has turned away.’62 Influential precedents therefore supported the Vincentians’ conversion work in Marseille post-revocation.

58 Simard, Saint Vincent à Marseille, 133-147.
59 See for example CCD, 1: 420, 458.
60 Ibid., 3:304, Denis Gautier to de Paul, 1648.
62 CCD, 13a: 303, 13 June 1644. See also ACM, Contassot dossier, ‘L’Etablissement des lazaristes à Sedan avant la Révolution, 1643-1791’ ; Coste, Grand Saint, 2:120-127.
As for the appointment in Rochefort, this was clearly based on Marseille, a fact which explained Jolly’s matter-of-fact announcement to the Congregation in 1681. However, notwithstanding Jolly’s nonchalance, the early phase of the mission unearthed more problems than the changes at Marseille had done. Documentary evidence of the Marine from the 1680s, consisting mostly of letters between the local intendant, Nicolas Arnoul, and Colbert, revealed that the Vincentians on the ground were initially confused by the range of responsibilities the new posting conferred. In January 1683, Arnoul wrote that the Vincentians had arrived, ‘but it seemed to me that they were still unresolved about what they had to do.’\footnote{BNF, NAF/21329, fol. 29, Arnoul to Colbert, 30 January 1683: ‘…il m’a paru qu’ils étoient encore irrésolus sur ce qu’ils avoient à faire.’} Firstly, the breadth of the Vincentians’ remit at Rochefort appeared to disturb the community. In April 1683, Arnoul claimed the Vincentians would be happy to limit their tasks at the port, claiming that they were ready to abandon the hospital to the Brothers of Charity, in order to ‘restrict themselves to the care of the [naval] chaplains.’\footnote{BNF, NAF/21329, fol. 102, Arnoul to Colbert, 4 April 1683: ‘…pour se retrancher au soin des aumosniers.’} In addition, the Vincentians refused to give confession in the town because they had not officially received the care of the town’s parish.\footnote{BNF, NAF/21329, fol. 115, Colbert to Arnoul, 12 April 1683: ‘…ne confessent point ny ne veulent confesser…’; BNF, NAF/21329, fol.175-176, Arnoul to Colbert, 30 May 1683: ‘…selon leur institut ils ne confessoient point dans les lieux où ils étoient establis, à moins qu’ils n’y eussent la paroisse…’}

The critical detail about these early objections is that they were not serious enough to make the Congregation resist the crown’s insistent commands. In a curt letter to Arnoul written prior to the official contract, Colbert called for an end to ‘the continual difficulties [the Vincentians] are making’ and ordered that they take up residence in the house designed for them to begin their functions.\footnote{BNF, NAF/21329, fol. 180, Colbert to Arnoul, 9 March 1683: ‘…les difficultez continues qu’ils font…’} Regarding the other source of angst, the Vincentians’ refusal to confess in the town, the central administration again ordered their cooperation. In doing so, Colbert cleverly exploited the Vincentians’ preference for missionary work by explaining that ‘[His
Majesty] only established [the Vincentians] there as a sort of continuing mission, and thus they are in a position where by their institution they must confess.’

If the issues raised by local Vincentians did not win sympathetic ears among crown officials, they also failed to find echoes in Paris: no letter analogous to Alméras’ worried missives concerning Fontainebleau or Versailles was circulated. Even the serious question of parochial duties in the town did not elicit Nacquart-style reproofs. Furthermore, any lingering concern at Saint-Lazare was doubtlessly vanquished by the terms of the Congregation’s highly favourable final settlement. The community was promised every necessity, from lodgings to furnishings, with ‘everything at the expense of His Majesty.’

The crown also sought to establish the long-term financial security of the Rochefort house with the gift of several benefices. In October 1689, the abbey of Saint-Eloy-de-la-Perrière was united to the house, and in March 1693 the king provided further income with the concession of another abbey, Saint-Vivien-lès-Saintes. In 1685, Arnoul was able to report that the Vincentians were becoming ‘very satisfied’ with the crown’s actions in their direction.

III

The 1683 Rochefort contract provides a crucial insight into the crown’s mind-set as far as the terms of future engagement between the Congregation and local officials were concerned. It is apparent from this document that the crown hoped for close collaboration and mutual respect between the Vincentians and its own delegated officials in the marine, who were enjoined to ‘support the said priests in the exercise of their functions.’ In theory, this atmosphere of support and harmony would be buttressed by maintaining two distinct jurisdictions, and the contract envisaged that the Vincentians ‘will not get involved in any way with the temporal

---

67 BNF, NAF/21329, fol.148, same to same, 14 May 1683: ‘…Sa Majesté ne les y a establis que comme une espèce de mission continue, et qu’ainsy ils sont dans le cas auquel par leur institution ils doivent confesser…’

68 AN MAR, B3/53, fol.346: ‘…le tout au dépens de Sa Majesté…’

69 For the particular details of these benefices see Louis Audiat, Saint Vincent de Paul et sa Congrégation à Saintes et à Rochefort, étude et documents (Paris: A.Picard, 1885), 55, 56, 61-73.

70 BNF, NAF/27331, Arnoul to Seignelay, 28 March 1685.

71 AN MAR, B3/53, fol.346: ‘…appuyeront lesdits Prestres dans l’exercice de leurs fonctions…’
Yet the nature of the Gallican church and the crown’s bureaucracy under Louis XIV rarely allowed for the kind of cordial distance in church-state relations that the Rochefort contract seemed to promote. When it came to managing these relations, the contract’s clauses were entirely precatory; jostles between missionaries and the crown’s superintendants were therefore likely.

Historians have emphasised the Congregation’s superior position vis-à-vis temporal authorities at the two ports, especially Marseille. Gaston Tournier makes a bold claim that the Vincentians were the real masters of the galleys, and that even the king’s agents were bound to submit to their authority. He asserts that the Vincentians wrote personally to the court and were ‘always listened to’; he even suggests they were able to obtain the dismissal of officers who displeased them. Internal Congregation histories add to Tournier’s grand depictions of the power exercised by the missionaries in this period, albeit in more positive terms. In his history of the Marseilles house, for example, Simard claims that the Vincentians at the Marseille hospital were ‘almost exclusively invested, through the confidence of the intendants généraux, with nearly unlimited power in the spiritual and temporal direction of this establishment of charity.’

Historiographical emphasis on the power of the Congregation in the marine draws on the accusations of contemporary witnesses. The most famous of these was the Protestant galley convict, Jean Marteilhe, whose memoirs, published in 1757, asserted that the Vincentians’ new-found favour in the realm, through their close links with Louis XIV at Versailles and elsewhere, ensured them free rein at Marseille. He called the Vincentians’ power there ‘tyranni[cal]’. He also claimed that the power of Vincentians was ‘feared by people in Marseille,’ and that the

---

72 Ibid. ‘…ne se mesleront aucunement du temporal…’
74 Ibid., 1:34.
75 Simard, Saint Vincent à Marseille, 169: ‘…ils furent presque exclusivement investis, par la confiance des intendants généraux, de pouvoirs à peu près illimités dans la direction temporelle et spirituelle de cet établissement de charité.’
76 I have translated the passages from Marteilhe that occur in this chapter. For the French see Jean Marteilhe Mémoires d’un protestant condamné aux galères, pour cause de religion. New revised edition (Paris: Société des Ecoles du Dimanche, 1881), 219.
crown’s officials in Versailles ‘regarded them as oracles.’

Contemporary voices in the marine corroborated Marteilhe’s assessment. In 1701, the lieutenant general of the galleys, Jacques de Noailles, complained to Pontchartrain that the ‘fathers of the Mission think they are masters of the galley chaplains,’ believing that all orders had to pass through them. Similar language was applied to the Vincentians at Rochefort. A group of seven chaplains in Rochefort wrote to the minister in 1702 challenging a decision of the Vincentian superior. Seeking to reverse his decision, the chaplains attacked his claim to be their ‘master’ and railed against his ‘stubbornness’ and harsh language.

The negative narrative of power that has been constructed around the Congregation’s so-called masterdom at the marine bases is built on several untested assumptions. The dominance of the Vincentians is assumed, without discovery or discussion of the actual composition of religious personnel at both ports, particularly the larger base at Marseille. Thus, several historians, including Tournier, treat the Congregation proper and the body of galley chaplains as a single entity.

Doubtless, the lines between the two groups were somewhat porous. The foundation contracts for both Marseille and Rochefort, for example, ordered the marine chaplains to live en communauté with their Vincentian supervisors in the hope they might acquire some virtue and assiduity in the performance of their functions. However, closer analysis reveals that there existed definite divisions between the chaplains and their ‘masters’ in the Congregation.

Who were the ecclesiastical personnel on the king’s ships? Evidence for marine personnel at this time is scant, consisting mainly of chaplain lists, many of which contain substantial gaps. For example, in his history of the house at Marseille Simard claims that there were forty chaplains at the port in 1680, one for each galley, but in the 1683 lists of the ‘personnel civil’ at Marseille only sixteen

77 Ibid., 216-217: ‘on redoutait beaucoup à Marseille le pouvoir de chacun de ses membres en particulier…’; ‘…les ministres les regardaient comme des oracles…’
78 AN MAR, B/6/95, fol. 188, 5 January 1701: ‘…les pères de la Mission se croient tellement maitres des aumosniers que les commandements ne leur peuvent rien ordonner de leur chef, mais que les ordres doivent passer par leur canal pour être reçeus d’eux.’
79 AN MAR, B/3/119, fol. 378, Le Sieur Fourcadelle to Pontchartrain, 20 May 1702.
80 See Tournier, Les galères de France, 1:34; Zysberg, Les galériens, vie et destinés, 18.
chaplains are registered.\textsuperscript{81} Despite the drawbacks, however, cross-checking with the Congregation’s personnel lists can provide a window into the status of some of the men who brought Catholicism to the galleys. The first striking detail in the lists is the fact that Vincentians are hard to find. In their studies of the galleys, Vigié and Bamford rightly highlight the fact that not all the galley chaplains were Vincentians, but both decline to show this empirically.\textsuperscript{82} For example, the chaplain of the \textit{Superbe}, a priest called Ingignac, was not a Vincentian. Neither were his colleagues on the \textit{Victoire}, the \textit{Fière} or the \textit{Favorite}.\textsuperscript{83} The most famous chaplain of the \textit{Superbe}, Jean Bion, who recorded his experiences as a chaplain in published memoirs, was not a member of the Congregation either.\textsuperscript{84} The presence of other clergy also extended to auxiliary institutions at the arsenal. In 1703, there were three chaplains stationed at the \textit{bagne}, none of whom were Vincentians.\textsuperscript{85}

The two groups of chaplains at Marseille and Rochefort, were, in fact, motley crews of clerics from a variety of backgrounds. At Rochefort in 1702, there were three Irish priests resident at the Vincentian seminary.\textsuperscript{86} At Marseille, of the seven chaplains to the hospital recorded in the 1714 personnel lists, many were foreign clergy employed to cater to specific groups on the marine. For example, chaplain O’Driscoll on the list was an Irish priest and chaplain to the English and Scottish galleymen. Chaplains de Mérode and Naguet were Liégeois and Syrian respectively. The only clearly identifiable Vincentian in this cohort was Aymar de Garcin, who doubled as chaplain in the hospital and royal chaplain.\textsuperscript{87} Further, the lists do not indicate whether the chaplains were diocesan or regular clergy, but other sources confirm that a wide variety of orders were represented among the chaplaincy corps. According to Marteilhe, the chaplain of the \textit{Palme} was a Dominican from

\textsuperscript{81} Simard, \textit{Saint Vincent à Marseille}, 184.
\textsuperscript{82} Vigié, \textit{Les galériens}, 221. Bamford, \textit{Fighting Ships}, 115
\textsuperscript{83} AN MAR, C/2/54, fol. 10, Personnel civil (galères), 1680-1736. These were MM. Besson, Louvet and Boulanger. Christian names are not given.
\textsuperscript{84} Jean Bion, \textit{Relation des tourments qu’on fait souffrir aux protestants qui sont sur les galères de France} (London: Henry Ribotteau, 1708).
\textsuperscript{85} AN MAR, B/6/96, fol. 527. These were MM. Fabre, Grizolles and Digne.
\textsuperscript{86} AN MAR, B/3/119, fol. 380.
\textsuperscript{87} AN MAR, C/2/54, fol. 26.
In 1697, the minister for the marine railed against the behaviour of a priest called Damasqui, a Recollect.

It is highly unlikely that the Congregation itself supplied permanent ship chaplains to the galleys, whether in Marseille or Rochefort. For a start, the foundation contracts of both houses envisaged no such scenario: it was quite clear that the Vincentians were simply in charge of finding suitable chaplains for each ship or, at most, providing one missionary to accompany an embarkation of ships. More importantly, however, the Congregation did not have human resources to spare for galley service. The original number of Vincentians for the Marseille house had doubtless expanded since the 1643 contract: for example, an additional two were added by the terms of a 1659 legacy. With twelve members, the Rochefort house was also a large community. But the range of responsibilities at both locations meant that the Vincentians stationed there were in high demand for numerous other activities. At Marseille, for example, the missionaries were involved in multiple land-based operations, which embraced missions in the diocese, and a diocesan seminary founded in 1673, in addition to responsibilities in the hospital. Given this accumulation of tasks, it is hardly surprising that Vincentians are scarce in the chaplain lists.

The fact that the body of chaplains contained a large number of clergymen who were not Vincentians is important because the history of marine chaplains in this period often turns on their abuses and negligence. The poor reputation of France’s naval chaplains was captured by Père de la Chaise, who famously described them as ‘the rubbish of [religious orders] and of [the] dioceses.’ Many of the men who presented themselves for service in the royal marine’s chaplaincy corps

---

88 Marteilhe, Mémoires d’un protestant, 179.
89 AN MAR, B/6/92, fol. 106.
90 ACM, Marseille dossier, copy of legacy of Laurence Teyrac de Paulian, 26 May 1655.
91 This increased by ten when the Congregation took over the parish in 1687.
92 For information on this seminary see AN MM 534, fols. 243-244. The contract provided that three Vincentian priests and two brothers be committed to the seminary.
93 Bamford, Fighting ships, 117.
94 Cited in Cabantous, Le Ciel dans la mer, 217: ‘…les rebuts des religions et des diocèses…’ This seems to have been the case elsewhere. A group of chaplains from Brest complained to the minister in 1702 that the Jesuits in charge there were forced to hire men who dishonoured the corps and ‘scandalised the marine’ with their behaviour: AN MAR, B/3/119, fol. 296, 10 April 1702.
were unknown quantities with no institutional links to their Vincentian superiors. Their virtues or capabilities had not been observed for two years in the internal seminary. In a letter to the minister of the marine in 1701, the superior of the Rochefort house, Jacques de l’Islefort, explained that the major task of the Vincentians was ‘to see to it that each vessel of the king had a good priest for a chaplain, of exemplary life,’ but this was a difficult task.\footnote{AN MAR, B3/104, fols.73-74, Jacques de l’Islefort to Pontchartrain, 22 June 1701: ‘…tenir la main à ce que chaque vaisseau du Roy ait pour aumônier un bon prêtre, de vie exemplaire…’}

Given the uncertain and diverse background of galley chaplains the crown’s hopes for exemplar chaplains were often disappointed. In fact, the Congregation was regularly forced to complain or apologise about the chaplains’ behaviour. In a letter to the superior in Rochefort, Noel Parmentier, on 13 March 1684, Jolly complained that a group of chaplains from Provence ‘do not wish to submit themselves to any of the rules’ and claimed that putting the Vincentians in charge of recruiting chaplains was ‘too troublesome’ because ‘people would impute their defects to us if we chose them.’\footnote{AN MAR, B/3/104, fol.75, Extract of letter from Jolly to Parmentier 13 March 1684, ‘…ne veulent pas se soumettre à aucun des règlements’; ‘…trop malaisée…on nous imputeroit leurs deffauts sy nous les aurions choisis.’} The chaplains’ absenteeism and sloppy work ethic were also perennial problems. Jolly’s successor Pierron was forced in 1701 to apologise to Pontchartrain on behalf of six priests ‘who against their word failed to present themselves for duty at Rochefort.’\footnote{AN MAR, B/3/104, fol.73, de l’Islefort to Pontchartrain, 22 June 1701, ‘…qui contre leur parole ne se sont pas rendus au Séminaire de ce port…’} Vincentian frustration with some chaplains’ unpredictable conduct reached boiling-point in 1702. Responding to accusations from a group of chaplains that he was behaving as their ‘master’, the superior at Rochefort, Jacques de l’Islefort, attacked what he saw as a ‘small cabal’ of priests who had engaged in open rebellion against him.\footnote{AN MAR, B/3/119, same to same, (n.d), ‘petit caballe.’ The missionary was responding to mémoires dated 20 May 1702 written by seven chaplains to the minister and the king: AN MAR, B/3/119 fols.378-379 and 384-385.} De l’Islefort reported that the king’s commissary, who intervened in the dispute, found the chaplains had ‘airs, language and manners that would even ill-befit superiors.’\footnote{Ibid. ‘…des airs, des termes et des manières, qui ne conviendroient pas même à des supérieurs.’}
Problems between the chaplains and the Congregation were even worse in Marseille, where their conduct had dogged spiritual administration on the galleys for decades. In 1685, the king noted in an ordinance that the ‘chaplains established on the galleys do not acquit themselves of their functions with the necessary application.’ In an effort to bolster the authority of the Congregation, the king reminded the chaplains of their subordination and compelled them to present themselves at the Vincentian superior’s daily spiritual conferences with ‘exactness.’ Furthermore, no chaplain was permitted to leave the port without the permission of the superior. The crown’s criticism of the chaplains meant that relations between them and the Congregation were permanently strained. In 1701, for example, Arnoul commented that the Vincentians had failed to win the ‘trust, friendship or the esteem’ of the chaplains.

These histories confirm that the Vincentians’ principal ‘power’ in the marine was reduced to managing the ills (and egos!) of a cohort of chaplains who frequently rejected their supervision. But the Vincentians’ position was weakened for other important reasons. They were unable to rely on steady support from either the mother-house or the crown. The decentralisation of authority to the royal chaplains at both ports, combined with the houses’ geographical distance from Paris, meant that interventions from Saint-Lazare were rare and usually ineffective. In terms of assistance from the crown, in 1698 Parmentier bemoaned the fact that the minister for the marine had not bothered to respond to his correspondence. The crown’s assistance was inconstant and missionaries frequently complained of poor resources, particularly at Rochefort. If, however, support was slow, rebukes were swift.

\[100\] AN MAR, A/2/5, fol.117, Ordinance of 11 November 1685: ‘…les aumôsiers établis sur les galègres ne s’acquittent pas de leurs fonctions avec toute l’application nécessaire…’

\[101\] AN MAR, A/2/5, fol. 129-130, ‘Règlement sur les fonctions des Aumôniers des galères,’ arts. 8 and 9.

\[102\] AN MAR, B/3/113, fol. 317, Arnoul to Pontchartrain, 1 January 1701.

\[103\] AN MAR, B/3/104, fols.70-71 Parmentier to same, 22 June 1698.

\[104\] Parmentier wrote several letters in 1698 complaining about the missionaries’ lodgement, sacristy and pensions, including one to Madame de Maintenon: AN MAR, B/3/133, fols.236-237. His successor de l’Islefort complained four years later that the house did not have enough money to feed and keep the chaplains: AN MAR, B/3/119, fol.377.
Chapter 4: Masters and Servants

IV

The argument that the Congregation wielded immense spiritual power, whether in Marseille or Rochefort, also rests on the assumption that its supervision of chaplains avoided the glare of other officials, secular or ecclesiastical. However, the Congregation’s ability to hold these men to account was heavily affected by its own subordinate position in the marine. This fact has been ignored by historians. Tournier asserts that the ‘fathers of the Mission were solely in charge of spiritual matters on the galleys,’ but the reality was far more complex.  

A 1646 document describing the functions of the royal chaplain explained that these were exercised ‘under the authority of the local ordinaries,’ who had to approve the chaplains nominated by him.  

In Marseille, Bishop Du Luc had no compunction asserting his rights over the cohort of chaplains, by levying diocesan taxes on their incomes for example.  

When it came to the missionaries’ role in issuing the certificats de catholicité, the bishop complained to Pontchartrain in 1699 that the Vincentian superior in Marseille presumed to issue them without consulting him. The bishop responded with clear irritation to this presumption of Vincentian authority, asking ‘Are [the galleys] not part of my diocese? Are [they] more privileged than all the other parishes under my jurisdiction?’ The crown’s decision in this matter clearly revealed the limits of Vincentian spiritual power at the port, with the minister reminding the royal chaplain that the bishop was ‘sole judge of the religious fact’ in his diocese.  

The power of the bishop of La Rochelle was equally protected at Rochefort, and the 1689 ordinance ordered that chaplains appointed there were to receive his approval first.  

Examples of episcopal intervention constitute an important source for contradicting Tournier, but it is the role of crown officials that deserves even greater

105 Tournier, Les galères de France, 34.  
107 AN MAR, B/6/92, fol.59.  
108 AN MAR, B/3/107, fol.101, bishop of Marseille to Pontchartrain, 22 July 1699: ‘Ne font-elles pas partie de mon diocèse? Les galères sont-elles plus privilégiées que toutes les autres paroisses qui sont sous ma juridiction?’  
109 For details of this dispute see AN MAR, B/6/32, fol.399-400 and 400-401.  
110 Ordonnance de Louis XIV pour les armées navales et arcenaux de Marine (Paris: Estienne Michallet, 1689) Title 9, art.8, 360-361.
attention. The foundation contracts had removed the Congregation from local oversight, but in reality reports from officials on the ground asserted at an early stage the Vincentians’ subordinate role. In early 1689, the local *intendant* in Rochefort, Michel Bégon, reported his dissatisfaction with the management of the missionaries’ house and seminary to the marquis de Seignelay. The nature of complaints was almost identical to those raised in Marseille, mainly regarding the Vincentians’ ability to maintain the correct number and quality of chaplains. Seignelay’s response, on 19 April 1689, made it clear that missionaries working at the port were accountable to both himself as minister of the marine and other central authorities, and he promised to report the difficulties to the superior general and the king. More importantly, however, Seignelay’s correspondence with Bégon clarified that an additional layer of authority existed between the Congregation and the crown, which the Rochefort contract seemed to ignore. In his 19 April missive, Seignelay stated that he expected Bégon to transmit certain instructions to the local community of Vincentians, and to make sure that the correct number of chaplains was maintained at the seminary. Earlier, he had asked Bégon to examine a proposal that Jolly had made to send some Daughters of Charity to Rochefort and to report back to him on this suggestion. These facts indicate that the Congregation was in no way insulated from the supervision of local officials at the port.

The history of one royal chaplain in Marseille, Josse Boulenger, serves to prove the case further. Like François Hébert at Versailles, Boulenger occupied a role of great significance in the Congregation and in the realm under Louis XIV. Born in Amiens in 1665, he entered the Vincentian seminary in August 1685, and made his vows two years later. In the mid-1690s, he came to prominence with his appointment as superior in Marseille and royal chaplain of the galleys, shortly after

---

111 Michel Bégon, who was *intendant des galéres* in Marseille from 1685 to 1688, when he became intendant de la Marine in Rochefort.
112 This information can be gleaned from a letter Jolly wrote to Seignelay, 24 May 1689, printed in ACM, Contassot dossier, ‘Les Lazaristes à Rochefort avant la Révolution 1683-1791,’ 30-31.
114 Same to same, 7 April 1689, cited in Contassot, ‘Les Lazaristes à Rochefort,’ 29.
115 *Catalogue du personnel*, 62.
the superiority of Yves Laurence, who as royal chaplain (1686-1692) had been a highly popular figure in Marseille among crown officials and chaplains alike.\textsuperscript{116}

Boulenger’s period in office was crucial because it fell to him to execute some of the most sensitive responsibilities in the Marseille house’s history. Marc Vigié attributes the renewed efforts at converting religious dissidents to Boulenger’s arrival, and called his approach ‘less conciliatory’ than that of Laurence. Once again repeating the theme of Vincentian power, Vigié claims that Boulenger was supported by the superior general of the Congregation and the bishop of Marseille in ordering punishments and establishing discipline on the galleys.\textsuperscript{117} For his part, Bamford calls him a ‘high-handed’ disciplinarian whose reign in Marseille signalled a break with the ‘permissive’ Laurence.\textsuperscript{118} Although judgements differ in their severity towards him, the period of Boulenger’s royal chaplaincy from 1695 to 1701 is actually most useful in showing that the Congregation’s power in Marseille remained heavily checked. While Boulenger’s personal correspondence has been lost, his actions, the reactions of local officials, and the interventions of the crown can all be reconstructed from the archives of the minister of the marine, which remain largely intact.

The year 1699 provides ample evidence of the scope of crown supervision over Boulenger. The first area of disagreement that year was the extent of his authority over chaplains. Initially, it seemed Boulenger’s arrival heralded a new period of strict supervision of them and the correspondence indicates that he undertook a clean sweep of supposedly irresponsible chaplains by removing them from their appointments. However, as the chaplains’ behaviour came under greater scrutiny, so did the management of the royal chaplain, with the minister of the marine frequently undermining his decision-making authority. On 1 April 1699, Pontchartrain wrote to the commissaire des galères in Marseille, an official called Croiset, ordering him to re-examine the case of a chaplain dismissed by Boulenger.

\textsuperscript{116} According to internal Congregation data, Yves Laurence was transferred to Algeria as vicar apostolic in September 1693: \textit{NCM}, 4:40. Laurence was not Boulenger’s immediate predecessor. This was André Gallien, royal chaplain from 1692-1695: \textit{ACM}, Contassot dossier, ‘Les Lazaristes à Marseille avant la Révolution,’ 100.
\textsuperscript{117} Vigié, \textit{Les galériens}, 223.
\textsuperscript{118} Bamford, \textit{Fighting ships}, 118-119.
for negligence, in order to ascertain whether the chaplain deserved this, and requested that the chaplain be reinstated if evidence indicated he did not warrant dismissal. In June that year, the central administration was forced once again to re-assert the power of secular authorities over the Vincentian superior. On 4 June, Boulenger had written to the minister complaining that the chef d’escadre of the galleys, Montolieu, had, through an aide-major, convened the chaplains of the galleys without consulting him. In doing so, Boulenger invoked his rights as royal chaplain over those of any secular agent. The minister approached the complaint with caution, and sought the advice of both Montolieu and Croiset. Later, in a letter to Boulenger on 8 July, the minister rebuffed the chaplain general’s claims:

Before giving an account [of this matter] to the king I was informed of what has been done on similar occasions in Marseille and as people assure me that the practice has always been to make this convocation through the aides-major, and that your claim is a novelty that those who have preceded you have never demanded, His Majesty has ordered to tell you that [he] wishes the established usage to be followed and that no change be made to it…

The crown’s scrutiny then moved to Boulenger’s control of fellow Vincentians serving at the compound. In July, Pontchartrain was informed by a local agent that Boulenger had removed the Vincentian chaplain of the hôpital des forçats, Giraud, from his functions. In a letter to Boulenger dated 22 July, the minister revealed that this removal was made ‘even though all the officers who are in charge there are

119 AN MAR, B/6/32, fol. 144, Pontchartrain to Croiset, 1 April 1699.
120 AN MAR, B/6/32, fol. 327, same to Croiset, 17 June 1699; fol.329, same to Montolieu, 17 June 1699.
121 AN MAR, B/6/32, fol. 361, same to Boulenger, 8 July 1699: ‘Avant d’en rendre compte au Roy je me suis informé de ce qui s’étoit passé à Marseille en pareille occasion et comme on m’a asseuré que l’usage a tousjours esté de faire cette convocation par les aides-major, et que vostre prétention est une nouveauté que ceux qui vous ont précédé n’ont point demandé, Sa Majesté a ordonné de vous dire qu’elle veut que l’usage soit suivi et qu’il n’y soit apporté aucun changement.’
122 The personnel lists of the Marseille house compiled by Contassot do not include Giraud, whose first name is unknown: ACM, Contassot dossier, ‘Les Lazaristes à Marseille avant la Révolution 1643-1791,’ 2:177-180. It is possible that Giraud subsequently left the Congregation. The official who reported the news was Nicholas François Arnoul de Vaucresson, who later became intendant des galères.
satisfied and the sick have trust [in Giraud]…’ It is quite clear from the letter that Pontchartrain had serious doubts about Boulenger’s judgement, and told him it was the king’s wish to reinstate Giraud if the circumstances did not support his dismissal.123

At this point, the necessity of making cumulative reproaches to Boulenger led the minister to go above the royal chaplain’s head on the Giraud issue. Writing to the superior general, Nicolas Pierron, on 2 September 1699, the minister gave little credit to either Boulenger’s or Pierron’s decision-making:

I wrote him (Boulenger) by order of the king to leave [Giraud] in place but he writes that you deemed it necessary to send him to Narbonne. If there is some particular element in his conduct which forced you to make this change, then it should be preferred for the convenience of the service, but if you ordered it solely based on the ‘excitations’ of sieur Boulenger, who seems very animated and unsettled, His Majesty desires that you make the said sieur Giraud return to Marseille to take up the functions of his employ…124

September 1699 was a poor month for Boulenger. The disputes between him and the crown over his power to designate chaplains continued. On 1 September the chevalier de Langeron, captain of La Ferme at Marseille, wrote to the minister directly, complaining that Boulenger had refused to allow him the chaplain of his choice, one sieur Cavasse.125 In the midst of the dispute Jérôme Phélypeaux de Pontchartrain officially succeeded his father Louis as minister of the marine on 6 September 1699. Soon after, he gave the benefit of the doubt to the marine officer, writing on 8 September to Boulenger that unless ‘…you have [particular reasons] that regard the morals or the religion of this chaplain…it would suit little to refuse a

123 AN MAR, B/6/32, fol. 380, Pontchartrain to Boulenger, 22 July 1699: ‘…quoy que tous les officiers qui y ont inspection en soient satisfaits et que les malades y ayent confiance…’
124 AN MAR, B/6/32, fol. 456, same to Nicolas Pierron, 2 September 1699: ‘S’il y a dans sa conduite quelque procédé particulier qui vous ayt obligé à ce changement, il doit estre préféré à la commodité du service, mais si vous l’avez ordonné uniquement sur les excitations du sieur Boulenger qui paroist bien vif et inquiet, Sa Majesté désire que vous fassiez retourner ledit sieur Giraud à Marseille pour reprendre les fonctions de son employ…’
125 The minister confirms receipt of this letter in AN MAR, B/6/32, fol.455, Pontchartrain to Boulenger, 8 September 1699.
captain the small satisfaction of keeping a chaplain with whom he is satisfied.\textsuperscript{126}

Boulenger did not back down, and the minister allowed him to proceed with the dismissal. However, Pontchartrain did not fully trust the independent judgement of the Vincentian, and instead charged the bishop of Marseille with establishing the truth later that month.\textsuperscript{127}

A year of tense relations between Boulenger and the central administration over the disciplining of galley chaplains ended with a stern rebuke from the minister in December 1699. The stimulus for the reproach was a royal ordinance imposing an interdict on chaplains who were absent from their galleys for more than fifteen days without the bishop’s permission. Seemingly discontent with the move, Boulenger wrote to the minister, who sided unequivocally with episcopal authority. Pontchartrain began by criticising the way matters had been tackled to date:

\begin{quote}
…as [the ordinance] is based on two omissions of the Mass which you acknowledge yourself, and which would not have happened if you had paid the necessary attention to the matter, [the bishop] has done well to bring a new precaution as those taken to date were insufficient…\textsuperscript{128}
\end{quote}

But Pontchartrain did not end his analysis there. In a frank assessment of Boulenger’s approach to his position in Marseille, the minister told him that he reduced his office to the indiscriminate exercise of raw power, when it had been given to him only ‘in order to make sure the divine service is carried out and only to make particularly sure that it is not neglected.’\textsuperscript{129} In a final demonstration of whom the central government trusted above all to supervise the chaplains, Pontchartrain

\begin{quote}
…réduisez la fonction d’aumosnier réal à la Supériorité sans vous souvenir qu’elle ne vous est donnée que pour faire remplir le service divin et que pour avoir un soin particulier qu’il soit négligé.\textsuperscript{129}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid. ‘…vous en avez des particuliers qui regardent les mœurs, et la religion de cet aumosnier…il seroit peu convenable de refuser à un capitaine la légère satisfaction de luy conserver un aumosnier dont il est satisfait.’

\textsuperscript{127} AN MAR, B/6/32, fols.487-488 and fol.492, same to bishop of Marseille, 23 September 1699 and same to Boulenger, 30 September 1699 respectively.

\textsuperscript{128} AN MAR, B/6/32, fol. 579, same to Boulenger, 9 December 1699: ‘…comme elle est fondée sur deux omissions de messe dont vous convenez vous mesme, et qui ne seroient point arrivées si vous y aviez eu l’attention nécessaire, il a bien fait d’y apporter une nouvelle précaution puisque celles qu’on a prise cy devant ne suffisoient pas…’

\textsuperscript{129} AN MAR, B/6/32, fol. 579: Pontchartrain to Boulenger “…réduisez la fonction d’aumosnier réal à la Supériorité sans vous souvenir qu’elle ne vous est donnée que pour faire remplir le service divin et que pour avoir un soin particulier qu’il soit négligé.”
ordered Boulenger to ensure that the deference due to the bishop of Marseille’s authority was observed by the chaplain corps.\textsuperscript{130}

Boulenger survived 1699, but the onslaught of criticism from Versailles that year casts a long shadow over arguments that the Vincentians were free agents in the performance of their functions at the ports. Moreover, the Boulenger era highlighted the weakness of the Congregation’s mother house in defending its position vis-à-vis the crown. Given their greater interventions in the affairs of the royal parishes, the superiors general were remarkably restrained when it came to the ports. The only memorable intervention occurred in May 1689, when Jolly made a robust defence of the missionaries’ conduct at the Rochefort house to Seignelay after Bégon’s series of complaints. However, even this spirited letter ended with grovelling prostrations, and the superior general ended by assuring Seignelay that it was the Vincentians’ intention to do everything ‘for the service of God, and for the service of the king, and for your particular satisfaction.’\textsuperscript{131}

As for the on-going controversies over supervision of chaplains at Marseille, Pierron’s voice appears even more muffled. The minister of the marine only approached Saint-Lazare when patience with the royal chaplain began to diminish in September 1699, and even then the crown envisaged no greater role for the superior general than to re-examine and, preferably, to reverse Boulenger’s decisions in light of the central government’s clear instructions on the running of the mission. More importantly, following the crown’s interference in Pierron’s election, its meddling in the Giraud case marked another intrusion into the extremely sensitive area of the Congregation’s control over personnel, a once-hallowed principle whose gradual erosion was evident. After this, it was clear that in the sequence of objectives proposed by Jolly to the minister in his letter, the satisfaction of the crown trumped all others.

\textsuperscript{130} \textit{Ibid.} ‘…faire…à M. l’Evêque de Marseille par les aumonsiers les déférences qui luy sont deues.’

\textsuperscript{131} Jolly to Seignelay, 24 May 1689, printed in ACM, Contassot dossier, ‘Les Lazaristes à Rochefort,’ 31: ‘Notre désir est de faire tout ce qui nous sera possible pour le service de Dieu, et pour celui du Roi, et pour votre satisfaction particulière.’
Tournier’s characterisation of Vincentian power in the Marine, and especially at Marseille, is double-edged. Not only were the Vincentians hegemonic in their exercise of authority, they were cruel too. Pontchartrain’s rebuke to Boulenger in December 1699 contained a discomfiting criticism of the way his methods had steered him from holier pursuits towards an unseemly exercise of power. In fact, Pontchartrain’s remarks harked back to the very reason behind Vincentian involvement in the marine. De Paul had begun his ministry on the galleys with an imperative of service and assistance toward those who suffered on the ships. He therefore had a critical role in the origin of charitable relief for the slaves and his work with the galleys received the praise of both contemporaries and future commentators. After his death, his eulogist praised his charity toward the galley slaves of Marseilles, saying their vermin and disease were ‘his brothers and his sisters.’

Abelly’s biography in 1664 hailed de Paul’s work with the galleymen at all stages of their misery. Claiming this work represented an ‘extension of his charity,’ Abelly described de Paul’s interactions with the galley convicts in these terms:

[De Paul] listened to their complaints with great patience, he pitied their hardships, he embraced them, he kissed their chains, and intervened as much as he could through prayers and reproaches made to the comites and other officers, that they [the galleymen] might be treated more humanely…

After the edict of Nantes was revoked, a narrative of Vincentian persecution replaced this emphasis on charity as de Paul’s followers were accused of betraying their core values. One of the most important perspectives on this betrayal came from Jean Marteilhe, whose memoirs stand out as unique in the debate over the

---

132 Du Tour, Oraison funèbre, 26: ‘…ses frères et ses sœurs.’
133 Abelly, La vie du vénérable, 1:57-58: ‘…écoutait leurs plaintes avec grande patience, il compatissait à leurs peines, il les embrassait, il baisait leurs chaînes, et s’employait autant qu’il pouvait par prières et remontrances envers les comites et autres officiers à ce qu’ils fussent traités plus humainement…’ The comite was one of the most influential officers of the galley, responsible for making the chiourme row.
Vincentians’ fidelity to de Paul’s ethos after 1660, because he wrote as a non-Catholic and as a layperson. Marteilhe opened his attack on the Vincentians by suggesting they used their reputation for ‘simplicity and disinterestedness’ to gain their power at Marseille. He further demonstrated an adept use of the kind of rhetoric employed previously by other critics of the Congregation. For instance, he referred to de Paul as a ‘simple priest’ and acknowledged his ‘reputation for holiness.’ Marteilhe also paid attention to the first institutional goal of the Congregation, saying de Paul was ‘charged with giving missions in the countryside for the instruction of the peasants and the common people.’ However, according to Marteilhe, the Vincentians had abandoned the path lit by their founder, and instead had chosen a worldlier, more Jesuitical model of religious life. Closing his argument, Marteilhe made yet another effective reference to a core value of the Congregation, saying that ‘among ecclesiastics ambition is an epidemic sickness….it was under the cloak of humility that our [Vincentians] covered their ambitious designs.’

Marteilhe made his claims in the specific context of Vincentian missions to Huguenot convicts, successor to what he called the ‘cruel missions’ accompanying the dragonnades – the forced lodgement of regiments in Huguenot communities. Michelet set the Vincentians’ missions on the galleys in his wider discussion on the ‘terrible charity’ that reigned in France’s institutes of correction in the ancien régime. He accused the Vincentians of abusing Huguenots and supervising cruel tortures in their efforts to impose religious discipline. In his history of the galleys, Vigié connects the Vincentian abuses to the theme of power, arguing that the Vincentians supervised what he calls ‘systematic terror’ and ‘individualised

---

134 Marteilhe, Mémoires, 216: ‘… les chefs de cette congrégation avaient eu le secret de se concilier la confiance du Roi, par un certain air de simplicité et de désintéressement…’
135 Ibid., 216-217: ‘…chargé de faire des missions dans les campagnes pour l’instruction des paysans et du commun peuple.’
136 Ibid., 217. Speaking of Jesuit influence on the Congregation, Marteilhe said: ‘…les Lazaristes avaient de trop bons modèles devant les yeux pour suivre l’institution de leur fondateur.’
137 Ibid. ‘Parmi les ecclésiastiques l’ambition est une maladie épidémique qui n’affecte que l’intérieur: aussi ce fut sous le manteau de l’humilité que nos Lazaristes couvrirent leurs vues ambitieuses.’
139 Ibid., 295.
persecution’ by insisting on physical punishments for dissenters.\textsuperscript{140} Internal histories are more evasive on the subject. In their study, Mezzadri and Román simply concede that the extirpation of heresy figured heavily among Louis XIV’s political goals, and that the Vincentians, as the crown’s servants, were bound to execute its orders in this matter.\textsuperscript{141}

The core of claims that the Vincentians betrayed the ethos of Vincent de Paul lies in the affair of the \textit{bonnet rouge}, a red cap worn by galleymen which had to be removed by all as a sign of respect during the celebration of Mass on the vessels.\textsuperscript{142} From the early 1690s, all the elements of a serious confrontation between missionaries and the prisoners began to emerge. Several prominent Protestants on the galleys began secret correspondence with co-religionists outside France, to whom they related the increasingly violent reaction of Vincentians and other chaplains to their growing defiance. On 1 January 1693, the galley convict Lensonnière made veiled references to religiously-motivated violence on the galleys in a letter describing how ‘this exterior man who seduces and maltreats the inner man so often makes us feel the prick of his needles…the Gospel has not taught them to relieve those who suffer.’\textsuperscript{143} This opaque condemnation was followed in 1699 by a letter written by a group of Huguenot prisoners on 14 December to a correspondent in the Hague, which explicitly placed the Vincentians at the heart of violent conversion at Marseille:

These messieurs of the Mission and chaplains of the galleys, who are the major drivers of this system of cudgels and batons, spare us the need to use logic to convince them, since their actions are sufficient, and reveal what they are. In the past, when they had us maltreated, they hid behind themselves…But now they lift the mask, they can no longer dissimulate;

\textsuperscript{140} Vigié, \textit{Les galériens}, 212.
\textsuperscript{141} Mezzadri and Román, \textit{The Vincentians}, 229.
\textsuperscript{142} Vigié, \textit{Les galériens}, 217.
\textsuperscript{143} BSHPF, 15 (1866): 489-490, Pierre Butaud, sieur de Lensonnière to M. de la Cantinière, 1 January 1691: ‘Cet homme extérieur qui séduit et maltraite si souvent l’homme intérieur nous fera sentir ses aiguillons… l’Evangile ne leur a pu apprendre à soulager les affligés…’

174
they expose the skin of the wolf and of the tiger, which they used to cover
with that of a fox… ¹⁴⁴

The ‘system of cudgels and batons’ was a reference to the principal means of
punishment for dissenters – the bastonnade, a particularly cruel form of corporal
punishment on the galleys.¹⁴⁵

The clergy’s volatility prepared the way for the Huguenots’ refusal to
remove their bonnets during Mass; this long-standing practice became the focus of
resistance on the galleys after the treaty of Ryswick was signed in 1697.¹⁴⁶ Then, in
1699, a group of prisoners adopted a constitution which aimed to offer support to
Huguenots suffering on the galleys. Article three of this constitution addressed the
question of ‘uncovering the head’ during divine service. The Huguenots promised to
‘support with charity’ those members of the faith who, through illness or fear,
complied with instructions to remove their hats at this ceremony. However, the
leaders of the revolt against adopting correct postures at Mass made it clear that
continued resistance was preferred and promised to ‘do everything within our reach
to help…[those who complied]…to tend towards Christian perfection and prefer the
fear of God…to the fear of men.’ ¹⁴⁷

According to Protestant testimony, the missionaries were key players in
procuring punishment for those who refused to genuflect during Mass. In his
memoirs, Jean Marteilhe claimed that the missionaries persuaded the major of the
galleys, an official named Bombelles, to ‘mete out the bastonnade to all the

messieurs les missionnaires et aumôniers des galères, qui sont les grands ressorts de cette machine à
gourdins et bâtons, nous épargnent la peine d’employer les raisonnements pour les convaincre,
puisque leurs actions le font assez, et font voir ce qu’ils sont. Autrefois, quand ils nous faisoient mal
traiter, ils se cachaient…Mais présentement ils lèvent le masque; ils ne peuvent plus dissimuler, ils
laissent voir la peau du loup et du tigre qu’ils couvroient de celle du renard…’
¹⁴⁵ For descriptions of this procedure see Zysberg, Les galériens, vies et destins, 168-171. A more
extensive and dramatic explanation can be found in André Chamson, La Superbe (Paris: Plon, 1967),
chap.9.
¹⁴⁶ Zysberg, Les galériens, vies et destins, 105. Marteilhe himself dated more vigorous efforts at
conversion in the 1690s to just after the treaty, 219.
¹⁴⁷ ‘Règlement fait sur les galères de France par les confesseurs qui souffrent pour la vérité de
l’Evangile, aux Eglises de Genève et des Cantons Protestants de Suisse,’ 20 February 1699, cited in
Tournier, Les galères de France, 1:262: ‘nous fairons ce qui dépendra de nous pour les porter…à
tendre vers la perfection chrétienne et préférer la crainte de Dieu…à la crainte des homes…’
Reformers until they consented to keep themselves in this posture when one would say the Mass.\textsuperscript{148} Other witnesses claimed the crown’s agents and missionaries worked together in the violent repression of dissenters, but set the clergy’s contribution apart. In April 1696, Pierre Serres, one of three brothers on the galleys, wrote:

Among our enemies, the churchmen and the [officers], who are normally in such different and opposite humours, agree so well on this point that one scarcely notices any difference, except that the former…manage the persecution in such an adept, grave and serious way …\textsuperscript{149}

Huguenot testimony was unanimous on the clergy’s key role in these repressive measures. Indeed, in highly emotive language Serres called the clergy the ‘gun-stokers’ of the system.\textsuperscript{150} This description captured the separate but coordinating role the missionaries played in repression, for they provided the inculpatory evidence necessary for punishment. But there are significant limitations to the evidence of Protestant galleymen. In the first place, the written material is sparse, restricted to a small number of letters. While the little correspondence that survives converges on the central role played by Vincentians, it should be recognised that the prisoners had an interest in attacking all personnel involved in their confinement. Secondly, Huguenot evidence often repeated the same confusion of chaplains and Vincentians we identified as problematic above. The case against the Vincentians here should therefore be compared with internal documentation of the crown, in order to shed greater light on the Vincentians’ exact role in the affair.

The role of French churchmen in the destruction of heresy was by no means negligible at this time, but it was the crown that lay at the source of violent measures against Huguenots.\textsuperscript{151} Between 1661 and 1685, Louis XIV approved ninety-seven

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{148} Jean Marteilhe, \textit{Mémoires}, 219: ‘…faire donner la bastonnade à tous les Réformés jusqu’à ce qu’ils eussent consenti à se tenir dans cette posture lorsqu’on dirait la messe.’
\item \textsuperscript{149} BSHFP, 18 (1869): 37: ‘Parmi nos ennemis, les gens d’Eglise et les gens de guerre, qui sont d’ordinaire d’une humeur si différente et si opposé, s’accordent si bien en ce point qu’on n’y aperçoit presque point de différence, sauf que les premiers…manient la persécution d’une manière si adroite, si grave, et si sérieuse.’
\item \textsuperscript{150} \textit{Ibid.}, Serres used the word ‘boute-feux.’
\item \textsuperscript{151} Jean Orcibal. \textit{Louis XIV et les protestants} (Paris: J. Vrin, 1951), 21-23.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
mesures vexatoires designed to crush the practice of the reformed religion in the realm, culminating in the revocation.\textsuperscript{152} When the practice of Protestantism was outlawed entirely, the crown followed with more stringent approaches to conversion, sponsoring infamous rounds of dragonnades, which it had first used in 1681.\textsuperscript{153} In his study of the edict and its application, Orcibal argues that laymen, and not ecclesiastics, were at the heart of this process, which pitted even senior members of the episcopate against ministers like François-Michel Le Tellier and the marquis de Seignelay, as well as local intendants such as Nicolas-Joseph Foucault.\textsuperscript{154} Indeed, so zealous were secular agents that they attracted comments more appropriate for church personnel. And so, in 1685 Madame de Sévigné could write that ‘[e]veryone is a missionary at the moment: every person thinks they have a mission and above all magistrates and provincial governors…’ This pleased the king, who, according to Sévigné, had taken on the role of prime preacher himself by revoking the edict.\textsuperscript{155}

This truth extended to the royal marine, where responsibility for implementing the ‘Catholic space’ fell above all to the crown’s officials. Even before the affair of the bonnet rouge broke out, instructions issued from Versailles do not buttress the idea that the Vincentians’ were the masters of cruelty. For example, in April 1699, when it emerged that the hospital chaplain Giraud allowed invalid Huguenots to remain in hospital beyond their convalescence period in order to instruct them in the faith, the minister took swift action. Writing on 15 April, Pontchartrain ordered this practice to cease, arguing that it was a ‘useless expense and an opportunity to pretend to convert in order to avoid the galleys.’\textsuperscript{156} Later, the minister received a letter from Giraud, complaining about opposition to the practice.\textsuperscript{157} The minister remained concerned that this approach would attract only those who wanted ‘to live for a time more comfortably in the hospital,’ but he was

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid. 57.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid. 69.
\textsuperscript{154} Le Tellier (1641-1691) was secretary of war for Louis XIV. Foucault (1643-1721) was intendant of Montauban in the same reign.
\textsuperscript{155} Cited in Orcibal, Louis XIV et les protestants, 128: ‘Tout est missionnaire présentement : chacun croit avoir mission et surtout magistrats et gouverneurs de province…’
\textsuperscript{156} AN, MAR, B/6/32, fols. 178-179, Pontchartrain to Lombard, 15 April 1699: ‘…ce seroit une despense inutile et une occasion de paroistre vouloir se convertir pour n’estre pas sur les galères.’
\textsuperscript{157} The minister referred to this letter in a letter to Vaucresson, 6 May 1699: AN, MAR B/6/32, fol. 213.
willing to accept it under stricter conditions. In the end, the Vincentian was permitted to retain ten *religionnaires* and given responsibility for monitoring the progress of ‘sincere conversion.’

Even when members of the Congregation were directly involved in coercion, it is quite clear where ultimate authority for repressive techniques lay. On 27 May 1699, the minister wrote a letter to Montolieu about concerns raised regarding the behaviour of the Huguenots. In previous correspondence with Pontchartrain, Boulenger had accused the local administration of applying too much freedom to ‘*religionnaires obstinez,*’ which allowed them to act in concert, assemble together, and even to corrupt Catholics. In a rare display of support for Boulenger, Pontchartrain chided Montolieu, saying the king was ‘surprised’ that his orders were neglected over the interests of other parties. Pontchartrain reminded Montolieu that Huguenots who refused to be instructed in the faith were to be restrained on the *brancade.* The second question raised by Boulenger was the posture of non-Catholic slaves, but especially Huguenots, during the Eucharist and other celebrations, which failed to conform to law. This was the first mention of the affair of the *bonnet rouge,* and its remedy came directly from Versailles:

[The king’s] intention is that you give an order to all the lower officers to [force the slaves to adopt this posture] and punish them when they fail to do so, and that you get information from the chaplains from time to time regarding what is happening in this matter.

In a separate letter to Boulenger on the Huguenot question, Pontchartrain asked him ‘to examine if [his] orders were carried out punctually and to inform [him] about it

---

158 AN MAR, B/6/32, fols. 280-281, same to Vaucresson, 27 May 1699: ‘…vivre pendant quelque temps plus commodément dans l’hospital…’

159 AN MAR, B/6/32, fol.272, Pontchartrain to Montolieu, 27 May 1699. Pontchartrain repeated the concerns of Boulenger thus: ‘… la liberté qu’on laisse aux Religionnaires obstinez que sont sur les galères, les mettent en estat d’agir, et de s’assembler ainsi qu’ils convient les confirme dans leur endurecissement, et leur a mesme donné moyen avec les secours d’argent qu’ils ont de pervertir quelques Catholiques.’

160 *Ibid.*, fol.273: ‘Son intention est que vous donniez ordre aux bas officiers de les y obliger et les punir lorsqu’ils y manqueront et que vous vous informiez de temps en temps des aumosniers de ce qui se passe sur ce sujet.’
at the appropriate time.\textsuperscript{161} Without a doubt, the fact that Boulenger took action to report Huguenot ‘liberties’ at this time in no way absolves the role he played in extracting harsh instructions from the crown. On the other hand, competing voices and authority structures are not difficult to make out at Marseille, and Pontchartrain’s response corroborated Serres’ general description of the missionaries as ‘gun stokers.’ They supplied ammunition for the crown’s weapons of repression, acting as informants for the minister and encouraging harsher policies on the ground. However, execution of the crown’s instructions was entrusted to senior secular officials, \textit{bas-officiers} and ship captains.\textsuperscript{162}

VI

Evidence on violence and conversion at Marseille casts doubt on the assertion that the Vincentians managed the ‘system of cudgels’ alone. However, a major coup for the critics of the Congregation came when the crown itself blamed the Vincentians for orchestrating abuses. The correspondence from this period demonstrates that the affair of the \textit{bonnet rouge} was not isolated, but took place in the context of increasing frustration with spiritual administration at Marseille. Criticism from the crown prior to the affair supports this perspective. For example, according to reports received by Pontchartrain in 1699, sick slaves resident in the hospital at Marseille were making testamentary legacies to the Vincentians and chaplains of the hospital. In one particular case, monies were left to the chaplains at the hospital to dispense in alms. Writing to his officials at Marseille in May, Pontchartrain expressed concern that this practice would ‘degenerate into abuse.’ It is evident from the tone of the correspondence that the central administration suspected coercion on the part of chaplains at the hospital. Pontchartrain allowed the will to be disposed of in the manner desired by the prisoner, but warned that the chaplains be told that ‘this will

\textsuperscript{161} \textit{Ibid.}, fols. 284-285, Pontchartrain to Boulenger, 27 May 1699: ‘Vous aurez soin d’examiner si ces ordres sont ponctuellement exécutez et lors qu’on y conviendra de m’en informer.’

\textsuperscript{162} See Pontchartrain’s letters to Croiset and Montolieu on the 10 June 1699, at AN MAR, B/6/32 fols. 307 and 308 respectively.
be the last time, and that we will force them in future to give back what they would have thus engaged dying prisoners to give them.’  

At this stage, however, it was unclear whether the offending chaplains were members of the Congregation, for the minister did not mention any Vincentians by name; in fact Pontchartrain alluded specifically only to some Capuchin priests at the hospital. However, in further correspondence issued after Jérôme Pontchartrain officially took the ministerial reins identified the Vincentians as the problem. In a letter written in January 1701 to the highest official in the corps de galères, Jean-Louis de Montmort, the minister alluded to ‘intrigues’ in which the Vincentians were accused of participating in the hospital, and rebuked the intendant for not establishing the truth about ‘their conduct in the hospital and [the issue] of what becomes of the effects of dead prisoners.’ Some months later, this truth appears to have been established, but not in the Vincentians’ favour, for the government procured key personnel changes at the base. On 17 April 1701, Pontchartrain wrote to Montmort revealing that the superior general Pierron had promised to remove a chaplain called Miroir from Marseille altogether. Later, Pontchartrain alluded to accusations that the superior of the hospital, Leduc, was also involved in mischief, and ordered his removal.

The hospital saga added to a growing body of negative judgements about the Vincentians’ general conduct at the port. In reference to the troubles caused by Boulenger in Marseille, Arnoul, who by this time had had experience of Vincentians there and at Rochefort, stated that ‘…everyone complains about them, [as much]
here as I saw people used to complain about them formerly in Rochefort.’  

Soon after, in a letter to Montmort in January 1701, Pontchartrain remarked that the Vincentians’ conduct had attracted ‘the hatred of slaves whose trust they were supposed to search for through their charity.’ These comments were far from administrative musings. In a highly unusual step, Pontchartrain wrote later that month to Pierron and remonstrated with him about the missionaries’ conduct. Asserting that complaints against their record were frequent and emanated from trustworthy quarters, the minister accused them of ‘indiscreet and false zeal,’ as well as organised violence against prisoners through the \textit{bastonnade}:

\begin{quote}
His Majesty has ordered me to inform you about [these abuses], and to excite you to remedy it by sending persons whose conduct [will be] quite wise and edifying and full of charity to assure that you can re-establish trust and esteem, without which we cannot hope to bring back to the bosom of the Church those people who have exposed themselves to suffering the [penalty of the] galley for having separated from it…I will remind you that we never had any similar complaints or anything analogous [to this] when Sieur Lorence [sic] was superior in Marseille, and it would be desirous if the Religious you send in the future know, as he did, how to win the affections and esteem of everyone.
\end{quote}

Pontchartrain’s letters at this juncture were remarkable for several reasons. Firstly, multiple rebukes to the Congregation’s superior general in Paris and its local representatives in Marseille constituted unprecedented actions, and employed unusually harsh terms. The climax of these came with the removal of Boulenger,

\begin{footnotes}

\footnote{AN MAR, B/3/113, fol. 317, Arnoul to Pontchartrain, 1 January 1701: ‘…tout le monde s’en plaint icy comme j’ay veu qu’on s’en plaignoit autre fois à Rochefort.’}

\footnote{AN MAR, B/6/34, fol. 21-22, Pontchartrain to Montmort, 19 Jan 1701: ‘…la haine des forçats dont ils devoient rechercher la confiance par leur charité.’}

\footnote{AN MAR, B/6/34, fol. 35-36, same to Pierron, 26 January 1701: ‘Sa Majesté m’a ordonné de vous en informer, et de vous exciter à y remédier en y envoyant des sujets d’une conduite assez sage et édifiante et plaine de charité pour vous asseurer de restablir la confiance et l’estime sans lesquelles il ne faut pas espérer de ramener dans le sein de l’église des gens qui se sont exposez à souffrir la galère pour en soutenir la séparation…je vous feray souvenir qu’on n’a jamais eu de pareilles plaintes ou approchantes pendant que le Sieur Lorence estoit supérieur à Marseille, et il seroit bien à désirer que les Religieux que vous envoyerez sceussent comme lui se concilier les affections et l’estime de tout le monde.’}

\end{footnotes}
whom the crown replaced with Aymar de Garcin, a Vincentian of noble extraction, in 1701. Furthermore, the central administration of Louis XIV, so often characterised as brutal and intolerant, invoked the vocabulary of charity in its charges. As the example above demonstrates, Pontchartrain’s letters were tinged with Vincentian vocabulary, which he continued to employ after Boulenger left Marseille. Greeting Garcin in 1701, the minister welcomed the new superior’s desire for ‘charity and moderation.’ This language clearly suggested that the missionaries’ under Boulenger had deviated from core elements of their *esprit primitif*. However, given the crown’s own role in managing conversions, Pontchartrain’s judgement is open to question.

The practical and political effects of repressive policies obviously weighed on Pontchartrain’s mind. There was significant evidence that the policies adopted at Marseille had the opposite effect on the Huguenot prisoners than that intended by their architects. What little testimony remains from *religionnaires* indicated that aggressive tactics were more likely to confirm them in their faith than inspire conversions. In a 1693 letter, Cantinière-Baraut declared that the methods used were ‘much more capable of confirming a faithful man in the truths he has learned than of steering him away from them.’ Furthermore, international scrutiny of the Huguenot persecution on the galleys was increasing. Some of the accounts of abuses sent from Protestant galleymen to their correspondents on the continent were published and disseminated in journals such as the *Gazette d’Amsterdam*. Even as the affair of the *bonnet* mushroomed, the revocation of the edict and the *dragonnades* had already proven disastrous for France’s foreign policy, alienating Protestant princes in Europe and filling their armies with French escapees. The government therefore had a genuine interest in dampening criticism of an embarrassed administration by advocating a softer approach. In February 1703, the

---

172 AN MAR, B/6/34, fol.150-151, Pontchartrain to Aymar de Garcin, 27 April 1701.
minister wrote saying, ‘His Majesty does not want [the Huguenot prisoners] to be mistreated…,’ finally calling an end to the affair.176

However, even if the crown was motivated by powerful secular concerns, the judgement that the Vincentians had lost their charity was not unfair. The assessments of Pontchartrain did not spring from any anti-clerical or anti-Vincentian sentiments. On the contrary, as patrons the Pontchartrain clan, especially Louis Phélypeaux and his wife, had invested huge sums in new churches on their private estates as well as establishments of charity almost exclusively entrusted to the Daughters of Charity. Louis continued to do so even after he left the marine in 1699.177 His son and protégé Jérôme was therefore well placed to comment on the deviance of some missionaries, particularly those stationed at the hospital. Without doubt, a fair assessment of the correspondence from 1695 to 1700 suggests that Boulenger was, indeed, an overly zealous advocate for harshness in the persecution of Huguenots. Furthermore, similar accusations of cruel and violent methods were levelled at Boulenger’s successor Aymar de Garcin, which suggest that the Vincentian policies developed under Boulenger were not isolated. In his memoirs, Marteilhe painted an extremely unflattering picture of Garcin. He described an incident with Garcin, in which the priest urged an assembled group of Huguenots to recant:

There is every probability that three-fourths of you will perish between here and Marseilles…and then when those who survive reach Marseilles, they will, as all the other Protestants have done, make their abjuration in my presence.178

Marteilhe consistently portrayed Vincentian missionaries as hard and heartless, with no sense of charity. It is a striking fact that, amidst the evidence of this era, the sole allusions to subjects like charity appeared in Pontchartrain’s missives. The

176 AN MAR, B/6/36 fol.180, Pontchartrain to Montmort, 28 February 1703.  
177 Berger, “Rural Charity,” 401-405.  
178 Marteilhe, Mémoires, 217: ‘Il y a toute apparence que les trois quarts de vous périrez d’ici à Marseille…et puis, quand ceux de vous qui en échapperont seront à Marseille, ils feront comme tous les autres protestants qui étaient en galère et qui ont tous fait abjuration entre mes mains.’
vocabulary employed, particularly in the minister’s letter to Pierron in January 1701, was an effective method of achieving action by Saint-Lazare. This was because accusations that Vincentians at Marseille pursued an immoderate, pugnacious programme in their dealings with Protestants were a damning assessment of their fidelity to de Paul. De Paul had kept firm to a statement he made in 1628 that conversion could only be achieved by ‘gentleness, humility, and patience.’

In letters to his priests working with Huguenots in Richelieu and Sedan, de Paul counselled an approach based on charity and not indignation. He maintained this position throughout his life, saying to a Vincentian in 1659 that the presence of Huguenots would ‘force you to be more restrained in their company, more humble and more devoted towards God, and more charitable to your neighbour.’ At the time, the missionaries’ method even received praise from the crown.

The gulf between these examples and the accusations made against Vincentians under Boulenger would not have been lost on the superior general. However, the Congregation did not acknowledge the failures of the Boulenger period, beyond removing personnel deemed offensive by the crown. On one hand, this seems exceptional given the willingness of previous superiors general to compose circular letters at moments of great stress or turbulence in the Congregation’s development. Pierron had certainly done so after his drama-filled election, an event with far fewer implications for the Congregation’s *esprit primitif* than the crisis at Marseille. On the other hand, there was ample reason for Pierron’s silence on this occasion. Given the wide sweep of evidence presented against the Vincentians, his failure to make any defence of Boulenger or other staff at the port was probably because he recognised that no convincing excuses could be advanced. More importantly, however, it was in the general interest of the Congregation to keep the fall-out from the saga as localised as possible. Pontchartrain’s rebuke to Pierron may have been robust, but it contained a generous invitation to return to the

---

179 *CCD*, 1:66, de Paul to Antoine Portail, 15 September 1628.
180 See for example *ibid.*, 1:429, same to Lambert aux Couteaux, 30 January 1638; 2: 447, same to Guillaume Gallais, 13 Feb 1644.
182 *Ibid.*, 1:458, same to Lambert aux Couteaux, 22 March 1638: ‘The King’s advocate in Loudun told me that the Mission’s method with regard to heretics is excellent, in that it establishes the divine truths without arguing controversial points. The Huguenots are delighted with this.’
tranquility of the Laurence era via some simple personnel changes at a local level. This method of coaxing Pierron cast the affair as an unfortunate parenthesis, whose remedy required no general act of repentance from the Congregation at large. It is therefore easy to see why the superior general complied without further comment.

After the hospital and bonnet controversies were settled by the crown’s instruction in 1703, the Vincentians’ work at Marseille attracted far less negative attention. Simard argues that Garcin’s noble extraction and links with the military smoothed the way for restoring the Vincentians’ reputation during his long superiority (1701-1727). On 19 August 1713, the maréchal de Tessé praised the Vincentians’ management of the hospital, saying Garcin ‘keeps everything in order, and there is nothing to report.’ The Vincentians later earned praise during the terrible plague which afflicted Marseille in 1720. On 1 Jan 1721, Jean Bonnet wrote a circular lauding the ‘Christian charity’ of seven missionaries who gave their lives whilst tending to the plague-ridden. These stories helped the Vincentians recover some of the aura of the de Paul years, but ultimately failed to blot out the disgrace of the Boulenger period. The prevailing negative judgements of Vincentians in this era, which still permeate the historiography of the period, demonstrate just how successful the crown was at forcing the Congregation to shoulder some of the blame for its own policies.

VII

The affair of the bonnet, and the storms set in motion by it, could scarcely have been predicted in the 1680s. After all, the Congregation’s new prominence in the marine occurred in the middle of a flurry of other profile-enhancing developments under Louis XIV. Marteilhe infamously suggested that the so-called masterdom of Vincentians at Marseille derived from their Congregation’s emergence as a darling of the royal court, and there is some truth in this. Its increased responsibilities at

---

183 According to Simard, the de Garcin house became extinct at the beginning of the seventeenth-century; the last of the line was the abbé de Garcin-Châtelard, chanoine de Saint-Pierre de Vienne. It appears that Aymar was descended from a collateral branch of the family connected to the abbé’s sister: AM, 53, 47-48.
185 RC, 1:324.
Marseille and practical monopoly of spiritual roles at Rochefort, even in the face of some initial objections, recalled Louis XIV’s inexorable commands regarding the parish of Versailles and subsequent royal foundations. Furthermore, the Vincentians’ strong position at both houses was bolstered by legal contracts that clearly manifested the crown’s great confidence in them.

Comparing the royal establishments studied in Chapter Three with the Vincentians’ marine bases is a useful way to explain how this initial confidence turned into the disasters of the late 1690s. Above all, this comparison reveals a significant irony in the wider context of the Congregation’s development post-1660. The royal establishments of Versailles and Saint-Cyr had given birth to, and sustained thereafter, a high level of fear and awareness about potential damage to the Congregation’s core values and institutional integrity. The actual results of the Vincentians’ time at court proved that this anxiety was excessive, but at least it had prevented drift. In contrast, the two houses of the marine studied in this chapter elicited no major worries from the leaders of the Congregation. Clearly, it was considered that the new tasks at Marseille and Rochefort found enough legitimacy in precedents set by de Paul and earlier missionaries to shield the Congregation from injuries to its esprit primitif. And yet it was precisely these institutions, full of precedents and positive endorsements from the past, which stored up the ingredients of controversy.

The fact that the Congregation did not spy potential risks in its new responsibilities at the two ports under Louis XIV is all the more startling given that these involved fundamentally different roles than those fulfilled by the Versailles missionaries or the confessors of Saint-Cyr. Of course, at Rochefort, superficial similarities existed, such as the Vincentians’ duty to repeat the Exaudiat in honour of the king, but the content and context of their core tasks diverged from facilitating courtly piety and charity. At court, the Vincentians were instruments of conversion working among free residents, who could either embrace or reject their apostolate. The contrast with the two ports could hardly be more evident, where they were agents of a crown-sponsored conversion campaign directed at a captive audience, and often achieved through violent means. The stakes could not have been higher,
for the Vincentians’ agency came at a time of increasing royal vigilance over threats
to its hegemony, both domestic and foreign. The revocation of the edict of Nantes
was a perfect example: after 1685, Vincentian missions on the galleys, which had
been conducted since de Paul’s time, acquired new political moment because they
featured as important elements in the crown’s massive terrorism of religious
dissidents.

It was precisely because the Vincentians held wide-ranging responsibilities
that they were exposed to tight scrutiny. However, both contemporary voices and
subsequent historians have erected a pendulum of power which sways almost always
in the Vincentians’ favour. These accounts depart from reality because they leave no
room for the operation of a complex hierarchy in the marine. Bishops and local
officials directly challenged the royal chaplain’s power to supervise the chaplains,
and the chaplains themselves squarely rejected the Congregation’s authority over
them. In this field of competing claims to pre-eminence, the crown itself emerged as
ultimate victor. Under Louis XIV, the royal marine came to symbolise the supreme
power and glory of the king, a supremacy which rarely, if ever, admitted rivals. The
role of the Congregation in its management of chaplains obeyed this logic, and
should always be seen as a role of service and not one of control. As this chapter
demonstrates, the spiritual functions at the port bases were always carried out in the
service of the crown’s wider objectives, and the crown successfully asserted its
authority over the chaplaincy corps throughout the period. Both the early years in
Rochefort and scrutiny at Marseille in the 1690s showed the crown willing to
question the Congregation’s control even over its own members and seek increasing
accountability for actions taken at the ports.

In truth, one of the main buttresses to the assertion for Vincentian hegemony
at Marseille lies in the affair of the *bonnet rouge*. The testimonies of Huguenot
prisoners, local crown officials and, ultimately, the ministry of the marine all
converge in arguing that the Vincentians were the prime orchestrators of cruelty on
the galleys, executing the king’s persecution of dissidents with relish. Marteilhe’s
memoirs have been uniquely persuasive on this point, and his dramatic language
rings through subsequent works. The fact that the crown chose to believe the
negative reports was enough to convict the Vincentians, and losses were high. Boulenger’s removal constituted a definitive moment for the Congregation, which, as it did during the Pierron election, again lost its jealously-held control over internal matters. This time, however, loss also extended to the Congregation’s reputation as the living embodiment of Vincent de Paul, and the picture that emerged of some Vincentians in the Boulenger era clearly departed from the familiar principles of charity for which they were famed. The bonnet revealed a difficult truth: Vincentians’ engagement in what de Paul had called the ‘affairs of Princes’ threw obedience to raison d’état and service of esprit primitif into an unavoidable collision, in which the latter undoubtedly emerged damaged.

All was not lost, however. The crown’s rebuke to the Vincentians was made at its own political convenience, and not because of strong moral objections to their conduct. This explains why reservations expressed about the Vincentians’ place at the port bases did not, in the end, translate into any further action to remove them outright. The historian Samuel Mours claims that the affair led to the Vincentians’ replacement at Marseille, but the king’s clear favour, so evident during the Rochefort negotiations, made such a result unlikely.186 In his response to Arnoul’s report that everybody complained about the Vincentians, Pontchartrain admitted that the problems at Marseille and Rochefort revealed them to be ‘ill-suited’ to their tasks at both ports, but confessed that ‘they are established and that it is not to be presumed that the king desires to make changes in this matter.’187 Another action of the monarch at this time revealed that the problems at Rochefort and Marseille were not affecting his relations with the Congregation in general: it was precisely during the affair of the bonnet rouge that Louis XIV sought to meddle in Nicolas Pierron’s election. The Vincentians may have lost some of their claims as servants of Monsieur Vincent, but they were still very much prêtres de Bourbon.

187 AN MAR, B/6/34, fol. 27-28, Pontchartrain to Arnoul, 19 January 1701: ‘…ils sont establis et il n’est pas à présumer que le Roy veuille y apporter des changements.’
Chapter 5. Re-establishing Madagascar: The Congregation in the Mascareignes, 1711-1736

On 10 May 1711, the Congregation elected its sixth successor to Monsieur Vincent. Jean Bonnet took the reins of an institute that had changed enormously since the mission to Madagascar ended.¹ The irony of Alméras’ vision of the little Company in the wake of the mission’s closure lay in the fact that it was precisely at this time that the Congregation started to grow in stature, administering royal parishes in Versailles and Fontainebleau, as well as serving the crown’s interests in its marine establishments at Marseille and Rochefort. In addition, the Congregation’s popularity in France was replicated elsewhere. In the first decade of the eighteenth century, the Vincentians expanded their operations on the Italian peninsula and Bonnet’s immediate predecessor, Jean Watel, founded houses in Florence, Casale, San Remo and Forli. But in the words of Bonnet’s predecessor, Nicolas Pierron, as he announced that a Vincentian was en route to China as vice-apostolic visitor, ‘God does not make use of our little Congregation in Europe alone.’² This made for an impressive bilan when Bonnet was elected. However, these successes only cast the catastrophe in Madagascar into sharper relief.

At the beginning of Bonnet’s generalate, an opportunity arose to wipe the stain of Madagascar and seek again the potential glory of an Indian Ocean mission. In 1711 the neighbouring Île de Bourbon (present-day Réunion) was presented to the Congregation as a suitable mission site. However, the island’s prior history was anything but attractive. Bourbon was one of three islands in the archipelago commonly called the Mascareignes, and had been the site of a largely experimental French colony (less than a hundred people) until 1674. Its use as a site of permanent settlement began after the massacre at Fort Dauphin in Madagascar the same year, when the ‘debris’ of French commercial interests in the Indian Ocean, still in the hands of the Compagnie des Indes, transferred there.³ Like its fore-runner in

¹ Bonnet was superior general from 1711 to 1735.
² RC, 226, 1 January 1700: ‘Non seulement Dieu se sert de notre petite Congrégation en Europe…’
Madagascar, the small colony at first appeared destined for instability. Between 1696 and 1714, the island had five governors, one of whom was famously overthrown in a civil coup. Furthermore, conditions were poor and in 1714 the governor of the island returned to France to ‘give an account of the misery of the inhabitants.’

The Congregation’s appointment to administer spiritual affairs on Bourbon was unsurprising. The island had, in fact, welcomed several Vincentians to its shores before, when missionaries stationed at Fort Dauphin travelled to the island for convalescence and short pastoral visits to the small community there. However, since the abandonment of the colony in Madagascar, pastoral care of the island’s three parishes had been delivered by a variety of secular and regular clergy, mostly *en passage* to India. Between 1667 and 1715, there were seventeen pastors on the island. Early correspondence revealed the extent to which the island’s religious life relied on the combined efforts of several parties, especially the commercial company. In a 1691 letter to the duc de Mazarin discussing the need for priests on Bourbon, the minister of the marine, Louis Pontchartrain, claimed he had spoken about the matter to the Company’s directors, and would ‘ensure, when they send vessels there, that they send a sufficient number of ecclesiastics’ to the island. Later, on 16 February 1698, the archbishop of Paris made two French secular priests his vicars general on Bourbon, but even these clerics were transitory. Separate accords between the Company and orders such as the Recollects also failed to provide regular spiritual care to the island. From 1703, the Holy See’s attention was drawn to the neglected state of this care after its legate, Cardinal Tournon, made a short stop-over at Bourbon that year, and reported on the island’s poor moral

---

5 AN MAR, B/1/14, fol.30v: ‘…représenter la misère des habitans.’
6 Three Madagascar Vincentians, missionaries Cuveron, Monmasson and Jourdié, were present on the island for short durations in the 1660s. Jourdié remained on the island from 1667/8 to 1671: *NCM*: 4:76.
7 *RT*, 3:203.
8 AN MAR, B/2/78, Louis Pontchartrain to the duc de Mazarin, 17 avril 1691: ‘…j’auray soin, lorsqu’ils y envoyont des vaisseaux, qu’ils y fassent passer un nombre suffisant d’ecclésiastiques…’
state.\textsuperscript{11} Afterwards, the nuncio in France communicated the pope’s desire to establish ecclesiastics on the island to the French crown, a proposal the new minister for the marine, Jérôme Pontchartrain, again greeted with reference to the sovereign company’s responsibilities, saying only that ‘as this island belongs to the Compagnie des Indes, His Majesty has judged it appropriate to communicate it to the directors of the Company…’ \textsuperscript{12}

But the directors of the Company were slow to organise the kind of fixed spiritual administration sought by the Holy See. In response to the nuncio’s report, they claimed that they had sent two priests to the island, whose inhabitants consequently ‘no longer [lacked] spiritual care.’ They were open to the possibility of a mission, but called for more information.\textsuperscript{13} Later, in 1706, representatives of the Company rejected a suggestion to send Dominicans to the island, stating that the islanders wanted ‘good secular priests.’\textsuperscript{14} Finally, in 1711, a meeting of Propaganda in Rome settled on the ‘pastors of Saint-Lazare.’\textsuperscript{15} As well as missions on Île de Bourbon, the Congregation later accepted work on its neighbouring island of Île de France (now Mauritius), and several of its missionaries arrived in 1722. During the next two decades, at least twenty Vincentians served on the islands.

Bonnet greeted the initial news of appointment with great enthusiasm. In a new year’s circular to the Congregation announcing the appointment on 1 January 1712, he stated that the project had already been accepted, and awaited only final planning by the nuncio and the king. Saying the island was ‘right beside Madagascar,’ Bonnet echoed the positive recommendations about Madagascar that de Paul had made to Charles Nacquart in the 1640s:

\textsuperscript{12} AN MAR, B2/180, fol.426, Jérôme Pontchartrain to the Marquis de Torcy, 18 February 1705: ‘…comme cette isle appartient à la compagnie des Indes sa Majesté a jugé à propos de la communiquer aux directeurs de cette compagnie…’ The contents of the nuncio’s suggestion were further explained in another letter, dated the same day to the directors of the Company, see also AN, MAR, B/2/180, fol. 426.
\textsuperscript{13} AN MAR, B2/180, fol. 453, same to same, 11 March 1705: ‘…ne manquent plus de secours spirituels.’
\textsuperscript{14} CAOM, F5/A/8, directors of the Company to Jérôme Pontchartrain, 13 April 1706.
\textsuperscript{15} Archives of Propaganda, acts 1711, vol. 81, fol, 45v printed in \textit{RT}, 5:104-106.
In embarking on the new mission on Île de Bourbon, the Vincentians were reminded that it was a continuation of the hopes de Paul had cherished for Madagascar. The preamble to the formal treaty signed between the Congregation and the Compagnie des Indes in 1712 stipulated that Pope Clement XI ‘judged it proper that the mission founded on the Île Dauphine or Madagascar before 1664 be re-established on the Île de Bourbon.’

Like de Paul before him, Bonnet sought to connect the Congregation’s rhetoric of the esprit primitif to the new mission. Separate instructions issued to the four missionaries in 1712 enjoined them to live ‘according to the rules and spirit of our Congregation,’ and summoned them to ‘the practice of charity and good works.’ Later, in his first report of the missionaries’ work to the entire Congregation, Bonnet explained how the people had received the Bourbon Vincentians with joy, and that the missionaries themselves were filled with zeal ‘to spare nothing for the salvation of [these] poor people.’ He further claimed that the missionaries were grateful for ‘the grace God had given them by calling them to the tending of this strange and desolate vineyard.’

Conceiving the new mission as a continuation of the Madagascar affair was a dangerous strategy. Madagascar had, after all, been characterized by poor physical conditions, little spiritual progress among the indigenous people, and volatile relations with the commercial company. However, the early years of the new mission announced definite improvements. It is worth recalling Alméras’ circular

---

16 RC, 1:274: ‘...l’air y est bon et fort tempéré, les vivres, dit-on, y sont aussi bon, aussi communs et a meilleur marché que dans l’île de France ou à Paris. Elle est habitée par les seuls Français; les insulaires voisins y servent et y peuvent être instruits dans notre sainte religion.’
18 AN, S/6717, 1 November 1712: ‘...secundum regulas et spiritum nostrae Congregationis... ut simul cum fiducia et gaudio invicem vos consideretis in provocaciones charitatis, et bonorum operum...’
19 RC, 1:288, 1 Jan 1716: ‘...à rien épargner pour le salut de ce pauvre peuple.’
20 Ibid. ‘...la grâce que Dieu leur a faite de les appeler a la culture de cette vigne étrangère et désolée.’

192
letter to the Congregation at the close of 1671, when he admitted his powerlessness to remedy the Madagascar missionaries’ neglected situation, largely because no formal contractual agreements between the Vincentians and their commercial patrons on the island existed. In contrast, the establishment treaty signed by Bonnet installed the missionaries in Bourbon on much surer ground in temporal matters, and was the basis for their future roles as major stake-holders in Bourbon, above all as slave-holding planters and members of the local government council. These achievements were a great coup for Bonnet, who repeated none of Alméras’ or Jolly’s objections to accepting either the islands’ three parishes or the significant temporal roles his missionaries would fulfil in the nascent colonial community.

Temporal advantages, however, did not guarantee a successful mission. The 1712 treaty aimed to prevent a repeat of the most noxious aspects of the Madagascar exercise, such as the missionaries’ temporal dependence on the Compagnie des Indes, but it did not secure harmony in the Vincentian community. For instance, accusations that the treaty made the Vincentians too comfortable were likely to raise prickly questions. The missionaries’ multiple roles in the Mascareignes, both as planters and in government, constituted precisely the kind of secular privileges and dignities de Paul had often warned his sons about, and it was not long before problems arose both within and outside the Vincentian community. Yet, this reality is not acknowledged by the mission’s hagiographers. For example, in a speech delivered in 1860, the bishop of La Réunion, Armand Maupoint, claimed that the first missionaries had redeemed the colony by their apostolic activity. Maupoint asserted that the laws of the island ‘were imprinted with a gentleness and a humanity which could only flow so freely from the pages of the Gospels and the chalice of a priest.’

In the rest of his homily, Maupoint insisted that the activities of the Vincentians in the Mascareignes could be placed in a pure continuum linking them to the ethos of de Paul as it had previously developed in France.

---

21 *AM*, 27:150, speech of Mgr Armand Maupoint, 19 March 1860: ‘Toute la législation bourbonienne…est empreinte d’une douceur et d’une humanité qui ne peuvent découler ainsi à pleins bords que des pages de l’Evangile et du calice du prêtre.’

22 *Ibid.*, 152
Two important facts cast the bishop’s confident assertions into doubt. Firstly, a crucial lesson of the Madagascar exercise was the acute sensitivity of the Congregation’s apostolic goals to changing contexts. Thus, the possibility of another failure in a similar colonial environment remained very much alive in the re-established mission. Secondly, Maupoint’s comments took place in the context of a wider discussion on the Vincentians’ work amongst the large population of slaves on the island, whom they identified early on as pastoral equivalents to the Congregation’s traditional European ‘poor.’ However, Maupoint failed to mention that the missionaries were, from the beginning, heavily tied to the maintenance of the slave system as slave-holders themselves. Therefore, his contentions plead for reconsideration.

The conclusions reached by Alméras in the wake of Madagascar linked the fate of that particular mission to broader institutional questions. Facing the end of the project, Alméras had appealed to the Congregation’s relative weakness and organisational incapacities as a missionary body to justify his decision to close the mission. But events since December 1671 had changed the institute’s complexion decisively. If the Congregation’s self-presentation as the little Company poorly reflected reality in the de Paul era, it was even less plausible at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, the Vincentians’ experience with secular authorities, both at Versailles and the marine bases, had regularly forced them to defend their rights and independence, and tested their capacity to survive competing interests. In light of this, the ‘re-established’ Madagascar mission offers a kind of litmus test for the Congregation’s institutional development as a new century dawned. The Madagascar mission proved a sound test case for the Congregation’s ‘corporate mindset’, and is especially useful in diagnosing the Vincentians’ fragility in the immediate period after de Paul’s death. The over-arching question posed by the new mission was whether half a century of change and development produced more confidence in his heirs.

The compatibility of colonial life with the corporate goals of the Congregation had been at the centre of storms created during the Madagascar project. In particular, that
mission’s history spotlighted how questions of a purely temporal nature came to intrude into the spiritual life of missionaries. For example, the absence of provisions impeded the evangelical goals of Vincentians by preventing the celebration of the Mass. The missionaries’ dependence on the commercial company for food-stuffs led to flat-out want, to the point where the missionaries were unable to survive. In other ways, conditions in an embryonic colonial society sparked tensions with the missionaries’ corporate identity. Nacquart’s and Bourot’s separate comments about the inappropriateness of governing people and the missionaries’ permanent contact with lay parishioners – morally licentious colonists to boot – highlighted legitimate obstacles to preserving their *esprit primitif*. In light of this history, the effort to reestablish the Madagascar mission through the Bourbon exercise threw up a major question: would the blights of the previous exercise be repeated?

After a somewhat tumultuous journey, four Vincentians, Daniel Renou, Louis Criais, Jacques Houbert and René Abot, disembarked on Bourbon from their ship, the *Saint-Louis*, in December 1714. On 3 January 1715, the missionaries took possession of their three parishes on the island. Renou, who had been appointed prefect apostolic of the mission, remained at Saint-Denis, residence of the colonial governor. Criais and Abot settled at Saint-Paul, and Houbert was assigned to the parish of Sainte-Suzanne.23 In marked contrast to the legal vacuum under which missionaries had operated in Madagascar, the provisions of the 1712 treaty offered a well-ordered, self-sufficient and independent base for the new parish priests. Article five promised the Vincentians the use of already-built presbyteries in the parishes of Saint-Paul and Saint-Denis, while article six made provision for the construction of another in the parish of Sainte-Suzanne, to which land and gardens would be attached. Article nine provided for the annual payment of three hundred livres per priest in return for the administration of parochial duties and the dispensation of the sacraments. The inclusion of these clauses was not, of course, peculiar: similar conditions applied to many of the Congregation’s European projects. However, the provisions constituted a major improvement on the past locally. Above all, the main

---

23 AM 27:165-166; AN MAR, B/1/14 fols. 29 and 34. The Vincentians did not live ‘in community’ strictly speaking, but they did communicate regularly. When the individual parish groups grew, two or three Vincentians lived together under the same roof.
evil of the Madagascar project, the missionaries’ dependency, appeared foreclosed by the new treaty.

On the pastoral front, much work awaited the small group of missionaries. According to a demographic study of Bourbon in this period, the island’s three parishes were populated with 417 men and 812 women when the missionaries arrived in 1712. By 1735, the population of these three parishes had doubled and the number of parishes increased accordingly. In 1731, a new parish of Saint-Louis had joined the three original parishes. In 1732, Saint-Pierre was founded, followed in 1733 by Saint-Benoît. Given this growth in population, spiritual concerns ought to have dominated, but it was secular matters that beset the missionaries’ early years on Bourbon. While the 1712 treaty went to some lengths to prevent the kind of troubles experienced in Madagascar, some of its clauses, in fact, stored serious problems for the future. The first of these lay in the possibility of missionary involvement in the island’s commerce, which the treaty identified in article four:

\[
\text{In order that the priests whom Monsieur Bonnet deems to send to the Île de Bourbon shall not be distracted by any temporal responsibility, and in order that they might apply themselves solely to the edification of the peoples, the said priests shall not engage in commerce nor make any acquisition on the island.} \]

This decisive prohibition on engaging in distracting activities, especially commerce, was not accidental. There was significant historical basis in Bourbon for suspicions that the commercial nature of the colony would corrupt men of God sent to minister there. During the negotiations for appointing missionaries to Bourbon in 1698 Jérôme Pontchartrain warned the Company directors about accepting either the first candidates who presented themselves or members of religious orders who, he

\[26\] 1712 Treaty, art.4: ‘Pour que les prêtres que M. Bonnet propose d'envoyer dans ladite Île de Bourbon ne puissent être distraits par aucun soin temporel, qu'ils s'appliquent uniquement à l'éducation des peuplês, les dits prêtres ne peuvent faire aucun commerce ni acquisition dans l'Île de Bourbon.’
Chapter 5: Re-establishing Madagascar

claimed, were ‘capable of falling into excesses the consequences of which are often sorrowful.’

Before the Vincentians’ appointment to Bourbon, the island’s pastors had been accused of just such excesses. In a report sent in 1708, one of the Company’s directors described the curé of Saint-Denis as a man of ‘crass avarice’ and accused him of engaging in commerce on the island, by buying and selling goods to the islanders.

The director went on to accuse another priest, the curé of Saint-Paul, of drinking ‘beyond his thirst,’ and worried that future priests would only wish to make themselves ‘masters of some terrain’ on Bourbon. The theme of corruption continued when in 1711 the Company recognised the islanders’ desire for ‘disciplined pastors’ who were not ‘mercenary.’

Given both the ban on commerce contained in the treaty with the Congregation, and the weight of recent history, temporal awards capable of corrupting missionaries should have been avoided. However, article seven of the treaty, which made the Vincentians planters on a par with other land-owning colonists, made just such a gift and united to each parish ‘a reasonable plot of free land’ for missionaries to cultivate. This provision led to one of the more serious early accusations surrounding the Mascareignes mission: that the Vincentians became wealthy planters in the fledgling colony. Indeed, a report compiled in 1808 by the post-Revolutionary vicar general of the Congregation, Dominique François Hanon, lamented the poor spiritual fruits that accrued from the Mascareignes mission. On the other hand, Hanon went on to claim that ‘no other mission offered as many temporal advantages’ and that the missionaries were even able to make ‘a kind of fortune through the more or less flourishing plantations that each missionary

---

27 AN, MAR, B2/131, fol 95, Pontchartrain to directors of the Compagnie des Indes, 15 Jan 1698: ‘…il ne convient pas de prendre pour cela le premier venu ny des Religieux qui n’ayant aucun expérience du monde, sont capables de tomber dans des exces dont les suites sont souvent funestes…’


29 Ibid., 57-58, ‘…au-delà de sa soif…’; ‘maîtres de quelque terrain.’

30 Ibid., 250, Mémoire sur l’Île Bourbon addressed par la Cie des Indes au gouverneur Parat le 17 février 1711: ‘…[les habitants][… demandent…de véritables pasteurs réglés…et point mercenaires.’

31 1712 Treaty, art.7: ‘…il sera accordé et uni à chaque cure une raisonnable étendue de terrain libre …’
had there.’ However, despite the gravity of Hanon’s assessment, and the impact it has on judging the Vincentians in the post-de Paul period, its basis has never been critically scrutinised.

The concession of land to the Vincentians on Bourbon integrated them into the colonial community, and connected them to the rights and interests of the island’s planter class, whose main concentration was the cultivation of coffee. Six coffee plants were introduced to Bourbon in 1715 from Moka, and coffee thereafter became the dominant crop on the islands’ plantations. The monopoly enjoyed by the commercial company on coffee sales in the European market lay at the root of the island’s prosperity, and testimonies besides Hanon’s suggest that the first missionaries participated in the fortunes made on the island at this time. In a letter to the superior general long before Hanon wrote his report, Louis Criais revealed in 1734 that the missionaries had been accused by Company officials of living ostentatiously. According to Criais, the Vincentians’ plantations were deemed ‘superb and magnificent.’ To boot, the missionaries were accused of having ‘too many servants’ and of generating ‘immense revenue.’

Descriptions of the Vincentian properties in the mission’s early phase are rare, and the little evidence that exists is inconclusive when it comes to the missionaries’ wealth. For example, instructions from the directors on 10 November 1717 revealed that the missionaries were sharing the Company’s plantation at Saint-Paul, although the directors ordered a new piece of land to be found for them. In 1722, an inventory referred to the missionaries’ plantation at Sainte-Suzanne, which abutted the Company’s own lands. The Vincentians’ coffee crops at Saint-Paul and Sainte-Suzanne were described in a letter from Houbert in 1721:

---

32 AN, F/19/6212, ‘Mémoire de M. Hanon,’ 2 February 1808: ‘…aucun autre mission n’offrit autant d’avantages temporels….on put même y faire une espèce de fortune par les plantations plus ou moins florissantes que chaque missionnaire y avait.’
34 ACM, IBR 1504 (unpaginated), Criais to Noiret, begun 3 November 1734 and ended 8 December 1734: ‘Ce sont tous les jours de nouvelles chicanes par rapport à nos habitations qu’ils disent être superbes et magnifiques, de nos domestiques, qui sont toujours en trop grande nombre…ils paraissent persuadés que de là, nous tirons des revenus immenses…’
35 RT, 1:8.
36 RT, 1:32, Ce que valait Bourbon, 18 May 1722.
We have several big [coffee] trees in our garden at Sainte-Suzanne, which produce fruit in abundance, and more than a thousand young plants, which in three years’ time will give us enough fruit to exchange for other foodstuffs…our [confreres] at Saint-Paul also have 7 to 800 feet [of these trees] in their plantation which promise a lot…\(^{37}\)

Once the Vincentians’ plantations had been established, missionaries firmly defended their rights to keep them on the same basis as other colonists. In his 1721 missive, Houbert stated that fears that the Company might decide it was ‘bad that we supply coffee to it just as well as the other inhabitants’ were unnecessary.\(^{38}\) According to Houbert, while the terms of the Congregation’s foundation on Bourbon prohibited the missionaries from engaging in commercial activities, their participation in the coffee crop was ‘totally different.’\(^{39}\) He asserted that the Vincentians’ coffee plantations would ‘cause no harm to the inhabitants, who will never have enough of this product.’\(^{40}\) Furthermore, the missionaries’ crops would be advantageous to the commercial Company’s profits, as there would be ‘a greater abundance of coffee in the country.’\(^{41}\) Finally, Houbert insisted that any participation by the missionaries in coffee production came at the instigation of their commercial patrons, who ‘exhort us, as well as the other inhabitants, to work at this cultivation as much as we can.’\(^{42}\)

It appears, however, that Houbert was too hasty in his comments, for the missionaries’ plantations became the object of jealousy in the community. On 22 March 1720, the Company had conceded plots of land to the parishes of Sainte-Suzanne and Saint-Denis on Île de Bourbon. Only three years later, directors of the

\(^{37}\) *RT*, 3:290, Houbert to Bonnet, 3 November 1721: ‘Nous en avons plusieurs grands arbres dans notre jardin de Ste Suzanne, qui portent du fruit en abondance, et plus d’un millier de jeunes plantes qui, d’ici à trois ans, donneront assez de fruit pour en faire matiere de commerce …Nos messieurs de St Paul en ont aussi 7 à 800 pieds dans leur habitation qui promettent beaucoup.’

\(^{38}\)*Ibid.*. ‘…il ne faut pas craindre que la Compagnie trouve mauvais que nous luy fournissions du café tout aussi bien que les autres habitants…’

\(^{39}\)*Ibid.*. ‘…d’une toute autre nature…’

\(^{40}\)*Ibid.*. ‘…fait nul tort aux habitants qui n’auront jamais trop de cette marchandise…’

\(^{41}\)*Ibid.*, 291: ‘…une plus grande abondance du café dans ce pays.’

\(^{42}\)*Ibid.*. ‘Aussi Messieurs les officiers de la Compagnie nous exhortent, aussi bien que les autres habitants, de travailler a cette culture le plus que nous pouvons.’
Company in France wrote to their counterparts in the colony expressing concerns that the ‘the priests have a plantation on the island which is very far from the presbytery and that they even cultivate coffee trees there.’\textsuperscript{43} The letter went on to state that ‘temporal cares take [the priests] away from spiritual ones to which they are consecrated’ and declared that it was not appropriate for ‘church people to possess lands above those necessary for their subsistence.’\textsuperscript{44} The barrage of criticism continued when, in 1725, the provincial council decided to repossess the concessions granted to the Vincentians, and judged in its deliberation that the land ‘which was accorded them was too considerable as much as to its size as to its advantageous position for growing coffee from Moka.’\textsuperscript{45} The council went on to remind the missionaries that their lands were allotted to grow grains and vegetables for personal use only.\textsuperscript{46}

This type of controversy over the Vincentians’ temporal possessions revealed a startling fact about efforts to re-shape the Madagascar experience through the new mission. In an attempt to prevent the kind of insecurity evident in Madagascar, the 1712 treaty sought to ensure the missionaries’ sustenance and stability. However, it unwittingly created similar discontent in Bourbon, albeit in reversed circumstances. The deprivation that caused dismay in Madagascar was simply replaced with a keen sense that the missionaries in Bourbon were living in conditions of plenty that were unbecoming to Vincentians. Crucially, the criticism did not spring solely from outsiders, as some members of the missionary community candidly identified what they saw as waywardness in others.

The first sign of internal divisions came when Houbert drew attention to what he saw as the extravagance of the island’s superior, Daniel Renou. This time the subject of contention was not plantations, but the house Renou was in the

\textsuperscript{43} ACM, IBR, 1504, Correspondence between Compagnie des Indes and Conseil provincial, extract of letter 23 April 1723: ‘…les prêtres ont une habitation dans l’île fort éloignée du presbytère, et qu’ils y cultivent même des arbres de café…’

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid. ‘Les soins temporels les détournent des spirituels auxquels ils sont consacrés. D’ailleurs, il ne convient pas que vous souffriez les gens d’Eglise posséder des terrains au-delà de ceux qui sont nécessaires à leur subsistance.’

\textsuperscript{45} ACM, IBR, 1504, Extract of deliberation of the Conseil supérieur de Bourbon, 18 March 1725: ‘…qui leur y est accordé est trop considérable, tant pour son étendue que pour sa situation avantageuse à la culture du Caffé de Moka…’

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
process of building for himself. According to Houbert’s 1721 report, Renou spared nothing to make the house ‘magnificent,’ and he estimated that 1,000 écus had been spent on the project:

He has not contented himself with a common and ordinary building like all the honest people of the island have, even the most comfortable and the richest, but he needed ornaments which distinguish him and put him above all the others without exception.  

Houbert framed his condemnation in decidedly Vincentian language, claiming that the ‘excessive expenses’ Renou had made were ‘against the simplicity of [the priestly] state.’

Another dispute illustrated further points of division between Houbert and Renou, this time regarding their roles in the colonial government. Article thirteen of the foundation contract appointed the Vincentians to the provincial council, which acted as the island’s government council and main law court. The council was usually established for most French overseas territories and consisted of the most prominent colonists and planters. In Bourbon, the Vincentians were given a consultative and deliberative vote in all civil matters, and sat second in rank to the governor on the council. On 2 January 1715, shortly after their arrival, the first four priests swore their oath as councilors. Until 1718, the Vincentian contingent constituted a sizable influence on the council: four clerics sat on a nine member body. At this point, the missionaries appeared to be in a strong position.

According to a letter written by Renou to Bonnet in 1721, sparks of discontent were kindled when changes were made to the missionaries’ rank on the council. The new Compagnie des Indes had procured for one of its members on the council, sieur Desforges-Boucher, a brevet making him a lieutenant du roi.

---

47 RT, 3:293: ‘Il ne s’est pas contenté d’un bâtiment commun et ordinaire comme l’ont tous les honestes gens de l’isle, même les plus accommodez et les plus riches, mais il luy fallut des ornements qui le distinguent et le mettent audessus de tous les autres sans en excepter aucun.’
48 Ibid., ‘...[les] dépenses excessives qu’il a faites pour des choses superflues et qui sont contre la simplicité de notre état.’
49 Albert Lougnon. L’Île Bourbon pendant la Régence (Nérac: G.Couderc, 1956), 84.
50 Ibid., 119.
Subsequently, the governor of Bourbon, Joseph Beauvolliers de Courchant, wrote to Renou explaining that Boucher’s new dignity in the realm meant that he, and not the missionaries, was entitled to the second rank on the council.\(^{51}\) Initially, Renou’s letter to Bonnet on the matter recognised the negative effects of the missionaries’ secular dignity, saying that he had communicated the change to his confreres in Bourbon, and that all had agreed that ‘these points of honour, and rights of precedence etc. did not warrant that we put ourselves out’ defending them. The missionaries were therefore disposed to cede the second rank ‘with a good heart’ to Desforges-Boucher.\(^{52}\)

His disavowal notwithstanding, Renou went on to make remarks which flatly contradicted the stance of good-hearted humility the missionaries had decided to pursue. While he recognised as inappropriate the points of honour the Vincentians enjoyed in the island’s government, he claimed that they nevertheless intended to register their protest against the measures because their rank was ‘accorded to the ecclesiastics by the Company in order to honour the sacred dignity which they bear.’\(^{53}\) Renou also invoked the tradition of the realm’s assemblies and estates general, ‘which give the second rank to the ecclesiastical order.’\(^{54}\) He justified the missionaries’ complaint by claiming ‘we owed this respect to what the Company had arranged in our favour,’ and stated that they were not willing be deprived of such favour ‘without at least protesting against the attack people are making against our rights.’ Renou made a final plea to Bonnet to settle the matter with Company officials.\(^{55}\)

At this point, Houbert joined the fray. Also writing to the superior general, Houbert confirmed the protest led by the prefect apostolic against the actions of the Company, but laid his support squarely with the latter, saying that both Desforges-Boucher and the Company were within their rights to insist on new seating

\(^{51}\) Beauvolliers de Courchant was governor from 1718 to 1723.  
\(^{52}\) AN, M/214, n.9. Fragment of letter from Renou to Bonnet, circa 1721: “…ces sortes de points d’honneur, de droits de préséance etc ne méritoient pas que nous nous missions fort en peine…”  
\(^{53}\) Ibid. “…accordée aux ecclésiastiques par la compagnie pour honorer la dignité sacrée dont ils sont revêtus…”  
\(^{54}\) Ibid. “…qui donne le second rang à l’ordre ecclésiastique…”  
\(^{55}\) Ibid. ’…nous devions ce respect à ce que la compagnie ait réglé en notre faveur de ne pas nous en laisser dépouiller sans du moins protester contre l’atteinte qu’on donne à notre droit…”
arrangements. Furthermore, Houbert highlighted the fact that the dispute distracted his confreres from the Congregation’s core spiritual functions:

I have also advised our [confreres] not to push this affair any more, [as it] could very well only attract confusion to us, all the more so as it concerns something purely temporal, and does not have anything to do either with the glory of God, nor the salvation of our neighbour.\textsuperscript{56}

Houbert ended his assessment by suggesting that the missionaries cease to participate in the council, because the role ‘has made us odious to several inhabitants’ and had brought no advantage to them either.\textsuperscript{57} According to Houbert, the Company took advantage of the council’s meetings only to bolster its own interests, and not spiritual affairs.\textsuperscript{58}

The missionaries’ uncomfortable position on the council came to the fore again over another issue. In his 1721 letter, Houbert reported the arrival of pirates to Bourbon’s shores. Groups of these pirates had terrorised the islands since the end of the seventeenth century, demanding refreshments and provisions and engaging colonists in trade.\textsuperscript{59} In response to this, both the commercial Company and the crown issued various instructions in 1701, 1709, and 1711, forbidding islanders to receive or help these wandering criminals.\textsuperscript{60} However, Houbert revealed that the Company had issued instructions to the governor to receive pirates wishing to avail of amnesties in accordance with legislation approved in 1719.\textsuperscript{61} On 25 November 1720, the council, with the missionaries in attendance, granted amnesty to a group of these pirates. A few months later, Houbert reported that the Company had instructed

\textsuperscript{56} RT, 3:294-295, Houbert to Bonnet, 3 November 1721: ‘Aussi ay-je fort conseillé à nos MM de ne point pousser cette affaire plus avant, qui pourroit bien ne nous attirer que de la confusion, d’autant plus qu’il ne s’agit ici que d’une chose purement temporelle, et où il ny va ny de la gloire de Dieu, ny du salut du prochain.’

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 295: ‘…nous a rendu odieux à plusieurs habitants, sans leur procurer aucun avantage.’

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid. ‘Messieurs les officiers de la Compagnie…n’ont coutume d’assembler que lorsqu’il s’agit ou de favoriser leurs intérêts ou de vuidier des procès odieux.’

\textsuperscript{59} Lougnon, L’Île Bourbon, 159-160.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 160-161.

\textsuperscript{61} Lougnon discusses the background to this new legislation in ibid., 166-168
the governor to ‘receive [the pirates] if they come here, and even to attract them as much as possible.’

The decision dismayed the missionaries. Disturbed by the possibility of illicit commerce on Bourbon, a contravention of the seventh commandment which could ‘ravage the vineyard of the Lord…on this island,’ Houbert revealed that all four missionaries on Bourbon gathered in Saint-Denis to lay out the principles that they would follow in any future engagement with the pirates. The first of these measures was to refuse any gift, ornaments, or mass offerings from them. Furthermore, the missionaries made demands of the islanders themselves, forbidding them to buy stolen merchandise from the pirates, or give them anything unnecessary ‘under pain of restitution or, if they refuse, deprivation of the sacraments.’ Finally, the missionaries demanded that if the buccaneers wished to convert, they would be obliged to make restitution of their stolen goods.

The missionaries’ reaction failed, and the inhabitants of Saint-Paul welcomed the filibusters ‘with open arms.’ Furthermore, the Company’s response to the Vincentians’ rival conclave in Saint-Denis was decidedly negative. Commissioners of the Company in Paris accused them of ‘sowing trouble in the colony’ and permanently excluded the missionaries from sitting as magistrates on the council on 16 January 1723. Clearly, both the missionaries’ previous pretentions over seating arrangements on the council and their attempts to cut across its authority on the pirate question were decisive in this decision, although the metropolitan authorities invoked the fact that the Jesuits and Capuchins were also banned from ‘getting involved in the affairs of commerce’ in Pondichery to justify it.

The aftermath of this incident once again exposed sharp differences between the Vincentians on their role in society. In his 1721 letter to Bonnet, Houbert

---

62 RT, 3:295: ‘…les recevoir s’il s’en présente, et de les attirer même autant qu’il le pourra…’ Houbert was referring to an ordinance of Beauvolliers de Crouchant issued on 10 January 1721: Lougnon, L’Île Bourbon, 169.
63 Ibid., 296: ‘…ravageassent la vigne du Seigneur…dans cette isle…’
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., ‘…sous peine de restitution et, en cas de refus, de privation des sacraments.’
66 Ibid., 297
67 Commissioners of the Company to Beauvolliers de Crouchant, 2 April 1722 cited in Lougnon, L’Île Bourbon, 172.
68 Ibid., 172, n.40: ‘…se mêler des affaires du commerce de la Compagnie…’
Chapter 5: Re-establishing Madagascar

described how some missionaries found the task of keeping and executing their adopted principles regarding the pirates easier than others. When it became evident that their policies were being ignored, some wondered ‘whether these rules were not too severe and if we should soften them.’ Houbert leveled tough criticism at Renou, whom he accused of backtracking on the missionaries’ policies, saying ‘he has changed his mind several times on this matter since the [missionaries’] rules were made.’ For example, Houbert accused Renou of giving his consent to an ordinance of the governor which compelled the islanders to provide provisions to the pirates. Quoting Renou in his letter, Houbert claimed the prefect had argued his case by appealing to the respect owed to secular laws approved by the ‘prince’ (Louis XV), which offered an amnesty to former filibusters. These laws were authorized by the design of seeking ‘the public good and the right of the people, which gives [the Prince] the power’ to procure the survival of the colony. However, Houbert identified serious moral error in what he saw as Renou’s giving in to political power. Attacking the ‘odious system’ of accommodation, he stated it was ‘horrible and a monster in Christian morals.’ In contrast to Renou’s support of the prince’s law, Houbert invoked the ‘law of God’ and ‘forum of conscience’ which ‘these princes do not claim to disturb.’ It was clear from Houbert’s remarks that he felt certain Vincentians had sacrificed principles for expediency, and he had few kind words for the approach of the Vincentians based at the parish of Saint-Paul either. Although he acknowledged they were not able to swallow the accommodation entirely, Houbert acidly noted that they had ‘combattu it only feebly.’

Behind Houbert’s critique lay a fundamental difference in approach when it came to the missionaries’ role in the government of the colony. Clearly, Renou had a far more realistic understanding of its limitations than Houbert. Moreover, as leader of the church community on the island, it was his responsibility to ensure the

69 RT, 3:300, ‘...si ces règles n’étoient point trop sévères et si on ne devoit point les adoucir...’
70 Ibid. ‘...il a varié plusieurs fois sur cette matière dans ses sentiments depuis les règlements faits.’
71 Ibid., 301 ‘...par la vue du bien public et par le droit des gens qui luy donne le pouvoir.’
72 Ibid. ‘...horrible et un monstre dans la morale chrétienne.’
73 Ibid., 302: ‘...à quoy ces princes ne prétendent pas toucher.’
74 Ibid., 301-302: ‘[ils]...n’ont pourtant pas pu gouter tout à fait ce systeme, mais aussi ils ne l’ont combattu que feiblement.’
missionaries’ presence did not become totally irrelevant. A degree of compromise was therefore deemed necessary. This approach ran headlong into Houbert’s theologically-infused convictions, which refused any relaxation of the missionaries’ core principles in favour of royal power. Ultimately, the most important detail in Houbert’s exposition was the fact that it shared much of the tone and language of the Congregation’s critics in the post de Paul era. By far his most stinging attack on Renou came when he said that the prefect’s new tactic was ‘very false and very odious, and entirely unworthy of a man of intelligence and probity like him.’ As a result, Houbert unwittingly added an important internal voice to a growing chorus of critics who, while acknowledging the nobility of Vincentian ideals, insisted that the missionaries’ principles were often corrupted in their dealings with secular power.

II

Most of the divisions of this early period were limited to two of the four priests on the island, Houbert and Renou, whose constant dueling ended soon after. In circumstances which once again drew the criticism of Houbert, Renou left Île de Bourbon at the end of 1721, and never returned. As for Houbert, he died after a protracted illness on 20 June 1722. But the disappearance of the two protagonists did not occur before significant fault lines had been exposed over the missionaries’ roles on the island. Even if the truth was stretched, the Vincentians’ manner of living had attracted the censure of secular officials who accused them of running afoul of their contract and engaging in commerce. Furthermore, the missionaries themselves had reached very different conclusions about the best way to mix their temporal roles in the nascent colonial society with their pressing spiritual goals. This made for a disappointing start to the ‘re-established’ Madagascar mission.

At the end of his 1721 letter, Houbert pleaded with Bonnet to give missionaries instructions and advice that might help them during what he called ‘unfortunate times,’ in order that they could ‘bear as good missionaries the works

75 *Ibid.*, 303: ‘…ce système de M Renou paroit et tres faux et tres odieux, et tout a fait indigne d’un home d’esprit et de probité comme luy…’
77 ACM, 1506. See also *Catalogue du personnel*, 306.
and perils to which we are exposed.’ Yet, Bonnet, at least at the beginning, does not appear to have been alarmed. Although any letters he wrote to the missionaries have been lost, in six separate letters to the members of the Congregation between 1717 and 1723, Bonnet communicated assessments of the missionaries’ work which revealed nothing but his satisfaction with the mission. For example, Bonnet stated in 1717 that the missionaries were ‘perfectly happy with their people and their people perfectly satisfied with them.’ In 1719, he wrote that the missionaries were ‘strongly united’ and that Bourbon itself was an ‘earthly paradise.’ And in 1723, Bonnet even dared to use the term ‘success’ when referring to the missionaries’ efforts.

Bonnet seemed even less concerned by issues arising out of the missionaries’ possession of plantations. In one oblique reference made in 1722, he informed the Congregation that the missionaries needed more coadjutor brothers to ‘look after the cultivation of their land, from which they take their subsistence.’ At least from his perspective in France, his lack of anxiety in this matter seemed well-founded. After all, accusations about the missionaries’ ‘immense’ revenue could be dismissed as nothing more than thinly-veiled feelings of jealousy amongst other planters. Missionary planters, unlike their lay peers on the island, were given the use of free slave labour by the terms of their concessions and did not have to buy slaves. Moreover, as celibate clergymen their lands were surely coveted because they did not fall victim to division among heirs, a phenomenon which heavily reduced the productivity of entrepreneurs in Bourbon. As far as the Vincentians’ roles as members of the council were concerned, even less anxiety about drift from corporate practice emanated from Saint-Lazare. This was entirely natural given that Bonnet himself signed and approved the relevant terms of the foundation contract in 1712.

78 Ibid., 311: ‘…pour nous aider à supporter en bons missionnaires les travaux et les périls où nous sommes exposés.’
79 RC, 1:293, 1 January 1717: ‘… parfaitement contents de leurs peuples, et les peuples parfaitement satisfaits d’eux.’
80 Ibid., 322, 26 December 1719.
81 Ibid., 331, 1 January 1723.
82 Ibid., 327, 1 January 1722: ‘…pour veiller à la culture de leur territoire, d’où ils tirent leur subsistance.’
83 Haudrère, La Compagnie des Indes, 1:662.
Chapter 5: Re-establishing Madagascar

However, Bonnet’s lack of concern should not hide reality. Decades earlier in Madagascar, the missionaries’ temporal neglect went hand-in-hand with a lost sense of vocation and corporate life. Ironically, the perceived remedies for this neglect had the same effect in Bourbon during the mission’s first phase. The gift of plantations was, to be sure, a handsome means of counteracting abuse, but as Hanon’s post-Revolution report adjudged, it was a double-edged sword. The Vincentians’ properties actually increased in size and number. This was largely due to the erection of new establishments, which by 1736 stood at six parishes, each with their own lands. In 1734 Louis Criais, then prefect apostolic, revealed to the superior general that the Vincentians’ combined plantations were well in excess of four hundred *arpents*. Despite this, by the late 1720s and early 1730s, there were few signs that temporal certainties had created a healthy Vincentian community on Bourbon. In a letter written around 1727, Criais informed Bonnet that he was sending another of the Congregation’s members, a coadjutor brother named LeGrand, back to France. Without elaborating, he claimed that LeGrand had committed ‘heavy faults’ and had ‘edified the public so little.’ Later, Criais decried against François Roby, saying he was ‘anxious and inconstant,’ and that ‘everyone in the community felt antipathy’ towards him. Furthermore, the increased holdings only ensured that the Vincentians remained on the defensive long after Renou and Houbert’s contretemps. In the same letter, Criais alluded to ‘noise’ created by the missionaries’ largest plantation at Saint-Paul and wondered whether ‘[there was] so much to denounce.’

---

84 ACM, IBR, 1504, Criais to Bonnet, n.d. Perboyre dated this letter to 8 December 1734. Criais mentioned that Pierre Benoit Dumas was governor of the island in his letter, and Dumas ceased to be so in 1735. Criais also alluded to the missionary François Léon, who was only sent to Bourbon in December 1733: *RC*, 1:416. Dates between this date and 1735 are therefore plausible, and I follow Perboyre’s judgement.

85 *Ibid.*, fragment of letter from Criais to Bonnet, n.d: ‘lourdes fautes’; ‘si peu édifié le public.’ Lougnon dates this heavily mutilated letter to 1727: *Archives départementales de La Réunion. Documents concernant les Îles de Bourbon et de France pendant la régie de la Compagnie des Indes, répertoire de pièces conservées dans divers dépôts d'archives de Paris* (Nérac: G.Couderc, 1956), 180. Given that Criais mentioned René Abot in this missive, the letter was doubtless written before 18 August 1730, the date when Abot died.

86 *Ibid.*, Criais to Bonnet, 8 December 1734: ‘…plus inquiet et plus inconstant…’; ‘…tous ont une grande antipathie…’

87 *Ibid.* ‘Y a-t-il donc tant à se récrier?’
Feelings that the missionaries were in the business of profit remained alive. By the terms of their foundation contract with the Company, the Vincentians were prohibited from receiving any gift or bequest in any form whatsoever during their stay on the island. However, in a deposition referring to an incident on the Île de France in 1733, the superior general described ‘brouilleries’ between François Roby, and a deputy of the local prosecutor, over money entrusted to the priest by a sick islander, one Paul Baragué. According to the affidavit, the deputy threatened to seize the goods and arrest Roby if the money was not handed over to him. The missionaries on the island subsequently yielded, but the general lamented the ‘bad disposition of certain people towards them.’ On 11 December 1734, the Company wrote to the governors in Bourbon noting that the Vincentians were depositories of funds which ‘they not only [had] not informed anybody of, but some of which they still kept hidden and buried.’ In response to this news, the Company ordered officials in Bourbon to seize the funds and prevent them being used ‘for the personal profit of Messieurs of Saint-Lazare.’

Some missionaries continued to embrace the often exotic life of planter-colonists, which continued to cause division in the community. In 1734, Criais expressed exasperation with another of his confreres, Jean-François Desbeurs, whom he claimed had ruined the house at Saint-Paul by his ‘little economy’ and ‘bad deals.’ According to Criais, Desbeurs had developed a passion for buying horses which he called ‘depraved.’ Clearly, Bonnet’s failure to provide decisive relief when confronted with Houbert’s pleas for guidance ensured that the mission revived elements of the Madagascar experience that might have been avoided otherwise.

---

88 Ibid., 1712 Treaty, art.4.
89 ACM, IBM, 1502, ‘Mémoire que le supérieur Général de la Congrégation présente à Messieurs les Directeurs de la Royal Compagnie des Indes touchant les Isles de Bourbon et de France, circa 1736’: ‘...la mauvaise disposition où quelques personnes sont contre eux...’
90 Company directors to Conseil supérieur of Bourbon, 11 December 1734 in Lougnon, Correspondance du conseil supérieur de Bourbon et de la Compagnie des Indes, 10 March 1732 - 23 January 1736, 242: ‘...non seulement rendu compte à personne, mais dont ils tenoient encore une partie cachée et enterrée.’
91 Ibid. ‘...faire employ de ces fonds...en observant néanmoins que, sous quelque prétexte que ce soit, ils ne peuvent tourner au profit personnel de Messieurs de Saint-Lazare.’
92 ACM IBM, 1504, Criais to Bonnet, 8 December 1734: ‘peu d’économie’; ‘mauvais marchés.’
III

One of the defining characteristics of the Madagascar mission was the abuse that missionaries believed they encountered at the hands of their lay patrons. At that time, missionaries like Nacquart and Bourot had found it difficult to live as members of an apostolic society in the turbulent colonial setting. Their legitimate complaints were often ignored, leading to another characteristic of the mission, the feeling of decline rather than improvement in the missionaries’ conditions after a significant period of time. In many respects, the evidence from the first twenty years of the Mascaigne mission uncovers a similar pattern of disputes, largely relating to articles of the 1712 treaty which were distinct from the issue of land holdings. However, one significant difference emerged: the second time round the missionaries showed tremendous forcefulness and resourcefulness in defending their interests and seeking solutions.

At the outset, the crown and commercial Company had sought cooperation with and respect toward the Vincentians from secular agents on the island. Just a week after the signing of the treaty on 29 December 1712, the minister for the marine in Paris wrote to the island’s governor in terms which echoed the establishment contracts for the Congregation’s royal foundations in metropolitan France. Pontchartrain explained to Parat that it was the king’s command that the Vincentians be allowed to ‘exercise their functions in tranquility’ and that they be given ‘all the protection that they will need.’ Evidently, the potential for breaches of duty in this regard by the colonial authorities was a cause of concern to the crown, and Pontchartrain instructed Parat to ‘have every regard for the missionaries that they deserve.’ 93 Later, the Company directors backed up these summonses by ordering secular agents on the island to keep ‘the entire colony in the respect due to religion and to its ministers.’ 94

Despite these instructions, the missives of early Bourbon missionaries sounded all too familiar complaints over the Company’s failure to care for them

---

93 CAOM, F/3/208 fol.28, Pontchartrain to Parat, 29 December 1712: ‘…l’intention de Sa Majesté est que vous leur laissiez exercer tranquillement leurs fonctions, que vous leur donniez toute la protection dont ils auront besoin et que vous aïez pour eux tous les égards qu’ils méritent.’
94 RT, 1:5, 10 November 1717: ‘…(en contentant) toute la Colonie dans le respect dû à la Religion et à ses ministres.’
once they arrived on the island. Most points of contention related to items in the foundation contract, especially the Vincentians’ pensions of 300 livres per year. In 1715, Pontchartrain related the missionaries’ complaints to Bonnet that their salaries had not been paid and were too small for survival. In response to these complaints, the minister for the marine assured Bonnet that the money would be sent on the next ship to Bourbon. In his 1721 letter, Renou claimed the missionaries were badly paid by the Company, and described conditions which rhymed perfectly with Bourot’s comments about life in Madagascar decades previously when he reported that the missionaries had to wear the clothes of their deceased confreres:

It is not conceivable to what point of extremity the lack of being paid has reduced us to the present, in a new establishment which could not be made without very large expenses in order to lodge us, furnish us, provide us with cattle for our subsistence, buy [slaves], feed them and ourselves too etc. We are on the verge of going totally nude for want of material to clothe us, and money to buy some...

Given the missionaries’ capacity for self-subsistence through their plantations, there may have been more than a little exaggeration in Renou’s account, but missionaries nevertheless continued to grumble. In 1734, Louis Criais revealed to the superior general that the missionaries’ salaries had remained the same since Renou’s era, despite considerable inflation in the local market. In addition, he observed that the missionaries had not been paid any stipends for two years. In a separate letter to a friend in France written at the same time, Criais claimed that the missionaries

95 AN, MAR, B2/241, fol. 718, Pontchartrain to directors of the Company, 5 June 1715.
96 Ibid., fol. 789, same to Bonnet, 19 June 1715.
97 AN, M/214, Renou to Bonnet, circa 1721: ‘Il n’est pas concevable à quel point d’extrémité nous a réduit jusqu’à présent le manque d’être paeiz dans un nouvel établissement qui ne s’est pu faire sans de très grosses dépenses pour nous loger, meubler, pourvoir de troupeaux pour notre subsistance, acheter des noirs, les entretenir et nous aussi etc. Nous sommes à la veille d’aller tous nuds faute de toile pour nous habiller, ni d’argent pour en acheter.’
98 ACM, IBR 1504, Criais to Bonnet, 8 December 1734.
‘scraped a living’ on the island, and were often ‘reduced to their wits to subsist’ there.\footnote{Ibid., Criais to Gilbert Noiret, 3 November 1734 to 8 December 1734: ‘…nous ne faisons que vivoyer dans l’isle et…nous y sommes assés souvent réduits aux expédients pour pouvoir subsister.’}

Closely related to the question of their salaries was the missionaries’ canonical status on the islands. The 1712 foundation contract entrusted the parishes to the Congregation, but ambiguity soon emerged about the missionaries’ exact title over these, especially whether they were immovable \textit{curés} or simply Company chaplains. In 1721, Renou complained that the Company had failed to recognise that the missionaries were even on Bourbon, and seemed to believe that they would be soon replaced by Capuchins.\footnote{AN, M/214, Renou to Bonnet, circa 1721.} The Company itself suggested the Vincentians were disposable employees when it issued regulations in November 1732 forbidding the Vincentians from using the title \textit{curé titulaire}.\footnote{These regulations were mentioned in a letter written to the directors from Bourbon, 31 December 1733: Lougnon, \textit{Correspondance 1732-1736}, 159.} These regulations were met with vehement opposition by the Congregation. In 1734 Criais claimed that the missionaries were ‘ceaselessly exposed to the caprice and to the variations of a band of merchants.’\footnote{ACM, IBR, 1504, Criais to Noiret, 3 November 1734 to 8 December 1734: ‘…sans cesse exposés aux caprices et aux variations d’une bande de marchands…’} In an interesting inversion of the Company’s previous accusations that the Vincentians were engaging in commerce, Criais claimed that the Company’s officials spoke ‘like bishops and popes’ and treated the affairs of religion like merchandise.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, ‘Ils parlent, ces messieurs…en Evêques et je serais tenté de dire en papes.’} Criais’ missives sounded more ominous notes to the superior general in Paris, when he declared that the missionaries found it impossible to live decently in Bourbon, and that any future missionaries would not ‘reasonably be able to stay [there].’\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 1506, Criais to Bonnet, 12 March 1733: ‘…aucun des missionnaires que vous pourrez envoyer dans la suite ne pourra raisonnablement y rester.’}

Another front in the Congregation’s ongoing war with its commercial patrons opened when it accepted the pastoral care of Bourbon’s neighbouring island Île de France in 1721. Projects for the appointment of the Vincentians to the island had originally been supported by missionaries on the ground; Renou in 1721 suggested to Bonnet that it was ‘important…that [Île Bourbon and Île de France] be governed
by pastors who are members of the same body.\textsuperscript{105} On 22 January 1722, Bonnet informed the Congregation that four of its members based in France, Jean-Baptiste Borthon (who would act as vice-prefect apostolic), Gabriel Igou, Etienne Lecocq and Pierre Adam were \textit{en route} to work in the island’s two parishes, Notre-Dame in Port Bourbon and Saint-Louis.\textsuperscript{106} However, relations between Vincentians and the colonists in these soon became even worse than those on Bourbon, while the early history of the mission was also dominated by the colony’s many troubles, caused by successive famine, cyclones, and moral disorders. The situation was so poor that Borthon and Igou moved to Bourbon for a time shortly after, in 1724.\textsuperscript{107} By the end of the decade, conditions on the island were still poor. In circular letters to the Congregation in 1729, Bonnet admitted that the island was not as ‘established, organised or policed’ as its neighbour. He was at first loath to lay blame on the Compagnie des Indes, saying only that the Company ‘[was working] seriously’ at establishing order, and that “the beginnings [were] always very difficult.”\textsuperscript{108} Nevertheless, two years later the superior general reported similar findings, and noted that Igou and Borthon had suffered since their arrival there.\textsuperscript{109}

The controversies over the missionaries’ status and entitlements on both islands revealed a similar pattern to that previously played out in Madagascar. However, where the Madagascar missionaries had limited their complaints to the superior general, the missionaries on both islands of the Mascareignes responded with a robust defense of their interests and adopted a multipronged effort in doing so. The 1721 Saint-Denis gathering called to deal with the pirate amnesty unveiled harder missionaries who took bold steps to assert their authority in the colonial environment. Then in 1726, faced with what he called the ‘atrocious and public insults made to pastors and to priests,’ Borthon placed the entire settlement of Port

\textsuperscript{105} AN, M/214, Renou to Bonnet, 1721: ‘…important…qu’elles fussent gouvernés par des pasteurs qui fussent membres d’un même corps…’

\textsuperscript{106} RC, 1:327.


\textsuperscript{108} RC, 1:353-354, 1 January 1729: ‘…la colonie de l’île Maurice n’est pas encore si bien établie, si bien formée et si bien policiée…’; ‘Les commencements sont toujours fort difficiles.’

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 378, 1 January 1731.
Bourbon on the Île de France under interdict.\footnote{CAOM, F/5/A 8, 31 March 1926: “…insultes atroces et publiques faites à des pasteurs et à des prestres…”} Similarly, threats of interdict by the missionaries on Bourbon continued to be made up to 1735.\footnote{Conseil supérieur in Bourbon to directors, 31 December 1735 in Lougnon, Correspondance 1732-1736, 314.} As for their neglected pensions, the missionaries affirmed in a letter to Bonnet in 1733 that they all agreed it would be better to abandon the islands, leaving the Company to ‘find some priests disinterested enough to serve the island for free and to live there on thin air.’\footnote{ACM, IBR, 1506, Extract of letter from Criais to Bonnet, 12 March 1733: “…chercher des prêtres assez désintéressés pour desservir l’Île gratuitement et pour y vivre de l’air du temps.”} Somewhat sarcastically, Criais, who was writing on behalf of the missionaries, doubted the Company would ‘find any [priests] of this nature.’ In 1734, he wrote again that the missionaries were tired of ‘projects…that usually end in words and promises only,’ and again told Bonnet they were ready to leave ‘at his good pleasure.’\footnote{Ibid., 1504. Criais to Bonnet, 8 December 1734: ‘projets…qui n’aboutissent pour l’ordinaire qu’à des paroles et des promesses…’}

But the missionaries did not simply complain to their superior general. On 11 November 1728, Borthon and Igou wrote to the minister of the marine in Paris decrying the ‘pitiable state’ of the colony, which they blamed on the ‘bad behaviour of the officers and employees on the island.’\footnote{ACM, IBR, 1504, Mémoire of Jean-Baptiste Borthon and Gabriel Igou, 11 November 1728.} In his letters from the early 1730s, Criais revealed that the Congregation sought advice from the parlement of Paris and protection from powerful quarters externally, such as Cardinal de Fleury, the controller general of finance, and the archbishop of Paris.\footnote{Criais referred to these appeals in his letters to Bonnet and Noiret in 1734. The archbishop of Paris at this time was Boulenger’s old critic in Marseille, Charles Vintimille du Luc.} The missionaries’ most audacious move came when they wrote to King Louis XV in 1733. Announcing that their troubles had brought ‘such great obstacles to the success of their mission and to their curial functions,’ the missionaries begged the king to accord them his ‘powerful protection.’\footnote{AN, S/6717, (see printed copy in RT, 5:140-141): ‘…de si grands obstacles au succès de leur mission et aux fonctions curiales…” This manuscript is undated, but the chain of events permits it to be dated to approximately 1733.} They took issue with the Company’s new regulations which refused to recognise their rights as curés and beseeched the king to fix the
conditions of their establishment, so that they would not be subject to the lay ‘employees [who composed] the Council.’

In 1734, the missionaries’ clear displeasure finally produced a more decisive response from Saint-Lazare. On 20 November, Bonnet declared to the Congregation that its members were pulling out of the Mascareignes. This circular letter shared important features with Alméras’ formal termination of the Madagascar mission in 1671. Both decisions came after the missions had operated for similar lengths of time. Furthermore, Bonnet made sure to state that his recall of the missionaries was, like Alméras’ before him, taken in solemn consultation with his councilors at Saint-Lazare. Despite these similarities, however, Bonnet’s letter of 1734 was remarkable for its difference. Its most striking feature was its curt, almost matter-of-fact, language. Alméras had begun his 1671 letter with a lengthy lament on the perils, losses and disasters of the Madagascar mission. Moreover, Alméras’s missive had reminisced about the spiritual hopes that lay at the core of the project’s origins, referring for example to de Paul’s original wishes and the desire to spread the faith among the unbaptised. In this respect, Bonnet’s letter could scarcely have been more different. Acknowledging simply that the Congregation had sent missionaries to the island twenty years previously ‘by order of Our Holy Father the Pope Clement XI,’ Bonnet explained that the Congregation was withdrawing because the Compagnie des Indes ‘no longer [wanted] vicars apostolic, nor titular and immovable parish priests, but simply desservants, waged chaplains, and some priests whom they can dispose of, hand to hand, like their domestics.’ Bonnet’s letter contained no references to de Paul or what had inspired the mission to the ‘poor islanders’; in fact, the 1734 missive focused largely on temporal achievements or lack thereof, admitting that the priests of Bourbon ‘were not too bad because their brothers [in the Congregation]…had made for them some plantations and gardens, with the help of

---

117 Ibid. ‘…employers composants le Conseil…’
118 RC, 1:433, 20 November 1734: ‘…ne veulent plus de vicaires apostoliques, ni de curés titulaires et inamovibles, mais de simples desservants, des aumôniers à gages, et des prêtres dont ils puissent disposer, de la main à la main, comme de leurs domestiques…’

215
the blacks, their slaves.' On the other hand, Bonnet said the missionaries of Île de France lacked everything needed for their life and upkeep.\textsuperscript{119}

It is reasonable to assume that Bonnet’s letter surprised Vincentians, not least because it represented a sudden volte-face for the superior general. In only January of the same year, Bonnet had repeated his positivity of the 1720s, claiming that all the Vincentians of both islands were living in ‘peace, in good health, and in the tranquil exercise of their functions.’\textsuperscript{120} Moreover, the November epistle ignored some recent improvements in church life on the island. For instance, in June 1734, Criais testified to the construction of a new chapel for one of Bourbon’s parishes, which was a gift to the missionaries along with lands and slaves.\textsuperscript{121} It appears that the commercial Company was also surprised by Bonnet’s precipitate action. In a letter to the council of Bourbon, the directors in Paris stated that they did not see ‘what could have discontented Messieurs de Saint-Lazare,’ and added that the Vincentians were wrong to think of themselves as \textit{curés titulaires} of the island, simply because no canonical erection had been made to that effect by an episcopal ordinary.\textsuperscript{122}

Bonnet’s 1734 letter decisively changed the course of events in the mission’s history. Initially, the Company reacted by attempting to find replacements for the Vincentians.\textsuperscript{123} When this failed, Company officials, especially those based in the Mascareignes, adopted a more conciliatory posture vis-à-vis the Congregation. In fact, the Company’s more placatory mood can be traced to the same letter referring to the Vincentians’ discontent on the islands, at the end of which the directors ordered officials on the ground to pay them ‘all the attentions, politeness and deference due to their character.’\textsuperscript{124} Then, just a few months after Bonnet’s crucial announcement, the council in Bourbon made flattering appraisals of the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{119} \textit{Ibid.}, ‘… ne sont pas trop mal, parce que nos frères… leur ont fait des habitations et des jardins, avec le secours des noirs, leurs esclaves.’
\item \textsuperscript{120} \textit{Ibid.}, 1:416, 1 January 1734.
\item \textsuperscript{121} \textit{RT}, 3:317, declaration of Criais confirming construction of chapel for Saint-Louis parish, 22 June 1734.
\item \textsuperscript{122} Directors to the conseil supérieur of Bourbon, 11 December 1734 in Lougon, \textit{Correspondance 1732-1736}, 240: ‘…ce qui a pu donner sujet de mécontentement à Messieurs de Saint-Lazare…’
\item \textsuperscript{123} \textit{AM}: 27:171.
\item \textsuperscript{124} Directors to conseil supérieur, 11 December 1734: ‘…toutes les attentions, politesses, et défférences dues à leurs caracteres…’
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
missionaries, saying ‘all fulfil their functions to the edification and satisfaction of the public.’\textsuperscript{125} Furthermore, the council conceded that the Vincentians only sought ‘a fixed and constant [system] that assures them honest subsistence and upkeep.’\textsuperscript{126}

Unfortunately, Bonnet did not live to see the real outcome of his letter, for he died on 10 December 1735. On 27 July 1736, after a series of meetings with the controller general of finance and Bonnet’s successor, Jean Couty, the directors of the Company agreed brand new terms for the mission’s temporal and spiritual privileges.\textsuperscript{127} Paying homage to the edification brought to the island by the Vincentians, the treaty made good on the ‘permanent, fixed and invariable’ base which they had sought for so long.\textsuperscript{128} Its terms marked critical advances on its predecessor. The first remedy to the missionaries’ perceived lack of authority was the first article, which permanently united the parishes on both islands to the Congregation. This settled the question over the missionaries’ status as \textit{curés titulaires}. Next in line was a solution to their salaries. The 1712 treaty had accorded only 300 livres per priest on the island as an annual pension; its counterpart in 1736 awarded 750 per year.\textsuperscript{129} Ultimately, the renegotiated treaty ensured the continuance of the mission up to the Revolution in 1789, and even beyond. To his credit, Bonnet’s threatening letter ensured that a repeat of a fundamental detail of the Madagascar mission, its costly failure, was avoided. This was because it jolted the Company into resolving the missionaries’ complaints. However, it is important to recognise that the treaty dealt solely with secular matters, and left the question of the missionaries’ ultimate purpose in the Mascareignes – evangelisation – completely unaddressed. It is to this we now turn.

\textsuperscript{125} Conseil supérieur of Bourbon to directors, 20 March 1735 in \textit{ibid.}, 266: ‘Tous remplissent leurs fonctions à l’édification et à la satisfaction du publique.’
\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Ibid.}, 267: ‘…un état fixe et constant qui leur assure une subsistence et un entretien honnestes.’
\textsuperscript{127} Jean Couty, superior general from 1736 to 1746.
\textsuperscript{128} Preamble to the treaty between the Congregation and the Compagnie des Indes, 27 July 1736. The preamble can be found in \textit{RT}, 1:118 and the treaty in ACM, IBR, 1506: ‘…une forme permanente, fixe et invariable…’
\textsuperscript{129} \textit{Ibid.}, articles 3 and 4.
IV

One of the striking features of the Mascareignes project, and particularly the correspondence of the early missionaries stationed on both islands, is the remarkably dense coverage given to temporal matters, without equally lengthy reports on spiritual occupations. This seems unusual given that the Mascareignes mission, as a re-establishment of Madagascar, drew all of its value as a second opportunity to fulfil the apostolic goals which had failed in the 1670s. The special attraction of the Madagascar mission had, after all, lain in converting significant numbers of unevangelised peoples. In conceiving the 1648 mission, de Paul had displayed the same solicitude for their spiritual state that he applied to the poor of Folleville. When the Madagascar mission ended, Alméras included the dismal lack of progress among the indigenous population as one of the acute failures of the mission. Decades later, when the Congregation re-established its Madagascar mission in the Mascareignes, the dream of converting non-Europeans was still very much alive. Addressing the missionaries in 1712, Bonnet followed de Paul by referring to their particularly 'holy vocation,' and summoned them to be ‘active and faithful workers for the salvation of the faithful and the conversion of the infidels.’\textsuperscript{130} The new mission therefore offered the Vincentians a precious chance to re-engage with this exotic variation of their \textit{esprit primitif}, and obtain better results.

At the beginning of the mission, however, it was uncertain whether the missionaries would have the benefit of spiritual charges comparable to their poor of the European countryside. A report that Governor Parat sent to his superiors in France in 1714 claimed that the four priests sent by the Congregation sufficed for Bourbon, ‘there being no indigenous of the country.’\textsuperscript{131} Unlike Madagascar, the Mascareignes had no native population at the time the missionaries arrived, although the islands did have a large non-European population. Soon after, the Mascareignes became home to thousands of slaves, purchased mainly from Madagascar, but also the Indian sub-continent and West Africa. According to statistics gathered by

\textsuperscript{130} AN, S/6717, copy of instructions to missionaries, 1712: ‘…pro salute fidelium et infidelium conversione strenue et fideliterque laburatuos.’

\textsuperscript{131} AN, MAR, B/1/14 fol. 29, 22 December 1714: ‘Ces 4 Missionnaires suffisent en cette isle, n’y ayant pas de naturels du pays.’
Régent, in the year the missionaries arrived there were 524 slaves on Île de Bourbon. By 1736, when the Vincentians’ contract for the Mascareignes was renegotiated, this situation had changed dramatically. In these two decades, the non-European population increased exponentially on both islands of the archipelago. From 1723 to 1730, the slave population in Bourbon alone rose from 1,699 to 3,355 souls. By 1736, 6,522 slaves worked on Bourbon’s plantations, dwarfing the European population on the island. Smaller numbers reached Île de France, and in 1735 there were 648 slaves there. These increases meant that the Vincentians’ pastorate on the islands consisted largely of ministry to slaves.

Despite this, the Congregation is rarely discussed in historical studies of Catholic missionary orders and slave societies, probably because Vincentians did not go to the major slave-trading colonies under French domination in the early modern period. French missionary engagement with slave populations was largely concentrated on the islands of the Caribbean, which had attracted French explorers since the 1550s and were colonised in a more organised fashion from the 1620s onwards. Three major religious bodies, the Dominicans, Capuchins and Jesuits, established missions on the islands of French conquest – Saint-Christophe, Martinique, Guadeloupe and Dominica. Parallel efforts at evangelisation were also led by smaller groups of Augustinians and Carmelites. In comparison with the Mascareignes, these colonies hosted giant slave populations; in 1725 the slave population of Île de Bourbon hovered around 1,800, compared with over 31,000 in Guadeloupe the same year. However, the Vincentians’ neglected role in this history is not simply based on mathematical calculations. Besides being numerically less important, Vincentian ministry to slaves did not produce the type of publications emanating from more famous orders. Because they were discouraged from

---

133 Haudrère. La Compagnie française des Indes, 2:650. According to figures gathered by Haudrère, the population of slaves in 1635 was 6,880 compared with 1,716 whites.
134 Régent, La France et ses esclaves, 336.
135 Ibid., 14-20.
137 Régent, La France et ses esclaves, 335-336.
publishing treatises or travel relations, the Vincentians in the Mascareignes never produced the kind of literary output comparable to that of Jean-Baptiste Labat, a Dominican whose many works included valuable testimony on slave conversion and slave-holding in the Caribbean colonies.\textsuperscript{138}

The Vincentians’ institutional ethos sets the Congregation apart from other slave-holding missionary orders of the period. In Martinique, the Jesuits owned one of the biggest sugar factories dependent on slave-labour in 1660. Similarly, the Dominicans and Jesuits on Guadeloupe were among the three biggest slave-holders in the colony, and relied on slaves for their sugar plantations.\textsuperscript{139} But none of these religious orders professed the same kind of affinity and devotion to marginalised groups as the Vincentians. Furthermore, unlike these orders, the Vincentians had a particular history of fighting against the evils of slavery, a history which drew on the apocryphal but much-peddled story of Vincent de Paul’s own escape from enslavement in North Africa.\textsuperscript{140} According to this story, de Paul’s experience of and escape from slavery led him to begin ministries to console and fortify the slaves of Barbarie. This ministry of consolation also included significant efforts to purchase their freedom.\textsuperscript{141} During de Paul’s lifetime, the Congregation’s ministry to slaves was always regarded and spoken of as fully integrated with its general outreach to the marginalised and forgotten, and thus fit perfectly with the rhetoric of the \emph{esprit primitif}.

This prior history of involvement with slavery was, however, a poor predictor of the attitudes the Vincentians would take in a colonial environment. The slaves of Barbarie were, in the main, European Christians captured by wandering pirates and held by enemy ‘infidels’. Vincentian combat against the conditions of enslavement in this context rested on factors that were entirely absent in the

\textsuperscript{138} One of Labat’s best-known works is his \textit{Nouveau voyage aux îles de l’Amérique} (Paris: G. Cavelier et P.F. Giffard, 1722).

\textsuperscript{139} Philippe P. Boucher, \textit{France and the American Tropics to 1700, Tropics of Discontent} (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopskins University Press, 2008), 158, 230

\textsuperscript{140} Abelly, \textit{La vie du vénérable}, 1:17-19. De Paul’s supposed captivity in Tunisia (1605-1607) has attracted significant scholarly criticism. See also Joseph Guichard, \textit{Vincent de Paul, esclave à Tunis} (Paris/Bruges: Desclée et Brouwer et Compagnie, 1937) and Román, \textit{St Vincent de Paul}, chaps. 4 and 5.

Mascareignes. In fact, the question of opposition seemed largely moot as evangelisation by Catholic missionaries was used to justify the slave-trade in the French-controlled colonies.\textsuperscript{142} Further, unlike in North Africa, the Vincentians were themselves stake-holders in the trade. In addition to the provision of plots of land for the missionaries, the establishment contract of 1712 also promised to assign one black slave to each of the four priests designated by Bonnet.\textsuperscript{143} Right up to 1736, successive contracts reveal that slaves were included as essential elements of the mission’s temporal properties, and contributed to the missionaries’ ability to subsist. But these treaties do not shed any light on the Vincentians’ feelings about slave-holding and Christian ministry.\textsuperscript{144}

The majority of religious orders working in colonial contexts were also active participants in the slave trade, but its objective morality in a Christian society was not an absolutely settled question among some of them. The Capuchins, for example, were notable dissenters and had even been expelled from Saint-Christophe in 1646 because they preached that baptism dissolved the bond of slavery. In 1685, they wrote to Propaganda requesting that slave-holders be enjoined to treat their chattels mercifully. These examples of Capuchin dissent were not immediately compelling to Vincentians working thousands of kilometres away, decades afterwards, but there were early positive signs that the Vincentians’ \textit{esprit primitif} would guide their efforts at evangelizing slaves.\textsuperscript{145} In a letter to Bonnet written in 1721, Renou reported that the standard for his ministry to slaves in the Mascareignes was the Congregation’s calling to the poor:

\textsuperscript{143} 1712 Treaty, art.8: ‘Pour le service des 4 prêtres que M. Bonnet destine pour ladite île Bourbon, la Compagnie fera remettre à chacun d’eux un esclave nègre, avec la faculté d’en choisir un autre à leur gré, s’ils ne sont pas contents de celui qu’on leur aura donné, à la charge pour chaque prêtre de les nourrir et entretenir, et les nègres resteront en propre à la Compagnie.’
\textsuperscript{144} AN, M/214, Treaty between the Compagnie des Indes and the Congregation for the religious service of Île De France or Mauritius, 21 March 1721, art. 7. When the missionaries were appointed to the Île de France in 1721, the establishment contract for their mission also provided one slave each to future Vincentians. When the treaty was renegotiated in 1736, it promised three slaves per Vincentian parish priest, as opposed to the one slave accorded before. The treaty also guaranteed one slave for curates on the islands.
\textsuperscript{145} Peabody is careful to point out in her study that not all Capuchins were champions of slave rights in this period: “A Dangerous Zeal”, 69 n.42.
...they [the slaves] are the object of my great affection and of my most attentive care. I regard myself as being sent for them above all others. Their slavery and their misery, which renders them despicable in the eyes of men, are to me what ought to engage the service of a son of Monsieur Vincent more effectively. When [our] holy founder directed our zeal to the salvation of the poor people of the countryside, it seems to me that his intention was, with stronger reason, that we work to procure that of the poor slaves, which is all the more forgotten.\textsuperscript{146}

Missionaries who followed Renou continued to adopt this line. In November 1728, the two missionaries stationed on the Île de France declared that they went to the island only ‘with the view of having the consolation of instructing poor infidel slaves.’\textsuperscript{147} Later, another missionary, François Léon, who had stopped on the Île de Gorée en route to Île de Bourbon, claimed that the ‘spiritual and bodily miseries of the poor negroes of this coast [were] very touching.’\textsuperscript{148} Léon went on to say that compassion spurred him towards the ‘conversion of the poor slaves of Île de Bourbon.’\textsuperscript{149}

Early assessments of this conversion effort were positive. Writing in 1717, Bonnet reported on pastoral success in the island’s three parishes, claiming that the ‘infidels are converting little by little,’ and cautiously adding that ‘the [missionaries] baptise them only when they have moral assurances of their good disposition.’\textsuperscript{150} In letters written to Bonnet twice in 1717, Renou boasted:

\textsuperscript{146} AN, M/214, n.9, Fragment of letter from Renou to Bonnet, Île Bourbon circa 1721: ‘…j’avoue qu’ils sont l’objet de ma plus grande tendresse, et de mes soins les plus empressés. Je me regarde comme étant envoié pour eux préférablement à tous les autres. Leur esclavage et leurs misères qui les rendent méprisables aux yeux des hommes et qui ne laissent aucune ressource à l’amour-propre dans ce qu’on fait pour eux, sont, à mon sens, ce qui doit engager plus efficacement un enfant de Monsieur Vincent à se consacrer à leur service, et que quand ce saint instituteur a donné pour objet a notre zèle le salut des pauvres gens de la campagne, il me semble que son intention a été à plus forte raison que nous travaillassions à procurer celui des pauvres esclaves, qui est encore plus abandonné.’

\textsuperscript{147} ACM, IBR, 1504, ‘Mémoire of Borthon and Igou,’ 11 November 1728: ‘…dans la vue d’avoir la consolation d’instruire de pauvres esclaves…’

\textsuperscript{148} \textit{Ibid.}, François Léon to Bonnet, 23 January 1734: ‘[La vue] des misères corporelles et spirituelles des pauvres nègres de cette côte est très touchante…’

\textsuperscript{149} \textit{Ibid.}, ‘…la conversion des pauvres esclaves de l’Île de Bourbon.’

\textsuperscript{150} \textit{RC}, 1:293, 1 January 1717: ‘…les infidèles se convertissent peu à peu, et ces messieurs ne les baptisent que lorsqu’ils ont des assurances morales de leurs bonnes dispositions.’
Chapter 5: Re-establishing Madagascar

Even the blacks, from whom...I expected the least, are beginning to be totally different, and the word of God works surprising changes in several of them. I have baptised about twenty-five adults, with whom I am very happy...

Like his confrere Renou, René Abot wrote early on that ‘spiritual life in our parish of Saint-Paul goes quite well,’ and that the majority of free-men and slaves went to confession. However, Abot also struck a cautious note by stating that the initial fervour had ‘slowed down a little.’ Like Madagascar, general claims of success among their unevangelised parishioners were a feature of initial missives both from missionaries and from Saint-Lazare, but difficult pastoral realities often lurking behind the hyperbole.

For instance, in 1721, Renou described how he had baptised an ‘old idolater,’ and was working on the baptism of another ‘poor infidel.’ He did not specify in clear terms whether the ‘infidel’ was a slave, but it seems likely given that he reported that he lived on a ‘planter’s estate.’ The missionary described the difficulties he encountered in instructing the man, blaming his lack of progress on the slave’s ‘weakness of mind, incapable of understanding reason when I pressed him to become Christian.’ Faced with this dilemma, Renou admitted only that he tried to intimidate the slave with ‘the fear of the fire of hell,’ and that he would not ‘abandon him.’ Renou ended his letter by begging the superior general to pray for all the islanders, but especially for the slaves, because ‘they have a great need of it, our work towards them not having to date all the success that we would have

---

RC, 1:314, citing letters written 8 April and 15 September 1717: ‘Les noirs mêmes, de qui j’avais eu l’honneur de vous mander que j’espérais le moins, commencent à être tout autres, et la parole de Dieu opère des changements surprenants en plusieurs d’entre eux. J’ai baptisé environ vingt-cinq adultes, dont je suis fort content…’

Ibid., 315, citing letters written 8 April and 22 September 1717: ‘Le spirituel de notre paroisse de Saint-Paul va assez bien.’

Ibid., “…s’est un peu ralentie.”

AN, M/214, Renou to Bonnet, circa 1721: “…chez un habitant.”

Ibid., ‘…foiblesses de son esprit incapable d’entendre aucune raison quand je l’ay pressé de se faire chrétien…’

Ibid. ‘…que j’ay voulu l’intimider par la crainte du feu de l’enfer…’
Renou’s determination did not last long however, and his exit from the colony was attributed by his confre Houbert to his disgust at the lack of progress in spiritual affairs, so much so that Renou, we are told, ‘was tempted to bang his head.’

The missionaries’ efforts at evangelisation were subject to enormous constraints in the colonial environment, evident on Île de France by the end of the 1720s. In a 1728 letter, probably written to the minister of the marine, missionaries Igou and Borthon painted a desperate picture of efforts to convert slaves, a task frustrated by the disorder and immorality of colonial society. The two missionaries claimed that colonial officials made ‘sacred enterprises against [their] ministry,’ conducting, for example, the secret marriages of slaves. Marriage of slaves was a delicate issue in the colonies, especially when owners meddled in the matter. In France’s Saint-Christophe colony, for example, the Jesuit Jean Mongin had noted in a famous published letter long before that masters resisted allowing their slaves to marry because ‘as soon as [the slaves] are married…[the masters] cannot find buyers as easily…’ Borthon and Igou also claimed they had poor infrastructure for the celebration of other sacraments, such as ‘decent places to celebrate the holy mysteries.’ Finally, the missionaries alleged that prostitution, debauchery and dissent among the Europeans put ‘invincible objects’ in the way of progress among non-believing slaves.

Testimony from both islands in the 1730s remained negative. In a memoir sent to the cardinal minister in Paris sometime before 1736, Criais revealed that the Vincentians had made proposals for the improvement of the colony. These furnish

---

157 Ibid. ‘Ils en ont un très grand besoin, nos travaux auprès d’eux n’ayant pas eu jusqu’à présent tout le succès qu’il seroit à désirer.’
158 RT, 3:310, Houbert to Bonnet: ‘…il étoit tellement dégouté surtout à cause du peu de fruit qu’il faisoit auprès de ses paroissiens, qu’il étoit tenté de faire un coup de sa tête…’
159 ACM, IBR, 1504, Borthon and Igou to unknown recipient, 11 November 1728: ‘…[on y a fait] des entreprises sacrilèges sur notre ministère…’
161 ACM, IBR, 1504, Borthon and Igou to unknown, 11 November 1728: ‘Ils mettent un obstacle invincible…au progrès de la Religion Chrétienne parmi les noirs infidèles…’
162 The original memoir is lost, but Gabriel Perboyre provided an extract in his manuscript history, and attributed its authorship to Criais: ACM, IBR, 1506. The memoir is referred to by the superior general in a later letter to the Company directors around 1736: ACM, IBR, 1502. The cardinal in
important information on the many inadequacies that the missionaries perceived in
the servile population’s piety. According to Criais, the missionaries suggested going
directly to the shacks of slaves on Sundays and feast-days ‘to oblige them to come
[to church], as well as to the instructions that are carried out there.’ He further suggested that ‘there be people at the door of the church to prevent them from
leaving before the end of the sermon.’ The memoir also had harsh words for
slave-holders who ‘let [their slaves] run here and there.’ In 1734, Igou also wrote
from Île de France with a stinging attack on his flock, saying he had ‘more than
fifteen hundred souls on my shoulders and I hardly have one who might be truly
Christian.’ Echoing Criais, Igou lamented that he could not get masters or their
slaves to come to his instructions, saying that those who were supposed to set an
example for the slaves were ‘the first to give themselves over to the most shameful
vices.’

The missionaries’ complaints tally with statistical evidence from the period.
For Bourbon alone, Prosper Eve shows that between 1726 and 1735 only 509 slaves
were baptised out of 3,875 new arrivals. Illegitimate births among slaves at Saint-
Denis rose from 32.5% in the decade 1710-19 to 53% in 1730-39. Furthermore, the
marriage rate among slaves in Bourbon was also disappointing. At Sainte-Suzanne,
there were only 99 marriages between 1724 and 1733, and 71 marriages at Saint-
Denis between 1720 and 1729. This lack of success among slaves mirrored the
Madagascar history precisely, except this had been due in large part to ongoing wars
between the French colonial contingent and an armed indigenous population. The
missionary Etienne’s death in 1663 had constituted sure evidence that the cause of
failure was also tied up with the missionaries’ own embeddedness in European

question was André-Hercule de Fleury, who presided over the Conseil des Indes, the highest
administrative and judicial forum for the colonies.

163 Ibid., Extract of memoir from Criais to the cardinal minister, n.d: ‘…pour les obliger à y venir,
ainsi qu’aux instructions qui s’y font…’
164 Ibid. ‘…qu’il y eut à la porte de l’Eglise des personnes pour les empêcher de sortir avant la fin du
sermon.’
165 Ibid. ‘…laissent courir çà et là leurs esclaves…’
166 ACM, IBR, 1504. Igou to Bonnet, 15 October 1734: ‘plus de quinze cent âmes sur mes épaules et
à peine ai-je une qui soit vraiment chrétienne…’
167 Ibid. ‘…les premiers à s’adresser aux vices les plus honteux.’
168 Prosper Eve, Naitre et mourir à Bourbon à l’époque de l’esclavage (Paris: Éd. l’Harmattan; Saint-
Denis: Université de la Réunion, 1999), 76-78.
colonialism, even if most Vincentians had felt a sense of separation from the distinctly secular agendas of this enterprise. Decades later, war was not a feature of the missionary experience in the Mascareignes, but the Vincentians’ relationship with repressive colonial power was markedly closer.

V

Vincentian corporate ethos had always put a premium on both spiritual and physical relief of the poor. One hagiographic account of the Vincentians’ ministry on Île de Bourbon characterises them as the ‘redressers of wrongs’ in the Mascareignes, declaring that they were advocates of the innocent and the oppressed, especially slaves.169 This fits in with the esprit primitif rhetoric that emerged from Renou, but the reality was different. When he had described the previous work of de Paul with the slaves of northern Africa, Abelly had mentioned ‘all sorts of services and assistance’ de Paul had made available to them, which went beyond the purely spiritual.170 However, confronted with the misery of slaves in Bourbon, Renou placed clear limitations on the kind of service a Vincentian could offer them. Unlike their work in northern Africa, the ministry to slaves in Bourbon directed the Vincentians’ zeal toward the salvation of the ‘poor slaves’ but stopped short of seeking other kinds of relief, such as their freedom.

The Vincentians’ involvement with slavery on the islands ran much deeper than the 1712 contract reveals, starting with the first attempts to kindle the slave trade, to which they raised no objection. When the council in 1717 commissioned the ship Courrier de Bourbon, under the command of Antoine Boucher, to go to Madagascar in order to gain more slaves, the missionaries were party to decision-making. The Courrier’s first attempt was a failure; but the signatures of the Vincentians Abot and Criais are found in procès verbaux of council sessions which explored the possibility of further enterprises.171 Early on, the missionaries’ exercised their rights to buy and sell slaves. In 1718, Criais and Abot were engaged

169 Herbert Mondon, L’organisation religieuse des Îles de France et de Bourbon au temps de Mahé de Labourdonnais, in RT, 2:221.
170 Abelly, La vie du vénérable, 1:19.
171 RT, 1: 390-391, 392-393, 396-397, documents dated 27 August 1718, 16 December 1718 and 17 December 1718 respectively.
as private slave-holders in buying and selling slaves, as a document from July of that year demonstrates. Petitioned by a ship captain and his director of commerce for a Malagasy-speaking slave ‘to facilitate the commerce and trade’ they desired to carry out on Madagascar, the missionaries provided one of theirs for ‘the sum of one hundred and twenty piastres which [were] immediately used to buy one noir and one négresse to replace the one’ sold.\textsuperscript{172}

Besides owning slaves themselves, the Vincentians were enrolled by the crown to buttress the wider system of control in the slave-holding colony. From 1685, Louis XIV began issuing codes for regulating, on one hand, the ‘discipline of the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church,’ and on the other, the policing of slaves. The fact that these two areas of legislation were addressed in the same documents is an indication of the role religion played in the control of slavery and slave colonies. Among the first articles of the king’s edict of March 1685 for the American colonies was a command that all slaves be baptised and instructed in the faith. Furthermore, owners of slaves in the colonies were ordered to observe Sundays and feast days as days of rest; slave labour on these days was forbidden.\textsuperscript{173} In addition, the ordinance prescribed penalties for \textit{marronage}, the act of escaping slavery, which included mutilation.\textsuperscript{174} These stipulations were repeated in the edict Louis XV prepared for the regulation of slaves in Bourbon and the Île de France, issued in December 1723.\textsuperscript{175}

As members of the council, the missionaries were in attendance when this body approved policing measures on 23 November 1718, particularly regarding the punishments for fugitive slaves, which included hanging and strangulation.\textsuperscript{176} When

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Transaction between Abot, Criais, Desilette-Maget and Robert, 5 July 1718, reproduced in Jean Barrasin, “L’esclavage à Bourbon avant l’application du Code Noir de 1723” in \textit{Recueil de documents et travaux inédits pour servir à l’histoire de La Réunion (ancienne Île Bourbon)}, (Nouvelle série 2, Nerac, 1957), 47: ‘…la somme de cent vingt piastres qui ont été aussitôt employées à acheter un noir et une négresse pour remplacer celui que nous leur fournissons…’ The contract stipulated that the slave should be freed when the ship finished trading, but there is no evidence that this was due to a principled anti-slavery stand by the missionaries.
\item Ibid., 46.
\item Lougnon, \textit{L’Île Bourbon}, 257-261.
\item Ibid., 119-123.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
their role on the council ended in 1723, the missionaries’ interest in regulating slave
life did not cease. In their proposals to settle the religious life of the colony and
encourage co-operation by the slave population, Criais did not hesitate to suggest
that the colonists ‘assemble the negroes and negresses every three months to read
out the rules to them and by this means help them in their duty.’ These proposals
drew on the missionaries’ shared interest in ensuring stability in the slave economy.
Describing the Vincentians’ proposals for a better island, the superior general
claimed that ‘the more blacks will be instructed [in the faith] and supervised the less
they will become libertine and marrons.’

How the Vincentians handled the delicate question of marronage reveals the
depth of their interest in maintaining the slave-system. By the 1720s and 1730s
marronage had become a critical problem on both islands of the Mascareignes and,
in response to violent raids conducted against the colonists by marron slaves,
detachments of soldiers from the colony were sent in pursuit of these fugitive bands,
normally resulting in fighting and death. On 30 September 1728, the directors of the
Company in Paris wrote to the administrators in Île de France noting ‘the various
encounters that [the French] have made with black marrons, some of whom we have
had killed…’ The directors in Paris, however, were firm on the action to be taken
against remaining marron slaves and ordered an island official, Sieur Brousse, to
‘march out himself with a good detachment and try and exterminate this race.’
But the problem of these wandering bands did not disappear, and a letter from the
council in 1735 lamented that slave revolts were ‘always feared in every colony
where there were slaves.’

177 ACM, IBR, 1504, ‘Memoir from the superior general,’ n.d: ‘Ne pourroit-on point assembler tous
les trois mois les noirs et négresses pour leur faire lecture des règlements et par là les contenir dans le
devoir…’
178 Ibid. ‘Plus les noirs seront instruits et veillez, moins ils deviendront libertins et marrons.’
179 Directors of the Company to the conseil provincial of Île de France in Lougon, Correspondance
du conseil supérieur de Bourbon et de la Compagnie des Indes, 22 janvier 1724- 30 décembre 1731,
80: ‘…des diverses rencontres qu’on a fait des noirs marons, dont on a tué quelques-uns…’;
‘…marcher lui-même avec un bon détachement et de tascher d’exterminer cette race.’
180 Conseil supérieur in Bourbon to the directors of the Company, 31 December 1735 in Lougon,
Correspondance 1732 –1736. 318: ‘…est toujours à craindre dans toute colonie où il y a des
esclaves.’
The principal dilemma that arose was whether the Vincentians should contribute to the costs of repressing marronage. The commercial company insisted that the Vincentians, as slave-holding colonists, should contribute on the same basis as everyone else. According to Company correspondence, they were included in the charges levied in 1728. However, the Vincentians quickly objected to participating in these operations, initially on moral grounds. They seemingly claimed that they could not, ‘without becoming irregular, contribute directly or indirectly to these sorts of expenses which tend to kill and spill human blood.’ However, it soon became clear that their first concern was ensuring tax immunity for their properties, and the missionaries successfully invoked the ancient privileges of the clergy of France to bolster their claims. They also shared the fears and anxieties of the colonial community. Writing in 1732, the missionary Gandon referred to the ‘barbarous cruelty’ of the fugitives on the Île de France, and claimed that ‘people hardly felt safe anymore.’ In response, the immediate priority was control and subordination, and the missionaries were far from being by-standers in this process. At the height of the troubles, Gandon’s two confreres on the island wrote claiming that there was nobody better than the priests ‘to stop the desertion of the blacks and prevent them from damaging the colony.’

The early group of Vincentians was too involved in the security interests of the colony to seek the freedom of slaves. Yet to say that they were entirely content with their involvement would be mistaken. The Vincentians’ private writings are remarkable for the high degree of moral self-reflection which exposure to slavery occasioned in them, a fact which distinguishes them from the published racist views of other clergy working in this domain. For example, the Vincentians’ commentaries on their initial interactions with slaves in this period are free from what Peabody calls the ‘virulent anti-black characterisations’ which appeared in the testimonials of
newly arrived missionaries in the Antilles during the 1640s and 1650s. Renou’s relatively mild allusion to his convert’s weakness of mind stands in acute contrast to the kind of graphic references to slaves’ general stupidity or laziness which dotted the writings of Jacques Bouton or Maurile de Saint-Michel, a Jesuit and Carmelite respectively. Also glaringly absent are remarks similar to those found in the relation of André Chevillard, a Dominican who worked in Guadeloupe in the 1650s, where he referred to blacks as ‘an insupportable nuisance’ whose ‘goat stench’ he detested.

However, the Vincentians’ moral objections to slavery had nothing to do with the morality of the system per se. They were concerned that their roles as slave-holding planters impinged on their corporate duties and sacred vows. This connection between the demands of corporate life and slave-holding had arisen before in the Caribbean, for the Capuchins’ vow of poverty had limited the number of slaves they had kept. For the Vincentians, dangers to the vow of celibacy raised their head first. In his 1721 letter, in which he claimed to speak on his own behalf and that of the Vincentians Criais and Abot, Houbert explained an initial area of disagreement between them and Renou on the implications of keeping plantations and slaves if this meant close contact with female servants. According to Houbert, Renou suggested the missionaries renounce their plantations in exchange for pensions in order to avoid this danger:

> The principal reason of all those that he [Renou] gives you, and which, in truth, seems plausible and the most capable of making an impression on your mind and on ours, is that in doubling our pensions and taking our plantations away from us, we would be dispensed from the obligation of having negresses in our domestic [service.]
Houbert’s specific use of the female ‘negress’ indicates that problems identified with employing slave-labour had more to do with potential threats to the priests’ dignity, in this case their chastity, than any objection to slavery itself. The missionaries were no doubt mindful of strict instructions issued by Bonnet before their departure in 1712 which banned them from having any woman in their service.\textsuperscript{189} However, Houbert went on to contradict the arguments Renou had allegedly presented in the strongest terms. Firstly, he asserted that it was Renou who had taken female slaves into his domestic service before the other missionaries, who then followed his example ‘despite themselves and only at [Renou’s] solicitation.’\textsuperscript{190} According to Houbert, Renou also hired women slaves in the hope they would marry his male slaves. Secondly, Houbert attacked in more general terms Renou’s idea that foregoing their plantations would free them from the use of slave labour, saying that the missionaries required it in order to help them procure things ‘necessary for life.’ He backed this up by referring once again to Renou, who had retained the services of three slaves in Saint-Denis and specified that the missionaries in the other parishes keep two each.\textsuperscript{191} In conclusion, Houbert simply stated that it was ‘up to us to take the precautions which the fear of God should inspire in us to avoid the inconveniences’ associated with slave-keeping.\textsuperscript{192}

When it came to marronage and celibacy, missionaries gave great attention to the impact slavery had on ecclesiastical dignities and their sanctity. In contrast, only one missionary in this period spoke candidly of the noxious pastoral consequences brought on by their positions of mastership, especially the ill-feeling engendered amongst their own ‘poor slaves.’ Igou captured this in a letter written to a confrere on 15 October 1734, where he described the difficulty in having ‘a

\begin{quote}
Houbert’s specific use of the female ‘negress’ indicates that problems identified with employing slave-labour had more to do with potential threats to the priests’ dignity, in this case their chastity, than any objection to slavery itself. The missionaries were no doubt mindful of strict instructions issued by Bonnet before their departure in 1712 which banned them from having any woman in their service.\textsuperscript{189} However, Houbert went on to contradict the arguments Renou had allegedly presented in the strongest terms. Firstly, he asserted that it was Renou who had taken female slaves into his domestic service before the other missionaries, who then followed his example ‘despite themselves and only at [Renou’s] solicitation.’\textsuperscript{190} According to Houbert, Renou also hired women slaves in the hope they would marry his male slaves. Secondly, Houbert attacked in more general terms Renou’s idea that foregoing their plantations would free them from the use of slave labour, saying that the missionaries required it in order to help them procure things ‘necessary for life.’ He backed this up by referring once again to Renou, who had retained the services of three slaves in Saint-Denis and specified that the missionaries in the other parishes keep two each.\textsuperscript{191} In conclusion, Houbert simply stated that it was ‘up to us to take the precautions which the fear of God should inspire in us to avoid the inconveniences’ associated with slave-keeping.\textsuperscript{192}

When it came to marronage and celibacy, missionaries gave great attention to the impact slavery had on ecclesiastical dignities and their sanctity. In contrast, only one missionary in this period spoke candidly of the noxious pastoral consequences brought on by their positions of mastership, especially the ill-feeling engendered amongst their own ‘poor slaves.’ Igou captured this in a letter written to a confrere on 15 October 1734, where he described the difficulty in having ‘a

\begin{quote}
Houbert’s specific use of the female ‘negress’ indicates that problems identified with employing slave-labour had more to do with potential threats to the priests’ dignity, in this case their chastity, than any objection to slavery itself. The missionaries were no doubt mindful of strict instructions issued by Bonnet before their departure in 1712 which banned them from having any woman in their service.\textsuperscript{189} However, Houbert went on to contradict the arguments Renou had allegedly presented in the strongest terms. Firstly, he asserted that it was Renou who had taken female slaves into his domestic service before the other missionaries, who then followed his example ‘despite themselves and only at [Renou’s] solicitation.’\textsuperscript{190} According to Houbert, Renou also hired women slaves in the hope they would marry his male slaves. Secondly, Houbert attacked in more general terms Renou’s idea that foregoing their plantations would free them from the use of slave labour, saying that the missionaries required it in order to help them procure things ‘necessary for life.’ He backed this up by referring once again to Renou, who had retained the services of three slaves in Saint-Denis and specified that the missionaries in the other parishes keep two each.\textsuperscript{191} In conclusion, Houbert simply stated that it was ‘up to us to take the precautions which the fear of God should inspire in us to avoid the inconveniences’ associated with slave-keeping.\textsuperscript{192}

When it came to marronage and celibacy, missionaries gave great attention to the impact slavery had on ecclesiastical dignities and their sanctity. In contrast, only one missionary in this period spoke candidly of the noxious pastoral consequences brought on by their positions of mastership, especially the ill-feeling engendered amongst their own ‘poor slaves.’ Igou captured this in a letter written to a confrere on 15 October 1734, where he described the difficulty in having ‘a

\begin{quote}
us retranchant nos habitations, nous serions dispensez de l’obligation d’avoir des négresses dans notre domestique.’
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{189} AN, S/6717, 1 November 1712 (also printed in \textit{RT}, 5:111-117), ‘…et illud potissimum religioni, conscientia et fama sua inviolabile decretum observabunt, ut nulla unquam foeminam in suo famulau habeat…’
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{190} \textit{RT}, 3:291, Houbert to Bonnet, 3 November 1721: ‘…malgré nous et qu’à sa sollicitation.’
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{191} \textit{RT}, 3:292.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{192} \textit{Ibid.} ‘…et c’est à nous à prendre toutes les précautions que la crainte de Dieu doit nous inspirer pour éviter les inconvénients…’
\end{quote}
serve servant over whom one must watch, and who, despite one’s vigilance, gives themselves over to disorders which force one to punish them, with all rigour and against natural kindness, in order to prevent them from doing it again; [these people] have no affection for you despite the affection you have for them, and…would slit your throat the very first…

The impressive fact about Igou’s comments is not that he openly acknowledged the high level of distrust that existed between the missionaries and slaves, but that he appeared surprised by this situation. Unlike the earlier correspondence of the Madagascar missionaries, these later Vincentians failed to grasp how their connections with colonial society, especially their invigilation over and punishment of non-Europeans, affected the responses of these people as pastoral targets. This failure led to significant self-pity in Igou, who could only lament that ‘[i]t is very difficult to not let it get one down, to be upset, and to want to get out of such countries.’

Despite complaints like Igou’s, there is no evidence that the missionaries sought to change their position. As they had done with their rank on the council, they steadfastly defended the necessity of keeping slaves in order to maintain their plantations, which they saw as key to their survival. Houbert declared that keeping slaves was a ‘necessary evil’ in their houses. Later, when responding to Bonnet’s inquiries about how they employed their slaves, Criais asserted that they were ‘so necessary that, far from thinking of reducing their number, we are disposed to increase it,’ and defended their small number compared to the ‘forty, sixty and even more’ belonging to some colonists. Criais did, on the other hand, capture the self-reflective approach of the Vincentian community at this time, concluding that they

---

193 ACM, IBR, 1502, Igou to unknown correspondent, 15 October 1734: ‘…avoir un domestique sur lequel il faut veiller, et qui malgré la vigilance qu’on apporte s’adonne à des désordres qui obligent à les châtier, en toute rigueur et contre toute douceur naturelle pour les empêcher de l’y retomber ; gens qui n’ont aucune affection pour vous malgré l’affectation que vous avez pour eux; et…vous égorgeroient les premiers.’

194 Ibid. ‘Il est bien difficile de ne se laisser pas abattre, de se désoler, et de souhaiter d’être hors de semblables pays.’

195 RT, 3 :292, Houbert to Bonnet: ‘…un mal nécessaire…’

196 ACM, IBR, 1504, Criais to Bonnet, 8 December 1734: ‘…tellement nécessaires que bien loin de penser à en diminuer le nombre, nous sommes dans la disposition de l’accroître…’; ‘…40, 60 et même plus comme nous conaissons des matelots…qui en ont jusqu’à cens.’
were ‘priests and what is more, people of community, against whom people are always on guard.’ He therefore remained wary of excess and asserted that the missionaries had not ‘completely forgotten’ the need to ‘reduce [slaves kept by them] to the barest [number] necessary.’

Evidence for this short period dries up before any major change occurred in the Vincentians’ feelings on the mission to slaves. In fact, the missionaries of the first phase set precedents that seemed to solidify the conflict between their role as apostolic men and their position as slave-holders. The next missionary for whom we have testimony bemoaned in a 1740 missive the fact that missionaries had to deal with slaves as masters, saying the Vincentians had to ‘shout,’ ‘storm after them’ and ‘put them in irons and in chains.’ Summarising the early phase of the mission, the missionary asked with sarcasm, ‘Do we not have there a beautiful mission and great tasks for missionaries?’ Answering his own question, the anonymous missionary claimed, ‘[You] would have to be a famous doctor to persuade me that we will get to heaven doing this job.’

VI

These two decades of the Mascareignes mission are crucial because they constitute a bench-mark for measuring the Congregation’s development post-1660. Surprisingly, the 1712 mission has never been compared with its predecessor in Madagascar, even though contemporaries spoke of it as a re-establishment of the mission which had sunk in 1671. Both missions were infused with special significance: the Madagascar mission had been a much-loved project of the founder and was regarded, at least at the beginning, as a fulfilment of the Congregation’s esprit primitif. For their part, the later missions to the Mascareignes were invested with special weight as a means to honour de Paul’s memory and recover some of the lost glory of the Congregation’s first ad gentes mission. However, although contemporaries spoke of reviving and

197 *Ibid.* ‘…des prêtres et qui plus est des gens de communauté contre qui on est toujours en garde.’; ‘…on a pas tout à fait oublié…qu’il est de la dernière conséquence de les réduire autant qu’on pourra au plus mince nécessaire.’

198 AN, M/214, unsigned letter, 1740. While its exact author is unknown, the letter was almost certainly written by a Vincentian: ‘…ont crie, on tempeste apres eux, ont bat, ont amare, on mest aux fers et à la chaîne. Ne voilà-t-il pas une belle mission et de beaux emplois pour des missionnaires. Il faudroit estre un fameux docteur pour me persuader qu’on gagne le ciel à faire ce métier.’
re-establishing the Madagascar mission when they conceived the new project, they, of course, expected different results. Madagascar had been a painful experience which forced the Vincentians to abandon a project whose origins were deep in their collective identity. Much hung, therefore, on an effort to obtain the success which had been so elusive in Madagascar.

In a number of ways, the history of the mission’s first two decades of the Mascareignes mission demonstrates how similar it was to its predecessor on Madagascar. Much of the process of resurrecting Madagascar was, in the final analysis, negative. The community life of the first four missionaries was dominated by issues, to use Houbert’s term at the time, ‘of a purely temporal nature.’ The missionaries’ roles as planters and councilors exposed the community to the censure of outsiders and created serial conflict between two of the missionaries themselves. These clashes eventually led to accusations that the Vincentians’ new roles caused loss of virtue in their community, a complaint Nacquart had voiced decades before in Madagascar. The second area where much of the Madagascar experience was repeated lay in the generally poor relations subsisting between the Congregation and its patron on the two islands, the Compagnie des Indes. Familiar complaints of the lay Company’s neglect and disdain dotted the letters of the first missionaries.

Pastoral objectives were frustrated by contradictions that emerged between the missionaries’ roles in the colonial community and their own stated allegiance to the islands’ ‘poor’, the sizeable populations of slaves. Of the three genres of difficulties the early missionaries faced, their early sense of disappointment about the ministry to slaves must be regarded as the most important in terms of honouring their esprit primitif. During previous missionary assignments, such as Versailles, the Vincentians had shown a capacity to apply this ethos in new settings which marked them out for distinction among other clergy. Initially, it appeared that the missionaries might do the same in Bourbon when Renou coined their sense of obligation to the slaves in terms which distinctly recalled de Paul’s solicitude for the poor.

The evidence which emerges from the first twenty years of the Mascareignes project shows, however, that Vincentian ideas about applying the esprit primitif
Chapter 5: Re-establishing Madagascar

were as context-sensitive as they had been in the 1650s when missionaries first went to Madagascar. Early on, the two key strands of the traditional Vincentian apostolate to the poor were subjected to significant pressures. The early efforts for salvation of slaves were obstructed by poor religious infrastructure and the indifference of slave-holders to evangelisation. Furthermore, the Congregation’s calling to provide parallel physical relief was limited. The letters of Renou, Léon, and Igou all sympathised with the suffering of the slave population, but the type and extent of relief offered could never be on a par with the Congregation’s previous work in North Africa. The first groups of missionaries were unable to escape their status as colonists and slave-holders; protection of slave rights never entered their minds. Like the majority of missionaries working in slave societies of this period, the Vincentians actively cooperated in the slave system by owning slaves, controlling their activities and punishing them. And when missionaries did engage in the morality of the system, their concerns were limited to the ill effects of slave-holding on their priesthood, its obligations and dignities. This did not improve the missionaries’ position among slaves, and pastoral achievements of this twenty year period were judged as being as slight as those among the ‘poor’ of Madagascar decades previously.

However, this stage of the Mascareignes project can appear bleaker than it actually was. If unalloyed failure was the hallmark of Madagascar, a curious amalgam of success and failure, strength and weakness, characterized the first two decades of the Mascareignes exercise. The treaty of 1712 placed the mission on far stronger foundations than those prevailing in Nacquart’s time. While there were many difficulties in the early history of the mission, the terms of the 1712 treaty, replaced in 1736 with the highly-advantageous new contract, ensured strong and enduring Vincentian participation in the temporal life of the colony. Furthermore, the missionaries showed themselves more than equal to asserting the rights contained in the charter. In the Madagascar mission, only Nacquart and Bourot had emerged as missionaries capable of taking on secular officials and protecting the mission’s interests with rigour. In the Mascareignes, Renou, Houbert, Criais, Borthon and Igou all made forceful written interventions at various stages and
directed them to multiple authorities. The Congregation’s leader Jean Bonnet, while initially slow to take action in managing the mission, eventually made a bold decision which towered over those of his somewhat meeker predecessor, Alméras.

Bonnet’s decisions must be read in the context of the Congregation’s general stature in the eighteenth century. The association had been in steady ascent since the appointment to Versailles in 1672. Above all, Bonnet’s actions, particularly his 1734 letter, marked a changed atmosphere at Saint-Lazare from that which reigned when Alméras ended Madagascar and the Versailles mission began. To be sure, the disasters of Madagascar were far more worrying for the Congregation than the anxieties the Mascalignes created, but the conclusions drawn from perceived failure were far less mournful in 1734 than those made in 1671. Tellingly, Bonnet made no allusions to the Congregation’s weakness or wider organizational faults, as Alméras had done. This is attributable, at least in part, to the institutional mind-set of the Congregation at this time.

The 1734 recall letter made several references to the Vincentians’ honour, and the Congregation’s general honour was an important factor weighing on Bonnet’s mind when he decided to end the mission. The recent beatification of de Paul in 1729 had filled Saint-Lazare and its foreign provinces with pride and confidence, and letters both before and after the event give important context to Bonnet’s decision. On 1 January 1734, Bonnet wrote to the Congregation stating that the beatification had led to an increase in esteem and affection for the Vincentians in Italy, and ‘made them desired by several prelates.’ As for Poland, Bonnet claimed the missionaries there were ‘esteemed by the great and the small…’ Therefore, if the prior decision to end Madagascar was taken

---

199 *RC*, 1:433. Bonnet said the missionaries lived on Île de France ‘without honour, without respect,’ that the vexations on the islands ‘degrade[d]’ and ‘dishonoure[d]’ them, and that they could not ‘live with honour.’


because Alméras believed the Congregation was a weak ‘little Company,’ Bonnet had ample reason to end the Mascareignes project because he believed it no longer so.

The display of strength by the missionaries and Bonnet ultimately produced the greatest difference between Madagascar and the Mascareignes missions: the continued participation of the Vincentians. They remained connected to the island right till the Revolution, and distinguished themselves in many spheres.\footnote{Claude Prudhomme. \textit{Histoire religieuse de la Réunion} (Paris: Karthala, 1984).} In fact, reports issued later by government officials revealed how much the early manoeuvring by these men paid off for the project in the long-run. When the islands reverted to royal rule in 1768, colonial administrators praised the Vincentians’ roles in cultivating the land and standard-bearing for the ‘better culture.’\footnote{Report of Jean-Daniel Dumas and Pierre Poivre, 24 February 1768, cited in \textit{AM}, 27:235.} Remembering the work of the missionaries, a report issued to Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802 singled out their roles in slavery, especially as they had helped ‘to maintain subordination among the negroes.’\footnote{\textit{Actes du Gouvernement français concernant la congrégation de la Mission, dite de Saint-Lazare, fondée par saint Vincent de Paul} (Paris: Maison mère de la Congrégation, 1902), 70. Report to Napoleon Bonaparte from the conseiller d’Etat, 16 Brumaire an XI (7 November 1802): ‘Les missionnaires qui sont restés dans les deux premières îles ont contribué de tous leurs moyens à maintenir la subordination parmi les nègres.’} The fact that they were remembered in such terms, however, reveals just how much the Vincentians’ survival and strength depended on roles which had acutely challenged the unity of the early community in the Mascareignes and had little to do with their fundamental ethos.
The idea of the perpetually present founder is common to the history of many, if not most, religious institutes. Indeed, the premises and objectives of the beatification and canonisation processes in the Catholic church, hinged as they are on establishing instances of the prospective saint’s communication beyond the grave through miracles, reinforce the notion that these holy men and women are invisible but constant companions to their followers. When Vincent de Paul died in September 1660, the Congregation of the Mission, the institution he had founded and which he shepherded for thirty-five years, was robbed of his physical presence. But de Paul had been at the centre of the Congregation’s evolution since 1625, and his followers desired that he remain their central guide despite his death. From the outset, individual members like Gilbert Cuissot wrestled so much with the task of finding a suitable replacement for him that he ‘saw’ de Paul anew when he cast his ballot at Alméras’ election in 1661. The actions of the Congregation’s leaders after that date betrayed their consistent desire to keep reminders of de Paul’s earthly existence close at hand. In 1664, Alméras hailed de Paul ‘resurrected’ with Abelly’s biography, a work commissioned so that Vincentians could ‘hear him speak’ again. In the 1720s, Jean Bonnet included updates concerning the health of the Congregation’s oldest member, André Ruffé, in his annual circulars, because he was ‘the last disciple’ who knew de Paul.  

The beatification process brought another generation of Vincentians in contact with his body, when its remains were disinterred for canonical inspection in 1712.  

De Paul’s ethos filled the gap left by his death. This ethos, a schema of values called the spirit of the Mission, embraced traditional Christian virtues like humility and simplicity, and in this sense was not pioneering. However, these virtues were placed in the service of a unique pastoral objective: missions among the rural poor. Each step along de Paul’s life and ministry at the helm of the Congregation,

---

1 *RC*, 1:332, 343. Ruffé entered the seminary on 7 July 1660, and attended de Paul’s burial in September that year. He died in 1728, see *RC*, 1:658 and *Catalogue des prêtres*, 546.  
from the early days at Folleville to his conferences at Saint-Lazare in the late 1650s, confirmed the importance of this goal. Its presence in the Congregation’s founding documents and subsequent prescriptive literature, above all the common Rules, is arrestingly consistent. Furthermore, it was imbedded in the ethos-building infrastructure which de Paul erected and maintained for the Congregation, especially its internal seminary. Every phase and element of the seminary’s training process explained and reinforced this goal, so that no Vincentian could plausibly pass its threshold and be in doubt about the expectations placed upon his life and work.

This ethos was rigid in its original conception, but its application turned out to be highly elastic as time passed. During de Paul’s government of the Congregation, it became clear that strict interpretation and observance of the Congregation’s fundamental documents were impossible. The 1625 foundation contract offered an early clue to the Congregation’s expansive gamut of activities in the future, for alongside the obligation to give missions to the rural poor were the Vincentians’ duties to the diverse population of galley slaves. Its responsibilities to a further group, clerical ordinands, were affirmed shortly after in the 1633 papal bull. By 1660, the spirit of the Mission embraced a wide range of groups, from the ignorant Catholics of Folleville to the natives of Madagascar. Other important fixtures of the de Paul period, such as the pervasive image of the ‘little company,’ a representation which tended to limit the Congregation’s horizon, started to lose their currency as the Vincentians’ functions grew in size, number and prestige.

Although there was a certain gulf between the emphases of the Congregation’s prescriptive literature and de Paul’s personal words up to 1660, the question of systematic infidelity to the Congregation’s original programme barely emerged under his generalate. As far as objections about drift from individual Vincentians were concerned, neither the complaints of the disgruntled Vincentian missionary based in Annecy in 1659 nor the letters of Nacquart from Madagascar convinced de Paul that the Congregation was moving away from its fundamental agenda. The reasons for this are straightforward. For a start, while the Congregation’s pastoral landscape had widened since 1625, it remained a small force in the French church largely dedicated to its missions. Furthermore, the fact
that de Paul was never ruffled by these occasional complaints was compelling. Along with the Gondis, he was the co-founder of the association, the bearer of its first message at Folleville, the petitioner in appeals to Rome prior to papal approval of the Congregation in 1633, and, above all, the codifier of its supreme laws – the common Rules. This history conferred unrivalled legitimacy on the determinations that he made of the relationship between Vincentian values and work, and de Paul made it clear that no disunity separated them unless he said. If Cuissot’s ghost seemed unlikely in fact, the reported words of the wraith’s final exhortation, which conveyed de Paul’s ultimate responsibility for every decision in the Mission, entirely reflected reality.3

The founder’s dominance as sole judge of the Congregation’s fidelity to its ethos evaporated with his demise, creating one of the most significant differences between the de Paul period and its succeeding era. Few external commentators had dared to declare that there had been any deviation from de Paul’s original mission during his life-time, but the Fontainebleau appointment in 1661 changed the landscape for good. The most important detail in the publication of the Mathurins’ deposition on the Congregation’s claim to the parish of Fontainebleau in the mid-1660s was the fact that it made the Vincentians’ fidelity to de Paul a public question, rather than one confined to Congregation members. Moreover, the affair revealed that the capacity of outsiders for judgement on this matter was bolstered by their access to and invocation of the legal history of the Congregation, its common Rules, and significant passages from Abelly’s biography. The fact that these documents consistently emphasised the Congregation’s unique destiny to the poor further empowered those critics who identified breaches in fidelity after de Paul’s demise. The Mathurins proceeded to pontificate on the Vincentians’ fidelity with a confidence akin to the founder’s, and their precedent was followed by priests, politicians and even Protestants in the post-de Paul era.

The Mathurins’ limited their grim verdict that the Vincentians had ‘violate[d] the purity of their Institute’ to the dispute over the parish of Fontainebleau. Indeed,

---

3 ACM, Alméras Register, 2, fols.1726-7, 27 March 1678: ‘If it is a crime, put me in irons; if it is an error, it is mine, so fear nothing; let this curse be on me, my son.’
more general assertion that the Vincentians were inert, indifferent or quiescent on the subject of fidelity would have been plainly wrong in the 1660s. After all, the Congregation did not greet the Fontainebleau appointment with complete equanimity. On the contrary, the ‘honour’ elicited panicked prayers that the Vincentians would remain faithful to their original identity. These prayers were fervent because the Congregation’s leaders were simultaneously undertaking institution-wide efforts designed to stem any accusations that they were, to use Alméras’ word, ‘impostors’, or fraud practitioners of de Paul’s ethos. The Congregation’s steady stream of legislative measures in the 1660s sought to banish all uneven applications of the Rule by emphasising uniformity across the board. Further, the Congregation’s leaders took repeated action to define future measurement of Vincentian fidelity with reference to a single rhetorical device – that of the *esprit primitif*. Although it is unlikely de Paul ever used this term himself, the Vincentians made the *esprit primitif* – and service of the poor which it demanded - the fundamental principle of their quest for fidelity up to and far beyond his beatification in 1729.

The Madagascar mission and its recall in 1671 were crucial to the Congregation’s identity formation post-1660. However, there has been a tendency to cast the mission’s termination as an unfortunate parenthesis in the Vincentians’ history, probably because it was a then-rare variation on their usual engagements in France. As a result, the light that the mission sheds on key debates about Vincentian fidelity has often been ignored. Above all, the Madagascar experience revealed how deeply discussions about faithfulness and drift penetrated the Congregation’s ordinary membership. Lives, letters and foodstuffs were lost during the journey between France and the colony at Fort Dauphin, but the missionaries’ strong sense of what their roles were and whom they were supposed to serve consistently survived intact. In testimony that unveiled the concrete results of Vincentian identity formation in the internal seminary, Nacquart and Bourot closely monitored potential tensions between their actual occupations in the colony and the vision of their corporate ethos. Moreover, they remonstrated with their superiors when dissonance between these two appeared.
Indeed, in all the missions examined in this thesis, it was on-the-ground missionaries like Nacquart, Bourot and Roguet at Fort Dauphin, Hébert at Versailles, and Houbert in the Mascareignes, who tested the sensitivity and vulnerability of a centrally-conceived aspiration like the *esprit primitif*. These tests revealed critical information about the fundamentals necessary to preserve de Paul’s legacy in new contexts. In one of his letters to de Paul, Charles Nacquart referred to the virtue and zeal which had helped Saint Francis Xavier in his missions, but he also emphasised that the ‘authority of those who supported him and supplied him liberally with necessities contributed a great deal’ to his successes.\(^4\) This comment spotlighted a key element to the Vincentians’ ability to live their values and maintain their *esprit primitif*: structural support, especially money. Whether they came from commercial patrons like the colonial Companies and the crown, or the leaders of the Congregation based at Saint-Lazare, supportive frameworks were key to a successful mission. Another enormously influential variable was the nature and scope of the missionaries’ roles on the mission site. In particular, the missionaries’ level of interaction with outsiders and the degree of secular authority they were exposed to or exercised themselves made a crucial impact on their ability to remain sons of Monsieur Vincent.

Dominique Deslandres argues that ‘without [money], [there was] no mission, no missionary, and no convert either.’\(^5\) From the outset, patrons played a significant role in facilitating the Congregation’s work because of their financial support. The Gondi family played a central part both in originating the mission at Folleville in 1617 and sponsoring the Congregation’s formal foundation in 1625. They handed the princely sum of 37,000 livres in cash over to de Paul the day the contract was signed.\(^6\) The provision of initial funding to start the mission was, of course, vital, but consistent support and financing throughout was just as essential to achieving the Congregation’s long-term goals, largely because the Congregation itself was not in a position to bear the full costs of its activities. Two contrasting cases emerged in the court and colonial missions to demonstrate. On one hand, the string of appointments

---

\(^4\) *CCD*, 3:572.  
\(^5\) Deslandres, *Croire et faire croire*, 149, 390.  
\(^6\) *CCD*, 13a: 214.
from Versailles in 1672 to Saint-Cyr in 1690 revealed active patrons who committed enormous sums for the creation of stable Vincentian establishments. At Saint-Cyr, when Louis XIV dissolved the abbatial title of France’s most prestigious Benedictine abbey at Saint-Denis, he did so to release 50,000 livres in *rentes* for the new establishment’s income.\(^7\) Real success, however, depended on continued generosity beyond foundation, as patrons demonstrated their willingness to participate in important Vincentian causes. In this case, the fruitful fulfilment of Louis XIV’s command to Hébert to ‘teach the court how to save ourselves’ and the Congregation’s own desire to preserve its ethos of charity owed, in large part, to the regular almsgiving of the house’s mistresses, the noble Dames de Saint-Louis, who entrusted disbursement to their Vincentian confessors. The consistent flow of funds from patrons not only gave birth to the establishment, but was elemental in helping it acquire and sustain its distinctly Vincentian character as an institute of charity.

On the other hand, the two colonial missions demonstrated how failures in the patron’s duty of care led to negative missionary outcomes. Of course, the types of patronage arrangement which existed for the Congregation’s projects in Madagascar and the Mascareignes were distinct from those at court. The Vincentians were dependent on commercial expediencies in the Compagnie des Indes for their survival and work at Fort Dauphin, mainly because the missions were part of new, and often dangerous, experiments in French settlement and trade. Nacquart summarised succinctly when he said that he lived ‘hand to mouth’ at Fort Dauphin.\(^8\) Over a decade later, Bourot’s complaints made clear that the commercial Company’s dereliction of its duties as patron affected the missionaries’ health and their pastorate, as the Company routinely denied them basic elements necessary to Christian missionary service. The mission’s dependence on the Company ultimately ended it. The patron’s role in determining the final outcome of the mission was also transparent in the Mascareignes. To be sure, the missionaries’ sustenance there was more secure than in Madagascar due to their cultivation of plantations, but Vincentians still levelled complaints about the Company’s disregard for their needs,

\(^7\) AN, S/6712, “Foundation contract,” June 1686, articles 9 and 10.
\(^8\) *CCD*, 13a:581.
and Bonnet decided to terminate the project in 1734. This time, however, the mission’s destiny underwent a monumental change when the Company ultimately made good on its patronal duty to create a ‘permanent, fixed and invariable’ mission when it agreed the terms of the 1736 treaty. In this instance, the patron’s intervention ensured that the Congregation’s mission avoided the dreadful fate of Madagascar.

The acts of a conscientious patron made a significant difference in obtaining positive results, but if internal institutional support was missing, especially from Saint-Lazare, fidelity to values became a fatally imperilled task. When the Vincentian brother, Gérard Minser, said that ‘if virtue cost two liards in Saint-Lazare, it would cost one hundred’ at Fort Dauphin, his point of comparison was not an arbitrary one.9 As discussed in Chapter One, life at the seminary in Paris was by no means luxurious or care-free, but missionaries stationed there did enjoy greater advantages, such as guaranteed resources for their pastorate and regular guidance from superiors. Successful management of the Congregation’s increasing range of labour always required what Alison Forrestal calls the ‘cultivation of capable Congregation workers,’ but key missions revealed that this process of mentorship could not be confined to the two year seminary period.10 The fact that Bonnet eventually established the séminaire de rénovation in 1712 was recognition that nurturing the Vincentian ethos was an enduring responsibility for the Congregation’s leaders.

Decisive and rapid response from the superiors general remained a consistently influential factor in ensuring success on the mission site. Letters from missionaries in Madagascar and the Mascareignes demonstrated that the superior general was the primary point of appeal, especially in times of physical and moral desperation. However, the history of both missions demonstrates the uneven record of Congregation leaders when it came to offering help to missionaries working on the ground. At Fort Dauphin, management of the mission’s unending misfortunes was the subject of arbitrary, even naïve, decision-making. Under de Paul, the mission continued for over a decade because he refused to take decisive action and

9 ACM, MR 1502, Marin Roguet to Alméras, 26 October 1671.
pull his missionaries out, a decision which he may have regretted.\textsuperscript{11} Even when de Paul died, further appeals by missionaries were, for a time, given short shrift by Alméras, who reminded missionaries that it was the colonial Company’s duty as patron to handle their temporal requirements.

Of course, the patron’s responsibilities and those of the superior general often intersected. Bonnet’s actions prior to the 1736 treaty in Bourbon were certainly a decisive, although tardy, spur to the patron’s revised approach. However, the superior general’s role as successor to Vincent de Paul made his interventions uniquely important in preserving the Congregation’s ethos on a given mission site. François Watel’s swift and strong remonstrances to Louis XIV after Hébert’s nomination to the episcopate in 1703 were a reminder of the superior general’s spiritual duty to police the Congregation’s schema of values, in that case when the king as patron took actions that threatened their long-term preservation. In contrast, the failure of the superior general to enforce those values through regular mentoring had critical consequences. Until Bonnet’s actions in 1734, missionaries on the Île de Bourbon, and later Île de France, were largely left to fend for themselves. To make matters worse, when a missionary addressed Bonnet for moral guidance on the propriety of keeping plantations and slaves, as Houbert did in 1721, the superior general did not take his pleas seriously. The superior general failed to resolve serious concerns damaging to the Vincentians’ spiritual life and reputation, and the small group of missionaries suffered for it.

If the mission worked best when the patron and the superior general’s roles were broadly defined, the opposite was true for missionaries. It is important to recall that part of the reason for de Paul’s long-held belief in the uniqueness of his Congregation was its exclusive pastoral remit, an idea which had its ultimate origin in the foundation contract’s prohibition on work in towns as well as accepting ‘benefices, dignities or offices.’ Subsequently, de Paul’s hesitation in taking on the Roman house in 1656, and the 1668 decree of the general Assembly urging Vincentians to flee the world ‘outside the functions of our state,’ reinforced the rule

\textsuperscript{11} There is a Vincentian myth that de Paul ultimately lamented the missionaries who had died there on his death-bed: \textit{AM}, 86:791-792.
that fidelity to the mission meant observing certain limitations on their roles. The value of these limitations became evident in Madagascar, where the role of parish priest hobbled the Vincentians’ ability to fulfil their core commands. Indeed, when it became clear that the missionaries were reduced to being pastors of the French instead of evangelists to Madagascar’s ‘poor’, Alméras deemed the project meaningless.

The Madagascar mission unveiled why parishes were judged too distracting to Vincentians. Missionaries there insisted that their constant exposure to and oversight of lay people strained their personal and corporate identity as members of a society of missionaries. This sentiment was perhaps best captured by Nacquart when he declared that it ‘is not the job of Missionaries to govern people’ and asked for other secular priests to be sent to Fort Dauphin instead. However, it should be remembered that the missionaries did not carry any official authority at Fort Dauphin, which can be more properly called an attempted settlement than a stable colony. The Fort populace was a tiny, insulated and embryonic colonial society discovered in a poor moral state and constantly at war with the indigenous. It was therefore the convergence of multiple factors that heavily burdened the missionaries’ core tasks and produced their sense of frustration. A more compelling link between distracting roles and distortion of the *esprit primitif* was made at the marine bases and later in the Mascareignes, where the missionaries combined their apostolic activities with the exercise of official, royally-delegated power.

Some of the most impressive commentaries to emerge in the on-going audit of Vincentian roles post-1660 came from Jean Marteilhe in Marseille and two missionaries in the Mascareignes, Jacques Houbert and Gabriel Igou. At first glance, the bases of comparison between these three eye-witnesses are flimsy. After all, Marteilhe was a lay Protestant convict, Houbert and Igou Catholic missionaries. All, however, converged on a fundamental clash that appeared between secular roles and the goals of Vincentian ministry. In Marseille, the revocation of the edict of Nantes in 1685 added the role of government informant (‘gun-stokers’ in Serres’ formulation) to the Vincentians’ identity. In the colony of Bourbon, the missionaries’ temporal responsibilities took the form of membership of the
Conclusion

provincial council. However, the mixture of secular and sacred powers at both sites militated against preservation of the Congregation’s principles. Although delivered decades apart, Jérôme Pontchartrain’s 1701 assessment of Boulenger’s behaviour in Marseille and Houbert’s 1721 report on the missionaries’ conciliar rank were eerily similar in their final verdicts: secular cares made the missionaries odious to those whom they targeted in their ministries and compromised their claims to virtue. Later, Igou added his voice to this chorus in his appraisal of keeping slaves. According to him, slave-holding was a métier which exposed him to the wrath of the very people he wished to convert.

In comparison, the Vincentians’ experiences at court should have been anomalous. On one hand, threats to the esprit primitif appeared powerful there. For a start, the missionaries performed very similar parochial functions to those which caused complaint in Madagascar. Moreover, the Vincentians of Versailles were also nearer to France’s centre of power than those at any other site, and indeed held offices which made them public persons at the highest level. On the other hand, the presence of these elements did not affect the Congregation’s ability to maintain its core ethos; indeed, it flourished. Closer inspection reveals why no anomaly existed. The Congregation’s fear of working at Fontainebleau, and especially Versailles, was premised on images of the compounds as places of corruption and worldliness. This anxiety was understandable given that these motifs were pervasive in contemporary discussions of royal courts, and continue to be relevant to historical scholarship. But in essentials the operating conditions of the Vincentians’ court-based houses involved no cosmic variation or attack on their esprit primitif. While the Versailles compound itself was densely populated, its surrounding areas were overwhelmingly rural.12 Even if sizable numbers of aristocrats joined their flock, there was no lack of the Vincentians’ traditional targets – poor Catholic people – either at Fontainebleau, Versailles or the estates of Saint-Cyr. Further, if it is true that permanent parochial functions were added to the Vincentians’ remit at these locations, it is also evident

12 Saugrain, Claude-Marin, Dénombrement du royaume par généralités, élections, paroisses et feux (Paris, 1709), 1:3, 7, and 9. By the end of Louis’ reign, the domaine at Versailles embraced over a dozen parishes, most of which were sparsely populated. The village of Bucq had 70 feux according to Saugrain’s denombrement, Louveciennes had 48, Rennemoulin had just 16.
that the houses continued to designate its members for missions.\textsuperscript{13} Finally, although the court Vincentians were physically close to the highest secular power, there is no evidence that they wielded any power themselves. Even a figure like Hébert, who remained close to Maintenon, was never invited to venture into political decision-making. The traditional elements of Vincentian work and roles were respected at court, and the results were constructive.

II

The favourable outcome registered at Versailles was obtained, in large part, because of pro-active Vincentian leadership. The poor results which ultimately emerged at the other three mission sites studied in this thesis paint a different picture. At Madagascar and later in the Mascareignes, the Congregation’s basic missionary objectives, conversion of the ‘poor’ non-Christians and relief of their suffering, were not achieved. At Marseille, not only did the Vincentians’ missionary efforts to convert the Huguenots fail, a radically different image of them was born, as cruelty came to characterise a ministry previously endowed with de Paul’s charity. And even at the much-vaunted court base of Versailles, the Congregation’s institutional independence, so important to de Paul, was irrevocably damaged. Faced with this tally, the convictions of Alméras, Jolly, Pierron and Bonnet about guarding the founder’s legacy seem to ring hollow. However, blame for these failures cannot be attributed to the superiors general alone. In the colonial missions, important factors outside their control fundamentally undermined their ability to prevent disappointment, especially the irregular and faulty lines of communication between France and the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, these external factors do not easily absolve the Congregation’s leaders for accepting roles and powers which were likely to cause trouble for Vincentians in the first place.

During his generalate de Paul had shown himself more than astute in identifying functions which he thought would ‘pervert’ the spirit of the Mission, as he had done when declining the Roman house and parish in 1656. However, his followers’ ability to pre-empt the distortion of their ethos by avoiding certain

\textsuperscript{13} See for example ACM, Fontainebleau dossier, ‘Visites depuis 1663 jusqu’à 1788,’ visitation of 12 July 1695.
assignments or responsibilities was not clear-cut. On one hand, the question simply did not arise for some missions. Madagascar was a mission planned by the founder, and his followers inherited its faults. As for the bases at Marseille and Rochefort, the Congregation’s leaders did not spot potential dangers either to the *esprit primitif* or their association’s independence because powerful precedents for their new responsibilities had actually been set during the de Paul period. Yet it would be wrong to characterise de Paul’s successors as less wary about danger: after all, they consistently expressed their anxiety over the court assignments. Furthermore, superiors general often did not baulk at refusing establishments which compromised key principles. Alméras and Jolly refused to accept the seminaries at Reims and Grenoble respectively over disagreements with the bishops about the superior general’s power to move personnel.¹⁴

Most factors which figured in the decision-making of de Paul’s successors were similar to those de Paul had faced. However, a powerful new agent entered the mix after his death: Louis XIV. During de Paul’s lifetime, Louis XIV’s predecessor, Louis XIII, had been an important player in the emergence and development of the Congregation: his 1628 letter to Pope Urban VIII was an example of his kingly solicitude. However, Louis XIV’s rule was felt in the Congregation at a much deeper level than that of his father. Some of the Congregation’s most prestigious new establishments created post-1660, such as Saint-Cyr, were projects personally conceived by the monarch. Because of this, the sovereign became closely present to Vincentians at this time. While Vincent de Paul frequently enjoyed the company of the king or his regent, his meetings were largely related to business on the *conseil de conscience* or were unusual encounters, for instance his assistance at Louis XIII’s death-bed in 1643. In contrast, Louis XIV’s contact with the Congregation was not limited to either one individual or even one site. For the first time, the Vincentians ministered to the king as their parishioner at Fontainebleau and Versailles. The king was often a vigilant patron in person too; for instance, Jolly greeted Louis during a high-profile visit the king made to inspect the *Hôtel des Invalides* in Paris in May 1661.

¹⁴ *AM*, 63: 620.
1682, just a day after a similar visit to the Versailles chapel.\footnote{MG, 1682, 1:159-161.} Furthermore, the Vincentians benefited from Louis’ power as regular protector, as was evident when the king’s ‘bounty’ settled the dispute over the ownership of Saint-Lazare in 1675, or when Louis confirmed Jolly’s decision to remove the parish priest at Rochefort in 1695.

The Congregation was not the only ecclesiastical institution which experienced the intrusion and omnipresence of Louis XIV’s monarchy. Even before the king personally took the reins of government, skirmishes over church matters signalled growing secular interference in the religious sphere. In the 1650s, the trial of Cardinal de Retz, and the appointment of a suffragan to the see of Paris, had exposed a crown ready to diminish long-respected episcopal rights, and even a papacy willing to do the crown’s bidding.\footnote{Forrestal, Fathers, Pastors, Kings, 115-116, 149.} Thereafter, the sovereignty’s ‘unbounded enthusiasm for intervening in ecclesiastical affairs’ became a hallmark of Louis’ personal reign. Throughout the seventeenth century, the increasing currency of political gallicanism among jurists and parlementaires set the stage for the kind of bold assertions of control that Louis XIV would make over the church. From its edict against Jansenism in 1664, its efforts to plunder the régale in the 1670s, and later its 1695 decree securing extensive oversight over ecclesiastical discipline, the monarchy cast its net wide over the Church, its institutions and its rights.\footnote{Ibid. 157-158, 228.}

Even in this atmosphere, ‘poor village priests’ like the Vincentians seemed unlikely bed-fellows of Louis’ crown. However, their Congregation and its ethos were deeply attractive to him. The king recognised the personal salvific function of charity, evidenced in his remarks to Hébert, and the Vincentians’ rise was closely related to the spiritualisation of the monarchy which intensified in the 1690s. The crown also deployed charity to strengthen its power. Louis XIV’s charity for the poor noblewomen of Saint-Cyr, dispensed to form ‘holy spouses for Christ’, was more importantly an insurance policy to ensure future recruits for the king’s dwindling armies. As a result, these charitable schemes reinforced the image of
paternal monarchy and expressed the king’s power and solicitude over the widest range of subjects. The particular stripe of charity provided by the Vincentians, which united the objectives of spiritual and bodily care, was also advantageous. Its holistic approach was not a programme unique by any measure, for Counter-Reformation Catholicism tended to emphasise the unity of spiritual and temporal relief in its administration of charity. However, the ‘Vincentian family’ offered a unique network of organisations capable of delivering it.

For a start, the ‘Vincentian family’ was highly efficient. Its system of centralised government concentrated power in one superior general, for the head of the Vincentians was simultaneously director of the Daughters of Charity. Such a structure permitted the superior general to call upon a wide range of support bases and personnel in the provision of services sought by the crown. Most importantly, the general was resident at Saint-Lazare in Paris and not in Rome like other major orders. This arrangement meant that the crown was able to exercise tighter control over the Vincentians when they worked on its behalf. Therefore, if the Congregation’s constitutional organisation made it easier to control, its operating ethos also made it a useful tool in controlling others. The results were clear. By establishing the Daughters of Charity and the Vincentians together, as occurred at Rochefort, Saint-Cyr, and other Vincentian establishments, Louis XIV mobilized the resources of two organisations close to royal authority in order to create complete dependence – religious and corporeal – on those who received his charity.

Vincentian leaders in the post-de Paul epoch were well aware that the crown gained more from this alliance than the Congregation. ‘We accept them only in a sense as violence, from persons whom we cannot resist’ was the somewhat curt response of the 1692 assembly to a question concerning avoidable assignments, but at least it was honest. The Congregation’s relationship with the king was complex. It was characterised by some elements of Roland Mousnier’s model of ‘fidelity relationships’, and reproduced certain features of the patron-client framework proposed by Sharon Kettering. The ‘affective bond’ so important between master and fidèle can be seen in Louis XIV’s declaration of love for the Congregation when

---

Alméras sent Thomas Berthe for an interview at Versailles in 1671.\textsuperscript{19} In addition, the ‘reciprocal exchange’ relationship inherent between patron and client was transparent, for the Congregation provided valuable pastoral services in exchange for Louis’ protection and economic aid.\textsuperscript{20} However, some critical features to both models were not present. For instance, the relationship was not strictly personal or ‘dyadic,’ nor did it fulfil the ‘free choice’ element of Mousnier’s fidelity formulation.\textsuperscript{21}

Common to both models is the inequality of the relationship between master and \textit{fidèle}, patron and client. This inequality is fundamental to understanding the relationship between crown and Congregation and was even more acute because Louis was at once the Vincentians’ patron and king. Of course, the Vincentians posed little objection to this natural hierarchy: in fact, they had a record of exceptional loyalty to the crown. In a letter to a confrere in 1649, de Paul admitted that he could not disobey a monarch’s summons, even if it conflicted with a pressing spiritual task, ‘since I myself have always believed and taught that Princes, even wicked ones, must be obeyed, as Scripture says.’\textsuperscript{22} After he died, the Congregation scrupulously avoided contentious issues likely to steer them away from the \textit{via regia}, such as Jansenism and Quietism. However, the important detail in de Paul’s letter was not the recognition that the king had to be obeyed, but the fact that remaining faithful to him came at the expense of other agendas.

The Congregation post-1660 sought to safeguard key governing and pastoral principles as well as serving the king. But Louis XIV’s sceptre rarely tolerated divided hearts. The king’s audience with Berthe prior to the Congregation’s installation at Versailles was couched in amorous language, but it demonstrated his capacity to bulldoze the Congregation’s resistance, and it set the tone for the future. Delegates at the August 1697 assembly learnt that the crown’s political expediency required an act of obedience of wide sweep, as confirmed when they complied with


\textsuperscript{20} Kettering, \textit{Patrons, Brokers, and Clients}, chap.1.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid.}, 18-20.

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{CCD}, 3:429, de Paul to Antoine Portail, 11 May 1649.
the king’s momentous veto of Maurice Faure and elected Nicolas Pierron as superior general in 1697. Similar dents in the Congregation’s independence were incurred at Marseille, when personnel were removed at the crown’s instigation. Wherever the Vincentians’ virtue or *esprit primitif* was lost or damaged, obedience to crown policy was a common factor. At Marseille, Boulenger’s régime of harsh discipline was dictated by royal authority and its officials. Similarly, the controversy over the pirate amnesty on the Île de Bourbon in the early 1720s, which aroused such fierce hostility from Houbert, was a faithful application of the ‘Prince’s law,’ and Renou’s compliant approach won the day. Finally, the missionaries’ participation in the slave régime in the Mascareignes, deemed so invidious to Igou in 1734 and his anonymous successor in 1740, was commanded by royal legislation for the colonies. Fidelity to a deceased founder’s ethos remained a noble goal, but it was trumped by loyalty to a living sovereign’s politics on every occasion.

III

The letter that Alméras wrote when the Madagascar mission closed in 1671 included very specific analyses of the Congregation’s attempts to evangelise the Malagasy, but it ended with a broader declaration concerning the Congregation’s place in the wider church. Alméras’ reference to the Vincentians’ general capacities vis-à-vis the Society of Jesus is interesting because it was a reminder that the Congregation was one group of actors among many clerical associations in the early modern Catholic church. More memorable again is Alméras’ unfavourable judgement of the Congregation, which he deemed too small and therefore unfit to participate in foreign mission outside Europe. At the time, it suited Alméras to promote this argument because of the Vincentians’ obsessive need to project images of the Congregation developed in the de Paul period and routinely embellished afterwards. According to these descriptions, the Vincentians were the ‘dregs, the sweepings, the rejects of the world’ and their Congregation ‘one of the poorest and most insignificant limbs of Christ’s body on earth.’

23 *CCD*, 11:1; *RC*, 1:265.
The stereotype image of the Vincentian missionary was just as unflattering in the minds of outsiders. In their factum, the Mathurins had alluded with condescension to the ‘ancient limits’ of the Vincentians’ apostolate, and were surprised that they had the ‘vanity’ to aspire to live in the ‘Louvores’ of kings instead of ‘cabins in obscure hamlets’ or ‘temporary tents in the middle of fields.’ Later, Marteilhe’s remarks on the Vincentians’ conduct were dotted with legendary images of their founder as a ‘simple priest.’ Like Alméras before him, Marteilhe compared the Vincentians with the Jesuits, but this time suggested the followers of de Paul cultivated their reputation for simplicity and humility for less honourable purposes. Whether used for good or ill, these representations of the Vincentians defied the test of time. In 1782, a report by d’Hamécourt, an official of the marine, gave praise to the Vincentians but found them men of restricted talent. D’Hamécourt said the Vincentians were ‘active’ and ‘hard-working’, but that ‘one rarely finds in them talents outside their functions. They are solid but not brilliant.’

The evidence presented in this thesis challenges these images of Vincentian missionaries. The first missionary to shatter the traditional representations was the redoubtable Charles Nacquart, whose forceful attitudes belied the idea that members of the Congregation were ‘meek and humble-mouthed.’ Later at court, several Vincentians revealed themselves as skilful diplomats well able to hold their own in the presence of grandees of the realm. Hébert’s robust defence of his refusal to attend Racine’s play Esther, and Watel’s successful admonishment of Louis at the time of Hébert’s nomination to the episcopate, come to mind. The image of Vincentians as ‘priests of the countryside’ was further contradicted by the breadth of their activities at houses like Marseille. There, the Vincentians acted as missionaries and supervisors of the galley chaplains but also as hospital chaplains and directors of the diocesan seminary. Finally, the missions often stacked temporal roles alongside the Vincentians’ strictly apostolic tasks, which did reveal ‘talents outside their functions.’ Nacquart is mainly remembered as author of the first Malagasy

---

24 Mémoire instructif, part ii, 20: ‘…viles Cabanes dans l'obscurité des Hameaux….ou des Tantes (sic) passagères au milieu des Champs.’
25 AM, 27:237-238: ‘…mais on trouve rarement chez eux des talents étrangers à leurs fonctions. Ils ont beaucoup de solide et rien de brillant…’
dictionary. From 1715 to 1723, Vincentians were active members of the colonial government on Île de Bourbon. On both islands of the Mascareignes, they were remembered as excellent land-owners and planters.

If Alméras’ unfavourable comparison with the Jesuits was partially valid in 1671, it ceased to be in the eighteenth century. Indeed, Marteilhe’s suggestion that the Vincentians overtook the Society in prestige was largely accurate as the century progressed. The decisions taken by Alméras and Jolly cemented the Congregation’s close relationship with the monarchy, and ensured durable favour for the Vincentians through the reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI. For instance, in 1727, they took up the administration of Versailles’ second parish, the church of Saint-Louis; and in 1753, they were appointed directors of the *Ecole militaire de Paris*.

The separate fates of the Society of Jesus and the Congregation of the Mission in the pre-Revolutionary decades were truly remarkable. The Jesuits faced a series of embarrassing expulsions in European and colonial locations (beginning with Portugal in 1759), followed by the regional suppressions of their order in France (1764) and Spain (1767), and the universal extinction of the Society by Pope Clement XIV in 1773. In the same period, the Congregation of the Mission showed few signs of bucking trends established since de Paul’s death. In its French provinces alone, nine new houses were opened between 1762 and 1788. Moreover, when clergy were sought to replace the Jesuits at major locations, eyes fell on the Congregation. In 1780, the *conseil du roi* entrusted former Jesuit houses in the Ottoman Empire to the Congregation. On 25 January 1784, Louis XVI approved decrees passed by Propaganda Fide transferring the Jesuits’ previous functions in Peking, exercised in close proximity to the Chinese emperor, over to the Vincentians.

---

26 *RC*, 1:378, 573.
28 Julia, “‘L’expansion’” 401.
30 *Actes du gouvernement français*, 65.
The experience of Vincentian missionaries would suggest that this growth in prestige and wealth came at a heavy price. The 1668 Assembly’s cautionary decree about ‘fleeing the world’ had underscored an idea that remained salient throughout the Congregation’s development in the ancien régime, and especially under Louis XIV. According to this decree, every step taken towards either greater visibility or an ever more diversified apostolate was related to a proportional breach in maintaining de Paul’s key values and the simple goals of the esprit primitif. Ironically, it was during the immediate post-de Paul period, the ‘era of fidelity’, that trends which gradually moved the Vincentians away from their esprit primitif were cemented. In consequence, the formulation employed by the 1668 decree can be seen as a highly risky method for measuring their fidelity. It gave a constricted definition to the esprit primitif which made the Vincentians’ stated task of preserving the ‘spirit of their vocation’ in new contexts unnecessarily difficult. With the advantage of historical retrospect, and a broader understanding of de Paul’s legacy, the Vincentians do not appear as unfaithful as either they or contemporaries believed. Their roles alongside the Bourbon crown illustrate perfectly. On one hand, because these new roles did not comport either with the Congregation’s humble beginnings at Folleville or already stale self-representations such as the ‘little company’, the Vincentians and outside observers identified them as treacherous. On the other hand, it may be argued that de Paul’s followers were simply faithful to a more realistic history of his life, because they reproduced his personal fame, popularity and influence with patrons at a corporate level. However, it should be remembered that, unlike his disciples, de Paul did not work under the shadow of his own example. Whether or not their standards of fidelity were too strict and unrealistic, they were the only ones which mattered to his heirs and were consistently used by their critics. In his 1757 memoirs, the Protestant galleyman Jean Marteilhe perhaps delivered the most memorable judgement that the fils de Monsieur Vincent had, in fact, faltered in applying their strict objectives. What he did not know was that, long before this date, the mission undertaken at the ramshackle settlement at Fort Dauphin had already revealed them to be fragile, and often unachievable, aspirations.
Bibliography

Manuscript sources

Archives des Affaires Etrangères, Paris


Archives de la Congrégation de la Mission, Paris


Dossiers des maisons de la Congrégation: Fontainebleau, Saint-Cyr, Saint-Cloud, Versailles, Marseille.

Directoire pour les Confréries de Charité, la prédication, missions, exercitants etc. Mss. 632


Registers on the superiors general: Alméras (2 vols.), Jolly, Pierron.

Règles du directeur du séminaire interne, n.d.

Règles du séminaire, 1652.


Saint Vincent Béatification et Canonisation Register 2F

Archives départementales des Yvelines

Etat civil (Baptêmes, mariages, sépultures), 1685-1686.
Bibliography

2 MI 262 (Microfilms)
Série D: 93, 94, 106, 173, 243, 244.
1 H Dépôt/A2.

Archives départementales de la Vienne
G 444

Archives nationales, Paris
Série S: 6699, 6705, 6709, 6712, 6715-16, 6717.
Marine – Séries A/2, B/1, B/2, B/3, B/6, C/2
Séries M 214 and MM 534-543.
F/19

Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en Provence
Séries : F/3, F/5/A, C/5/A

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
Nouvelles acquisitions françaises: 23500, 21329, 27331.

Printed Primary Sources


Bibliography


Chevillard, André. Les desseins de son Eminence le cardinal de Richelieu pour l’Amérique ce qui s’est passé de plus remarquable depuis l’établissement des colonies. Rouen, 1659.


Recueil trimestriel de documents et travaux inédits pour servir à l’histoire des Mascareignes françaises, 1932-1949. 8 vols. Published by Albert Lougnon under the patronage of the Académie de l’Île de la Réunion. Saint-Denis (Réunion).


Reference works


Secondary sources


Antonello, Erminio. ‘Le Missionnaire vincentien et les pauvres.’ *Vincentiana* 4,5 and 6 (July- December, 1984), 785-795.


_________. *Saint Vincent de Paul et les Dames de la Charité.* Paris, n.d.


Félibien Des Avaux, Jean François. Description sommaire de Versailles ancienne et nouvelle. n.p., 1703.


Bibliography


Lhuillier, Théophile. Erection de la paroisse Saint Louis de Fontainebleau, une lettre inédite de Louis XIV. Fontainebleau : E. Bourges, 1893


____________. Correspondance du conseil supérieur de Bourbon et de la Compagnie des Indes, 22 janvier 1724- 30 décembre 1731. Saint-Denis, G.Daudé; Paris: E. Leroux, 1934.


______________. “Gallicanesimo et vita religiosa.” *Divus Thomas* 76, no.1/2.


______________. “L’historiographie vincentienne selon les époques culturelles.” *Vincentiana* 28 nos. 4-6 (1984), 292-313.


Bibliography


Simard, H. *Saint Vincent de Paul et ses œuvres à Marseille*. Lyon: E.Vitte, 1894.


