The origin of the Vincentian Studies Institute can be found in the Second Vatican Council's mandate that religious communities renew themselves in light of the “signs of the times.” The council suggested that this renewal take place within the context of a careful self-reflection by each community of its founding charism.[i]

A more remote origin of the Institute can be found in the work done by a variety of French Vincentian historians beginning in the mid-nineteenth century after the Congregation of the Mission's post-revolutionary restoration. The fourteenth superior general, Jean-Baptiste Étienne (1801-1874), had a lively concern for the preservation of the “primitive spirit” of the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity. He and his successors commissioned a variety of historical materials including the Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission, editions of selected letters of Vincent de Paul, editions of community documents, and a multi-volume history of the Congregation of the Mission.[ii] Confreres such as Gabriel Perboyre, Jean-Baptiste Pémartin, Félix Contassot, Jean Parrang, Fernand Combaluzier, Pierre Coste, and André Dodin are representatives of this French school of Vincentian historiography. Their labors established the foundation for all contemporary work in Vincentian studies.

In the early 1970s there was an attempt to found an organization similar to what would become the Vincentian Studies Institute. The inspiration for this idea was the Jesuit Historical Institute in Rome and the Academy of American Franciscan History then located in Bethesda, Maryland. The idea was that the American Vincentians should have a similar organization. The Visitor and Vice-Visitors of the western region of the United States initially accepted this proposal but, for reasons that are not entirely clear, nothing came of it at that time.[iii]

In 1973, the Very Reverend James Richardson, C.M., the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity, met with the Visitors (provincial superiors) of the United States provinces. He requested that they undertake a new translation into modern American English of the correspondence, conferences and documents of Saint Vincent de Paul. Of course this meant the translation of Pierre Coste’s monumental fourteen volume French edition originally published from 1920-1926.[iv] This new edition also would include those materials discovered since the Coste translation.[v]

After the 1974 General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission Reverend Richardson, established the Group International d'Etudes Vincentiennes (G.I.E.V.). Two American confreres, including John Carven, C.M. (USA East), and Stafford Poole, C.M. (USA West), were involved in this effort. The objectives of this organization were: (1) to promote scientific Vincentian studies and assure their dissemination; (2) to make known Vincentian thought and spirituality; and (3) to help the members of the Vincentian Community learn more about their heritage.
The organization proved unsatisfactory, in part because of a lack of clarity about its purpose and functioning and the infrequency of its meetings. Because of dissatisfaction with it, a revised organization was proposed at and approved by the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission in 1980.[vi] It was known as the Secrétariat International d’Etudes Vincentiennes (S.I.E.V.), and is still in existence.[vii]

Foundation, Growth and Membership of the Vincentian Studies Institute

In 1978, at an annual G.I.E.V. meeting held at Niagara University, New York, a number of representatives of the North American Provinces attended, including Reverends John Carven, C.M., (USA East), Stafford Poole, C.M., (USA West), James King, C.M., (USA East), Frederick Easterly, C.M., (USA East), William Eigel, C.M. (USA Midwest), John Rybolt, C.M., (USA Midwest), and Douglas Slawson, C.M. (USA West). These confreres had the idea of forming a national organization for the study of Vincentian history and spirituality. They felt that a national version of the international organization would be better able to serve the needs of the United States provinces. There was also discussion of a possible role in the organization for the Daughters of Charity.

A preliminary proposal was drawn up and submitted to the Vincentian Conference (comprised of the five United States Visitors) in October 1978. The response was favorable, and the organizers were authorized to have two meetings in which to draft a constitution, bylaws, and prepare a preliminary budget. The two organizational meetings were held at Kenrick Seminary in Saint Louis, Missouri (November 1978), and Mater Dei Provincial House, Evansville, Indiana (March 1979). Out of these meetings came the Constitution and By-laws approved by the Vincentian Conference in October 1979. In the following March the organization began its work with a meeting held at Saint John’s Seminary College, Camarillo, California.

The first election for a presiding officer turned into a tie. Since the newly-adopted constitution did not provide for this eventuality, the choice was decided by a flip of the coin. The late Reverend Frederick Easterly, C.M. (USA East), thus became the first presiding officer of the Vincentian Studies Institute. During the mid-1980s and early 1990s, Reverend John Rybolt, C.M. (USA Midwest), served three terms as Presiding Officer. In 1993, the author succeeded him as Presiding Officer.

As the Institute began, each of the five Vincentian provinces appointed members, and provided annual funding. In 1982, the Visitatrixes of the United States provinces of the Daughters of Charity agreed to appoint sisters representing their provinces to the group without, however, accepting a formal role in sponsorship or funding. This arrangement would last for the next ten years. The organization has since met twice annually, in fall and spring, in various locations across the country. Until 1995, the headquarters of the Vincentian Studies Institute was located at Saint Mary’s of the Barrens in Perryville, Missouri.

A major change in the Institute’s governance took place in 1992. At this point the five United States provinces of the Daughters of Charity agreed to join the five Vincentian provinces as the organization’s corporate sponsors. The ten provincial
superiors approved a new set of constitutions and bylaws in 1994 corporately becoming the institute’s “Governing Body.” The Governing Body met annually to review the work of the Institute, its performance to strategic plan, and approve its budget.

It was at this time that the organization also created a category of at-large membership to allow for members in addition to those representing the ten provinces who are appointed by the respective provincial superiors. The terms for all members were five years and were renewable. In the fall of 2000, the Institute welcomed its first at-large member from outside the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity: Sister Regina Bechtle, S.C., of the Sisters of Charity of New York. In 2002, Dr. Simone Zurawski of the Department of Art and Art History at DePaul University joined the Institute as its first lay at-large member.

Over the years the Institute’s work has been made possible by a succession of members representing the various provinces. Several of these former members have died including, Reverends Frederick Easterly, C.M. (USA East), William Eigle, C.M. (USA Midwest), James King, C.M. (USA East), Warren Dicharry, C.M. (USA South), Frederic Braakhuis, C.M. (USA Midwest); Sisters Mary Basil Roarke, D.C. (USA Northeast), Hilda McGinnis, D.C. (USA West), Jacqueline Kilar, D.C. (USA Southeast), and Virginia Kingsbury, D.C. (USA East Central).

Move to Chicago

In 1995, the headquarters of the Vincentian Studies Institute relocated to the John Richardson Library of DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. The university generously donated office, storage and inventory space, and provided support and technology services. In 1996, with the retirement of Executive Secretary Gerry Hartel and editor Reverend Stafford Poole, C.M., the Institute hired Mr. Nathaniel Michaud to serve as our Publications Editor and Executive Director.

Collaboration with DePaul University

Also in 1995, with the closing of the Midwest Province’s Saint Thomas Theological Seminary in Denver, Colorado, the Vincentian history and spirituality sections of the seminary library were donated to the Vincentian Studies Institute. In 2001, the remaining Vincentian volumes from the seminary library collection at Saint Mary’s of the Barrens in Perryville, Missouri, were transferred to the V.S.I. library at DePaul. The Richardson Library at the university maintains this large non-circulating research collection. The Institute continued over the years to add newly published, rare, and out-of-print Vincentian titles.

The mission synergies afforded both to the university and the Institute by its presence at DePaul were wide ranging. The library’s Special Collections division established a collection of rare and out-of-print Vincentian volumes to complement the V.S.I. Library. As part of this collection there is a section called “Vincent’s reading list.” These works reflect those specifically mentioned by Vincent in his extant correspondence or conferences. There is also a Vincentiana Collection dedicated to material culture items that reflect the Vincentian experience over the centuries as it was experienced on a day-to-day basis. Also in 2001, the Midwest
Province of the Congregation of the Mission relocated its DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives to the university as part of this Vincentian research center.

Vincentian Heritage Journal

The mission adopted by the Vincentian Studies Institute was to “promote a living interest in the Vincentian Heritage.” The organization began its work with the publication of a journal entitled Vincentian Heritage. From 1979-1982 the Institute published one issue a year. In 1983 the journal began appearing bi-annually. The first editor was Reverend John Carven, C.M. (USA East). Reverend Stafford Poole, C.M. (USA West), succeeded him in 1986. In 1997, the Institute hired its first lay editor, Mr. Nathaniel Michaud.

Over the last twenty-eight years 44 volumes of Vincentian Heritage have appeared, representing the work of 133 authors, and totaling 6,006 pages. The journal published two commemorative issues, dedicated to the Very Reverends William Slattery, C.M. (the 19th superior general from 1947-1968), and James Richardson, C.M. (the 20th superior general 1968-1981), at the time of their deaths.[viii] Three issues have been dedicated to the papers given at our various national symposia.[ix] In collaboration with the Sisters of Charity Federation in the Vincentian-Setonian tradition the Vincentian Heritage has published two issues dedicated to papers delivered at national Seton symposia.[x] One issue published the papers of a Vincentian Heritage symposium held at DePaul University, Chicago in 1992.[xi] Another issue in 2004 contained the papers from a national Vincentian leadership institute. The journal has developed from a somewhat homespun effort to one that can now proudly stand next to any of its peers.

Other Publications

After several years concentrating on the journal’s development, in 1987 the Institute undertook a new phase of its research and publishing mission by sponsoring the reprint of Joseph Leonard’s English translation of Coste’s three-volume biography of Saint Vincent.[xii] In 1989, the Institute published two popular histories of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity in the United States.[xiii] These were followed in 1993 by the first English annotated translation of Louis Abelly’s 1664 biography of Saint Vincent de Paul.[xiv] These works have in subsequent years been followed by the publication of other translations, reprints, magazines and original research in Vincentian history and spirituality. This latter group included the publication in 1995 by Paulist Press of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: Rules, Conferences, Writings. This volume was co-edited by Reverend John Rybolt, C.M., (USA Midwest), and Sister Frances Ryan, D.C. (USA East Central).[xv]

Most recently, in 2007, the Institute published In the Footsteps of Vincent de Paul: A Guide to Vincentian France by Rev. John E. Rybolt, C.M. The work is a lavishly illustrated and complete guide to the sites in France associated with Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Louise de Marillac, and the Vincentian tradition.

The V.S.I. has undertaken two archival microfilming projects producing microfilm editions of the Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission, as well as materials in the archives of the General Curia of the Congregation of the Mission in Rome concerning
the United States provinces. At present these resources are being converted to a digital format. Plans are also underway for digitizing other research resources.

Monograph Series
In 1996, the Institute published Sister Betty Ann McNeil D.C.’s (USA Southeast), monograph, The Vincentian Family Tree.[1] This first ever “genealogical” study of “Institutes of Consecrated Life, Societies of Apostolic Life, Lay Associations and Non-Catholic Religious institutes in the Vincentian Tradition” was a significant contribution to the development of national and international Vincentian family relationships. This work represented the first of a planned series of scholarly monographs to be published periodically by the Institute.

The second monograph published in 2001 was the present author’s Jean-Baptiste Étienne and the Vincentian Revial. The third monograph published in 2005 was Frontier Missionary: Felix de Andreis, C.M. 1778-1820 Correspondence and Historical Writings by Rev. John E. Rybolt, C.M. Sr. Louise Sullivan, D.C., contributed the fourth monograph published in 2007, Sisters Rosalie Rendu: A Daughter of Charity on Fire with Love for the Poor. Planning is underway for future volumes in this series.

Continuing Education
As the 1980s drew to a close the Institute explored new avenues of fulfilling its mission: particularly in the area of continuing education. In June 1989, the organization sponsored its first national symposium entitled: The Age of Gold: The Roots of Our Tradition. This event, which examined the French spiritual roots of the Vincentian tradition, took place at Saint Mary’s of the Barrens in Perryville, Missouri. Two years later, in 1991, to mark the 400th anniversary of the birth of Saint Louise de Marillac, the Institute sponsored a second national symposium at Marillac Provincial House, Saint Louis, Missouri.

The next continuing education effort sponsored by the Institute began in June 1997. After extensive consultation, the membership determined that a pressing issue in contemporary Vincentian experience was mission-based leadership development. This led to the choice of the theme for the next national symposium: Vincentian National Leadership Symposium: Unfolding the Legacy of Our Mission. This effort proved so successful that the Institute repeated the symposium three times in November 1997, September 1998, and November 1999. This offering drew a wide representation from all branches of the Vincentian family.

In 2004, the Institute sponsored a conference at DePaul University for Vincentian-Setonian archivists. The theme of the conference was “Vincentian Archives for the 21st Century: The Records of Our Past, Look to our Future.” Almost 30 archivists from across the country attended this event.

Participants were asked to evaluate each continuing education program, and their input always guided subsequent event planning. Evaluations of these programs have been uniformly high. A total of 572 members of the Vincentian Family attended the nine continuing education events.

“Double Family” to the “Vincentian Family”
From the time of its first continuing education efforts, the Institute noticed a growing awareness of a network of relationships within the charism in the United States that Vincentians, Daughters of Charity and others have now come to very familiarly call the “Vincentian Family.” For the last fifteen years the Vincentian Studies Institute has sought to expand its mission from the narrower concept of serving the “Double Family,” to the much broader national and international reality encompassed by the concept of serving the “Vincentian Family.” It would not be immodest to say that the Institute has been a leader in this movement.

In the summer of 2003 the Institute sponsored its first Vincentian Family Heritage Tour to sites associated with Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac in Paris and throughout France. The thirty-five participants represented many branches of the Vincentian family in the United States. A second tour took place in August 2005, and a third in August 2007.

During this time the Institute made a commitment to foster collaborative ties with the Ladies of Charity, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, and the Sisters of Charity Federation in the Vincentian-Setonian tradition. Various members became liaisons at the national level with these organizations.

Research Grants

Beginning in the late 1980s, the V.S.I. provided occasional grants to support Vincentian research projects. A number of confreres, sisters, and lay scholars, took advantage of this grant opportunity to support their Vincentian research, writing and publication. In 2002, the Institute formalized this grant program offering up to $15,000 in grants annually. Two recent grants awarded include: Sr. Betty Ann McNeil’s (USA Southeast), demographic study of the entrants into the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph in Emmitsburg, Maryland, from 1809 to 1850, and the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, United States Province (1850-1909); and Dr. Richard J. Janet of Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Missouri, who is researching a book that is tentatively titled: “In Missouri’s Wilds: A History of St. Mary’s of the Barrens Seminary and College 1818-2000.”

On the Web

In 1998, the Institute’s web site first made its appearance. Regularly updated, this site continues to provide in-depth information about the V.S.I.’s mission and its activities. Beginning in the late 1980s, the Institute received increasing numbers of inquiries concerning the availability of back issues of our publications, Vincentian titles published by other publishers, and Vincentian Heritage art, post cards, medals, posters and other devotional items. After its 1995 move to Chicago, the Institute experimented with a variety of outsourcing options for bookstore operations. Since 2002, the DePaul University Publications Group has managed this e-commerce enterprise. Beginning in the summer of 2007, Barnes & Noble will take over management of this resource.

A Transition: The V.S.I. at DePaul University

In 2004, at the time of our twenty-fifth anniversary, I wrote the following:
The future of the Vincentian Studies Institute of the United States is linked with the future of the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, and the wider Vincentian Family in this country. As the number of confreres and sisters grows inexorably smaller, the Vincentian Studies Institute will change: through the use of technology, the attraction of a new generation of lay Vincentian scholars, and perhaps even the eventual turning over of the organization to the Vincentian laity, who will in any case lead the charism in the new century.

In 2007, the time has come for this change. Through a prayerful discernment with the V.S.I. membership, the institute’s Governing Body concluded in 2006 that the time for a transition in sponsorship had arrived. An institutional candidate to take over sponsorship was immediately apparent: DePaul University.

Given the long association of the Institute with DePaul, and given DePaul’s own Vincentian mission and institutional commitment to the Vincentian Heritage all sides readily agreed as to the desirability of this move. DePaul, for its part, pledged the financial resources to support the Institute as part of the university’s Office of Mission and Values, and also pledged to continue its traditional mission and forms of outreach to the wider Vincentian family in the United States. Both an editorial board and an advisory board have been established to help guide the Institute as it becomes part of the university on 1 July 2007.

In April 2007, the last regular meeting of the Vincentian Studies Institute took place. Over the last twenty eight years, 41 men and women have served as members of the V.S.I. The representatives came not only from the provinces of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, but also have included representatives from the wider Vincentian Family. Over the years these members attended a total of 55 regular meetings held in 21 different locations across the United States.

The members provided the following summary of the institute’s activities:

- 44 individual volumes of the journal Vincentian Heritage were published, containing 272 articles, comprising 6,006 printed pages.
- 19 other original works, reprints, or translations were published. These works represented 6,489 printed pages.
- 18 research grants were given to scholars resulting in a number of studies, articles, presentations, and books.
- An online Vincentian Heritage Bookstore Operation served thousands of customers.
- The ten provinces provided operational funding totaling: $1,300,761.91.
- A total income of $2,646,295.00 was generated against total expenses of $2,624,106.00.
- 9 continuing education workshops, symposia, and Heritage Tours were held with 572 participants.

Over the last twenty-eight years the Vincentian Studies Institute has been faithful to its mandate to "promote a living interest in the Vincentian Heritage.” The Institute has grown in ways that no one could have foreseen at its foundation. This
growth reflects the classic model of providential unfolding that is so characteristic of all apostolic activities in the Vincentian tradition. The Institute approaches the future confident that under its new sponsorship its mission will continue to grow and evolve in ways that will promote “a living interest in the Vincentian Heritage” among the wider Vincentian Family in the United States. We believe that in turn, this “living interest” will continue to manifest itself in the multiple forms of Vincentian service to our brothers and sisters who are most in need.

End Notes

[iii] Both Reverends Stafford Poole, C.M., and John Rybolt, C.M., provided personal reminiscences for this article.
[v] This Vincentian Translation Project, which is now approaching its thirtieth anniversary, has to date published the first eight volumes of Vincent’s correspondence, two volumes of documents in translation, and two volumes of conferences. The first volume published in 1985 is dedicated to Reverend James Richardson, C.M., and is a tribute to his role in the encouragement of Vincentian Studies. This effort, under the editorship of Sister Marie Poole, D.C., has also played an important role in the contemporary revival of Vincentian studies in English. There is, however, no formal relationship between the Vincentian Translation Project and the Vincentian Studies Institute.
[vi] The 1980 General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission also requested that individual provinces or groups of provinces establish local groups for the study and promotion of our Vincentian Heritage. Several provinces, especially in Europe and Latin America, have established such organizations in line with this request.
[x] Ibid., 14:2 (1993); ibid., 18:2 (1997).