

FIFTY YEARS OF THE HISTORICAL INSTITUT

We are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the Historical Institute and it gives me special pleasure to introduce this issue of *Spicilegium Historicum*. The Historical Institute of our Congregation was set up during the brief but visionary generalate of Very Reverend Leonard Buijs. One year after his election as the superior general and rector major in the General Chapter of 1947, Father Buijs convened the first-ever Congress on Redemptorist History. This assembly, which met in Rome during Easter Week of 1948, agreed on an ambitious programme for the coming years: the collection and cataloguing of the documentary patrimony of the Congregation, a new biography of Saint Alphonsus, the dissemination of the circular letters of our Founder, a new history of the itinerant missions and the creation of an Historical Institute. The last goal was envisioned to be a team of Redemptorists charged with promoting the study of our particular history. The Congress expressed the hope that the new Institute would promptly produce a synopsis of the history of the Congregation.

The Historical Institute was formally erected by a decree of Father Buijs on 11 December 1948¹. The text of the decree connects the creation of the Institute with the mind of the 1947 General Chapter. Its first members were Maurice De Meulemeester (Belgium), Oreste Gregorio (Napoli), and Peter Bernards (Lower Germany); a general consultor, Engelbert Zettl, was named to serve as a liaison with the General Council. While the hope for a comprehensive history is still being realised, the Historical Institute soon began other forms of service to the Congregation; chief among them was the semestral publication, *Spicilegium Historicum*. First proposed by Father Buijs in 1953, the inaugural issue appeared in May 1954 under the signature of his successor, Very Reverend William Gaudreau. The editorial team included Oreste Gregorio, Andres Sampers (Holland) and Joseph Löw (Austria).

Five decades have passed since the creative impulse of Father Buijs and his contemporaries. We are still appraising the effect of

¹ *Analecta*, 20 (1948) p. 198.

those fifty years on our Church and our Congregation. It is practically a cliché to speak of the sea change experienced by Catholics since 1948. But permit me to highlight some events within and without the Congregation that I believe will help to underscore the vital contribution the Historical Institute has made to the life of our Congregation in the second half of the twentieth century.

Among the consequential elements within the Congregation, one could recall the figures of the five superior generals: Leonard Buijs, William Gaudreau, Tarcisio Amaral, Josef Pfab and Juan Manuel Lasso de la Vega. More particularly, an inescapable fact is that the Congregation reached a statistical acme in 1964 and the number of its members has declined ever since. On the other hand, one must not overlook the growing international character of the Congregation and, thanks to a spectacular growth in Latin America, Asia and Africa, the lessening of its exclusively European features and orientation.

The single most momentous event for the Congregation in the last fifty years, however, took place in the universal Church. I refer, of course, to the Second Vatican Council, especially its call for a renewal in the consecrated life. The Congregation obeyed the command to renew itself and, while there have been many and unmistakable gains, there have also been troubling consequences. The most serious of these has been an apparent loss of identity for many Redemptorists and a questioning about the meaning of the Congregation in the life and mission of the Church today.

These historical factors help to indicate the critical role the Historical Institute has exercised in the last five decades. While its accomplishments are many, I would like to highlight the three most significant.

First, it cannot be denied that the investigations and publications of our Historical Institute have played a crucial part in restoring the figure of Saint Alphonsus to the members of the Congregation. This contribution is more than a point of academic interest. The Second Vatican Council, in its sacred constitution *Perfectae Caritatis*, established the primitive inspiration of the founder or foundress as the criterion for renewal of a religious family. But, how could Redemptorists hope to begin such renewal if Saint Alphonsus remained inaccessible to us?

The work of the members of the Historical Institute has made possible new and insightful biographies and monographs that have served to put flesh on the figure of Alphonsus di Liguori. With each passing year Redemptorists have been able to understand better the genius of our Founder, while adapting his insight to the circumstances of a global Congregation. The chief beneficiaries of this wealth of scholarship have been our candidates, students and young people in general. Their idealism has found a resounding echo in the person of Saint Alphonsus.

The second gift of the Historical Institute is that of placing the foundational moments of our Congregation in their proper context. Redemptorists now have a much better appreciation to the socio-cultural milieu of the Kingdom of Naples in the eighteenth century. This allows us to grasp the concrete situation in which the gracious invitation of God met the generous and creative spirits of Alphonsus and his first companions. Understanding the urgent pastoral needs of that time and place, we can comprehend the particular choices made by the first Redemptorists with regard to pastoral methods and the lifestyle of the community. The studies regarding the evolution of the primitive Rule have helped us to understand that the juridical expression of our particular charism did not fall from heaven in a complete and immutable form in 1749 or 1764, but has undergone the changes necessary in order to respond to new situations and unforeseen challenges.

An ever-increasing clarity around the historical context of the foundational moments of the Congregation allows us to live today with the sort of "creative fidelity" that the Holy Father asks of consecrated persons². That is, by better understanding the circumstances in which Redemptorists first sensed the call of the Redeemer and by analysing their particular response, we can make choices today that seek to reproduce the same missionary dynamism and audacity that characterised Alphonsus and his companions. At the same time, we can avoid any sort of fundamentalism that would seek to canonise elements that were proper for the Congregation during a certain epoch, but now would be obstacles to the apostolic life.

Finally, the third accomplishment of the Historical Institute is that it has favoured the intellectual life of Redemptorists. The most

² John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, (Rome: 1996), n. 37.

recent General Chapter has expressed its concern for an excessive activism in the Congregation that is indicated by an abundance of work, but a dearth of reflection³. When we lack a dimension of study and appreciation of our history, we risk making rash or imprudent decisions because we are increasingly disconnected with our past. Or, we unconsciously adopt a helpless and despairing attitude toward the challenges of our world and Church. By labouring to connect us with our past, the Historical Institute has kept before our eyes the challenge to be men who are able to think and assess, then act with creative fidelity.

Fifty years ago Fathers Buijs and Gaudreau connected the wisdom of Cicero and his appreciation for the classic virtue of *pietas* with the need for a Historical Institute. This virtue, the highest in the Roman scale of values, was seen as consistent with a salutary love for one's family and one's homeland⁴. Knowledge of one's history greatly favours the possibility of *pietas*, for *historia sit magistra vitae, et lux veritatis*⁵.

The General Council has recently underscored the need for us to recover a sense of personal identity, affiliation and – dare we say it? – a healthy pride in being a Redemptorist⁶. For fifty years the investigation and publications of our Historical Institute have served to fortify the Redemptorist identity. Now, more than ever, we need the work of this body as well as the willingness of each confrere to study and benefit from the fruits of its labour.

Sincerely yours in
Christ
Joseph W. Tobin,
C.Ss.R.
Superior General

Buga, Colombia, 31 May 1998
Solemnity of Pentecost

³ XXII General Chapter, *Final Message* (1997), n. 6; cf also the first *Communicanda* of the present General Council (1998), n. 9.

⁴ Cicero, *De Re Publica*, 1. VI, *Somnium Scipionis*, passim.

⁵ Cicero, *De Oratore*, II, 9.

⁶ *Communicanda* 1 (1998), n. 18.