

Fr. Vincent J. Donovan 73 USA TZA

* August 15, 1926 Pittsburgh, PA * May 13, 2000 White Oak, PA

He attended Central Catholic High School before entering the Redemptorist junior seminary of St. Mary's at North East, PA, in 1941. When he graduated from it in 1946, the Redemptorists did not want him for their novitiate, saying that he was too nervous, but recommended him to the Spiritans. He became one of a number of Fathers who came to us from the same source; off-hand I can name the Fathers Francis Fitzgerald, Joseph Noppinger, Louis Schenning and Edward Smith. Vincent made his vows on August 15, 1947 at Ridgefield, CT, and then did his senior seminary studies at Ferndale, Norwalk, CT, where he was ordained on June 6, 1953. He graduated with a B.A. and a B.D.

While at Ferndale, he contributed articles to the in-house magazine Spiritus. In one of them he stressed the role of the laity in the apostolate. People, he argued, glibly use the word "vocation" only for the priesthood and religious life, but Christ's call extends really to all his followers, including lowly workers: "be my apostles, even as Matthew, John, Peter or Paul". Workers do so by making their labor holy, as Christ himself has done. "Fishers of men is what you are, other apostles is what you are."

Having been a very good student, he was sent to Fordham University in 1954 for graduate studies to prepare himself for further studies at the Gregorian University in Rome. There he became ill and was hospitalized. When he had recovered in mid 1956 he was assigned to the place of his dreams, the Kilimanjaro mission in East Africa, without having earned his licentiate in theology.

By the time he sailed, Egypt and Great Britain were in conference over the control of the Suez Canal, but the canal was open to traffic. His ship was the only British vessel in a convoy being piloted through the Canal in between two Egyptian destroyers fore and aft, while all along the canal big guns stood aimed at the ship. Obviously the passengers were nervous, but nothing untoward happened. When the ship reached Aden they were allowed to land for a quick look at that place. There he was suddenly surrounded by a mob throwing stones at him, but he was rescued by the local police. After reaching Mombasa he made his way to the Moshi Diocese in Tanganyika.

He was posted there at Kilema to study Swahili. He learned the language with surprising ease and a few months later was able to deliver his first sermon. He was then attached to the Kwizu station in the Pare mountains as assistant to Fr. Michael Carr. Though he expected to be there for a long, time, he was soon named rector of the senior seminary at Kibosho, near Moshi, and taught there for several years. At an undetermined time he was posted to Burka, an annex of Arusha, where there was a middle school, called a junior seminary, for Maasai boys, his first contact with these people.

In 1962 he went on leave to the U.S.A., after an absence of seven years. Just then the new diocese of Arusha was close to being formally established and on his return he was placed in charge of its catechetical center at Usa River. He is remembered for his innovative approach, dovetailing catechetical formation with the upcoming liturgical celebration of the Eucharist on Sundays. The interest in the Maasai, however, which he had acquired in Burka, soon made him a prime candidate for work among them. The Maasai were still semi-nomadic warriors and cattlemen, whom he called the aristocrats of Africa. Echoing Bp. Alexandre Le Roy, who had worked in Tanganyika in earlier times, he was convinced that, once Christianized, they would be the best of all in Africa. So far, however, they had resisted all efforts to evangelize them. True, both Lutheran and Catholic missionaries, had opened schools for them and the older students would usually be baptized, but after returning to their people's kraals, they would live again as they had done before going to school. There simply was no social support system for isolated converts.

Stationed in Loliondo in north Maasailand, Fr. Donovan decided to use a different approach. He must have remembered Fr. Libermann's admonition to become Negroes with Negroes, to adopt their ways of thinking, their culture, so that a truly African Christianity could arise. He studied the way St. Paul the Apostle had worked: St. Paul would preach the Good News in several areas and when he had a group of Christians in one, he would leave them as an established local church with a local leader or bishop and then do the same all over in another area. Vince resolved to do the same for the Maasai. His plan was to begin with an inner circle of six Maasai kraals to be visited once a week for a whole year, then another more outer circle of six and so on until his mission would be accomplished. Thus began his endless safaris, week after week.

On arrival long palavers began. The dialogue would be about the Maasai's religion and culture and what Jesus could mean for them. He learned as much as he gave, but the Maasai slowly began to understand in terms of their culture, what Jesus could mean for them and to accept to live as a Christian community. Together, virtually the entire group would ask to be baptized. And so a new little Christian community was formed. His primary evangelization work was then finished and he could go on with the next circle of six kraals. He realized, of course, that follow-up formation was needed, but that was a task that others could do. The arrival of Maryknoll Sisters solved that problem for him: they took over the task of on-going formation and training for leadership.

He would have loved to give each group an elder or priest (the word priest means elder) as St. Paul did, but that was not possible as yet. Formation of Maasai for future priests had already started at Burka and Bp. Dennis Durning of Arusha had a number of Maasai students in his Oldonyo-Sambo junior seminary, but the first of them to reach ordination did so only after Vincent had left Africa; so for the time being non-Maasai priests had to visit the kraals for the administration of the sacraments.

Catholic priests were not the only ones interested in the Maasai; Lutherans also preached the Gospel among them. Fr. Donovan did not want to fight them and, together with Fr. Edward Kelly and others, opened up lively dialogue sessions with them to mutual benefit.

Vince's interest in the Maasai was not limited to primary evangelization. While on leave in 1967, friends provided the necessary funds to enlarge the Loliondo small hospital. There the Austrian priest and physician Dr. Herbert Watschinger dedicated most of his life to their care.

In 1973 illness obliged Fr. Donovan to leave Africa. He became vocation coordinator of the U.S. East Province as well as a member of its provincial council for a three year period, and again in 1979, earning the gratitude of his superiors for his dedicated service. He also devoted time to prepare his first book about his experiences with and learning from the Maasai, entitled *Christianity Rediscovered*. It was published in a first edition by Fides/Claretian Press in 1979 and then in a new edition by Orbis Books in 1982. Reprinted repeatedly, it became an influential best-seller in missiology

right up to the present, much lauded by many for being enlightening and criticized for being unorthodox by others.

In 1981 he became pastor of St. James, African-American Parish in Dayton, OH, and served there until 1985. He then took a six month sabbatical for study in preparation for a new book. In 1986 he became rector of the Shrine of Our Lady of Victory at the former African-American St. Peter Claver Parish in Philadelphia. The Shrine continued to function as a center of non-parochial ministry among the former parishioners. The only exception granted by the Archbishop was that funeral services for deceased Blacks 60 years old or over could be held at the Shrine.

In September 1988 he was transferred to Chicago's St. Mary Magdalene Parish as its pastor. The following year his new book, *The Church in the Midst of Creation*, was published by Orbis Books. In this book he discussed the church of yesterday, of today, and of tomorrow, indicating why it was what it was in the past, why it is what it is now and what it must be tomorrow: a church being reborn and built up from its grassroots, with all the implications this has for understanding its sacraments, its mission, structures, faith and action.

In 1991 he was placed at the Laval community of Duquesne University to do theological research and assist in campus ministry. At the same time he was also able to continue delivering fascinating lectures or engaging in dialogue in many places. Two years later he became associate pastor of Fr. Edward Vilkauskas at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Monroe, NC. He worked there to the full satisfaction of Bishop William Curlin of Charlotte, paying special attention to Hispanic people in the parish. He also continued his work as a writer and speaker, including participation in ecumenical meetings.

On Friday December 3, 1999 the septagenarian "Lion in Winter," as National Catholic Reporter headed an article about him, "roared" for the last time. It was on the occasion of the golden jubilee of Fr. Edward Kelly as a priest, then stationed at Our Lady, Queen of Peace in Arlington, Va. The two had worked closely together in Tanzania and labored among the Maasai to evangelize them in their own culture. "If Christ is in a culture," Vincent said in his final address, "something in that culture will live and something will die. Evangelizing a culture is not an empty gesture, not without repercussions." People, he argued, want the church to stay the same all over, but history

bears witness to the fact that the Jesus of Nazareth becomes our Christ differently in different cultures: a Greek Christ, a Latin Christ, an Irish Christ, a Black Christ and so on. Every culture is ready to be evangelized, but 80 percent of the world have not yet been evangelized.

Their evangelizers should not be an attempt to impose on those tribes of the world elements of the evangelizers' own culture that are foreign to the Good News of Jesus which they come to bring to them. They must be open to other cultures.

All this is wholly in keeping with what the present Pope said when he went to Africa and said that the Church in Africa must assume an African face, become a truly African Church. As such, it would differ from tribe to tribe, even as it did in Europe and other parts of the Western World.

Vincent's speech at Arlington was indeed the final roar of a lion. Suffering from various ailments, he went to Pittsburgh after receiving the "heartful gratitude (of the bishop) for four years of zealous service in the Diocese of Charlotte."

After evaluation of his condition at Mercy Hospital in Pittsburgh, his sister Nora Koren took care of him at her home. He died there suddenly on May 13, 2000 at her home in White Oak, PA. He had just come back from the florist to buy a bouquet for her on Mother's Day. Funeral services were held at Trinity Hall Chapel, Duquesne University, and a memorial service was celebrated at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Monroe, NC. Burial took place in the Spiritan plot of St. Mary's Cemetery in O'Hara Township.