

The general secretariate and its relationship with the provinces.

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From time to time, all Visitors come in contact with the Curia General through the office of the Secretary General (e.g.: sending documents from the Province, notification of vows, ordinations and deaths, the Catalogue, statistics etc.). I must also mention the two publications from the Curia: *NUNTIA* and *VINCENTIANA*, of which I have been in charge for the past two years. So, we are in contact quite frequently, and I would like us to talk today in order that these contacts be as good as possible in the better service of the Congregation.

Introduction:

I will begin this brief introduction to the General Secretariate by saying that it is a team of people at the service of the Superior General and the entire congregation.

So, more than the one person whose name and function you know, the General Secretariate is **a team of five people**, made up of two Daughters of Charity, one from the United States and one from Spain, and two Italian lay-women, who work with me. It's a team within which each one takes on various responsibilities and often works in different languages.

My role as **Secretary General**, is **on the one hand**, to direct, coordinate and supervise the work of this team whose other members, in many areas, do the greater part of the work (e.g. for the Catalogue or the statistics where I just set out the general guide-lines and supervise the work). **On the other hand**, my role is the one set out in Statute 61: to prepare for Councils, to participate in them and take the minutes, as well as writing out some of the letters that may follow on from them. I also have responsibility for filing all recent documents and letters which, after some years, are sent to Fr. Davitt's General Archives.

I will touch on 2 principal issues which can be subdivided into several points.

1. Communications between the General Secretariate and the Provinces.
2. The publications from the General Curia.

I. Communications between the general secretariate and the Provinces.

For my part, while I don't have any major problems, I think that certain things could be improved both to facilitate our work and improve its quality. I would also like your reactions with regard to the quality of the service we offer, as well as suggestions to improve it. I would now like to give you some information and make some suggestions to you:

1. POSTAL AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS.

It is not always easy to be in contact with countries that are far from Rome and with which means of communication are not always the best.

* We are already very pleased that almost all the provinces have a **FAX**, even if some of them don't always work very well and we have to try a number of times before a document goes through. There are also some faxes linked with the telephone on the one line: this is not helpful and could be improved so that, when you dial the fax, you don't get the 'phone. There are currently machines which can be added and which can direct a call automatically to the fax or the 'phone as required.

* **POST AND TNT** (the private delivery service which we also use), are not always either quick or very reliable, especially with certain less well equipped countries. The Italian post is sometimes very slow and uncertain, so, for preference, we use the Vatican post, which is more reliable.

If you notice that the post isn't working: that it is too slow, that it doesn't arrive or that it arrives in bad condition, it is very important that you let us know, in order that we can send you the documents in question again and also so that we can, eventually, reclaim for losses, especially from the TNT company. Last year, I conducted an inquiry amongst the Visitors about this, which revealed some problems, happily not too many, which I was able to take up with TNT. Unfortunately, some Visitors did not reply.

* **TELEPHONE BY SATELLITE** is used in one province (Zaire) where the telephone doesn't work and the post doesn't work any more. This is very useful, because it is the one direct means of communication. Some Visitors might like to think about this for themselves or for some of their more isolated confrères.

* **INTERNET.** The General Curia, as I announced in the last NUNTIA; is now on the Internet, as are certain houses and some confrères in the Congregation. This allows us, thanks to the **ELECTRONIC POST** (E-mail), to send, instantaneously, messages, simple letters or more important documents, from one computer to another, in another country or on another continent. This also allows us access to a vast world-wide reservoir of information (World Wide Web) from which we can draw out various data, or insert our own, on life in the Congregation or on St. Vincent (as St. John's University in the United States or our provincialate in Naples have already done). It is a means of communication which will probably develop a great deal in the future and which will be more and more widespread in the Congregation. I would be grateful if

you would forward the Internet numbers of your houses (including information pages in the World Wide Web and E-mail) which will, in future, be published, with the telephone and fax numbers, in the Catalogue of the Congregation.

2. COMMUNICATING INFORMATION TO THE GENERAL SECRETARIATE.

I would like to make some recommendations about getting information to us and on answering the questionnaires we send you. I will begin with three general recommendations which, if properly followed, will make our task a good deal easier;

- a. **use the out-lines** we send you.
- b; **follow the instructions** we give you and
- c; **abide by the time limits** given.

Take for example:

* **ATTESTATION OF VOWS.** When the Visitors inform us of vows in handwriting rather than using the required formulae, there is always some information missing and we have to send faxes looking for it. On top of that, since we have to file the vows in the archives, we must have the *original signed document* and not a photocopy or, even worse, a fax.

* I am taking advantage of this chance to say that sur- and family names *must not be changed* between the time of taking vows and the death of the confrère, otherwise, we have problems in finding and filing documents. It does happen, especially in certain provinces, that there are two names, where the order (of names) can change from time to time or one is dropped altogether, or the spelling changes, or that people use different names. These are all things to be avoided.

* **THE CATALOGUE:** We have modified its presentation in order that it might be clearer and easier to use. We hope you are pleased with it. I will give you a questionnaire at the end on which you can say what you think of the new lay-out and also make any suggestions.

The Catalogue, and the statistics, require quite difficult work from the secretaries, which they do with the greatest care. But sometimes, you could help their task by following more closely the instructions we give you better. Not doing so leads to mistakes: for example, when you rewrite all the pages on your province rather than just making the necessary corrections on the pages of the previous year's catalogue. As well as that, you should try to respond as accurately as possible.

* **THE STATISTICS:** We have translated the formula from latin into the vernacular languages and we have modified the structure so that it will be clearer and will give more information, which will then be published, with tables and graphics, in Vincentiana. I hope it wins your approval.

The Sister who looks after it, and who used to be a maths. teacher, complains that, not only are the Visitors not always good at maths but they do not always read the the questions properly before answering and thus give answers which are manifestly incorrect. She also has to send a lot of faxes to get clarification. Once again, I suggest taking the greatest possible care in your answers and over the sense they make. That will save us a lot of time and allow us to present better statistical reports. In light of your answers and suggestions this year we will try to improve the formula for next year.

Thanks to the answers that we received this year and with the information from the preceding years, I've been able to do a study, to appear in n°3 of *Vincentiana*, entitled *The statistics of the C.M.; statement of a crisis and chances for the future*, in which I try to present the tendencies throughout the Congregation from the crisis years of the '60s and '70s, when there were numerous departures from the Congregation, up to today. I was particularly interested in the relationship of the number of incorporated members to the number of young in formation also in differences according to world regions.

In the end, I traced the following major tendencies in the Congregation:

- a) From a global point-of-view, after the major crisis of the '60s and '70s, which saw a great reduction in our active numbers, overall this is beginning to slow down as the years go by, except for the number of Brothers; which continues to decline worryingly.
- b) Elsewhere we experience a noticeable increase in the number of young in formation. If this tendency continues, we could hope for a stabilisation and, perhaps, in a few years, even an increase in our membership worldwide.
- c) However, the reality varies greatly according to region; some having a lot of vocations and increasing in number and others having few vocations and continuing to decline: If these trends continue in the years to come we will see a movement of the Congregation from the North and the West to the South and the East.

The numbers make us think. They reveal, at one and the same time, a chance to be seized and a challenge to be taken up. I will leave you to discover this article yourselves. I have a few copies if you are interested.

3. THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGES

Normally, the General Curia can only ensure that the Circulars of the Superior General, the various documents from the Secretariate as well as its publications (*NUNTIA* and *VINCENTIANA*) are sent out in three languages: that is, french, spanish and english. Sometimes, some circulars of the Superior General or documents from the General Secretariate may be translated into another language, if that is possible,

but it is not the rule. I know that there are a lot of other languages in the Congregation, but, unfortunately, it is not possible to do this regularly.

Some provinces immediately translate the circulars or *NUNTIA* and send us the translation. I am thinking particularly of Austria with the german language. That is really excellent. I would like to encourage provinces with the same language; who do not belong to the french-, english- or spanish-speaking groups , to make an arrangement between themselves to do such translations-especially of the Superior General's circulars and *NUNTIA*-which they can share with one another. Here I am thinking especially of those who speak italian or portugese; or also of Poland and Slovakia. It is something to which you yourselves can give serious consideration.

II. CURIA PUBLICATIONS.

I have been in charge of *NUNTIA* for almost three years and of *VINCENTIANA* for almost two. I am lucky to be able to rely on the cooperation of various secretaries, benefitting particularly from the number of languages they speak. I would like to give you some information and make some requests about these publications.

1. NUNTIA

This little information bulletin is a regular link between all the confrères in the Congregation and can be a means of communicating, of sharing experiences and, thus, of building up community between us. I have tried to publish more substantial and concrete news without lengthening the thing too much. The various secretaries help me to find news items by reading through the provincial bulletins. Then, with this harvest, combined with what the correspondants for *NUNTIA* send us, I prepare a first draft of the bulletin in french. Then, along with Frs. Lauro Palú and Italo Zedde, who make up the *NUNTIA* commission, we consider the content. After that, it is translated into english and spanish. And, finally, one of our secretaries does the lay-out. We have tried to improve the content and style of our bulletin, in the hope that this will give the confreres a taste for reading it.

NUNTIA certainly contains Curia news and I am in a good position to know it. But, just as important is the news from the Provinces. In order to catch up on it, we read the provincial bulletins. But I also requested, some two years ago now, that each province would have a **NUNTIA correspondent**, who, after any important event in the Province, would sent me the information on it. Some people do this very well. Others never send anything, which is a pity! I would like to ask Visitors, if they need to, to

encourage the literary zeal of their province's correspondent. I will give you a copy of the letter where I set out all the necessary instructions.

I would be glad to hear your reactions to the content and format of **NUNTIA**. I would also like to know how you distribute it among the confrères of your province. You will find a questionnaire on this as you leave the room.

2. **VINCENTIANA**

Two years ago, I was made director of **VINCENTIANA** with the task of publishing it along new lines: in three languages (french, english and spanish) in the hope that, reaching about 70% of the confrères, it would be more widely read. An editorial council was also named, made up of Frs. Ignacio Fernandez de Mendoza, Vicar General, and Thomas Davitt, Curia Archivist.

We meet from time to time to chose the subjects we want to touch on and the confrères we want to ask to write the articles. We also decide if we want to publish any unsolicited articles sent in by confreres. Then, we send the texts to the translators, most of whom are confrères. After that, one of our secretaries puts it on computer and gives the disc to the printer. Finally, we correct the printers' proofs at the secretariate.

We look for subjects which will enrich confrères' knowledge and reflection at different levels of their lives: spiritual; apostolic; community; and knowledge of vinentian sources and the Congregation today etc. It is a very interesting work but not always easy since, sometimes, articles we have commissioned arrive late or not at all, or others are not exactly what we were expecting.

We have moved from a single edition in various languages to three editions in three languages. This has not been achieved without difficulties, the chief being:

- overall there is more work involved (last year we edited in all almost 1300 pages)
- the cost of printing should really be dearer. But we have overcome this obstacle by reducing the number of pages a little, while increasing the number of subscriptions (we have gone from 550 to almost 850) thanks to the provinces which have taken out more subscriptions (for formation houses etc) and thanks also to individuals (confrères, Daughters of Charity and even some lay-people in the vinentian movements) and finally because...we have found a cheaper printer! So much so that the overall price of the publication is less than it used to be (1993)

Once again, we are well aware that three languages are not sufficient for the Congregation. Unfortunately, it is not really possible, given the limited number of confrères in the C.M., to increase the number (of languages). There are several

reasons for that: it is not easy to find translators, it would require more work and it would cost more. However, when an article is written in a language other than one of these three, we include a photocopy of it for the confrères who speak that language.

I would now like to make some requests of you:

1. Recognising that the new lay-out of **VINCENTIANA** could be improved, we rely on your comments and suggestions. I will give you a sheet for you to give me your advice and make any suggestions.
2. I am looking for translators. I am really speaking to french-, english- and spanish- speaking Visitors. Could you, specifying the languages, send me the names of confrères who would be able to do a translation every two or three months, or even only every four or five months?

In the hope that these few words will foster the collaboration between us in order to serve the Congregation better, I thank you for your attention.

(Traductor: Eugene Curran, C.M.)