

The Visitations of the Provinces

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In the history of our Congregation there is a long tradition of making visits to the houses by the Superior General or one of his delegates, starting from the time of St. Vincent himself. Coste lists many references to the visitations and to those destined to make them. St. Vincent wrote frequently on this subject, giving abundant indications of the contents of a visitation, above all from the point of view of renewal in the community. As an introduction I will make use of some thoughts from St. Vincent.

He wrote to a superior on 29 June 1646: "As for the visitation of the houses of the Company, that is a custom of every holy Community and of the Church itself" (SV II, 601).

St. Vincent frequently sent a missionary to visit the houses. The names which recur most often as delegates of St. Vincent for the visitations of the houses are those of J. Dehorgny, A. Portail, T. Berthe, Lambert aux Couteaux.

Writing to Jacques Chiroye, superior of the house of Luçon around 1640, he said among other things: "Fr. Dehorgny is going to make a visitation of your house. I hope ... that his visit will be a source of consolation and edification for you. So, I shall see you through him and embrace you with him, in the love of Our Lord, whom I beg with all my heart to bestow on you the dispositions of St. Zachary and St. Elizabeth for the reception of the graces the Blessed Virgin's visit brought them" (SV II, 248).

He wrote to Lambert aux Couteaux, superior of Richelieu, on 26 August 1640: "We are making the visitation here just now [at St. Lazare]. Never have I better recognized how important it is for us to make good use of this interval for our spiritual advancement. Providence has given it to us for that purpose.... We must endeavor to have God reign sovereignly in us, and then in others" (SV II, 96-97).

1. What is the visitation?

After more than three centuries of history of the Congregation, we note that many developments have been made in its juridical structure, and thus even in the visitations.

But now this topic is regulated by the Constitutions and Statutes. Only the Statutes have an explicit reference to the visitation, saying:

It is the function of the Superior General:

"Without prejudice to his right to make a canonical visitation whenever one is needed, to visit the provinces and vice-provinces at least once during his time of

office, either personally or by a delegate, in order to animate them and be informed about how their members are doing" (S 51, 2).

The Constitutions do not mention the Visitation explicitly, in the traditional sense. But C 101, 102, 103 give, in part, the juridical base of the Superior General for the government of the whole Congregation. These articles, therefore, include visitations also. In fact they affirm that the Superior General, as successor of St. Vincent, governs the Congregation with such care, especially through spiritual animation and apostolic activity, that the charism of St. Vincent will always remain alive in the Church. All these statements refer also to the provinces, the houses, and the individual confreres.

At this point we could ask ourselves if the so-called canonical visitation is still in existence. That is to say: the visitations made by the Superior General or the assistants are they canonical or ... deuterocanonical? I sought the wisdom of Fr. Miguel Pérez Flores to obtain the following precisions:

_ Canon 734 of CJC, which is typical for Societies of Apostolic Life, refers to Canon 628, § 1, where it establishes that Superiors should visit the houses and the members of the same Society, according to their own laws. That is precisely the canonical visitation.

_ Now our Statute 51, 2 says that the Superior General, either personally or by a delegate, should visit the provinces and vice-provinces at least once during his time of office. That is the prescription of our Congregation.

_ A few years later, after our General Assembly of 1980, the new Canon Law precisely approved for Societies of Apostolic Life what we had written in Statute 51, 2. The conclusion is that in our law whenever it refers to visitations, it always means canonical visitations.

According to these premises, the clause given by Statute 51, 1 "salvo jure visitationem canonicam peragendi" no longer has any significance. The Superior General, personally or by others, always has the right to make visitations, according to our law.

2. Why and when is the visitation made?

Based on the above mentioned articles of the C&S, we can give the following summary of what usually is done during the visitation.

1* - First of all, the end, the scope of the visitation is primarily to animate the provinces in all the aspects of our missionary life. Animation is a very broad concept, and we use it according to our C&S, and following the traditions and customs of the Congregation.

2* - Another important aspect of the visitation is to improve mutual communication in the provinces and among the confreres with the Superior General, since he is "the center of unity and coordination of the provinces" (C 102; S 51, 2).

Usually all these prescriptions and programs are carried out in the following way:

1. The visitor prepares the calendar of the visitation of the houses and informs the province about the essential points of the visit, i. e. that a personal interview will be held with each confrere of the province and also a community meeting in each house.

2. At the beginning of the visitation there is a meeting with the provincial council (as far as possible).

3. A (second) meeting with the provincial council is held at the end of the visitation. This meeting is very important. Whoever makes the visitation usually at this moment gives the visitor and the councillors his impressions and recommendations. It is very important to share and talk together about the visitation.

The Assistant General who makes the visitation then writes a report for the Superior General and the General Council about the visitation. After a common discussion during a meeting of the General Council, the Superior General sends out two letters. One of these, to all the confreres of the province, is primarily intended to encourage and animate them. A second letter is generally sent to the visitor and the provincial council. This one is meant, in particular, to give suggestions or recommendations to the visitor for special cases, or particular situations. These recommendations need not necessarily be made public.

One year after the visitation, the Superior General, either directly or through the Assistant who made the visitation, asks the Visitor for a brief report of how the recommendations and suggestions which were made in the letters sent to the province at the conclusion of the visitation, were implemented.

Because the visitation is one of the main duties of the Superior General or his delegate, and since he is the center of unity of the Congregation, the visitation has principally the effect of maintaining such global unity in the Congregation, and developing spiritual animation and apostolic activity in the provinces (C 102, 103).

The nature of the visitation may also be noted in C 107, 1*, where it is said that the Superior General should "work with great solicitude that the firm and fervent spirit of our Holy Founder be fostered everywhere, that the apostolic activity and renewal of the Congregation be continually promoted, and that the Constitutions and Statutes be applied in as fitting manner as possible".

3. Visitations since the last General Assembly

It should be pointed out that the Assistants General make the longer visitations, which include conversations and interviews with every confrere, while the SG, generally speaking, makes shorter visitations, but more numerous, which consist in:

- meeting with the provincial councils,
- meeting with the confreres in two or three different places,
- meeting with the Daughters of Charity,
- meeting with various groups of the Vincentian Family.

The reason is primarily because the SG cannot normally remain away from the Curia for more than about two weeks. Experience has also shown that it is nearly impossible for him to interview all the confreres of a large province.

Here is the list of the visitations already made since the last General Assembly or to be made before the next General Assembly. Some provinces, for various reasons, have asked to postpone the visitation until after the next General Assembly.

Fr. Robert P. Maloney (Superior General):

In Continental China twice, Taiwan, Tanzania, Bolivia, Chile, Zaire, Vietnam, Japan, Albania, Mozambique, three of the Spanish provinces, Mexico, Naples, the USA provinces, where he also preached several retreats to the Confreres and the Daughters.

Five or six times a year he goes to Paris for meetings with the General Council of the Daughters of Charity. On three occasions a year he also gives them a conference; moreover he gives a conference to the CM confreres at each session of CIF. He also has had meetings with the various Visitors Conferences, such as Europe, CLAPVI, USA, Africa, Spain, Italy.

In the past few years he has participated in meetings with the leaders of the Vincentian Family, that is to say, the Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity, the President of the Conferences of St. Vincent, the President of AIC. He has often had meetings with the national groups of the Vincentian lay movements.

Generally speaking the SG, as well as the Assistants General, remain more than half the year away from Rome because of the visitations or various commitments in the provinces.

Fr. Ignacio Fernández Mendoza (vicar general):

Cuba (twice), Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru, Central America, Barcelona, Chile, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Zaragoza, Madrid, USA-West, Salamanca.

Fr. Lauro Palú (assistant general):

Argentina, Mozambique, Rio de Janeiro, Colombia, Portugal, Ecuador, Curitiba, Paris, Turin.

Fr. Victor Bieler (assistant for the missions):

Netherlands, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Zaire, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, India, Australia, Nigeria, Madagascar, Fortaleza, Philippines.

Fr. Italo Zedde (assistant general):

Poland (together with Fr. Chester Mrówka, Visitor of New England), Hungary, Slovenia and Canada, Slovakia, Germany, Ireland, Toulouse, Austria, Rome, Naples, Middle East Province, India, USA-Southern, USA-Midwest, USA-New England, USA-East.

Fr. Victor Bieler, the Assistant General for the Missions, has travelled a lot in order to visit, not only the provinces, but also the international missions, usually once a year (Solomon Islands, Bolivia, Rwanda). All the Assistants General have preached retreats, particularly Frs. Lauro Palú and Ignacio Fernández Mendoza. Fr. Italo Zedde has also made some trips to Eastern Europe (Ukraine and Siberia), at the invitation of the local bishops, to study the possibility of new missions there. Fr. Palú represents the Superior General in contacts with the various lay groups of the Vincentian Family: in this capacity he has made trips to attend their meetings in several different countries.

Fr. Emeric Amyot d'Inville, Secretary General, has also made some visitations: Tanzania, Vietnam, Cameroon, Toulouse and has preached some retreats. Fr. Patrick Griffin, the Econome General, has travelled a lot for some problems connected with his office. He goes frequently to Paris as coordinator between CIF and the General Curia. He will be going to visit the mission in Tanzania shortly.

4. Conclusions and Expectations

First of all, on behalf of the entire General Curia, and especially the General Council, I would like to express very warm and sincere thanks to all the Visitors and provincial councils, who not only have received us in a friendly and fraternal way during the visitations, but who have also kindly taken care of the expenses of the journeys.

The main purpose of the Superior General in making the visitations, personally or by delegate, is precisely to help the visitor and the entire province continue with greater courage in the Vincentian spirit. Another reason is to help resolve some provincial problems, whenever possible; some problems are resolved with time, others simply cannot be resolved.

Finally I would like to ask your suggestions on the subject of visitations. The purpose is that they might help the Superior General and the Assistants provide better service to the provinces in what concerns visitations.

Visitations to houses during Saint Vincent's times:

ANNECY:

- M. Dehorgny, II, 188; — M. Portail, III, 267, 472, 473; — M. Berthe, V, 599; VI, 629; VII, 16, 19, 495.

CAHORS:

— M. Portail, III, 26, 57, 71, 78, 81, 92, 98, 104, 106, 112, 114, 122, 126, 143;
— par M. Dehorgny, VIII, 233, 263.

LE MANS:

— M. Portail, II, 569, 572, 577, 588; — saint Vincent, III, 403, 411, 412, 413, 415, 416, 419; — M. Lambert, IV, 273; — M. du Chesne, IV, 483, 492; — M. Alméras, V, 21, 22; — M. Berthe, V, 496; VI, 360; — M. Dehorgny, VIII, 114, 116.

LORM (Notre Dame de)

— M. Berthe, VI, 576; — M. Dehorgny, VIII, 149; — M. Cuissot, VII, 358.

LUÇON:

— M. Dehorgny, II, 247; — M. Lambert, III, 215; — saint Vincent, III, 413, 430, 433; — M. Lambert, IV, 143; — M. Berthe, VI, 488, 520; — M. Dehorgny, VIII, 195, 213, 221, 474.

RICHELIEU:

— M. Portail, II, 609, 610, 612, 613, 619; III, 8, 25; — M. Berthe, V, 469; VI, 360; VII, 495; — par M. Dehorgny, VIII, 43, 114, 116, 130, 137, 143.

SAINT-LAZARE:

— Visites canoniques, II, 96, 102, 110, 112, 208.

SAINT-MEEN:

— M. Portail, II, 608, 610, 612; III, 73; — par saint Vincent, III, 413, 423; — par M. Berthe, V, 496; VI, 360; — par M. Dehorgny, VIII, 116.

SAINTES:

— M. Portail, III, 8, 25-28, 51; — M. Lambert, III, 215; — M...., V, 415; — M. Berthe, VI, 423, 487, 488, 521, 549; — M. Dehorgny, VIII, 43, 130, 195, 221.

SÉDAN:

— M. Berthe, IV, 157, 183; VI, 615; VII, 591, 598; VIII, 11.

TOUL:

— M. Dehorgny, I, 446; II, 55, 67-68, 80; — M. Lambert, II, 290; — M. Portail, V, 433; — M. Berthe, VII, 598; VIII, 10, 11.

TREGUIER:

— saint Vincent, III, 413; — par M. Berthe, VI, 360; — M Dehorgny, VIII, 67, 116, 147, 194.

Turin (Torino):

— M. Berthe, VI, 287, 587; VII, 16, 17, 19, 35, 227, 276, 296-297, 364, 399, 419, 422; VIII, 203.