

**On horizon shifts**  
**\_ Some Reflections on the General Assembly of 1997 \_**

*Robert P. Maloney, C.M.*  
*Superior General*

As you can imagine, my sisters, many sheets of paper come across my desk. During the last days of the General Assembly, but before its final document had actually been written, an especially interesting one-page analysis of the Assembly found its way there. I suspect that the author, an elected delegate, wishes to remain anonymous. But I reproduce her observations for you today, with only slight editorial modifications, because they seem to me a particularly astute appraisal of the Assembly.

**Horizon shifts that were evident during the 1997 general assembly**

1. From a Community shaped predominately by European customs to an international Community where the customs of all regions are honored.
2. From an attitude of "rescuing" and giving to the poor to an attitude of solidarity with persons in need, working hand in hand with them to promote change, engaging the poor in their own promotion.
3. From a tight focus on the affairs of the individual provinces to a focus on sharing the Company's resources on a worldwide basis.
4. From an understanding that unity depends largely on external signs to an understanding that unity is founded predominately on common motivation, common convictions, and common action.
5. From preaching the gospel to those we serve to searching for the seeds of the gospel in their culture: "reaping before sowing."
6. From a highly centralized administration to a more decentralized one.

Of course, these horizon shifts did not take place suddenly nor did they happen precisely during the month of the Assembly; rather, they have been evolving gradually in the minds and hearts of Daughters of Charity in recent years. The Assembly, however, made them evident for all of us to see, and, in fact, promoted these shifts by its atmosphere, its discussions, and its decisions. Let me examine these horizon shifts with you today one by one.

1. *From a Community shaped predominately by European customs to an international Community where the customs of all regions are honored.*

a. *Signs of this horizon shift.*

In the book of the Acts, as he is about to ascend into heaven, Jesus sends his disciples out to be his "witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). But actually only in the latter part of the 20th century has Catholicism truly become a "world-Church."<sup>1</sup> During the pontificate of Paul VI a striking shift took place in the Church's statistical center of gravity. The turning point arrived in 1970: 51% of the Catholic population was living in the southern hemisphere.<sup>2</sup>

A similar shift has been taking place gradually in the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Though numerically the Company's numbers are still by far greatest in Europe, many young provinces are now flourishing in Asia, Africa, and Central and South America. The responsibility for formation and for the leadership of those provinces is passing more and more into the hands of those born there. It is striking that, during the Assembly, an extra delegate was awarded to Vietnam as the province with the greatest number of young sisters in formation.

Some of the most powerful moments during the General Assembly were the times when we listened to testimonies presented by sisters from various countries with strikingly diverse cultural backgrounds.

Among the most important decisions of the Assembly was a change in Statute 39 whereby from now on Africa will be represented on the General Council by an African sister and Asia will be represented by an Asian sister.

b. *Challenges for the future.*

I am convinced that one of the greatest challenges facing the Daughters of Charity, and many other communities, is to hand on your tradition integrally but flexibly. I say *integrally* because you have a wonderful heritage that you want to preserve: giving your lives to God in community through a love for the poor that is practical and effective, lived out in simplicity and humility. But I also say *flexibly* because you do not want to build a European community in non-European cultures. You do not want to make the mistake that architects frequently made in the past, when they constructed European or North American style buildings in cultural settings where they seemed as foreign as a pagoda would seem here in Paris.

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<sup>1</sup> K. Rahner, "The Abiding Significance of the Second Vatican Council," in *Theological Investigations XX*, 90-102; cf. also "The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future," in *Theological Investigations XX*, 103-114.

<sup>2</sup> W. Bühlmann, *The Church of the Future* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1986) 4-5.

Good initial formation is the key to handing on the tradition integrally but flexibly. I offer the entire Company this challenge, my sisters: focus your energies on good initial formation. As the twig is bent, so grows the tree.

**2. *From an attitude of "rescuing" and giving to the poor to an attitude of solidarity with persons in need, working hand in hand with them to promote change, engaging the poor in their own promotion.***

*a. Signs of this horizon shift.*

The word "accompaniment" has become very much a part of the vocabulary of modern communities. This is not merely a linguistic shift. Rather, our language is expressing an attitudinal change. Today, especially in the Church and often in secular society, we recognize how important it is that the poor themselves be engaged in their own promotion. We see that human dignity demands self-determination. We believe in personal involvement in one's own education, in the acceptance of responsibility for creating one's own future. In recent decades a remarkable shift of emphasis has taken place, from "assistentialism" in works of charity (giving alms, providing "things" for the poor) to "human promotion" (accompaniment of the poor person in the overall process of personal formation and self-help).

The fourth commitment of the General Assembly of 1997 states this all very clearly. We pledge "to give our life to the Poor and offer them a service responding to their real needs, taking into account their desires, aspirations and values in order to enable them to become agents of their own promotion."

Notice how often the Assembly document emphasizes *solidarity*. It does so in the eighth, tenth, and twelfth commitments. Notice too how strong is the Assembly's emphasis on *collaboration* with the laity, with the Vincentian Family, and especially with our Vincentian Marian Youth Groups.

*b. Challenges for the future.*

The challenge of this second horizon shift is already stated very clearly by the Assembly itself: "to join forces with people who defend life and human rights, as well as with those who struggle for justice and solidarity for those who are excluded from society, especially women and children who are the poorest of the poor in many parts of the world." I encourage you once again, my sisters, as the third millennium dawns, let the Daughters of Charity be known as a Company that stands in solidarity with those excluded from society, and especially with women and children, who are the poorest of the poor in so many parts of the world.

**3. *From a tight focus on the affairs of the individual provinces to a focus on sharing the Company's resources on a worldwide basis.***

a. *Signs of this horizon shift.*

This shift has actually been taking place very notably over the last several decades. I mention here two important signs.

\* For years, numerous Daughters of Charity have volunteered to go to missions in other countries. Formation programs have been organized to help them in inculturating and in acquiring new languages. Over the last six years the Company has gone to Albania, Cambodia, Ghana, Angola, Byelorussia, Ukraine. The Company has been able to count on interprovincial personnel assistance in emergency situations in Mexico, Guatemala, Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia, and Egypt. One hundred fifty-five Daughters of Charity have gone to the missions *ad gentes* over the last six years.

\* The Company shares remarkably its financial resources on a worldwide basis. Those provinces which have greater financial resources have channeled, through the General Curia, huge amounts of financial assistance to the service of the needy in poor countries.

b. *Challenges for the future.*

The challenge under this heading is very clear too. In the past six years the Mother General has placed great emphasis not only by her writings but also in her actions, on the missionary identity of the Company. So I say to you, my sisters, during the next six years as the third millennium dawns: Go! Go, as missionaries. Do not hesitate to offer yourself to go where the poorest of the poor dwell, either in your own province or in the missions *ad gentes*. Go. Go without fear.

**4. *From an understanding that unity depends largely on external signs to an understanding that unity is founded predominately on common motivation, common convictions, and common action.***

a. *Signs of this horizon shift.*

The Company has placed great emphasis over the past several decades not only on initial formation, but also on ongoing formation. The provinces themselves organize frequent formation workshops touching on the various aspects of our lives: spiritual, apostolic, community, Vincentian, professional. On an international level, two or three programs are organized every year here at Rue du Bac, with sisters coming from all of the countries where the Daughters of Charity live and work. All of these programs recognize that the foundations of community are not so much external signs, but rather common motivation, common convictions, and common action, as the philosopher Bernard Lonergan frequently pointed out.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *A Third Collection* (Mahwah, New Jersey: 1985) 5-6.

The fifth commitment of the General Assembly of 1997 states this very clearly. It binds the Company "to recreate communities rooted in Jesus Christ who share their experience of God, live communion by dialogue and discernment, in a mutual attitude of servants energized by common plans which are creative, realistic, demanding and able to be evaluated."

Moreover, the decision that the Assembly made concerning the habit confirms the Company's recognition, already clear in recent years, that its unity does not depend on uniformity of dress. In fact, this decision acknowledges that the needs of the poor and the varied sensibilities of different cultures should be key factors in determining what the habit of the Daughter of Charity is. The Assembly decided:

"The official habit of the Daughters of Charity is:

- that proposed and chosen by the 2nd Legislative General Assembly (the present habit)
  - or a modified habit: navy blue skirt, coiffe, white or blue blouse
  - or a habit modified according to the different cultures and needs of the service of the poor and approved by the Visitatrix and her council."
- The wearing of the coiffe comes within the competence of the Visitatrix and her council.

All the sisters wear a distinctive universal sign of their belonging to the Company."

*b. Challenges for the future.*

As I see it, my sisters, the Company already has a rather clear grasp of the common motivations, the common convictions, and the common actions that ground its unity. The challenge is to deepen these continually. There is always a tendency in groups, especially large ones, to confuse uniformity for unity. That can be a serious malady in an international community because it leads to the imposition of detailed practices that seem strange to young people coming from other cultures. When I was a novice, we were permitted to shower only twice a week. As young people, we griped continuously about this strange practice and sometimes laughed hilariously about it. Once the novitiate was over, all of us showered every day just as we had before the novitiate. This odd regulation of our bathing had contributed nothing to the deepening of our motivations, convictions, and actions, even though for some reason it had seemed important to those responsible for formation. The challenging question for us today is this: What will really deepen the deepest motives of a Daughter of Charity (her desire to give herself to God in the service of the poor)? What will deepen her deepest convictions (that she wants to live in simplicity, humility, and practical charity)? What will deepen her commitment to action done in common with others (especially communal prayer, a joyful life together, and common service of the poor)?

**5. *From preaching the gospel to those we serve to searching for the seeds of the gospel in their culture: "reaping before sowing."***

*a. Signs of this horizon shift.*

Church documents these days address few themes more frequently than inculturation. Pope John II, who has spoken about inculturation again and again, wrote to all the Daughters of Charity: "Love of the poor entails respect for their cultures, which reveal the soul of their human communities, as well as recognition and acceptance of the values which make up its richness."

The word "inculturation" has been frequently on the lips of every Daughter of Charity during the two years of preparation for the General Assembly and during the time of the celebration of the Assembly itself.

The fourth conviction expressed by the Assembly states: "we are convinced of the need to engage in a continual process in order to discover personally and in community the 'seeds of the Word' and the values they present in all cultures and among the Poor:

- solidarity, the struggle for justice and freedom
- recognition of the dignity of every human being
- close personal relationships, hospitality and the sense of celebration
- trust and hope in Providence...

and to discern the counter-values which are opposed to the Gospel and to our Vincentian identity:

- increase in poverty and exclusion
- economic exploitation
- violation of human rights
- loss of a sense of God
- the 'culture of death'..."

*b. Challenges for the future.*

The challenge is already implicit in the conviction above expressed so clearly by the Assembly. Today I want to encourage especially the Visitatrixes and the formators in all the provinces of the Company to discern with the sisters of the province what are the seeds of the word in each culture and to discern too what are the counter-values, those opposed to the Gospel, in each culture. There are surely abundant seeds of the word all over creation, because God made it. But there are also abundant weeds, Jesus assures us, because all human persons, ourselves included, are sinful.

**6. *From a highly centralized administration to a more decentralized one.***

**a. *Signs of this horizon shift.***

Immediately after Vatican II, Pope Paul VI told religious communities that their "mode of government should be such that the exercise of authority is rendered more effective and expeditious, as our times demand. Superiors, therefore, at every level, should be given appropriate powers so as to minimize unnecessary and too frequent recourse to higher authority".<sup>4</sup>

The revised Constitutions and Statutes of the Daughters of Charity succeeded only partially in implementing this "principle of subsidiarity" that Paul VI enunciated. One of Constitutions' most significant steps toward decentralization was its emphasis on the local community plan as the instrument for concretely defining the life of the local community and for engaging the sisters in a mutual covenant for living out that life. The Constitutions also expanded the powers of Visitatrixes and increased the involvement of the sisters of provinces in the choice of their leaders through broad consultation.

During the Assembly, the decision on the habit, which I just described, was a key step in the direction of decentralization. Formerly, almost all decisions concerning the habit had to come to the Mother General and her council. Now these can be handled on a provincial basis.

**b. *Challenges for the future.***

The principle of subsidiarity is clear. The challenge is to apply it consistently.

The Assembly recognized that more still needs to be done in regard to decentralization. Too many things that are actually decided on a provincial level still arrive in Paris, unnecessarily taking up the time and energies of the members of the General Council and the Secretariat. The General Assembly decided that a committee should be appointed which will draft a revision of the Constitutions and Statutes that will then be proposed to the next General Assembly. One of the challenges facing this commission, and therefore facing the next General Assembly, will be to come to fuller grips with the question of subsidiarity and decentralization.

Horizon shifts are very important, my sisters. They influence what we actually see. From the roof of the General Curia, I can view much of Rome. I can catch a glimpse of the dome of St. Peter's, and I look out at homes where poor people live. Occasionally I watch drugs pass from hand to hand. The other day I even spotted

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<sup>4</sup> *Ecclesiae Sanctae* (August 6, 1966) 18.

someone who had once robbed me. When I descend to my office, which is only one floor below, the horizon is very different: I can see neither St. Peter's nor the poor. So it is good for me to go up on the roof from time to time to change horizons! Your Assembly has done just that, my sisters. In fact, the whole Company has been doing it, especially over the last six years. Its horizons have expanded toward internationality. Its service of the poor has taken on new perspectives and new overtones. Its relationship with new cultures has become a source of enrichment.

I encourage you, my sisters, and the whole Company today, to rejoice in these new horizons. Let your eyes be filled with the varied colors of God's creation. Read and study well the document of this Assembly. Make its convictions your own and live its commitments in solidarity with your sisters. Let this document set you on fire, as the Assembly says. *Be* a new fire. Let the burning charity of Christ go out from you to communicate itself to the hearts of others, especially the poor.