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Character of the CM

**Father Richard McCullen, CM,
Superior General from 1980-1992
of the Congregation of the Mission
and the Company of the Daughters
of Charity**



Lauro Palú, CM

The Editorial Board of *Vincentiana* has asked me for a testimony about Father Richard McCullen, of happy memory among the members of the Congregation of the Mission, since I accompanied him during his second term as Superior General. My intention is to share a little of the lived experience with the successor of Saint Vincent de Paul during the time we worked together.

I write this with a lot of emotion recalling the atmosphere of the General Curia, the friendship all of us shared, the help of all kinds we gave each other. It is equally emotional to recall all the names and to hear only a few answering “present,” because the rest are in the Mission in heaven: Paul Henzmann, Miguel Pérez Flores, Jean-François Gaziello, Alberto Piras, Léon Lauwerier, Stanislao Prosperini, Luigi Festari, Alejandro Rigazio, Thomas Cawley, Victor Bieler, Brother Joseph Nagel, Sister Eleanor McNabb, Sister Mary Ellen Sheldon, and Sister Montserrat Roset, all of whom are affectionately remembered.

Since these are personal recollections about work and friendship, this is not a history of the Congregation nor a judgment about Father McCullen’s time in office.

I met Father Richard McCullen in the General Assembly of 1980. In the CLAPVI meetings prior to the Assembly, we were looking for criteria for electing the new Superior General who would replace Father James Richardson. We suggested many qualities (health, relatively young age, diverse pastoral works, experience with the Daughters of Charity, knowledge of various languages, etc.). Then Father Martiniano Leon asked the Moderator to suspend the session for a few hours so he could go to the Vatican to ask Pope John Paul II if he would accept being the next Superior General.

When the Assembly began we knew the most likely candidates were José Elias Chaves (from Rio de Janeiro who had been named bishop by the Pope a few months before), Florian Kapuściak (Assistant General from Poland who wrote to the Assembly saying that if elected, he could not accept), Miguel Pérez Flores (from Salamanca), Richard McCullen (from Ireland), and a few more. We began to exchange information, a kind of “electoral campaign.” We wanted to find out what the language groups had decided. There was an atmosphere of well-intentioned curiosity which sought to determine the direction of the Assembly and the writing of the new Constitutions.

Then we went to the beautiful chapel of the Leonine College, Provincial House of Rome, for the Eucharist invoking the Holy Spirit to show us the best candidate. Before entering I mentioned to Father McCullen that his name came up often. He told me he spoke no other languages, but only English. I told him this was not important, since that is why we had Assistants and the General Secretariat. A few years later, when someone asked him during a talk in the Province of Brazil (sic), how he felt when they chose him as Superior General, he confessed he could accept the office very calmly, because I had told him about the languages and the help he would have.

In the following ballots, Father McCullen surpassed Father Pérez Flores who had seemed to be the favorite in the previous ballot. Father Pérez Flores was immediately elected as Vicar General. One of the most beautiful testimonies of that Assembly and its results was the unstinting loyalty and the efficient collaboration Father Pérez Flores rendered to Father McCullen in the two terms they served together.

In that Assembly of 1980, which lasted for 54 days, we tried, among other things, to formulate the end of the Congregation (one end? two? three?). We did not arrive at a conclusion from all these discussions, because some asked to be heard and attacked the positions of others without weighing the reasons or understanding the motives for rejecting certain formulations, etc. One morning I asked the Central Commission to propose a long session in which we could speak *to* one another and not *against* one another. We only partly achieved that. Nevertheless, at the end of the morning Father Erminio Antonello (from Turin), speaking for the Italian language group, proposed a text which seemed to capture what the different groups wanted. This is the present Article 1 of the Constitutions.

In 1983, Father McCullen visited the Province of Rio de Janeiro. When the Visitor was presenting me, Father McCullen said: "I know him; this is Father Palú, the man who likes consensus." When I was elected at the 1986 Assembly, there were two new Assistants, Father Robert Maloney and I, and two who had been reelected: Fathers Pérez Flores and Jean-François Gaziello. Many times the four of us were of two minds, two on each side. Father McCullen should have had the deciding vote, but he never cast it, always moving us to new considerations and trying to achieve consensus. Sometimes Father Maloney suggested postponing the decision until the following day. It was truly moving to see him in the chapel praying, asking the Lord for light, and never going by our rooms to try to convince us of anything. Father McCullen entrusted to me the preparation of a short text about arriving at decisions through consensus, and not by majority. Consensus is not exactly consent, but rather an effort to find the common threads in what is desired and proposed.

As Assistant General one of my jobs was to accompany the General in his visits to some of the provinces or to some special meeting. Thus I helped him in Portugal, in Spain (for a meeting of the Vincentian Marian Youth in Torre de Benagalbón), in Italy (for the Marian Youth in Loreto), in Mozambique, in Egypt, and in the Brazilian Provinces (Rio, Curitiba, and Fortaleza). I was designated by him to accompany the Volunteers of Charity at the international level (International Association of Charities, AIC). He sent me to their meetings, to their General Assembly, and to other commemorations of the centennial of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society (SSVP). My job was to clarify and maintain tranquility, assuring the members that the Superior General was not trying to unite the Ladies with the men of Ozanam into a new international association. For 12 years I was the liaison of the General Council with these branches of the Vincentian Family; and, in the final years, I was named by the Vatican as the International Ecclesiastical Assistant for the AIC.

In the visits to the Portuguese-speaking provinces, I had to translate his homilies and talks. The beauty of his English was well known and much appreciated, as was the special care he took in what he wrote and published. He asked us for literal translations, being careful to be faithful to the text. On one occasion I had to tell him I knew the Portuguese language, when he insisted there were two negatives in a phrase to give the necessary force to a thought. I

answered him that, for simple people it was easier to understand “we should do...” rather than “we should not fail to do...” He understood and never again insisted. He said he thought of the simpler Brothers and Sisters when he spoke, never trying to appear too cultured or refined and inaccessible to them. In Mozambique he spoke in English, I translated into Portuguese and a school teacher spoke in *Changana*. He would ask: “Did I say all that?”, because *Changana* has a very different sentence structure from our western European languages, and it greatly lengthened the phrases.

On our first visit to Lisbon he said to me: “Now you translate into Portuguese.” Relax, I told him, I will. But I was greatly surprised when he began in English. I thought he would speak Italian. On such occasions I felt vividly and concretely the grace of office, because in Rome it was hard for me to understand everything he said in English. He would say that, in his visits to the provinces, he always spoke in English, because he wished to be sure of saying what he wanted to say; and it also tired him less.

He simply recognized he did not have much facility for languages. And so in Brazil, Portugal, and Mozambique, each night, he would prepare with me the reading of his texts for the next day. I would make him copies enlarged to 120%. The Sisters often commented that he understood the texts perfectly because his pauses were intelligent, in just the right part of each phrase. I had marked everything, with signs we understood, for a normal pause within an enumeration, a longer pause for opposition, a pause followed by other words to give a certain insistence he knew how to appreciate.

After visiting almost a dozen Portuguese-speaking provinces of the Daughters, sometimes he would tell me to answer directly myself what I knew he would answer to their questions or those of the young people for whom the Sisters cared. He would reserve ample time in his contacts with them to answer their questions and to satisfy their endless curiosity.

Young people were a special passion of Father McCullen, the reason for his hope, an area in which he wished to sow many truths and teachings in order to cultivate their hearts and elevate their spirits, by presenting to them the ideals of Christianity and of the following of Saint Vincent, Saint Louise, and Ozanam. The young men and women responded with near adulation to his personality, as I saw in Benagalbón and Loreto with the Vincentian Marian Youth.

Whenever it was possible during his visits to the provinces, he would speak to each confrere, attentive to their signs of affection for which he was deeply grateful. He would ask each confrere about his works, his joys, his hopes. Talking with the seminarians, he made them see the beauty of the Vincentian vocation. He was interested in their studies and their work, and he encouraged them to learn other languages.

To give life to this desire for communication among the members of the Congregation, he encouraged the provinces to install the first fax machines in their secretariats. He began the modernization of the Curia with the first computers, with the enthusiasm of Fathers Pérez-Flores, William Sheldon, Robert Maloney, and, shortly afterwards, of Victor Bieler. The General Secretariat went from the electric typewriters of Paul Henzmann to the computers of Victor Bieler and Emeric Amyot d'Inville.

During his visits he would usually do some sightseeing. He was always very learned, very interested in affairs and constructions. In Rio de Janeiro, the Visitor took him to the figure of Christ the Redeemer, the great statue that blesses the people of the *marvelous city* and of all Brazil. From the top of the mountain, he saw when they lit the public lights of the city, the necklace of lights along the avenues, and he opened his arms like the Christ figure, as if he himself were electrified. Returning to Rio, after six years, he asked to see the same marvels. I have seen him with similar emotions in Egypt, before the pyramids with a light-and-sound spectacle.

To go around as a tourist or a visitor, beloved and important, meant having to eat some exotic things typical of each culture (and he visited all the provinces of the different continents). Apparently he had no fears of strange meats or unknown sauces, knowing they would never offer him anything bad or dangerous. With no problem, he would taste Polish dishes in Curitiba, typical fish dishes in Fortaleza, rich fruits from northeastern Brazil, curiosities from Egypt, etc. But he was extremely careful not to get sick or contract any kind of stomach problem, which would prevent his being present when the poor began their parties with the artistic presentations they had been rehearsing for months. With this thoughtful pastoral attention, he would leave aside whatever seemed problematic, dangerous, or that he knew would give him problems.

He knew how to admire the dances, the songs, the choreography. He liked to see the gardens and the collections of plants of the Sisters. In Rio de Janeiro, they gave him a beautiful orchid which he kept for many days to take it to his elderly mother, because from Rio he was going to Ireland. Whoever heard him speak to his mother by telephone knew the tenderness, the affection, the warm-heartedness of a man in the warm and loving hands of his mother. He had for the Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity an affection like that of Saint Vincent for Saint Louise.

Another example of his thoughtful pastoral action: in Mozambique, they gave him dozens of figures, some simple and others of wonderful craftsmanship, many of precious wood like ebony or red cedar. Because they could cause some problems in the airport, we pondered what pieces he would take to the General Curia. Surely he read my mind, because he gave me a small horse in red cedar with a missionary mounted on it who carried a banner which read, *Love one another*. He said: "I'll take these two scepters," symbolic black ebony, liturgical scepters of local tribal chieftains, "and the horse is yours." He felt he was truly our leader with all simplicity and friendship; he showed it in all simplicity and clarity.

Delicate, not scrupulous, but rather courteous in his requests. He called me to his office at five minutes to noon. I found him with a bottle and two glasses. He spoke to me of different things for the five minutes that were left until the deadline of pontifical secrecy and he could tell me that the Pope had named Jose Carlos Melo from my province as bishop. We celebrated the appointment with a toast.

When Father Maloney began his first term as Superior General, he sent us Assistants to learn or improve our command of some language. I went to Ireland for English. Father McCullen was waiting for me in the airport; he took me to "my house" (Raheny), where I stayed for a month. On the weekends, he took me to visit his country: the rich and precious greenery of the countryside and the coast, the typical crosses of the traditional places, and he explained to me in detail all the symbols of each place with its theological and historical richness. He took me to the places of Saint Patrick and other saints, happy to belong to the Irish race and to have such relatives.

Speaking of these larger realities helped Father McCullen to forget for a few moments the problems which distressed him, such as the lack of vocations in his province and in general, the sad cases of alcoholism

in the clergy, and the scandal of priests who were denounced as pedophiles. Surely his last years were sad. It is very nice to see on the Internet the photo gallery that appears when one searches for Richard McCullen, CM Two things strike me: the last photos of his face on the eve of his 90th birthday, marked by age like that of John Paul II, the light, the depth, and firmness of his look. He liked it very much when André Dodin published the first portrait of Saint Vincent with his head inclined, which would be the typical characteristic of Saint Vincent. In many of these photos, Father McCullen also has his head inclined like Vincent. And in these photos, he looks at us attentively as though wanting to enter into our souls, with intensity and affection, with no trembling, without fear or threats, with his great heart.

We exchanged greetings at Easter and Christmas for many years. His words were always very personal, because he would refer to what we had lived together during the six years of his second term. He thanked me repeatedly for the small help I gave him as Assistant. When we finished the *Tempo Forte* Meetings of the Curia, twice a year, we would generally leave for new visitations or for a retreat for the confreres or the Daughters of Charity. As often as I could, I offered to write letters in the languages I know. This seemed to him like some extraordinary help, something unforeseen, as though it were something worthy of merit. I took advantage to further my knowledge and familiarize myself with the fine points of the different cultures. In the letters to the Italians, he would ask me to use the most agreeable superlatives like “my dearest” or “most devoted.” To the Brazilians, he would say “missing you,” etc. After 1992, he would write to friends in Brazil in what he remembered of Portuguese. He would read the magazine *Colegio San Vicente de Paul* which I directed in Rio de Janeiro and he would comment on its contents. He sent me his last letter when I celebrated my 50 years of priesthood. It made me very happy to see how generous he was and how he nurtured memories, recalling past events; and, above all, how he learned from Saint Vincent that we should be grateful to those who help us, however humble that service was.

A wonderful confrere, a model, a friend, an unforgettable older brother.

Translated: Joseph V. Cummins, CM