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## FORMATION

### The Vincentian Charism and the New Evangelization

Some significant Vincentian elements for the present-day process of evangelization

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#### 1. Introduction

When Father Joseph Agostino invited me to make this presentation, I was flattered and experienced a certain pride. After all, not just anyone is invited to address the esteemed delegates of a General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission. Then, however, as I began to write, the flattery and the pride became fear and trembling.

With your understanding and kindness, I intend to present some humble reflections on what is a very relevant theme, the relationship between the Vincentian charism and the new evangelization. These reflections are based on my priestly, Vincentian, and community experience, as well as a careful and reflective reading of the responses that the provinces submitted to the questionnaire that had been distributed by the Preparatory Commission of the Assembly.

#### 2. Starting Point: Confrontation between being and doing

Frequently in our meetings, gatherings, and assemblies, we ask many questions with regard to Vincentian being and doing. We have two perceptions: on the one hand, we agree on the fact that the charism, the being, the identity, the characteristic mark of Vincentians has been, is, and will be fully present, fully and completely actualized, and relevant. On the other hand, the manner in which we are to live and transmit this Vincentian manner of being is not so clear. Thus, we are dealing with a confrontation being our identity and our relevance, between our charism and our mission.

In recent years, we have been searching (at times with great anxiety) for our unique characteristic, our proper place in the midst of society and in the midst of the Church's process of evangelization, a place, which at previous times, might have been very clear, but which is not so clear at this time of radical and total change. We journey hesitantly, with our doubts and concerns, with our hopes and successes, with our contradictions and our yearnings for yesterday.

Therefore, it is important to ask ourselves a series of fundamental questions about our present and future situation. Can we, as Vincentians, contribute something to the new and urgent process of evangelization? Are we, as Vincentians, able to make fruitful our charism, our spirituality, and our participation in the process of the new evangelization? What specific Vincentian elements can contribute to the process of evangelization, elements, that, in turn, will make the process of evangelization more effective? What is the specific area of evangelization for Vincentians and in what places should we be found?

More than 50 years ago, the Second Vatican Council placed before us a very basic, simple, and relevant principle that enables us to respond to the questions that I have just proposed, namely, a constant return to the primitive inspiration of the Founder (charism) and incarnate and inculcuate that inspiration to the changing conditions of our time (mission) (Cf., *Perfectae Caritatis*, 28 October 1965, # 2).

### **3. The Congregation of the Mission exists in order to evangelize**

As the year 1975 was coming to an end, Pope Paul VI stated: *Evangelizing is in fact the grace and the vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize* (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 8 December 1975, # 14). Almost 400 years ago, Vincent de Paul gave life to those words and to that evangelizing vocation as he established a Congregation in order to evangelize the poor.

Today that mandate with regard to evangelization has become all the more urgent. The last three Popes have spoken insistently and repeatedly about the new evangelization. They have taken up anew the theme of evangelization and have reminded us about the importance of engaging in the process of evangelization with new methods, with new expressions, and with new ardor. We must evangelize once again because we find ourselves in the midst of a new multicultural and globalized society. Pope Francis has introduced a prophetic and significant nuance into the discussion, a nuance that is very Vincentian:

the new evangelization has to occur in the midst of the multiple and contradictory peripheries of life: the material, moral, geographical, existential, and spiritual peripheries, etc.; and this evangelization has to include dialogue and healing, hope and joy (cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, #20, 30, 46, 191).

The Congregation of the Mission is involved, in a radical manner, in the process of evangelization and thus, *evangelizing is to be considered its own grace and vocation, and expresses its deepest identity*. This affirmation of our Constitutions (cf. Constitutions #10) is most obvious and everyone agrees with those words. Nevertheless, doubts and discussion arise when we begin to speak about the “evangelizing place” that Vincentian evangelizers ought to occupy. That is the very heart of the question.

Yet we cannot, as such, speak about a process of Vincentian evangelization nor about a process of Franciscan or Ignatian or Dominican evangelization. The vast arena of evangelization belongs to all Christians and is for all Christians. Evangelization is the task of the whole Church. A rainbow is a combination of all the various colors and its beauty is derived from that reality. It is a combination of colors and not one specific concrete color. Each color contributes to the beauty of the rainbow. It could be said, then, that we are seeking for that specific Vincentian color that will enhance the beauty of the rainbow of evangelization. In other words, what can the Vincentian charism contribute to the task of the new evangelization?

#### **4. General Framework of the Vincentian Mission**

A first and most significant response with regard to the concern that is before us is provided by Vincent de Paul in the conference of 6 December 1658 that he gave to the Missionaries. The theme of that conference was “The Purpose of the Congregation of the Mission.” In developing that theme, we find these most important words: *[our mission is] to make God known to poor persons; to announce Jesus Christ to them; to tell them that the kingdom of heaven is at hand and that it's for persons who are poor.*<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that these fundamental and most significant words of Saint Vincent are seldom

<sup>1</sup> *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jacqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume XII, p. 71; future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [CCD] followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, CCD:XII:71.

referenced or utilized by the members of the Congregation of the Mission and yet have been included in the previous Constitutions and in the present Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity. Is this situation simply related to the use of some mere casual anecdote or is this a symbol of something more serious?

In my opinion, those words of Vincent present us with the best summary of that which is constituted as the Vincentian element with regard to the process of evangelization. Those words enable us to understand the words that Pope Paul VI wrote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and that Pope Francis wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium*. This general framework ought to inspire, guide, and unite all our evangelization activity. All our attitudes and dispositions ought to move us toward this same general framework.

The internal history of Vincentian intuitions presents us with this general framework. Furthermore, within this framework we find the necessary strength that enables us to ground, give life to, and actualize the Vincentian mission. Without such strength, the mission would remain as some altruistic strategy or some demagogic speech. Three elements grounded Vincent's radical evangelizing option and those same three elements ought to make fruitful, today and tomorrow, the Vincentian mission.

**The experience of a gracious God, protector and liberator of the poor:** God is above all else, is absolute. We are channels of God's goodness and mercy. The God that Vincentians ought to proclaim is the God who is *the protector of the poor* (CCD:X:411), the God of love and of mercy. God opts for the poor. Therefore, the cause of the poor is God's cause and the question of the poor is God's question. Thus, we can say that for a Vincentian, the option for the poor, besides being a mandate and a commitment, is first and foremost a reality of faith and a theological truth.

**The centrality of Jesus Christ, evangelizer and servant of the poor:** Vincent's whole life was Christ-centered and Vincent's Christology is not theoretical but rather existential and life-giving. As a result, our Vincentian identity is Christ-centered and our option for the poor can only be understood in light of the fact that the cause of the poor is Christ's cause and, therefore, Vincentians continue to proclaim (as stated by Vincent de Paul) *Jesus Christ as the evangelizer and the servant of the poor*. Vincentians also focus their eyes on the words found in Luke 4:18-19: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor...*). That is the key

element when speaking about a Vincentian's option on behalf of the poor or a Vincentian's vocation and mission in the midst of the Church and society.

**A passion for the poor:** here we are not simply talking about some vague concern for the poor or drawing closer to those who are poor. No, when speaking about a passion for the poor, much more is involved. Let us listen to Vincent's words in this regard: *the poor, who do not know where to go or what to do, who are suffering already and who increase daily, are my burden and my sorrow* (CCD:III:492). In other words, the poor are to be our dominant passion and therefore, everything else is secondary. Vincent de Paul, inspired by this passion for the poor, stated: *We should sell ourselves to rescue our brothers and sisters from destitution* (CCD:IX:390).

## 5. Three non-negotiable and irrevocable priorities

A second response, which complements the first response, is found in the famous, and often forgotten, article of the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission (# 12) which is a lively, operational, and updated translation of the Vincentian charism. Article 12 points out the path, the goal, and the rhythm of our mission. We can go around in circles as we search for our place in the process of evangelization, but we must always return to article 12 of our Constitutions. Someone has said: *in order to be original we have to return to our origins*.

I am going to focus on the first three parts of this article, which, in my opinion, are three non-negotiable and irrevocable priorities when speaking about the being and the doing of Vincentians. These are three priorities that are key if we want to understand the place where Vincentian evangelizers ought to be found.

### 5.1. a clear and expressed preference for the apostolate among the poor

Many individuals could easily find a correlation between this first Vincentian priority and the call to establish a preferential option for the poor. Nevertheless, even though this might be laudable and demanding with regard to Christians in general, much more is expected of Vincentians. When our Constitutions speak about "a preference for the poor," we see that this expression is nuanced with two clarifications that leave no room for doubt. Our Constitutions speak about "a clear" and "an expressed" preference. In other words,

our Constitutions refer to a radical option, one that is neither theoretical nor abstract. Those two adjectives make it clear that our preference for the poor is by no means optional, but is obligatory; is not preferential, but is fundamental and exclusive.

Furthermore, this clear and expressed preference for the poor and among the poor implies effective visibility. In other words, this option on behalf of the poor must be effective, something that can be seen and touched, something that can be evaluated and that can be demonstrated. Well-written documents, great projects, and good intentions are not enough.

The primary and fundamental place for Vincentians in this plan of the new evangelization is defined in this simple constitutional proposal. As our Constitutions speak about a “clear and expressed preference for the poor,” we are reminded of the words that Vincent spoke on many occasions: *The essential aim of Our Lord was to work for poor persons. When he went to others, it was only in passing* (CCD:XI:122). *We are priests for the poor ... God has chosen us for them; this is our primary mission and everything else is an accessory to this* (P. Collet, p. 421 in the Spanish edition).

### 5.2. ...attention to the realities of present-day society

Here we are dealing with the second priority that is highlighted in our Constitutions. This priority means that Vincentians cannot evangelize from afar or from the perspective of a spirituality that is not incarnated. This second priority reminds us of the fact that the incarnation is the primary, essential characteristic of Vincentian spirituality. Therefore, from the perspective of an understanding of our language as Vincentians, when we speak about being attentive to the realities of present-day society, we are saying that there can be no evangelization unless such evangelization is incarnated and inculcitated. There can be no evangelization unless we insert ourselves into the midst of the reality that we want to evangelize.

In order to avoid the temptation of living in the clouds, this second priority focuses our attention on the social reality. Here we are confronted with a specific Vincentian task that is related to our fundamental option on behalf of the poor: *special attention to the factors that cause an unequal distribution of the world's goods*. Thus, according to the letter and the spirit of this article of our Constitutions, a Vincentian's vision and analysis of the reality must be done from the poor, with the poor, for the poor, close to the poor. And, more

specifically, that analysis and that vision of reality ought to be directed toward the vast inequalities and injustices, toward the lack of solidarity and the extensive corruption – all of which continually create more and more poor and marginalized persons.

When Pope Francis spoke about an “economy of exclusion,” the “throwaway culture” and the “culture of death” (expressions which he used when he addressed the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination [9 May 2014]), he was shining light on the consequences of a serious and profound analysis of the social reality. In that way, he was teaching everyone, including us as Vincentians, about the need to be attentive to the realities of present-day society. In fact, so that we might have no fear with regard to trespassing on certain boundaries of prudence and orthodoxy, Francis tells us something that can sound strange coming from the mouth of a Pope: *We should not be concerned simply about falling into doctrinal error, but about remaining faithful to this light-filled path of life and wisdom. For defenders of orthodoxy are sometimes accused of passivity, indulgence or culpable complicity regarding the intolerable situations of injustice and the political regimes which prolong them (Evangelii Gaudium, # 194).*

This second priority that is found in our Constitutions also points out the reason and the purpose of our social analysis: *so that we can better carry out our prophetic task of evangelization.* That phrase points out to us a clear and certain direction, namely, evangelization demands an effort to transform social, political, economic, cultural, and even religious structures; evangelization demands not just a repetition of the same old boring moralistic sermons, but a pastoral approach that utilizes saving, healing, and liberating gestures and activity. In summary, Vincentians ought to be engaged in a pastoral approach that is comprised of prophetic actions of solidarity on behalf of those who are socially excluded and marginalized; they are to embrace bold and courageous positions with regard to concrete, specific injustices; they are to minister in an open, collaborative manner that expresses their solidarity with the forgotten members of society; and they are to promote humanizing initiatives.

As a result of the Second Vatican Council, the most encouraging and insightful voices of the ecclesial community have reminded us of an unquestionable truth: the struggle for justice is a constitutive dimension of evangelization.

### 5.3. ...being evangelized by the poor

This third priority must be read in its entirety: *some sharing in the condition of the poor, so that not only will we attend to their evangelization, but also that we ourselves may be evangelized by them.* I have highlighted and underlined the final part of this article because it seems to me to contain the most substantial and conclusive message. We are dealing with the reality of learning in “the school of the poor.”

These ideas are very much in line with what Vincent taught, as well as in accord with the most authentic Vincentian tradition that has been maintained through the years: the poor, in addition to being our lords and masters, are also our teachers. It is true that Vincent de Paul never stated or wrote that phrase, that is, never said or wrote that the poor are our teachers. It is no less certain, however, that the content of that expression underlies Vincent’s thought and activity. Again, Vincent never stated that the poor evangelize us or that we are evangelized by the poor. Such language was neither possible nor imaginable in the theology and the pastoral activity of that era. The best Vincentian hermeneutic, however, points out to us the fact that Vincent said in his own language that which we are saying today in our language.

Therefore, for Vincentians, the cry of the poor, their basic needs, the abandonment and marginalization and exclusion that they experience, their lack of intellectual and spiritual resources – all of these are clear signs of God’s will. They are palpable manifestations of the reality that God is anointing us to struggle on their behalf and to proclaim to them the Good News of integral salvation. Vincentians have to learn a series of important lessons in “the school of the poor,” lessons that are most important with regard to their mission of evangelization. For example, Vincent highlights the following lessons: the poor teach us about the will of God; they also teach us about our place in the Church, and in society; furthermore, the poor lead us to God and continually remind us about Jesus Christ. With their suffering, the poor make us question ourselves; they invite us to live a radical form of poverty; they enable us to experience “the bite” of poverty; and, through their patience and their welcoming presence, they evangelize us.

We spend our life seeking the will of God and we forget that we have it right before our eyes. Pascal has told us that events and the cries of the poor show us what God asks and requires of us!

## 6. Evangelizers with a Vincentian spirit and moving out toward the peripheries

Evangelization without spirit becomes propaganda, social activism, or some humanistic project or action. An evangelist without spirit is a publicist, a social activist and politician, a leader of the masses. Here we can apply to the evangelizer those words that the famous German theologian, Karl Rahner, wrote in the 1960s: *The Christian of the future will be a mystic, that is, a person who has experienced God, or he will not be a Christian.*

In chapter five of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis wants to make it very clear that there can be no true evangelization apart from the spirit. Following this wise principle of the Pope, I would dare to say that a Vincentian evangelizer cannot engage in a process of true evangelization apart from a Vincentian spirit. The Holy Spirit, the protagonist and primary agent of evangelization, instilled in Vincent de Paul and his Congregation a charism, a spirit, a proper and specific spirituality that enabled the Missionaries to engage in a process of evangelization on behalf of the poor. Vincentians who are not motivated by this charism and spirit will experience a certain emptiness in their pastoral ministry as evangelizers.

Vincentian evangelizers have to be coherent with regard to their proper and specific spirit, not because that spirit is greater than or less than something else, but because it is the gift that the Holy Spirit gave to our Founders and their followers in order that they might fulfill the mission that had been entrusted to them. To act in a contrary manner would mean that Vincentians were living without unity of life, without fidelity to the spirit, and without a sense of belonging to their vocation and their mission. This would also lead them into the ongoing temptation of becoming caught up in other suspicious and unacceptable spiritualties.

Vincentian evangelizers have to be filled with a spirit of incarnated humility, compassionate simplicity, merciful gentleness, mortification that leads to greater solidarity, and a zeal that is bold and creative. Borrowing an expression from Johannes B. Metz: *Christians have to live a mysticism of open eyes*. In other words, their experience of God has to be inspired not by a mysticism of closed eyes in which one contemplates one's own state of being, but rather a mysticism of open eyes, which enables one to enter into solidarity with those who suffer.

Inevitably, this spirit leads one to “the peripheries,” that is, leads one to willingly embrace the mission, leads one to reach out, leads one

to engage in a process of discernment with regard to one's plans, projects, and ministry on behalf of those who are poor. The parable of the Good Samaritan should be seen as a powerful example of what it means to go out to the peripheries, to those places where one will encounter those who have been trampled upon, abused, mistreated, those who are invisible in the midst of this consumer society that is so lacking in expressions of solidarity.

## 7. Vincentian proposals for the new evangelization

When we ask ourselves, as I have done at the beginning of the presentation, about the contributions that Vincentians can offer to the new evangelization, we almost always formulate a long list of missionary activities that utilize the media or an extensive list of projects that are more or less idealistic.

Nevertheless, what I would like to do here is highlight some simple Vincentian proposals that will enrich and actualize the new evangelization. These are proposals that arise from the Vincentian charism and that, at the same time, reveal the depths of our charism.

### a). The diaconate of charity as a privileged manner of evangelization

The link that connects and gives unity and coherency to the mission is the diaconate of charity. Indeed, the Vincentian charism has a diaconate structure. When I utilize those words, I am referring to the service of charity, to the mission of charity, to the state of charity that Vincent de Paul lived. In this diaconate of charity we find perfect union, charity, justice, mercy, service, self-giving, the civilization of love, human promotion. Furthermore, the diaconate of charity inspires, molds, and impels the Vincentian mission, thus placing the poor at the center of its works and institutions.

### b). The organization of charity as an evangelizing witness

One of the characteristic elements of the diaconate of charity is organization. The coordinated organization of charity is at the very root of the Vincentian mission. Nevertheless, this organization of charity ought to be bold and creative. John Paul II speaks about *a new "creativity" in charity* (*Novo millennio ineunte*, 6 January 2001, # 50): a charity that is new and renewed for the present era, which demands such newness because the present situation is new and the globalization of indifference has claimed new victims.

### c). Sensitivity as a fundamental attitude

*To be a Christian and to see our brother suffering without weeping with him, without being sick with him! That's to be lacking in charity; it's being a caricature of a Christian; it's inhuman; it's to be worse than animals (CCD:XII:222).* As a natural and logical consequence of charity, Vincent de Paul highlights the power of sensitivity. Without such sensitivity, there is no openness to the poor nor is there a willingness to approach the poor. Without this sensitivity there is no evangelization; there is no Good News for the poor. On the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Jericho and that defines the meaning of life, the lack of sensitivity makes us exploiters, like the assailants and the priest and the Levite who maintained a position of false neutrality. On more than one occasion, I have heard it said that Vincentians are to be renowned experts in social sensitivity. That is, indeed, both a challenge and a commitment with regard to the process of evangelization.

### d). The incarnation as an indispensable path for evangelization

We can establish a golden rule that states: there can be no mission without incarnation; there can be no mission without inculturation into the world of the poor. A document published by the Episcopal Conference of Spain, *The Church and the poor*, states: *Our charity ought to lead us to reach out to and to approach those who are poor. We should share in the life of the poor and should be found in their midst so that we can analyze their situation in a realistic manner, share their problems and seek solutions to those same problems, share in their friendship and share in the special friendship of the Lord which is extended to those who serve the Lord's poor (# 134).*

### e). A vision of reality from the perspective of the poor and as seen in the eyes of God

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: *We have learned to view the great events of history from the perspective of those perceived as "insignificant," those who have been abused, the powerless, the oppressed, the despised, in a word, from the perspective of those who suffer.* There is no doubt that the world is viewed differently from the peripheries than from mansions, from the mud and barbed wire of refugees than from the great avenues and boardrooms, from threatened lives than from those that are settled. Therefore, what we seek is not the vision of the

sociologist but the vision of God, who views the depths of our structures and, as a result, is moved to the very core.

#### f). Making a shared mission a reality

For many years, we have spoken about the Vincentian Family, about the shared mission of the Vincentian Family, about collaboration among all the members of the Vincentian Family. Now is the time to take seriously this concept of a shared mission. In October 1964, the wise and holy Daughter of Charity, Mother Suzanne Guillemin wrote the following prophetic words: *we have to move from a position of authority to a position of collaboration.* The shared mission of all the branches of the Vincentian Family demands mutual understanding, unbiased collaboration, sincere openness, a change of perspective, loyal communion, common formation, strengthening the Vincentian charism, and union that preserves autonomy.

#### g). Systemic change as a necessary dimension of evangelization

Vincent de Paul was aware of the fact that structural causes produced, fostered, multiplied, and made poverty never-ending. Vincent, with the means and the categories of his era, struggled against those pervasive structures. Vincent never doubted that such action, directed at unjust situations, was a dimension of the evangelizing process on behalf of the poor. Today we, as Vincentians, speak about systemic change. Briefly, and in general terms, systemic change is focused on changing dominant structures in the midst of which the poor live and are caught up in a downward spiral that impoverishes them and marginalizes them. At the same time, the poor are encouraged to develop strategies that will enable them to escape this vicious circle of poverty and exclusion. If there is any doubt about the evangelizing dimension of systemic change, one can simply review the numerous Church documents that refer to the intimate relationship between evangelization and human promotion.

#### h). The Church's Social Doctrine – a Vincentian emphasis

There is no doubt that the Vincentian charism experiences a level of comfort and ease in the presence of the Church's social doctrine. At the same time, the Church's social doctrine has a dynamism that enlivens, strengthens, and actualizes the Vincentian charism. Indeed, if charity is the heart and the fundamental axis of the Vincentian charism, then, we cannot forget, as Benedict XVI stated: *Charity is at*

*the heart of the Church's social doctrine (Caritas in veritate, 29 June 2009, # 2).* We should also be mindful of the fact that a member of the Vincentian Family, Frédéric Ozanam, is known as the precursor of the Church's modern social doctrine.

### i). An overall perspective: the conversion of the poor

Here we are not referring to some simple conversion that enables us to fill our journals with our "daily conversions." When we say that Vincent de Paul engaged in the action of conversion, we are not talking about small, fragmentary, moral acts of conversion, acts in which Vincent was surely engaged. Rather, we want to highlight something more profound and all-encompassing about Vincent's life: conversion of the poor means that the poor have to be at the center of our evangelizing activity and, at the same time, the poor have to point out to us the path of evangelization. If the poor are not our perspective and our point of reference, then, who is this Christ to whom we give witness? If the poor are not the first beneficiaries of the Good News, then, why do we want to engage in the process of evangelization? If our cause is not the cause of the poor, then, how are we going to continue the mission of Christ? The theologian, Jon Sobrino, takes up that position when he affirms that the crucial question is not whether the Church will transmit saving knowledge, but whether the Church will continue, in word and deed, the liberating history of Christ.

## 8. A final word

To evangelize from a perspective of commitment to the poor and from a perspective of charitable service is the most authentic Vincentian manner of evangelization. It is our best contribution to the new evangelization. The reason for this is both simple and logical: the option for the poor becomes the fundamental axis of the new evangelization and is able to make the profound and infinite love of God visible and credible in our midst. This option for the poor stirs up a desire to make real the civilization of love. Yes, it is precisely in such a place that we, as Vincentians, should be found.

## DISCERNMENT

### First Conference

Bishop Varghese Thottamkara, CM

#### Introduction:

My dear confreres,

It was a pleasant surprise for me when the Superior General asked me to preach a one-day retreat to you, the members of this 2016 General Assembly. Although unsure if I am the right person, I accepted it as a penance for making the proposal that the General Curia invite a CM bishop to speak at the General Assembly. I was motivated to make such a proposal for several reasons: first, it is my conviction that a Vincentian who serves as a bishop would be able to speak authentically of the Vincentian Charism as well as the mind of the Church. Secondly, as a Vincentian, the bishop-confrere who is invited, could speak frankly since he is not immersed in discussions on the selection of a new Superior General and council. Most important of all, I am happy to have the great grace to meet many of my confreres from all over the world, whom I miss a great deal since my episcopal appointment to Ethiopia in 2013.

I humbly acknowledge that by the grace of God, I was privileged to guide the General and Provincial chapters of three Religious Congregations in India. The conferences I gave and the topics discussed were much appreciated as helpful for focusing them to their task. Encouraged by this positive stroke, I have chosen the topic “**Discernment of the will of God on the personal and community level**” for reflection, because of my conviction that the primary task of an Assembly is to discern the will of God for the Congregation. I understand that my duty here is not to present you with new theological constructs, but to enable you to reflect, pray, and prepare yourself to fulfill the purpose of this Assembly. So, I humbly offer you some practical and simple thoughts for reflection, prayer, and deliberation. In this first talk, I present some general principles of discernment and, in the second talk that follows, some practical points and contemporary issues of relevance will be dealt with.

**Discernment** is a practice that Jesus lived quite intensely. Discerning the will of God and fulfilling it was food for Jesus (John 4:34). He was convinced that he was anointed by the Holy Spirit and commissioned by his heavenly Father (Luke 4:18-21). Jesus conversed with the Father before any important actions or functions so often that the disciples, seeing him praying, asked him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1). He was convinced that he should always do what his Father wanted and not what he desired. He glorified God on earth by fulfilling the work the Father gave him to do (John 17:4). Yet, it was not easy for Jesus to discern and fulfill the will of the Father. He spent hours in prayer to find what the Father wanted from him (Luke 6:12). And it was with much pain and agony that he accepted the Father's will in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:41-44). His Father meant everything to Jesus. His life was a struggle to follow the will of his Father. Jesus did not get his will done on earth. "*My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not as I will, but as you will*" (John 26:39). Only with intense prayer and great agony was he able to do what the Father wanted him to do. (Cf., Philippians 2:6-8; Hebrews 5:7-8).

For Saint Paul, discerning God's will was also very important. He exhorted the faithful of Ephesus to "*Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord*" (5:10); and again, "*Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is*" (5:17). In his letter to Colossians, Paul spoke of the help that Christ gave him in making right decisions: "*The peace that Christ gives is to guide you in the decisions you make; for it is to this peace that God has called you together into one body*" (3:15).

For Saint Vincent, discerning the will of God was a theme very dear to his heart as he sought to imitate Christ. The same theme was presented by Vincent in his own vernacular of the time, using terms such as 'seeking the will of God,' 'dependence on the providence of God,'<sup>1</sup> 'seeking the kingdom of God before everything,'<sup>2</sup> and 'fidelity to God.'<sup>3</sup> Saint Vincent once exhorted the missionaries in this way: "*Let us abandon ourselves to the providence of God and be on our guard against anticipating it.*"<sup>4</sup> On another occasion, he said to them, "*Perfection doesn't consist in ecstasies but in doing the Will of God.*"<sup>5</sup> If

<sup>1</sup> CM Conference, 29 November 1656.

<sup>2</sup> CM Conference, 21 February 1659.

<sup>3</sup> CM Conference, 29 November 1656.

<sup>4</sup> CCD II, 499; 16 March 1644.

<sup>5</sup> CCD XI, 285; 17 October 1655.

for both Christ our Divine Savior and our holy founder Saint Vincent<sup>6</sup> discerning and fulfilling the will of God was so important a duty, should it not be the central theme with which this 2016 General Assembly should be concerned, while dealing with such weighty matters for the future of the Congregation of the Mission?

### What is discernment?<sup>7</sup>

From its Greek and Latin roots, the verb ‘discern’ means to sift, to separate, to distinguish, as we separate rice from grains or from foreign matter. Though it may be used in a variety of ways today, in spirituality it has a specific meaning and may be defined as “a sifting of one’s inner experiences to discover their orientation and hence recognize their origin.”

- ✓ ‘Inner experiences’ include thoughts, beliefs, and judgments (of the mind), feelings and sentiments (on the level of emotions), and desires and inspirations (on the level of the will). These three levels are in constant interaction. They lead to the formation and development of attitudes, values, and habits of thinking and acting.
- ✓ ‘Orientation’ is a key word in discernment. Our inner experiences tend to influence the direction we take and the choices we make. They orient us towards that which is good or bad. To discover the orientation requires a certain awareness and understanding of these inner experiences.
- ✓ ‘Origin’: In classical terminology, good and evil spirits are constantly acting upon us to lead us to good and evil respectively. From our final choice – for good or for evil – we can recognize what spirit was moving us. Hence, discernment is often called ‘discernment of spirits.’ These spirits need not always be personified. We have good and evil spirits **within** us, such as desires to love and serve; to be honest, pure, and just; or, on the contrary, tendencies to dominate and cheat, and the roots of the ‘capital sins.’ There are also good and evil spirits **around** us, in our world: people who are examples of commitment, service, forgiveness,

<sup>6</sup> To show how important discerning the will of God is to Saint Vincent, André Dodin, CM, in his book, *Vincent de Paul and Charity: A Contemporary Portrait of His Life and Apostolic Spirit* (New City Press, New York, 1992, pp 91-99), gives 32 quotes from Vincent on the theme.

<sup>7</sup> For the following presentation, I am indebted a great deal to the book, *Discernment - A Way of Life* by Rex A. Pai, S.J., Vaigarai Publications T.N., India, 2001.

and holiness; organizations and movements working for unity, dialogue, justice, and peace. These are opposed by counter spirits such as consumerism, racism, corruption, terrorism, and fundamentalism. These spirits in us and around us can exert strong influence on us, whether we know it consciously or not. In discernment, more emphasis is given to orientation than to the origin of spirits. What is more important is to know the path we take before arriving at the final choice, which may be good or evil (or less good).

### Seeking God's will

Discernment is often described as seeking and finding God's will through the process of sifting inner experiences to discover their orientation. Now what do we mean by God's will? It may be understood in several ways:

- ✓ First, it is accomplished through God's overall plan for humankind and the world as stated in Ephesians 1:10 "*The plan, which God will complete when the time is right, is to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head.*"
- ✓ Secondly, this would be in a general way, what God wants us to do, such as doing good and avoiding evil, observing the commandments, to live in love and build a better world.
- ✓ Thirdly, it would be to know what in a concrete situation God wants of me, what is pleasing to him here and now! The first two are relatively simple, as they call for discernment as we have been taught over the years. This third way is needed when we are faced with searching for an answer to some of the practical questions of daily life.

It may be well to keep in mind another distinction regarding God's will: between what God wants and what God permits. God wants us to be happy and free, loving, and other-oriented. God does not want us to sin or to suffer, to be cruel or selfish, but he permits or allows it because he has given us the wonderful gift of freedom, which we sometimes misuse. When we talk of God's will in both these areas, we should be clear what we mean.

## PRE-CONDITIONS FOR DISCERNMENT

Certain dispositions (also called ‘attitudes’) are needed for one to discern properly. The more these are present, the better one can exercise discernment well. They include the following:

- 1). **A commitment to look for God’s will in the details of life.** God does speak to us through small and big events and incidents. An attentiveness to listening to God’s voice in every person, thing, and event in our life makes us sharp in discerning. Even good Christians may find this bothersome, believing that God’s commandments and Church teachings alone are sufficient guidelines to lead a good life.
- 2). **Faith in a God who is loving, self-revealing, and concerned about us and our world.** What kind of image of God we have is an important question here. If we have distorted images of God (such as one who punishes and condemns), it can interfere with good discernment. A child having a loving trust in his father would be confident enough to consult his father on every detail of his life. Such childlike trust and confidence is needed for a person who wants to discern the will of God.
- 3). **A relationship with God that we call prayer.** We saw that Jesus was able to discern the will of his Father through his intimate relationship with the Father. This does not mean praying many hours each day, but keeping personally in touch with God on a regular basis, giving God a privileged place in our life. Specifically, this includes a desire to grow in one’s personal relationship with Jesus, allowing for an intimacy with Christ that leads us to interiorize more and more his mind and heart.
- 4). **An awareness of our inner movements – thoughts, feelings, and desires – that play an important part in our choices and decisions.** Through constant practice, we can develop a facility of being in touch with our inner selves. Self-awareness of both our strengths and limitations is also required. Neither overconfidence nor despising oneself is helpful in discernment.
- 5). **An awareness of social reality, the world, and the context in which we live and make our choices.** This implies not merely having information, but understanding to some degree the forces operating in society that influence us and shape our lives and worldview.

- 6). **Growth in inner freedom from fears and anxieties, prejudice, false beliefs, attachment to persons and things, resentments and unhealed wounds of the past, to name just a few!** No one can ever be completely free of the many influences in our world. Yet, we have to ensure that none of these factors control or strongly influence our decision-making.
- 7). **Fraternal love:** One who discerns has to be other-oriented or altruistic rather than self-oriented, with a forgiving, compassionate, and non-judgmental heart. A person with a judgmental attitude will find it difficult both to discern and to accept the will of God mediated through another human being.
- 8). **One who develops the courage to take risks.** Fear may prevent us from considering alternatives that cost us and blind us to see where God actually may be calling us.

For you, my dear brothers in the Little Company, I add these special dispositions of which I know you are all aware and trying to live and model for the confreres in your provinces:

- 9). **Along with our Vincentian virtues of simplicity, mortification, meekness, and zeal for souls,** I believe one needs a certain degree of that other Vincentian virtue, namely **humility**: I discern with a humble spirit, because I don't always know clearly the path to take. This would reflect a lived dependence on God, an openness to his Holy Spirit, a good degree of self-acceptance, and a readiness to listen and learn from others. If a situation seems crystal clear, there may be no need for discernment.
- 10). **Vincentian identity:** As Vincentians, we know there are other prerequisites, such as love for the charism, spirit, and mission of the Congregation. We should have an awareness of our Vincentian identity and a conviction that we are discerning as Vincentians.

Since the requirements for a discerning person seem demanding, we may often settle for shortcuts, such as tossing a coin to decide the matter; depending on a more experienced person or a person in authority (such as a superior) to tell us what to do; or falling back to relying on tradition, law, custom, or even our likes and dislikes to make our choice. Discernment is a way of life for those who are not satisfied with just doing good and avoiding evil, but who desire to search for what is pleasing to God, and to do the most loving thing in every aspect of one's life.

Inner experiences are privileged ways through which God reveals his will and helps us to understand and accept what he wants us to do or be. But God also reveals himself in an equally privileged way through outer reality – the world in which we live, and its socio-economic, political, cultural, and religious context in which we make our choices and decisions. This may also be seen as reading ‘the signs of the times’ a term used by Saint John XXIII, which later became popular in the Church. What is God saying and revealing through the events and happenings in our world today? How do the current issues of human rights, justice, solidarity, poverty, etc. influence us? What is our stand toward them? It is by answering these and similar fundamental questions that we have to discern the will of God through the outer realities. If we give importance to our inner experiences alone and ignore God’s revelation in social reality, our discernment will be partial and distorted. Like the discernment of the inner reality, discerning the outer reality is equally challenging. Some prerequisites for doing this well include:

- ✓ An awareness of social reality and understanding of the various forces operating in society, including a familiarity with the basics of social analysis and exposure to the reality of poverty and injustice. This awareness should be coupled with a knowledge of the Social Doctrine of the Church. These realities will provide us with an adequate framework to view and analyze social reality and formulate adequate responses.
- ✓ An evangelical approach: This would mean looking at reality as Jesus did from the perspective of the poor and downtrodden. Ultimately, it enables us to embrace the evangelical approach of seeing Christ in the suffering faces of the poor.
- ✓ From this will then come an evangelical option. We take sides with the poor, defend and promote their cause, and become committed to working for justice and peace.

#### **Collective discernment:**

In religious communities, members and groups are called to make a collective discernment on important matters affecting the Congregation and its members. In such cases, discernment may be understood as a prayerful search in common to discover where God is calling us as a group. This is the function of this General Assembly. Along with this, there are also certain prerequisites for group

discernment as well, such as dispositions on personal and group levels, and these will influence the process itself.

a). **On the personal level:** as previously noted:

- ✓ Awareness of our inner movements – thoughts, feelings, desires.
- ✓ Awareness of social reality, the context – economic, socio-political, cultural, religious.
- ✓ Inner freedom from fears, attachments, prejudices, and resentments. This would include readiness to be challenged, an openness to change my opinion or inclination, and an absence of any desire to win and triumph.

b). **On the group level:**

- ✓ Mutual respect: This entails respect for each one in the group, including a respect for each one's liberty to hold and express his opinion, and trust in and acceptance of each one in the group. This inclusive attitude helps all to be attentive to one another and learn from the ideas of the other person with an understanding that God can speak even through the mouth of the little ones.
- ✓ Openness to search for the truth, not alone, but along and together with others. Each member should be ready to search and accept truth, wherever and whenever it is found.
- ✓ Non-judgmental attitude, not attributing unworthy motives to others. All should understand that every member of the group is called by God and mandated by the community. And each one is looking for the good of the community and for the glory of God. A pharisaic judgmental attitude of "Can anything good come from Nazareth" (John 1:46) will be counterproductive in group discernment.
- ✓ Simplicity in sharing what one thinks and feels. This is a Vincentian virtue of absolute necessity for good group discernment. It is connected to truthfulness. In our talks and actions, we should be simple and truthful. Our thoughts, words, and actions should match. Duplicity always hinders discerning the will of God.
- ✓ Listening to others attentively and with empathy, especially to what is said and not said. All may not have the same eloquence or clarity in expression. But the community should be able to listen even to such persons as to understand what is being com-

municated. In an international community, the effort of the members in this regard should be to understand the meanings of expressions and terminologies.

### As regards the process:

- ✓ Belief that the process of discernment we go through is valid and worth doing, thus avoiding negative attitudes or actions.
- ✓ Trusting that God, through his Spirit, will lead us as a group. If it is the work of God, the Holy Spirit cannot fail us, neither can we defeat God's plan.
- ✓ Giving sufficient time to discuss and deliberate without undue hurry or rigid deadlines. Some ideas may need sufficient time to mature. Some decisions may need more time than other ones.
- ✓ Working toward arriving at a common vision or goal, shared and accepted by all the members of the group. Concretely, this could lead to more effective service toward those in need, offered in the spirit of the Gospel, the value of life lived in community, or mission according to the religious (Vincentian) charism.

### Appendix

#### Some helpful distinctions:

Some authors also speak of distinctions to be made and, while not specifically speaking of discernment, they could help us in making the right decisions.

- 1). In his book *Call to Love*, Anthony de Mello distinguishes between 'world' feelings and 'soul' feelings. Examples of the former are what we feel when we are praised or appreciated, when we win, succeed, or come first, when we exercise power over others. Examples of 'soul' feelings are when we appreciate natural beauty, enjoy a good friendship, a book, or a prayer, do something to stimulate our creative powers, such as music, art, or cooking. Both types of feelings are positive and good, but there are important differences in quality and orientation. 'World' feelings are more superficial; they give a thrill and excitement, which makes us desire them all the more; they lead us to the ego more easily. 'Soul' feelings are deeper, more lasting, and genuine, and give nourishment to the true self. An

awareness of this distinction will enable us to cultivate the right feelings, and to avoid running after those that could deceive.

- 2). In a short article on “Seeking Happiness” Ronald Rolheiser says that some key questions we often ask ourselves are: Am I really happy? Do people like me? Is my life meaningful? Rolheiser says that these are valid questions, but the wrong ones. For happiness, love, meaning do not come to us when we go in search of them; they come to us as a byproduct when we try to forget ourselves for others. So the authentic questions to ask ourselves are: Am I trying to bring happiness into the lives of others? Am I going out of myself in love? Am I helping others toward having meaning in their life? When we go in this direction, the first set of questions will find their answers.
- 3). In the Appendix to his book, *Certain as the Dawn*, Peter van Breemen distinguishes two basic approaches to Christian life: the **moralistic approach** and the **faith approach**. In the first, the most important issue is my love for God and for my neighbor, such as what I do and how I love. In the second approach, it is God’s love for me as I am and for my neighbor; namely, how I am loved, from which flows my doing and loving. This is stated briefly, but so truly, in the first letter of John, “We love because God first loved us” (4:19).

According to our basic approach, we will understand all other realities such as God, sin, prayer, Eucharist, Confession, the Cross, and other aspects of Christian life in different ways. In the moralistic approach, it is finally my love for God that makes me holy; the emphasis is on me serving God. In the faith approach, it is ultimately God’s love for me that makes me holy; the emphasis is on the God whom I serve. We do not have to choose between these approaches: faith and works have to go together – each call for the other. The important question for a discerning person is: Where do I place the emphasis? It makes a world of difference when we base our lives on the faith approach.

## DISCERNMENT Second Conference

An Assembly united in the mind of Christ

Bishop Varghese Thottamkara, CM

*“I am the Vine; you are the branches. If you live in me, you will bear much fruit.” John 15:1-8*

My dear confreres,

Having discussed with you some principles of discernment, I will suggest some contemporary areas of discernment for the Congregation as a whole. As members of the 2016 General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission, you have assumed a grave responsibility. You are tasked with participating in a communal discernment process for the good of the Congregation. The worldwide Congregation, the Church, and God's poor are all looking to see how you will respond to this great call and responsibility. You can and will rise to the occasion. In so doing, you will fulfil the mandate given you by God, the Church, and the confreres in your provinces.

Jesus, our Master, and Vincent, our Holy Founder and Father of the Congregation, want this Assembly to be conducted after the mind of Christ so that it may be a fruitful moment of grace for the Church, the Congregation, and the poor who are our portion. Remember that we have no existence and identity apart from Christ. You are at this Assembly, because the Holy Spirit has led you here. Remain attached to Jesus; seek his mind and his will. Allow the life-giving love of Christ to flow into and through you. Allow the person of Jesus to think, reflect, speak, and listen through you, so you can produce the “fruit that endures” that Christ wants from you.

Detach yourself from your own preconceived ideas and engage your capacity to think, reflect, discuss, listen, speak, and deliberate in the Spirit of Christ, so that the Lord can think, speak, and act through you. Do not give your capacities to the evil spirit, as seen in one who sows division and discord; nor to the human spirit, which shows itself

in egoism, selfishness and self-glorification; nor to the worldly spirit of blind imitation of prevailing culture, including hedonism and utilitarianism. All of these things will distract you from your concerns and duties.

Listen to the voice of the Lord speaking in your conscience. Do not listen to other voices that will block you from listening to God's voice, discerning and giving yourself over to His will. Recall the grave responsibility entrusted to each of you as members of the General Assembly.

As members of the General Assembly, you serve the Lord, the confreres, and the poor, so:

- With deep faith in God, ask what God wants from you.
- Maintain a spirit of prayer and discernment.
- Allow God to guide and challenge you.
- Be ready to accept and surrender to God's will, let his glory be your main goal.

As members of the General Assembly, you represent the Church and so:

- Ask what the Church wants from you.
- Maintain a spirit of obedience to Church authorities and their teachings.
- Seek how to promote dialogue, respect, and response to the needs of local ordinaries.
- Study and look for guidance in the Church documents.

As members of the General Assembly, you represent our Congregation and so:

- Study and discern the mind and spirit of the Founder.
- Pray and discern what your confreres want from you.
- Look for new ways to preserve and promote the Vincentian charism.
- Maintain the spirit of our Constitutions and look for practical ways to fulfil them.

You are the representative of the poor and so:

- Discover who are the poor you and your confreres serve and find out what their needs are.

- Strategize on new ways to serve and evangelize them.
- Let the real good of the poor be your motive.

As people, who are filled with the Holy Spirit, and who represent the Church, the Congregation, and the poor, and, above all, as good Christians:

- Put aside any inclination to seek selfish and worldly ways of engagement.
- Allow your discussions to be led by the Holy Spirit and elevated to where discernment of God's will is your primary concern.
- Let there be respect for everyone's freedom, right, and dignity.
- Listen patiently to one another and make sure you speak what is good and useful for all.
- Seek to understand both the advantages and disadvantages of each argument or option. Avoid adapting predetermined ideas that will impede true openness to the Holy Spirit.

My dear confreres may I encourage you humbly, if you want to do exactly what God wants from you, before making any important decisions please do the following both as individuals and as a group:

- Pray to God to enlighten you.
- Observe all details.
- Free yourself from all preconceived ideas, emotions, and attitudes that might influence your observation and decision.
- Be able to distinguish between God's will and your impressions and desires.

### **Some practical points for reflection and discernment!**

I offer these practical points to assist in your reflection and discernment. These are some ideas of mine, and, of course, you may draw from similar questions of contemporary relevance for your reflection and discernment.

- 1). Is there a need to promote a fuller global vision of the Church, the Congregation, and the poor whom we serve?

There should be a conscious effort by all at the Assembly to understand that by membership in the Congregation we are members of a global family – the worldwide Congregation of

the Mission, sharing the same charism, vision, and mission. As Saint Paul reminds us, “For in one spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13). As members of the same family, our love, concern, and solidarity should extend to all members of the family that is our Congregation, irrespective of provinces and nationalities. Neither should we make such distinctions with the poor. God’s poor are everywhere and they need to be served.

Due to historical reasons and circumstances, our Congregation, like many others, developed into static compartmentalized provinces, which led to a certain indifference and apathy toward one another. As a consequence, provinces located in the same region or country at times had little or no coordination among one another. Due to societal, economic, and social factors, some provinces existed alongside one akin to the parable in Luke’s Gospel of the ‘rich man’ and ‘Lazarus.’ Walls between them were built, allowing neither personnel resources nor material resources to flow from one to another and create a balance. They became strangers to one another, despite our desire to preach and live in fraternity and solidarity. I do acknowledge that, in recent decades, much has been done to bridge this gap. Yet, I believe that we, as a Congregation, still have much to do to catch up with the spirit of the gospel.

Hence, may you ask yourself the following questions and pray over them:

- Although times and situations have changed, have we evolved in our understanding of the need for collaboration and resource-sharing among provinces and regions?
- Where there once were walls between provinces, can we now build bridges of collaboration and community?
- Are we ready and actively trying to share our members and our material resources with other provinces for the better service of the poor?
- Can I arise from my own limited perspective of interest in my province and expand my vision to view the Congregation from a global view?

## 2). Do we need a change of perception and approach?

Here I use as an image the parable of the weeds and crop in the Matthew's Gospel (13:24-30). What I mean is that today's weed may become tomorrow's crop. Let me provide a current example.

After the development of herbal medicines all over the world, farming and the life of farmers have radically changed. In past times, when a farmer cultivated wheat, barley, or maze, if other plants were seen growing in the field, they were considered weeds and immediately removed. But after the development of herbal medicines, farmers realized that some of the plants they considered as weeds and had removed from the field actually were precious medicinal plants. This realization made them cultivate these medicinal plants to earn more. Today, when they cultivate these medicinal plants, if wheat or a maze plant is found growing in the field, they consider it a weed and remove it. Surprisingly, **the weed has become the crop and the crop has become the weed!** So the reply of the master in the gospel parable "Let them grow together ..." Yes, let them grow together until the time we realize that they are not weeds but precious medicinal plants.

Here a change of perception has changed the attitude and approach of the farmers. This is also true in many Congregations today. The members from some provinces, along with their ideas, opinions, services, and contributions were once considered worthless weeds. Now, they are finding their place in the Congregation as valuable and precious treasures! The right perception, judgment, and attitude alone have brought about this change. So I propose the following for your reflection:

- Can I accept the other person, his ideas and visions, as a gift to the Congregation (John 17:24)? Or do I see them as weeds to be immediately ignored or even uprooted?
- Can I respect the opinions of others even if I do not agree with them?
- How can I align my ideas about and approach to my confreres to be in line with the mind of Christ and the way of Saint Vincent?

### 3). What are the criteria for election?

My dear confreres, in terms of election procedures, allow me to offer some reflections based on my own experience in previous General Assemblies and from my experience of guiding the General and Provincial Chapters of some Religious Congregations in the process of the election of their major superiors. I learned that these ideas were much appreciated as helpful for their election process. Let me speak of this sensitive matter directly and plainly. I believe you, my confreres, will be able to accept it maturely.

A key function of a General Assembly is the election of the Superior General and Council. It is an important moment of discernment, to be done with utmost care and caution to insure you are acting with the mind of Christ and following the way of Saint Vincent. Worldly spirits of geopolitics and human dynamics of power and prestige (for oneself, one's province, or a Visitors' Conference) have no place in this time of discernment of the will of God for the Congregation. Animated by fraternal charity, fortified by prayer and proper discernment, let the Holy Spirit be your guide and elector for the Superior General and Council.

When the General Assembly deliberates on the election of the Superior General, the first question to be asked is not whom shall we elect as the Superior General. Before that takes place, you need to define the challenges, needs, and priorities of the Congregation over the next six years. Once you have faced this important question, you may then ask who is the right person to guide the Congregation now and to address the challenges, needs, and priorities you have recognized and set as the standard and direction of the Congregation for the next six years. Once you have identified the "What," the answer as to "Who" will become much clearer to the Assembly.

So the first duty of this General Assembly is to discern, spell out, and prioritize the challenges and needs of the Congregation today. In this course you may ask,

- What are the needs of the hour and the main challenges facing the Congregation?
- What areas need special attention, reinforcement, and strengthening?

- What direction should the Congregation take during the coming years, specifically in the fields of vocation, mission, fraternal life, living out the spirit and charism? (As you discern the future direction of the Congregation, do not forget the future is where there are young members and where there are vocations.)

**Election:** Having identified the above matters, the Assembly may proceed to identify the person and the team most apt to accomplish it.

- Who is the right person to address the above challenges and needs?
- What are the qualities and strengths needed in a Superior General to address those challenges and needs?
- What motivates me to suggest a specific name of a candidate for election as Superior General or member of the Council? Is this desire of God?

When speaking about the qualities needed of a Superior General, one may consider some key qualities required, such as love for the Mission, the poor, and the Congregation; that of a person attuned to discerning the will of God and with demonstrated wisdom in following it; a readiness to face challenges; the prudence to challenge others; and the courage to make decisions, be they ordinary or extraordinary. Of course, it is understandable to seek leadership in a confrere with some known qualities to address the specific needs and challenges identified by the Assembly. And finally, you should consider the need for good physical health, psychological balance, spiritual strength, and missionary maturity needed for one in a ministry of responsible leadership.

Once the Superior General is elected, the Assembly proceeds to elect the Vicar General. Here, too, the primary consideration should not be nationality, language, or ethnicity, but to find a confrere who can complement and enhance the gifts, talents, and limitations of the newly elected Superior General. The election of the Vicar General will make clear to the Assembly the qualities and strengths needed in confreres, who will serve as members of the General Council, as a collaborative team. The most important point is that they should complement one another as a perfect collaborative team.

I hope this process can assist you, as members of the General Assembly, to reflect on those who can complement the newly elected Superior General in his strengths and limits, because all of us here share the same human reality. We are all gifted people, but also people who have human limitations that we must acknowledge. That is why gathering as a graced community, actively discerning the will of God, and with a readiness to promote the continuance of our charism must be your main focus in electing a Superior General, Vicar General, and Council members. I pray that you be guided by the Holy Spirit and do exactly what God wants you to do.

## Appendix

This is a review of what I have discussed in the two conferences to assist you in discernment.

### **Signs of being on the right track of discernment:**

When you make a decision according to God's plan:

- 1). You will enjoy peace, serenity, happiness.
- 2). You are willing to let go of your ideas and hold on to the insight given by God.
- 3). You are willing to take responsibility for decisions made and to take responsible initiatives to fulfil them.
- 4). You feel God has worked through you and you thank God for this privilege.
- 5). You are ready to surrender to God's plan, even if it is contrary to your desire.

### **Signs of being out of God's plan:**

- 1). Inner restlessness: This may mean God is trying to get your attention.
- 2). Feeling perplexed: If this occurs, wait quietly and trust that God will make his will clear.
- 3). Disappointment: This may indicate God is trying to speak to your heart and redirect it from a way that is not in keeping with his will.

- 4). Confusion: This may indicate you have not yet fully discerned God's will or surrendered to it.
- 5). Obsession or Factionalism: Both these behaviours can indicate that you are allowing yourself to be drawn into ways of thinking or associations that will not benefit promotion of the charism of the Congregation or the good of its members.
- 6). Spiritual Coolness: This can be a sign of God's presence being withdrawn.
- 7). Unwise or imprudent speech or actions: A sign of missing God's will in the concrete reality of the workings of the General Assembly.

If you cannot find God's will, ask yourself:

- Is some personal sin or spiritual obstacle blocking me?
- Do I have a mixed motive, or am I making it difficult for God to get my attention?
- Am I truly led by the Holy Spirit or am I depending too much on myself?
- Is my mind already made up about what I want to do?
- Is bias or some type of hidden prejudice hindering me from seeking the truth?
- Are my desires so strong that discerning God's will is difficult?
- Am I trying to bargain with God? Do I tend to act prematurely?
- Do I depend too much on the opinion of others?
- Am I overly influenced by my emotions or those of others around me?