

Commentary on the Final Document of the 2016 General Assembly

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“400 years of fidelity to its charism and the new evangelization”

Almost half the delegates at the 2016 General Assembly were participating in such an event for the first time. As a result, the Assembly developed in the midst of a fresh and youthful environment, especially with regard to community sharing, work in small groups, and interventions during plenary sessions.

The “miracle of the Assembly” is that all the data, information, and multiple communications from the various offices and committees, as well as from the provinces of the Congregation (many quite distinct in tone and content), resulted in ideas and proposals that were formulated through discussion and dialogue and ultimately became part of the Final Document. This paper is an attempt to present some reflections on the primary theme of the Assembly (fidelity to the charism and the new evangelization), a theme that was treated somewhat hastily as the Assembly was drawing to a close, and is also intended as a reflection on the spirit that was so prevalent during the Assembly. The almost unanimous approval of the Final Document reveals that the delegates recognized the text as a more or less faithful reflection of the spirit that prevailed during the Assembly.

The Assembly was a moment of grace and the Final Document is an invitation to the whole Congregation to launch out into the future toward which we are being led. Each Assembly is a time of hope, a time in which we, together with the many people with whom we share our life on a daily basis, write a new page in our history (and we do so in harmony with the Spirit of God).

To accept the Final Document and to deepen our understanding of it is to accept the Assembly and to desire that every Missionary, every local community, and every province become rooted in its potential for renewal. As so often occurs with such things, everything depends on its acceptance and the manner in which this document is integrated into our reflection, into our formation and pastoral plans, and into the daily life of the Missionaries.

In this article I want to offer you a commentary on the Final Document. Certainly, the text is most important and while any commentary can be viewed as simply more literature, nonetheless such words are important because they provide us with a context. Some ideas were discussed at length in the assembly hall and are expressed in a word or a short phrase. Perhaps the document is not very original. If, however, we take seriously our international and intercultural realities as well as the urgent need for collaboration and solidarity, then we will begin to understand the important consequences with regard to the renewal of the Congregation.

THE THREE SECTIONS OF THE DOCUMENT

The three parts of the document correspond to a classical method based on “see,” “judge,” and “act” (even though this is not made explicit). The “challenges” (the first section of the document) present the reality in the midst of which we develop our vocation and our life. Thus, there are challenges in the present socio-cultural reality, as well as in the present reality of the Congregation. An important detail: the challenges are not simply statements about our reality or about some problems that influence our lives, rather they are opportunities to grow in our identity and in our fulfillment of the mission. They are true *kairos* that invite us to *give thanks to God* (Final Document, # 2). This is a very positive perspective from which to view reality, because in the analysis of said reality we can also come to an understanding of the factors that encourage us to continue the journey. Vincent engaged in such a process.

Why were these six challenges, and no others, chosen? Why is there no mention of other realities? The Assembly did not want to engage in an exhaustive analysis of the present reality, but selected those factors that were most directly related to the theme that was under discussion.

In the second section of this document (*The Vincentian Charism for the New Evangelization*), four principles of Vincentian spirituality are made explicit: [1] Jesus Christ is the Rule of the Mission, [2] the complementary relationship between action and contemplation, [3] the poor are our brothers and sisters and our lords and masters, and [4] a Vincentian understanding of evangelization. The content of these four principles (which correspond to “judge”) inspired the delegates and enabled them to develop the commitments, which are outlined in the third section of the document.

The *Lines of Action and Commitments* (Final Document, # 3) can be viewed as the “landing strip” of the document. It is perhaps the most important part of the document, which cannot be neglected. Without this part the document would make no sense, but would be simply some theoretical reflection (like so many others that currently exist). Thus, the third section provides the Congregation with a program that is intended to guide it toward the future, *a future of which we dream and which we embrace with hope* (Final Document, # 3). Note that the document speaks of “lines of action” and “commitments.” What is the difference between these two concepts? Each line of action, which is written in bold print in this section, is a global option. The commitments, enunciated under the lines of action, are concrete options, or as the document states, *the lines of action indicate the spirit with which we live out our commitments* (Final Document # 3). The commitments (21 in total) are more specific and easier to evaluate.

A word about the style and the form of the document: even though during the Assembly there was much dialogue about “doing more” and less conversation about “being more,” nevertheless, in the document there is a balance between illuminating principles and concrete proposals. There is also an introduction which provides a context for the document and a conclusion in which everything is placed in the hands of the Blessed Mother, the Church, and our Founders. The document is schematic and the language of the document is balanced and clear. There are no ambiguities. The document states clearly and directly what is intended.

In the following pages, I share some reflections and observations on the content of each of the three sections of the document and I hope that these reflections will be helpful.

CHALLENGES, OR OPPORTUNITIES TO ACTUALIZE OUR VOCATION

The Document begins by presenting us with four challenges that are proper to our era. Many Church documents begin with an analysis of the reality of the ecclesial institutions. The reality that is analyzed should lead us to raise questions about the more effective manner to minister, thus avoiding utilizing methods that are no longer valid. In this regard we are called to *creative fidelity*. The document refers to three challenges that we, who have been entrusted with the mission of evangelization, must confront. Those challenges are more than some statement of the reality or a statement of difficult problems that must be confronted. They are real stimulants that will enable us to be effective and prophetic as we live out our vocation. At the same time, those challenges present us with an opportunity to grow in our Vincentian identity.

With regard to the first challenge in which reference to God and Christian commitment have little or no importance, our response has to be one in which we renew our missionary courage and our fidelity to the purpose of the Congregation, or, as the document states, *an urgent call to missionary conversion and authenticity* (Final Document, # 1.1a). However, the evermore generalized environment of unbelief (which is seen in so many countries) presents us with another opportunity to question our ministerial approaches and pastoral programs. Are we actually touching the lives of those who are alienated and those who have distanced themselves from the Church or are we satisfied with reaching out to those who are already related to the Church in some manner? We should not continue to speak about a “new evangelization” unless we are willing to change our pastoral plans. This concern coincides with Pope Francis’ words when he states: *we cannot passively and calmly wait in our church buildings; we need to move from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, # 15). In another place the Pope states: *Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigor* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, # 109). The Pope refers to all of this as pastoral and *missionary conversion* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, # 25), the same phrase that appears in our Final Document.

The second challenge invites us to become aware of certain counter-values that are present in our globalized culture, values that attempt to make our vocation less significant and invalidate our prophetic call. Among the counter-values that are mentioned we find reference to *a weakening of the capacity for reflection and for commitment, a culture of hedonism and individualism* (Final Document, # 1.1b). It is not easy to become aware of this influence because all of those realities move us in the direction of something that is comfortable, something that is not very demanding, but, nonetheless, something that is devoid of life and meaning.

Individualism, for example, destroys every sense of community and of a common mission. I have seen more than one community work fail because each individual focused on the work as his own and did so in an independent manner, not realizing (or not wanting to understand) that the work of one person had to be coordinated with the work of others. Thus, each one surrenders his self-interest for the sake of a common project. Article three of the document, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*,¹ affirms that cultural influence has been a factor that has facilitated the appearance of such a mentality. The search for personal fulfillment and well-being at the cost of everything else is another manifestation of that same reality. Furthermore, today individualism can be clothed in many other wonderful names, such as, particular charism, cultural peculiarities, personal processes, thus, creating even greater confusion.

In view of this challenge, the document refers to *the civilization of love grounded in the Truth of Christ* (Final Document, # 1.1b). The creation of this civilization of love ought to begin in our own houses. A necessary condition for this to occur is the reinforcement of the theological dimension of community life. Without a solid spiritual foundation, without spiritual and theological motivation, community life begins to break up and individualism, with its thousand faces, becomes present in our midst. This includes hedonism, which is pointed out in the document. The community plan, developed in a serious manner, seeks to harmonize the mission and community life.

¹ The English text of this document can be found at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_20080511_autorita-obbiedienza_en.html

The third challenge refers to the various forms of poverty: *refugees, immigrants, those who are excluded and confined to the peripheries* (Final Document # 1.1c). In the midst of this globalized world, one is able to see evermore clearly the great contrast between growing poverty and misery on the one hand and incredible waste and consumerism on the other, the rich man and the poor man, Lazarus, seated at the same table and perhaps invoking the same God. The response of the Congregation to this situation, previously and presently, can be none other than a clear option on behalf of the less fortunate members of society. Vincent stated: *There isn't a single Company in the Church of God that has for its position persons who are poor, devoting itself totally to the poor ... That is what Missioners profess to do; it's their special characteristic to be, like Jesus Christ, committed to the poor² ... We are priests of the poor. God has chosen us for them. They are our chief duty; all the rest is just secondary.*³

The best way for the Congregation to express its option for the poor would be to have the majority of its members involved in such service on behalf of those men and women who are poor, and ministering on their behalf with a formation that makes them competent. Here I make special reference to formation with regard to the Social Doctrine of the Church. This option also demands physical closeness to the poor, affective and effective service on their behalf, and insertion into their world. We are not bureaucrats who serve the poor, rather we are companions on a common journey, brothers and disciples to those individuals who are our *lords and masters*. Such a conviction, therefore, calls us to be involved in an ongoing process of discernment with regard to our lifestyle.

² 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].

³ Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul: Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*, 3 vol., edited by John E. Rybolt, CM, translated by William Quinn, FSC, notes by Edward R. Udovic, CM and John E. Rybolt, CM, introduction by Stafford Poole, CM, New City Press, New Rochelle, New York, 1993. Volume III, p. 117.

This section on challenges concludes with reference to those challenges that most directly affect the situation of the Congregation: the reduction of our strength in many provinces, which should be seen as a call to ever greater collaboration; the influence of a globalized culture; the challenge to grow in our identity; and the need to become more conscious of the international dimension of the Congregation, as well as an awareness of the various proposals with regard to reconfiguration, which is an invitation to intensify our missionary endeavor (Final Document, # 1.2). Since these themes will reappear in the final section of the document, I will leave my comments on these points for later.

PRINCIPLES OF THE CHARISM, OR OUR IDENTITY IN THE CHURCH

The second section of the Document reminds us of four principles, which are viewed as convictions of Vincent de Paul *that motivate us and set on fire our commitment to the New Evangelization* (Final Document, # 2).

Jesus Christ is the *center ... the rule ... the content ... and the reason* for our life (Final Document, (2.1). Those four words (center, rule, content, and reason) reveal the absolute centrality of Jesus Christ for Vincent and for us. This is so with regard to Vincent because it is impossible to explain his life and his ministry without making reference to the person of Jesus Christ. With regard to ourselves, it becomes clear that if we do not connect with the spiritual experience of Vincent de Paul and the manner in which he related to Jesus Christ, then all our other efforts at renewal will be ineffective. Neither our Assemblies, nor our documents, neither our formation programs, nor our pastoral plans are able to bring about renewal by themselves. All of those realities are valid instruments for renewal, but they suppose an interior renewal.

We live in a somewhat turbulent era of rapid change. Consecrated life is experiencing a crisis and a disorientation that effects the very identity of its members. In the midst of such a situation, it becomes more and more necessary to focus on that which is essential and to find a unifying center that gives meaning to all that we do. Any foundation other than that of Jesus Christ would mean that we are building on sand.

A complementarity between contemplation and action is the second principle mentioned, even though in the document it appears as *spiritual life for the mission* (Final Document, # 2.2.). The gospels are a wonderful synthesis of Jesus' activity and contemplation, of Jesus' active life and his prayer life. Inspired by Matthew 25, Vincent made the poor not only an inescapable commitment, but also "a theological focal point." Vincent, as a mystic, had told us that God is to be found in prayer and in action. According to article 42 of our Constitutions, they are two complementary forms that continually nourish us. Vincent spoke about *leaving God for God* [CCD:X:76] when moving from prayer to some other activity.

Without such mysticism, that is, without encountering God in daily activities, pastoral and missionary activity would become nothing more than some form of activism. Vincentian contemplation provides depth to our ministry and motivates our charitable and missionary activity. Such contemplation preserves us from the trap of some spiritual dichotomy in which we view prayer as a reality that is completely separate and apart from our ministry. Our spirituality is an integral spirituality and is not composed of separate entities, but rather integrates seemingly opposite entities. This basic Vincentian principle is expressed in the document when it states: *the spirituality of the Congregation ... is nourished in prayer, in listening to the Word of God, and in the celebration of the sacraments, is expressed ... in "compassionate and effective charity with the poor"* (Final Document, # 2.2). Today, that form of Vincentian spirituality, that complementarity between contemplation and ministry is a patrimony of the whole Church. Such was stated by the Latin American bishops when they gathered together in Puebla: *through [Jesus'] solidarity with us, he enables us to vivify our activity with love and to transform our effort and our history into a liturgical action* (Puebla, # 213).

The poor, our brothers and sisters and teachers ... reveal Christ to us ... are our own portion and our inheritance and evangelize us (Final Document, # 2.3). This principle with regard to the poor brings together diverse but complementary elements. As can be seen, the poor are a source of our vitality and a constant inspiration for the Congregation because, through an encounter and dialogue with those who are poor and through the various ministries that are exercised on their behalf, a

prophetic and mystical dimension is revealed. The mystical dimension enables people to “know” that Jesus Christ is not distant or far removed from them but is revealed in those who wish to share in their lives and in their concerns. The prophetic dimension is revealed when those who become friends with the poor also defend them and give witness to and promote their dignity.

Here we warn of the danger (a danger that Father Eli Chaves often references), namely, that of viewing the poor as an intellectual or a virtual reality. Here we recognize the importance of entering into a relationship with those who are poor, becoming their friend, viewing them as brothers and sisters, being sensitive and merciful when ministering with them and for them, and participating in their suffering. When this fundamental point of reference is lost, then any work or ministry can be justified. Thus, we see the beginning of a process that can rob our Vincentian vocation of its meaning and that can also lead to a loss of our identity.

The last principle refers to our evangelizing mission. Vincent had a very modern understanding of evangelization: *we can say that coming to evangelize the poor doesn't simply mean to teach them the Mysteries necessary for their salvation, but also to do what was foretold and prefigured by the prophets to make the Gospel effective* (CCD:XII:75). The phrase, *to make the Gospel effective*, implies that we take into consideration the whole person as the object of our evangelization. The Final Document states that the Vincentian charism *joins evangelization and charity, preaching with promotion: dimensions of the same missionary action that seek the salvation of every human person and of the whole human person, in service of the Kingdom* (Final Document, # 2.4). In this regard, Pope Francis has stated: *from the heart of the Gospel we see the profound connection between evangelization and human advancement* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, # 178).

LINES OF ACTION AND COMMITMENTS, OR FORWARD MOVEMENTS

Inspired by the Apostle, Paul: *with regard to what we have attained, continue on the same course* (Philippians 3:16), the last section of this document invites all the Missionaries to make real this Congregational

Plan during the next six years (2016-2022). I offer some brief reflections on each of the lines of action, all of which *express the future of which we dream and which we embrace with hope* (Final Document, # 3).

1. *The Good News of Mercy* (Final Document, # 3.1) – the Assembly has gifted us with this first line of action that is extraordinarily rich and fruitful, that goes beyond the celebration of the Jubilee Year of Mercy and that for Vincentians has a perennial validity because it is grounded on that which is most authentic about our charism. The specific commitments (to live the sacrament of reconciliation, to come up with new forms of repetition of prayer and fraternal correction, to update the ministry of popular missions so that God’s mercy becomes more evident [Final Document, # 3.1]) will lead us, on a personal and on a community level, to an experience of God’s mercy.

We should recall here that mercy cannot be reduced to some sentiment of pity nor can it be viewed simply from the perspective of fulfilling the various works of mercy (which very often do not lead us to the root causes of suffering). Mercy is more radical. It is a basic gospel attitude that enables us to confront human suffering in an understanding manner. It is rooted in the heart and flows into our mouth, our hands, and our feet. Thus, J. Sobrino refers to *the principle of mercy* that provides the Church with an identity and leads her to follow Jesus Christ, who was compassionate toward those excluded from participation in society and toward those who experienced violence. Mercy, as a principle, introduces Christians to a new dynamic that enables them to see reality with the eyes of compassion, that sensitizes them to the suffering and the needs of their brothers and sisters and that enables them to make the suffering of others their own suffering and that, then, impels them to seek transformational activities and solutions.

From this biblical perspective of mercy which is presented to us by the Church and by theologians, we are invited now to understand, to live, and to interpret the heritage that we have received from Vincent de Paul, the witness of God’s tenderness and mercy. Mercy has the ability to touch others in a profound manner; it goes beyond daily routines and beyond doing things in the same way as yesterday (cf., *Evangelii Gaudium*, #33). Those who allow themselves to be caught up in this dynamic of mercy will soon find themselves becoming more inventive and more creative.

2. Internationality and Interculturality — during the Assembly there was much dialogue on both of these themes. From the time of its establishment, the international nature of the Congregation has been one of its primary characteristics. In fact, Vincent viewed the vocation of the Missionaries as a universal vocation. In one of his conferences to the Missionaries, he left no doubt about that reality: *our vocation is to go, not just to one parish ... but all over the world* (CCD:XII:215). Vincent's practice was in harmony with his theory. During his lifetime, the Congregation was found ministering in Poland, Italy, the British Isles, Madagascar, and Algiers. Vincent had intended to send Missionaries to Brazil, Spain, Northern Africa, and Sweden. Today, globalization, the trends of worldwide migration, the ease of communication, as well as an awareness of poverty and the urgent needs of evangelization all make the international nature of our vocation all the more relevant.

If we view this line of action in a serious manner, we will naturally be led to specific commitments. For example, it might be necessary to revise our programs of initial formation in order to provide some assurances that our candidates are willing to go to those places where the poor are found, to those places where there is an urgent need for evangelization (places within the confines of their own province or places outside their province). In the Final Document we find some commitments than might be very useful: *to make the local community the first school of intercultural dialogue; to organize intercultural houses of formation on the interprovincial and intercontinental levels; to offer our students ... concrete experiences of interculturality ... including the learning of languages* (Final Document, # 3.2). Indeed, in order to be faithful to the Final Document and to the voice of the Assembly, we must build solid foundations in order to promote the international and intercultural dimensions of the Congregation throughout the various stages of initial formation. In the future, the international nature of our community will be assured only to the degree that our formation is international.

Another consequence of the call to internationality is to revise and articulate the manner in which this is coordinated between the provincial and the congregational levels. There should be a balance between the autonomy of the provinces and the fact that we are one body. Before the approval of the 1984 Constitutions, the Congregation

was very centralized (the same could be said about the majority of the ecclesial institutions). However, after the approval of the 1984 Constitutions, the Congregation entered into an important process of decentralization. As a result, the provinces grew in their autonomy and today the danger is not centralization (as in the past), but an excessive autonomy which blurs one's awareness of belonging to an international congregation and, therefore, makes it difficult to promote international projects. Provincialism is a great obstacle that prevents the development of our international and intercultural dimensions. The Assembly, sensitive to this theme, understood that the International Missions are an extraordinary impulse and a demand. As such, they guarantee the international perspective of our Congregation (Final Document, # 3.3b).

3. Solidarity — some years ago, John Paul II stated: *solidarity is the new name for charity*. During the Assembly there was much discussion about this theme. In the Common Rules we read: *members of the Congregation ... should understand that ... all our belongings are common property* (Common Rules III:3) ... that is a clear reference to the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Our Constitutions also reflect this same concern for solidarity “ad intra” when it is stated that *provinces and houses should share their temporal goods with each other so that those who have more help those in need* (Constitutions 152, §1). Such assistance is not merely an act of generosity, but is a demand of justice and charity.

What motivates this solidarity within the Congregation? It is not simply the fact that we are filled with hope about our ministries or about belonging to a particular province; rather, we are filled with hope because we are members of a Congregation that rises above all those realities. On more than one occasion Vincent stated that we *should get along as good friends* (Common Rules VIII:2). As dear friends who have good relationships with one another, we must also be concerned for one another. As pointed out in the first two commitments, solidarity should be made manifest by the way that we share our financial and our human resources. Thus, we find the following proposals in the Final Document: *to insure the self-sustainability of the provinces through the sharing of human and fiscal resources on the local, conference, and*

congregational levels; to organize an international missionary center to prepare confreres who will go to the International Missions of the Congregation and of the provinces (Final Document, # 3.3a and 3.3b).

What must be done so that these commitments become a reality? The Assembly asked the Superior General and his Council to study and to put in place a plan that will promote effective solidarity among the provinces. Furthermore, this proposal should concretize financial solidarity in the Congregation. It seems that we must also apply this principle to the relationship among the provinces. We are not dealing with the development of some passing project, which, at a specific moment, might resolve some urgent need and then, in a short time, things return to their original state. This proposition has a profound significance because it attempts to provide the Congregation with a permanent structure of solidarity and hopes to do this in light of a plan that will be developed by the General Council and the Continental Conferences.

The last two commitments in this section refer to solidarity “ad extra” with the poor. Here I wish to comment more specifically on the last commitment: *to use Systemic Change as the methodology in our efforts to evangelize* (Final Document # 3.3d). The Assembly has highlighted a method that is to be utilized in all our efforts at evangelization, a method that, according to John Paul II, enables us to scrutinize and to deal with the root causes of poverty that are present in existent social systems. This systemic-change approach views evangelization and pastoral activity as a process that serves the whole person, body and spirit. This approach also highlights the prophetic dimension of the evangelization process. Not only should this methodology be utilized when dealing with social justice concerns, but also it should become an integral part of all our evangelizing efforts. In other words, all our pastoral activity ought to flow from a sensitivity to the world of those who are poor and ought to give prophetic witness as we defend and promote the rights of those persons excluded from participation in society. This approach is not something that is improvised, but is learned. This reality is expressed clearly in the commitment that states: *to prepare agents of Systemic Change who will live it and promote it, especially among our own, as well as among the laity and the clergy* (Final Document, # 3.5e).

4. Missionary Collaboration (Final Document, # 3.4) — there was a strong and consistent call for collaboration throughout the Assembly and this call was made with regard to collaboration with the Vincentian Family, collaboration among the provinces, and collaboration with the Church in responding to urgent needs. When the extent of our mission in the Church and in the world is fully understood, there will naturally arise a desire to minister with others in order to make our outreach all the more effective. Ministering alone results in discouragement. Thus, collaboration is quite natural to our charism. This has been so since the time of its establishment. In the Introduction to our Constitutions we read: *St. Vincent brought together as many people as he could, rich and poor; humble and powerful, and used every means to inspire in them a sensitivity to the poor ... He moved them to help the poor directly and indirectly* (Constitutions, p. 19). Therefore, the meaning of missionary collaboration can be none other than *to respond better to the calls of the poor* (Final Document, # 3.4).

Specific personal attitudes facilitate and generate the possibility for collaboration; for example, the desire to minister together or a concern for sharing resources. The development of common plans is an excellent means to promote collaboration. Frequently, those and other such attitudes require personal conversion, conversion that is animated by the spirit of our charism. Experience tells us that when such collaboration occurs within the Vincentian Family, it often results in a greater enthusiasm, zeal, and a desire to promote our charism.

There are many examples of collaboration among the provinces and with the various branches of the Vincentian Family. Nevertheless, as pointed out in the Final Document, there is a need to intensify and to strengthen our collaboration. The Year of Vincentian Collaboration has made us more aware of this need, and, therefore, we must continue this process of collaboration. We begin to see the need to develop structures that will facilitate such collaboration. Vincentians are a very large Family within the Church, but if we do not join together in a common objective, the Family will lose its vitality.

5. Formation for the Mission (Final Document, # 3.5) — this has been a recurrent theme in recent Assemblies and this point was mentioned in the Final Document of various Assemblies. This occurred

because we have experienced situations in which our confreres have not been provided with competent formation. At the same time, however, confreres must begin to accept responsibility for their ongoing formation.

Formation has little to do with that which was done 60 years ago, when it seemed as though the principles were clear, sure, and indisputable. The social context of that era was infinitely less complex than that of today. Formation today must confront ever more complex needs and challenges. In light of so many diverse visions of the world and such varied lifestyles, individuals will often encounter difficulties as they attempt to find meaning in the midst of all these different situations. In this context, then, it becomes important that we do not lose sight of the purpose of our initial and ongoing formation; namely, our formation is intended to lead us to a human, spiritual, and missionary maturity. The Final Document states: *Formation is an essential path for the realization of our missionary vocation. It is a space for the discernment and the carrying out of the will of God. It is a permanent motivation to respond to grace* (Final Document, # 3.5).

In the *Ratio Formationis*, the Congregation has concretized the model of formation for our candidates. In light of the *Ratio Formationis*, it would be good to review and to revise, where necessary, the process for our initial and ongoing formation, the competency of our formators, and to adapt our processes to those outlined in the *Ratio*. Our formation should (among other things) further open the Congregation to her international nature, foster the growth of the members in solidarity, and strengthen the bonds of collaboration. In other words, our formation should lead to the promotion of the Lines of Action that were promulgated during the Assembly. Furthermore, initial formation should, by its nature, become more international, more open to intercultural realities (both of which are pointed out in the Final Document). Opening our formation to our international nature could, at one and the same time, also promote missionary and vocational solidarity. What concrete actions are necessary to order for our formation to move in the direction that has been pointed out by the Assembly and by the *Ratio*?

A FINAL WORD

As stated during the Assembly, the Final Document is guided by an underlying principle that is not explicitly stated. Here I refer to the principle of our Vincentian identity. Without this perspective, all the Lines of Action lack meaning. Our Vincentian identity can be summarized with the phrase: *to follow Christ evangelizing the poor* (Constitutions # 1). That phrase should motivate and should give meaning to our whole life. If we do not renew ourselves from the perspective of this core principle, then our process of renewal will be found lacking in that which is essential and our Lines of Action will motivate no one to seek new horizons. Indeed, all our activities should be focused on renewing those elements that provide us with a proper identity within the Church. Only in this way will we be found worthy to celebrate 2017.

Translated: Charles T. Plock, CM