

## Between Memory and Prophecy!

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### Short Introduction:

It is right to thank God, the beginning and the fulfillment of our entire existence and of our personal and community history. The one who does not give thanks for little things will never give thanks for much because gratitude is “the memory of the heart.” In addition, gratitude is a virtue that brings joy, serenity, and laughter into our lives and into the lives of those around us, as well as being a clear sign of our human and spiritual maturity. I am completely convinced that only mature and responsible people know how to say “thank you,” thanks for all, thanks for everything, and always thanks for our being. “Thanks is a hug turned into words,” says an anonymous author. This is because the phrase “thank you” is the best prayer that anyone can say. Thanks expresses extreme gratitude, humility, and understanding. Yes, gratitude is the virtue of a heart that sings God’s mercy. If we fail to say “thank you” in our lives, we will prove to be all the more superficial and coarse, reducing ourselves to useless and fruitless talk. Therefore, we always say thank you in our lives because, after all, it is God who is the Lord and guide of our life and existence.

We all know that our Assemblies, Provincial or General, are an ecclesial event. We meet as a Church and within the presence of the Church. It is an event that belongs to the life of the Church. We know, as Irenaeus says, “Where there is the Church, there is the Holy Spirit.” So, despite and beyond all human limitations and frailties, which we inevitably carry with us, our Assemblies are guided by the Holy Spirit. I would say that they are the *Tempo Forte* of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Congregation of the Mission. If we lose sight of this, human factors and our human frailties can bring us disappointment, frustration, and a misunderstanding of community life. Because, as Patriarch Athenagoras I said, “Without the Holy Spirit, God is far away, Christ remains in the past, the Gospel is a dead word, the Church is a mere

organization, authority is a power, mission is propaganda, worship is a memory, and Christian action is a morality of slaves.”

The action of the Spirit is unpredictable because, “The Spirit blows where it wills” (John 3:8). The Spirit does not use our criteria and parameters and does not begin to add up how often we do it. We experienced it also during this last Assembly. Those who arrived in Chicago with pre-determined human programs and calculations and preconfigured prior prejudices left defeated, disappointed, and frustrated: the Spirit blows where it wills! We Christians know that the Holy Spirit passes through locked doors and renews hope. The Holy Spirit turns the big stone that crushes the just and it revives. Yes, that same Spirit was with us and in us as representatives of the entire Congregation and inspired our actions and decisions in spite of our human limitations, which were invariably present.

Certainly our imperfections and our limitations weigh upon us. They are a burden from which we cannot be freed. Our life is imperfect, our communities are imperfect, and our relationships are filled with problems. Our Congregation is never as we would like. Yet, in our being imperfect there is space for a discovery, for a change, and especially for a common path. Perfect means finished, completed. From that which is finished and completed, nothing is missing. It is closed and stopped. Perfection ignores any possibility of change. Rather, imperfection gives the opportunity to dream, to be curious about the world because it is imperfect, and, above all, it gives a forward movement to history. Saint Thomas Aquinas said that we know and love imperfectly! That is true. However, imperfection feeds the desire and opens us to the wonder of the incomplete miracle that we are, our provinces and our local communities. “There is a fissure in everything, and that is where the light comes in,” says Leonard Cohen, a Canadian songwriter. Our General Assemblies are trying to seize this light that comes from our fissures and with this light illuminate our future by offering lines of action and operational plans capable of prophetically guiding the story of the Congregation of the Mission in the next six years.

**a) FIRST WEEK: REMEMBERING THE CHARISM AND LIVING IT!**

During the first week, this Assembly sought to answer the following questions: Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we

headed? What is our true identity today in the Church and society? The answers to these questions are spread throughout the Final Document of the Assembly. The Assembly attempted to assess its life, works, and convictions in order to identify strengths and weaknesses. In the end, continuing the theme of the previous Assembly (July 2010), it ended up renewing itself faithfully to God, to the charism, to today's times, to solidarity with the poor, and to everything between this. In doing this, I want to emphasize that the general climate of this Assembly was peaceful and quiet.

The Vincentian Family is now on the threshold of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of its charism. The memory of living our charism, however, is not a narrative of the events that occurred as far back as 1617, but rather it is our recognition of those fundamental and foundational experiences of our true identity in the Church, as it was at that time and so it is today. Yes, like a blossoming flower in the Church, this is precisely our charism; it is still alive and fruitful. We are the fruit of the flower that blossomed in 1617. So far, it is not a memory of the past, but it is a celebration of gratitude in the present because, in us and with us, that charism is still alive; the initial flame has defied time and, after four centuries, the oil of the flame lit in 1617 is not exhausted, indeed, it is still burning. How can we not thank the Lord for all this? God willed that through us, members of the Vincentian Family, that charism put into the hands of Vincent was not a passing moment but is still alive and life-giving.

Our Assemblies have a big responsibility: to be a bridge in history. The main task and the ultimate responsibility of any General Assembly, the supreme authority of the Congregation of the Mission, is not only to elect the Superior General, but also to guard attentively the charism (perhaps purifying it with a common discernment) and faithfully transmit it to succeeding generations. This is the historical responsibility of each General Assembly of the Congregation. The General Assembly is called to make a transitional "bridge" in the history of the Family. It is called to acquire a new self-awareness that helps to live its own identity in the Church today in service to the poorest with renewed fidelity. Therefore, the objectives of our Assemblies always come from far beyond the forces and resources of our Congregation, but we have our eyes fixed on the future.

One must always keep his eyes fixed on the future because, unfortunately, we humans have a big drawback: we have a short memory. We easily forget many things. The Bible, which knows this limitation, reminds us, “Take care and be earnestly on your guard not to forget the things which your own eyes have seen, nor let them slip from your memory as long as you live, but teach them to your children and to your children’s children” (Deuteronomy 4:9). If the Congregation of the Mission has defied the times, across four centuries, it is because it has not forgotten the tenderness, the all-forgiving love, and the mercy of God. That is why this light lit in the Church four centuries ago has not yet burned out. The role of our Assemblies in faithfully transmitting our charism is decisive.

The first week of our Assembly was dedicated to the memory of its own charism as understood in the biblical and theological sense. To “remember” is not a historical recalling as if we live in the past nostalgically. It is in the biblical and theological sense: “If my father was still in Egypt, I would still be a slave ... I would be deprived of freedom and dignity. God has just released me and made me go from slavery to freedom; from a foreign land to that land flowing with milk and honey...” (Gamaliel, explaining the celebration of the Passover). Precisely, our Assembly also remembers its charism and says, with grateful appreciation, this celebration is not a remembrance of the events that took place back in 1617, but we are that experience because the flame of that experience is still alive in the ministries of the Vincentian Family. The Assembly said it in different ways and at different stages.

The 42<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly, to ensure continuity and the legacy of the 41<sup>st</sup> Assembly held in Paris in July 2010, asked on several occasions about the creative fidelity of the Congregation of the Mission and the five lines of action outlined by that Assembly in implementing this creative fidelity. Regarding this memory of creative fidelity in the Congregation of the Mission, some provinces shared with the rest of the Assembly their experiences. Above all, there was the much anticipated report of the outgoing Superior General which, in principle, was to present a global view of the health and the success of, or contrarily, the lack of success regarding the Assembly of 2010. The Assembly,

based on these experiences, had to assess the progress made by the Congregation of the Mission in the Church and in society over the last six years. Unfortunately, the first week, in addition to recalling the history of the charism, faced many other practical and bureaucratic things, which were absolutely inevitable, but that stole so much time, sometimes compromising the noble task and duty of developing the theme chosen for the Assembly.

The status quo of the Congregation of the Mission presented by the outgoing Superior General to the Assembly focused on two themes only: solidarity and the international missions. This choice of themes unduly neglected the overview or the general framework of the real experiences of the Congregation of the Mission. Effectively, he said little or nothing about its challenges, opportunities to be promoted, the continuing creative ventures, and did not even propose a way to make our charism alive and vivifying! In my view, this omission forgot one very important thing: our General Assemblies are Assemblies of all our provinces and vice-provinces to take stock of their current situation, share the experience of their common charism and witness given in their church and society, to assess together the health and debilities of their provinces and local communities, their creativity or suffering, and the fidelity to or betrayal of their ministry. All this could not and should not be set aside, because the life of our provinces, as important and urgent, cannot be reduced to the possible solidarity among our provinces and international missions. It must evaluate not their quantity, but their quality, and the legacy they are leaving behind.

In summary, maybe due to the new methodology that was not imparted and followed well, the first week did not have a good connection with the main theme of the Assembly of 2010. It fell short of clear direction from the competent authorities on our challenges and opportunities today and could not polish off the charism in order to relaunch it again. This lack of focus on the principal theme of the meeting itself, and having a variety of topics not easily reconcilable, obfuscated the possibility and the ability of this Assembly to remember our charism so it could renew its historical fidelity. This will be the task of the redacting committee, which I think saved the meeting by filling in the gaps.

**b) SECOND WEEK: OUR “TODAY” AS HISTORICAL AND RESPONSIBLE!**

“Who do we want to be today?” This Assembly, like the previous ones, had to answer this fundamental question. In the diversified context of the world, how do we want to live and express our charism? What are the ministries that shine as lights in the world as the Congregation of the Mission and its identity in the Church? Not only that, “who of us” can help the Congregation to be what it was called to be in the Church? This last question is closely linked to the previous questions. Therefore, the second week was a week of true and proper discernment, during which we looked to each other. Why? Because we had to discern which of us can, with his life and his testimony, “...inspire the members of the Congregation of the Mission to dream more, learn more, do more, transform more,” and at the same time, “...be a credible sign of unity of the international Congregation of the Mission.” In leadership, that which matters most is the ability to translate the vision of the Assembly into reality. Any General Assembly is looking for leaders who, on the one hand, must be “practical and realistic” and on the other “must speak a language of the visionaries and idealists.” To do this, superiors should be artists because to be superiors “...is the art of the art” (Saint Vincent). An important grounding in this art is to have one’s sight fixed on the image of the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-21). Not only as artists, superiors should be able to see the invisible and be attentively vigilant. In all this, the fundamental quality that is asked of superiors is the “virtue of prudence” and that it will be accompanied by wisdom, sowing hope in a world which “...sows the wind, reaps the whirlwind,” as the prophet Hosea says (Hosea 8:7).

Under the rubrics of the second week, there was a fundamental question: “Who of us can help the Congregation better and more today?” To answer this question, the General Assembly went to its knees to pray, had common and private discernment, and discussed this question at various levels in linguistic and continental groups. Why? It was certainly not done to campaign for someone and elective politics, which does not help anyone, but rather to discern the will of God for our Congregation. To discern the will of God, it is obvious that the Assembly needed to kneel and pray, because no one could

project it on the main screen of the Assembly hall nor find it written on beautiful slides on display during the sessions. The will of God often comes through an experience of the cross. And the cross, by its nature, is painful and disappointing. Our superiors are the fruit of days of prayer and discernment done at various levels. But all of this is just in preparation for the Holy Spirit to act in us, with us, and for us. The final product, that is, the final choice, is not of the Assembly, but rather of the Holy Spirit. It is He who chooses, and not the Assembly. What the Holy Spirit does is always the best. Faced with the active presence of the Holy Spirit, human calculations, intrigues, and purely human parameters have no substance and are passed over and set aside. In this sense, the will of God is to be seen not in the process, but in the end product, the final choice of the people. The process to discern the will of God, humanly speaking, can be done badly and can leave some dissatisfaction, because there may be people who try to rob our future. Thankfully, however, all this did not happen. Certainly we are children of our time, of our society, and with the dominant mindset of our century. But Paul warns us, saying, “Do not conform yourself to this age” (Romans 12:2). To conform to the mentality of this century is always a risk that remains on our horizon and is a constant challenge for all.

In summary, the principal work which was the major concern of the first week was to answer the following questions: Who are we? From where are we coming? Where are we headed? Are all of us walking in the same direction? Instead, the second week focused on the question: Who can accompany us on this journey, which is not easy? I believe that the Assembly, inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit, has given the appropriate answers.

### **c) THIRD WEEK: LIVING PROPHETIC HOPE!**

One of the main tasks of an Assembly is to shake the consciences of its members and say, “Awake, O sleeper!” (Ephesians 5:14). This is done in different ways. As the ultimate authority of the Congregation of the Mission, the General Assembly has the duty and responsibility to highlight and to prophetically call its members towards a future full of hope. If the prophetic dimension is missing in our Assemblies, our mission can be reduced to “surviving.” But we are called to project

and promote our charism and prosper. To thrive we need passion, compassion, humor, and a way of life. Without passion and compassion, the oxygen of the soul in love with Christ and the poor, our mission cannot be accomplished and promoted. I also believe this Assembly is able to energetically transmit and promote the proper charism. “A burning passion combined with complete detachment is the key to all success” (M. Gandhi).

Our “tomorrow” is the favorite son of our “today” as today is the heir of yesterday. Let us remember, along with Lord Byron, that, “The best prophet of the future is the past.” What we are today, that is, our lives, our testimonies, our aspirations and intuitions, and our convictions, either positively or negatively, affect our future. With this in mind, we must carefully discern the present century, our “historic now,” with attention and care. If attention is not paid to the lifestyle we live and to the witness given, to our work and collaboration in ministry, and to the quality of our local communities, precisely in our “historic now” in its broadest sense, we cannot open the horizons of our future. We cannot force the dawning of our future. If we want to prophetically launch our charism, we must pay attention to what we are sowing today because, as rightly said by the prophet Hosea, “When they sow the wind, they shall reap the whirlwind” (Hosea 8:7). Therefore, the future of the Congregation of the Mission, in large part, depends on our ability to read the signs of our times and judge them with the heart of God.

The prophets, men of God, more than proclaiming the misfortunes of an unknown future, are the spokespersons and interpreters of the will of Yahweh for their people. As God’s spokesman, God wants the conversion of the hearts of His people. The prophets do not stop shouting and throwing stones against those who resist this conversion of life and heart. They try to influence the way we live, our actions, and the moral behavior of their people. The call and the mission of the prophets was not to gossip, but rather was a call to conversion, to right moral behavior, and to wisdom before God and the community of the elect. For this, true prophets throughout time are men and women of low prestige! They suffer the consequences of their prophecies. Their life, love, and passion get dirty. Most often, they face much hostility and are mistreated. Not only that, they are suffering because of the

mission entrusted to them. Yet, their efforts may fail, their vision may be temporarily blurred, and sometimes they may even lack oxygen to breathe, but their mission goes beyond their well-sealed tombs and, in defiance of hard and closed hearts, in the end divine justice triumphs and they are treated fairly for what they have suffered. As usual, a person is only able to dig up the graves, but God opens them, overturning once and for all the great stones that seal the tombs of the righteous. This is the story of the Resurrection.

The work of the prophet is fulfilled in word and deed, like two sides of the same coin. The essential elements of the prophetic announcement are: the absolute priority of having God in life, the affirmation of individual and social justice, the purification of worship, the consolation of the people afflicted with various things, and the announcement of universal redemption. To the prophets the question of justice is fundamental. Justice is the balance scale of the Spirit of God and not the courts.

We know that the mission of the prophet is difficult since it presumes to be the reference point of the life of faith and morals of his own people, a word heard in silence, whispered in the ears of faith. Often, for this reason, the prophet suffers from loneliness and is persecuted. The divine voice heard in silence is a gospel, that is, the Good News, which goes through the tribulation, suffering, denial, betrayal, and scandal of the suffering servant.

This year, the Congregation of the Mission wants to renew its vocation and prophetic mission. In fact, the Final Document of this Assembly, a succinct document, after a brief analysis of the challenges reaffirms its willingness to begin again with Christ: the Rule of the Mission! Its prophetic realism, like 400 years ago, begins with Christ. He is the center, the North Star, and the key to all the happenings and events of our lives and our ministry. Yes, it is He who rules our lives and it is He who gives sense and meaning to our mission. In Him alone we see, love, and serve the poor. At the heart of our mission and our spirituality, there is a real and concrete Christocentrism: Jesus in the poor and the poor in Jesus should be loved, revered, and served. This is the heart of all. The rest is the story of our lines of action that we want to put into action as far as we can!

## **Conclusion**

I conclude by quoting Søren Kierkegaard on the strength and the victory of love: “What makes a great man, admired by creation, pleasing in God’s eyes? What makes a man strong, stronger than the whole world? What is it that makes him weak, weaker than a child? What makes a man steady, steadier than the rock? What makes him soft, softer than wax?” The Danish philosophical existentialist asks this and responds: It is LOVE. If the charism given to Vincent DePaul has come down to us, enduring four centuries, it was because Saint Vincent knew how to love. In his spiritual testament, in the person of Jeanne, the small and latest addition to the Daughters of Charity, imaginatively quoted in the conclusion of the film *Monsieur Vincent*, said, “Jeanne, you’ll soon see that charity is a heavy burden ... it is not enough to give broth and bread.” To Jeanne, as to all of us, he asked her to serve the poor with “gentleness and kindness” because they are our “...demanding and susceptible patrons.” In short, Saint Vincent gives valuable advice on how the poor should be served: it is not in doing much for the poor, the question is, “how much love we put into doing that which we do.” Yesterday as today, this should distinguish us from others. The Congregation of the Mission, like the other branches of our Family, poor, humble, and fragile as it is, has tried laboriously to preserve this precious gift and, thanks to God, it is still alive in the Church. It is up to us to continue this. It is up to us to make it even more alive and life-giving. It is up to us to make it visible and tangible.

At the same time, however, we recognize that, “We hold this treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Corinthians 4:7), which is all of us. Yet God does not stop loving us, He never ceases to renew His trust. This is the Year of Mercy. Entrusting ourselves to His divine mercy, if we learn from Saint Vincent that it is not doing much that matters, but rather putting much love into what we do, then we could be credible prophets and, at the threshold of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of our charism, we will be a good historical bridge to it.