

MY HOPES FOR THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION OVER THE NEXT SIX YEARS

A number of years ago, as I began my first mandate as Superior General, I expressed my hopes for the Congregation in the years ahead. Thanks be to God, with the generous cooperation of members of our family throughout the world, a number of those hopes have become a reality.

Today, in my first year of a new mandate as Superior General, I offer you my hopes for the next six years. I want to do this humbly, since only God knows the future and, as it unfolds, God often reveals to us unexpected things. When I spoke six years ago, for example, I hardly mentioned the Vincentian Family, but it now holds a very important place in our consciousness. But while recognizing how limited our human vision is, I also express my hopes today with confidence because I believe that God walks with us and because I trust that with your help and that of other members of our Vincentian Family we can make many of our dreams a reality.

Of course, I am eager for us to continue the projects we have begun over the last six years: our new international missions, CIF, new forms of communal prayer, the use of new means of communication, and so on. I have already spoken about these many times. The hopes that I express today flow largely from the General Assembly of 1998 and from some initial reflection on that Assembly.

1. *I hope that we can, together with the members of our worldwide Vincentian Family, become a united force, an army (so to speak), in the evangelization and integral human promotion of the poor.*

During the General Assembly the members of our family presented us with 20 recommendations. I will not repeat them all here. Let me mention the four loudest calls that I heard in these recommendations.

1. I heard a call for coordination on local, regional, national, and international levels. Different words are used to describe the coordinating structure. Sometimes it is called a team, sometimes a committee, sometimes a secretariat. But there is a clear call to create coordinating instruments for channeling our common energies. Internationally, the heads of many of the principal branches of our family have been meeting regularly for the last four years. I hope that such regular meetings will now be organized on the national, regional, and local levels.

2. I heard a repeated call for mutual help in formation. The members of our family want to deepen their spirituality. They want to understand St. Vincent better and his vision of Christ and of the world. They judge that this is one of our family's greatest needs and they recognize that we can help each other in satisfying that need. Recently I asked a confrere and a married lay woman to collaborate on a book about Vincentian spirituality in the lives of lay men and women. Members of various branches of the family

will join with the authors in a retreat to offer them suggestions for concretizing this spirituality.

3. I heard a call for greater communication within the family, through sharing publications that already exist, through creating new ones perhaps, through the use of media like the Internet. I will return to this theme later when I speak about Internet.

4. I heard a loud call, even a cry, for collaborative projects in various parts of the world, to attack the needs of the poor. Last year we published in *Vincentiana* six collaborative projects being realized on various continents. I hope that in every country where our family lives such collaborative projects, with the participation of all the branches, will soon be realized.

I hope that we can respond to these four calls.

2. *I hope that we can enrich our formation programs throughout the Congregation of the Mission on all levels.*

The General Assembly addressed this question very directly and made commitments:

- a. to the initial and ongoing formation of our own members,
- b. to the formation of our own formators,
- c. to the formation of the wider Vincentian Family.

I have many hopes in this regard. Let me just mention three.

1. I hope that we can assist our own formators to be masters and guides in the spiritual journey. It is most important that our formators be rooted experientially in the mystery of God's love so that they can help our candidates to share profoundly in that same mystery. The mission of the Congregation is, after all, to announce this mystery joyfully. The good news is that God is alive, that he lives within us, that he works among us, and that he has a special love for the poor. Our formators play a crucial role in helping all of us to become immersed in this mystery. My hope is that the Congregation can assist them to plunge more and more into its depths.

2. I hope we can establish regional centers for the Vincentian formation of our formators. I want to encourage all of the Visitors' conferences (CLAPVI, ASPAC, COVIAM, the European Visitors, the USA Visitors) to organize such regional centers, where our formators might be able to come together, for example, once a year for several weeks for study, for sharing of experiences and concerns as formators, for an experience of community living and prayer together.

3. I hope that we might be able to assist other branches of our Vincentian Family in developing better formation programs. As I mentioned earlier, I hear this call for help repeatedly. Our lay branches (especially AIC, the youth

groups, and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul) continually encourage us to offer such assistance. This often demands hard work, creativity, and the preparation of attractive materials, even books, that will assist others in their formation. The challenge too is to disseminate these materials broadly so that they reach those at the base. There are millions of lay members in our family. How can such formation materials reach them all. That is the key challenge. My hope is that we meet it.

3. *I hope that the "newer provinces" – those of Africa, the Asian-Pacific region and Latin America – might continue to grow in inculturating the Vincentian charism, and that the "older" provinces – those of Western Europe and North America in particular – might generate new life as smaller, more focused, and more flexible bodies.*

The Congregation is growing rapidly in Africa, in the Asian-Pacific region, and in many countries of Latin America and is diminishing in numbers in the United States and Western Europe. I hope for the full inculturation of the Vincentian charism in the "new provinces" and a revitalization of the charism in the "older provinces."

The leitmotif of holiness was striking during the Synod for Africa, the Synod on Consecrated Life, the Synod for Asia, and the Synod for the Americas. The message of the African Synod states that holiness is the aim and true fruit of inculturation. Holiness involves authenticity, integrity, coherence between what we say and how we live, especially in regard to the vowed life. In other words, when we preach solidarity with the poor, we must also live in solidarity with the poor. When we exhort others to a simple life style, we must live simply ourselves. When we speak of obedience, we ourselves must be quick to listen, quick to obey the signs of God's will. When we say that we are celibate, we must live celibacy genuinely. Our love for God and for his people must be profound and also fruitful; it must be evident that we have many sons and daughters whose life in God we seek to nurture daily.

Authenticity, integrity, coherence (or what St. Vincent called "simplicity") must be the sign of Vincentian holiness wherever the Congregation is truly inculturated.

Here in Europe there are very promising signs of growth in the East, with expansion into the former Soviet Union. In Western Europe and the United States, however, the number of vocations has diminished very significantly and the median age of the confreres has risen dramatically. I admire the efforts made in these provinces to reevaluate their apostolic works, to create new forms of community living, and to revitalize our common prayer. I want to encourage the Visitors and all the members of these provinces in a difficult task. I say to each member of these provinces today: do not lose heart. I am deeply confident that the Lord is with us, that he loves the poor, and that the charism of Vincent de Paul is immensely attractive as a way of reaching out to the poor. I urge you to be creative in engaging others in the practical, effective charity for which our founder is so noted. Engage them at the same time in St. Vincent's deeply evangelical spirituality. Help them to see Christ the evangelizer and servant of the poor as the center of their lives.

4. *I hope that we can make our Vincentian voice heard clearly before international organisms like the United Nations and the European Community.*

We have much to learn from the AIC in this regard. The work done at their center in Brussels can be a model for us.

As you know, in December 1998 we were officially recognized as a Non-Governmental Organization which has the right to participate in various committees at the United Nations. This new form of service to the poor is about to begin. I am eager that we make our Vincentian voice heard at the UN on important social issues like poverty, hunger, education, health care, and human rights.

5. *I hope that we might develop a creative "ratio missionum" that will be of service in the missions ad gentes sponsored by the provinces and in the new international missions under the care of the Superior General.*

This was one of the specific commitments made by the recent General Assembly.

More concretely, what I would hope for is an overall mission plan, drawn up by experienced confreres, that will offer guidelines for broad-scale evangelization within a mission and at the same time for integral human promotion. The unity between evangelization and human promotion, so important to St. Vincent, has become a keystone in the social teaching to the Church today.

To implement this, we recently named a commission to begin drafting the *Ratio*. Its members are: Victor Bieler, Antonius Sad Budianto, Jorge Homero Elías, Dominique Iyolo Iyombe, Hugh O'Donnell, Ángel Santamaría. The committee met in early January and has now sent out a questionnaire seeking input from all confreres.

6. *I hope that we might use modern means of communication creatively in the service of the poor and in channeling our energies on issues of justice and peace.*

The General Assembly of 1998 committed us to establishing a worldwide communication network, in cooperation with the wider Vincentian Family, and to use it not only for fostering our own formation and the dissemination of information within the Family itself, but also to find ways of making this tool immediately accessible to the poor.

At our meeting of the heads of some of the principle branches of our family held in Rome on January 14-16, 1999, we decided to open such a family page. We hope that it will start up by the beginning of April this year. The beginnings will be modest since much work needs to be done within each of the branches of the family and also in all of our own provinces. Recently I wrote to all of our Visitors asking for a list of all the web sites within the Congregation of the Mission and for the names of any confreres in their provinces who would be interested in collaborating in the development of our family page. Collaborators can work on this project several hours a week right in their own houses, without needing to move.

I hope that this page can be a conversation place where we can inform one another on issues of justice and peace and unite our energies toward concrete goals.

7. *I hope that MISEVI will spread to other countries.*

Our General Assembly asked that we work together, *as a family*, in the missions *ad gentes*. I am happy to say that when the Province of Colombia offered to open a new mission in Rwanda, it said that it would be a mission *of the family*.

Recently, after two years of consultation, I submitted MISEVI's International Statute to the Holy See for approval. This new member of our family has as its goal the sending of lay men and women to the missions *ad gentes*. MISEVI provides for their formation, their apostolic placement, their community setting, their economic sustenance, their human and spiritual support system, and their eventual reentry into their homeland.

I hope that this Association, which exists now mainly in Spain, will soon spread to other countries.

8. *I hope that we can encourage young people to join our already-existing Vincentian lay groups (like the Vincentian Marian Youth groups, AIC and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul) and that we can also form other Vincentian groups in the service of the poor.*

Recently the General Council completed a study, on which all of us enjoyed working, since we found it interesting. The study is entitled "On Associating Groups and Persons with the Congregation of the Mission." It has now be sent to the Visitors and will soon be published in three languages in *Vincentiana*.

This study, in its conclusions, offers many concrete suggestions about groups and persons who might be linked with the Vincentian Family, like teachers, doctors, nurses, students in our schools, etc. I would hope that we can foster Vincentian associations that will offer such persons a share in our spirituality, our prayer, our bonds of friendship, and our apostolic mission.

9. *I would hope that we can increase the funds that we are building up for our missions and for formation.*

Here let me begin by thanking the Visitors and the individuals who have been marvelously generous in contributing to the International Mission Fund: 2000, which we began in 1995 and which is steadily growing. Next year we will begin to use the interest from that fund for the poor and for the formation of those who will serve them.

When St. Vincent established works, he always tried to provide an economic base that would guarantee their future. The purpose of IMF: 2000 is precisely to establish such a base. I will continue to appeal to the Visitors and to the confreres to

help this fund increase, since the Congregation is growing fastest precisely in those places where its economic resources are most meager.

10. *I hope that we can become a family that prays mightily and beautifully.*

Do people say of us: "Those Vincentians really know how to pray!"? People surely know our family for its works. The name Vincent de Paul is synonymous with works of charity. Many bishops also spontaneously think of the Congregation of the Mission when the topic of formation is on the table. But do people see us as a group that is deeply committed to prayer? Do the young people who come among us feel attracted by experiencing how we pray?

St. Vincent himself was a wonderful pray-er. His contemporaries readily recognized him a contemplative in action. He put great emphasis on mental prayer but he also asked us to attune ourselves to the rhythm of the Church's liturgical life and to celebrate it beautifully.

My hope is that we can support one another in meditating daily and fruitfully and that our common liturgical prayer will, as I have often stated, be "something beautiful for God" and attractive to the young. I am about to write to the entire Congregation in this regard.

Jürgen Moltmann wrote recently:

The mystics _ especially the women mystics _ have repeatedly described the closeness of God as ... flowing waves of energy. Surrounded, flooded and interpenetrated by divine streams of energy, body and soul awaken like flowers in the spring and become fruitful _ that is, they themselves become life that gives life ... People touched by the Spirit will pass on the energies of the life that gives life, and apparently not only from soul to soul, but through their bodies too. The bodily zones that radiate energy are the glowing face, the shining eyes, the speaking mouth, the play of features and the gestures which show affection and commitment. It is these which supply and charge the metaphors for the life-giving, stimulating and electrifying closeness of God in the Spirit.¹

I hope that our family will radiate God's life. Within our family we are surrounded, as the author of Hebrews puts it, "by a great cloud of witnesses."² They radiate energy: Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, Catherine Labouré, Elizabeth Ann Seton, Frederick Ozanam, Rosalie Rendu, Justin de Jacobis, John Gabriel Perboyre, and countless others. I hope that many of us will be like them, filled with God's life, filled with love of the poor, radiant witnesses from whom God's energy flows.

Robert P. Maloney

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Life of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 275-276.

² Heb 12:1.