

Meeting of the Visitors
Animation of the Local Communities
All Hallows College – Dublin
(4-16 June 2001)

by Christian Sens, C.M.
Visitor of Toulouse

On 3 June, the feast of Pentecost, we were awaited at All Hallows College for the meeting of the Visitors scheduled to begin the following day. The fraternal and happy atmosphere was to remain with us all during our two weeks here.

I invite you now to follow me through this journal that I agreed to write, to understand a little of what we did. I am going to simply list the conferences, which have been presented in this number of *Vincentiana*.

Monday 4

Kevin Rafferty welcomed us, and **Corpus Delgado**, a member of the planning committee, and moderator, explained the purpose of the meeting, which was to make visible the fraternal communion of the C.M. The first week would be centered on local communities and on the role of the Visitor in animating them.

The **Superior General** suggested a goal: “*the construction of a healthy ecosystem for the community*” and we then listened to a summary of the responses of the Visitors to the questionnaire sent out by the planning committee. During the group sessions to follow, the Visitors were asked to point out the positive aspects as well as the difficulties that they see in the life of the local communities.

Fr. Maloney presided at the closing Eucharist of this first day. We ate supper at 6:00, as we did each day. The long evenings allowed for meetings, discussions, walks in the city of Dublin, and possibly visits to pubs!

Tuesday 5 – Wednesday 6

We heard reports of the group work accomplished the previous day. The positive aspects in the life of local communities are the community plan, fraternal relations among the confreres, a real interest in community life, especially among the youngest confreres, and a simple lifestyle. The difficulties that were reported are individualism and activism, generational differences, and differences in

languages and cultures, as well as the difficulty of finding superiors who favor creativity.

We welcomed an expert from the USA, **Brother Loughlan Sofield**, who would stay with us for two days. By small steps, he led us through the maze of community life, the steps to take in building community, the problems and the ways of facing them. He specified that community is first the lived experience that is the source of beliefs and convictions about what community is or ought to be. These beliefs arouse in each person emotions and feelings that in turn generate ways of living. The goal of community living is the mission of evangelizing the poor. A balance therefore has to be found between community life and mission, while not forgetting that the community is an integrating part of the mission. Of course, new forms of community living have to be found, instead of just thinking in former patterns. Community life is built up day by day and demands confidence, brotherhood, faith sharing, evaluation, support and an orientation toward the mission, acceptance of differences, the capacity for dialogue, and recognition of the gifts of each person. No community is free of conflicts, but it is a sign of a mature community that it can confront these. What characterizes this is not the absence of conflicts but the presence of pardon. It can happen that fatigue, even exhaustion, wear us out, and our community life then becomes really difficult. Is this because of an overload of work, or rather because our expectations are disappointed?

Thursday 7

We went on pilgrimage to *Glendalough*, center of Celtic spirituality. St. Kevin founded a monastery here in the sixth century. The missionary who guided us invited us to undertake an interior pilgrimage, the pilgrimage of life. The Eucharist was celebrated in a ruined church, in the open air. There was no altar, but three Visitors held, with great dignity, the chalices and the paten in their hands. Several times, the missionary reminded us that only silence will let us accomplish an interior pilgrimage ... but we had so many things to share!

Friday 8

Two conferences followed by group work took up the morning. **Ignacio Fernández de Mendoza** reminded us of the “*the theological dimension of the Vincentian community*,” and **José Antonio Ubillús** offered us “*the Vincentian community plan*.”

The afternoon was set aside for the theme of the Visitor as an animator of local communities. During a panel discussion, four Visitors shared their thoughts.

- **Franz Kangler** is the Visitor of the Province of Austria. Tensions arose and some confreres had a hard time accepting his residence in Istanbul instead of in Austria. His first concern was to calm things down, and to renew the bonds among the confreres by proposing spiritual meetings twice a year, as well as times of common relaxation. At the end of two years, the climate changed, and relationships became more confident and open. The current perspective is to develop the meaning of a common membership between the Austrian confreres and the Polish confreres who work in Austria.

- **Eli Chavez**, of the Province of Rio, pointed out the challenges to community life: differences in works, geographical dispersion of local communities, differences of outlook, and a tendency to individualism in the post-modern world. The province is growing older and the number of confreres is diminishing. It is now at work at giving itself new life: a provincial action plan which would serve as a reference point for local community plans, a revision of works, more Vincentian works in the service of the poor, a new orientation for the administration of our funds to better serve the poor, a proposal for our formation programs, and better care of aged and sick confreres.

- **Urban Osuji**, the Vice-Visitor of Nigeria, regularly visits his local communities. These visits reinforce good relations among the confreres and let the Visitor see the confreres, talk over the problems of the local communities with them, and involve them in making needed decisions. He is also careful to observe how the community prays. Many meetings have been proposed. The superiors meet four times a year; the formators, each month. Each local community sets aside at least one evening a week to relax together. Faith sharing is successful especially for the students, who are more at ease with this than are the priests.

- **Bernard Quinn** spoke with us about the canonical visitations of the Province of the West of the United States. They are very effective in animating local communities, and the confreres appreciate them. A member of his council goes with him and this allows a more objective view of the local community. Those confreres who wish can meet the Visitor in private. The program for the visit is based on what the confreres actually experience and on the problems that they want to discuss. The canonical visitation is also a time to see the places where the confreres work and to meet with those who exercise pastoral responsibility there.

After the evening meal, two experiences of prayer in common were proposed to us. We could choose between *lectio divina* presented by **Paul Roche** and evaluation of our lives, presented by **A. Sad Budianto**.

Saturday 9

Jorge Pedroza presided at the common Eucharist.

Two conferences and group sessions were the work for the morning. **Santiago Azcárate** talked to us about “*The Vincentian community, a community for the mission*” and **Józef Kapuściak** “*The local Vincentian superior.*”

In the first afternoon session, the reports from the groups were presented, and they dealt with four themes:

- *Community life*: many provinces today have small local communities. Should they be modeled on the large local communities of the past? The **Superior General** might present some reflections and directions on the community of apostolic life in the Congregation.

- *The Practical Guide for the Superior*: without neglecting the juridical part, there should be more criteria to help guide the spiritual and missionary orientation for which everyone is looking. This “guide” should take into account the variety of local communities, or at least it should be able to be adapted for the conditions of each province.

- *Formation*: Young people should be initiated into the values of community life. Provincial, or interprovincial, meetings should be seen as times for formation. The various meetings of confreres should allow a deepening of the communitarian dimension. Experiences of community life could be shared in *Vincentiana*. The wish of the Superior General for the animation of local communities through his letters and reflections based on the lived realities of local communities was also mentioned.

- *The community plan*: this is a vital instrument for community life. When local communities draw it up, they should take into account the provincial plan. A periodic evaluation is necessary so that the community plan not become a dead letter. Perhaps it would be good if there were in each province some confreres trained to help the communities in drawing up their local plan. Some plans could serve as models to be published in *Vincentiana*.

As on the previous evening, two experiences of community prayer were offered us at the end of the day: a Christian reading of reality, with **Simão Valenga** and a meditation that promotes fraternal life, with **Giancarlo Passerini**.

Monday 11

Sunday, the Lord’s Day, was a free day, set aside for rest and relaxation of everyone, including this chronicler.

Józef Łucyszyn opened the week by presiding at the common celebration of the Eucharist.

The moderator explained to us the direction of this second week: the international dimension of the C.M. and collaboration among provinces. We began this theme by having a panel on the international missions.

- **Hugh O'Donnell** presented some information about the *Ratio Missionum* that the General Assembly of 1998 asked the Superior General to draw up. The document has not yet been finished. It tries to be faithful to the spirit of the C.M., namely a disposition to go to the ends of the earth for the salvation of souls and the good of the neighbor (St. Vincent). The Constitutions emphasize the mission "ad gentes." The General Assembly of 1992 asked for a mission in Albania to be opened, and the final document ended with these words: "... to the ends of the earth, even to China." After that assembly, more than 50 confreres have responded to the calls of the Superior General, and international missions have been founded in Albania, the Solomon Islands, China, El Alto in Bolivia, Tanzania, Mozambique, Siberia, Ukraine, Rwanda, Burundi and Cuba.

He also talked to us about the China mission, opened at the initiative of the Superior General, made possible thanks to the generosity of other provinces. An international community has been formed, and for the first time, confreres from Asia have entered China and now participate in the mission in that country.

- **Giuseppe Guerra** then talked about the international mission of *Rrëshen*, in Albania. The confreres there come from the three Italian provinces. Poland has sent one confreres, now in the mission of the Solomon Islands. They work with the Daughters of Charity, who have a nursery school, a dispensary, and they also catechize. Juridically, the mission has been confided to the Province of Naples but collaboration among the three Italian provinces is very close. It has now been established as the "Albanian Region" with a regional superior named by the Superior General. Albania is a poor country. The mission was opened in the north of the country, where Catholics are in the majority, but 50 years of Communism have not helped the Christian life. The catechetical formation of the laity is an important goal. A seminary/apostolic school has been opened. The mission is bearing fruit.

- Confreres from Poland are represented on all the continents, and the Visitor, **Bronisław Sieńczak** can say, as a king of Spain did, that "the sun never sets on my kingdom," which extends from Taiwan to Bolivia and Haiti, passing through Siberia, Russia, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Austria, Germany and France. Since 1976, Polish confreres have been working in Madagascar and Congo and the province has answered the calls of the Superior General to go to Albania, Bolivia, Haiti, and more recently to the Solomon Islands. The Province of Poland presently has two special concerns: 1) confreres who return from the mission and who do not want to join the province, perhaps because it seems too traditional to them; 2) how to help the new Vice-Province of Sts. Cyril and Methodius.

- **Paul Roche**, the Vice-Visitor, introduced us to this new vice-province. It has five missions that used to depend on the Province of Poland. The vice-province includes several countries, and visas are needed to move around. Differences of languages and cultures, even in our local communities, are also a problem. The Catholic Church is a minority, and it can be suspected of proselytizing, or of profiting from the economic problems of these countries. The vice-province does not have its own financial resources, and needs confreres from other provinces.

- **Victor Bieler** then shared some news about the international mission of the Solomon Islands, a very poor country with conflicts among different tribes. The Congregation works in an interdiocesan major seminary. The country has many islands and communications are difficult.

In all these international missions, inculturation is a must. We not only have to give, but we also have to receive the riches of the people and of their culture. What binds us is a relation of reciprocity.

The second morning session was consecrated to the Vincentian Family. **Benjamín Romo** presented this to us and pointed out the challenges to be met today, such as the project on the fight against hunger currently being developed. Following this presentation, the issue of groups who want to be “Vincentian” but who do not belong to known branches of the Family was brought up.

During the two afternoon sessions, **John Rybolt** gave us some information about the *International Formation Center* (CIF) and **José Maria Nieto**, the Secretary General, discussed the “*The road taken by the Conferences of Visitors.*” All day Tuesday and Wednesday were given over to these Conferences of Visitors.

Tuesday 12 – Wednesday 13

The Conferences of Visitors worked, and your chronicler will take a rest by simply listing them: **APVC** (Asia/Pacific), **CEVIM** (Europe/Middle East), **CLAPVI** (Central and South America), **COVIAM** (Africa/Madagascar), **CUSAV** (USA).

Thursday 14

The Conferences of Visitors answered three questions about the outcomes of the conclusions of the General Assembly of 1998 concerning the life of the provinces and of local communities.

- *the challenges*: confreres are increasingly aware of the widening circle of poverty. The phenomenon of immigration is growing.

Awareness of the need of a new evangelization is very strong. This implies looking for a new language of faith and a stronger direction in truly Vincentian and missionary ministries in service of the poor.

- *the convictions*: The evangelization of the poor calls, on our part, for a genuine closeness and resolute dedication in the fight against different types of poverty and their causes. Actions are undertaken, formation programs are set up to analyze the root causes, and a conscientious and responsible laity is being formed, all to allow the poor to become agents of their own development.

- *the commitments*: everywhere we see the will to have a better knowledge of the Vincentian Family, and a genuine collaboration through setting up common plans and programs for formation. In some countries, a national council of the Vincentian Family has been set up.

The various groups in the Vincentian Family should develop as equals. We find that the confreres are often asked to handle their formation, but other groups could also be our formators.

In the second morning session, a panel presented a reflection on interprovincial and international collaboration in the area of formation. This reflection was carried on in a context of internationalization or globalization, with, at the same time, a strong regionalist or even nationalist current.

- **Alfonso Berrade** presented the common Internal Seminary of the provinces of Argentina, Chile and Peru. The experience has been positive. It lets young people discover more fully the international dimension of the Congregation, and become enriched by encountering others. This opens the door to a future interprovincial collaboration and to a sharing of missionaries. The experience likewise has limits, especially regarding the feeling of belonging to a province. Should this be planned for all stages of formation? A lengthy presence of young confreres in another country would not support the discovery of their own province, nor its missionary work or a familiarity with the other confreres. It is certainly preferable to plan sharing of young confreres for a longer or shorter period.

- **Maurice Sullivan** talked about the meetings of formators in the Asia/Pacific region. The number of students is rising in this region. The most recent catalogue lists 169 of them. Three meetings of formators took place in the Philippines, Indonesia and India. They are planned for every 18 months in January or July. The formators give positive evaluations. The sharing of experiences and of questions with other formators is beneficial. They have especially been able to clarify the respective roles of the director, the spiritual director, and the teachers of the students.

- **Manuel González** talked to us about the formation meetings organized in Central and South America (CLAPVI). These periods of sharing and deepening of experiences took place in three areas: Central America/Mexico/the Caribbean (Spanish); South America (Spanish), and Brazil (Portuguese.) They lasted two weeks and always had the same dynamic: a human reflection during the first week, and a Vincentian reflection in the second week. Each aspect of the theme presented is studied in its three dimensions: human, spiritual and pastoral. The results of the evaluation in these three areas are very positive, and the confreres want them to continue.

- **José María López Maside** presented the theme of collaboration with the Vincentian Family in the area of formation. Its goal is knowledge and deepening of the Vincentian identity. The creation of the CEME publishing office favors this project, as well as does the important effort made by the C.M. provinces of Spain to prepare good specialists and formators in Vincentian spirituality and in the pastoral field. New paths of collaboration have been opened up: the Vincentian Weeks in Salamanca, since 1972, have as a general theme “Vincent de Paul, the continuity of a Founder”; the summer courses at Salamanca that offer a cycle of three years of Vincentian studies for the Daughters of Charity, and of five years for Vincentian students; the Congress of the Vincentian Family; the publication of Vincentian materials and their availability in Vincentian educational centers; the systematic incorporation of Vincentian laity in popular mission teams; formation programs proper to each group.

We left All Hallows College at the beginning of the afternoon. We were divided into two groups, without knowing exactly why. The secretaries, the translators and the moderators went to visit the diocesan major seminary, some 60 km. from Dublin. The Superior General, his council and the Visitors had a meeting at 4:00 p.m. with the President of Ireland. We first visited St Peter’s parish where our confreres presented two Vincentian projects: one for refugees and the other for the Travelers. And then we left for the presidential palace, where the President of Ireland received us with simplicity, gentleness and humor. She welcomed and said hello to each one, and then offered us coffee and cookies. We visited the reception rooms and the museum that traces the history of the Republic of Ireland. Numerous camera flashes will immortalize this event.

Friday 15

The first morning session was devoted to a panel presentation about interprovincial and international collaboration in the areas of mutual aid, financial aid and twinning.

- **Elmer Bauer**, the Treasurer General, introduced this panel and made two important points: 1) the need to have a precise contract regarding financial aid and/or personnel, since Visitors and their councils change and their words can be lost while what they write remains; 2) the need for provinces that receive gifts to acknowledge them when they are received and give some information about how they are used.

- **Gabriel Naranjo** is the Visitor of a province that for several years, as elsewhere in Colombia, has enjoyed a vocational boom, with an average of six ordinations each year. Sixty confreres have been ordained or have taken vows in the last ten years. The province has been listening to the calls of the Congregation, and has sent confreres to many countries on all continents. For the last ten years, it has sent two students yearly to the Province of Toulouse. They learn French, finish their courses at the Institut Catholique of Paris and then work for three years in the Province of Toulouse. This experience will continue, but young priests will be sent, as the recent Provincial Assembly asked. The sending of confreres reinforces the awareness of the international character of the C.M. and the missionary sense of the province. The province receives these many vocations as a gift that it should share. On the financial level, the province can meet currently only 30% of its needs. Thus it needs to be helped today to become financially self-sufficient tomorrow.

- **Christian Sens** pointed out that the Province of Toulouse helps financially several provinces, or responds to requests because it can. And in the measure that it can, it considers that it must do so. This is a way of living out our solidarity. Welcoming students from Colombia and, in a lesser way, from Chile is a very rich experience for the province. The meeting of cultures and the discovery of different experiences allow openness and permits, beginning in the years of formation, some experience of the international dimension of the Congregation. This is a richness for the local communities that receive them after ordination. Their presence also reveals poverty and invites us to humility. France, the “eldest daughter of the Church,” has become a mission country. In the past it sent out missionaries, while today, it receives missionaries from another continent.

George Weber and **John Ranasingh** presented the experience of “twinning.” An agreement was drawn up between the Southern Province of the United States and the North Indian province. The North Indian province has numerous vocations and slim financial resources; the American province has the reverse. The goal of this agreement is the evangelization of the poor. The American province agreed to send confreres for a short period to give retreats and to bring some help in Vincentian formation. The Indian province is putting confreres at the disposition of the American province for longer periods, especially for missions. The financial help from the American province is going

to establish gradually a fund that will belong to the Indian province at the time of its 25th anniversary of foundation, in 2022.

Thanks to **Félix Álvarez** we discovered two Spanish associations, COVIDE et AMVE. The Visitatrixes and Visitors of Spain have established a non-governmental organization, COVIDE (Vincentian Cooperation for Development). The goals of this organization are: to raise funds for development projects in the Third World; education and awareness programs for the missionary cause and the sending of volunteers/lay missionaries to developing countries; and evangelization. AMVE (Spanish Vincentian Missionary Action) is an organization through which the Spanish provinces of the Daughters of Charity and of the Congregation, in relation with the entire Vincentian Family, take their place in the universal Church's missionary activity "ad gentes," as seen in the thought of Vincent de Paul. Its goal is to animate and give life to the Vincentian missionary activity of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity of Spain in developing countries and the mission territories where they are sent. Information and formation are also a part of its objectives.

Following this panel, several other experiences of mutual help or exchange of confreres were shared in the meeting.

In the second morning session, **Thomas McKenna** told us about the study undertaken in the USA in view of a reconfiguration of the provinces. The goal can only be a better response to the challenge posed by the evangelization of the poor.

Elmer Bauer gave us some information on the web page of the Vincentian Family, during the first afternoon session.

The second afternoon session was a time for free discussion with the Superior General and the members of his council. I will report here just a few points.

- Investigations are currently underway with other organizations such as the United Nations, the FAO, the European Community, and other Congregations. At the conclusion of these investigations, it will certainly be possible to name someone who could help the Visitors in developing their requests for funds from these organizations for the accomplishment of their plans.

- Currently, the requests for help in building are quite numerous. The mission funds at the Curia are not large enough to be the primary source of financing. These funds, however, can help formation plans or can support a

mission. Help for building plans should come from other provinces or organizations.

- “Aid to the Church in Need” grants study scholarships, but it limits the number granted to the same province. Other organizations also grant scholarships.

- Two confreres represent the C.M. at the United Nations, an enormous bureaucracy. They have to learn patience and find the best contacts that will allow them to navigate up through the different levels of participation. At present, our two confreres have access to the second level, which allows them to participate in committees.

- A meeting of the Miraculous Medal Association will take place next October in Rome. Its Statutes have been reviewed and approved by the Holy See. The Association has about 6,000,000 members and is growing in various new areas. It presents a popular dimension to Marian spirituality, and its object is the evangelization of the poor, especially poor families.

- When asked about his relationships with the Holy See, **Fr. Maloney** answered that they are not very frequent. On the contrary, the Procurator General and the Postulator often go the Vatican. The Holy See allows great liberty.

Other meetings are more frequent. The major superiors of men meet twice a year, and the societies of apostolic life also have meetings. Other groups also exist in Rome, such as for treasurers general, assistants general, archivists, multi-media groups, and the international Justice and Peace organization.

- The book on Vincentian spirituality for the laity is being prepared. Its publication is a little bit behind schedule.

- With the year 2004 in mind, **Fr. Maloney** explained his favorite plans: drawing up a Guide for the Local Superior; stabilizing the new international missions by putting them under a province, and giving them a solid financial basis; planning for the international mission in Chicago requested by the archbishop; propagating the Miraculous Medal Association in several more countries; providing greater stability for the Vincentian Marian Youth and for MISEVI. He also announced the publication of a document for the provinces concerning financial management. It should appear shortly.

The evening meal was festive. The water served each day was changed into wine. The party went on quite late in the evening, and we were all singing in

various languages. This was an important moment in our brotherhood, and showed that the next day would be our last working day.

Saturday 16

The Visitors gave their personal evaluations of the whole meeting, and offered their opinion of themes proposed by the groups for the next General Assembly. There are numerous: revision of the Statutes; a new reading of the Constitutions at the beginning of this third millennium; and several themes concerning formation, community for the mission, and evangelization of the poor today. The time then arrived for thanks, which **Fr. Maloney** gave to those men and women who helped with this meeting and to all its participants.

Fr. Maloney then presided over the concluding Eucharist. It was also time for sending us on mission, and for the return to our respective provinces.

(JOHN RYBOLT, C.M., traslator)