

# The General Assemblies of the Congregation of the Mission: History and Outcomes

## Introduction

The supreme authority in the Congregation, its general assembly, has been crucial for its development and direction. In its nearly four centuries of existence, the Congregation has held forty-one of these meetings, the first being in 1661. Vincent himself, however, held preliminary assemblies in 1642 and 1651 mainly to develop the rules and constitutions of the nascent Congregation. Besides facing issues specific to the community, the delegates must consider the community's dependence on Church authorities as well as its position relative to the politics of the wider world. To interpret the results of the assemblies, therefore, one must study world history as well as the experience and the law of the Church.

The assemblies dealt with too many issues to outline here. The focus of this study, therefore, is on assemblies noteworthy for their long-term impact on Vincentian life.

## I. Earliest developments

St. Vincent based much of his thinking about rules and procedures on those of the Jesuits. For the Common Rules, he adopted some of their practices, and in the *Codex Sarzana*, the earliest text concerning assemblies, he employed Jesuit language at times. The Jesuit Latin term for assembly, *congregatio*,<sup>1</sup> conflicted with the name of the community, *Congregatio Missionis*, and probably for this reason the Vincentian term became *conventus*. The French term, *assemblée*, became, in turn, the standard for several European languages.

Many of the issues that the founder included in the early draft of the Constitutions continue to be Vincentian practice. The following list cites the Constitutions of 1668, sometimes called the "Magnae constitutiones."<sup>2</sup> St. Vincent developed these but had not completed them at the time of his death.

1) The general assembly is superior to the superior general (C 1668, ch. I, §2), although he can summon a general assembly (C 1668, ch. I, §5).

2) Its charge is to maintain the Congregation's faithfulness to its charism and rules, and to hold elections (as of new superior general [C 1668, chs. III, VI]).

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<sup>1</sup> *Codex Sarzana*, John E. Rybolt, trans., ed., *Vincentiana* 35:3-4 (1991): 307-406.

<sup>2</sup> *Collectio Bullarum, Constitutionum ac Decretorum quæ Congregationis Administrationem spectant. Die 2 Feb. Anno Domini 1847* [Paris], 263 pages.

3) It considers proposals (*postulata*) from provinces (C 1668, ch. VI) and issues decrees and legislation (C 1668, ch. I, §7).<sup>3</sup>

4) The assembly elects four assistants for the superior general (C 1668, ch. II, §1) as well as his admonitor (C 1668, ch. IX).

5) The text provides for government between the death of a superior general and next general assembly (C 1668, ch. IV) and the possible replacement of a superior general.

6) This text also deals with the conduct of a general assembly (such as vocational order among delegates, voting, the secretary) and makes provision for the admittance of delegates, their substitutes, and their absences (C 1668, ch. IX).

In addition, the founder provided for two kinds of general assembly. The first and more important was that held for the election of a superior general after the death or replacement of the previous one. The second deals with the business of the Congregation during the lifetime of a superior general (C 1668, ch. XII); these were to be held every twelve years, unless an election for a superior general took place within that period (C 1668, ch. XI, §8).

The work of past assemblies resembles the procedures of more recent ones, even since the publication of the Constitutions of 1984. However, certain matters have changed, often for the sake of efficiency. Three of these are noteworthy.

1) The opening, closing, and transfer of houses formerly required an action of a general assembly (C. 1668, ch. I, § 3), or, when needed, the written approval of European provinces (undoubtedly to facilitate rapid communication). The delegates almost always supported the superior general in these kinds of proposals.

2) The voting system was modeled on that for the election of a pope: the form of the ballot, the use of an urn to receive the ballots, an individual oath before voting and casting the ballot while kneeling before a table supporting a crucifix and the urn. Finally the ballots were to be burned (C. 1668, ch. 7).

3) The superior general proposed candidates for vicar-general and superior general, although the delegates were left free to make their own choice (C. 1668, ch. 3, §1-5).

The same early constitutions provided for the holding of provincial assemblies to prepare for the general assembly (C. 1668, chs. 5, 10). Two points are noteworthy: who can be a delegate and how to conduct the assembly. Many issues in those early constitutions remain part of Vincentian practice today.

The 1668 Constitutions also continued the saint's decision to hold sexennial assemblies. Their purpose was to have a small and brief meeting at least six years after a general assembly, to discuss the health of the Congregation. This meeting would determine whether a general assembly should be called for the purpose of considering major issues facing it, such as conflicts among provinces or abuses that required remedies (C 1668, ch. 2, § 5; ch. 11). Fifteen of these were held from 1679 to 1939. They averaged only five days with about twenty-two confreres in

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<sup>3</sup> The 1668 Constitutions specify ordinances, replies (*responsa*), rules of office, decrees, catalogues of provinces and houses along with their income, lists of members (including those who left or were dismissed), and a necrology.

attendance. None of them ever asked for a general assembly to be held.<sup>4</sup> Since they were basically useless, the Congregation eliminated them in 1954 from its revised constitutions.

The major outcomes of the general assemblies involved primarily the elections of superiors general and their assistants (who had no terms of office), and various decrees based on postulata submitted either by the superior general or individual provinces. In handling the postulata, many assemblies deferred to the judgment of the superior general and his council. They, then, issued responses (*responsa*) to individual provinces or groups of provinces, but these lacked the force of law for the entire Congregation, since they were mainly clarifications about points of rule or procedure.

The decrees of the assemblies, even including the responses, formed the basis for Vincentian jurisprudence, our case law.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Before the French Revolution

Between the general assembly of 1661 and that of 1788, the Congregation had sixteen general and seven sexennial assemblies. The general assemblies averaged seventeen days in length with about thirty members (growing from nineteen in 1661 to thirty-five in 1788). All took place at St. Lazare in Paris.

Although many issues may seem trivial to later generations, some were so important that they have defined and regulated the Congregation of the Mission until the present. The major issue of the first assembly, 1661, was the election of the founder's successor. René Almérás, already a close confidant of Vincent's and vicar general of the Congregation, became superior general. The assembly's only other business was the election of the assistants and the admonitor.

The second assembly took place in 1668. It was a general assembly called for the business of the Congregation, principally the still-unfinished constitutions. The discussions filled an astonishing forty-nine days in the summer's heat (15 July through 1 September), a length surpassed only by the fifty-four days spent in 1980, also in the heat of summer (16 June through 8 August). The important result of the 1668 assembly was the official constitutions, which guided the Congregation until 1954.<sup>6</sup>

Still in the seventeenth century, the 1697 assembly opened an issue that would take generations to resolve and nearly caused a schism in the Congregation. Basically, the probable election as superior general of a non-French citizen, Maurice Faure, a native of Savoy, came to the attention of Louis XIV. He vetoed it, thus implicitly denying the office to Italians, Poles, and all others except French confreres. The basic issue concerned the nature of the Congregation:

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<sup>4</sup> The superior general and his council could also propose that a general assembly could replace a sexennial assembly; this was the case for 1668, 1692, 1849, 1867, and 1955.

<sup>5</sup> These are contained in *Collectio completa Decretorum Conventuum Generalium Congregationis Missionis* (Paris, 1882).

<sup>6</sup> A selection of twenty of the most important articles was made and presented to Clement X, who approved the text (with slight changes) in 1670. They were called the "Constitutiones selectae."

was it French, since its founder was French and it began in France, or was it not. If so, what relation did non-French provinces have to it? The question was so complex that it was referred to the pope, but the resolution was unsatisfactory. Strictly speaking, the matter continued to trouble the Congregation until the election of the first non-French superior general, William Slattery, (although he had to assume French citizenship), and the transfer of the generalate to Rome, a solution that the Italians and others had been proposing for centuries.<sup>7</sup>

From as early as the 1668 Constitutions, another concern was the “primitive spirit” (“*spiritus Instituti*,” 1668; “*primitivus spiritus*,” 1673; “*spiritus primigenius*” 1736). While certain practices were either introduced or abandoned over the centuries, the general sense of being faithful to the spirit of the founder has remained. Questions regularly arise in assemblies on this matter, and fortunately so, since discussing them allows the Congregation to reflect on its character and purpose in the Church. A related concern was the significance of the Common Rules, understood as a basic guide to Vincentian life. The 1954 constitutions (art. 219) called for “esteem and veneration” for them as a model of perfection but did not consider them binding under pain of sin.<sup>8</sup> The later constitutions adopted this perspective.

Jansenism, a matter on which Vincent took a firm position, returned in other forms after his death. It was particularly evident in a struggle to promote his canonization: Jansenists had their own candidate. The 1717 and 1724 general assemblies had to deal with the related question of those confreres who supported many French bishops in a struggle with the Holy See, as codified in the papal constitution *Unigenitus* (1713). The bishops supporting Cardinal Noailles of Paris refused to accept *Unigenitus*, inasmuch as it appeared to trample on the self-described “Gallican liberties.” The pope, by contrast, insisted on his authority to force the Noailles’ party of bishops to accept it. The Congregation’s neutrality helped it survive this series of conflicts, although a few confreres, including Father and Himbert (first assistant of the Congregation), were expelled for upholding the cardinal’s position in this conflict.

### III. From the restoration to 1919

In this period of more than a century, the Congregation held twelve general assemblies. Attendance at the beginning was small (only twenty) but ballooned to sixty by 1861 and reached ninety-five in 1919. Their average length, however, remained fairly steady at only eleven days. These totals are an important indicator of Vincentian recovery. (During the same time, six sexennial assemblies were held.)

Under Napoleon, the Congregation began a slow restoration in France. Since it was impossible, both legally and logistically, to hold an assembly until 1829, the pope appointed a series of vicars-general to govern the community: French for France and Italians elsewhere.

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<sup>7</sup> For the history, see Luigi Mezzadri, Francesca Onnis, et al., *The Vincentians. A General History of the Congregation of the Mission* (Hyde Park, NY, 2013), 2:3-36. The history of other assemblies is found in various volumes of *The Vincentians*.

<sup>8</sup> General Assembly 32, 1955, decree 18 (“*Collectio completa Decretorum Conventuum Generalium Congregationis Missionis. Nova series post approbationem Constitutionum*,” p. 6).

Dominique Salhorgne was the first superior general elected in this period (the pope appointed his predecessor, Pierre Dewailly), but the elderly Salhorgne resigned after only six years. In 1835, Jean-Baptiste Nozo, the candidate of the assembly's conservative wing, succeeded him, but he took a leave of absence in 1841. Jean-Baptiste Etienne, often referred to as the "second founder" of the Congregation, assumed office at the assembly of 1843 and presided over the general assemblies of 1849, 1861, and 1867, and over the sexennial assemblies of 1855 and 1873. Although his impact was prominent during his life, the delegates at the later assemblies began to discount his importance by neglecting his often-repeated summons to, among other things, maintain strict uniformity and obedience to all the rules and practices that Etienne himself restored or originated. These assemblies, therefore, were of less importance than in earlier times.

The same cannot be said of the lengthy generalate of Antoine Fiat, following the four-year office of Eugene Boré. Fiat, elected in 1878, presided, as Etienne had, over three general assemblies: 1890, 1902, and 1914, when he resigned for reasons of health. He also held three sexennial assemblies: 1884, 1896, and 1908. Apart from the elections of his assistants, these six assemblies mainly limited themselves to clarifications about points of the rule. Nonetheless, they made at least three significant decisions. First, the 1890 assembly gave its full support to founding apostolic schools, an innovation in the Congregation. Second, the 1902 assembly had to deal with the specter of Modernism, particularly acute for Vincentians, given the large number of confreres teaching in major and minor seminaries. It was a period of significant struggle, since some confreres were either barred from teaching, such as Guillaume Pouget, or expelled, like Vincenzo Ermoni. Third, all the assemblies had to deal with threats to the existence of the Congregation, since the French confreres were expelled from their seminary work and schools. Large numbers left for foreign missions, as in China and Latin America.

After decades of both numerical growth and apostolic stagnation, the delegates at the 1919 general assembly faced several major issues. Surprisingly, the ninety-five delegates dealt with them in only thirteen days. Many of the questions dealt with the newly-published Code of Canon Law: whether Vincentians are religious; if not, what that means in practice (decrees 560-70). Another dealt with the number and nationality of the assistants of the superior general (decree 572).

During this century, many other matters came before the delegates: the rights of non-European provinces; membership of Vincentian bishops in the Congregation; the establishment of apostolic vicariates as Vincentian provinces; the expulsion or civil suppression of provinces and their impact on Vincentian life (as in Germany, Mexico, and Portugal); and temporary vows.

Minor issues were basically about points of rule, such as uniformity: clothing, schedules, community practices, and finances.

#### **IV. Twentieth century, 1919 to 1980**

The Congregation underwent many changes during this period. To deal with them, eight general assemblies and two sexennial assemblies took place. The most visible changes are the expansion of both their length (from 12 days in 1931 to 54 in 1980) and the number of delegates (from 112 in 1931 to 161 in 1969).

The world was also changing. Social movements (decolonization, revolutions, totalitarian regimes) and several wars, especially the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, brought enormous challenges to Vincentians. Twenty-one new provinces or vice-provinces came into being, and others grew in size. New missions were founded as a consequence. At the same time, two provinces were suppressed (Iran and Algeria). New works sprang up alongside the traditional ones: universities, new styles of missions (tent missions, *Forains du Bon Dieu* in France; motor missions in the United States), and radio and television productions, to name only a few.

At the same time, the Congregation continued its long-delayed study of its identity vis-à-vis the Code of Canon Law, as required by the Church. The 1931 general assembly, in particular, laid the groundwork for further adaptations, but it would take another two decades before constitutions would appear. Even after their publication in 1954, numerous questions remained, and these would need review in the light of the Second Vatican Council.

To accomplish this review, the Church instructed every congregation to take a new look at the existing constitutions and return to the community's basic sources. The delegates at the 1963 general assembly legislated a few hesitant adaptations concerning liturgical changes and community daily prayers (decree #51). Following the conclusion of the council, by contrast, the confreres swung into action with lengthy and complex studies and analyses of Vincentian life. These culminated in the assemblies of 1968-69 and 1980.

The first was a two-year extraordinary general assembly, and the second came to an agreement on revised constitutions. These were published, after more revisions and Vatican approvals, in 1984. This new document resolved many important matters that had agitated the Congregation since its earliest days: elections, terms of office,<sup>9</sup> French or international identity, centralization vs. decentralization, the vicar-general, and the relationships among the provinces as well as with the center, now moved to Rome. The 1974 assembly composed the juridical section on community government; with few modifications it became part of the 1980 constitutions.

## **V. Recent history, 1980 to 2016**

Following the Holy See's approval of the constitutions, what remained to be done? This question arose while planning the 1986 assembly.<sup>10</sup> Besides electing the superior general (in fact, reelecting Richard McCullen) and electing the vicar-general and assistants, the delegates decided to analyze the responses from provinces and individuals concerning three points: evangelization of the poor, community for the mission, and formation for the mission. Out of these discussion

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<sup>9</sup> This assembly requested William Slattery's resignation and specified that thereafter the superior general would have a term of office.

<sup>10</sup> See *Vincentiana* 30:5-6 (1986) for the documents. With thanks to Robert Maloney his observations and suggestions on this study.

flowed a plan, the Lines of Action, to guide the community's direction for the next six years.<sup>11</sup> The assembly also initiated another innovation: a final document addressed by the assembly to the Congregation. Previously, the superior general normally communicated an assembly's work. Despite this new procedure, the preparation of the final document in this and subsequent assemblies proved to be extremely laborious, contentious, and time-consuming. Experience shows, it must be admitted, that the delegates' earnest efforts aroused little interest in, with only limited impact on, the provinces.

The 1992 assembly discussed but did not resolve two other issues: the establishment of an ongoing formation program (the CIF), and new international missions. Both began shortly after the assembly.

The Congregation's relationships with other groups, the Vincentian Family, also took shape in these years. This climaxed in the assembly of 1998, which devoted an entire week to learning about and reflecting on various groups whose leadership had been invited to attend as observers.<sup>12</sup>

During this period two other structures developed. One, initiated in 1971 by CLAPVI in Latin America, was the conferences of visitors or provinces. These regional groups met during the assemblies, as in 2004, to draw up their own lines of action or local plans for the following six years, within the context of a Congregation-wide plan.<sup>13</sup> A second structure, dating from 1983, was a regular meeting of the visitors between general assemblies.<sup>14</sup> Although lacking legislative force, these meetings resemble in some respects the sexennial assemblies. Their purpose is to review the state of the Congregation and begin planning for the following general assembly.

The post-constitution assemblies also had to face declining membership in many provinces. This reality contrasted sharply with the energetic and hopeful calls from the assemblies to renewal and recommitment, as if no problem existed in aging provinces, numerous departures, and few vocations. One of the outcomes of the changes in membership was the move toward the fusion or "reconfiguration" of provinces, ultimately involving the suppression of provinces and the establishment of new ones.<sup>15</sup>

The 2010 assembly was held in Paris, the first to be held there since 1955. The 2016 assembly is planned for Chicago, the first in the Congregation's history to be held outside of Europe.

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<sup>11</sup> See *Vincentiana* 36:4-5 (1992).

<sup>12</sup> See *Vincentiana* 42:4-5 (1998).

<sup>13</sup> See *Vincentiana* 48:4-5 (2004); on the conferences of visitors, see José María Nieto, "The Visitors' Conferences," *Vincentiana* 46:3 (2002): 232-39.

<sup>14</sup> "Rencontre des visiteurs, Bogotá, 10-25 janvier 1983," *Vincentiana* 27 (1983): 89-217

<sup>15</sup> Among the earliest studies is Thomas McKenna, "Reorganization of Provinces," *Vincentiana* 46:3 (2002): 239-46.

## Conclusion

The importance of the general assemblies should not be minimized. Their most important responsibility is to elect the superior general, the vicar-general, and the assistants. The issues (*postulata*) submitted by individual members and by provinces stemming from the provincial assemblies have been crucial for the direction of the entire Congregation. Even though only a small percentage of the confreres attend general assemblies as delegates, every member has a responsibility for their agenda and procedures.

As the time arrives for domestic and provincial assemblies, each confrere should, to the best of his ability, take seriously his personal and communitarian responsibility to guide the entire Congregation. Some questions, such as the following, may help in this preparation:

- Am I taking seriously my responsibility to help guide the Congregation by participating actively in the deliberations of our assemblies?
- What help can I offer to the Congregation at large in the resolution of its major concerns?
- Where do I perceive prayerfully that the Holy Spirit is guiding the Congregation at this time?
- If elected as a delegate to the provincial or general assembly, what can I do to prepare myself for this responsibility?

John E. Rybolt, C.M.