

Fr. James Richardson, C.M. _ A profile with a human perspective

By Rafael Sáinz, C.M.

On February 5, 1909, in Dallas, Texas, James W. Richardson was born into a very large and deeply religious family. The Richardson family would gift the Church with a Daughter of Charity, an Ursuline sister and two Vincentian missionaries, James W. and John T., younger than James by 14 years and currently Chancellor of De Paul University in Chicago. On September 30, 1925, James entered the Novitiate of the Congregation of the Mission in Perryville, Missouri and was ordained a priest on October 10, 1933. After receiving his doctorate in Canon Law in Rome, he returned to the United States and dedicated himself to the ministry of teaching and forming candidates for the Congregation.

In 1958, Fr. Richardson became the first Vice-Provincial of the newly-created Vice-Province of Los Angeles. In 1968, he was elected Superior General, the 21st successor of St. Vincent de Paul. The General Assembly of 1974 re-elected him for another term of six years.

In 1980, at the age of 71, animated by a love for the poor and for the foreign missions, he volunteered for and was sent to the Major Seminary of the Good Shepherd in Maralal in the northern part of Kenya. This area, inhabited by semi-nomadic tribes of shepherds, is one of the poorest regions of Africa.

Fr. Richardson's vision was, in great part, responsible for the fact that the Congregation was working in Maralal. Near the end of his second term as Superior General, Fr. Richardson was visited by a priest from the Diocese of Treviso, in Veneto, working as a missionary "donum fidei" with the Consolata Fathers of Turin. The bishop of Maralal, Bishop Cavallera, also a Consolata missionary, told this priest, "Do not leave Italy without a firm commitment that the Congregation of the Mission will come to Maralal and take charge of the formation of our seminarians. The work of formation, especially for serving the poor, is the charism of the Priests of the Mission. We need their help with the intellectual as well as the spiritual and pastoral formation of our seminarians." Up to this time Bishop Cavallera sent his seminarians to the National Seminary in Nairobi, a modern seminary with an international faculty that seemed to have everything. When the seminarians, however, returned to Maralal as priests, their heads were filled with many ideas, yet they found it difficult to adapt to the life and the pastoral needs of the people. Like St. Vincent before him, Fr. Richardson heard the Voice of God in the words of the Bishop. Faithful to the true spirit of the Congregation, he sent a group of Vincentian missionaries to Maralal.

In Kenya, Fr. Richardson taught in the seminary and involved himself in the formation of a small group of seminarians. They traveled with him to surrounding

villages when he celebrated weekend liturgies. He returned from Maralal in 1987 to the major seminary in Denver, Colorado. When he became ill, he was moved to the infirmary. He returned to the Father on July 8, 1996.

His funeral was celebrated in the Church of St. Vincent de Paul in St. Louis, Missouri, on Friday, July 12. Fr. Robert P. Maloney, C.M., Superior General and Fr. Richard McCullen C.M., former Superior General joined the many confreres present. Sr. Juana Elizondo, D.C., Superioress General, participated with the large group of Daughters of Charity who had come. The body had been brought from Perryville to St. Vincent's Church and late that night his body was returned to Perryville. Fr. Richardson's body was laid to rest in the Vincentian cemetery beside the remains of those first Vincentian missionaries who came to the United States in the 19th Century.

Fr. Maloney presided at the Eucharist and preached the homily. Fr. McCullen led the assembly in the final commendation and farewell and Fr. John T. Richardson presided over the brief burial ceremony. It was a simple, prayerful celebration.

I lived with Fr. Richardson for twelve years, (1968 to 1980) in Rome. When he was elected Superior General in 1968, I was elected Vicar-General.

During those years we developed a close friendship and became steady collaborators. Without doubt, others will speak about what he has done and what he said during the years of his leadership of the Congregation. These were difficult years: difficult because of the changing circumstances and experiences, difficult because the General Assemblies (which are considered "constitutive" for the Congregation) called us to adapt our original charism to the conditions of the contemporary world and the contemporary Church. It could be said that the entire period of Fr. Richardson's term as Superior General was characterized by renovation and renewal in faithfulness to the spirit of St. Vincent.

Others will record their interpretations of those times. I would like to share something of my perspective on the real human person I knew.

What most impressed me about Fr. Richardson was his humanity: he was a complete man, his mind and spirit were focused on that which was true, loyal, and responsible. He committed himself to doing what should be done. He never tried to make himself "look good," to be a "very important person." He always tried to make things better. Sometimes he could be demanding on others, but he asked more of himself first.

He was humble to the depths of his heart. He never sought to place himself on a pedestal. A short time after his election, at common recreation, we were talking about the Pope's suppression of some of the honorary titles which the Holy See had granted to our Superior General. Afterwards, we noticed that the name plate on Fr. Richardson's door had changed — the title "*Most Honored*" had disappeared, leaving only "*Fr. James W. Richardson, C.M.*"

During a concelebration in the chapel at the Leonianum, just a few weeks after his election, before a select group of priests and sisters, he delivered the homily, which he wrote himself, in Italian. As might be expected, the homily was no model of linguistic perfection. It was, however, a model of courageous humility. When he had finished, I affirmed his courage, to which he responded: *"What did you expect? Sometimes I show myself to others like a stammering baby."*

When Fr. Richardson was convinced that the truth was in what others proposed, he fully embraced it. I recall many occasions on which Fr. Richardson called me to his room to speak to me about what was on his mind and to get my reaction. On one of these occasions, after listening to him respond to my observations and my objections to a decision which he was proposing, I told him, *"Look, Fr. Richardson, you have asked for my opinion, and I have given it with total honesty. I have nothing more to add. Now you must decide. I want you to know that from the outset, I accept whatever you decide. You will have my complete support in this decision."* In this way we ended a friendly, and a very lengthy conversation. The following day he said to me: *"I have thought about what you told me and I see that you are right; but it is better not to think about that right now."* He did the same thing in meetings and conversations with me or with Provincials or with groups of confreres. He would change his own observations or insights to those of the Assistants on the spot.

He was a hard worker. Neither long meetings nor long trips seemed to tire him. In fact he seemed to rejoice in the long meetings, hour after hour, of the General Council, meetings which he prepared for in great detail. He filled many notebooks with his distinctive handwriting.

And his austerity! He was very austere in everything. He was never known to have a special fondness for any food. Once, I was visiting one of the Latin American Provinces. Fr. Richardson had traveled on to Cuba to visit and greet the confreres and the Daughters. While awaiting the arrival of his plane from Cuba, a Visitatrix of the Daughters told me that while in Rome she had met a man who worked for Air France. This man claimed to be a good friend of Fr. Richardson, so much so that Father frequently visited his house, and dined with him and his wife. This woman would always prepare Father's favorite dish. The Daughter must have seen in my expression such a total skepticism that she asked me: *"What do you think of this?"* *"It seems to me, Sister,"* I responded, *"that you are speaking about some other Superior General, not ours."* The fact of the matter is, Fr. Richardson had no "favorite" dish. He ate everything and anything. He did not go out to dine unless it was with some confreres who were visiting from the United States and this he did only a few times during his twelve years in Rome. The man, who was supposed to be a friend of Fr. Richardson turned out to be a nameless and vulgar swindler.

Fr. Richardson had a great love for the Little Company, for the Daughters of Charity, for the whole Vincentian Family. Every day he dedicated long hours of work to them and their mission. He constantly thought of them.

He was a temperate man, profoundly pious, faithful to all the practices learned and internally assimilated during the years of his formation.

In summary: he was a man devoted to God, to his brothers and sisters, to the poor. Now, may this good and faithful servant rest in the peace of the Lord.

Translated by Charles T. Plock, C.M.