

State of the Congregation of the Mission

July 1998

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Introduction

We begin this Assembly in the twilight years of the second millennium. We can already see signs on the horizon that harbingers the dawn of the third. Today we look back and we look forward, confident that the Kingdom of God is really here among us. For Christians the presence of the Kingdom has a wonderful sense of urgency: "I tell you, the time is running out," Paul writes. "From now on, let those having wives act as not having them, those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away."¹

Theologians have attempted to describe the paradoxical nature of the Kingdom by saying that it is here "already," but "not yet" fully. Its energies are at work among us now by the power of the Risen Lord, but we await its fullness when all things are finally restored in Christ.

This already-not-yet tension places the Church in a paradoxical position in regard to time. She adheres to the *past*, with its rich tradition, but is not shackled to it; rather, she develops it, constantly mediating between the word of God and contemporary circumstances. She attends to the *present*, but she is not coerced by its demands; rather, she is continually discerning what is of God and truly promotes the human person, but also what is of sin and ultimately corrupts us. She looks forward to the *future*, but not with anxiety; rather, she awaits the Lord's coming with confidence, knowing that "eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it entered into the human heart what things God has prepared for those who love him."²

I ask you today to look back briefly with me, especially over the last six years, so that we might understand ourselves better. Then I ask you to look forward in this Assembly that we might launch out on a mission that is renewed and vibrant.

I. Some Statistics

When St. Vincent died the Congregation had only about 225 members. How many are we today? Are we increasing or decreasing? What is the factual reality of the Congregation?

¹ 1 Cor 7:29-31.

² 1 Cor 2:9.

I have asked the Secretary General, Emeric Amyot d'Inville, who knows the data much better than I, to present a statistical picture for you. The data will help us see the changing face of the Congregation. It is clear that those provinces which are growing fastest are frequently those that have the fewest economic resources.

II. New international Missions

By the time of St. Vincent's death, the Congregation was already international, having moved out from France into Poland, Italy, Madagascar, Ireland, Scotland, the Hebrides, and the Orkneys. Today we have 50 provinces and vice-provinces, and many of these have foreign missions. In fact, we encourage every province to start a mission, or at least to cooperate in one if possible. Some provinces have even given birth to three or four other provinces.

At the last General Assembly, in 1992, two of the commitments that the Congregation made concerned the missions *ad gentes* (# 5 and # 6), including a commitment to open at least one missionary project in Eastern Europe. In the last six years, many confreres have volunteered to go to new and generally very poor places, and the Visitors have been very generous in making the sacrifice of letting them go. As a result we have been able to send mission teams to Albania (1993), to Mbinga in Tanzania (1993), to Honiara in the Solomon Islands (1993), to China (1994), to El Alto in Bolivia (1994), to Xai-Xai in Mozambique (1994) to Kharkiv in the Ukraine (1995), to Ni_nij Tagil in Russia (1997), to Ruhengeri in Rwanda (1998). Volunteers have also gone to strengthen already existing missions in Cuba, Mozambique, Ethiopia, and Algeria. Often in these missions, we work side by side with the Daughters of Charity; sometimes, in fact, the Daughters preceded us, as in Rwanda, and our going there is precisely to accompany them.

Things have not always been easy in these missions. In fact, at times inculturation has been difficult. The missionaries have had to learn new languages and to adjust to new customs and to rugged physical conditions. Some were not able to adjust, but most did. Their placements are often very remote, like Siberia or El Alto or Mpepai or the Solomon Islands; some too are very dangerous, like Rwanda and Algeria.

These are not the only new missionary initiatives. I am delighted to say that the provinces, even those with diminishing personnel, continue to open new missions both within and outside their own territories and many assist missions with financial aid. Almost all of our provinces have undergone a serious revision of works in order to reach out more clearly and effectively toward the poor.

III. Popular Missions

In these years there have also been significant efforts toward renewing the popular missions. Such efforts have often crossed provincial, and even national boundaries. These renewed missions have the following characteristics:

- a) a time of significant preparation (the pre-mission),
- b) the organization and training of a mission team, often involving a large number of priests, deacons, sisters, brothers, and lay men and women,
- c) an extended time period within the area of the mission (the time varies),
- d) catechesis and reflection on the word of God within small groups,
- e) involvement of the *local* clergy and laity in the mission itself,
- f) organization of works of charity within the mission area,
- g) follow-up.

IV. Formation of the Diocesan Clergy

At the General Assembly of 1992, in his reflection on the state of the Congregation, Fr. McCullen expressed the desire for a greater Vincentian presence in this apostolate which is so crucial for the renewal of the Church today.

I am happy to say that our presence in the formation of the diocesan clergy has increased over the last six years. Some of our new missions aim precisely at assisting the clergy. Today, the Congregation continues to sponsor a number of seminary programs where diocesan priests are formed: at Piacenza and Genoa in Italy; at All Hallows in Ireland; at Gda_sk in Poland; at Popayán, Arauca, Garzón, Ibagué, Inzá, Betel, San Vicente del Caguán, Restrepo, and Vereda Minas Belalcázar in Colombia; at Chongoene in Mozambique; at Adelaide in Australia; at Curitiba in Brazil; at Malang in Indonesia and at Honiara in the Solomon Islands. Confreres in various countries also participate in seminary programs that are run by others for training diocesan priests (e.g., in the United States, Fiji, Nigeria, Poland, Byelorussia, France, Mozambique, the Philippines and many other countries). Likewise, they serve in universities that offer programs for priestly formation (e.g., at St. John's University in the United States, at Belo Horizonte in Brazil).

V. Vincentian Family

Today we witness a renewed sense of enthusiasm and energy in regard to the Vincentian Family. I can only say, as St. Vincent might put it, that Providence has brought this about. When I visited Mexico with the Vicar General four years ago, I was struck forcefully by the close cooperation among the various branches of our family there. On returning here, we discussed this in the General Council and decided to call together, for the first time, the heads of the principal branches of our family. A huge amount has happened since then. In fact, the family and its mission is the theme of this General Assembly. The Vicar General, José Ignacio Fernández de Mendoza, as well as Fr. Palú, who is the Assistant responsible for contact with the various lay

groups in our family, will speak about our family at length several days from now, so I will say no more today.

VI. Ongoing Formation

What about the growth of the missionaries personally? Do they continue to be renewed personally, to read, to reflect, to change?

Our Statutes (S 42) ask the provinces to promote personal and communal ongoing formation programs. Some provinces have very well organized formation plans and a director for ongoing formation. Interprovincial programs have also been creatively developed over the last six years by the various conferences of Visitors. Here I will mention a few of the most significant projects undertaken on an international level.

In order to promote the ongoing formation of the confreres, we held a Vincentian Month in 1993 on the theme of the last General Assembly: "New Evangelization, New Men, New Communities." Confreres came from all of the provinces to participate in it.

In 1994, we began the International Center for Vincentian Formation (CIF): St. Vincent de Paul. It runs two sessions a year with 20-30 participants each time. Our intent is that all confreres within the 35-50 age bracket will take part in this program. The evaluations have been very positive. Fr. John Rybolt is here. He will report to you later in this Assembly and can answer any questions that you might have.

In 1996 we published an *Instruction on Stability, Chastity, Poverty and Obedience in the Congregation of the Mission*. Now it is being used as the basis for ongoing formation programs in many provinces. I am most grateful to the Vicar General, to John Prager, Jaime Corera, Léon Lauwerier, Hugh O'Donnell, Miguel Pérez Flores, and Benjamín Romo for all their help in bringing this project to completion.

In 1996 we held a meeting of all the Visitors in Salamanca to discuss inculturation of the Vincentian charism and a whole series of other practical matters that the Visitors thought would be helpful. Similar themes had been discussed at the COVIAM meeting in Kinshasa in 1994.

In 1997 we held another Vincentian Month, on the Popular Missions. A large number of confreres came from the provinces, as well as Daughters of Charity and lay men and women who work with us on our Popular Mission Teams. The evaluations were very positive.

At the beginning of this year we held the first meeting of new Visitors and introduced the *Practical Guide for Visitors* which we hope will be helpful for all those

who take on the service of Visitor. Much of the work for this *Practical Guide* was done by Frs. Miguel Pérez Flores, Joseph Levesque, and Yves Danjou, to whom we owe lots of gratitude.

VII. Prayer

St. Vincent told us: "Give me someone who prays and he will be capable of everything." How do I assess prayer in the Congregation?

As I go around the provinces I sense that most confreres pray faithfully. Occasionally some overemphasize work to the detriment of prayer. But most are admirable in their commitment to both. In regard to our Community prayer, especially the praying of Lauds and Vespers, I sense that some progress has been made, though more could be done to make it better prepared, more beautiful, less mechanical. To help us in that regard, we named a Commission on Prayer that began to meet in 1993. We owe much gratitude to its members: John McKenna, Manuel Nóbrega, Urban Osuji, Bernard Schoepfer, and Luis Alfonso Sterling. The goal of the Commission was to help us renew our common prayer. I asked it to be guided by the following principles in regard to our common prayer:

- a. It should be beautiful.
- b. It should be simple.
- c. It should be attuned to the prayer of the Church.
- d. It should be flavored by the Vincentian tradition.
- e. It should be flexible (adaptable to different situations).

This Commission produced a provisional *Vincentian Book of Prayer*. It stated explicitly that this was not to be an 'editio typica' to be translated or followed slavishly, but that it was simply a sample of what might be done in other languages and cultures. It was not intended to replace the Church's Liturgy of the Hours, which remains the framework in which we generally pray, but was rather to provide another, more specifically Vincentian, option which might be used on various occasions.

A number of provinces have taken up the challenge to work at developing forms of communal Vincentian prayer appropriate to their own language and culture. The results of their work are on display here at the Assembly. This coming September these results will be evaluated and then the Commission will meet once again to discuss the next step.

VIII. MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

When St. Vincent died it took months and months for the news to get around. Confreres were still writing to him six months after he was dead. Today news spreads

almost instantaneously because of modern means of communication. Are we using the new means of communication well?

We are, to some extent, and I hope that we can do much more in the future.

Actually, several years ago we established a Commission on the Use of the Media. I am very grateful to its members: Victor Bieler, Victor Groetelaars, Lourenço Mika, Attilio Mombelli, and Augustine Towey. It did very good work, but we found some of its proposals too expensive at that time and did not think that the costs would be proportionate to the results. But what has been done?

Recently I asked all of our provinces to establish in the Visitor's office and in the principal house of formation an Internet connection with e-mail. This will enable us to communicate very rapidly with just about all of the Visitors and all of the houses of formation. It will also enable us to send articles and other useful formation materials to the houses of formation in Spanish, French, and English and to facilitate the interchange of such materials among themselves.

During this General Assembly we are using a Vincentian Family Home Page on the Internet and putting frequent bulletins on it. This allows confreres all over the world to tune in regularly on what is happening here. A number of provinces already have their own home pages. Here at the General Curia we receive and send a great deal of the daily correspondence by e-mail.

We are also making a video of the General Assembly which we hope the Visitors will be able to use to communicate the Assembly's results more effectively to the confreres in the provinces.

The members of SIEV have produced, among other things, a compact disk which has on it the writings of St. Vincent in various languages, plus many other interesting things. A provisional version is available right here for anyone who would like a copy.

IX. Investigating the causes of poverty

You recall that in 1986 Pope John Paul II gave us a rousing challenge:

Fathers and Brothers of the Mission, search out more than ever, with boldness, humility and skill, the causes of poverty and encourage short and long term solutions; adaptable and effective concrete solutions. By doing so, you will work for the credibility of the Gospel and of the Church (Osservatore Romano, English Edition, August 11, 1986, p. 12).

There have been a few significant steps in this regard, though I wish that we were doing more. St. John's University in New York has established a Center for

Church and Society with a view toward investigating the causes of poverty and proposing short and long term solutions. It has an interesting page on the Internet.

Recently, we began to seek recognition from the United Nations as an NGO so that we might participate on the many committees at the United Nations that treat questions that interest us as Vincentians, such as poverty, famine, war and peace, health care, education, and human rights. Our application process is now complete and we are awaiting the results, which will probably not come until next December. In this realm of activity, we have learned from AIC, which is very well organized in its relationship with the UN, the European Community, and other international organizations.

X. Finances

All these things cost a lot of money. As you know, St. Vincent always wanted our works to have a sound financial basis. So, what is the financial state of the Congregation?

Later today the Econome General, Pat Griffin, will explain our financial situation and will be available to respond to any questions you might have.

Conclusion

My brothers, being fully alive means looking back and looking forward, looking in and looking out. Looking back is history. Looking forward is hope. Looking in is meditation, with a view toward conversion. Looking out is mission, with a view toward creating new life.

Today we have looked back, especially over the last six years, in order to assess the state of the Congregation. In the days ahead I ask you to look forward to envision new possibilities.

There is a theme that the prophet Isaiah loves to repeat. The prophet states: "See, I am doing a new deed, even now it comes to light. Can you not see it? Yes, I am making a road in the wilderness, paths in the wilds" (43:19-20). Isaiah voices God's promise: "Behold, I am about to create new heavens and a new earth. The things of the past shall not be remembered or come to mind. Instead, there shall always be rejoicing and happiness in what I create" (65:17-18a).

Isaiah sees that his prophecies are already being fulfilled. Notice that this is precisely Jesus' perspective in the text that is foundational to our Community. In the synagogue at Nazareth he unrolls the scroll and reads the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. Therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor" (Lk 4:18). "Today," Jesus adds, "this scripture passage

is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:21). Jesus tells us that today the longings of Isaiah are being realized.

I assure you that I have seen this repeatedly during my visits to the provinces. I have seen the signs of the kingdom today. I have seen in our Vincentian Family men and women who are filled with God's Spirit and who spread that spirit by their love, by their compassion, by their enthusiasm, by their peace. I have seen captives liberated through countless programs of integral human promotion, liberated from sin, liberated from oppression, liberated from ignorance. I have witnessed the blind seeing through operations performed in the hospitals staffed by the Daughters of Charity, or through programs that favor the blind in our schools, or through the eyes of Ladies of Charity or members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society who come to their homes to read aloud. Recently in Madagascar I saw hundreds of the lame walking, and living joyfully in our homes for the handicapped. There too I saw lepers cleansed by medicines that halt their ravaging disease, and cleansed also by the love and the care of confreres and Daughters of Charity who have welcomed them into their home.

The challenge for us is to continue to make this Isaian prophecy, and our community motto, come true today. "Today," Jesus says, "this word is fulfilled in your hearing." Today in 1998. Today in 1999. Today in the third millennium. Having repeatedly witnessed the generosity of so many members of the Vincentian Family, I encourage you, with confidence: today, and in the third millennium, continue to make the blind see, continue to make the lame walk, and continue to help the poor know that the good news is really being proclaimed in their midst.