

Contacts with the Vincentian Family

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In the General Council, I have been charged with maintaining contact with the lay members of our Vincentian Family. The Superior General cannot personally attend to the ever increasing number of invitations which so frequently arrive from our entire family. Since this task was not foreseen by our Constitutions and Statutes the one given this responsibility does what he can in the midst of and often in place of his duties as Assistant. I believe this arrangement to be valid and useful, especially since this Assembly, for the first time, is dedicated to the theme of our family, and from tomorrow on we can count on the presence among us of the Daughters of Charity and other Congregations, and some lay groups of Vincentian inspiration.

I would not know how to describe how my predecessors accomplished this service. I can only describe my personal experience briefly. I see a lot of the International Association of Charities (AIC). I have attended meetings of their international board of directors many times, mainly in Belgium (Brussels, Wingene, Bruges) and in Italy (Milan and Turin), of the Permanent Committee every six months, and of the Executive Board once a year. I went to their General Assemblies in 1990 (Assisi, Italy), in 1992 (Dellaan, Belgium), in 1994 (Antigua, Guatemala), in 1996 (Rome, Italy). I have given them retreats and days of recollection. I have participated in several continental meetings, like the Latin American Seminar in Caracas, Venezuela; national: Getsemani, Ecuador; Mendes, Brazil; St. Louis and Cleveland, U.S.A.; also a few regional meetings: Lazio in Rome, Italy; finally local meetings: Guadalajara, Mexico and Funza, Colombia. I was invited to the national meeting of Association Advisors in El Escorial, Spain. I attended many times, during their beginning years, meetings of the Italian Young Vincentian Volunteers. Three years ago, I was named to be international ecclesiastical assistant for the AIC. This position has been prolonged until the end of this Assembly, because they wish to present to the Vatican a "terna" of names which will include one of the Assistants of the Superior General in order that a confrere may represent the Congregation at official AIC meetings, as I have been doing these three years, thus assuring union and continuity with the first foundation of St. Vincent. I will have more to say on this point at the end of this paper.

I was present at the end of the General Assembly of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Paris in 1992, and at the meeting marking the Society's 150 years in the United States, in St. Louis. I met with the Directors of the Society in Buenos Aires, Argentina; Santa Fé de Bogotá, Colombia; Lisbon, Portugal; and Madrid, Spain. On the local level I have contacted members of the Society in many different cities and towns, during visits to the provinces and while on vacation.

I took part in the European Congress of the Vincentian Marian Youth in Rome in 1996, an international congress in Paris in 1997, in a national congress in Portugal; and I believe I was seven times in Benagalbon, Spain, at meetings of their younger (15 to 18) groups; in the Catechetical School and meeting of the older (18 to 25) members. At the Catechetical School, once they got to know my ideas and I handled the language better, I was able to give some courses and talks. I also gave talks to the Daughters and confreres who work with Marian Youth, in Murgia and Madrid. After this Assembly I will return to Benagalbon, this time as a "private" for the three activities already mentioned; and after that to Murgia for a meeting with the Vincentian Marian Families and another with the older group of Vincentian Marian Youth. In Italy, when I had time, I helped the Marian Youth in their process of reorganization. In Paris also, I often met with the Marian Association for work sessions.

By preaching retreats to the Daughters of Charity, I believe I have also served the Vincentian Family, either by speaking directly to the Daughters, often inspired by some concern for other groups of the family, but especially in some countries, for Vincentian Marian Youth. I acted thus in twelve provinces where I made canonical visitations, and in others where I was invited by the Daughters or their Directors. I was very pleased in Spain and Portugal to meet many sisters and some confreres whom I had previously met as members of Vincentian Marian Youth groups. I could add the same observation about confreres and seminarians of thirteen other Provinces.

I helped make contact between Volunteers of Charity and other associations, either by providing documents, or by means of correspondence. Depending on conditions, I was able to correspond with adults and youth members of various branches of the family in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, the United States, Mexico, Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Albania, South Africa, Madagascar, etc.

Finally, I took part in many activities common to different groups of the family, like the group for Vincentian Animation in Quercinella, Italy; the Latin American Conference of Vincentian Provinces on Vincentian Laity in Santiago, Chile; days of Prayer for the Family in Brussels, Belgium and in Barcelona, Spain. During canonical visits to the provinces, or when I went to preach retreats, I attended local and regional meetings of the family in Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Egypt, Mozambique, Lebanon, and Greece.

Any results from all this activity? I have learned plenty from every group, and I have passed on all I could to the General Council. There is no longer the fear, which did exist in certain sectors, that the Superior General desired to unite the Volunteers to the Conferences of St. Vincent and the Marian Youth with the Vincentian volunteers and so forth. The Family Day of Prayer had its start with the AIC. The volunteers preceded us in the intensive use of fax and electronic mail. They, together with the sisters, made us realize the importance of preparing well the advisors of the lay groups and the Provincial Directors of the Daughters of Charity. The Marian Youth in Spain

moved the Superior General to organize youth groups on an international level. The missionary efforts of the Vincentian Marian Youth inspired us to think about seeking other forms of collaboration by our youth groups, especially on the missions. Some profitable experiences of collaboration in the formation of several groups of the family caused initiatives on our part towards joint formation on an international level, with months, weeks, and days of formation open to priests, brothers, sisters, and lay members of congregations of Vincentian inspiration.

In this paper, I have referred several times to a problem which seemed to get more serious with the passing of time: and therein is part of the problem, the passing of time so rapidly that one cannot answer the many letters that arrive, nor even give thanks for all the invitations and publications that come in. Just the study of and approval of the statutes of different national associations take an extraordinary amount of the Superior General's time. In the General Council we recently spoke of this, and we came to the conclusion that in the future, if we want to maintain contact with the greatest number possible of Vincentian Family groups in an organic and systematic way, we have to think about assigning one of the Assistants exclusively to this task; or naming a confrere to it, as is done in the case of the Director General of the Daughters of Charity. Two steps must be taken: drawing up an accurate description of the position and determining the financial possibility of covering the expenses involved in the many journeys and activities which the Superior General deems important for assuring good relations and development of the family.

(translated by John Kennedy, CM)