

Appreciative Discernment

by: Joseph V. Agostino, C.M.
Coordinator, PCGA 2016

Introduction

At the December 2014 meeting of the Preparatory Commission, we heard a presentation on a methodology which may be used to guide the discussions of the delegates at our upcoming General Assembly: Appreciative Discernment (AD).

At the heart of this process lies the belief that the usual starting point for discussion – dealing with problems or weaknesses – is a negative way to begin a conversation that we hope will lead to fruitful change.

It is much more effective to begin by asking ourselves: what do we do well and how can we grow these strengths throughout the Congregation? There is an expression that states, “Your point of view shapes your life.” When our starting point is the narrative of the richness of our Vincentian charism throughout its many cultural manifestations, then we are better poised to respond to the call of the poor today.

What Is Appreciative Discernment?

Appreciative Discernment is a process based on a theory of change called “Appreciative Inquiry.” Many articles have been written on its nature. Most of them are taken from a business or social perspective dealing with the organizational dynamics of such change. This methodology has one absolute principle: the “focus is on the positive because a positive focus leads to positive action” (*Appreciative Discernment*, William Nordenbrock, CPPS, p.4).

Rather than looking at it from a sociological perspective, I would like to place it in a Biblical and Vincentian one. The first step begins with the name. “Inquiry” is a term which can easily be replaced by “Discernment.”

“Discernment is the process by which we, individually and communally, seek to know the will of God and to make the positive choice to align our lives with the divine will” (Nordenbrock, p.1). As Saint Vincent de Paul said, “Oh Monsieur, what a happiness to will

nothing but what God wills, to do nothing but what is in accord with the occasion Providence presents, and to have nothing but what God in His Providence has given us” (*Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, 3:193).

Speaking of this providence, Jesus said to his disciples: “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). Appreciative Discernment begins with a disciple’s affirmation of the goodness of God, the beauty of creation, and the inherent dignity of men and women created in God’s image and likeness. We have been blessed, first with the gift of life. And that blessing has been augmented with the gift of God’s love made incarnate through Jesus and made irrevocable by the power of his Resurrection.

Starting from this perspective, AD seeks to approach change through a “search for the best in people, their organizations and communities, and the world around them” (*The Change Handbook*, p. 276). Thus it seeks to understand what gives life to us as a Congregation and to base our planning processes on our strengths.

This is not to say that we do not deal with problems. Nor is it an attempt to fabricate an idyllic picture of community life. When problems arise they are validated as a part of our lived experience as Vincentians and are reframed so that they may lead us to positive actions.

Examples of AD questions may include:

1. Describe a time in the life of your province which you considered a highpoint, when the confreres were most engaged and felt most alive and creative.
2. What do you most value about yourself and your ministry? What are the gifts with which God has blessed you for your service of the poor?
3. What are the dynamics/factors at work in your province when it is at its best?
4. Imagine your province ten years from now, when everything is just as you wish it would be. What is different from how it is now? How have you contributed to this dream?

How does AD Lead to Positive Change?

AD calls us to shift from problem solving to a positive analysis of what lies at the heart of our Vincentian charism and mission. In this way, it does not do a SWOT

(Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats) Analysis, but rather seeks to unearth the root causes of our strengths as a Congregation. The process, though simple, can lead to profound changes in the life of the Congregation from an individual confrere to the Curia in Rome.

An outline of this process follows.

I. Discovery: appreciating and valuing the best of “what is”

The starting point involves the affirmation of “best practices” that exist throughout the Congregation. We unveil our positive core, recognizing how God has blessed us. This is the most important step in the process because it focuses us on the future that we hope to create together as a Congregation. We have many instances of best practices throughout the world. Ramzi’s school of faith (Lebanon) and the experience of expanding from the Province of Australia to the Province of Oceania are but two examples worth studying. Discovery explores what gives us life and zeal for the Mission.

“A foundational belief that guides us is that our God will never leave us orphaned ... Our mission is defined and fulfilled when we fully bring the charism that we have received to the Church and the world” (Nordenbrock, p. 5).

II. Dream: envisioning what “might be”

As we study our best practices, we ask how we can build upon them and make them the “new norm” for our life as a Congregation. What might be? What would we look like if our communities embraced these practices on the local, provincial, and Congregational levels? What are the signs of the times and the voices of the poor calling us to be and to do? What is the world calling from us? By imagining our best possible future, we also acknowledge the work of grace in our lives.

III. Design: dialoging about what “should be”

What are the concrete steps that we can take, based on our strengths, to enable these new norms to become part of the fabric of our life as a Congregation? How can we embrace our future with courage and responsibility? What can we innovate to create our preferred future?

IV. Destiny: How can we strengthen our capacity as a Congregation to build hope and sustain our zeal for these new directions? Thus we turn our dreams into actions which will help us remain faithful to our charism.

An Application of the AD Model

Research has shown that the utilization of an AD model has created a culture or a “passion for service” within those organizations that have used it. Without a doubt, and in all humility, the Congregation has served and continues to serve well. But we also live by a Fifth Vow: the Vow of Silence! Throughout our many provinces most “best practices” are not identified, shared, or replicated. Our collective wisdom remains an underground river giving life to many yet untapped in its potential to be of even greater service to the poor. The following application may help us better understand how AD might unleash this wellspring of apostolic zeal.

I will apply the process to one of the three major themes of the upcoming General Assembly: solidarity among the provinces of the Congregation.

The context: in an article that appeared in the January-March 2015 issue of *Vincentiana*, we read:

Economic Solidarity is not a new concept in the Congregation. In our rule on poverty, Vincent de Paul wrote: “Members of the Congregation, individually and collectively, should understand that, following the example of the first Christians, all our belongings are common property...” (CR III, 3). The Constitutions specify this further: “The Congregation of the Mission possesses temporal goods for pastoral and community needs ... it administers these goods, however, as the patrimony of the poor, with solicitude, but with no attempt to grow rich” (C 148, § 1). They go on to say: “Provinces and houses should share their temporal goods with each other so that those who have more help those in need” (C 152, § 1). Such assistance is a demand of charity and justice. It is not simply an act of generosity. As such, it even challenges the most generous among us to give beyond our present levels of giving.

We are an international Congregation almost since the time of our foundation. But we will not become a global community until we have embraced solidarity both as individual confreres and as provincial entities. The realization of our true missionary vocation will come about as we grow in the lived experience of belonging not to a specific ministry, nor to a particular province, but to a Congregation that both encompasses and supersedes these realities. No matter where we are assigned, we are confreres called to the service of the Mission as friends who love one another deeply (cf. C 25, 1°) And as dear friends, we care

for each other's needs (Gay – Agostino, *Underlying Themes of General Assembly 2016: Multiculturalism, Solidarity, and Collaboration*, p. 142).

What might be one way to apply AD to this important area of the life of the Congregation? It might take the shape of the process outlined below.

I. Discovery

- a. We are members of an international Congregation. When have you most felt yourself a part of our worldwide community?
- b. What gifts, talents, and treasures have you and your province placed at the service of the Congregation beyond your borders?

II. Dream

- a. As we listen to our stories, what are the blessings and characteristics of who we are when we are at our best?
- b. What would it look like if these blessings or gifts were fully utilized and given for the benefit of the Congregation and the poor whom we serve?

III. Design

- a. How can we structure these realities, molding them into a Call to Action for the international Congregation?

IV. Destiny

- a. What mechanisms should we create to evaluate and sustain these interprovincial initiatives?

Why AD Works

Our engagement in the process of AD will enrich the quality of our relationships as confreres, as provinces, and as an international community. It does so by fostering a greater spirit of collaboration, which is born out of a new depth in our knowledge of one another.

Meeting one another as brothers – maybe for the first time – can be a liberating experience. AD is seen as an instrument that releases the following dynamics among its practitioners.

A. the freedom to be known in relationship

This comes from a depth of sharing that goes well beyond the roles we play. It offers us a chance to appreciate each other's unique dignity as a child of God and a son of Vincent. "Love, like that between brothers, should always be present among us ... For this reason there should be great mutual respect, and we should get along as good friends, always living in community" (CR VIII, 2).

B. the freedom to be heard

So often people speak at one another rather than listening to what is being said. The C&S remind us that “we should pay close attention to the opinions and needs of each confrere humbly and fraternally, thereby working to overcome the difficulties involved in community life...” (C 24, 3°).

C. the freedom to dream in community

Where there is no vision the people perish. Our Congregation should be a safe haven where confreres from diverse cultural backgrounds can together envision the future that Vincent challenged us to embrace. “And that, Sisters, was the beginning of your Company. As it wasn’t then what it is now, there’s reason to believe that it’s still not what it will be when God has perfected it as he wants it” (CCD, IX, 194).

D. the freedom to choose to contribute

When we collaborate together, exploring our options as a community, we make a deliberate choice to use our gifts in the service of one another. Our C&S, in speaking about our communal life together, remind us that “the evangelization of the poor, which gives to all our work a unity that does not stifle diverse talents and gifts but directs them to the service of the mission” (C 25, 2°). Thus, creativity is engendered and zeal is stoked.

E. the freedom to act with support

To know that other confreres and provinces care about what you do fosters solidarity and cooperation while encouraging innovation. It calls forth the best in all of us.

F. the freedom to be positive

We live in a world which all too often emphasizes the negative, the worst of the human condition. AD frees us to be people of the Word – understanding at ever deepening levels the presence and action of God in the midst of our story today.

AD is in some ways a tool for the taking of a prophetic stance in our world today. By shifting our perspectives, we are able to base our actions on principles, which are better suited to building up the Church, the Congregation, and the poor whom we serve. What follows are two such principles.

1. The principle of Systemic Change

By viewing our Congregation as a living, social system, we are better poised to understand the dynamics of the communities in which we live, those whom we serve, and even the world around us.

2. The principle of Collaboration

Inquiry and change happen simultaneously. By asking the right questions, we set the stage for what we discover, constructing a future that strengthens the bonds of our relationships with each other. Creating that image together is probably the most important aspect of the change we seek. The more positive the questions we ask, the more long-lasting and successful the change we seek.

Conclusion

Albert Einstein once said, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.” As confreres who live in the miracle of the Resurrection, we can only offer life and hope to those whom we serve. All of our relationships thrive when we see the best in others and when we acknowledge the gifts that God has given them. Thus, we affirm their desire to participate in the ongoing creation and redemption of the world in which Jesus stands at the center and all men and women live in the dignity with which they were created.

AD is not a panacea, by any means. But it can be a useful tool in our creation of a prophetic revolution of change. As was mentioned at the Meeting of Mission Superiors in Rome in September 2015, being prophetic means being countercultural at times. Only dead fish flow with the current. We are called to flow against the current, to be alive! “According to the varying circumstances of time and place, our work of evangelization ... should be faithful to *‘the kingdom, that is to say, the new world, the new order, the new manner of being, of living, of living in community, which the gospel inaugurates’*” (EN 23), (C 11).