

## Interview with the Superior General<sup>1</sup> G. Gregory Gay, CM

2 June 2016



1. As your term of office as Superior General comes to a close, how would you evaluate the present situation?

I imagine, from the sense of this question, that you are asking for my personal evaluation of these past years. First, I must say that I am satisfied with the way things unfolded during these past 12 years that I served as Superior General. I have no hesitation in saying that I have received much more than I have given. True, I am a little tired, but this tiredness means I have worked throughout all these years. Every night when I go to sleep, I experience a certain satisfaction that I am tired after having spent another day giving of myself, serving, and encouraging the members of the Congregation of the Mission and of the Vincentian Family.

2. What did you experience when the people referred to you as “the successor of Saint Vincent”?

To tell the truth, I was embarrassed. There were occasions when the Sisters would take my hands and kiss them or would embrace me and tell me that they felt as though they were embracing Saint Vincent and yes, I was embarrassed. I personally feel that I am far from being the holy man, the committed man, the poor man, the missionary that Saint Vincent was. Nevertheless, I have taken seriously the fact that I am the 23rd successor of Saint Vincent de Paul and I do my part by incarnating the charism that I discovered through my formation and my lived experiences among the people whom I have visited and with whom I have shared my life.

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<sup>1</sup> This interview was conducted by a member of CLAPVI.

### 3. What are the challenges that you believe the new Superior General ought to confront?

Two simple words. I believe the new Superior General will have to continue to confront the reality that we are an international community and will therefore have to break down the walls of provincialism. The second challenge revolves around the fact that we have become too comfortable. Therefore, we have to deepen our missionary spirit. Those two elements, our international and missionary character, are intimately related to one another. We receive our identity from the fact that we are members of the Congregation of the Mission and as such, we are members of an international and a missionary congregation.

### 4. What are the challenges for the Vincentian Family?

During these past 12 years we have taken many steps forward as a Vincentian Family and that forward movement is the result of the collaboration that exists among so many branches and in so many places. At times, it was members of the Congregation of the Mission, who promoted and encouraged said collaboration. At other times and in other places, it was the Daughters of Charity or members of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society or the Vincentian Volunteers (AIC). Nevertheless, deepening our understanding of the meaning of collaboration will continue to be a great challenge.

Here, perhaps it could be said that we must come to a better understanding of what it means to work together in a common mission, in a shared mission. There is too much individualism in the different branches of the Vincentian Family: much individualism in the Congregation of the Mission, and, at times, in the Company of the Daughters of Charity and the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. In other words, there is much individualism and little desire to minister together. We impose “our focus” over the common desire to evangelize and to serve our lords and masters, the poor, in whom we discover the person of Jesus Christ.

### 5. What things remain to be done?

As a General Council, we have attempted to fulfill all the Lines of the Action that were recommended by the General Assemblies of 2004 and 2010. These are things that the Congregation requested

of us (the Superior General and the Council), things that we were asked to put in motion. I would have liked to have given greater consolidation to the international missions and also would have liked to have given a better formation to those who volunteered for those missions and to those who were appointed as local superiors of those missions.

With regard to the Vincentian Family, I wish I had had the opportunity to create different centers of the Vincentian Family in those places where the members have been most active. For example, a center in Asia, preferably in India, because there is much collaboration among the members of the Vincentian Family in that region; another center in Latin America, perhaps in Peru or Mexico or in some place in Brazil, where there is so much active collaboration; another center in Africa where there is an urgency and a need to promote the Vincentian Family.

Another reality that remains to be confronted involves a greater understanding and commitment with regard to some programs that were initiated in 2005. Here I am referring to a systemic-change approach to ministry, a concept that still needs to be understood and accepted in the wider Vincentian Family. In my opinion, this approach is one of the best ways to accomplish our mission of charity. We must frame our charitable activity in terms of the promotion of justice (in other words, we must frame our activity in accord with the spirit of Frédéric Ozanam and the social doctrine of the Church).

From a financial perspective, I would have liked to have set up some patrimonial funds, not so much for individual provinces, but rather a patrimony fund for initial and ongoing formation (for the use of those provinces on the path to development). I also would have liked to have set up another fund for emergencies, thus having available funds when disasters arise in the various provinces. We have always attempted to contribute something when such situations occur, but our resources are very limited. It would be wonderful to be able to develop such a fund so that we could respond more effectively during times of crisis.

Another matter concerns those confreres in difficulty. Even though we have made strides in dealing with those situations, there is still much to do in order to regularize those situations in such a way that

redound to the good of the individual confrere and the particular province. This is especially necessary at this time where there is great suspicion with regard to religious life, suspicions that are caused because of our inappropriate action in various situations.

**6. What has given you the greatest satisfaction as Superior General?**

My greatest satisfaction has been that I have had the opportunity to experience ways in which our charism is being lived in all the different places that I visited. I know that many have and do criticize me (including members of my council). They say that I travel too much. But, in reality, that has given me great satisfaction because it has enabled me to witness the ways in which our charism is being lived. At the same time, my travels have given me the opportunity to animate and encourage the members of the Congregation of the Mission and the members of the larger Vincentian Family to continue to give witness to our mission of charity and evangelization.

**7. Besides the election of a new Superior General, what else do you believe will occur during the General Assembly?**

Hopefully we will be able to deepen our understanding of the primary theme of the Assembly which is evangelization, as well as deepen our understanding of the various ways in which we can continue to impact the world with our charism. In order to do this, I believe we must deepen our understanding of those themes that I have already mentioned: our international and missionary character. I have no hesitation in saying that the Church has many needs.

As Superior General, I would like to be able to respond to all the requests that the bishops present to us, especially the requests that come from our Vincentian bishops who minister in difficult situations and who do not experience the support/accompaniment of the Congregation of the Mission. I also believe there is a need to insist on the formation of our own and thus cultivate this missionary spirit from the initial stage of formation. When I speak with our seminarians, I discover that they are being formed in this or that province but, at times, I wonder if they are being formed for the whole Congregation of the Mission. In other words, are they being formed to be available to go anywhere in the world, even India (as

Vincent would say)? At the present time, instead of India, I would say even Papua New Guinea, Tefé, Beni (Bolivia), Alaska, Punta Arenas, all those places where we have international missions; even Chad, Angola, Mozambique (which is the poorest province in terms of personnel and finances). I would like to dialogue about the need to move out of our comfort zone and to go to those places where the Church needs us (thus responding to those needs from the perspective of our charism).

#### **8. Do you have some message to give to the Congregation of the Mission?**

My dear confreres, perhaps you will regret having asked me that question. My message is that we must be what we are meant to be; we have to deepen our identity as members of the Congregation of the Mission. In our initial formation, as well as in our ongoing formation, we have to deepen our understanding of the missionary spirit. If we want to respond positively to the petitions of the Superior General (requests for the international missions and for the most abandoned provinces), then we must be willing to go to the peripheries of our provinces, to the most abandoned places.

At times, we are satisfied with the things that we do in common and yes, we have reason to be grateful for those accomplishments. But we can still do much more. We can reach out to those living beyond the borders of our province of origin. I believe that having formators imbued with a missionary spirit will enable our charism to be passed on in an integral manner to each one of our candidates. As a result of that formation, these young men will have no fear of leaving their province, no fear of ministering in a place that is different from the place in which they were born. We are missionaries and this is one of our greatest challenges.

Another aspect of my message, and this I address particularly to the Visitors, would be to improve communication with the General Curia.

These, then, are the challenges that all of you face. I hope that all of us will have the courage to move out of our comfort zone and to go on mission, be that a mission of your province, an international mission, or another province that has need of more missionaries.

**9. Can you tell us about your plans when you complete your service as Superior General?**

My term of office will be concluded on 5 July, the date that we are scheduled to elect a new Superior General. The first thing that I am going to do is spend some time with my family and with the members of my Province of Origin, which is Philadelphia. After that I have already signed up to participate in a program called, Ministering to the Ministers, located in San Antonio, Texas. This Institute is administered by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the program itself will continue for four months (August 15-December 10). I plan to update myself theologically, spiritually, and psychologically. I also want to take care of my health because I know that I am out of shape. I have not had the opportunity to exercise on a regular basis. There have not been enough hours in the day for me to walk, which is something that I love to do and my eating habits have not been good. Wherever I go, people want to celebrate and offer me wonderful food. Because I want to honor my host, I find it impossible to refuse such hospitality. I believe this is the way that we should all share around the table. During this sabbatical, I will engage in a process of discernment with regard to God's will for my future ministry. As Superior General of the Congregation, I have the right to choose the province to which I will belong. In this regard, I am going to take time to discern with others what it is that God desires of me. In this way, I hope to be able to respond in a more intentional way and perhaps become involved in one of the international missions. This is a decision that I will make, perhaps at the end of October, so that by the beginning of the new year, I will be able to begin some ministry of serving and evangelizing the poor in that place where God is calling me.

**10. Anything else?**

I want to thank the members of CLAPVI for the support that they have given, not only to me, but also to the Assistants General, who have visited the various provinces or vice-provinces. We have experienced a great support from all of you. As I stated before, perhaps we could have deepened those relationships through better communication among the provinces and the Secretary General or with the Superior General himself or his Assistants. We are offering

the new Superior General and his Council a series of suggestions that we hope will better the relationship between the Superior General and his Council, between the Curia and the provinces. We want to provide the Assistants with an opportunity to come to know the provinces during the first three years and then during the second three years to make a formal visitation of the various provinces. This would mean that we would continue what we decided in the previous Assembly, namely, to elect five Assistants, one of whom would be the Vicar General, all of whom would assist the Superior General with the canonical visitations.

I hope that we elect a Superior General and a General Council that desire to move forward the processes that have been initiated through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Also, as stated previously, I hope there is a desire to deepen our understanding of our missionary and international character, to deepen our understanding of a common or shared mission with the Vincentian Family, as well as with other individuals, who collaborate in the process of evangelization, on behalf of our sisters and brothers, who are most poor, who are our lords and masters.

May God bless all of you and once again thank you for your support and forgive me for the times that I have not taken the time to understand you.

Translated: Charles T. Plock, CM