

Significant Events XLII Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission

by: Juan Corpus Delgado, CM

During the time from 27 June to 15 July 2016, the Congregation of the Mission held its XLII General Assembly at *DePaul University*, Chicago (USA). The Office of Communication presented a daily summary of events on the various social networks. Also, on four different occasions, some of the Catholic news agencies reported on the deliberations of the Assembly.

I do not intend here to write anew the Chronicle of the Assembly; rather, I want to highlight some of the more significant events and provide a context for the Final Document of the Assembly.

I. SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

1.- The General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission was held in the city of Chicago (USA), at DePaul University that is administered by the Vincentian Missionaries of the Western Province of the United States. This University was established at the end of the 19th century and at the present time some 22,000 students are enrolled in that institution. This was the first time that the Congregation held its Assembly **outside Europe**. All the previous Assemblies were held in either Paris or Rome. The decision to hold the Assembly in Chicago was made in light of the 200th anniversary of the arrival of the Vincentians to that country. At the same time, the decision also highlighted the international character of the Congregation.

2.- As customary, the Superior General presented his report on the morning of 29 June. Father **Gregory Gay** began by thanking the Lord for all the blessings that he had received during the past 12 years during which he served as Superior General. In the context of the celebration of the 400th anniversary of the birth of our charism, Father

emphasized the fact that even though we are a small congregation, nevertheless our spiritual identity is vibrant because there are always poor people who are requesting our attention and assistance. Father presented some recommendations to the whole Congregation: (a) through prayer and contemplation let us deepen our experience of God and of Christ, incarnated in the person of the poor; (b) let us remain faithful to our roots, that is, to the virtues that Vincent gave us as a heritage, to the Constitutions and the commitments that animate each province and local community; (c) let us deepen our understanding of the international character of the Congregation and the spirit of collaboration (sharing personnel and material resources) and let us do this on the provincial level and in union with the wider Vincentian Family; (d) let us overcome the temptation of routine and comfort and, therefore, let us engage in a mission of “boldness and go out to the peripheries.” From the perspective of our charism and creativity let us open ourselves to the word so that we might be more effective in our service on behalf of those who are poor.

Father Gregory also presented two initiatives that need further study and reflection: [1] the possibility of creating an international and intercultural theologate in Africa that would support those provinces that have few vocations; [2] the creation of an international mission in Northern Africa (Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania), where the residents are primarily Muslims.

3.- Father Joseph Geders, the Treasurer General, presented his report with graphs and charts. He did not focus on numbers, but analyzed the economic situation of recent years and perspectives for the future. He insisted on the financial solvency and the sustainability of the provinces, that is, an ability to sustain the provinces as a result of their own resources or through a shared solidarity. At the present time, 60% of the provinces are unable to maintain themselves financially and it does not appear that in the near future this situation is going to change in any radical manner. Father concluded by highlighting the fact that if we want to be effective in our ministry on behalf of the poor, then we need permanent financial funds. In order for that to happen, we need to foment new forms of solidarity and mutual support and we need to do that in a creative and responsible manner.

4.- Election of the Superior General, Vicar General, and Assistants General – Bishop Varghese Thottamkara, CM, bishop of the Apostolic Vicariate of Nekemte in Ethiopia, directed the retreat prior to the election of the Superior General. He shared with the delegates two reflections on the importance of discernment in order to discover the voice of God (which, in turn, makes possible the right election of an individual). After celebrating the Eucharist and invoking the Holy Spirit, the presence of 113 electors was verified. The election process was begun and Father Tomaz Mavrič was chosen to be the 25th Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission. On the morning of 7 July, Father Javier Álvarez was reelected as Vicar General. Then on 8 July, Father Aarón Gutiérrez (Province of Mexico), Zeracristos Yosief (Province of Saint Justin De Jacobis/Eritrea), Mathew Kallammakal (Province of North India) and Miles Heinen (Western Province of the United States) were elected as Assistants General.

5.- Liturgy and prayer, important moments in every gathering of the missionaries, were especially joyful as a result of the careful planning of the commission responsible for providing the resources for such fruitful participation. Much of the music was done in accord with the Taizé tradition and various musical instruments accompanied the singing. Booklets had been prepared that facilitated our morning and evening prayers. The university's musicians and choir accompanied the participants in our more significant celebrations. All of this planning enabled the spiritual rhythm of the Assembly to be characterized by liturgical prayer and celebration.

6.- The various sessions of the Assembly included times of witness from different individuals. On the morning of 29 June, Sister Kathleen Appler, DC, Superioress General of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, addressed the Assembly. The seminarians and students from different provinces throughout the world presented video messages to the delegates. Individual confreres and various local communities, Daughters of Charity, members of the Vincentian Family, Bishops, so many different individuals assured the delegates of their prayers.

7.- On 1 July, Father John Rybolt, presented the commemorative volume that had been written as a summary of the *History of the Congregation of the Mission* (this volume included many photographs).

Each province was gifted with a copy of this volume. At the same time, the author thanked the Superior General and the Provinces of the United States for their personal and financial support in making this work a reality. At the present time, this work is being translated into other languages.

8.- Father Tomaž Mavrič wanted to maintain an open dialogue with the members of the Assembly. This dialogue took place on the morning of 15 July. The Superior General invited the delegates to speak freely and openly, to express their concerns and suggestions and to do this so that the General Council might serve the Congregation in the best possible manner. During the dialogue various concerns were expressed and suggestions were offered and all of these were carefully noted by the Superior General, who expressed his gratitude to the delegates for this exchange of ideas. Father Tomaž concluded this dialogue by encouraging the participants to promote the same type of dialogue in their provinces and local communities.

II. FOUR REALITIES THAT TOUCHED THE HEART OF THE DELEGATES

During every General Assembly there are events that go beyond the various themes that are being discussed and that touch the heart of those who have gathered together. Here I highlight four events that seem to have touched our hearts in a very special manner.

1.- Holland

During the morning session of 13 July, the moderator invited Father Gregory Gay and Father Harrie Jaspers to approach the presiders' table. Here I refer to the events as narrated in the official minutes for that day.

Then Father Gregory GAY and Father Harrie JASPERS came to the front table. Father Gregory GAY talked about how, in 2015, the missionaries of Holland had formed one community that is directly linked to the General Curia. The confreres of the Province of Holland have made a big impact with their missionary zeal throughout the Congregation. Their work has been especially significant in the Provinces of: Fortaleza, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Central America, China, and Congo. Father Harrie JASPERS presented how the Province of

Holland has made the transition into a community and the means it has foreseen to keep the Vincentian Charism alive in Holland by working with other groups, the laity, and, especially, the Center of Saint Vincent de Paul. Father Silvio Alfredo BATISTA MITOZO, Visitor of the Province of Fortaleza, thanked the Dutch confreres, who had arrived in Brazil in 1927, for their missionary spirit, which was present in the work there of the formation of the clergy and in the missions of the Amazon. Father MEMHERU Mekonnen Menkir, Visitor of Ethiopia, highlighted the missionaries' commitment to inculturation in the land where Saint Justin De Jacobis had arrived in 1839 and the effort they made to learn the language of the peoples and work closely with them. Then, the Visitor of Indonesia, Father Robertus WIJANARKO, gave, on his behalf, a recognition of the missionary activity of the confreres from 1923, a vibrant spirit that is still enjoyed today in the Province of Indonesia. Father José Edilberto LAZO RODRÍGUEZ, Visitor of Central America, also remembered the work done by the missionaries of Holland and the love of the confreres for the land and people, and how their witness gave hope to the confreres there. Father Yohanes KUSNO BINTORO, Visitor of China, pointed to the witness of some missionaries from Holland who were Bishops in China, especially, Frans SCHRAVEN, whose process of beatification is in course and who now is known as the patron of those who suffer from sexual abuse. He remembered the work of many missionaries who always united mission charity to their evangelization. The emotion, filled with gratitude, that brought tears to the eyes of some of the confreres of the Assembly, led to a spontaneous intervention from Father Henry Miguel KRISTEN. Father Bernardin YOGA MONGU, Visitor of Congo, brought the tribute of the missionary action of the confreres of Holland to a close, referring to a work done together with the confreres of Belgium in his country, mentioning their dedication to formation and the development of the Pigmyes, considered the poorest of the poor. After listening to the testimony of those provinces, where the missionaries had been so prominent, the Superior General promised Father Harrie JASPERS and the members of his community the prayers of all the Assembly and of the entire Congregation, while at the same time asking his community to pray for all of us. Father Tomaz MAVRIČ expressed his hope that one day new vocations would flourish again in the land of Holland.

The words of gratitude expressed by the Superior General ended with a gift to remind the community of Holland of today's tribute to their missionary contributions, given on behalf of the Assembly, the Congregation of the Mission, and the Vincentian Family. The Superior General and Father Harrie JASPERS, shared a fraternal embrace, while the Assembly came to its feet in an emotional round of applause.

2. Cameroon

On 6 February 2016, Cameroon was established as a Vice-Province and Father Clément Victorien Ondoua Kono, became the first Vice-Visitor. Cameroon had been part of the Paris Province. Cameroon is a young and multinational province: there are 40 missionaries (five different nationalities) who form five local communities (one of which is in the Republic of Central Africa). The confreres minister in parishes (mostly rural parishes) and serve those persons who are poor. They also accompany the Daughters of Charity and the various branches of the Vincentian Family. There are some 30 seminarians and that number would be even greater, but the vice-province cannot receive all those who present themselves because it lacks financial resources. Indeed, the main challenge for the vice-province is to become financially self-sufficient. Other challenges are the formation of candidates, ongoing formation, and providing the opportunity for some missionaries to specialize in different areas of ministry.

3. Vietnam

Fathers Augustin Gia NGUYEN HUU and Gérard DU TRAN CONG, respectively Vice-Visitor and Delegate of Vietnam, spoke to the delegates about the reality of the vice-province. They thanked the confreres for their prayers and support. The history of this vice-province began in 1955 with the arrival of the first Vincentian missionaries (missionaries who were not able to enter China). At the present time there are 77 priests, one deacon, four brothers and 150 students and seminarians residing in 11 houses. Their ministry is focused on formation and ministering in those areas that enable their charism to be discovered and embraced by others. They are working in six different dioceses, going out to the most remote and difficult areas, at times, risking their own lives. The vice-province has provided missionaries for the international missions of the Congregation.

4. Nigeria

The delegates united in prayer and expressed their solidarity to the Province of Nigeria as they recalled the tragic death of six seminarians on 22 February 2016. The Visitor, Father Cyril Nnamdi Mbata, thanked the delegates for their support and prayers (expressions of that support arrived from every part of the world almost immediately after the news of the accident was reported). Father spoke about the reaction of missionaries in Nigeria, the family members of the deceased, and the faithful men and women who knew these seminarians and/or had a relationship with the Vincentian Family. Missionaries from Ireland established the presence of the Vincentians in that country and today there are ten houses and some 80 young men in various stages of formation.

III. THE FINAL DOCUMENT OF THE XLII GENERAL ASSEMBLY

As a result of a decision of the Superior General and the Preparatory Commission, a decision that was affirmed by the members of the Assembly, the work of the Assembly did not flow from a Working Document. The work of the Assembly was based on a process of Appreciative Discernment, a methodology that encouraged dialogue and an exchange of experiences among the delegates. The Synthesis and Redaction Commission put into writing those guidelines and commitments that would give a direction to the ministry of the Congregation during the next six years.

The Visitors and delegates, grouped together by continent, were entrusted with the task of making the lines of action more concrete and in accord with the reality of their geographical area.

Another Commission organized and presented the various postulata that were then discussed and studied by the Assembly.

The 2016 General Assembly produced three distinct documents.

1.- FOUR HUNDRED YEARS OF FIDELITY TO THE CHARISM AND THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

This document was developed by the Synthesis and Redaction Commission and is based on the discussions that took place in the various work groups and during the different plenary sessions of the Assembly. This document was given to the delegates on 9 July and was

discussed in small groups and during plenary sessions (11-12 July). As a result of those discussions, a second edition of the Document was presented to the delegates on 14 July and further changes were incorporated into the text which was approved by the Assembly on 15 July. Following the methodology of see-judge-act and in light of our charism, the delegates proposed various commitments in order to respond to the Church's call to engage in a new evangelization.

2.- LINES OF ACTION AND COMMITMENTS OF THE CONTINENTAL GROUPS

These are five brief documents developed by the members of the Assembly when they came together in continental groups (geographical areas of the various Conferences of Visitors: APVC – Conference of Visitors of Asia and the Pacific; CEVIM – Conference of Visitors of Europe and the Middle East; CLAPVI – Conference of Visitors of Latin America; COVIAM – Conference of Visitors of Africa and Madagascar; NCV – National Conference of Visitors of the United States). These documents were redacted and approved by their respective continental groups. These documents were incorporated into the documentation of the Assembly in order to express the support of all the delegates for those commitments.

3.- FINAL DOCUMENTS THAT WERE APPROVED

The General Assembly, as the supreme authority of the Congregation of the Mission, in addition to electing the Superior General, the Vicar General and the Assistants General, can *enact laws or Statutes, and Decrees, for the good of the Congregation, with due regard for the principle of subsidiarity. Statutes which are not explicitly abrogated remain in force.* Decrees must be explicitly confirmed in order to remain in force. The General Assembly modified the content of Statutes 68.1 and 89.2, confirmed the three decrees approved by the previous Assembly, and approved one postulatum.

In light of the celebration of the 400th anniversary of the origin of the Mission and the Charities (1617-2017), and as pointed out by the General Assembly, the Apostle Paul indicates the path that we are to follow: *with regard to what we have attained, continue on the same course* (Philippians 3:16).

Translated: Charles T. Plock, CM