

The Congregation of the Mission “Apart” in Chicago

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It was in Chicago, Illinois, USA, “the Garden City,” “the Windy City” that the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission took place outside Europe for the first time in its history.

In moving away from Paris and Rome for its 42nd Assembly, the members of the Company “came away” effectively in order to live this time of mercy, discernment, communion, conversion, evangelization, and abandonment together to Divine Providence in a different cultural context.

Thanks to the environment and especially to the cultural diversity of the delegates, each person was able to experience, once again, the transcultural nature of the Vincentian charism.

The Primacy of Mercy

The convening of this Assembly was seen as the work of God’s mercy: a mercy that was active in the decisions confreres made in choosing delegates to participate in it. This is the way of incarnation desired by the Lord to appoint those who would take part in this unique and decisive meeting for the whole Congregation for the next six years.

This mercy was also that of the participants towards each other. The differences in points of view, in reasoning, in cultures, in experience and age did not reduce the participants to disrespect or obstruction. The same applied to speeches in form and substance. Everyone was received as he was and treated with respect, but above all with love and patience, in a good spirit and with humour, even if there was sometimes a little tension and impatience.

Mercy will ultimately be what is asked of all the members of the Congregation. The Final Document and the election of members of the General Curia may disappoint some confreres. However, everyone

is invited to enter into what is an act of mercy in order to forgive the impertinence of the choices of the Lord and the delegates who were aided by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was invoked at the beginning of each session.

In order for mercy to be ever more fruitful, is it not necessary that each confrere, each community, each province, and the whole Congregation discover its own poverty every day and then renew its availability to begin listening to the Word of God, the Church, people who are poor and marginalised in order to identify what truly pleases God and what is the most Vincentian way to respond?

Ways of Discernment

The General Assembly was experienced as a long and deep process of discernment to hear the call of God, the Poor, and the Church. The risk of hearing oneself speak, of asking questions that nobody asks, of being turned towards the past or to the future without inhabiting the present is always there. Discernment functioned on at least four levels: the process of working, the signs of the times, challenges and ways to address them, how leadership might implement lines of action.

Working arrangements evolved throughout the Assembly. They were refined at each session. The starting pattern and the approach to the work during the sessions changed to adapt to each new development or direction that appeared in the work of the small groups and in plenary sessions.

In identifying the positive aspects in our world, in the Church, and in the Congregation, in welcoming the related challenges of our time and in the future, delegates sought the most appropriate ways to respond to them. The path to the Final Document seemed like a long, trying period of gestation: a pregnancy that was, still, the fruit of a real engagement of ideas, experiences, aspirations, and needs, but sometimes fear and apprehension as well. This document had to respond to two requirements: the collection, synthesis, and prioritization of all the contributions; and with clarity, accuracy, and brevity in the presentation. These two criteria led to the voting of a readable document reminiscent of our Constitutions and Statutes, setting out lines of action or themes for direction and describing the implementation of concrete commitments.

The election of the Superior General, the Vicar General, and Assistants General was one of the three high points of the Assembly. The proposals of the Visitors, the discussions of the Continental Conferences, the numerous exchanges in plenary sessions, the day of recollection, and the various informal sharings helped us to receive from God, the Church, the Congregation, and the poor the leadership team. If, therefore, the governance of the Congregation at the level of the General Curia is a gift of God, how do we allow it to realise concretely the international and intercultural character of the whole Company in each of the provinces through dialogue, listening, and obedience?

Signs of Communion

How beautiful it is to be gathered in the unity of the faith and of the communion of the Vincentian charism beyond ethnic and cultural differences, difference in age and ministries, the variety of political, economic, and religious situations in countries and continents, differences in the way of understanding and living out in concrete ways the faith of the Church and the Vincentian charism, the peculiarity of personal and provincial experiences! During the meeting, several signs of unity and communion were palpable and on display.

This communion took place in the common celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours and the Eucharist, times of reflection and sharing in small groups and in the plenary session, at meals, in the moments of impromptu friendly meetings, free time, and in moving between the working areas.

This communion was also noticeable in this common will to be attentive to the signs of the times, to stay true to the heritage received from Saint Vincent, live justice, fraternity, solidarity, sharing concretely together human and financial resources, and other skills and expertise.

The concern to respond to the demands of the diocesan churches in the areas of formation, pastoral care, and mission was also an expression of the communion of the "poor" Company with the local churches. It was reaffirmed that the horizon of the Company was not itself but God, the Church, and the poor.

Another place of communion is formation and mission *ad intra*. Commitments to establish common centres of formation, the creation of joint missions, interprovincial and continental communities, as well as the international “Solidarity Fund” project, all contributing in some way to respond to the various forms of poverty of the provinces, were also visible signs and intentions of this communion.

The willingness to pool resources would thus allow the Company to deal with its own deficiencies and lacunae more effectively. One of these poverties is precisely the difficulty of welcoming confreres from different socio-cultural and geographical areas into communities. It is truly necessary that the sharing of resources be no longer unilateral. This is already effective in some provinces, but these are isolated cases and there are still large reservations in many provinces and communities.

The Assembly also wanted to stress the communion with other members of the Vincentian Family. It highlighted communion in the charism. It profoundly stressed the fact that other members of the Vincentian Family are not primarily or merely associates but truly agents of the Vincentian charism, each according to his/her own identity. It is the same in the missionary field. Not only was there this desire that other members participate fully in a common mission, but that this involvement be not only in terms of performance or collaboration, but really in consideration, development, decision-making, and evaluation. If such is the case, there really is a need for conversion of the view and stance of the Congregation in relation to other branches of the Vincentian Family. Since the other members of the Vincentian Family are agents of the Vincentian charism, as well as the Congregation of the Mission, is it not to be reformulated again today?

The Need for Conversion

Fidelity to the Vincentian charism in moving towards personal holiness, the formation of the clergy, the service of the poor, living by missionary virtues in the diversity and cultural change of our time requires continual renewal. This renewal appeared during the Assembly not only in terms of returning to the sources or the founding instincts but also in terms of creativity in relation to the new poverties that have emerged, and to the manner of missionary life, community life, and governance. The Chicago Assembly was the place where the

difficulty of living community and the mission concretely in the current international and actual multicultural context of the world, the Church, and society was fully revealed.

The danger of provincialism emerged very quickly during the interventions and exchanges. It is probably linked to a style of government and individualistic culture. From hyper-centralization, the Company has moved to hyper-decentralization, each province claiming its independence, exhibiting its cultural and historical distinctiveness, drawing attention to the legal and political particularity of the country or continent in which it is located, not hesitating to underline its autonomy in financial or human resources, but, fortunately, also making known its fragilities, its poverty, and its needs. Now between these two extremes there is a real need to find fair criteria for more collegial decisions between the Superior General and the Visitors.

Day by day, the General Assembly became a place and a moment of conversion. Fear, reticence, and suspicion gave way to Faith and Hope. To live and to give credible witness, each province has become aware of the need to share its wealth reciprocally so that no one is in need and that all suspicion of paternalism disappears. The scandal of provinces rich in financial or human resources while others are poor financially and humanly posed a question. At the end of the Assembly, how can we not welcome these commitments from the richest to the poorest? Now these affective and intellectual conversions must become effective and practical. If this conversion remains theoretical and intentional, what then will be the credibility of the Congregation of the Mission for the proclamation of the Good News and its commitment to greater justice?

Mutual Evangelization

The everyday life of confreres, communities, and provinces is sometimes made up of withdrawal into oneself, of incomprehension, and even the rejection of others, accompanied by the elevation of pastoral, missionary, and community practice as an absolute and valid norm everywhere and for all. Sometimes this focus on one's own reality leads to blindness, being judgmental, and even the condemnation of ministries and confreres. This navel-gazing sometimes creates arguments and quarrels that distance one from the heart of the Congregation and its Mission.

These three weeks of the Assembly allowed one to listen to others, to share community and missionary experiences and practices, to confront pain and joys, and to discuss projects. One discovers that elsewhere other practices exist claiming the same Vincentian charism or that confreres share the same problems and look for new solutions. All this has led to learning from others, to relativize one's own claims, and to evangelize one another. Even if this mutual evangelization was diffuse, it nevertheless retains its relevance and its acuity.

It became clear during the Assembly that the social, political, cultural, religious, and economic context contributes to shaping deeply the face of Saint Vincent and to determining the colour of the Vincentian charism in each epoch and in each region. Hence, does this variety not make it urgent to restore primacy to Christ, to the Vincentian Charism, and to the Poor in everything?

Abandonment to Divine Providence

Given the inherent limitations of human nature, the numerous places where the Congregation is present, the beginning and the end of the Assembly presented as an invitation to abandonment to Divine Providence which never errs in its designs, as Saint Vincent taught us. Nothing was in play beforehand and no certainty was safe.

If some began the Assembly with certainties and convictions, and others with a certain apprehension and question marks, the end made it possible, with a necessary re-reading, to see that God himself was at work. It is he who animates, structures, marks out, and directs the entire Company in its Assemblies.

This active presence of God was confirmed in the emergence of lines of action and the choice of government. Even if these two points could not entirely satisfy every member of the Congregation, and the delegates first of all, it is clear that they must be received as a work of God and of the Congregation. In this respect, since the Holy Spirit has presided over these decisions, since the members of the Congregation have made an act of trust in choosing delegates, what is expected of all, and of the delegates primarily, is the humble reception of the results of the Assembly in a spirit of abandonment to Holy Providence. Even if a

thirst remains in relation to the decisions of the Assembly, how are the lines of action going to impact on the life of the provinces, communities, and confreres with regard to their community and missionary projects?

Shortcomings/Insufficiencies

Although it is impossible to make a global and systematic analysis of the reality of the world in which we live, there are points that would have deserved special attention. This concerns the religious context and the climatic context. The references to these two challenges were very discreet. It also concerns the clarification of the missionary domain specific to the Company and within the Vincentian Family.

On the religious level, one sees on every continent a return to paganism, to cultures that are under evangelized, that do not know Christ and the obligations of the Christian faith. This lack of knowledge, even ignorance, is very widespread. This context, which recalls the position of the early Church, tests the relevance of our missionary, pastoral, and sacramental proposals and decisions.

The second aspect is the multiplication of churches and Christians called "evangelicals," "born again," or "Pentecostals." Even if the causes of this phenomenon are not always linked to the life, practices, and institutions of the Church, each member of the Congregation of the Mission cannot consider this movement as marginal or neglect to question his own means of Community and missionary witness. Millions of men and women who thirst are not adequately taken into account in our proposals for evangelization and for service of the very poor.

The third aspect is that of militant or political Islamism. The Congregation of the Mission has a great missionary tradition in predominantly Muslim countries. Today, Islam is no longer a remote reality or confined to a precise geographical area. It is present in many countries where the Congregation is on mission; hence the challenge to meet and dialogue with our Muslim brothers and sisters, the challenge to respond to Christians attracted by Islam or to Muslims provoked by Christianity, the challenge to respond to Islamophobia as a reaction to the violent attitudes of some who claim to be Muslim.

Where climate is concerned, it is a truism to affirm the link between climate justice and social justice. The Encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, of May 2015 and the Paris Conference on Climate Change “COP 21” of December 2015 have shown sufficiently the link between the global climatic situation and creation, and indeed the growth of poverty, and climate injustice and social injustice. It is impossible today to speak of social justice without climate justice. The issue of climate and its impact on the poorest is a missionary and pastoral field in which the Congregation of the Mission cannot economize.

Concerning the clarification of the missionary domain of the Congregation, the Assembly did not address the question of the primacy of evangelization of the poor over the service of the poor. There is often a certain ambiguity when the Congregation of the Mission speaks of its mission to the poor. The expression used is sometimes the “service of the poor,” whereas the more specific is “the evangelization of the poor.” The service of the poor comprises the mission of evangelization. However, is this not the domain of the Company of the Daughters of Charity? While it is certain that this service does not happen without evangelization, it is also true that the very nature of the Daughters of Charity is first and foremost the service of the poor as a place and means of evangelization. Evangelization and the service of the poor are really two sides of the same reality, but is the Congregation not essentially for evangelization without neglecting corporeal service?

Prospects

Back down from the “mountain of the transfiguration,” carried along by the experiences and results of the Assembly, the Company can continue to let itself be enkindled by the breath of the Spirit and to be governed by Christ Jesus. It is this Spirit that inspires each one to translate his belonging to the universal Church and the Congregation, beyond differences, concretely into action. It is this Christ who invites us to leave behind self-satisfaction and one’s own frontiers and to effectively join the peripheries of the World, the Church, and the Congregation of the Mission. Perhaps the next General Assembly will take place in Oceania, Asia, or Africa.

Translated: Paschal Scallon, CM