

The Government of the Congregation according to the new Constitutions

*By Yves DANJOU, c.m.
Province of Paris*

Government is an important part of the particular law of the Congregation of the Mission. It (the Congregation) is the image of the Church whose hierarchical structures are well known. But it has the obligation to be particularly well organised because of its status as a Society of Apostolic Life where the emphasis is placed on the apostolate set in place by its superiors and maintained by community life.

The first rules of the Congregation

Let us quickly recall that the present organisation of the Congregation is rooted in its history. St. Vincent was conscious, from the beginning, that he was setting up an association of missionaries which was to last. The contract of foundation of the Congregation of the Mission, established on 17 April 1625, is explicit: "That, following the death of the said M. de Paul, in order to continue the said work, to the greater glory of God and the edification and salvation of the neighbour, those who have been admitted to the said work and have persevered in it until that time will elect, by the majority of votes, from amongst themselves, one whom they deem fit to be their superior" (1). The bull of erection, "Salvatoris Nostri", promulgated by Urban VII on 12 January 1633, takes up the same themes while clarifying the powers of the Superior General a little more. (2)

St. Vincent was conscious of the importance of setting up the organisation of the Congregation well. Towards 1635, at a time when a severe illness puts his life in danger, he questions himself about what he might regret most; "Asking myself about what might distress me somewhat, I found that there was nothing, save that we have not yet set down our rules". (3) He undertook, from that moment on, to set down a rule by asking those around him and encouraging practices already in place in the communities.

In 1642, the favourable time seemed to have come. The King had just accepted the bull "Salvatoris Nostri". One year previously, the Archbishop of Paris had approved the use of vows in the Congregation of the Mission. St. Vincent, therefore, convoked the first General Assembly which opened at St. Lazare on the 13 October 1642. (4) Consisting of 12 members, this assembly took time to consider the rules relating to the Superior General and his

succession. It was foreseen that he would be aided in his office by two Assistants, that he could intervene, either himself or through the offices of others, in all the important affairs of the Company and that the assembly would be convoked every three years. As well as that, the houses were divided into four provinces.

Affirming the practices.

The first Assembly is important for the government of the Congregation because it 'consecrated' the supreme authority of the General Assembly, its duty to meet according to arranged times and its right to elect the Superior General who has, as his mission, to unite and organise the Congregation. These points will be filled out or clarified in what follows but, even until to the present, they constitute the basic elements of our administration.

St. Vincent knew that this assembly would be determinate for the future of the Company. He proposes his resignation as Superior General - out of humility, certainly, but also to ensure the good running and the future of the institution he had established. At the insistence of his confreres, he agrees to keep on in the office "protesting that this was the first act of obedience that he believed he had offered to the Company". (5) After this assembly, he undertook to make known what had been decided. On 11 December 1644, he wrote to the Superior at Rome, Jean Dehorgny: "Our task is to have our common rules approved here; those concerning the General, the election and the Visitors. If we are to reach the conclusion of this undertaking, in nomine Domine, you must see what you can do to this end." (6)

Certain practices had taken root as time went by. St. Vincent occupied himself in strengthening these. The community at St. Meen received an official visit from Antoine Portail who, moreover, gave it a positive report. Despite this, the superior, Jean Bourdet, did not hide his disagreement with the practice itself. St. Vincent replied to him on the 22 July 1646, showing him the importance of such an undertaking. He set out for him eleven reasons for preserving this practice which remains current practice the Congregation.

Codifying the Rules

Thus, the rules of government were clarified little by little. In 1651, a new assembly, which consisted of 14 members, took place at St. Lazare. It was concerned primarily with the final redaction of the common rules and confirmed what had been said on the subject of the election of the Superior General. In 1658, St. Vincent was happy to present to his Community "The Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission". This test, which is a rule of life, is not specific about the organisation of the Congregation. We know, however, by what

is known as the Codex Sarzana (7), that there existed a collection of texts which regulated the government of the Company.

In spite of all of this, it took several years before there was a well-established text recognised by the highest authorities of the Church. Rene Almeras, from the time of his election as Superior General after the death of St. Vincent, undertook to codify the regulations relative to the administration of the Congregation. These, after several amendments, were approved by the General Assembly of 1668 and ratified by the Archbishop of Paris.

The most important rules were gathered together to be submitted for the examination and approval of the Holy See. The "Constitutiones Selectae" which resulted from this were approved by Pope Clement X in the brief "Ex Injuncta Nobis" of 2 June 1670. They would be finally completed by the decisions of several different General Assemblies. The private edition of them, made in 1847 under the title "Collectio Bullarum, Constitutionum ac Decretorum quae Congregationis Administrationem spectant", would serve as the principal reference until the promulgation of the Constitutions of 1954.

The Constitutions of 1954.

It must be acknowledged; "The Constitutions and Rules of the Congregation of the Mission", promulgated on 25 January 1954, do not constitute anything really new. Their principal concern was to gather together in a clear fashion the principal rules which govern the Congregation, having been set in conformity with the Code of Canon Law of 1917. The rumour even ran that these constitutions had been imposed by the Holy See. The Superior General, Fr. William Slattery, had to explain this in the circular of 1 January 1954: "There is nothing (in them) which alters the spirit of the Company. The spirit of St. Vincent is found absolutely intact therein. The greater part of the changes concern the administration of the Company...as for the modifications made to the Common Rules, they are very small in number". And he concludes: "It is clear that no change has been made to the essentials".

That is correct, in particular with regard to the government of the Congregation. The underlying theme which one detects comes less from the rules themselves than from the spirit which had governed their elaboration and presentation. It diverges from our identity. The more or less explicit reference is to the consecrated life while St. Vincent had done everything to distinguish us from religious. He had declared once again before his death; "I tell you that this is not a religious (order) and that we are not religious". (8)

Even the division of the chapters is revealing of an understanding of the Congregation which was based more on hierarchical structures than on missionary activity. The tone is set from the beginning since the second chapter

sets out the order of precedence amongst the members of the Congregation. From that, it moves to its government and the people who constitute it, vows and ministries coming long after that. Considerations of power and organisation occupy almost half the document. Interpersonal relationships within the community are touched on only once and then only to highlight the dangers (#223).

The New Constitutions

The Constitutions of 1984 follow a different model. The organisation of the Congregation is dealt with in the third and last part. It is thus at the service of apostolic activity with the goal of realising the end of the Congregation and of supporting the life of its members. It is, at the same time, infused with the theology of Vatican II, attentive about situating the members of the Church in relation to the mystery of God. The Council, in the constitution "Lumen Gentium", by defining the Church as the People of God and presenting this notion before that of its hierarchy, wishes to show that all its members are equal "with regard to their dignity and common activity in building up the body of Christ" (#32). Such an affirmation looks not only to the deepest nature of the Church but also to its way of being and acting.

We see this same attitude in our Constitutions. These present the government of the Congregation from the starting point of the ideas of collaboration, participation, cooperation, responsibility and communion, principles which define the place and work of each member in the community. Since all the confreres have the responsibility of participating in the "fulfilment of the common mission" (#19), it follows that they also have the possibility of participating in its elaboration and organisation.

"All the Confreres, as a result of the vocation which makes them the continuers of the mission of Christ, have the right and the duty to collaborate for the good of the apostolic community and to participate in its government" (#96). From the beginning of the section which deals with the government of the Congregation, the general principal is set down, having both a theological and pastoral foundation since all the baptised are called to participate in and to continue the work of Christ. The Constitutions call the confreres not only to work for the "good of the apostolic Community" but also to collaborate, that is to say to act in accord with the members of the community and, ordinarily, to work with them. To that end, they must be able to participate in its government, having the right to discuss and intervene in the elaboration and realisation of its undertakings.

The consequences are set out as follows; "All cooperate in an active and responsible manner in the fulfilling of their functions, in taking responsibility for

the apostolic projects and in the fulfilling of orders which are received" (continuing #96). We can't forget that responsibility has a moral value. It is the expression of a free being who, with full understanding, is involved in what he undertakes. The responsible man has clear understanding of what he proposes to do. He accepts it consciously and becomes involved in the action which he has decided on.

Co-responsibility

We find these different demands in the Constitutions. Dialogue at the heart of the community (#37, §1), between confreres (#24, §2) and with the Superior (#97, §2), allow for a mature reflection on apostolic action, considering all its aspects and appreciating its value. It is not simply a matter of "gaining the floor", which is limited to making one's voice heard in a discussion. The confrere must enter fully into the decision which is adopted by all, that is to say "being responsible for undertaking apostolic projects". St. Vincent, in the Common Rules, insists that obedience is more than a simple acquiescence to a decision and must involve a commitment to support it (V, 2).

Finally, true responsibility demands a personal involvement in and carrying out of orders received. The word 'active' occurs several times in the Constitutions to underline, in the spirit of St. Vincent, that the true missionary identifies himself by the apostolic work which he undertakes. He is united with the desire of the Second Vatican Council to value the principle of participation of all religious in the government of their institute. The principle will remain one of the orienting points of the revision of Canon Law. Number 96 of the Constitutions, however, is inspired, in large part, by the conciliar decree "Perfectae Caritatis" which declares, specifically: "They (the Superiors) will lead the religious to collaborate by active and responsible obedience as much in the fulfilment of their task as in initiatives to be undertaken" (#14).

Thus, in community, there is no hierarchy of dignity but each, by reason of his function and place, is called to cooperate in taking responsibility in light of the common work to be undertaken. Responsibilities are defined more by reason of a common will than of an imposed power. That is why they are located in the community and unfurl from there as this (community) is "organised in order to facilitate the apostolic activity, to maintain and support it constantly" (#19). Real responsibility is, in fact, a co-responsibility which is expressed, primarily, within the community. We say, in fact: "helped by the indispensable service of authority, we undertake to be co-responsible for seeking out, with the Superior and in active obedience, the will of God in our life and in our works: we support dialogue between us, overcoming the more individualistic tendencies in our style of life" (#24, §2).

The Importance of Community

It is certain that the importance of community life set out in our Constitutions determines the particular style or mode of government. The structure of a group and the relationships between its constituents determine the exercise of authority and are defined by the powers which are exercised in it. In the subject index of the Constitutions of 1954, the word 'community' does not feature. In the present Constitutions, this term occurs frequently and sometimes in an insistent way. It has different connotations since it refers both to the reality of the religious group and to the relationships between the confreres. It is not by chance that community life is dealt with in the second chapter of our Constitutions and that the local community is defined as a living expression of the whole Congregation (#23).

This vision of things is characteristic of a style of government. The Common Rules retain all their value to define and maintain our identity and our spirit. They do, however, relate to social and religious structures based on the superior-subject relationships which existed in the sociological milieu of the seventeenth century according to which unity was expressed, above all, in conformity. In this document, the superior appears as the one around whom the community is organised. It is up to him to decide on matters of daily life (V, 5), as well as work (II, 10) and each one must believe that "the will of God is expressed in the will of the Superior"(V, 4). The unity of the group is established by the superior and is maintained through uniformity, "the virtue which maintains good order and holy unity" (II, 11). Eating, clothing, sleeping as well as: "what concerns the manner of directing, teaching, preaching, governing, and also with regard to spiritual practices" (II, 11) must be marked by the desire not to be 'singular'. Uniformity is presented, therefore, as an important criterion for the unity of the religious group, which is defined far more by its relationships "ad intra" than by reference to its openness "ad extra".

This comparison has its limits because of its historical context. In the seventeenth century, authority, based on power, was dominated by the symbol of the omnipotent father. Community, since the Protestant reform held suspect of many errors, did not represent a value in itself. The word itself is not used by Ignatius of Loyola in the rules which he established. However, in modern times, the individual superior-subject relationship is transformed to the benefit of the community at whose heart interpersonal relationships take place. This context allows us to highlight the spirit which currently guides communities, knowing that authority is a responsibility that is not limited but is better spread out in light of the activities of the different members who make up the communities.

In God's sight

This being said, government in the Congregation of the Mission is not exercised in a collegial fashion, even though our particular law foresees numerous obligatory consultations. Authority is neither an expression of, nor emanates from, the general will which delegates its power while keeping the right to oversee and control. Nor does it pertain, as a definitive and inalienable right, to the one who receives it. It is exercised in dependence on the one who has confided it to us, that is God, and is mediated by different ecclesiastical mediaries.

It is, thus, an obedience to God, a submission to the Church and a fidelity to the spirit of the Congregation. In this guise, it necessitates a continual spiritual discernment under the motivation of the Spirit and a deep and clear respect for the rules which govern the Congregation. This is the sense of the second part of #97, §1, of the Constitutions: “Conscious of their responsibility before God, they will consider themselves as servants of the community, with the purpose of realising the end proper to it, according the spirit of St. Vincent, in a true community of apostolate and life”.

St. Vincent asks, in the Common Rules, that we obey superiors “seeing Our Lord in them and they in Our Lord” (V, 1). The present Constitutions speak of “authority coming from God” (#97, #1). They are in accord with Canon Law which affirms, drawing its inspiration from the Conciliar Decree “*Perfectae Caritatis*”: “Superiors will exercise the power, which they have received from God by the ministry of the Church, in a spirit of service” (canon 618). This power cannot be a domination as it is more in the order of a mediation. “It has a sacramental aspect in which the human act is an instrument of divine grace”. (9) It is naturally characterised by a spirit of service.

To explain this, the Constitutions appeal to two images which complement each other but which are sufficiently different to be distinguished; The Good Shepherd and the Servant. They ask that those who exercise authority have “before their eyes the example of the Good Shepherd, who came not to be served but to serve”, an expression which was used for the bishops in the Constitution “*Lumen Gentium*” (#27). In St. John, Christ presents himself as the one good Shepherd, the one who knows his sheep individually, gathers them together while being ready to go in search of the lost sheep, protects them from dangers and leads them to life-giving places, while showing them an unchanging love. He is, at the same time, the servant of men since he is God’s servant. That is why he is meek and humble of heart, capable of setting himself aside and of going to the end in the expressions of love which inspire his service. We find in these two images of Christ an entire spiritual theology of the true leader.

The meaning of dialogue

The spirit of service never takes anything from the authority of superiors. This is affirmed in canon 618, just cited; “Docile to the will of God in the exercise of their responsibility, they (the superiors) govern their subjects as the Children of God and, to promote their voluntary obedience while respecting the human person, they listen to them freely and thus encourage their cooperation in the good of the institute and of the Church, while, however, guarding their authority to decide and order what is to be done”.

The Constitutions say the same thing in a similar fashion but more briefly; “they will engage in dialogue with their confreres, guarding their own power to decide and order what is to be done” (#97, §2). We find here one of the most favorable means to permit the members of a community to show their interest and involvement in a common work. The importance of dialogue is thus emphasised but without any other definition of its nature or its purpose. The goal is simply to mark the parameters, recalling that dialogue, though it leads to reflection and deliberation, cannot oblige the superior who retains his freedom to judge and his power to decide.

In fact, the principal of dialogue is dealt with in the second chapter of the Constitutions. We speak of “a frank and involved dialogue” undertaken at the heart of the community with the purpose of awakening “a development and expression of common purposes which may direct the decisions settled upon” (#37, §1). This is inspired by the teaching of Paul VI whose influence has played a significant role in the editing of the Constitutions, since the only explicit pontifical reference is to him. (10) Paul VI put dialogue at the centre of the evangelical mission of the Church. He published his encyclical “*Ecclesiam Suam*” on the 6 August 1964, some months before the promulgation of the conciliar Constitution “*Lumen Gentium*”, explaining that “in dialogue we realise the union of truth and charity, of intelligence and love” (#85).

Dialogue requires a certain right to information, which may pose a problem for the quality of communication, which subject is dealt with in minor ways in the Statutes (#78, §6 and #82). In the same way, the exercise of authority requires clarity and precision in its decisions. Canon Law sets out all its demands on this point when it declares; “The decree will be given in written form, setting out, at least in summary, its motives, when it deals with a decision” (canon 51 which completes canon 37).

To each his own responsibility

Responsibility demands that each receives the capacity to assume it personally within the limits of the duty which is confided to him. This is the

sense of number 98 of the Constitutions which cites, without naming it, the principal of subsidiarity. "One should avoid always running to the superior when a business can be regulated by the confreres themselves or by a lower level of government". This principal, used in the social teaching of the Church to regulate relationships between the State and the individual, has been taken up to define the different levels of responsibility in the Church. (11) The principal of subsidiarity is explicitly named in the ordering of the laws decided on by the General Assembly (#137, §3).

The general principals recall the right of exemption which the Congregation enjoys (#99) before concluding with the powers of the different levels of government. A final remark, which has elicited a number of reactions, accompanies this conclusion; "Superiors must have been admitted to Holy Orders" (#100) which hinders the nomination of a Brother as a Superior. This imposition, which Rome has also imposed on other clerical congregations, may be regrettable, but it must be admitted that it is coherent with our Constitutions. In these, only the clerics "realise their vocation, each according to his own order and following the example of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Priest, Pastor and Teacher, by the exercise of this triple function in all the forms of the apostolate which can contribute to the achieving of the end of the Congregation" (#52, §1)

It has been necessary to halt for a time on these general principals which treat of government in the Congregation of the Mission (#96-100) because these determine its spirit and constitute the real newness of these Constitutions. The rules particular to each office which follow on are not, as a whole, original. (12) The last redaction of these texts was mainly concerned with dividing them into Constitutions and Statutes. This is not unimportant as only the Holy See can give the authentic interpretation of the Constitutions, while the interpretation of the Statutes is confided to the General Assembly (#137, §5).

The Four Principal Norms

Nevertheless, we can draw out four principal norms which give a particular newness to the Constitutions and which are in a direct line from the rules we have cited previously: the set time-limits of appointments, consultation, freedom with regard to certain nomination processes and the obligation to have a common plan, either provincial or local.

The set time-limit to appointments is a constant in the organisation of Congregations. Functions being defined as services, it is appropriate that the time of involvement should be limited to allow for the renewal of personnel and to encourage the inventive dynamism of communities. Canon Law requires that "Superiors should be named for a determined and suitable period of time" (canon 624, §1). This prescription existed in our own former law. It was extended to

apply also to the Superior General whose appointment may not exceed a second period of six years (#105, §3). It is, moreover, this election (of the Superior General) which sets the rhythm for the convocation of ordinary General Assemblies (#137, §2; 138, §1).

The responsibility of confreres is exercised through consultations or whatever takes their place. With regard to the election of the Superior General, "We must facilitate the free exchange of information on the matters to be considered and the qualities of the confreres considered for election" (Statutes 82). For the Visitor and the local Superior, consultation with the confreres concerned is indispensable (#124; 130, §1). For their choice, great freedom is permitted to the provincial Assembly with regard to the mode of election (Statutes #68, §2 & 3, Constitutions #130, §2).

Finally, the obligation of getting projects underway, either at provincial or local level, is seen as a new way and major means of unifying the life of the confreres and giving dynamism to apostolic action. It is set down that the provincial plan should be undertaken with the consent of the Council of the Visitor (Statutes #69, §1) and that the Community plan manifests the true expression of the local community (Constitutions #27; Statutes #16; 69, §5; 78, §4). Each confrere is invited to take part in this (Constitutions #32, §1; Statutes #19). The number of references which relate to this sufficiently underline the particular interest accorded to the Community Plan.

A more administrative 'novelty' is the profile of the Vicar General. He was traditionally the confrere who was designated in secret by the Superior General to take over in the interim in the case of death. He now appears as the second-in-command in the Congregation, with the duty of replacing the Superior General in his absence, incapacity or death. Elected by the General Assembly, "he becomes, at the same time, the Assistant General" (#109). It seems that his role has rendered obsolete that of the Admonitor which has been done away for the Superior General as for other offices, even though it dates back to the time of St. Vincent.

Contrary to the former Constitutions, the spiritual and human qualities required to be a Superior are no longer set out, apart from the rule that he must be at least three years incorporated into the Congregation and aged at least twenty-five (#61). Each function, however, being defined in a succinct but implicit manner, it is easy to deduce from this the qualities required to take on this role. The Superior General is put forward as the "centre of unity and the coordinator of the Provinces" (#102). The Visitor must encourage "the participation of all in the life and apostolic activity of the Province" (#123, §2). As for the local Superior, he is the "centre of unity and the animator of the life of the community" (#129, §2). It is understood that each will respond as well as possible to what is

expected of him. One could say that, schematically, the Superior General coordinates, the Visitor stimulates and the local Superior animates.

Government is an important element in the life of a Congregation. Our current Constitutions present it in a spirit which is at odds with the cold expressions of the former Constitutions. Following the outlines of Vatican II, they move beyond the juridical character of the rules which direct us, in order to make them more 'global' in a spiritual vision which gives them a more significant and lively dimension. The Congregation of the Mission is not simply an association with a religious character. The organisation is animated by the desire to insert itself, with its own charism, into the life of the Church and to respond to its needs. That is why the importance given to the general principals of government show that this is not simply a structural element but that it also contributes to the identity of the Congregation, as desired by St. Vincent.

Footnotes:

- 1 Coste, XIII, 199-200
- 2 Coste, XIII, 201-202
- 3 Louis Abelly "The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul, founder and first Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission", Paris, 1664, book 1, ch. LI, p. 252.
- 4 Coste, XIII, 287-298
- 5 Coste, XIII, 298
- 6 Coste, II, 488
- 7 This text is a first version of our Common Rules followed by commentaries relevant to the various offices. It was discovered by Angelo Coppo at Sarzana (Italy). The critical text has been presented by John Rybolt in *Vincentiana*, 4-5, 1991, pp. 307-06.
- 8 Coste, XIII, 373
- 9 J.Beyer, "The law on the consecrated life. Commentaries on canons 607-746. Institutes and Societies", Paris, Tardy, 1988, p. 25
- 10 Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Nuntiandi" is cited three times in the Constitutions (#10, 11 and 16)
- 11 The extraordinary Synod for the 20th anniversary of Vatican II, in its final report of 7 December 1985, recommends further study on the principle of subsidiarity as applied to the Church
- 12 Several studies have already appeared on this subject. Thus, the offices of Superior General, Assistant General and the other Assistants have been dealt with in the course of the 38th General Assembly (*Vincentiana*, 1992, 4-5, pp. 489-515). The occasional meetings of Visitors have been the occasions for presenting and explaining the function of the Visitor

(Vincentiana, 1989, 4-5: 1996, 4-5). As for the role of the local Superior, it is often dealt with at provincial level. Fr. Richard McCullen gave an excellent exposition on this subject in Dublin in February 1997 under the title of "Mission at the heart of the Mission; the local Superior" cf. "Bulletin des Lazaristes de France", April 1998, pp. 103-109

(EUGENE CURRAN, C.M., translator)