

# XLI General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission

## Creative Fidelity to the Mission

Erminio Antonello, C.M.

June 28, 2010 marked the beginning of the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission. It took place in Paris where everything vibrates with memories of Saint Vincent and his first collaborators. One hundred sixteen Missionaries from forty-five provinces and four vice-provinces participated in the Assembly. The objective of the Assembly was to give new vitality to the missionary dimension of the confreres and this was expressed in the motto of the Assembly: *Creative fidelity to the mission*. In the opening homily that was preached by the Superior General the Missionaries were given some indications as to how they might accomplish this objective: *As Jesus became poor, we are called to become poor, poor with the poor. Not that we are called to share their same misery, but rather to feel their misery, to show our solidarity.... God continually leads us to the poor. That is our vocation. That is why the Spirit of the Lord has come upon us. We have been anointed to bring glad tidings to the poor. We pray that in this General Assembly we let it be the Spirit of the Lord Jesus that leads us to an ever greater commitment as brothers, united in the evangelization and service of the poor*. In fact, one of the characteristic aspects of this Assembly consisted of listening to the voices of the poor as the participants viewed videos that presented in a vivid way the suffering that these women and men endured in different parts of the world. Many of these videos, in their simplicity and immediacy, made present in the assembly hall profound and deep feelings. The presentation of the videos was followed by a time of silence which provided an opportunity to the members of the Assembly to internalize what they had just seen and heard. The delegates then engaged in a dialogue.

The dialogue was very diverse but focused on several themes. The first theme was systemic change which must be engaged in if the Missionaries want to serve the poor in an effective manner. Father Maloney, CM explained that in order to be faithful to the Constitutions that invite the Missionaries to reflect on the root causes of poverty it

is important to engage in the process of systemic change in order that the poor might be lifted out of misery. When involved in the process of systemic change one attempts to act in a way that promotes the human dignity of those persons who are poor. Two initiatives in this area of systemic change were presented to the members of the Assembly: a project of the Vincentian Family in Italy, *Water, a drop for life* and the microfinance project in Haiti that was established to assist one of the poorest societies in the world ... this initiative has been called *Zafen* which means *it is our business*. More information about this initiative can be found at <http://zafen.org>

Another theme that was focused on during the second round table discussion was that of on-going formation. It is said that the mission depends on the zeal of the Missionaries who are the most precious treasure of the Congregation. Therefore on-going formation has to be a primary task that each Missionary accepts responsibility for. Personal formation must be dynamic and communal so that said formation can influence the internal dynamics of the community and thus enrich each of its members. Also the unity of the community enables its members to confront the secularized and global culture of our era.

A third round table discussion enabled the participants to reflect on the problem of *reconfiguration* of the provinces, a reality that we must face because of our fewer numbers. This was a delicate theme which created, however, much discussion. In summary it was felt that the general direction must be one that favors an attitude of collaboration among provinces that are geographically, culturally and historically related to one another, thus leading them to undertake initiatives that commit everyone to future generations.

The message that the Pope sent to the Assembly was delivered by Cardinal Tarsicio Bertone and can be summarized in the following four points: 1. the missionary spirit means *a)* that we allow ourselves to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus Christ; *b)* that especially during this year of the priest we continue to be faithful to the formation of priests; *c)* that we have a great concern for the missions *ad gentes*; *d)* the we always be enflamed with the charity of our Founder who invites us to *run to the spiritual needs of our neighbor as if we were running to a fire* (CCD XI, 25).

The members of the Assembly still faced another week of work in which they would deal with other matters. The deliberations of the Assembly reached their climax with the re-election of the superior general, Father G. Gregory Gay. The unity to the Congregation was revealed as they stood together and gave Father Gregory a prolonged ovation. This applause was followed by the exchange of a fraternal embrace with each one of the delegates and with Mother General, Sister Evelyne Franc and her Council. The following day, Father Javier

Álvarez, director general of the Daughters of Charity, was elected Vicar-General of the Congregation. The election of four Assistants followed and then the delegates returned to their work on other documents and reflections.

The environment of the Assembly was characterized by friendship in which the participants, to use the words of Saint Vincent, *lived together as dear friends*. The message that we, as Visitors and delegates, brought home was that of encouragement to continue to be Missionaries but above all to be zealous Missionaries who proclaim the Good News to the poor and who are able to be signs of the visible presence of the Risen Lord. This was the specific message of the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal André Vingt-Trois who on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, the feast of Saint Thomas, said: *the mission for which we are sent is not simply to announce the message of the Gospel, nor even only, the person of Christ. We are charged with making him seen through and in the relations built among the members of his Church. Charity lived in the heart of the community is a constitutive element of the proclamation of the Gospel. It is in seeing how you love each other, that they will understand who it is who has sent you. To take up the missionary dimension of the ties which unite us, avoids closing ourselves in on our internal questions.*

The Assembly is certainly not decisive for the life of the Provinces, but its message is a threshold that should be experienced in order to live out our missionary vocation.

Translation: CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.