

Letter of the Superior General on Parishes

Rome, October 2011

*To the Visitors and their Councilors,
to the Presidents of the Continental Conferences,
and to all the Confreres of the Congregation of the Mission*

Dear Confreres:

May the grace and peace of Jesus Christ be with us always!

The General Assembly of 2010 approved a postulatam that was directed to the Superior General, requesting that a study be done of our Vincentian ministry in parishes, and that we explore the possibility of publishing a *Practical Guide* for this ministry. After studying this issue in a meeting of the General Council, I sent a questionnaire to all the Provinces so that, beginning with the reality, we might reflect on this theme and the possibility of formulating a *Practical Guide for Parishes*. Only twenty-three (23) Provinces sent me a response and I am grateful for this generous and wonderful collaboration.

The Council and I studied all the material that we received. I now present some of the significant reflections that I found in the responses that were sent. At the same time I present here the decisions that we have made in this regard.

1. The reports that were received reveal that parishes are a very significant reality in our ministry. In this regard we are dealing with a complex reality, one that is numerically significant in almost all the provinces and one that involves many confreres. At the same time the reality of the parishes is quite varied depending on the pastoral-social reality of each continent, of each country and each province. There is no unanimity with regard to the question of what constitutes a “conventional parish” or a “missionary parish” even though there is a concern and interest to adapt this pastoral reality to the specifics of our Vincentian missionary vocation. Today we are also aware

of those who propose putting aside this terminology because theologically and pastorally it is considered imprecise and improper.

2. Despite the limited number of responses and the vast diversity of experiences, the reports that were sent to us presented a great variety of elements that reveal the complexity of the theme and the need to deepen our understanding of this reality and to discern and evaluate our Vincentian ministry in parishes:

a) In general, the reports reveal an common awareness of our missionary nature, of our mission toward the poor, of our commitment to the formation of the clergy and the laity, of the need for ministry developed in accord with our Vincentian spirit, of the need to encourage Vincentian ministries and pastoral practices that are in greater conformity to our charism. This common awareness, however, is understood and concretized in so many different ways that there is the risk of justifying and legitimizing all our parishes so that ultimately our Vincentian identity is weakened and becomes devoid of meaning.

b) Some of the reports alluded to an awareness of the missionary nature of the whole Church and presented specific experiences, characteristics and demands that could be used to define our Vincentian identity in parishes. These significant elements can provide us with criteria, insights and new possibility for our reflection and ministry:

- The Vincentian missionary parish ought to be located among the poor, preferably among those persons who are most poor, and/or ought to be fundamentally oriented toward service of those who are poor. From the perspective of evangelizing the poor, it is important to be aware of the new forms of poverty and of the need to form the clergy and the laity. People who are poor, with their need for a holistic evangelization, are at the geographical, social and pastoral center of every Vincentian missionary parish.
- In fidelity to the spirit of Saint Vincent, the Vincentian missionary parish ought to be a “place of mission”: there one does not simply attempt to maintain and encourage the Christian faith of the parishoners, but rather one becomes committed to those situations in which the needs of the poor and the needs of the Church are most urgent; one becomes committed to those situations where there is a lack of clergy and other pastoral ministers. The Vincentian missionary parish ought to be in an on-going state of mission and ought to go forth to encounter the poor who are most abandoned and forgotten.
- The missionary parish ought to be characterized by pastoral action that is in accord with the Vincentian spirit, a spirit that

inspires all its activity. Said parish should not limit its activity to customary or usual practices but rather it should exert every effort to engage in on-going renewal, should be attentive to the signs of the time and most urgent needs of the poor and the Church. Without neglecting that which is uniquely Vincentian, our ministry in the parish should be accepted, planned and carried out in community, in harmony with the guidelines of the local church. Life and ministry in the parish ought to be done in conformity with the five Vincentian missionary virtues and our commitment to the parish ought to be defined by a specific timeframe.

- The missionary parish ought to develop as a priority those Vincentian ministries and pastoral programs that are in greater conformity with our spirit, for example: holistic evangelization that involves service of the Word and the practice of charity; promotion, formation, and participation of the laity in the pastoral mission of the Church; development of the Church's social and charitable dimension on behalf of those who are poor; development of a prophetic ministry and attention to the new forms of poverty, to minorities who are excluded and alienated; in the parish's social action, the study and the application of the methodology of systemic change and the Church's social doctrine should be utilized; support groups of the Vincentian Family through collaboration and joint action; collaborate with and support the diocesan clergy; develop a community spirit so that the parish becomes a network of communities; promote, collaborate with and support popular movement and outreach ministry.
- c) The existence and the permanent character of many parishes in the provinces seem to be the result of different historical events, different social, ecclesial and social realities, and the multiple challenges that surface during the process of evangelization. Understanding the situational context of our parishes raises other questions that are connected to this theme and that need further study and reflection, for example: the aging of the confreres and their missionary activity; financial support of the provinces; the Vincentian presence within the present ecclesial setting of each country or continent; formation for new forms of missionary ministry today, etc.
- d) In some provinces efforts are being made to put in place structures and initiatives on a provincial as well as a local level that will encourage, cultivate and develop the Vincentian identity of the missionary ministry in parishes, for example: gatherings of confreres who are engaged in parish ministry; creation of Provincial Commissions for parishes; evaluation of works that seek involvement in ministries that have greater Vincentian significance; formulation of a Provincial Pastoral Plan for parishes; signing of contracts with the

Diocese and thus establishing a commitment that is limited to a specific period of time; formation of confreres for parish ministry; formulation and evaluation of local pastoral plans. These initiatives are useful and necessary in order to engage in a dynamic Vincentian parish ministry.

3. The different elements that were submitted in the reports present many questions, distinct experiences and paths that demand serious reflection. Given the complexity of the theme and the small number of responses to the questionnaire I believe that this is not the opportune moment to formulate a *Practical Guide for Parishes*. I propose that we engage in a broad process of reflection on the distinct levels of the Congregation. More specifically:

- a) That all the Continental Conferences promote the study of this theme, presenting specific points that will help the confreres understand and evaluate in a better way this ministry and enable them to do this in light of our Vincentian missionary charism.

- b) All the Visitors with their Council should promote in their provinces a serious study of the Vincentian parish ministry. This should be done with a sincere and courageous evaluation of the ministries of the Province.

- c) *Vincentiana* will publish a special edition on parishes in order to encourage and enlighten our reflection on this theme.

- d) This theme will be studied and reflected on during the 2013 Meeting of the Visitors. It is hoped that at that time we will be able to gather together the results of the reflections in the provinces and then formulate proposals for appropriate and effective action.

4. I understand that this theme is of fundamental importance for growth in our creative fidelity to the mission. We are dealing with a question that has been expressed on many different occasions but that needs greater discernment and study. At this time, when the whole Congregation is making an effort to accept and put into practice the conclusions of the 2010 General Assembly, I believe that it is opportune to study this ministry of the parishes and to do this with the courage, seriousness, and responsibility that it requires.

- a) I encourage all the confreres to make every effort to reflect on and enter into a process of discernment on this important challenge. I invite you to engage in this process with the attitude of Vincentian conversion and fidelity. I especially invite the Visitors, the Vice-Visitors and their councils to make every effort to promote this reflection in their provinces and to make, calmly and courageously, the necessary decisions to enable our action to be truly missionary.

b) I ask that by August 31, 2012 you send me the results of your reflections and the decisions that you make in this regard so that together with the General Council we might study and reflect on this ministry.

I close this letter and ask God, through the intercession of Saint Vincent de Paul, to provide us with the light and the strength that will enable us to move forward together with joy as we recommit ourselves to be missionaries for the poor.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "G. Gregory Gay, C.M.". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the initials "G." at the beginning and "C.M." at the end.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General