

Letter of the Superior General and Assistants General to Visitors and their Councils: On Dealing with Confreres in Difficulty

Rome, 13 January 2012

To all the Visitors and their Councils

Dear Confreres,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever!

I hope you have enjoyed the beautiful Christmas season, which was an opportunity to live more deeply the mystery we celebrated for a better service of the poor. I also hope you were able to rest a little. For the confreres present in the Curia and myself, Christmas Day was a graced-filled time as we gathered with the Community of Sant'Egidio in the Trastevere section of Rome to serve dinner to more than 400 poor people. We returned full of joy and spiritually enriched.

I am writing today to share with you a concern that has bothered me and the members of my Council for a long time. It is the very large number of confreres who, in various ways, live their vocation and their belonging to the Congregation of the Mission in difficult situations. I am referring both to confreres who are absent, legitimately or illegitimately, and those who continue to live in community.

This concern was embodied in a reflection I made together with the members of my Council, which resulted in the attached document. I am sending it to you, asking you to read it, meditate on it, discuss it with your respective Councils, and put it into practice according to the specific needs of your provinces. Then, send me the results of your reflection before 31 July 2012.

I think this reflection, conducted in a serious and thorough way by everyone, is extremely important for the future of the entire Congrega-

tion, both the oldest and the youngest provinces. This conviction makes me turn to you, because our future is not only in God's hands, but also is entrusted to the responsibility of us all.

May Mary, Mother of the Congregation, intercede for us and bless our work.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "G. Gregory Gay, C.M.". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "G" at the beginning and a long, sweeping underline.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

***Reflection for Visitors and Provincial Councils
of the Congregation of the Mission***

CONFRERES IN DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

I. INTRODUCTION

This is not the first time that we are reflecting on and writing about confreres in difficult situations. In 1996, Father Maloney wrote a letter to all the Visitors and presented very precise guidelines. In the same year, Father Modesto López, in his role as Procurator General, spoke to all the Visitors who were meeting in Salamanca and there, addressed the subject of *Difficult Cases* (cf. *Vincentiana* 40 [1996], pp. 353-362). On January 24th, 2006, Father Gregory wrote a letter to the Visitors and the local superiors with the purpose of creating a greater awareness of the problem of absences and departures from the Congregation.

This document can be found in *Vincentiana* (2006), pp. 3-8. In 2007, there was a gathering in Rome for the specific purpose of empowering confreres from different provinces to help the Visitors and their respective councils in resolving the cases of absences and departures. All the presentations of the different specialists and the confreres can be found in *Vincentiana* 51, number 1-2. In this present reflection, we are mindful of these previous documents, but here we attempt to broaden our scope. For this reason we speak about confreres in difficult situations, and not just about confreres who have absented themselves from or departed the Congregation in a definitive manner. In this document, we will recommend specific operational measures in order to confront this multi-faceted and complex reality.

To begin with, we should be mindful of the fact that as we speak about confreres “in difficult situations” we are, in a sense, speaking about each one of us because, at some moment in our life, we have all experienced difficult moments or phases. At the same time we all have some aspect of our personality that our companions in community find difficult to deal with and that, at a given moment, has caused pain to our confreres.

In this reflection it is not our intention to speak about these difficulties that are more or less normal in community life but rather to refer to those confreres who present “great difficulties” and in this sense, make it difficult for them to live out their vocation. Our pastoral sensitivity should remind us of the fact that behind each “difficult situation” and behind every “great difficulty” there is always a person, a confrere who suffers and who can causes others to suffer.

We cannot consider the confreres in difficult situations without also considering the communities where they reside, where they suffer,

and where they also create difficulties. Confreres in difficult situations contribute to the creation of communities in difficult situations and vice versa. In fact, there are difficult confreres who themselves foment “difficult situations” and there can also be communities and authority figures (visitors and superiors) who, because of their leadership style, can provoke difficult situations. This reality is pointed out in number 21 of the document: *The Service of Authority and Obedience*. In light of the above reference, all who exercise authority in the Congregation ought to constantly examine how they exercise the authority that has been entrusted to them.

II. VARIOUS SITUATIONS

In this section, we outline the various situations that we encounter in the Congregation and in the Provinces, situations that demand the attention of the Visitors and their respective councils.

1. Confreres who live in community and there, in the midst of the community, struggle with their difficulties

These are confreres who are integrated into the community and are active participants in the community life and apostolic life of the local community, but experience moments or phases of difficulty. These difficulties can be quite diverse, even though they all produce personal weariness. Following the presentation that was made by Father José María Nieto during the 2007 gathering in Rome, we can group these difficulties into three categories:

- *Personal difficulties*: physical illness; psychological, affective, and sexual imbalance; difficulties with family of origin; and problems in their spiritual life and living the vows.
- *Difficulties in living community life resulting in personal weariness*: dissatisfaction with the local community (with the superior or confreres); problems in carrying out the community ministry of visitor, provincial treasurer, local superior; and difficulty in finding a sense of meaning as a member of the community.
- *Difficulties in ministry*: physical exhaustion because of excessive work; disappointment, weariness or great difficulty in carrying out the ministry that has been entrusted to one; lack of preparation or qualifications in carrying out the ministry.

All our confreres who live through and experience these difficulties and struggle to overcome them deserve our respect, our solidarity, our accompaniment and our support. As Saint Paul states: a great sign

of our fraternity is to *bear one another's burdens*. These confreres hope to find in authority (on all levels: general curia, the provincial level and the local level) the "good shepherd" who speaks a word of encouragement and who, as described in the gospel of Saint John (cf. John 10:1-21), intervenes on behalf of each one. It would be good to recall here the words that Pope Benedict XVI addressed to the Superior Generals in the audience of May 22, 2006: *I ask that you, Major Superiors, transmit a word of special kindness to those who are in difficulty, the elderly and sick, to those who are living moments of crisis and solitude, to those who suffer and feel lost....*

2. Confreres who are present in community but who, in reality, are absent from the community

These are confreres who are present but absent, or if you will, only physically present. These confreres at times experience serious difficulties and in turn create difficulties for the community. These confreres are members of every province. Some are found moving from house to house. In some provinces, especially in the larger provinces, special houses have been established where confreres can be sent and their negative impact on others is thus diluted.

How many confreres are "present but absent"? There is no doubt that the Visitors are well aware of these confreres in their respective provinces but on the level of the international Congregation, we have no specific number for this category. In the Curia we do not have statistics to account for this reality, a reality which has a great impact on the Congregation and the provinces.

As has been noted previously, this is a situation in which confreres live in community but in reality are spiritually, physically and/or emotionally absent from the community. Using the image of an "iceberg" we would say that the "present but absent" confreres are like the large masses of submerged ice, invisible but nonetheless real and sustaining the ice that is floating on the surface. At times these confreres who are "present but absent" lack the courage or the honesty to take leave of the Congregation in a definitive manner. They prefer to live in the community even though they bring to the community difficult and/or uncomfortable situations. We know that Saint Vincent spoke harsh words when referring to such confreres. Indeed, when he spoke about the incorrigible and ungovernable confreres he said: *You tell me that it is necessary to put up with such people at the start because the Company has such a need of men, and that, in time, we could purge the Company of them. It is true, Monsieur, that the Company does need men; but it would be much better to have fewer men than to have a number of dif-*

ficult individuals and deeds of that sort. Ten good men will do more for God than a hundred of those people (CCD: II: 421).

It seems that later Vincent softened his previous radical attitude, even though his basic conviction did not change: *It would be doing justice to the Company to amputate its gangrenous members.... However, because we have to allow for the practice of all the virtues, we are now exercising patience, long-suffering, and charity itself, in the hope that they will mend their ways... this does not mean that in the end we may not have to rid of them; that is a necessity* (CCD: IV: 42).

Here are some situations in which the “present but absent confreres” live:

- Confreres living in self-isolation and who lack a sense of belonging to the Province and the Congregation.
- Confreres living on the margin of community and do so according to their own criteria.
- Confreres who are unaware of the impact of their own actions.
- Even more serious are those confreres who lead a double life with regard to the vow of poverty or chastity.

3. Confreres absent from the community

According to the present documentation at the Curia, 211 confreres are absent from the community at this time. We include in this number all those confreres who have the permission of their Visitor for a leave of absence (cf., Constitutions 67), those confreres who are living outside the community with the permission of the Superior General (cf., Constitutions 70), and those confreres who are illegitimately outside the Congregation, which constitute the majority of the cases. The ages of the majority of those confreres who are absent from the community are between 40 and 60. Looking at the different continental groups, Latin America has the largest number of confreres absent from the community. The most often stated reasons for these absences are: “*vocational discernment*”, “*seeking to be incardinated in a diocese*”, “*disagreements and problems with the institution*”.

Some reflections on this data:

a) The Congregation, that is, all of us, are faced with an important problem. The percentage of absent confreres is too high. The number began to increase in 2002, and has risen every year as the total number of confreres in the Congregation has decreased.

It is difficult to find the causes for this phenomenon. Perhaps there is some connection to the aversion to anything that is institutional and/or that hints at “control” and therefore there is a current tendency that

invites people to work and to live in a free and individualistic manner. The fact is that there are many Missionaries who are seeking incardination into a Diocese because in such an environment they hope to be able to live and to work with more freedom and also hope to obtain greater economic independence.

Perhaps the cause of this can be found in the fact that many young confreres find themselves in stagnant, middle-class communities where living out the charism no longer attracts them. Our young confreres, even though they might be inconsistent, find mediocre communities to be unbearable and as a result of being in the midst of such a community will often become disillusioned.

The cause for such absences might be found in the psychological imbalance of many of our younger members who easily tire and become exhausted. This psychological imbalance can be the result of several factors, including the result of disintegrated family structures and difficult childhood experiences; inadequate formation that failed to distinguish between what is fundamental and what is relative; a formation that did not give sufficient significance to the meaning of belonging to a Congregation; or insufficient vocational discernment and/or accompaniment. It is very probable that in many cases a number of the causes that have been pointed out have played a role.

b) This problem of a high number of absences is having a negative effect on the Provinces and, as a result, on the Congregation. It is like a cancer in which there is the risk that the cancerous cells will infect the good cells. We see situations in which stipulated time frames are not respected. Thus, a legitimate absence becomes an illegitimate one. As a result, the individual remains outside the control of the Congregation for many years. This gives the confreres a message that, in the Congregation, one can do as one pleases.

Continuing with the image of cancer, we believe that, as Vincent de Paul said, we have to use the scalpel and cut those bonds that cannot be recovered. Therefore, we have to put order into the chaotic situation of absences and maintain this order. To do this will mean that we must control the time frame of the absences of the confreres on leave.

c) When considering the individuals who are absent, the Congregation and the Provinces ought to be very sensitive and merciful toward each confrere. At the same time, they ought to seek the good of the whole Congregation. Here, we seek to strike a balance between the institution and the individual, because while it is certain that the person is the highest good, yet it is also true that the common good of the community as well as that of the province and the Congregation cannot be given lesser weight.

How can this balance be applied to the theme that we are dealing with? Each confrere who is absent has to be treated with the greatest respect, even in those situations when the attitudes of the confrere seem to be unclear and self-serving. Through dialogue, we must seek that which is best for the individual confrere and for the Congregation, and we must express this clearly. Finally, we must be firm with regard to the time period of the absence. This should be communicated to the person whom the Visitor will designate to accompany the confrere during the time of his absence.

In some cases, the best for all involved would be that the individual confrere leaves the Congregation.

III. SOME REFLECTIONS THAT LEAD US TO TAKE ACTION

Clearly the situation of confreres in difficult situations demands the joint action of everyone: the Superior General, the General Council, the Visitor, the Visitor's Council, the local superior, the Missionaries and experts in different matters. The General Council has become aware of this problem and has agreed on certain criteria for action. Throughout this presentation, these criteria will be made very clear and during the coming years these same criteria will guide the members of the General Council. On the provincial level, it seems that the provincial council should reflect on ways in which they can help these confreres. In those provinces where there is a large number of absent members, it might be best for the Visitor to appoint a delegate to deal with these matters which often require much time, which Visitors do not have. It is also clear that the Office of the Procurator General is important, notably in those cases that demand a dispensation.

1. Here we are dealing with all those confreres in difficult situations

Those who are present and those who are absent from the community. These are some suggestions that can be very useful:

- Attention should be given to formation, to the formators, and to the processes of initial formation. This can be seen as a preventative action that, in the long term, produces very positive results. We all know that a good process of accompaniment during the period of vocational discernment and the initial period of community involvement is the best way to avoid some future difficult situations.

During the stage of initial formation Vincent was always demanding with regard to the candidates who desired to enter the Congregation.

To support what we have been saying we simply have to listen to the advice that Vincent gave to Father Louis Depont, the superior in Tréguier, with regard to the reception of postulants: *During this trial period you can send us the following information: his name, age, situation, level of studies, whether his parents are still alive and whether they are poor or well-off, if he has his title or the means of obtaining it, if he has practiced virtue in the past or has been depraved, his motives for leaving the world and for becoming a Missionary, if he is well-balanced, has no physical deformity and is in good health, can speak clearly, has good eyesight, and, in a word, is disposed to do and suffer everything, and to come and go everywhere for the service of God, as will be indicated to him by holy obedience. You must sound them out on everything* (CCD: VII: 120).

It is best to prevent something now than to have to heal something more seriously later. Perhaps this phrase is especially applicable to these situations. Prevention can be applied to the processes of initial discernment, initial formation, and on-going formation. It is necessary to learn from the past because we know that frequently the most serious difficulties could have been prevented if we had given more attention to initial discernment; a period when, with the help of other experts, we might have recognized the indication of some future problem.

- *Specific attention should be given to each case.* There are basic general regulations (lines of action), but in reality, each person and situation requires specific individual treatment. We are aware of the fact that what is helpful and useful for one person may be of no help and useless for another person. Here are some basic Vincentian lines of action: the chapter in our Constitution on community life (#19-27); number 65-76 of our Constitutions; confreres who are obliged to live alone because of their ministry (Statute #14); *A Practical Guide for the Visitor* (2005), #123-203; *Practical Guide for the Local Superior*, #69-73.

In the beginning, hope must be given to the individual. This should be done by offering the possibility of appropriate assistance (spiritual, psychological, or both). The confrere must show some openness; otherwise solutions can become very difficult to attain.

- *The role of the local community.* There is no doubt that the local community, in the person of the superior and the confreres, plays a fundamental role in accompanying confreres in difficult situations. In many cases, the local community is the umbilical cord between the confrere and the Congregation. We should remember here that the "absent" confreres should be assigned to a house and belong to a community (*A Practical Guide for the Visitor*, #128).

• *The role of the Visitor or confrere appointed by the Visitor.* The mission of the Visitor or his delegate should be that of seeking the prompt return of the confrere, utilizing all the available means. Therefore, the case should not be too easily classified as a "lost cause." Some means that can be used are: a sabbatical year, on-going formation, spiritual accompaniment, medical-psychological treatment, etc. In the case of a departure, the Visitor must help the confrere and guide him through the process whether this be incardination into a diocese or dispensation from the obligations of the priestly state. Later, when the confrere is settled in his new situation economic assistance should be provided to help the confrere become settled in this new state; the now former confrere might need assistance in finding employment or in adjusting to life in society and/or his new role in the Church....

At times the Visitor might find himself in a situation where he feels it best to utilize another confrere who is a friend or has a close relationship with the absent confrere. Such a confrere can be used as a bridge between the absent confrere and the community and can take on the role of a spiritual guide, one who accompanies the absent confrere and remains in contact with him.... It is clear that on many occasions such a confrere can be helpful to the absent confrere and well as to the community as a whole.

2. With regard to those confreres who are absent from the community

Here are some lines of action that require, on the one hand, the consent of the Superior General and his council and, on the other hand, the consent of the Visitor and his council.

a) After having evaluated the 211 absences from the Congregation, we believe that a process of expulsion should be initiated with regard to some of the confreres. Here we are referring to those more or less younger confreres who are absent illegitimately, are not waiting to be incardinated into a diocese and are, in reality, outside the Congregation even though their names appear in the catalogue and juridically are still part of the Congregation. These confreres, however, have no intention of returning to the community and live in a personal situation that is contrary to our spirit and our priestly style of life: inclusion such realities as secular profession, life of a spouse, or children.

b) There is another group of confreres absent from the community, but minister and live in a diocese and desire to be incardinated into the diocese at some time. Some of these confreres have not gone beyond the time granted them for said process (five years). Therefore

they are legitimately absent from the community. Other confreres have begun to work in a diocese with the permission of their respective Visitor (one year), but have continued living and ministering in said diocese without the permission of the Superior General. Therefore, these confreres are illegitimately absent from the community.

With this latter group of confreres it will be necessary to control the time frame of their absence, and thus regularize their situation so that the number of illegitimate absences be kept at a minimum.

c) There are some Missionaries in this group who desire a dispensation from priesthood. This is a complex process, and is described in #163 of *A Practical Guide for the Visitor*. In those cases the Visitor ought to appoint a judge instructor and a notary in order to question the interested individual. The General Council should collaborate with the Visitor and the Procurator General.

d) A fourth group is composed of older confreres who have lived in this condition for many years, and who cannot live in community because of psychological problems. Others are absent from community because of some very complicated and particular situations. In these cases, it is clear no single criteria can be established. Rather, each case must be treated individually while always being mindful of the good of the individual person and the good of the Congregation.

e) As a preventative measure it is necessary to examine the situation of the confreres who request a leave of absence and grant this absence to those confreres who present a serious and just cause (as indicated in the Constitutions and *A Practical Guide for the Visitor* [#123, 127]). Not just any motive is sufficient reason to grant something that is so serious and that involves significant consequences. At times it is preferable to place the confrere in a situation in which he has to opt either to belong to the Congregation or to leave the congregation. This is true in those cases where it is obvious that to grant permission for an absence is to enter a process that will inevitably lead to a slow agony. We must keep in mind that recourse to a temporary absence is not some panacea that magically resolves every difficulty, even though at a given moment it might appear to be a solution. In all of this we are saying that is necessary to engage in a process of discernment in order to know who should be granted this permission and under what conditions this permission should be granted.

It is very possible that in the Congregation of the Mission we are too quick to use #67 of our Constitutions to grant permission to be absent from the community for one year. This permission ought to fulfill certain requirements. For example, the confrere ought to have a "just reason", ought to be assigned to a house, and a confrere in dif-

difficulty should be accompanied by another confrere. If this is not done, then legitimate absences, instead of being a means to confront and resolve a particular situation, become a type of “morphine” which leads to euthanasia; that is, the legitimate absence becomes a path that leads to an illegitimate absence and then to departure from the community.

f) In the long run, preventive action is necessary but, as we have already pointed out, greater effectiveness is obtained by treating initial formation in a serious manner. This formation ought to be profound, clear and demanding. The formators ought to be well prepared and wherever possible a program of on-going formation should be offered to the confreres. We are convinced that a good process of accompanying the candidates, a good process of vocational discernment and initiation into community life provide a solid foundation in order to avoid some of the difficult situations in the future.

3. With regard to those confreres who are living a double life

The following applies whether the situation involves the vow of poverty (confreres who do not submit the fruit of their work to the Community, confreres who give no accounting of their expenses) or the vow of chastity (confreres who have a relationship with a woman and perhaps have children... and continue to live in community). It is possible that these confreres do not have the courage to abandon the Congregation nor the strength to correct their wrongs. It should be remembered that these disorders degrade and destroy all connected to the institution, in other words, degrade and destroy the Province and the Congregation. At the same time, we must also be mindful of the negative example that is given to young generations in a Province.

In this case, the Visitor and the local superior ought to confront the confrere, offering him the option of engaging in a process of radical conversion or entering a process of leaving the Congregation. In these cases there are no other alternatives. If the confrere does not react then there is no other solution than that of initiating the process of expulsion from the Congregation.

IV. FINAL ADVISE

The theme of confreres in difficult situations affects everyone; Visitors with their respective council, local communities, and naturally, the Superior General and his Council. From this present document, we want to initiate a dialogue with Visitors and members of their council with the purpose of helping to clarify different situations and

make decisions. The Congregation as a whole (and the level of the General Curia, provincial level and local community) cannot remain indifferent before this reality which affects the whole Congregational body and the provinces. Is this a theme that should be treated during the general meeting of the Visitors in 2013?

We request that this document be carefully studied during the meetings of the different Provincial Councils. We ask that you review what you are doing for the different confreres in difficult situations (using the categories that we have pointed out in this document) and consider what more you could do for these confreres. Finally, we ask that you communicate the results of your reflection to us by **July 31, 2012.**

We send you our cordial greetings, and be assured of our prayers.

Fr G. Gregory Gay and the General Council

Rome, 13 January 2012