

Panel Presentation by the Assistants to the Superior General

A SENSE OF BELONGING TO THE CONGREGATION

Javier Álvarez, C.M.

The sense of belonging to the Congregation is directly related to the Vincentian identity. When there is a Vincentian identity, the sense of belonging to the Congregation is assured; but when there is no identity; belonging may sound like celestial music. In reality, the two, identity and belonging, point to the same and only reality: identity relates more to the charism; belonging, to the institution. They're two sides of the same coin.

I have chosen this subject, along with the Vincentian identity, because it seems to be of utmost importance to go deeper within. I believe that here lies the root and explanation of a few problems that affect the Congregation today. For example: why is it that there are confreres, who, after being ordained for a few years, happily decide to be incardinated into a diocese? Why is it so difficult for Provinces to help the confreres grow so that they may better harmonize the demands of our charism in today's church? The lack of vocations and the aging members of the Congregation do not explain it all, because in the places where there are vocations and the average age of the confreres is not high, they have the same resistances. Is there is a lack of Vincentian identity that makes it difficult to see, as something natural, the plight of the poor, the evangelizing orientation of the all our ministries, and mobility as a permanent instrument to helping us continuously refocus on what is essential to our vocation?

What is our sense of belonging to the Congregation?

We understand by belonging, not only the feeling of being tied to an institution (being local, provincial or worldwide), but to live that sentiment with concretes gestures or points of interest that unite us.

We can distinguish three levels of belonging: local, provincial and general. When we speak of the local level, it is difficult to calculate the grade of belonging of our confreres, talking about the number and variety of our communities. It's not easy to speak about the provincial

level either. It's true that there are evident differences among them, that confreres are not linked to some as they are in others, and that even the manner in which the Province and the community is conceived is not the same in America as in Africa, Asia, or Europe, even though we're guided by the same Constitutions and the same Vincentian spirit.

In spite of all of this, we can say – I believe – that in the last 50-60 years there has been a noticeable change on this subject: from having a very strong centralization on the worldwide level to a great autonomy among the Provinces, with the consequential displacement of the sense belonging from the worldwide level to the provincial one.

The Second Vatican Council notably developed themes like 'theology of communion', 'ecclesiology', 'subsidiarity', 'shared responsibility', 'dialogue', and 'participation'. In the light of this new ecclesiology and the different way of understanding government, the Congregations revised and adapted their Constitutions. One positive result was decentralization in favor of the provinces in subjects like government, which were manifested in the Norms and the Provincial Assemblies, in consultation and in dialogue. In this manner, we have involved all in the life of the Province. Putting all these means of participation in place has made all the confreres feel like actors of their Provinces and not mere spectators, which could have happened in other times of lesser participation. Another achievement was that the provincial government can govern more realistically and be much more inculturated.

Therefore the consequences derived from the decentralization of governance in the Congregation have been very positive for the Provinces. On the other hand, there has been a loss of belonging to the Congregation on the general level. When we center our vision of a certain objective, we run the risk of weakening other ones; only in illustrating this decrease in the feeling of belonging to the Congregation, do I present these following symptoms:

- With some provinces, there is a difficulty in maintaining correspondence. I hear the Secretary General lament when Visitors don't answer correspondence from the Superior General and his Council in a timely manner. Is this related to belonging?
- Sometimes there is not enough communication between Provinces and the General Council. I refer to the collaboration requested concerning parishes after the 2010 Assembly. Another example: when the General Council sent a circular in February, 2012 about "Confreres in Difficulty", only 10 provinces responded.
- We know that some Visitors aren't diligent in sending circulars or communications sent from the Superior General to all of the members of their Province. At times, they can seem to sleep eternally on your desks.

- Some difficulties that come from the reconfiguration are caused by the excessive attention to the provincial level, and little to our missionary vocation that is more in harmony with the universality of the Congregation, not just a part of it. When the provincial feeling is exasperated, it can foster provincialism, an attitude that doesn't help us see and to be open to other realities that exceed the frontiers of a Province.

I don't want to continue with the casuistry, because it's only a symptom of a deeper problem we should get to; namely the sense of belonging to the Congregation. We are not trying to reduce the legitimate autonomy of the Provinces, but we must not neglect the general sense of belonging, where all of the Provinces should be, according to number 98 of our Constitutions.

Two Convictions to Fortify a Sense of Belonging on the General Level

1. The Congregation is formed by only one body

This is how Saint Vincent expressed it in the Conference given on June 27, 1642: *"We are all missionaries and form only one body, and as there is a narrow relationship between the parts of the body, this is the same union that has to exist between the members of the same Congregation..."* (XI, 44) Number 322 from the Practical Guide of the Visitor echoes Saint Vincent's conviction. It states that *"the Visitor must always take into account that the Congregation, notwithstanding its division into Provinces, is Universal, forming only one body"*. In the following numbers from the Guide, it invites all Visitors to have a clear understanding of such universality and to act according to it (Numbers 323-324).

It's important that the candidate who starts the Internal Seminary is instructed in being a part of the Congregation (Const. 83 & 1); and our vow formulas emphasize that it is in the Congregation of the Mission where we live our vocation of evangelizers (C. 58). Above all, as we have heard from Vincent, we're missionaries who belong to the Congregation of the Mission. It's important to feel we're a part of this body that has received one mission in the Church. The provinces are governmental structures that can change easily and must do so for a better efficiency and a greater fidelity to the charism to animate its works. When we stress provincial identity, we greatly impoverish our missionary vocation, create difficulties in interprovincial collaboration, and make it impossible to see the Congregation as a "body". We're also reminded of this in GA 10, as it invites us to *"cultivate a sense of belonging to the Congregation, farther than the local and provincial community"* (GA 10, Second Line of Action, 2).

2. *Our missionary vocation*

Here is what Vincent told a group of Missionaries in the Conference given on May 30, 1659: "Our vocation consists in going, not to a parish, not only to one diocese, but all the earth" (XI, 553). It seems clear that to be open to the Congregation facilitates that ability to not lose sight that we are missionaries and that in accordance with that, our lifestyle must be different than the diocesan priests. Here lies one of the most important features of our identity and surely our capacity to attract more vocations. Continuing with the same train of thought, I believe that the international missions and the requests that Superior General makes to the Provinces is a true sign that reflects our missionary vocation in the Church.

OUR MISSIONARY IDENTITY AS EXPRESSED IN INTERNATIONAL MISSIONS

Varghese Thottamkara, C.M.

The Origin

Jesus commanded his disciples after the Resurrection, "Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Good news to all creation" (Mk 16:15). St. Vincent, motivated by the spirit of Jesus, considered this commandment addressed also to him and to the confreres of the Mission personally and directly. So he named the society he founded "Congregation of the Mission" and wanted that his confreres go wherever the Divine Providence calls them. Vincent was convinced of the call of the Congregation for the foreign missions and spoke about it very eloquently. He once said "*How happy is the missionary who has no limit in this world on where he can go to preach the Gospel. Why then do we hesitate and set limits, since God has given us the whole world to satisfy our zeal?*" (Please consult "Ratio Missionum": introduction). The missionaries are not to be limited or restricted to one parish, diocese or nation, but to be sent to the whole world.

Over the centuries the Congregation remained faithful to this legacy of St. Vincent overcoming all tides and currents. One of the latest expression of our commitment to foreign missions is the "**international missions**" of the Superior General initiated by former Superior General Fr. Robert Maloney to respond to the call from all over the world. With firm conviction of the merit and need of it, Fr. Gregory Gay the current Superior General continues to pursue it as a goal and to expand and fortify the mission.

Today's International Missions

Today we have the following international missions:

1. In Bolivia, we have two communities:
 - a) El Alto: with three confreres, mainly engaged in pastoral and social activities.
 - b) Cochabamba: with four confreres: engaged in pastoral and social activities.
2. In the Solomon Islands, we have six confreres engaged in the formation of the diocesan seminarian. Lately we have started our own formation too. There are pastoral activities and spiritual direction for women religious. (This mission is principally supported by APVC in providing personnel).
3. In Papua New Guinea, there are seven confreres serving in 3 dioceses. In Port Moresby confreres teach in seminary and do pastoral activity in one parish. In Woitape, 2 are engaged in parish work in the mountains. In Trobiand Islands (Alotau diocese where Rolando Santos CM is the bishop) another two are engaged in parish works.
4. In Tunisia, we have two confreres are engaged in pastoral work and direction of sisters.
5. In Angola, we have two engaged in pastoral work, charity, and spiritual direction of sisters.
6. In Chad, we have three confreres engaged in pastoral works. (This mission is taken up in collaboration with COVIAM).

We also have confreres in international missions working in collaboration with the provinces such as Puerto Rico (in Haiti), Poland (in Benin) Sts. Cyril and Methodius (in Ukraine), Mozambique and Cuba. There are also confreres working in missions from various provinces.

Some missions which started as international missions have been handed over to the responsibility of provinces. Southern India taking up Tanzania is the best example. Some missions are being supported by Visitor's Conferences such as Solomon Islands by APVC and Chad by COVIAM. Many provinces have understood this Vincentian character of our mission and established missions in many places. The Congregation always remained missionary and that is the reason today we find ourselves in all the continents and more than 84 countries.

The provinces continue to take up missions and support it. When a province alone cannot take up a mission, this is an opportunity to the provinces and confreres to share in the international missions. It makes

our missions and communities truly international. This international and missionary character of our identity and charism should be inculcated and promoted from the time of formation. Some provinces have personnel resources to share; others have financial resources to share. With the sharing and collaboration, the international missions continue to fulfill the legacy of St. Vincent.

Obstacles

There have always been obstacles for missions going back to the time of St. Vincent. Towards the end of his life, he made a passionate plea to maintain the ministries that had developed in the Congregation, especially the foreign missions. He defended them by pointing out that they responded to our basic call to evangelize the poor. He warned against those who would seek to curtail or abandon difficult missions because of distance, lack of personnel, or loss of missionary spirit. *"There will be men who coddle themselves, men who have a narrow outlook, who confine their views and designs to a limited sphere within which they shut themselves up as in a tiny circle and are unwilling to leave it"* (SV XII, 92).

"Ratio Missionum" speaks elaborately of the need for selection and formation for missions. The Visitors are requested to select the best members for international missions and give them adequate preparation and formation within the province, so that they adapt to the missions easily. Some sort of help in adaptation and inculturation is given in the mission and at international level. But the basic formation from the province cannot be neglected.

Criteria for selection

The following points will help in selection and formation of confreres serving in international missionaries. Although policies may differ in their description, these qualities are essential.

1. *Missionaries must have emotional stability.* Missionary work is hard! Those ministering cross-culturally, if they are to be effective, must learn to speak other languages, learn new cultures, and speak God's eternal message in changing earthly contexts. Interpersonal relationships with co-workers, confreres who are also going through cultural stress and work anxiety, amplify tension. Only the emotionally stable should make the commitment for long-term, cross-cultural missions.
2. *Missionaries must have spiritual maturity.* They cannot effectively preach the Gospel by their own initiative and power. They are

mere “jars of clay”, who demonstrate that the “all-surpassing power” employed in Christian ministry is “from God and not from us” (2 Cor. 4:7). They join God in His work rather than God joining us in our work. Mission is thus a “supernatural work” done by the power of God. Therefore, missionaries must be people who are on their knees before God in prayer and who study the Bible not only to prepare sermons and lessons, but also to reflect upon God’s will in their own lives. Missionaries must have an intimate relationship with God, which influences who they are and how they relate to others. They are increasingly transformed into God’s likeness as they look upon Him (2 Cor. 3:18).

3. *This spiritual maturity will lead missionaries to be effective teachers of the Word of God.* Teaching a Christian worldview as revealed by God in scripture is integral to the missionary task. Therefore, missionaries being sent to foreign mission fields should be those who have taught the Gospel in their own culture and country and have empathetically nurtured disciples to Christian maturity.
4. *Missionaries must have the ability to adapt to the local situations.* While trying to build-up churches effectively, nurture new Christians to maturity, and equip national church leaders for Christian service, they should always look for acculturating the Gospel values into local traditions. They should not transport their cultural church to the mission; rather allow the Gospel values to get implanted in the culture of the place. Missionaries must be thoroughly trained to enter new cultures and lay the foundations of the Gospel.
5. *Missionaries must have effective interpersonal communication skills.* These interpersonal abilities are largely formed through parental, sibling, and other relational influences as we are growing up. They are difficult to learn as adults. Cultural personalities also vary from continent to continent and from country to country. Despite personality fit, however, all missionaries must have the ability to empathetically enter into the culture where they will minister. This will include also the capacity to work and collaborate as a team.
6. *The missionaries should have pure motives.* A missionary having a clear and direct motivation of evangelization, development of the mission, service of the poor and the glory of God alone should venture for a mission. The dubious motives of personal gain and vain glory will always defeat the purpose and do harm to the mission and the missionary.

Understanding these qualities is essential to the important task of selecting long-term field missionaries. Mission leaders and provincial

superiors must comprehend and carefully employ these criteria to ensure the quality of the missionaries they support. No missionary task in the local church is more important than this one. Without qualified missionaries there can be no effective missions on the field. Today, more than ever, we meet with difficulties and obstacles, but the need is also overwhelming. We as a Congregation and you as Visitors need to find the ways and means of overcoming the challenges to answer the universal call to be faithful to the legacy of St. Vincent.

Some questions we need to reflect upon:

1. *Is there a need to reawaken our confreres on the goal of being missionaries ad gentes? Is there any lethargy among the confreres to leave aside their comfort zone and go to the unknown lands? If yes, how can we help them to re-discover our missionary legacy?*
2. *Is the international and missionary character of our Congregation sufficiently emphasized in our formation programs? Is Vincentian Missiology part of the curriculum?*
3. *How can the provinces participate more concretely and specifically in the international missions of the SG?*
4. *Is there any program in the provinces to prepare the volunteers going for the international missions? (Such as language study, inculturation materials, and missiological dimensions).*

FORMATION FOR THE MISSION

Stanislav Zontak, C.M.

I am aware of your great responsibilities in fulfilling the role of the visitor of your province. I know that you have many problems and difficulties to resolve and projects to start to help your province and each of your confreres to make progress. I am grateful for your service and I offer my sincere thanks. Allow me to share with you my reflections about the area of formation, the area that the Superior General confided to me as assistant general.

I have visited various provinces and followed the situation of formation in the Congregation, and I handle material about formation in the general council. For this reason, I would like to lay out the main points for your attention and a deeper reflection to improve our commitment as formators (as you realize, the visitor is the main formator of the province).

The Place of formation among provincial priorities

Despite official declarations, formation does not figure among the most important priorities of various provinces. As we read the reports of provincial councils that you send to the curia, we see clearly that greater attention is given to the works of the province (of course, this is right), followed by economic matters, and then issues of discipline after other material concerns. But formation ranks among the last and the least matters being treated.

Organizing formation and preparing formation programs are left to a formation commission, but it does not always function adequately and actively. We forget that the visitor and his council should take the initiative, follow the development of formation, and make decisions that should be carried out, supported, and supervised.

Preparation of formators

The complex demands of formation, and the fragility and weakness of those aspiring to consecrated life today require competent formators, well prepared for this important task. I must share with you my concern about how formators in many provinces are being prepared for this responsibility, since we often find that, in the formation of unprepared confreres, certainly good and zealous men, they are incompetent and commit irreparable mistakes. We see a major drift of formators, who, although prepared for formation, are assigned other tasks (certainly important for the province). This indicates something about the real priorities of the province. If someone is clearly good in the area of formation, he should offer his service for at least ten years in this area. Frequent change of the formation team causes confusion for those in formation. Unfortunately, it often happens that the confreres who have studied formation work in another area.

I would like to emphasize that specialized studies in theology or philosophy are not a preparation for formation. Confreres who teach in these specific areas are not automatically capable of also being formators. If we want to put them in charge of formation, they will need other studies and specific formation. There are certainly many institutions that offer programs to prepare formators, and we should profit from them more than we do. I think that we should reflect seriously on how to make our formation communities more stable and solid.

The choice of candidates and their proper preparation

The experience of initial formation teaches us the importance of a good choice of candidates for the Congregation. In countries where we experience a lack of candidates, we especially note the danger of tending to accept with more benign criteria all the candidates who show up. In provinces with more candidates, the choice is relatively easier, but it is often marked by little knowledge of the candidate, of his personal story, and of his main motives. We rely on a report from his pastor or from the base community where the candidate is coming from, or where he has lived for some time.

Still, what is often lacking is regular contact with a confrere with one of the formators of the province. A candidate accepted without clear motivation or without the necessary human maturity impedes the whole group and creates many difficulties for the formators. Often, such a candidate has to be sent home, and this causes much upset for the entire group in formation. Over the long term, it may influence the group's relations with the formators and openness to future formation. It is much better to avoid these difficulties and prevent them by a more careful choice of candidates.

The candidates who are accepted should be well prepared before entering other phases of initial formation, novitiate (or internal seminary), and philosophy studies. However, the preparatory period in the first step of formation (the pre-novitiate year), has not always been considered with sufficient attention. This period requires the presence of competent and wise formators, able to receive the candidates with all their strengths and weaknesses, and to help them face courageously their own personality. This service helps them to start on the path of formation. The new *Ratio formationis* will devote a chapter to this issue, and I recommend it to your kind attention.

Formation of young confreres

Something else for our consideration is the formation of young confreres in their first years of service after priestly ordination. We see that, in many dioceses, during the first one or two years after ordination, the bishop meets his priests monthly to continue their formation and initiation into ministry. By contrast, in some provinces of the Congregation, we find the situation of confreres who are left to themselves after ordination with no formal initiation into ministry. Certain provinces organize yearly meetings for young confreres (up to ten years of ordination), but these meetings cannot replace the formation needed during the first year after ordination.

Knowledge of the official documents of the CM

Another area that can be improved is knowledge of the official documents of the Congregation, such as the Instruction on the Vows, the *Ratio Missionum*, and the Practical Guide for the Local Superior, and the *Ratio formationis*. These can contribute to the ongoing formation of the confreres. They certainly learned about these documents during their initial formation and they kept them in their personal library, but they never look at them again. These documents, together with the letters of the superior general, deserve to be studied and used more often, and they should form the basis for our ongoing formation. I think that we should do something more to motivate our confreres to study these documents, either personally or during community meetings.

A strategic plan for the specialization of the confreres

We know that confreres need to continue their professional post-graduate formation in order to work well and respond to the needs of the poor, and to take up the assignments that the province gives them. To accomplish this, each province should prepare a strategic plan for the specialization of its confreres which should coordinate with the strategic plan of the works of the province for the future. Specialized studies should be considered as flowing from the needs of the province. The province itself should ask appropriate confreres to continue their formation.

It often happens that the confreres themselves ask to do some studies since they are happy to deepen their knowledge of some material that interests them. The criterion for discernment is to judge how this desire of theirs corresponds to the province's own needs and plans. A good strategic plan for specialization, prepared by the province, can be very useful to channel the interests of the confreres, and to harmonize them with the works of the province.

Dear Visitors, these are the themes that I wish to share with you. I have no intention of criticizing the way in which you carry out your task in the area of formation. Quite the contrary, I only wanted to offer you some materials for your reflection, and in this way to improve the formation given in your provinces. If I can be useful to you in any way and help you with my own modest contribution, I am at your service.

TO DEVELOP THE VINCENTIAN MISSIONARY SPIRIT

Eli Chaves dos Santos, C.M.

Let me share a concern I have with you, one which I feel is important and relevant for our missionary work. At the present time, the Church invites us to a new evangelization and the Congregation proposes us to develop our faithful creativity for the mission. This strong missionary spirit that marks our present moment reminds me of a statement from our 2004 General Assembly: "Congregation of the Mission, I know what you are! Do not conform to mediocrity... work and untiring spread the frontiers of the mission...".

Within a Church that has a growing conscience of being missionary, this call originally made in 2004 continues to be true today. There is a concern today among many confreres that ask themselves: Do Bishops, clergy and other people in general identify us as true missionaries? Why is there a great absence of the Congregation in the initiatives and the missionary and charitable organisms of the Church? We have very few confreres who specialize in Missiology, and more so in Vincentian Missiology. How can we speak of stability and of a sense of belonging if we don't have a well-defined missionary identity? Our pastoral action seems more in the line of conservation and of a limited participation in parish settings. We risk centering all our energy in what we call "ordinary pastoral work". Which I define as a work tied to a territory (parish), centered on the liturgy, catechesis and parish services; a work that absorbs the confreres' best energies and which can become an obstacle instead in giving impulse to a more decisive and missionary evangelization.

Pope John Paul II said in Palermo in 1995, "The time has come to go from conservation to mission". What can this mean? The Synod about New Evangelization dedicated Proposal 50 to the Consecrated Life saying: "Consecrated life... can make a great contribution to evangelization. That is why the Synod asks the Orders and Congregations that they make an effort to reach geographic, social and cultural frontiers in the new evangelization. The Synod also invites the consecrated to take risks in the Areopagus of the mission. In this same spirit, I feel that the statement made by Jon Sobrino continues to be true: "Consecrated Life must be in the periphery, in the frontiers and in the desert". Those consecrated must be in the vanguard of the mission: in the periphery, with the poor and the excluded, there where the call of the poor is most urgent: in the frontiers, where the church encounters the new and difficult problems missionaries may encounter in the new Areopagus; in the desert where the gospel is not really known, where the church is poor, is a minority or is in its first steps.

A few years ago, Paulo Suess, a German missiologist who lives in Brazil told a group of confreres: "You Vincentians must be experts in mission, be careful you don't sin where you're called to be the most virtuous". Within a Church that is becoming more missionary, I believe that the missionary witness of St. Vincent calls us to prioritize and deepen our missionary work among the poor, inviting us to be on the vanguard of the mission. To be able to widen the mission frontier, I think we must ask ourselves: Who are we with, where are we, how do we work and what are our true objectives? What relationship should there be between "ordinary pastoral work" and "missionary dynamics"? From where can we give the mission its impulse? Are we doing what we have to or are we prisoners of a scheme that inhibits us from thinking or acting in a different manner?

The mission implies a dynamic of displacement, a movement towards the other, a penetration into society, we have to decentralize, have exit strategies. I feel that a revision of our works is necessary, of our commitments, of our plans and pastoral structure, especially in our parishes, so that we can increase the frontiers of our mission among the poor. I feel it would be enriching if our provinces, and the whole congregation, could implicate themselves more with these approaches. Without a doubt, these are a lot of questions; there is no easy and magical solution. But I would like see us making greater efforts in revising our "ordinary missionary activity", so that we may assume decisively our preoccupation for the mission as a criteria to evaluate and energize our activities (not all that is done is necessary nor the need to evangelize in the same manner), we need to develop a formation in a more missionary and Vincentian strategy, along with trying new and more significant missionaries experiences.

I recognize that a more decisive choice for the mission, lived from a true Vincentian Missiology, is an indispensable necessity so that in a spirit of faithful creativity, we can construct the future of the Congregation and the Congregation of the Future.

VINCENTIAN PRESENCE IN AFRICA: WAKE UP AND WALK!

Abba Zeracristos Yosief, C.M.

Introduction

As some of you may recall, the 2010 General Assembly did not accept what was called "*continental representation at the General Council of the Congregation of the Mission*". I chose the above theme to honor my color and African identity, and not to be 'lawyer of lost causes' for

African concerns. My objective in this presentation is to introduce this topic and to stimulate reflection and discussion. Our Vincentian presence in Africa is not yet very mature, solid, and consistent, yet it is emerging. But how?

In this way, I want to draw your attention to the troubled and suffering continent we call Africa. At times, we Africans are criticized for our rhythm of life, as some say that we are not 'punctual' and lack 'precision'. While there is some truth here, there can be unjustified exaggeration and generalizations of some particular issues. A very fundamental question we need to ask ourselves: *is Africa the "ENORMOUS SPIRITUAL LUNG"* (to use Pope Benedict's language in *Africae Munus* n. 13), *for the future of the Congregation of the Mission?* If yes, do you think this future is bright or dull? Of course, even in the international Congregation, I am not sure about Africa's good name and reputation. Its members are often accused of a lack of moral and financial transparency, accountability and fidelity, especially with the vow of Chastity!

I have begun by asking a *very provocative question*: Is Africa the time bomb that will one day burst, or a beautiful flower waiting to bud? Obviously, the position of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI was to say that Africa is: "An enormous spiritual lung for a humanity that appears in crisis of faith and hope".

Some hints on the sufferings of the African continent!

The actual situation of the African Continent is very complex and complicated. Today, Africa and its colors represent many realities, including: *poverty, misery, various illnesses (AIDS, Malaria, Tuberculosis...), wars of various kind, political and economic instability, corruption, illegal immigration towards the west looking for freedom and comfort...* in short, it is everything.. It was right what a confrere said to me at the 2004 General Assembly: "*In today's western society it is most unfortunate to be black and poor!*" (actually he said in Italian: *nella società occidentale odierna, è una sfortuna essere neri e poveri!*). I believe this affirmation is true at all levels.

Generally, we speak little of Africa and Africans, and when we do so, it is often in negative terms. There are prejudices and stereotypes we need to avoid when speaking about Africa. For example: "On a train, there were French, English and Africans", as if Africa were a small country like Switzerland! In fact, Africa is three times bigger than Europe; after Asia, it is the largest continent in area and population. In Africa, we have more than 2,500 spoken languages. And this is a continent embracing all skin colors: black, (the large majority), white, people of brown and yellow skin, as well as people with straight noses and crushed ones! Africa deserves our *love, respect, attention and sensibility!*

Africa: Black gold, victim of its own gold and diamonds

Unfortunately, “*the status quo*” on the African continent has some puzzling data. Just to give you an idea, reflect on these facts:

1. Thirteen percent of the world population lives in Africa. However, twenty-eight percent of the worldwide poor live in Africa, especially in *Sub-Saharan Africa*.
2. Of all AIDS patients in the world 62% are located in Africa. In some African countries in recent years, thank God, the number of newly infected people is declining; but in other countries, up to forty percent of a national population is infected with the virus. In the USA one AIDS patient needs \$13,500.00 for medication yearly, but in Africa it is \$8.00 dollars per person.
3. Every year, 344 million Africans suffer from malaria; tuberculosis seems unstoppable.
4. Over 260,000 women die every year during birth-delivery. 4 million African children die before reaching 5 years of age. Unfortunately, in Africa, every day, we assist the death of 12,500 children for curable sicknesses.
5. Over 45 million African children are deprived of the opportunity of education.
6. In the “G-8” countries” average life expectation is 78 years, but in Africa it is 46 years.
7. The annual income of an African is \$450 USD, 57 times less than in “G-8” countries.
8. After the end of the cold war, (1989 onward), 90% of wars, skirmishes, conflicts and senseless deaths in the world occurred in Africa. Why?
9. The GPA of forty sub-Saharan African Countries amounts around \$450 million per year, half of what Spain alone could produce.

There are many other things one could list, but suffice it to say that the above paints a clear picture on what we’re talking about. However, this is not the only picture of Africa. In fact, the African face is radiant and its soul beautiful. We Africans:

- Despite all the difficulties, problems, and hardships of life, we LOVE CELEBRATING LIFE & SOWING HOPE! The African soul knows how to smile and bear one’s own cross while singing and dancing. Where else but Africa could you find people who smile, sing and dance even on graves? It is a value of great worth to be shared with you.

- Are generous, hospitable and good!
- While some engage in tribal or cultic practices (stereotyped as 'witchcraft'), the African soul is always seeking the Transcendental One, the "**Totally Other**", our God.
- While we are very rich in natural resources, unfortunately, our richness is often misrepresented by the most powerful. Instead of taking advantage of our natural resources, we Africans are becoming victims of our minerals. In our midst we have 'Lords of war' (often instigated and supported by powerful countries). The social injustice endured by many Africans is best characterized by the philosophy of Machiavelli: the ends justify the means!

The Presence of the Congregation and its Role in Africa

If the name and fame of Africa is associated with *poverty, misery, various sicknesses (like AIDS, Malaria, Tuberculosis...), wars of various kinds, political and economic instability, corruption, forced child labor, illegal immigration of many young Africans towards the West who look for freedom and comfort...*, as Vincentians, it is time to ask ourselves: *what shall we do to change this image of Africa?* Again, keep in mind that the Vincentian presence in Africa is not yet very strong. At the moment, we have 6 provinces (Madagascar, Ethiopia, DRC, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Nigeria); 1 vice province (Mozambique); 3 regions (Cameroon, Ruanda and Burundi), and 8 Missionary areas (Egypt, Algeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Chad, Benin, Angola and Tunisia). Except for Madagascar (founded in 1647) and Abyssinia (founded in 1839), the others are relatively young (the late 20th-21st Centuries), as Christianity is young in sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, I can safely say the Vincentian presence in Africa is still in its 'adolescent' stage. Using this analogy, is it tolerable that some 'teen-age' growing pains be there?

What is our role as Vincentians? Is it to educate young Africans, revitalize and significantly increase our presence? I strongly believe, and in fact I am convinced that **EDUCATION IS THE KEY TO WAKE UP AFRICA!** And it is precisely in this that we could have a very fundamental role. If corruption, the struggle for power, and money are the cancers of our African society, we can fight them by educating the young generation. A good, solid, human and intellectual formation is the answer. We should make education our target and do so on two levels:

1. While I am aware we cannot address all the educational constraints Africans face, we can actively participate in its revitalisation. In this worthwhile, ambitious project, our well-known and

respected Vincentian Universities, with united forces or separately, could be of great help: *DePaul University, St. John's, Adamson, Niagara, All Hallows, along with Franz Foundation.* How and where? There are some relatively democratic and constitutional African Countries (Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, to start) where we could try to form a model university to grant quality education.

2. In the Congregation of the Mission in Africa, we can assure a solid formation of our candidates by choosing to locate it in one of the relatively peaceful countries where we have our seminary formation. For example, our seminary in Nairobi, Kenya could be one of the best options, because there are already good universities in the area, most notably CUEA and TANGAZA. In fact, for the first time, in nineteen years of its existence, COVIAM members unanimously approved of having a common theological formation for their candidates. This could be of great benefit, especially for the new missions and regions, who often have many difficulties in properly forming their candidates due to a lack of infrastructure and personnel. I believe all of us, particularly provinces with "grey hair", could actively collaborate in this project, so this COVIAM dream come true! As President Obama would say, *"Yes, we can!"*.

Conclusion: "Africa: A Continent of the Future & Hope"

Africa is not only the land of drama, wars, sickness and premature death, but Africans also know how to laugh, sing, and dance to life. Yes, we sing and dance even on day of death, so to speak! We laugh, sing and dance on the graves, because we know and believe that death is a transformation and passage to eternal and everlasting life. On February 10, 2012, Pope Emeritus Benedict said: *"Africa is described, in a very reductive way, and often humiliating, as a continent of conflicts and the endless and insoluble problems. On the contrary, Africa is, for the Church, the continent of the FUTURE AND HOPE"* (Africae Munus, 13).

In conclusion, let me quote **Jean Guilton**, a well-known French philosopher, who, in dialogue with Senghor, an African philosopher said the following:

"Africa is the continent of the future... of the next century? It never needs to fix the dates of the future. But how can you believe that? It is my political trainer/teacher who taught me! Who is your political teacher? This is a 'State secret', Senghor, it is a 'State secret'. Oh! My goodness! What did this illustrious Stranger say? He said: 'Look what happened to the Gauls after the Roman de-colonization:

political chaos, economical regression, difficult sanitary situations, absence of the State. But, the rational culture of the Greek-Romans went the way of assimilation. The renewal of life, fed by the Barbarian's flow, is preparing. Powerful nature, solid culture, family life, deep-down evangelization are the jewellery under big trees. ***One day, the circumstances will bring to the political stability, so that the whole of Africa will be a creative jet of unpredictable novelty***¹.

This is my hope and wish too.

In the past few decades, Archaeological researchers have tended to allocate the origin of human existence somewhere in East Africa [Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya...] some 10 million years ago. If man is created in the image and similarity of God as Scripture tells us [Gen 1:27], we can safely conclude that God is also black or brown! It is the African who resembles God; therefore, we owe them love and honour and must reserve for them our care and respect. Thank you.

¹ JEAN GUITTON, *Il mio Testamento Filosofico*, Mursia, Milano 1997, p. 92.