

Confreres in Difficulty

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On January 13, 2012, Fr. G. Gregory Gay, C.M., along with the General Council, sent a reflection to all the Provincial Councils of the Congregation with on this subject: “Confreres in difficulty”. In 2010 the Superior General gave me this mission, complicated and difficult, but one that deserves our attention, respect, and help because it deals with our brothers. We should not forget that behind this title (“confreres in difficulty”) lie actual confreres who suffer, and who unfortunately also cause suffering. It is here, more than any other subject, we need everyone’s collaboration: the General Council, Visitors, local Superiors and confreres charged of helping these confreres that are going through this special situation.

We can’t think about these confreres in difficulty without thinking about the communities where they reside or about the houses where they are assigned, if they live outside the province. In truth, confreres with difficulties contribute in creating communities in difficulties and vice versa. It wouldn’t be a bad idea for all of us who exercise some authority in the Congregation to frequently review how we exercise that authority, in the light of cited document, of Saint Vincent’s writings and specially the Holy Scriptures.

The reflection that I’m offering will touch on these three points:

- Responses from provinces to the January, 2012 letter from the General Council;
- Confreres who are absent from the community-province;
- The confreres “in difficult situations” who live in community.

I will conclude this last section by offering some concrete proposals.

I.

RESPONSES TO THE JANUARY, 2012 LETTER OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL TO THE PROVINCES

This letter was directed to the Visitors, so that with their respective provincial councils they could study and respond to these two questions in writing:

- What is the province doing to help these confreres that live in difficulty?
- What more can the province or must the province do for them?

Only ten provinces responded to these vital and current questions. The majority responded to the first question by presenting the reality of their provinces in what refers to the confreres in difficulty. Some of the actions that are being taken to help these confreres, specialists in appropriate centers to help cut the unbalances, establishing a provincial commission to accompany and mentor these confreres who decide to abandon the Province.

The following suggestions were made to the second question (“concerning what the Province can do or should do for them”):

- *Create or establish a “Community in Dialogue” model, according to the style of “Trivigliano” run by Fr. Matteo Tagliaferri, as step for overall precaution.*
- *Fortify community life in all ways: prayer, common formation, relaxation, etc.*
- *Offer confreres the help of specialists.*
- *Pay special attention to the different formation stages: initial and ongoing.*
- *Fortify the meaning of belonging to the Congregation.*

II.

CONFRERES ABSENT FROM THE CONGREGATION: SOME PRECISIONS

1. How many absentee confreres are there?

Actually the total number of confreres who are absent from the community are 192. In 2010 there were 211. In one way or another, there have been 65 cases resolved since the 2010 General Assembly, but another 46 have been added. So the result is 19 cases less than in 2010.

In this number we have included all those who have the permission of their Visitor for a year (cf. C. 67), those who are outside with the permission of the Superior General (cf. C. 70), and those who are illegally absent, although their number has decreased. The majority of absentees are between 40 and 60 years of age. The most often cited reasons for absences are: “discerning their vocation”, “a desire to be incardinated”, and “disagreements/problems with the institution”.

2. Why has the number of confreres absent from their communities increased?

The number has increased since 2002 and since then, the number has maintained or has grown year after year, even though the total number of confreres has decreased little by little.

It not easy to find the causes for this phenomenon. We may think that, for example, that a cause is an aversion to all that is institutional and control, favored by today's cultural currents which invites us to live and work in a free, individualistic way. In reality, there are many confreres seeking incardination into a diocese because they desire to live and work with greater liberty and seek an independent economy. We can't discard that in many cases, this may be due to the psychological factor of many of our young who tire and exhaust easily, or in by unstable behavior which reminds us of the consequences of the broken families or difficulties they encountered in their early childhood.

We also have to mention the possible question of their deficient formation as another cause, which did not help them to distinguish what is fundamental and incidental. Along with a lack of personal identity and inability to grasp what it means to belong to the Congregation, this person has often lived very poor vocation discernment.

It's also possible that in some determined cases, some of the young decide to leave a province or the Congregation because they find communities stagnant or who have lost their identities, and living out the charism no longer attracts them. Our young don't support mediocre communities that disillusion them. It is also possible, that in a few cases, there is a confluence of various causes that we have seen here or other ones that we can't comprehend.

3. Practical orientations offered by the General Council

Before all else, this must be our first principal: the Congregation and provinces must be very sensitive, patient and merciful with each confrere who is absent, but must also it must look to the common good of the Congregation and the respective province. A certain balance must be achieved between the institution and the person. If the person is the greatest good, then that should not diminish the common good of the community, the province, and the Congregation.

How can we translate or see this balance within this current subject? Every absentee confrere should be treated with great respect, even when he does not manifest it, or tries to lie and manipulate for his own interests. Through dialogue, we must help him know what is best for him and for the Congregation, and let him clearly see it. And finally

we have to be clear about the periods of absence, and his accountability to the Visitor or his delegate.

In the larger group of absentees, we have to distinguish the following four subgroups:

- The biggest subgroup is composed of confreres who work and live in a diocese with the intention of being incardinated. Some of these have not exceeded their permitted time to carry this out (5 yrs); therefore, they have a legitimate absence. On the contrary, others started working in a diocese with their provincial permission (1 yr), but the year finished and they continue to live and work without the permission from the Superior General. Therefore, they are in an illegal situation. For this group of confreres, it's very important to control the time allotted and regulate the situation, so that the number of illegitimate absences can be the least possible ones.
- There are a number of men who live outside of the community and desire to be dispensed from the priestly state or are already in the process. The procedure is described in the Practical Guide for Visitors (No. 163). In these cases, the Visitor must choose a judge and a notary for the interrogations with the interested person. The general council must collaborate with the Visitor and with the Procurator General.
- Another group is made up of older confreres that have been in this situation for many years. These are men who can't live in community, due to a psychological imbalance or because of conditions that are very complicated and particular. In these cases, it's clear that we can't establish a common criterion, but we must see what is most possible to do, always desiring the best for the man and that of the Congregation.
- Finally there is another group we must pay special attention. These are confreres who are young, who are absent illegally, and who don't desire to be incardinated, because they don't want to work in any diocese. In reality, they are out of the Congregation, even though they may be in the catalogue and legally belong to it. They have no intention of returning, they're living in situation which is contrary to our spirit and to priestly lifestyle: civil work, a partnered life, children...

In the case of these men, we must start a process of expulsion, because they are a hindrance to the Congregation, a negative example for new vocations, and even a certain danger for the Congregation, since they belong to it. The General Council is willing to collaborate; clarifying the objections that you may have about the most effective

way to reach the expulsion. The most effective way is, as it is stated in the Practical Guide of the Visitor, “center on obedience, because the most stubborn disobedience is easily proven”. (In the Practical Guide for the Visitor, the process of expulsion from the Congregation may be found in the section Nos. 165-190).

It is true that, in some cases, the Visitor may find it difficult to confront a confrere in an irregular situation, as he doesn't want to see him leave the Congregation. They may have some kind of friendship. In these cases, the Visitor may seek the help of the General Council: the confrere in question can receive an assignment from the Superior General. If he doesn't accept it, they can initiate the process for expulsion from Rome, which begins after the second canonical notice. The General Council knows that an expulsion is always difficult and very unpleasant, but when there's no other solution, it must be undertaken with charity, but with firmness.

As long as a confrere is absent temporarily, he belongs to the Congregation, even if he may have lived many years outside the community, or if illegally absent. Therefore, we can't erase him from the catalogue, and if he continues to belong to the Congregation and the province we must be in contact with him to help him to discern, to sustain him, to guide him, so he may not lose contact with the Province. This is a special task of the Visitor.

III.

“CONFRERES IN DIFFICULTY” WHO LIVE IN COMMUNITY

It's evident that within this group, we can find a wide array of situations and problems. Some have said, and with reason, that all of us, at some time in our lives, have passed through difficult moments. The object of this reflection is not those difficulties that are common in our daily lives, but those that live in prolonged or permanent situations of difficulty. In the January, 2012 letter, we made a distinction between the confreres that live in community, and that within them struggle with their difficulties and those others who are present in the community, but in reality are absent from the same.

1. Those who strive to overcome their difficulties

As mentioned before, these are integrated members participating in both community and apostolic life, but who are passing through moments or stages of difficulties. These difficulties can vary diverse; as we know they all come from important breakdowns. All confreres who go through these difficulties and struggle to overcome them deserve

respect, solidarity, closeness and our support, because as St. Paul said, it's a great fraternal sign "when we carry the weight of others". These confreres expect to find the "Good Shepherd" in the authority (general, provincial or local) that has the supportive word and is interested in them, as John's Gospel describes (cf. Jn. 10:1-21). We should also recall Pope Emeritus Benedict's words to Superior Generals on May 22, 2006: "To all of you, Major Superiors, I ask that you transmit a word of support to all those who are in difficulty, to the elderly and those who are sick. To all those that are going moments of crisis and solitude, those who suffer and feel they're lost..."

2. Those placing themselves at the outskirts of community and take of advantage of it

These are the ones who "present but absent", those who are absent but physically present". These confreres, who at times may have great difficulties, at the same time, create difficulties in the communities. They exist in all provinces; some go from house to house. In some provinces, especially larger ones, they seem to be a "cushion house" (provincial house or another) where the difficulty caused by the confrere begins to be dissolved by the environment, softening the wounds provoked in the rest of the confreres.

- Confreres who isolate themselves and lack a sense of belonging, to the Province and the Congregation.
- Confreres that live at the edge of the community and with their own criteria.
- Confreres who give no accountability for their actions.
- Even more serious, confreres who lead a double life, in regard to the vows of poverty and chastity.

What can be done to help these confreres in situations of difficulties who live in community? The letter of January 2012 that we developed posits possible ways:

- *Special attention must be paid to formation.* The need for adequate formators; for a discernment of motivation; all part of good initial formation. This is a preventive action that, in the long run, has good results. A solid accompaniment at the start of vocation discernment and community initiation is the basis to avoid difficult future situations.
- *It is better to prevent than to cure.* This phrase is probably best used in this case. Prevention can be the initial discernment, initial

formation and also permanent formation. We have to learn from our pasts; frequently the most serious difficulties could have been prevented if we would've put greater attention to the initial discernment, when with the help of experts we could have seen the indications of future problems.

- *Specific attention to each case.* There are some basic, general outlines, but each person requires specific treatment, as what is useful for one person may not be so for another. In doing this, we have to provide some hope to the person. This is based on the possibility of giving them some appropriate help, whether spiritual, psychological or both. We can't discard help from professionals in treating concrete problems, even though it could economically expensive. What one requires from each confrere in difficulty is openness.
- *The role of the local community.* Here, the superior and confreres play a fundamental role in accompanying a confrere in difficulty, as in many cases, local communities are the umbilical cord between the confrere and Congregation. Thus, a fraternal environment can benefit the confrere in difficulty, along with a superior, who is welcoming and attentive.
- *The Visitor's role or the delegated confrere.* His mission must be to look intensely and seriously in recuperating the confrere, and by using adequate ways without giving up. These are some ways: a sabbatical year, permanent formation, spiritual direction, medical-psychological help, to name a few. In a case where the confrere has decided to leave, it is important that they receive help from the Visitor and guidance in the corresponding process, whether it's incardination, a dispensation petition from all the priestly duties etc; then in his new way of life: some economic help at the beginning if it's necessary, help him find a job, so he can continue to function as a member of the Church and society.

Sometimes the Visitor may be forced to utilize a confrere who is a friend as a bridge between the confrere and the community. This friend can assist the Visitor in carrying out functions as such frequent communication, accompaniment, and other practical matters.

3. Two specific initiatives for confreres in difficulty who live in community

These are two specific proposals useful for this subject. The General Council asks Visitors to choose the viability (or not) of each of the following initiatives.

3.1. *Creation of a help center to refocus one's vocation, community life, and ministry*

- a) Place: "Saint Vincent de Paul Theologate House. Xoxhimanca – Mexico.

The Mexican Visitor, with the consent of his counsel, will give this house for this purpose. It is a relatively large house (for at least 30-40 people) and is comfortable, with large garden spaces, and near the city. The objective of this center is to attend to confreres of the Congregation, with the agreement of their respective Visitors and Superiors, who want and need to revise their lives and vocations, following a spiritual-psycho-therapeutically program in a community, whose goal is to reach a balance a human and vocational identity balance which enables them to carry out the proper ministries of our Congregation. We would not include confreres with deeper problems who are incapable of minimal community living.

- b) Concrete problems that the center is committed to treating:

- Constant vocational doubts
- Discontent in ministry and/or in community living
- Affective-emotional-sexual imbalances (no pedophilia cases)
- Addictions
- Depression, anguish, stress
- Community conflicts

- c) Program organization:

It will be a three month session held specific times of the year. Upon evaluation, we can determine if a longer time is needed. A minimum of five confreres are required. The personnel needed to run the center include:

- Two confreres with knowledge of Vincentian spirituality and of psychology.
- Two psychologists (male and female) part time, who are capable of working with a Christian orientation.
- One staff person for house maintenance
- One religious volunteer

- d) The program can have the following activities:

- Daily liturgy of the hours and Eucharist.
- An hour of Vincentian spirituality from Monday to Friday.

- Personal daily therapy with the psychologists
- Personal time for Reading and meditation...
- Monthly spiritual retreats
- Community events: exchanges, recreation, trips...

3.2. *Fr. Matteo Tagliaferri's "Community in Dialogue" in Trivigliano (North Italy)*

This Center is located in the surroundings of Trivigliano, Italy. This place currently has 4 confreres. The community and work are led by Fr. Matteo, a confrere.

- The objective of the "community in dialogue" is to help heal those imbalances in the person. As the name indicates there is a great emphasis on dialogue, co-existence and personal relationships. There is professional team: doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and Fr. Matteo as the animator and spiritual accompanist. In the Trivigliano Center there are 80 people who are receiving therapy. In Italy there are other centers that depend on this one. There are even two other centers outside of Italy, one in Lima and another in Bogota.
- Problems that "Community in Dialogue" face:
 - Diverse behavioral imbalances.
 - Personal immaturity that can derive from alcohol dependencies o other chemical substances.
 - Affective dependencies.
 - Immature vocation.
- This therapeutic program is aimed at laity, but a confrere has participated in it, along with diocesan and religious priests. Fr. Matteo is willing to receive a confrere who asks to go, but no more than 2 at a time. They can live in the community and also participate in the activities of the therapeutic center.

3.3. *Other possibilities*

Obviously, the above two means don't replace the resource of the specialized centers whose goal is rehabilitation. For more complicated cases, we have no other remedy than to go to them, which on the other hand exist in many other countries.