

THEME - 2

Reconfiguration

A German and Austrian Dialogue on Reconfiguration

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Editor's note

As the reality of reconfiguration looms before the Congregation, two Visitors have been steadily working together to make it a reality. At last July's Visitors Meeting, I spoke with Fr. Hans-Georg Radina, C.M., Visitor of the Province of Germany, and Fr. Franz Kangler, C.M., Visitor of the Province of Austria. Their presentation to the Visitors on the process they undertook to join their provinces together was well-received. Afterwards, they graciously agreed to be interviewed for *Vincentiana*.

Visitors' Background

Fathers Hans-Georg Radina, C.M. and Franz Kangler, C.M. have Vincentian roots that run deep. Both grew up in Vincentian parishes, which formed and influenced them. Hans-Georg and his family were members of a parish in Lippstadt. His father was a member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Franz recalls the confrere who was his pastor as a "prophetic presence" and a great influence on his life. Franz described his family as 'slightly shocked' when, at the completion of his studies, he told them of his desire to enter the Congregation. Both confreres credit their families and interaction with confreres as positive, lasting influences on their lives.

When asked to give a brief sketch of their provinces, both described them as "small, but dedicated" and "dynamic". Franz observed that the Province of Austria has undergone a series of changes, mainly in terms of apostolates and local communities. Hans-Georg noted that the Province of Germany has never really been a large one, either its area (northwest Germany) or its number of confreres. However, both agreed that their provinces, while smaller in number, have kept a balance between starting new ministries and, when possible, strengthening existing works. Hans-Georg observed that, "No matter what our size, we can't do everything we used to do. We need to make choices". Franz noted that, "In both provinces, we are blessed to have young gifted confreres. We owe it to them to plan properly for our future".

From these realities – the smaller number of confreres and a need to choose where to focus for the future – came initial talk of reconfiguration. “Actually, our two provinces talked about this for over a decade” Franz said. Hans-Georg agreed, and added that “at first, we did retreats between both provinces. Then, the two provincial councils met annually to discuss matters of mutual concern. From those small starts, there came the level of interaction we now have today”. As the two provincial councils, along with confreres of both provinces got to know one another, the stage was set not just for talk of reconfiguration, but the actual planning to make it a reality.

First stirrings of reconfiguration

“As you can see, our response to the request for reconfiguration did not just come from ‘above’ (meaning a mandate of the General Assembly), but from verities of a common language, the proximity of our two countries and works, and common elements in formation”, said Franz. In 2012, the two provinces held individual meetings, including separate provincial assemblies, and then selected confreres to be on a Steering Committee to study reconfiguration and develop a basic structure as a model of reconfiguration for both provinces. After a series of meetings, they proposed a model of reconfiguration as a province made up of two regions.

In 2012, meetings took place in Vienna and Munich. Reconfiguration was discussed in great depth, focusing on working out the complex factors involved in melding local communities, apostolates, and the civil and juridical issues arising from uniting provinces in two different countries. Following this Munich meeting, the Steering Committee met again in 2013 to discuss the results of their talks and plan a common provincial assembly in Munich, held in May, 2013. At this assembly, confreres voted to accept the proposals of the Steering Committee, its model of reconfiguration, and authorized the Committee to continue its work.

Both Fathers Hans-Georg and Franz believe this process has been effective in helping confreres to become more familiar with one another and their respective provinces, along with devising a plan that has been widely well-received. “Of course, sharing a common language and close geographical boundaries helps a good deal”, Hans-George noted. “We have shared resources in the past, such as the staffing of St. George’s School in Istanbul, which German and Austrian confreres began over 130 years ago”, Franz added. Both provincials agreed that after reconfiguration, they will be better able to collaborate in existing works and focus on new ones.

Details of reconfiguration process

What will this new province look like? How will it be led? When and how will it come into being? As with any major change 'the devil is always in the details', to quote an old proverb. Hans-Georg and Franz outlined an ambitious agenda for the next eighteen months. For the rest of 2013 through mid-2014, the results of the common provincial assembly in Munich will be studied and presented to the General Curia, with a visitation from an Assistant General, Fr. Zeracristos. (Ed. Note: Fr. Zeracristos was on the visitation when this issue went to press.)

Included in the actions for 2014 are a formulation of a set of common provincial norms and the unification of norms for daily life for this common province. Once done, this will be presented at a common provincial assembly for discussion and ratification. After this, the norms along with all other relevant data will be sent to the Superior General in Rome for ratification. The official date of the emergence of the new province will be January 1, 2015.

This new province will either be known as the Province of Austria and Germany (Österreich-Deutschland, using the actual names of both countries), or by the name of a common saint like St. Martin, St. Severin or St. Boniface. It will consist of two regions, and the organizational forms of existing civil law of both provinces (as it affects the confreres and their works) in both countries will remain unchanged. Properties, assets, and obligations will remain regionally-based, but the newly formed provincial council will equally be comprised of confreres from Austria and Germany to resolve any potential problems. Each confrere will belong to one of the two regions, and can transfer into the other region at their request or by their consent.

New Provincial Administration

There will be one Visitor of the new province and one common provincialate. Vienna has been proposed as the location of the new provincialate, as was recommended by the Munich provincial assembly. The Visitor will be elected for a period of six years, with a renewal of three additional years. He will be voted on by confreres in both regions of the new province. The Visitor will work with a Provincial Assistant, also voted in by confreres in both regions. Confreres with active voice are eligible to vote. Like the Visitor, he too will be elected for a six year term, with a possible three-year extension. However, will be stipulated in the norms that the Visitor and provincial assistant must be from different regions to have balanced representation.

The new Österreich-Deutschland Province will have two regional superiors from each country with an office in a house of their region. However, the Visitor and the Provincial Assistant will automatically

take office as the regional superiors for the region they belong to. Each region will elect two regional consultors for a period of three years, with re-election possible two additional times. These regional consultors will assist the regional superior in the administration of the region. Along with a regional econome, they form a regional council.

The provincial council will be compromised of the Visitor, Provincial Assistant, four regional consultors, and one of the two regional economies, appointed by the Visitor upon advice of his council. There will be careful, delineated differences between the Provincial and Regional Councils. The Provincial Council will focus on personnel planning, including the placement of confreres in various works of the province. It will also approve acceptance of candidates and grant permission for men in formation to take vows and to petition for ordination. This council will coordinate initial and permanent formation, and a common internal seminary and theologate.

The provincial council will also prepare provincial assemblies; supervise and administer the financial aspects of the province, and represent the province at Congregation-wide meetings, as well as to outside authorities in Austria and Germany. Regional councils will coordinate financial matters for their houses and works in their respective region, and will prepare decisions about personnel or works that need to be discussed by the provincial council. Decisions made by the provincial council may not be reversed or amended by the regional councils.

The above is what might be called 'broad strokes' of administrative details about the way in which the new province with its two regions will function. Detailed and finalized regulations will be given in the new provincial norms, now in the process of being formulated and submitted for approval. This new model of a province with two regions shall be put into place for six years "ad experimentum", after which an evaluation will take place in 2021. Different names for the new province are still being discussed by the confreres, as previously noted.

Reactions of the Two Visitors

Both Hans-Georg and Franz admit this process has been a difficult, complicated one, but very worthwhile. "Confreres, for the most part, have received this process well. While it has been unsettling to some, I think they realize we must do this or we will not survive", said Franz. "My hope is that once this process is completed and the new province is in place, it will make it easier for us to discern as Vincentians the future direction of our works, which we must do", said Hans-Georg. Both men agreed that without this major effort at reconfiguration, both provinces would phase out, due to their smaller numbers of confreres, and the trend of Catholics in both countries toward apathy in religious observance.

However, the Visitors noted that the Vincentian charism has great appeal with Catholics (active and inactive) in both countries, so there are opportunities for ministry and evangelization. But there are challenges in reaching out to evangelize, or in presenting the “New Evangelization” as promoted by the 2012 Synod of Bishops. Yet, both Visitors felt that among younger confreres there is an enthusiasm to reach out to youth by using the ministries in their provinces to do so. “It is a challenge, but with the new configuration of the province with its two regions, we will be better positioned to reach out to the young and present our charism in a way to attract them”, said Hans-Georg. “Our new province, along with all our confreres, young and older, working together can bring the vitality of our Vincentian charism to all who need to experience it”, said Franz.

Advice for Visitors

Fathers Hans-Georg and Franz were asked what advice they would offer other Visitors and confreres considering reconfiguration. “It’s good to start with a time-frame, even if you have to move it”, said Hans-Georg. Franz agreed adding, “And if you appoint a committee to work on it, you should trust them to do what is necessary”. Both strongly stressed the need to put into place a process that is inclusive and open and avoids being secretive or selective. “This way, you will have more participation and acceptance of the outcome by all the confreres” said Franz.

In doing reconfiguration with their respective provinces, both Visitors agreed they had to balance the mandate of the 2010 General Assembly with the realities of working with confreres in their provinces to achieve a worthwhile, lasting end. At the conversation’s end Hans-Georg summed up the outcome most appropriately: “If you’re going to do it, then do it properly”.