

Inter-Provincial Cooperation

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As a point of departure for my reflections I refer to Statute #5.1: *"In a spirit of co-responsibility, provinces, whether on their own initiative or at the invitation of the superior general, should give mutual assistance"*. I believe that this statute reflects the spirit that presently governs inter-provincial relationships.

This statute, redacted in a very simple manner, is in my experience, the cause of great joy and great pleasure for the Visitors. In the case of our province, we are a very small province involved primarily in missions *ad gentes* and therefore we have always had very limited structures to deal with initial formation and with formation for ministries proper to the Congregation (for example, popular missions). This reality has necessarily made us "very inter-provincial".

With regard to the dimension of formation, the fact that we have spent the time of the internal seminary as well as the years of philosophical and theological studies in other provinces has, in the majority of cases, been an opportunity for enrichment that has made us feel very close to the confreres of other provinces. At the same time, there have been moments when we have been pained as the result of the departure of some candidates whom we were unable to accompany in an adequate manner because they had been entrusted to other formators... thus the bitter sweet flavor of this experience. Truthfully, however, our experience on the whole has been more sweet than bitter.

The provinces are also able to put into practice the spirit of this norm when they participate with confreres from other provinces in different pastoral ministries or when they create inter-provincial houses or projects: inter-provincial communities of initial formation, Vincentian Missionary Evangelization Teams, and the formation of other commissions dedicated to various pastoral tasks. We have various local communities that could be considered inter-provincial as a result of the composition of its members: the mission in Honduras (San Pedro Sula, Puerto Lempira and Patuka) and the mission in Spain (Valencia). The presence of confreres from other provinces in our local houses in the Province of Barcelona is governed by contracts that define the rights and the responsibilities of the confreres and the respective provinces of those involved.

All of this enables us to maintain houses, pastoral works and projects that otherwise we would have to abandon because of the lack of voca-

tions. In my experience, the establishment of such contracts between provinces in which the form of inter-provincial collaboration is outlined and the rights and responsibilities of the confreres who leave one Province to minister in another are clearly stated... all of this is fundamental and avoids future problems. I have to say that ultimately, inter-provincial collaboration in pastoral ministry and the stability of the confreres in inter-provincial communities depends basically on their motivations and the good will of the respective visitors. When one of these elements is lacking (motivation or good will) the contract becomes like a piece of junk-mail and the work and/or house becomes a failed experience.

Another important area to be mindful of when reflecting on inter-provincial activity is the manner in which the Province relates to the General Curia and the Visitor relates to the Superior General. The Curia has insisted upon a more universal approach when reflecting upon our membership in the Congregation. This idea is reflected in the words of the Superior General that were addressed to the Visitors in Spain at the time of reconfiguration:

"Allow me to speak about the second point of our lines of action that deal with reconfiguration and states: 'To cultivate a vital and concrete sense of belonging to the Congregation that goes beyond the sense of belonging to a local and provincial community'. Without this dimension it will be very difficult to achieve any form of reconfiguration. This orientation of the General Assembly reminds us that we are Missionaries and that we are members of the Congregation of the Mission. Saint Vincent told the first Missionaries: 'We are all missionaries and we form one body'. It is interesting to note that the candidate, upon entrance into the Internal Seminary, becomes a member of the Congregation (cf., Constitutions, #83.1) and the vow formula highlights the fact that one is a member of the Congregation of the Mission and as such lives out his vocation as an evangelizer (cf., Constitutions, #58). Above all else we are Missionaries who belong to the Congregation of the Mission. Let us listen anew to the words of Saint Vincent as he speaks about the universal meaning of our vocation-mission: 'Our vocation is go, not just to one parish, not just to one diocese, but all over the world' (CCD: XII: 215). To highlight in an excessive manner our provincial identity impoverishes our missionary vocation, makes inter-provincial collaboration difficult and makes it impossible to think about reconfiguration".

This vision of universal membership in the Congregation that was highlighted in our last Assembly and that the General Curia has emphasized is not always lived out with calmness by the Provinces, the Visitors and the individual confreres. One has only to raise the question in a Provincial Council meeting that there has been an appointment of

a confrere to minister outside his province and thus become involved in an inter-provincial ministry that has been requested by the superior general... in said discussion one becomes aware of the tension that is produced by this situation. Why does this occur? Why is such an appointment viewed as a loss and not simply as a change in assignment? I am going to offer my personal opinion in this matter and I will also offer some suggestions in this regard.

The visitors exercise the authority they have received as a way of expressing their responsibility to provide for the ministries and the confreres of their provinces. When we emphasize universal membership and the power of the Superior General to appoint confreres to serve in any part of the world (cf. *Constitutions*, #101-103), the Visitor sees his authority diminished but not his responsibility. Thus, with fewer resources he is responsible for the same number of works. The same can be said about the provinces when they emphasize the universal and inter-provincial dimension... in this situation the province sees its right to dispose of its human and material resources diminished and yet its corresponding obligation to maintain a vitality into the future is not diminished. I believe that these tensions on many occasions lead to a rejection of interprovincial initiatives because they are seen as an imposition. To eliminate this tension we need:

- To diminish the responsibilities of the Visitor when his authority is diminished;
- To diminish the obligations of the Province when its rights are diminished.

In conclusion I personally am convinced of the need for greater inter-provincial activity with the Congregation. Such activity makes it possible for the Congregation to engage in the process of evangelizing the poor where there is the greatest need. But I believe that as long as inter-provincial activity is subordinate to the motivation of the confreres involved and/or the good will of the Visitors, such activity will be nothing more than anecdotal for a group of volunteers within the Congregation.

If we want the majority of the confreres to be willing to go anywhere in the world (as stated in the referenced text of Saint Vincent) and thus move beyond an excessive provincialism, then we have to undertake radical changes in the organization of the Congregation and examine the prerogatives of each member. For example, with regard to inter-provincial activity: are we willing to make our theologates regional seminaries places that are dependent on the General Curia or the President of the Conference of Visitors and places for international formation whose candidates are then appointed by the Superior General to those places where he believes they are most needed? This is

not a proposal but just one example to clarify what I am referring to when I speak about "radical changes".

To join two provinces together or to create an inter-provincial seminary in which everything is decided by consensus are not radical changes but minor, necessary adaptations that are implemented in order to survive during a time of crisis. Finally, and here I will conclude, without these radical changes that move our Congregation in the direction of a more universal vision of membership and inter-provincial availability of the confreres, the Visitors and the Provinces... without this the Congregation, as an institution, will more often be an obstacle to rather than a facilitator of inter-provincial activity.

Translated from Spanish by CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.