

The Poor, the Clergy and the Laity
Interview with the Visitors of the United States¹
General Curia — Rome, 30.V.2002

A. The Poor

This past week some leaders of the most powerful countries of the world convened here in Italy and discussed matters that affect the poor: What are the cries and the hopes of the poor from your perspective?

1. W. Hartenbach (Midwest): As Provincial of the Midwest Province I needed to be attentive to the poor in the Central United States and in East Africa. The challenges in each place are hugely different. In the United States the cry of the poor comes from those who do not have the training, the education, or the wherewithal to gain access to what is, generally, a very successful economy. The consequence of their lack of access to the economy results in their inability, often, to provide their families with food and the material things that this society judges to be adequate. The poor in the United States are, statistically, more likely to be women and children than men — they represent all of the various ethnic groups in the United States, not only African-American and Hispanic.

In East Africa the poverty is more stark and much more obvious. Kenya is one of the richest agricultural areas in the world and yet there are people who go hungry. The poor cry for their share of the country's wealth; the leaders of the country are more likely to misappropriate the wealth of the country than to share it. The cry of the poor in East Africa is for honest leadership that will see to it that each individual has his or her share of the country's goods.

2. T. McKenna (East): Along with respect and equal opportunity, it seems to me that many of the poor are calling for viability. Especially with shrinking financial markets and the need for someone to blame, there is an increased tendency to stereotype the poor as dishonest, lazy people who are scheming to live free off the government while “honest, hard-working people” have to struggle to earn their just wage. Also poor people are looking for better education, seeing this as the key ladder up the social and economic scale. With two Universities, the Philadelphia Province has a special opportunity to search out those poor who desire education and offer them what we can.

3. J. Sledziona (New England): The cries of the poor and the hopes of the poor surface everywhere. In the United States these cries and hopes focus on: a living

¹ At the time of publication of this interview two of the Provincials who responded have finished their mandate as Visitor: W. Hartenbach (USA-Midwest) and B. Quinn (USA-West).

wage, health care availability, access to decent schools, a break-up of the cycle of violence and despair in some of our cities, a more welcoming spirit for immigrant diversity and ethnic plurality, and the desire for deep community and compassion.

4. B. Quinn (West): The poor of the USA continue to challenge us CMs to know them and their issues, both material and spiritual. Poor people are too often a category for us and not faces and names of people we actually interact with. I believe they carry with them the inheritance passed on to us from Jesus and St. Vincent. We can do many things for them through our institutions and our connections; e.g., through the greater Vincentian Family, but there is a great power in our personal relationships. I think Mother Teresa's advice to love the poor one person at a time is a great Vincentian idea.

5. D. Borlik (South): Here in the United States, particularly in areas of new economic growth, we have seen the appearance and rapid growth of a new underclass, with great needs for living wages, basic medical care, education and formation both for integration into American society as well as into the Catholic Church. These people, traditionally Catholic and typically young, often find themselves margined from basic human services and Church organizations because of differences both in language and culture. Particularly in the states of Texas and Arkansas we Vincentians have noticed the growing numbers of these immigrants, particularly from Mexico and Central America, in parish communities, both in the larger metropolitan areas as well as in the countryside. From the Catholic Church many² of them have asked for more Spanish-speaking priests, sisters and qualified lay pastoral workers, for basic formation as Catholics, and advocacy around such issues as more just immigration law and family violence. However, these newcomers also bring a youthful vitality and a genuine interest and ability to work and celebrate together as community. In general, many Spanish-speaking Catholics continue to be margined because of inadequate family income and the challenges of adapting to a new language and cultural mores. They need Church leaders to develop a pastoral style that respects their religious and family traditions and that will include them in the parish and diocesan Church structures. We Vincentians find these cries challenging both in the short-term and long-term — both for our own direct ministry to the poor as well as informing our efforts to form other men and women for church ministry.

B. The Clergy

² By means of a *Needs Assessment* in preparation for rewriting the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* for the Diocese of Little Rock, 2000-2001, Vincentian missionaries helped to design and coordinate the study and final document.

We are living in the midst of a very difficult crisis caused by the sexual abuse of minors by priests and the way this issue has been dealt with by Church leadership: What, in your opinion, are the challenges for the formation of the clergy in this regard?

1. W. Hartenbach (Midwest): I believe that initial formation needs to develop to the point where it can facilitate the candidates' confrontation with their own humanity — that certainly includes sexuality in all its various forms but it should also take into account the other human drives that need to be integrated into life rather than suppressed. The great need now, I think, is ongoing formation of the already ordained. In the United States — given the declining number of priests — individual priests need to be helped to deal with the fact that they cannot do by themselves what, once, two or three priests did. The leadership of the Church must be challenged to acknowledge that fact. I am convinced that any ongoing formation of the clergy that does not involve the hierarchy's coming to terms with the current conditions will be doomed to failure.

2. T. McKenna (East): In the first place, a more candid, realistic portrayal of the pervasiveness and power of sexuality in a man's personality over a lifetime is needed. Along the same line, so is a more recognizable description of the concrete struggles a celibate has to go through to be successful in living his life. Allied to this is an emphasis on the very practical disciplines, which have proven helpful for living celibacy well. There has been some work done on the "characteristics of successful celibates" and I think these findings could be more pointedly used in the practical formation needed.

3. J. Sledziona (New England): One of the greatest challenges for formation of the clergy in the United States is finding a way to minister to diocesan clergy in supportive ways to form a united presbyterate around their bishop. In July 2002, two confreres (one from the New England Province and one from the Eastern Province), will begin serving the Diocese of Portland, Maine, as co-vicars for the clergy. This new collaborative enterprise is an effort to "pastor the pastors" and to serve the Church by continuing to form the clergy.

4. B. Quinn (West): In recent years our involvement in seminary formation has greatly diminished. However confreres still involved in this work approach formation from a much broader perspective. The psychosexual aspect of formation is and has to remain one of the key elements in every formation program. The formation of priests must always seek the integration of all aspects of the human person. We must also promote the kind of openness and honesty in our relationship with the laity that has been a large part of the problem involving the way Church leadership has dealt with the behavior of abusive clergy.

5. D. Borlik (South): Our vocation promoters and formators are our Community's bridge to those who aspire to Church ministry and leadership. They need to be selected with great care and foreknowledge, to be expected to develop their competencies continually, and to maintain close relations with their supervisors, counselors, and Visitor. In addition, since recent abuses demonstrate some disastrous consequences of the arrogance that can accompany an exaggerated regional and group isolationism, our programs for recruitment and formation should be a nationwide and collaborative Community enterprise. For instance, one NCV³ goal would be to develop support from and accountability to a broad-based supervisory board including: developmental psychologists, Church and civil law professionals, intercultural communication experts.

C. The Laity

The General Assembly of 1998 asked us to promote the Vincentian Family (to get to know each other, to work together on behalf of the poor, formation, etc): How has this been going in your province?

1. W. Hartenbach (Midwest): In the Midwest Province we have a fairly long history of a cooperative relationship with the St. Vincent de Paul Society and with the Ladies of Charity. Men from this province are part of the leadership of both national organizations. We have slowly begun to develop programs that will help form young men and women in the spirit of Vincent: there are Vincentian Volunteer Programs in Denver and in St. Louis; DePaul University in Chicago has a number of programs whose goal is service in the spirit of Vincent. There are ongoing efforts to facilitate meetings between and among the members of the various organizations who look to Vincent for their inspiration. Some of those efforts are successful and some are not. We have certainly begun and have moved forward to meet the challenge of lay and clerical cooperation; the challenge, of course, is continuous and so needs to be met continually.

2. T. McKenna (East): There have been some notable successes in joining with the other Vincentian organizations, particularly the outreach to the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Some new cooperative programs, especially in regard to formation, are being planned. On the other hand, there does not seem to be a rising ground swell of enthusiasm from some of the grass roots levels about this kind of family cooperation.

3. J. Sledziona (New England): The promotion of the Vincentian Family in the New England Province is only now beginning to take root, but not in all the

³ The July 1, 2002 *Decree Concerning the Establishment of the National Conference of Visitors of the United States (NCV)* states that "the National Conference will develop, and provide a report to the Superior General on, a mission-driven plan for ... vocation ministry and formation in the United States."

places where we serve. In some of our parishes there is an increased willingness to collaborate with the St. Vincent de Paul Society. One of our brothers will soon be working with the Daughters of Charity in the Province of the West. There is as yet no contact with the Ladies of Charity, except at National Leadership Council meetings.

4. B. Quinn (West): The CM of the Province of the West continues to find ways to implement the call of the last General Assembly to interact with Vincentian laity. One confrere is a full-time advisor of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and several confreres serve as advisors to the Ladies of Charity and in both cases some of these advisors participate regularly in local, regional and national meetings. The province has hosted a Vincentian Family Day for over 12 years in the Los Angeles area and now more frequently in other regions of the Western USA. A new organization/movement has developed at St. Vincent's Parish, Los Angeles, the "Misioneros Vicentinos" and four married couples from this group will attend the Vincentian month for Spiritual advisors in Paris this summer. More and more, the people we serve and collaborate with in our various apostolates are introduced in more formal ways as well as informally to the charism of St. Vincent de Paul.

5. D. Borlik (South): In general, the ideal of working closely with and promoting the Vincentian Family is quite attractive and desirable. However, it is far from realized in our geographically large province where Catholic organizations and associations have tended to appear and work in isolation from each other. Nevertheless, we have begun to think and act differently, especially where we share common pastoral challenges. In Arkansas, Daughters of Charity and Vincentian missionaries have begun to collaborate in planning and parish missions; in Louisiana a young-adults version of the St. Vincent de Paul Society has begun and is thriving (New Orleans area) and a Vincentian missionary works closely with lay team members for parish evangelization (Lafayette); in Texas and Louisiana we participate in the formation of the Vincentian Family through seminars and days of prayer. In addition, we have worked more with youth. First by inviting young people to join us for a service opportunity in our parishes and as "intern missionaries" on missions to such groups as migrant workers. Second, we help organize and encourage wide participation in international and inspiring youth events such as the recent **World Youth Day** and other **Vincentian Family Worldwide Gatherings**.