

GENERAL CURIA

Circular no. 1

Rome, September 11, 2004
Feast of St. John Gabriel Perboyre

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission

Dear brothers,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your heart now and forever!

Greetings to all of you. First of all, I want to take this opportunity at the beginning of my mandate to thank many of you for the offerings of prayers and support that you have given me through letters, e-mails and the like. I only regret not being able to respond personally to each and every one of the messages that I received. In these first few days here in the Curia I spent a great number of hours reading correspondence from around the world. It is truly a humbling experience and, at the same time, an inspiration for me to take more deeply to heart my responsibility as animator of the Congregation.

I would like to share with you a little bit of what I have done since I began my mandate. The first thing was to get some rest. I visited with my family. We spent time together at the beach.

The following week I spent in a special way and decided to do so after having been elected Superior General. I did a three-day tour with my Dad. We visited the Provincial House of the Eastern Province of the Congregation of the Mission, my province of origin, in Germantown, Philadelphia. I had the privilege of being able to celebrate the Eucharist with our confreres there in the infirmary and then afterwards a luncheon with the confreres of the Provincial House and those who attend the different parishes and apostolates in the area. It truly was a wonderful experience to be able to see once again many of the confreres with whom I have lived and/or shared ministry.

The following day I went with my Dad to the Community cemetery of the Eastern Province in Plainsboro, New Jersey. I went there first of all to say hello to the confreres of that local community who welcomed

us warmly and had a luncheon for my Dad and me. One of my main objectives was to be able to spend some time praying at the tombs of special confreres in my life, the first being my great-uncle, Rev. Elbert Gay, a former Subdirector of the Daughters of Charity and also a missionary in Panama. It was in and through my uncle, as I have stated at other moments, that I was inspired to be a missionary in the Congregation of the Mission. I also prayed at the tombs of a number of other confreres who had inspired me. One in particular, who I knew when I was in the Internal Seminary, was our former Superior General, Fr. William Slattery. We happen to be from the same area of the United States, from the city of Baltimore, Maryland. My Dad seems to think that we may even have been relatives, because my Dad's grandmother was a Slattery. I felt that praying at the tombs of these confreres was an opportunity to ask for the Lord's guidance, inspiration and wisdom in and through those who have gone before us. I learned from my short time in Guatemala of the great respect that the Indian culture has for its ancestors, living and deceased, and that the deceased continue to accompany us in our mission of bringing about fuller life to all those whom we meet.

The third day I rode over to Emmitsburg, Maryland with my Dad, where there is the Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. It is also the Provincial House for the Daughters of Charity of the Southeast Province of the United States. As a young priest, only six months ordained, I served as a temporary chaplain to the retired and infirm Daughters there. I had the experience of being their chaplain together with an older confrere (86 years old, Fr. Jim Twomey), who since has died, but we developed between ourselves a very beautiful friendship and he helped me learn to love the Community in a very special way. He also showed me how to be a gentle, loving servant, which I personally witnessed in his service of the sick sisters. I celebrated the Eucharist in the Basilica of Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton and in the homily I highlighted how certain members of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity had touched my life and continue to be a part of who I am today, through their example of love of the Community and the poor.

After my two-week home visit I returned to Guatemala on August 15th, where I was warmly received by the confreres, a great number of Daughters of Charity and even our confrere-bishop, Msgr. Ríos Mont, at the airport in Guatemala. It was quite a humbling experience. We went to the Provincial House in Guatemala and had an opening prayer service in our local chapel and then a meal shared by all with music, laughing and celebrating. It was truly a wonderful time.

The next day I left for our mission in Panama where I visited with our confreres, Daughters and members of the Vincentian Family. I participated in the ordination of one of our young confreres for the

Central American Province. I had the privilege to celebrate with him his first Mass and he asked me to preach the homily. The first reading from Isaiah spoke about being sent to be a messenger of the Lord and being willing to go far lengths to let God's name be known among all nations. Very appropriate words for a newly ordained missionary!

I returned to Guatemala where the local superior had arranged a number of activities for the confreres, the Daughters of Charity, and the Vincentian Family. I had the opportunity to share the Eucharist, meals and dialogue with each of these groups. It was certainly edifying for me and at the same time difficult. In the five years that I have been Visitor of the Central American Province I have come to know and to love many of the confreres, Daughters, and members of the Vincentian Family. There was parting with tears but at the same time hope that they will continue working together as a Family in the evangelization of the poor.

Since I have returned to the Curia, I have had the opportunity to do some reflecting and goal-setting for myself. What I would like to share in this circular, first of all, is that I want to take seriously my responsibility as animator of the Vincentian charism. I hope to be able to visit confreres, Daughters of Charity, and the Vincentian Family throughout the world. I want to spend time with the young people of the different branches of the Vincentian Family. I hope to see the works that the Family has with the poorest of the poor. They are our pride and joy, "a treasure hidden in a field," where we truly come to live more deeply our charism, being faithful in following Jesus Christ, evangelizing the poor.

In my visits I will not want to say a whole lot. I want to listen to what you have to say. I consider one of the greatest challenges facing us is learning to work together as a Family for the good of the poor, for their evangelization. While respecting the autonomy of each and every one of the branches of the Family, we should never lose sight of the fact that we are born of the same charism. That same love of God that inspired St. Vincent to serve the poor has been entrusted to us all. To live faithfully our charism, we are called to be missionaries, which means we know no frontiers, whether they be geographical, nationalistic, or even family related.

If we are people of faith and followers of Jesus Christ, we know that it is important that where barriers exist, where wounds have been created, we are called to heal those wounds, to reconcile the differences that keep us apart and to put our energy into serving the poor.

Another challenge I see facing us has to do with creativity in reorganization. In some parts of the world today, we are experiencing a reduction in vocations and an aging of the provinces. This has resulted in provinces that are getting smaller with less confreres in

full-time active ministry. These signs of the times challenge us to seek creative ways to invite others to share our charism and reduce the number of confreres working in full-time administration so that our ministry to serve the poor is not adversely affected. In some cases this may mean a consolidation of provinces. Therefore we have to be able to get beyond situations that have kept some of us apart for years.

Though the Congregation has made great strides in following more closely our particular charism, I think that we need to continue to reevaluate our works that are not directed in some way to the service of the poor. Some provinces are dependent on certain apostolic works for economic income to support their apostolic works with the poor. And yet we cannot allow these commitments to constrict us so as to impede new initiatives and ministries in response to the needs of the poor. I think it important that we look for innovative ways to financially fund our works. I also would like to see more and more confreres working in the service of the poor. That is being faithful to our heritage. It is where we come to experience true freedom, personal and communal liberation as sons of St. Vincent.

In our *Final Document* from the General Assembly, in section III, "A Hopeful Look Toward the Future," we made the following recommendations as an Assembly that are in line with some of the recommendations that I have made here. I would like to single out just a few of them. To be more faithful to our vocation, we are urged in the coming years to use criteria established in Constitutions 2 and 12 to revise the works that we have, initiate other works, and even abandon works that no longer respond to these criteria, giving new vigor to the actual Vincentian ministries that we have. We also need to promote interprovincial collaboration so that our apostolic activities for the evangelization of the poor can be more efficacious. Also, we state in our *Final Document* the need to develop, articulate and apply criteria that accentuate the prophetic and missionary character of our charism.

Another continuing challenge for all of us is the formation of the laity, the need to continue this prophetic vision of St. Vincent de Paul in organizing, forming and helping the laity to be faithful to their baptismal promises within the Christian community, serving their brothers and sisters in some type of experience of mission.

I realize that a number of the recommendations or challenges that I have mentioned here for the Congregation of the Mission are in line with our apostolic activity only. That is not, in any way whatsoever, to neglect the prayer dimension or the community dimension of our life as a Congregation. I thoroughly believe that if we are faithful to our apostolic commitment to be evangelizers of the poor, our hearts will want to dialogue with the Lord about what is happening in our experience with the poor and, at the same time, there will come from

within a desire to want to share and reflect on that in our own community experience, so that truly we come to live community for the mission. Our apostolic activity, when it is authentically lived out, will help us to deepen our own prayer life, our community bonds and will give us greater clarity in our identity as members of the Congregation of the Mission.

Later on I will be getting out a circular to the Visitors of the Congregation and to the young confreres of each of our provinces, but I would like to mention at this moment that I have already initiated a process, with the help of the young confreres who were delegates at our General Assembly, to establish a network of communication among those 15 years and under and myself. Steps for creating a website have already been taken.

Some practical points regarding my visits:

1. I am not a conference-giving person. My style is different. I hope that my presence could be less “academic” and with more dialogue, more of an opportunity to share, to listen, to express opinions. One of the things that I have learned after 19 years of ministry in Latin America is that as Church we are called to live our faith based on a model of “communion and participation.” That is more my style. When I come to you, it is not so much what I want to say to you, but rather what we can share together — our experiences of Jesus in the poor. In our dialogue with one another we can strengthen our efforts in their service.
2. I hope to be able to share the Eucharist wherever I go. I have a certain particularity about this point. I prefer to celebrate the Word of God that the Universal Church puts forth on any particular day. We are called to live out fully our being part of the Universal Church. St. Vincent wants us to be a people committed to the Church, working to bring about the Kingdom of God. When we celebrate the Eucharist, the highlight of our faith, we listen to God’s Word, the Word that the entire Church is listening to. We are in harmony with the entire Church and together as Church we allow the Word to revitalize our lives, helping us to bring about our personal and communal conversion and the conversion of the world in which we live.
3. One other practical point that I would like to mention before I conclude has to do with gift-giving. I imagine that in my visits there will be a desire to give me a gift as a remembrance of my presence. I certainly appreciate the thought but, as a symbolic gesture or remembrance of my visit, rather than a material object that at times could be costly, I would encourage you to give a monetary donation for the needs of the poor. If I am visiting someplace that is unable to give any kind of economic donation as a gift, the greatest remembrance would be the continuing desire

on the part of the confreres to give of themselves in service — and more concretely — to make themselves a gift of service to one of the missions where there is a need for personnel. I ask you to consider either financial help in and through donations for the poor or the donation of personnel so that we might be able to continue to give life to those most abandoned in our world.

I'd like to conclude this circular by reiterating who I am: "A missionary." I was inspired to be so by a missionary. I thank God for having had the opportunity to serve as a missionary. As Superior General, I will continue to be a missionary. I want to invite all of you to bring alive your missionary spirit so that together we may continue to serve the Lord, evangelizing the poor.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "G. Gregory Gay, C.M." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General