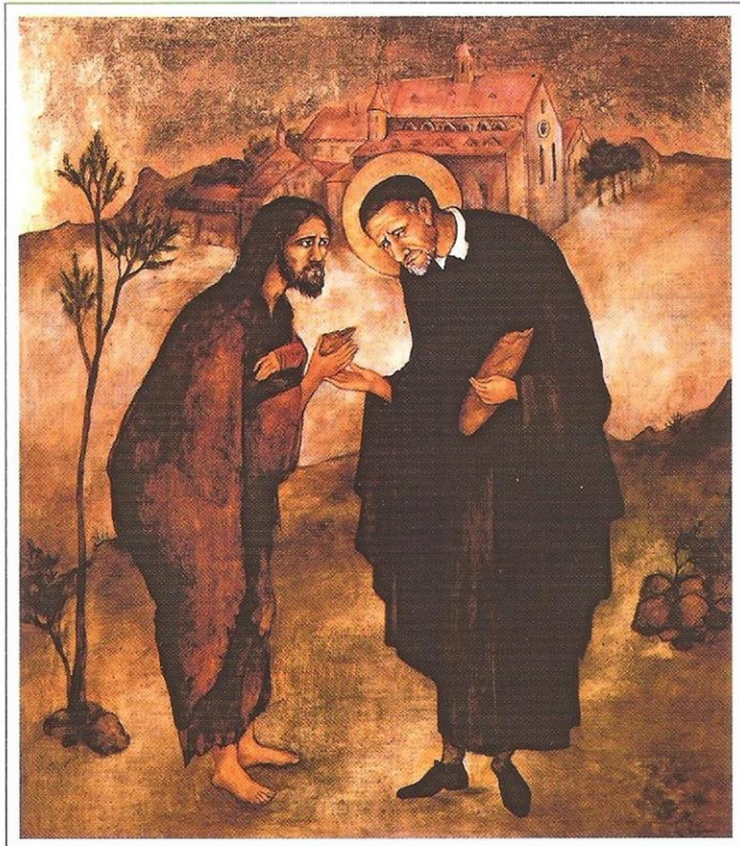


VINCENTIANA

49th YEAR- N. 3

MAY-JUNE 2005



Echoes of the 2004 General Assembly

CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION
GENERAL CURIA

GENERAL CURIA

Rome, 29 May 2005
Solemnity of Corpus Christi

To the members of the Vincentian Family

Dear brothers and sisters,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be always with you!

At the 11th meeting of the heads of some of the principal branches of the International Vincentian Family, which was held from 28-30 January in Paris, we looked at the most important activities of 2004 and those planned for 2005 for each one. It happens that all the lay branches have assemblies or international meetings this year: the AIC in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, from 11-13 February; the SSVF in Salamanca, Spain, from 19-23 June; the JMV in Paris, France, from 7-12 August; the AMM in Rome from 24-28 October and MISEVI in the Berceau, France, from 26-30 December. We also evaluated the campaigns of recent years. We all agreed that the campaigns were an occasion to become more united as the Vincentian Family in the various countries where we are. We would like to share with you some reflections from our dialogue on the activities of the Vincentian Family (appendix 1).

As we do every year, around this time, we are writing to encourage you to begin **the preparation for the “Day of Prayer of the Vincentian Family,”** which is held around 27 September.

After a lengthy reflection on the most recent world events and the different situations of poverty and marginalization, we decided that the theme for this next year will be “Vincentian Solidarity,” with the motto:

***“United as the Vincentian Family in solidarity
with the most vulnerable”***

We believe that this theme is thought-provoking and we hope that, everywhere, you will identify the situations of our most

vulnerable brothers and sisters and respond to these close and concrete circumstances in your countries. Who might be the most vulnerable in our respective countries? You have the answer. They might be the street children, the elderly who live alone and abandoned, the indigenous peoples, the women, the victims of natural disasters, etc. The celebrations around the feast of our founder, St. Vincent de Paul, will be held in this context.

In appendix 2, we present to you some situations of vulnerability in different contexts of the world. Without a doubt, each of you know other situations of vulnerability closer to you.

We are certain that you know other realities of poverty among the defenseless in your respective countries. We would like the different branches of the Vincentian Family or the National Councils of the Vincentian Family to identify these poverties and from their own real possibilities to develop projects for intervention, taking into account the three levels or phases of intervention: consciousness-raising or “political action,” educational action and concrete actions; all of this to respond to these situations of poverty. We invite you to develop, yourselves, proposals for the prayer around the feast of St. Vincent and to involve all the Family in it.

We are experiencing a privileged moment of the Holy Spirit’s action in the Vincentian Family. Let us live our Vincentian vocation with creative fidelity.

We conclude with these words of St. Vincent: *“Let us go then, my brothers, and apply ourselves with a new love to serve the poor, and even to seek out the poorest and most abandoned; let us recognize before God that they are our lords and our masters, and that we are unworthy to render them our little services”* (SV XI, 393).

May God grant us to live in unity as the Vincentian Family and to be in solidarity with the most vulnerable.

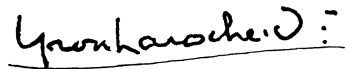
Happy Feast for the Feast of St. Vincent!

Your brothers and sisters in St. Vincent,



Marina Costa
President,
AIC

(Founded in 1617)

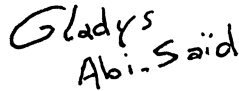


Yvon Laroche, rsv
Superior General,
Religious of St. Vincent de Paul

(Founded in 1845)



G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General,
Congregation of the Mission
(Founded in 1625)



Gladys Abi-Saïd
President,
Vincentian Marian Youth
(Founded in 1847)



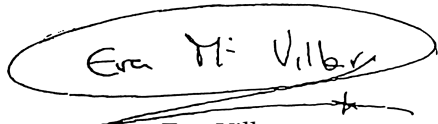
Sr; Evelyne Franc, D.C.
Superioress General,
Daughters of Charity
(Founded in 1633)



Benjamín Romo, C.M.
International Coordinator,
Association of the Miraculous Medal
(Founded in 1909)



José Ramón Díaz Torremocha
President,
Society of St. Vincent de Paul
(Founded in 1833)



Eva Villar
President,
MISEVI
(Founded in 1999)

APPENDIX 1

As we do every year, around this time, we are writing to encourage you to begin the preparation for the “Day of Prayer of the Vincentian Family,” which is held around 27 September. We also would like to share with you some reflections from our dialogue on the activities of the Vincentian Family:

1. **Campaign of the Vincentian Family since 2001:** *“The Globalization of Charity: The Fight Against Hunger”* (www.secretariadojmv.org/inter/proyecto_hambre/2004/english/pagina_principal_hambre_ing.htm).

This has yielded good results. At least 160 projects have been organized throughout the world.

There are many more of which we have not received any information. While the campaign has concluded, the concrete actions in each country and in the different branches of the Vincentian Family are continuing.

2. **Campaign of the Vincentian Family since 2003:** *“Political Action Against Malaria”* (www.famvin.org/malaria/).

The person in charge of the campaign noted that this type of campaign has three phases: 1) consciousness-raising; 2) educating and 3) concrete projects. The campaign is in the first phase (consciousness-raising).

Opinions were varied: some said that the campaign had achieved its objective; others, that it had failed. Everyone recognized the valuable work of the person in charge of the campaign. As a Family, little by little, we are becoming aware that “political action” is an essential expression of charity.

We agreed **to conclude** the “political action” (1st phase) of the campaign on 27 September 2005. We also asked the person in charge to continue on the educational level (2nd phase), for which a document, *Health Manual Against Malaria*, will be translated. It will be sent, through the various branches, to the countries where this scourge exists. Finally, we decided to support these countries in developing concrete actions (3rd phase). It is well to keep in mind that in all the phases we should involve, in the measure possible, the very persons to whom the campaign is addressed.

3. **Campaign of the Vincentian Family from 27 September 2004 to 27 September 2005:** *The Year of Youth in the Vincentian*

Family: "Sharing the charism with all generations." Prayer - Formation - Service.

This year had been for us, as the Vincentian Family, an opportunity to draw closer to young people, recognize their leadership and help them to learn the richness of our charism. It is urgent that youth have a real experience of meeting the very person of Jesus Christ in the poor. We continue to share our Vincentian charism with young people through a witness of holiness of life in the service of the poor.

The JMV, in the name of the entire Vincentian Family, will organize the Third Vincentian Youth Meeting, during the 20th World Day of Youth in Cologne, Germany, 2005, from 15-21 August, with the theme: *"With Mary, we come to adore you and serve you in the poor."* This will be the culmination of the International Year of Youth in the Vincentian Family.

4. Collaboration in the development of formation and information

- 4.1** Vincentian materials have been translated in Madagascar and Hungary. Future translation projects and adaptation of materials are foreseen for Vietnam, Mozambique, Nigeria, Congo, Ukraine, China, Ethiopia, Eritrea, etc.
- 4.2** Develop a collaboration network for financing, translating and diffusing formation material through Fr. Manuel Ginete, Delegate of the Superior General for the Vincentian Family.
- 4.3** Prepare a three-page leaflet for diffusion by the principal branches of the Family at World Youth Day.
- 4.4** Update the dossier for presenting the principal branches of the Vincentian Family.

5. Update: tsunami

- 5.1** Draft a Message of Solidarity for the members of the Vincentian Family in Southeast Asia struck by the tsunami. It will be sent to all the branches of the Vincentian Family via Internet.
- 5.2** The SSVP will organize a meeting to study the situation in Southeast Asia and develop a plan of aid. It will be on 19 April in Salamanca. All the branches were invited to send a representative.

APPENDIX 2

1. ***The State of the World's Children 2005.*** To be a child is a terrible experience for at least half the population of children in the world. UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, indicates this in its report on *The State of the World's Children 2005*. This year's report details that poverty, conflicts and AIDS are the principal threats for minors.
- 1.1 **Poverty.** In order to gauge the impact of poverty, the investigators of *The State of the World's Children 2005* based their report on studies from the University of Bristol and the London School of Economics. According to them, the principal elements for measuring the levels of poverty and the denial of children's rights are: shelter, nutrition, sanitation facilities, water, access to basic health care services, education and information. It is estimated that around 110 million children in Latin America live in poverty situations. It is chiefly the children of indigenous origin or African descent who are the most excluded. On a worldwide scale, 180 million children are trapped in the worse forms of child labor. Some 1.2 million children are annually victims of child trafficking and at least two million are exploited in the sex industry.
- 1.2 **Armed Conflicts.** *The State of the World's Children 2005* details that children are more and more the targets in armed conflicts. Around half of the 3.6 million people who died in conflicts during the 90s were less than 18 years of age. The principal consequences of this course of action in conflicts is reflected in the millions of children who are injured or disabled, are victims of sexual violence, traumas, hunger and disease.
- 1.3 **AIDS.** The death and sickness suffered by millions of adults due to AIDS wreck havoc in the lives of children and the number of minors who die from this disease is increasing. Among the principal repercussions of the epidemic on children is the surge of orphans caused by AIDS. HIV/AIDS destroys communities, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, since not only are parents and relatives dying, but also teachers, farmers, and others offering basic human services. The orphans are particularly vulnerable because they have nothing to defend themselves. For example, children whose parents died from AIDS, whether they are bearers of the virus or not, suffer from discrimination or are badly treated by people who are scared of the disease and ignorant of how it is transmitted. Many orphans have left school to earn money to survive and to take care of their younger brothers and sisters. The orphans are not the only children who

suffer the consequences of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Around three million young people, who are not all orphans, live with HIV. Millions more have to care for their ill parents and their brothers and sisters, or have lost their loved ones.

1.4 Street Children. Of the thousands of kids who live on the principal streets of Romania, the majority are minors. They are more than 5000, half of them concentrated on the streets of Bucharest. This information was released by the Romanian branch of the organization, "Save the Children." Its director explained that "children and youth who live in the street, without any help from relatives or institutions, are considered 'homeless.' The majority support themselves by washing cars, selling objects, collecting products for recycling, or asking for alms. Many are obliged to become prostitutes and an ever-increasing number of homeless minors and young people take hard drugs like heroin."

1.5 Children of the Tsunami. A third of those injured by the disaster in Southeast Asia were children. There is information that in some of the affected countries, traffickers in minors are exploiting the minors because they are left on their own. The mafia of child sexual exploitation and illegitimate adoption saw in this crisis an opportunity for its ends. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) confirmed some cases of child trafficking, as well as the use of cell phone text messages to make offers of children between three and ten years of age coming from the Island of Sumatra.

The humanitarian organization, Childwatch, verified the disappearance of 130 Thai orphans in Phuket and, on this same island, the person in charge of the women's refugee camp reported that, 24 hours after the tragedy, foreigners showed up offering to adopt minors in exchange for money. There have already been reports of sexual violence against the child population, many of them orphans who are counted among the million displaced persons. For this reason it is necessary to be alert to the mafias established in Indonesia, who could hand over the children to networks in trafficking of minors and sell them for forced labor or as sexual slaves in richer countries. The paradises of south Asia are not the only attraction for thousands of tourists who travel to these destinations. They also seek the commerce of prostitution and child pornography, as well as sex tourism with minors.

The break up of institutions, caused by the tsunamis of last 26 December, has left open a door to criminal exploitation, without scruples, of the most vulnerable. The illegal traffic in human beings is a more profitable business than traffic in drugs or arms. For this reason, the international community took a

series of steps to register all the displaced children, provide them with immediate safe care, locate their families, place a temporary moratorium on minors under 16 leaving the country and increase frontier controls to avoid illegal adoptions.

- 2. Indigenous peoples** living in broad areas on the earth's surface. Spread out over the world, from the Arctic to the South Pacific, they amount to, according to an approximate calculation, some 300 million people. Among the numerous indigenous peoples are the Indians of the American continent (for example, the Maya of Guatemala or the Aymara of Bolivia), the Inuit and the Aleutian of the polar region, the Sámis of Northern Europe, the aboriginals and islanders of the Torres Strait of Australia and the Maori of New Zealand. Many of these, like the majority of other indigenous peoples, have preserved their social, cultural, economic, and political characteristics, which are clearly distinct from the other sectors of the national population.

Throughout the history of humanity, every time that neighboring, domineering peoples increased their territory or that colonizers coming from distant lands seized new lands by force, they put at risk the cultures and the sustenance — including the existence — of the indigenous peoples.

The threats against the cultures and the lands of the indigenous peoples, against their juridical situation and against their other rights established by law, as different groups and as citizens, do not always assume the same forms as in the past. Although some groups have attained a relative success, indigenous peoples in almost the entire world struggle to obtain recognition of their identities and their forms of life.

- 3. Migrants.** Migrants are those who have left their lands in search of a better life, forming a veritable human wave which flows through the world and is ever increasing. Today, there are 175 million and in 2050 there will be 230 million, according to a demographic prediction, when the world population reaches nine billion. These data appear in the Annual Report on Migration of the International Organization for Migration (OIM), which gathers information from 101 countries and follows the migratory flows in their political, economic and social aspects. Migrations have existed throughout the history of humankind and depend on various factors, like the poverty of the countries of origin, natural, political and social tragedies and the demand for labor. Because of these factors, migration cannot be blocked, but confronted as a human phenomenon that, in the end, can produce benefits for the migrants and their countries of origin, as well as those that welcome them.

In 2002, 2.9% of the world population fell into the category of migrants; that is, one in every 35 persons left his/her land: men and women in search of a better future, generally leaving the southern hemisphere and heading toward the richer countries of the north. This migratory flow can change the demography of countries. Clandestine migration and human trafficking, not checked by the OIM, are criminal and illicit activities, but highly lucrative ones. Reliable statistics do not exist, but, by the approximate police evaluation of various countries, there would be more than two million persons (illegal migrants, women and children for prostitution), whose traffic generates ten billion dollars for criminal organizations.

4. Women

4.1 Women. The feminization of poverty is “another form of violence against women.” The majority of the 1.5 billion people who live with one dollar a day or less are women. The gap which separates men from women trapped in the cycle of poverty has continuously widened in the last decade. On the average, women earn a bit less than 50% of what men earn. Women who live in poverty often are deprived of access to resources of critical importance, such as loans, land, and inheritance. Their work is not recompensed or recognized. Their needs in the area of health care and nutrition are not priorities. They lack adequate access to education and support services and their participation in decision-making in the home and the community is minimum.

Trapped in a cycle of poverty, women lack access to resources and services in order to change their situations. The following data speak to us of the marginalized situation of women: three-fifths of the 115 million children without schooling are girls and two-thirds of the 879 million illiterate are women; women have the highest mortality rate in many countries, especially in southern and eastern Asia; more than 500,000 women die annually during pregnancy and childbirth, these deaths being most likely in sub-Saharan Africa; half of the cases of HIV/AIDS affect women; the number of women who are objects of sexual deals and subjugated to fluctuating work slavery, according to the data, is between 700,000 and 4,000,000 persons. Only 139 countries of the UN have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

4.2 Women Migrants. According to an estimation of the International Labor Organization (ILO), there are presently some 90 million people in the world involved in international migration, excluding refugees and those seeking asylum, and approximately half of them are women. In many countries, the

migration of women in search of work is much greater than that of men. Images persist of the “typical migrant”: the working migrant is a man, almost always young and works for economic motives.

There are presently two worrying tendencies in feminine migration: First of all, it is clearly noted that, in many parts of the world, women migrants are concentrated in vulnerable occupations, such as domestic service, “entertainment” (including forced participation in the sex sector), and caring for children and the sick. The vulnerability of these works comes from the high degree of subordination which exists between them and their employers. This vulnerability is accentuated by the fact that these sectors tend to be excluded from national labor legislation and from the tools that regulate international migration. Secondly, the participation of women in international labor traffic, which often, although not always, adopts diverse forms of forced labor, is another worrying feature that demands international attention.

FEATURE:

Echoes of the 2004 General Assembly

Presentation

by Alfredo Becerra Vázquez, C.M.

Editor of *Vincentiana*

The Congregation of the Mission experienced a time of grace and blessing during its 40th General Assembly.¹ This was a time in which God was really present in the midst of the 122 participants of the meeting. Fr. Robert P. Maloney, C.M., then Superior General, said: “God loves you personally — each member of this Assembly — and beyond that, he loves the Congregation of the Mission because he loves the friends of the poor. Allow God to pour out his Spirit on you in these days, assuring you of his presence and love.”²

Our Constitutions tell us that the aim of Assemblies in the C.M. is to preserve and promote the spirituality and the apostolic vitality of the Congregation (cf. C 135). In addition they define clearly its rights (cf. C 137).

The Preparatory Commission of the General Assembly (CPAG 2004), in its letter of 2002, proposed to us the theme for reflection: “*Our Vincentian identity today, having lived the new Constitutions for 20 years - An evaluation and three challenges for the future.*”³ They

¹ Cf. 40th General Assembly, 2004, Congregation of the Mission, “*Our Vincentian Identity Today in Light of the Constitutions: Evaluation and Challenges*” (Rome, July 5-29, 2004), in *Vincentiana* 48 (2004), 225-364.

² *Ibidem*, 237.

³ Cf. *Vincentiana* 46 (2002), 128-129.

sent the Consultation Document⁴ and other useful materials to get the Congregation preparing for the 40th General Assembly. Domestic and Provincial Assemblies were carried out throughout the Congregation. Later the provinces sent their contributions and thus CPAG 2004 drafted a Work Document that was sent to all the delegates for the General Assembly.

Fr. Robert Maloney sent a letter, dated 20 April 2004, to communicate some information about the General Assembly, along with the Work Document of the Assembly,⁵ the Directory, the postulata, and some practical instructions.

The General Assembly was an enriching experience. At it also, Fr. G. Gregory Gay, C.M., was elected as the new Superior General. The General Assembly drafted a Final Document.⁶

This dossier contains four articles that offer us reflections in light of the Final Document of the Assembly. The authors participated as delegates at the General Assembly.

In the first article, *Looking to the Immediate Past: A Challenging Horizon for the Construction of a Vincentian Identity*, its author, Eli Chaves dos Santos, C.M., invites to us to assimilate and to assume the conclusions and proposals of the General Assembly, to live our missionary vocation with creative fidelity, that is to say, as a “re-foundation” of the Vincentian charism so that it responds to the new poverties of our time.

Benjamín Ramarosan, C.M., is the author of the following article: *A Frank Look at the Present: Our Vincentian Identity Today*. The author focuses us on the necessity of living our identity as missionaries and sons of St. Vincent in the present moment, keeping in mind the fundamental purpose for which the Congregation of the Mission was founded.

40th General Assembly: A Daring Look Toward the Future is the title of the reflection that Santiago Azcárate Gorri, C.M., offers us. In it, he invites us to direct our glance toward the future with hope. Radicalism and confidence are two fundamental elements in our march forward. He proposes to us four points present in the third part of the Final Document: the strengthening of the charism, creative fidelity, a hopeful opening to the future and the importance of the formation of the Vincentian missionary.

Finally, Giuseppe Turati, C.M., in his article, *Reflection on the Postulates and Decrees Presented at the 2004 General Assembly*, does

⁴ Cf. *Ibidem*, 130-136.

⁵ Cf. *Vincentiana* 48 (2004), 65-76.

⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*, 353-364.

an analysis of these by subject matter, origin and the type of tendency they reflect. He puts forward various conclusions that show the different concerns of the provinces in the diverse parts of the world.

John Paul II said to us, "*Duc in altum!*," "*Put out into the deep*" (Lk 5:4). *Do not fear taking a risk, throwing out the nets for a catch. The Lord himself will be your guide! May God grant us this spirit of risk taking and of living out our Vincentian charism in a renewed, creative and joyful way!*

(ALFREDO BECERRA VÁZQUEZ, C.M., translator)

Looking to the Immediate Past: a Challenging Horizon for the Construction of a Vincentian Identity

by Eli Chaves dos Santos, C.M.

Province of Rio de Janeiro

In the midst of current changes and challenges, the Congregation of the Mission sought during its 40th General Assembly (Rome, 5-29 July 2004), to reflect on and to deepen its Vincentian identity. Out of this effort came the document, "Our Vincentian Identity Today in the Light of the Constitutions: Evaluation and Challenges."

I will try here to sketch a few reflections based on the first part of the document, "A sincere look at the immediate past," in the hopes of raising some points for a critical reading of it and for a creative reception, one both personal and collective, of the conclusions of the General Assembly.

I. The need for creative reception

Since some time has passed since the General Assembly, it is now time for the entire Congregation — provinces, local communities and confreres — to assimilate and accept the conclusions and proposals of the General Assembly. By the word "reception" we mean this entire process of assimilating and concretizing.¹ This ecclesiological category expresses the predominant concept of the Church as communion, and it applies to ecclesial groups, like the Congregation of the Mission, in its search for insertion into the current and specific life of the mission of the Church.

¹ On this point, see, Y. CONGAR, "La 'réception' comme réalité ecclésiologique," *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 56 (1972) 369-403.

A genuine reception consists, on the part of the entire Congregation, in receiving the orientations and definitions coming from a higher level (from the General Assembly). Reception supposes a passive process, that is, what others drew up is received and accepted. It consists in appropriating the content of the General Assembly as legitimate and valid for the work and life of the provinces, local communities and confreres.

The acceptance of this content is certainly not to be reduced to an act of obedience but requires a vital incorporation of what the members of the Assembly proposed. Reception is likewise active and vital. The Assembly's document cannot be a definitive word to serve as a ready response of universal value, to handle completely the diversity of the situations in which the Congregation finds itself placed in the world. Provinces, local communities and individual confreres are called to concretize the proposals of the General Assembly in their lives, works and concrete situations. They should emphasize and discern the most relevant and pertinent perspectives for the various historical situations in which they exist. Beginning with the senses elaborated by the Assembly, other perspectives can be deepened and further meanings derived from the original text.

Consequently, on the basis of a proper epistemology, the sense of a text is not given only by its authors and by the words used. The members of the audience are also coauthors insofar as they place the message into the vital contexts in which they ponder and the relevance of the aspects that illumine or define historical situations. Reception should be creative, since reading always involves a rereading, just as understanding always implies interpretation.² The original message of the General Assembly is a source of living water, capable of producing new meanings as one prolongs and concretizes its original meaning.

II. Sincere attention to the immediate past

In its General Assembly, the Congregation of the Mission sought to reflect and deepen its Vincentian identity methodologically by evaluating its life over the past 20 years of the current Constitutions.

As its starting point the Assembly began with its experience of the concrete reality of the poor and of the Congregation. The 46 provinces and five vice-provinces of the Congregation began with the working document, drawn up by the Preparatory Commission of the General Assembly (CPAG). They then evaluated the contribution

² Cf. L. BOFF, *Do Lugar do Pobre*, Vozes, Petrópolis 1984, 27-30; English: *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, trans. Robert R. Barr, Harper & Row, San Francisco 1988.

of the Constitutions to the deepening and the shaping of our Vincentian identity as seen in the successes, failures and the main changes in the Congregation and in the world, as well as the great challenges for the Congregation's future.

The conclusions of the Provincial Assemblies³ offer a broad picture of the diverse reality and the many challenges of the Vincentian mission within the complexity of the present historical moment, filled with profound changes. This starting point imparted a strong historical conscience and a great effort to the General Assembly in evaluating the immediate past as well as in projecting the future of the Congregation.

1. *Affirming the value of the Constitutions*

After reviewing the road trod by the Congregation in the last 20 years, the General Assembly, in its *Final Document*, asserted that the present Constitutions are the positive result of the call to modernize, presented in Vatican II. Thus, it affirmed the quality and richness of the Constitutions in defining our identity. It manifested clearly its appreciation of them and recognized the successes gained under their inspiration and the difficulties still to be surmounted.

Although the Assembly recognized the value of the Constitutions, it showed no intention of revising them. Instead, it affirmed the urgent need to involve in the life, ministries and structures of the Congregation the identity that, at least theoretically, is embodied in them. It affirmed too that the Constitutions embody the insights of St. Vincent de Paul and the Vincentian tradition, and that they impel our life toward the following of Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor. Together with this recognition, the Assembly proposed making the Constitutions a permanent point of reference, using them to search out the principles that inspire the mission and life of the Congregation.

The Assembly quoted the words of Fr. Richard McCullen in his promulgation of the new Constitutions: "Within the covers of this book our identity as a Congregation in the Church is delineated. We must not be content to leave that delineation on paper alone. The text must now be imprinted on our hearts and lived out in our vocation to preach the gospel to the poor." It affirmed that in these Constitutions are to be found the fundamental elements to delineate the quality of being Vincentian missionary.

³ Cf. *Synthesis of the Responses of the Provincial Assemblies*, in the Working Document of CPAG 04, photocopied text, distributed to the participants in the Assembly.

2. *The urgent call to creative fidelity*

The affirmation of the value and the modernity of the Constitutions, despite the difficulties and limitations of everyday life, imposes the urgent call to deploy in the mission and in Vincentian life the various elements that make up the identity described in the Constitutions, and to constantly examine our life.

In this sense, the Assembly's document urgently calls every confrere, local community and province to undertake dynamically what the Constitutions call us to, a creative fidelity. This means not falling into mediocrity and accommodation, but being a prophetic sign in urgent and generous missionary service, seeking new and living expressions of missionary service to the poor, being convinced witnesses and propagators of the vitality of the Vincentian vocation. Based on this creative fidelity, we will be able to give a reason for our identity and to respond to the challenges of the coming years.

A sincere look at the recent past in the Assembly's *Final Document* proposes to the Congregation of the Mission to travel the long road of hope, to construct a faithful and modern Vincentian identity. It invites the Congregation to become rooted in the vitality of the Vincentian mission in view of the "great history to construct" in following Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor.

III. Creative reception of the lessons of the immediate past

In its *Final Document*, the Assembly summarized what seemed to it the most significant in the last 20 years of the life of the Congregation, and it sketched out a rich and challenging horizon for the development of the Vincentian mission.

The creative reception of the lessons of this immediate past requires an interpretation and deepening of the affirmations of the Assembly, taking into account its pastoral nature and the methodological conditions and practices in the process of reflection and development of its conclusions.

1. *The methodology and dynamic of the Assembly: successes and limits*

Within the rich experience of St. Vincent, where reality, particularly the reality of the poor, is the privileged place of God's revelation, the Assembly began from the concrete reality of the mission and life of the Congregation. By analyzing and gathering up the contributions of the Provincial Assemblies, it noted the historic changes that have arisen in the living out of the Constitutions and the challenges that they posed for the mission and the life of the Congregation.

On the basis of the historical reality of changes, the Assembly adopted an evangelical posture of discernment. In this way, it avoided an attitude of reactionary resistance (which takes the form of old ideas and practices regarded as untouchable and fixed), and a fundamentalist posture (which, given the uncertainty caused by changes, reacts by affirming the tradition literally, demonizing change and assuming reactionary, aggressive and extremist attitudes). In the light of evangelical and Vincentian values, the Assembly saw in change signs of God's call to construct our Vincentian identity.

Consequently, looking to the recent past it outlined and projected a path for the Congregation within an open perspective, one that is inventive in affirming the Constitutions and receptive of what is new and different for the Vincentian mission amid historical change.

On the other hand, a critical and objective analysis of the first part of the document shows that the General Assembly did not make a broad and complete analysis of the reality of the Congregation in its own historical path or in the reality of the Church and of the world. It limited itself to generic and exhortative affirmations of an inter-congregational character. The Assembly, in view of its pastoral character, did not intend to make a scientific analysis to exhaust the question. Nonetheless, it should be admitted that methodological difficulties and special factors rendered more difficult a better and broader analysis of the life of the Congregation in these last 20 years and its many demands as well as its many theoretical and practical implications for understanding the construction of a Vincentian identity.

I understand that two principal factors conditioned and limited reflection. First, the Assembly's schedule mixed together reflection on a general theme with various other issues and activities, such as information about the life of the Congregation, the participation of members of the Vincentian Family, elections of the Superior General and his council, and so on. Inevitably, this caused a certain dispersion and great tedium for the members of the Assembly, which, in turn, prevented a great depth and consistency in the analysis of the central theme of the Assembly.

Another factor inhibiting reflection was the *Directory* approved by the Assembly to guide the dynamic of reflection and work of the members. According to the norms of the *Directory*, the working groups, using the "Documentum Laboris," were to make their reflections and proposals and bring them to the plenary session in the form of texts to be maintained, modified, or expanded for the development of the *Final Document* of the Assembly. Following the precise and rigid norms of the *Directory*, the work in the plenary

session consisted more in the effort to draw up a text than in reflection and debate, properly speaking, concerning the construction of a Vincentian identity. The abundant and rich reflections and ideas of the working groups were not deepened during the plenary session and became lost or diluted amid editorial and formal concerns raised by the *Directory*.

The practical demands of the *Directory* brought about fatigue and scattered the attention of the members of the Assembly. Further, in the absence of specialized advisors, the *Directory* made a systematic, broad and deep reflection on Vincentian identity very difficult. Apart from isolated interventions, the plenary sessions did not reflect on or deepen what was understood by identity, nor on the theological, sociological, psychological implications, etc., in the concrete process of development. The Assembly's dynamic and methodology did not allow the plenary sessions to devote themselves in any systematic or intense way to the historical and present reality of the Congregation, or to the world of the poor in view of what the Constitutions propose, and on that basis to deepen the implications and challenges for the construction of a Vincentian identity.

These limits explain the generic character of the affirmation concerning a sincere look at the immediate past in the life of the Congregation, as well as in the second and third parts of the Final Document. Limiting this analytical and theoretical base did not allow a clearer or deeper expression of the necessary articulation between the identity proposed in the Constitutions and the new demands and expressions needed for a coherent and up-to-date construction of Vincentian identity. The identity presented in the Constitutions requires a personal and collective process of identification through a process of existential and spiritual assimilation and a search for historical and concrete expressions of identity that the Constitutions theoretically present and which we accept for ourselves.

"The identity of the consecrated life is not a one-time reality. It is coming to be, it is being constructed. And this happens in relation to the different events of historical reality that arise. The opposite of the construction and the coming to be of identity is stability, immutability and sameness. Identity does not exist as something fixed or defined once and for all. Rigidity in identity is deadly, and accommodation is mortal, since what is remains to be discovered. Identity exists only in intimate relation with differences and in permanent transformation."⁴ Examining the immediate past rejects the rigidity of reactionaries or fundamentalists, but it does not deepen understanding nor the juncture between the affirmation of

⁴ J.B. LIBÂNIO, "A Identidade da Vida Consagrada e o contexto atual," *Convergência*, 367 (2003) 536.

Vincentian identity delineated in the Constitutions and the demands of the differences that the realities of the poor and of the Congregation impose today for the construction of Vincentian identity. What new expressions and commitments do the differences of the present historical moment call forth for understanding and living out what the Constitutions set down?

Fr. Libânio says that the formation of the identity of a social group (a congregation, for example) comes to be within a dynamic process, with moments of stability, deconstruction and construction. "When a social group arrives at experiencing an identity in a clear and well-structured way, we are at the high point of its evolution, that is, at the beginning of its decline. When a wave reaches its highest point, it rapidly begins its decline. Perfect analyses are its swan song."⁵ In its post-conciliar development, what are the deconstructive, constructive and conservative tendencies present in the Congregation, and producing advances and resistance? What concrete tendencies exist among us that bring about a situation of conflict between the delights binding us to the past and the present concrete initiatives that express, or not, the vitality of the charism and the desires that propel us into the future?

2. *The rich, challenging and promising horizon of creative fidelity*

An honest look at the steps undertaken in the last 20 years in the Congregation will call us to creative fidelity. When it uses a rhetoric that is exhortatory and not analytical, the document of the General Assembly situates us within the current issue of the "refoundation" of consecrated life. So as not to fall into voluntarist and useless discussions and proposals, it is necessary to receive and deepen this rich proposal of the Assembly within a challenging and pertinent theological reflection about what we today call "refoundation."

Making use of three suggestive images,⁶ we may state, first, that creative fidelity, or refoundation, means searching for new wines in new wineskins. New responses are needed for new problems. By means of today's challenges, refoundation implies exercising one's creative imagination without being stuck in the remains of a noble but ruined and lifeless past. Second, creative fidelity or refoundation is like an alarm clock: it pulls us from our night's sleep, calls us to leave our bed and to begin a new day full of surprises. Refoundation implies putting our feet on the floor of history, washing our face and opening our eyes to the challenges of reality, leaving a warm and

⁵ J.B. LIBÂNIO, *A Volta à Grande Disciplina*, São Paulo 1983, 19.

⁶ Cf. JOSÉ MARÍA ARNÁIZ, *Del Ocaso al Alba - Reflexiones sobre la Refundación*, 1999, pp. 2-6.

comfortable bed, putting on new clothes and working in building a new consecrated life. Third, creative fidelity or refoundation is a change of program. Using computer language, refounding is like installing a new program to process the data of charism on the basis of the experiences and needs of people today, and to do so in a new, evangelical way.

Refounding implies translating the founding charism into new practices and structures appropriate to our reality. It does not mean repeating what the Founder did or said, but rather gathering up his authentic intuitions and concretizing them in discourses, practices and structures that will be coherent and adequate to the demands of the present day. It implies returning to our “first love” and promoting necessary changes so that the founding spirit and the structures of life and action come together in a new unity that is at once fertile, harmonious and meaningful.

Creative fidelity or refoundation is not something that takes place from one day to the next; it is not the automatic fruit of someone’s desires and idealistic or pious acts. Neither is it a reality that arises mechanically from an institutional decree. It is not the fruit of theological velleities, of a decontextualized missionary ardor, of a clear and distinct idea, or of a technically perfect plan. It is also not the result of passing fads, or of inconsistent emotional impulses.

Authentic refoundation is a long, difficult, necessary and complex process in building a new way of being for consecrated life. It requires personal and communal conversion. It also has the dimension of grace and of the vocational call of the Spirit. God speaks to us in history and, through the action of the Spirit, summons us to answer his calls. A spirit of faith, courageous prophecy, attentive reading of the signs of the times, listening to the divine call, a prayerful attitude and continuous discernment, dialogue with the experience of the founder and his charism — all these are indispensable spiritual attitudes. To these we should add strategies and tactics of institutional reformulation to truly bring about a response to the call of the Spirit for creative fidelity.

The process of creative fidelity or refoundation is, in the last instance, a way of the Spirit, but one without signs and precise or exact rules for its development. Each individual, group or congregation does this in an original way. The process unfolds when, in openness to the Spirit, a group lets itself be questioned through a dynamic interaction between its charism and the calls of God in history. Out of this grows the need to return to the roots of one’s own charism, to discern the calls of God in history, and to think about concrete steps to elaborate new behaviors and structures of life and action on a personal, communitarian and institutional level. Genuine refoundation is born from inside out, from top to bottom.

Refoundation demands courage to change deeply. Every change demands breaks with the past and decisions that are courageous, risky and painful.

In its conclusion, the *Final Document* of the Assembly alludes to the distant past, the exemplary witness of St. Justin De Jacobis, and it repeats a quotation from the message of John Paul II that summons us to put out into the deep. Past and present join in the building of a future of creative fidelity in the living out of the Vincentian mission. The risk of the immediate past of the Congregation, the past 20 years of living out the present Constitutions, shows the richness and the modernity of the Vincentian mission sketched by the Constitutions, and the need to put out into deeper waters, to try to deepen the living out of our Vincentian identity through a confrontation with the changes and challenges that happen within the Congregation and in today's world.

A faithful and contemporary embodiment of the Vincentian mission demands a deepening and accepting of the differences between the reality of past and present, as well as a dialogue with them in view of a courageous and daring task of continuously constructing our Vincentian identity. Within a process of the creative receptivity of the horizon drawn up by the Assembly, all of us, confreres, local communities and provinces, are summoned and challenged to engage in this adventure of searching out new and authentic expressions to give today more visibility, consistency, dynamism and evangelical modernity to the Vincentian charism. In this way, we will put out into the deep waters of the Vincentian charism and build a great history of missionary service to the poor.

(JOHN E. RYBOLT, C.M., translator)

A Frank Look at the Present: Our Vincentian Identity Today

by Benjamin Ramarason, C.M.

Province of Madagascar

The second part of the *Final Document* asks us to take “a close look at the present.” This expression compels us to avoid concentrating our energy on dwelling on a mythic past and to use it for discovering our identity in the midst of the phenomenon of globalization in which we are actually living.

Our Founding Father gives us a model for living on this point. If his time is rich in masters of spiritual writing (the period of the French School), St. Vincent is above all a man of action, and it is life and experience which “teach” him what is good to undertake.

*Let us love God, confreres, let us love God but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows.... **For there are several who, having achieved an external equilibrium and a mind filled with lovely thoughts about God, stop there; and when this comes to reality and they find themselves needing to do something, they fall short.** They flatter themselves with their over-heated imagination; they are satisfied with the nice conversations they have with God at prayer; they even speak about him like angels, but emerging from that if there is a question of working for God, suffering, mortifying themselves, teaching the poor, going in search of the lost sheep, liking being without something, dealing with the sick or some other calamity, alas!, there is no one there, they lack the courage. No, no, let us not deceive ourselves.¹*

Can we also be like him, starting from experience and life in order to “seize” our identity at the start of this third millennium?

¹ COSTE XI, 40-41.

The “present”

This little word at the end of the title shows that there is no question of studying our identity as it existed in the past, nor will it cover how it will be in the future, even the near future, but what interests us above all is the identity which should animate us “today.” Since it is a Malagasy Vincentian who is writing, and to be more correct in the approach to the subject proposed, he prefers to engage with the subject from the perspective of the situation in his own country. We are not, however, going to confine our “look” only to the situation in Madagascar, because as the discussion develops we will realise that the important questions which challenge us arise everywhere, with some differences but basically the same.

Here in Madagascar these important questions are summarised by an expression which is very dear to the province: how to be “fully Vincentian and fully Malagasy?” (*sady vensanianina no malagasy*). We must not reverse the two components of the expression; the first one makes the basic point and initiates a descriptive movement in which the second, drawn on by a natural linkage, attaches a supplementary specification which is to some extent new.² This is the incarnation process. Jesus, the Son of God, is *sady Andriamanitra no olombelona* (fully God and fully man): “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14). This should also be the process of all evangelization.

From this fact one is tempted to conclude that it is inculturation which will be dealt with in this article, all the more so since this has more or less become the “fashion.” But that is not exactly what is intended. I realise that that is an urgent problem,³ but, in order to get there, there has to be more in-depth research. But the time limit imposed on me for teasing out “the present” does not permit me to do this. This will be just a quick glance at the question. I expect that other studies will follow.

It is for these different reasons that I propose to reword the question like this: “*How would St. Vincent act in Madagascar at this beginning of the third millennium?*”⁴ But I want immediately to give assurance that this will not be fiction, because, following the lead of our Founding Father, we are starting from the concrete situation.

In order to answer this question it is important to revisit the “end” of the Congregation as St. Vincent wished it when starting.

² Cf. G. GIRAUDO, “Prière eucharistique et inculturation,” in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 116 (1994), p. 183.

³ Cf. B. RAMAROSON, “Fihavanana, Fianakaviana, vie communautaire,” in *Aspects du Christianisme*, Juillet-Août 1995, pp. 123-138.

⁴ Hence the subtitle which I have added to the title which was suggested to me.

The end of the Congregation: Vincentian charism, Vincentian identity

I deliberately emphasise that Vincentian spirituality is nothing other than the end of the Congregation of the Mission⁵ and one may even extend this equally to the other Vincentian foundations because the same spirit animated St. Vincent in organising them. It is true that in the context of the CM itself a lot of ink has flowed on the matter of this end. One can recall the long exciting, and excited, debates of the different assemblies. **But for St. Vincent it was clear right from the start: “The evangelization of the poor is not one of the reasons for being a Vincentian, but it is THE reason.”**⁶ It was what he had experienced in Folleville and Châtillon (1617) which pushed Vincent to initiate the various foundations whose end is single: “To bring the Good News to the abandoned and disinherited.” This very strong emphasis by the Congregation has been affirmed unequivocally in the very foundation contract,⁷ and repeated in all official documents. Later on it resurfaces in his letters and all through his conferences.⁸ For St. Vincent perfection lies in

⁵ I do not intend here raising the points made by R.P. Maloney when he speaks of the “virtues” as the basis of Vincentian spirituality. I wish, rather, to place the “end” of the Congregation at the centre of Vincentian spirituality and thus extend what he develops when he starts with the virtues, by bringing forward this charism. Fr. Maloney recognises this on p. 14: “The Vincentian spirit is the Spirit of Christ sent to preach the good news to the poor, which manifests itself in the gospel maxims explained in the Common Rules...”

⁶ (This or that) “[do] not matter; our VOCATION is *Evangelizare pauperibus!*” (COSTE XII, p. 90).

⁷ The contract of the CM (17 April 1625): “... devote themselves entirely and exclusively to the salvation of the poor common people” (COSTE XIII, 198; English Vol. 13a, 214). The act of approval by the Archbishop of Paris (24 April 1626) specifies the association as follows: “... some priests who are serving in the missions, catechizing, preaching, and encouraging the poor country people to make general confessions...” (COSTE XIII, 203; English Vol. 13a, 218). The Act of Association of the First Missionaries (4 September 1626) uses the same terms: “... to devote ourselves to the salvation of the poor country people” (COSTE XIII, 204; English Vol. 13a, 222). Finally, the Bull of Erection of the Congregation, *Salvatoris nostri*, of Urban VIII, well emphasises that “The principal purpose and special goal of this Congregation and its members is, by the grace of God, along with their own salvation, to dedicate themselves to the salvation of those who live on the estates, in the countryside, on farms, in hamlets, and in insignificant places” (COSTE XIII, 260; English Vol. 13a, 298).

⁸ We cannot go through all the conferences here. We will merely pick out certain ones: “Is there anything which more [resembles Christ’s mission] than going from village to village to help the poor people to save themselves” (COSTE XI, 1). “As God has destined us to serve the poor” (COSTE XI, 68-69). “The missionaries are obliged by their state, by their vocation, to serve the most wretched, the most abandoned and the most overwhelmed by bodily and

evangelizare pauperibus. That is why one can say, **without beating about the bush, that the Vincentian identity is based on *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me.***⁹

If we wish, then, to have a look at Vincentian spirituality today in Madagascar, we must do so by starting from this Vincentian heritage.

Malagasy reality

The Malagasy reality is something which will help us to focus on this spirituality. Without wishing to make a comparison or draw a parallel, the present-day situation in Madagascar in many ways reminds us of what St. Vincent experienced in France in the 17th century. This will enable us to emphasise that everything combines to make us conclude that this Vincentian charism must hold first place in the evangelization of the island.

The deprivation which the people are experiencing seems at present to be reaching crisis point. Anyone going through the different parts of Madagascar, the rural areas and, above all, the outskirts of the towns, which are growing enormously because of the drift from the countryside, can see for himself the reality of poverty. It shows itself mainly in the lack of the most basic necessities. Scarcity is widespread and, as always, it brings epidemics in its wake. There is an increase in the “4 Ms.”¹⁰ Moreover, lack of security is rife in the towns as well as in the countryside. This social degradation becomes a seedbed for sects.

Madeleine RAMAHOLIMIHASO, a Catholic action official who worked in the Pontifical Council for the Laity in Rome, ends up one of her talks on the situation in Madagascar:

The totalitarian temptation of Marxist ideology¹¹ which has created “the new man” has uprooted and depersonalised the

spiritual calamities” (COSTE XI, 77). In what is usually called his “innermost thought” (the conferences given in the two final years of his life) Vincent never tires of repeating that the end of the Company is *pauperibus evangelizare misit me* (Conference of 6 December 1658, COSTE XII, 73-94).

⁹ When St. Vincent organised the CM he added a fourth vow to the usual three, the vow of stability. This is a vow to devote oneself for all one’s life, not just to the Congregation but especially in the CM for the salvation of the rural poor according to the rules and regulations currently in force (COSTE XIII, 283-286; English Vol. 13a, 315-317).

¹⁰ This is the name given to the street children in Madagascar. Cf. DENISE GAULT, *Pedro ou les collines du courage*, p. 27. “In the town people call them the 4 Ms. because the local words which describe them begin with M: violence, drugs, alcohol, prostitution.”

¹¹ The author is here speaking of the *ancien régime* (the Second Republic) which was of a socialist tendency.

*Malagasy people who from now on have neither a past nor a future. Can we be surprised at the attraction of the sects or drugs, or the regarding as normal the riots and rural uprisings?*¹²

This grim picture recalls what St. Vincent experienced at the time he set up the various foundations. Here is how Dodin sums it up in his book *Saint Vincent de Paul et la Charité*:

*Wars and epidemics, invariably escorted by famine, methodically ravaged all the provinces.... This underfed, maltreated and often unsettled people cannot attain a better cultural level.... Similar economic and cultural conditions favour rapid and collective changes of opinion. In the space of a few weeks families, villages or districts abandon the Catholic faith or abjure Protestantism. Wandering prophets rouse up towns, bogus messiahs evoke enthusiasm and the following month they are totally forgotten....*¹³

If that is the way reality is, how can this charism be lived out? Let us try first of all to understand *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me*.

Misit me

St. Vincent wanted to call the Congregation: **The Congregation of the Mission**. This was not by chance, but by design. Because of this, every Vincentian should be a missionary, that is to say an **envoy like Christ**. He must clothe himself in the Spirit of Christ who was sent by the Father:¹⁴ “As the Father has sent me I send you” (Jn 20:21). What is important for us in this saying of Christ is “**as the**

¹² M. RAMAHOLIMIHASO, *Qui montre le droit chemin communique la vie*, Ed. Foi et Justice, Antananarivo 1995. (Emphasis added by the author of this article).

¹³ A. DODIN, *Saint Vincent de Paul et la Charité*, Maîtres Spirituels, 1976, pp 6-7. Cf. also, L. MEZZADRI, *Vincent de Paul (1581-1660)*, Desclée de Brouwer, 1985, chapters 7-8, pp. 103-117. But for a more profound study we can refer to the article by RENOARD, “Les pauvres au temps de St Vincent,” in *Au temps de St Vincent... et aujourd’hui (1581-1981)*, Animation Vincentienne, Bordeaux 1981, pp. 17-36. An interesting bibliography is at the end of the article.

¹⁴ On 17 May 1658, after he had distributed the Rules, Vincent de Paul urged everyone to put them into practice because “they are drawn from the gospel and they tend to conform our life with that which our Lord lived while on earth. **Our Lord came, and was sent by his Father to evangelise the poor. Pauperibus evangelizare misit me (Lk 4:18). Pauperibus, to the poor! Fathers, to the poor, as if, by God’s grace, a task for the little Company to undertake.**” (Emphasis added by the author).

Father has sent me.” The Father sent Christ to reveal his love, and it is **this love which liberates and brings hope:** it is the Good News of Salvation. This is what Jesus stresses when he quotes the text from Isaiah (Is 61:1-11): “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring the good news to the poor” (Lk 4:18). Other Isaian texts bring together in an admirable way the deep sense of the messianic activity of Jesus, and they inspired Vincent de Paul in everything he undertook and they should therefore animate each Vincentian: “On that day the deaf will hear the reading from a book and, emerging from the obscurity of darkness, the eyes of the blind will see. More and more the humble will rejoice in the Lord. And the poor will exult because of the Holy One of Israel” (Is 29:18-19). “Then the lame will leap like a deer and the mouth of the dumb will shout with joy” (Is 35:5-6).

Because of this, a Vincentian in the footsteps of Christ is someone who is sent to make God’s love known. **To be a missionary is to continue Jesus Christ sent by the Father:**¹⁵

*This is what the missionaries undertake to do; their speciality is to be dedicated to the poor, like Jesus Christ. Our vocation is, then, a continuation of his or, at least, related to his in the circumstances. What happiness, my brothers! But what obligations we have to appreciate this.*¹⁶

This “enterprise,” started by the Son of God, to which a Vincentian is called, is *Evangelizare pauperibus*.

Evangelizare pauperibus

A Vincentian, like Christ, is, then, an “envoy” to evangelise the poor. Evangelization was the main theme of the last Synod of Africa and Madagascar. Many of the points raised call for an in-depth study but this is not possible in the framework of our analysis.¹⁷

If one speaks of St. Vincent in the context of evangelization, one may bring up two guidelines which in fact are only one: human development and evangelization. When St. Vincent speaks of the poor he means principally the concrete human individually, a

¹⁵ J. MORIN, *Carnets Vincentiens*, No. 1, Dax, 1991.

¹⁶ COSTE XII, 80.

¹⁷ I draw your attention to an interesting article by a confrere-bishop who was present at this synod. He wanted to bring out the points which were of most interest to a Vincentian. Cf. GERMANO GRACHANE, “Reflections on the special session of the Synod of the African Bishops,” in *Vincentiana* (January-February 1995), pp. 21-26.

person in the full reality of his existence, in his longing for “a better deal,” in order “to be more fully human.”¹⁸

“To evangelize the poor person” means bringing the Good News, means first of all freeing him from the “evil” which oppresses him, in order to “make him fully human.” That is the basic relation of St. Vincent to the poor.¹⁹ He always views these latter as “victims” who need to be freed. This freeing is effective only in so far as it recognises Christ as the true man. As a matter of fact, the Council says:

... only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light.... He Who is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), is Himself the perfect man. To the sons of Adam He restores the divine likeness which had been disfigured from the first sin onward. Since human nature as He assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect too.²⁰

That is the route taken by St. Vincent. We are not going to speak here of the everyday practices of this Vincentian experience, but how can one understand this charism today in Madagascar?

Continuity and tradition

It is not surprising that in a continent where the majority lives below the threshold of extreme poverty the Symposium of the Bishops’ Conferences of Africa and Madagascar has chosen an option for the poor.²¹ In so far as we are Vincentian we cannot but be a party to that. We should even say that this is not, like some institutes, a preferential option. For us Vincentians it is our *raison d’être*, as we have already stressed.

The task of human development is an integral dimension, an internal demand, of evangelization,²² because the poor person to be

¹⁸ In his first encyclical *Redemptor hominis* the Pope reminds us that, for the Church, all ways lead to man.... He is the primary and fundamental way for the Church (cf. § 14).

¹⁹ We recall the different encounters of Vincent de Paul: those of Folleville and Châtillon. In Folleville spiritual misery was present, in Châtillon, physical. But both of them diminished the person, oppressed him.

²⁰ *Gaudium et spes*, No. 22.

²¹ Cf. “Déclaration du SCEAM” after the 7th plenary session, in *Documentation Catholique* 1913 (March 1996), pp. 263-268.

²² PAUL VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, No. 31: “Between evangelization and human advancement — development and liberation — there are in fact profound links. These include links of an anthropological order, because the man who is to be evangelized is not an abstract being but is subject to social

evangelised is not an abstract being, but a subject of social and economic questions. He therefore needs an integral development. This attitude is not, of course, something new in the Congregation. The starting point for our Founding Father was every form of material or spiritual poverty seen in its various forms in the actual lives of people: sickness, ignorance, need, rejection, loneliness, insecurity, discrimination or oppression.

But at the end of this second millennium, the situation which prevails in Madagascar urges (“the charity of Christ urges us” [2 Cor 5:14]) to discover a new “stimulant” for a life of communion with the disinherited on all sides. The Congregation, in reacting to this call, the fundamental option for the poor, and I would even say radical for the poor (it must be at the root of everything which the Vincentian takes on) answers also the call of Pope John Paul II on the occasion of the 1986 General Assembly: *Search out more than ever, with boldness, humility and skill, the causes of poverty and encourage short and long-term solutions.... By doing so, you will work for the credibility of the Gospel and the Church.*²³

How can all that be lived out concretely today in Madagascar?

“Fihavanana,” the place and route of communion with the poor

It is well to emphasise right now that there is no “miracle solution” which would be applicable to all situations; love alone is the route to be travelled because it is “infinitely inventive” (COSTE XI, 146). However, as evangelization is the foundation of this liberation, I dare to say that **there is no evangelization outside a cultural framework.**²⁴ **Evangelization always develops within a language and culture.**

That is why I suggest that one should reflect on *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me*, starting from the category of *Fihavanana* which impregnates and animates the everyday life of a Malagasy (this is a

and economic questions. They also include links in the theological order, since one cannot dissociate the plan of creation from the plan of Redemption. The latter plan touches the very concrete situations of injustice to be combated and of justice to be restored.”

²³ These words of John Paul II echo those spoken by his predecessor, Paul VI, on the occasion of the 1974 General Assembly: “You will continue to be the hope of the poor.”

²⁴ Cf. PAUL VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, No. 20: “The Gospel, and therefore evangelization, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures. Nevertheless, the kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures.”

strong sense of relationship, solidarity, communion).²⁵ This means that the poor should be considered as *havana*, members of the *fihavanana*, and not outsiders. A point which should be emphasised here is that there is no Malagasy word to translate “outsider”; the word *vahiny* is used, which also means “guest.” But the poor person should not be merely a *vahiny*; he must be considered a *havana*. For poor persons to be really *havana* they must retain their *hasina* (dignity), they must be reintegrated into the life of the community and not remain as persons who are permanently being helped.

This is true liberation, as Pope Paul VI teaches in his exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*:

*With regard to the liberation which evangelization proclaims and strives to put into practice one should rather say this: — it cannot be contained in the simple and restricted dimension of economics, politics, social or cultural life; it must envisage the whole man, in all his aspects, right up to and including his openness to the absolute, even the divine Absolute.*²⁶

For this to be effective, the Vincentians must not only be for the poor but primarily with the poor (our Superior General’s Advent letter of 2004 urges us in this direction). This is possible if we are always **attentive to the welcoming, the hospitality, which involve us in a real sharing of living.** And here we come back to what the Founding Father wanted from the start, **the secular character** of the Congregation so that it would always be near to people and to poor people.

This must begin inside the community. The community must be a real means and place of evangelization of the poor. So that it may really become this, community life must take family life as its model,²⁷ **a place of sharing and participation**, a place where persons become brothers and sisters.²⁸

²⁵ Cf. F. BENOLO, “Inculturation et identité vincentienne à Madagascar,” in *COVIAM*, 1994.

²⁶ PAUL VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, No. 33.

²⁷ Community living is an important part of the Vincentian charism. This deserves to be developed here, all the more so since community is doubly important. First of all, it was always wanted by St. Vincent as a “pillar” of all evangelization. Secondly, the sense of community is very strong in Madagascar.

²⁸ The latest document from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life is very rich on this point: *Fraternal Life in Community*.

Church-family, community-family

St. Vincent in his conferences on community life often borrowed from the vocabulary of family life to describe relationships in community and the role of community in mission.²⁹

This idea of family needs to be developed, all the more so since the last African Synod considered it to be the key concept of evangelization: "Church-family."³⁰ This is not really new, especially in Madagascar, but it must be rediscovered in depth in order to show what the Church is. In stressing this aspect, in fact, we should put in first place the idea of solidarity and communion so dear to the concept of *fihavanana*. And since in the great Malagasy family each one has his place and role, it will be the same in the Church-family.

The way for putting this key concept into practice runs through the creation of living and mature ecclesial communities³¹ (i.e., basic ecclesial communities). We cannot expand on this important aspect to pastoral ministry. That would come under a different heading. We are merely mentioning it. Here again St. Vincent was "revolutionary" because he always believed in lay involvement. In fact it was he who first dared to get involved in organising associations of lay people so that they could have a part in works of charity and therefore in evangelization. One could even say that what St. Vincent did for the laity was prophetic.³² And more especially in Madagascar, at the start of this third millennium of Christianity, lay people, following the example of their ancestor Blessed Victoire Rasoamanarivo, are more than asked to share in evangelization. There will be no real evangelization without their participation. It is the catechists who animate the bush parishes. They must be helped to push further ahead to really find their place, and the Congregation, endowed with the experiences of its Founding Father, can enable them.³³

²⁹ Cf. J. MORIN, *op. cit.*, No. 1, pp. 87-96.

³⁰ P.B. Nothomb has given a long theological and pastoral reflection on this key-concept in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* (1995), pp. 44-64.

³¹ John Paul II in his post-synodal exhortation *Christifideles laici* devotes whole paragraphs to explain the necessity of forming mature ecclesial communities "in which the faith might radiate and fulfill the basic meaning of adherence to the person of Christ and his Gospel, of an encounter and sacramental communion with him, and of an existence lived in charity and in service" (No. 34).

³² Cf. J. MORIN, *op. cit.*, No. 3, Dax, p. 46: "Without doubt it was St. Vincent who started the **apostolate of a group by the group**, because it was he who, in the 17th century, entrusted the task of serving and evangelising the poor to the poor." (Emphasis added by the present author).

³³ On this point I draw your attention to the interesting article "The impact of the African Synod on the Vincentians in Africa," by JEAN-BAPTISTE NSAMBI E MBULA in *Vincentiana* (January-February 1995), pp. 27-33.

In this context, what sort of formation?

We must get to a formation plan which meets this need: fully Vincentian and fully Malagasy, within the context of globalization. This calls for **a strong human formation which tends towards real maturity in order to meet this global culture, which causes the spread of ignorance of real human values, and then a deep spiritual formation which leads to the primacy of God.** This means that formators need to change their approach in their thinking and practice: real experience and contact with Christ, the poor, knowledge of doctrines, dogmas, spirituality is needed. This is obvious. But it calls for, and this is perhaps very urgent in the present-day context, an emphasis on experience. Personal intimate experience of Christ is primary in arriving at a real choice of life which leads you to a real state of living. That is what is lacking in our formation programmes. **The priesthood remains a job and not a state of life.**

It is one thing to know Jesus intellectually, but it is something else to follow him. This calls for a real personal encounter (cf. the rich young man in the gospel: he knew Jesus “intellectually” because he addressed him as “Master,” but when Jesus called him he did not wish to follow). We need to change from a too intellectual formation, which has been the arrangement up to now, to **an “experiential” formation.** (Forgive my use of this rather crude neologism, borrowed from the English). And this way of approaching what a formation should be is very close to our African and Malagasy mentality, which always puts contact in first place, something concrete, which is experience. It is in this sense that real inculturation is achieved.

A formation project

If we really get to grips with this necessity, not to say urgency, it is not so much formation programmes which we need (there are too many of them), **but new models which give priority to human development and spiritual development, which help young people to live this personal and intimate experience with Christ, so that they can make the choice.** Academic competence is important but it should be oriented towards this human and spiritual development. Intellectual results are certainly needed, but they should not be the only things looked at. We must look in depth at the progress towards a choice of life.

These models of formation should take into consideration the problems previously developed.

Evangelized by the poor (Mt 25:31-46)

An important point of Vincentian spirituality is that “as evangeliser of the poor a Vincentian is evangelized by the poor.” The radical option for the poor is not just this primary attention which we should bring to them. It is also our docility to the message of which they are carriers. In that way we allow ourselves to be evangelised because there is something evangelical in those whom Christ himself chose by preference. That is above all the significance of Mt 25:31-45,³⁴ on which St. Vincent loved to comment.

Let us return to this text as a conclusion, in order to understand certain expressions used by St. Vincent, such as “We must treat the poor with gentleness and respect, remembering that it is **to our Lord** that we render this service” (COSTE X, 680). “But turn the medal around and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, who willed to be poor, is shown to us by these poor persons” (COSTE XI, 32). We know that St. Vincent reached these conclusions from Mt 25:40: “*Each time you have done this to a little one, to a poor person, it is to me that you have done it.*” What is the meaning of these words of Christ?

Without claiming to be an exegete,³⁵ it is interesting to look more closely at them so as not to fall into exactly the opposite sense.

This conclusion of Jesus comes after his declaration about what the “just” have achieved. These latter rightly claim that it is a gratuitous love, without asking questions about the identity of the person loved, which urged them to carry out these acts. That is what the Good Samaritan did in Lk 10:29-37: “Seek only to love.” When St. Vincent taught that we must turn the medal around, this does not mean merely seeing only Jesus in the person whom one is meeting. If it were merely that, that would be just a calculation and not genuine love! It is the love of Christ in us, the result of faith,³⁶ which urges us to love the other person just as he is, without asking his identity, to

³⁴ This text is proper to Matthew, as the Good Samaritan is proper to Luke (10:30-37). Both passages are often quoted by St. Vincent in his conferences. In fact one of the keys to getting at the sense of this teaching of Christ in Matthew is the parable from Luke.

³⁵ Many studies and commentaries have been written on this passage in Matthew. I point out one which seems to me to be very interesting, and very rich from the point of view of bibliographical references. A. FEUILLET, “Le caractère universel du jugement et la charité sans frontières,” in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 102 (March-April 1980), pp. 179-196.

³⁶ St. Vincent stresses this: “Turn the medal around and **you will see by the light of faith** that the Son of God, who wished to be poor, is present to us in these poor persons.” It is faith, then, that makes Christ present in the poor. (Emphasis added by the present author).

love him for himself. Like Christ, the Good Samaritan,³⁷ **to seek only to love**, is our sole aim. And that is the significance of “the charity of Christ which urges us” (2 Cor 5:14), the motto of the Daughters of Charity. Of course this will not be natural goodness, a humanitarianism, or some philosophy or other, but an authentic love rooted in faith, total communion with Jesus, such as lived by St. Paul and which made him say: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who is in me” (Gal 2:20). It is this Christ who is in me who therefore pushes me to serve no matter whom, and allows me to see in that person the face of Christ. In other words, it is Christ in me who reveals himself in the other person and who moves me to love him. That is why, when evangelising the poor, one is evangelised by them; one receives the Good News from them, the Person of Christ Himself.³⁸

This is why we can state that relationship with the poor person never has just one meaning. It makes us see another perspective, enriching and mystical: the meeting with Christ who calls us “to seek only to love like him, with no contamination, without expecting any other return.” (“*Love one another AS I have loved you,*” Jn 15:12).

(THOMAS DAVITT, C.M., translator)

³⁷ Broadly speaking, St. Vincent comments on this parable of Jesus every time he speaks of charity. We have an in-depth exegetical analysis done by L. RAMAROSON, “Comme le Bon Samaritain, ne chercher qu’à aimer,” in *Biblica* 56 (1975), pp. 533-536.

³⁸ John Paul II suggests this, when speaking to health workers in *Christifideles laici*, 53: “It is to just such people — doctors, nurses, other healthcare workers, volunteers — that **the call becomes the living sign of Jesus Christ and his Church in showing love towards the sick and suffering.** (Emphasis added by the present author).

40th General Assembly: A Daring Look Toward the Future

The Congregation in a Perspective of Hope

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Introduction

Focused on the objective of reviewing the life and the mission of the Congregation in light of the Constitutions, the 40th General Assembly did not limit itself to a careful look at the recent past or a close look at the present. Encouraged, however, *by the outstanding contributions to the work of the Church over the last four centuries* (John Paul II, Message to the Delegates of the General Assembly, 18 July 2004), the Assembly looked boldly and hopefully toward the future. The last part of the Final Document of our recent Assembly must be read from this perspective of hope — a hope that is rooted in the apostolic capabilities of the Congregation as manifested in concrete actions over the course of so many years and a hope that is inspired by the Pope's message which applied Jesus' words to Peter to our situation: *Duc in altum! Put out into the deep!* (Luke 5:4). *Do not be afraid to venture forth, to put out the nets for a catch. The Lord himself will be your guide* (John Paul II, Message to the Delegates of the General Assembly, 18 July 2004).

In these words of the Holy Father we hear a call to be radical and a call to trust. This is certainly how the Assembly understood those words. A call to be **radical** is implied in the Lord's command: *put out into the deep water* (Luke 5:4). Like the Apostles who were in the boat, this command means that we have to distance ourselves from the shore and confidently put out into the deep water. We have to abandon ourselves to the will of Jesus and work in those areas that the Lord has pointed out to us. To accomplish all of this we have a map: the Beatitudes — a map that guides our interior journey along the paths of holiness and commits us to act on behalf of the Kingdom of God. Let us be mindful of Peter's response to the Lord's seemingly impractical command: *Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets* (Luke 5:5). This should also be our attitude and our response as we look boldly toward the future and as we look boldly at our

mission: *We have been working and we have become weary even to the point of losing our optimism... but because you tell us and because we trust in your word, we will lower our nets for a catch. We will once again continue to fulfill our mission as we did during the time of our foundation — we will minister with a restless spirit.*

Only in this way can we embrace the second call: to grow in **trust**. Very little in society or in the actual culture encourages us in our vocation: the Church's loss of prestige, the frivolous treatment of the Gospel, the complete misunderstanding of our lifestyle, the lack of vocations, the aging of our communities, the draining of our strength, etc. Here in the West we are more moved by discouragement than enthusiasm and this leads us to seek refuge in some glorious past rather than to look forward with hope to an uncertain future. Nevertheless we feel called to have this confidence and called to be bold as we look toward our future. Pope John Paul II pointed out in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* that what we have done in the past should not lead us to adopt a disinterested attitude. *On the contrary, he states, the experiences we have had should inspire in us new energy, and impel us to invest in concrete initiatives the enthusiasm which we have felt.... In the cause of the Kingdom there is no time for looking back, even less for settling into laziness* (John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 6 January 2001, n. 15). In the Kingdom of God there is no time to look backwards. We have a mission to fulfill: the future is ahead of us and still to be realized. As long as we are alive, we have a mission to fulfill. The Lord calls us to fulfill this mission and we must attempt to accomplish this mission until the end of time — we must do this with confidence, courage and vision.

Therefore, from the dual perspective of radicalism and trust I want to share this simple reflection on the third part of the Final Document of our Assembly. Because of the limitations of time and space, I will focus on those aspects that are common to all missionaries and leave for future consideration the interesting lines of action suggested by the distinct continental groups. Without a doubt these lines of action compliment the work of the whole Congregation and provide useful, concrete ways that enable the spirit of this Assembly to become incarnated in real life situations.

1. A look that disturbs our whole being

Because the act of *looking* has a certain connotation of *focusing* or *thoroughness*, this can create a first impression of passivity and distance: we look at something outside of ourselves, we observe something with stark objectivity and respond in some calculated way. This, however, is not our way of *looking* for we are invited to focus on where this act of looking should lead us: to revitalize our vocation, to reinforce our apostolic activity, and renew our

community life. These are all active verbs: *revitalize, reinforce, renew*. They speak to us about giving new encouragement, greater vigor and rekindling our zeal. They speak about essential elements: *vocation, apostolic activity, community life* and these refer to our identity, our mission, our goal. Therefore, we are not speaking here about some indifferent *looking* but one that commits us. This is not a *looking* that is distinct and separated from our lives but one that is centered on our being and acting. Therefore this *looking* provokes us, questions us, and disturbs us.

At the same time this act of looking is not the act of some individual that takes place apart from time but rather involves a historical, concrete subject: one who has had a long experience, who is aware of the present moment and aspires to a future horizon. For this reason one looks with a perspective. A perspective that sincerely looks at the past — at what has occurred — and notes difficulties, achievements, and urgencies. A perspective that is carefully and attentively centered on the present, one that tries to identify the impacts and challenges that the present moment provokes in our lives as Vincentians. We are told that these challenges are related to our values, our apostolic activity, our community life and vocations.

From this context a new perspective arises. **A perspective that looks toward the future**, toward what lies ahead and therefore presents us with challenges. As we face the challenges in our value system, we hope to revitalize our vocation. As we face the challenges in our apostolic activity, we hope to reinforce our missionary activity and as we face the challenges in our vocation and community life, we hope to renew our communities. There is a thread that binds all these elements together, namely, **formation**.

Rather than highlight one or another aspect of each of these areas, it seems better to point out some of the axes that are present in all of these areas and that can provide us with a perspective for reading and applying the text. We are called to work this Document and not allow it to remain merely a written word. We are called to make this a living Document that encourages and guides us. A very valid instrument is placed in our hands, one that can renew our Vincentian life. Therefore we should receive this Document not simply as material for our prayer or our libraries. Rather we should use this Document to encourage and channel our vocation, our life and our mission. Therefore it is good to highlight some of the areas that are touched upon in the document.

2. The axes present in the third part

a) *Strengthening the charism*

Focusing on the Constitutions, we are reminded of the inspiring text: *the spirit of the Congregation is a participation in the spirit of Christ himself, as proposed by St. Vincent; "He sent me to preach the good news to the poor"* (Luke 4:18). From the beginning, then, our looking is focused on Christ. But not on some generic and universal Christ open to whatever perspective, but rather a Christ that was proposed by St. Vincent: a Christ immersed in the missionary current of God who had come to this world to evangelize the poor. Our charism, then, is Christ-centered and missionary and tends to identify us with **Christ-Evangelizer** and aligns us with the unique mission that the Father entrusted to the Son and that the Church continues in the unfolding of history.

In this regard we are encouraged to *develop, articulate and apply criteria to enhance the missionary and prophetic nature of our charism....* The long history of the Congregation and the experience of our personal journey have lessened the original vigor of our charism. The passing of time, consolidation of works, well known ministries, and inertia lead us to accommodate ourselves unconsciously to routines and thus the original sparks of zeal are extinguished. Therefore it becomes necessary to remember periodically our origins and return to the roots of our being. Let us reflect on our dynamic and missionary character, our prophetic and evangelizing character, our enterprising and apostolic character. We are called to shake off old habits, to open ourselves to new horizons and to transcend ourselves as we commit ourselves to serve others.

It is logical that the Document insists that we *use the criteria set down in our Constitutions 2 and 12 to review our existing works, to begin new ones, to leave those not in accord with the above criteria, and to give new vigor to our present ones.* This reminds us of a principle that years ago was enshrined in our Constitutions and that probably has not been put into practice with the necessary radicalism. The inheritance of the past weighs heavily upon our shoulders: ministries too closely bound up with the cultural reality, a pastoral ministry that revolves around preserving outdated ways, houses that have moved away from their primary purpose and/or moved away from serving the poor, formation that is focused on sacramental rather than missionary renewal, etc. All of this demands that we become involved in a **process of serious, loyal and committed renewal.**

To invigorate the charism, the Final Document insists on a new element that was not taken into consideration in the past, but is an element that has taken on new force in recent years: *we commit ourselves to work together with the members of the Vincentian Family*

and with other Church groups for the evangelization of the poor. This reality is being lived out with greater and greater force on an interprovincial level: the exchange of personnel, missionary commitments, support in formation and economic assistance. But we want to be able to plan this collaboration better, thus extending this collaboration to the members of the Vincentian Family and other ecclesial and social groups. In neither of these cases are we dealing with a reality that is demanded of us because of a scarcity of active members or because of the necessity of greater support. We are dealing with a reflective and theological option. We undertake this cooperation because we are part of a Church-communion that has to become visible in the cooperation and the unity among all its members as well as a form of cooperation with other groups of human society. We emphasize this collaboration because the evangelization of the poor is important to us and we are looking for the best means and want to make our best resources available for the accomplishment of this goal. In this way our charism is strengthened as we commit ourselves to remain faithful to our mission. Thus it also becomes clear that it is not simply efficient means that move us in this direction.

The primary source of energy arises from the efficacy of our charism. The ecclesial options (the option for evangelization and for the poor) as well as social realities (the new forms of poverty that we see on all levels and the availability of so many resources) highlight the importance of our charism in the present era. As Vincentians we do not have to reformulate or reestablish our charism. Rather we need to be aware of the *treasure* that we have received and we need to live this treasure with dedication, enthusiasm and courage. Christ is our prototype, St. Vincent is our model and the poor present us with a vast area for work. Now we must *take up our Constitutions, make progress in prayer, deepen our formation, strengthen our community life and commit ourselves to the mission.*

b) Creative fidelity

Because our charism is not simply a remembrance of something that has become a fossil but a reality that is rooted in the continual breathing forth of the Spirit, we are not called to preserve an unchanging charism but *to give creative and faithful expression to our Vincentian charism in the cultures of different peoples and in the new culture of our age.* At first sight, it could appear contradictory to speak about *creative and faithful expressions.* The word *faithful* brings to memory the past and refers to something that has been received, a desire to preserve, the maintenance of a stable attitude. On the other hand, *creativity* refers to something new, something that is created or that arises in the present moment. How then can we put *creative* together with *fidelity*?

From a Christian point of view, fidelity for us is not a codification of attitudes or a perpetuation of some determined works. Fidelity is reminding ourselves that we are immersed in a current of tradition that naturally arises from the past but continues to flow toward the future. From this tradition we embrace an inheritance that is rich in Vincentian spirituality, in a mission of evangelization, in admirable witness, in committed love in community and in committed love of the poor. One wants to be faithful to all of this, but this is not accomplished by standing on the shore. Rather we must enter the current of the flowing water. There in the current, as we realize that part of this river comes from afar, we also realize that the same river flows toward the future and this demands creativity. The channel of water is extended and flows toward other shores, irrigates other areas and satisfies the thirst of other people. Yes, this is an image, but one that illustrates the way in which we are called to be creatively faithful. We recognize that we are heirs of a rich tradition that enriches us. At the same time we also know that we are the protagonists of a history that commits us to maintain this charism alive and strong. Therefore, fidelity can only be creative: we do not view our fidelity as a focus on the past, but rather like a trampoline that moves us toward the future. We are not like a root that subjects us to a determined place but rather we are like a flowing stream that pushes us forward to new places.

Together, then, with our radical incarnational spirituality, this fidelity calls us to give life to our charism by **inculturating** it in diverse people and in diverse times. Our charism is incarnated and re-created first of all in every missionary, inspiring him in a specific way of being and illuminating concrete modes of evangelization. The charism also becomes incarnated in every period of history, in every people and culture: filling all creation with the spirit of Christ and making it possible to live the gospel and establish the Kingdom of God in every historical situation. Openness to the ways of the Spirit, reading the signs of the times, insertion in the world of the poor, affirming pluralism, the practice of dialogue, and sharing a community life become indispensable for this creative fidelity of the Congregation and of each missionary.

We should not be surprised, therefore, that the adjective **new** appears throughout the document: *new styles of community life, new vigor to our present [apostolic works], put renewed energy into the formation of those charged with the formation of our own members.* Here some distinctive ways are pointed out that will enable us to reconfigure and reconstitute our life. This is not done because of some desire for novelty or simply because we want to change things, but all of this is done from a desire to evangelize the poor in a better way and bring the poor the message of Christ in a better way. The exhortation to be *open to new styles of community life with lay people*

— something that would be worthy to do with calmness — is an exhortation to enhance our mission. A way to be faithful to our vocation is *to develop in our ministry new ways to integrate the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the Sacraments with the direct service of the poor*. The call to *put renewed energy into the formation of those charged with the formation of our own members* is an attempt to make all our apostolic activity more dynamic. The continuation of **Christ's mission** appears as the background for our motivation and **the evangelization of the poor** is the horizon that marks our faithfulness.

In accord with the Assembly Document we are exhorted to *promote, as true disciples of Christ, our availability and mobility in taking on ministries that suit our charism*. Thus we are placed before two truly missionary attitudes (availability and mobility) that ought to characterize the Vincentian outlook. Lack of mobility, unbending, attachment to places and people — all of these are attacks against the fidelity that we have committed ourselves to live. As long as we are available to accept the commitments that are in accord with our charism we reinforce the creativity and dynamism that should characterize our lives.

c) *A hopeful openness toward the future*

As we attempt to remain faithful to our vocation and our mission, the Assembly urges us to renew our community life and discover in the Trinity the vital principle that nourishes the Congregation for the mission. For this reason the Assembly believes that it is necessary to *formulate, put into practice and regularly revise our provincial, vice-provincial and community plans*.

This section highlights the importance of **planning** on every level. Planning is highlighted because we believe in the future. One plans according to the way that one hopes in the future. One also plans to enter into the reality, to prepare for what one hopes for and to approach in a Christian way the future. The author of a work entitled *El Vuelo de la inteligencia [The flight of intelligence]* states that *each person interprets the reality according to one's plans*. He places before us the example of the poem *la alcachofa [the artichoke]* written by Pablo Neruda. If the poet goes to his garden and discovers beautiful images and evocative words in this fruit it is because he knows how to give a different meaning to what he sees. It is *because he looks at things with a distinct Plan*. It is because each person interprets the reality according to his or her perspective.

Therefore the plan is most important. Not because it measures our actions or guides our thoughts, but because it focuses our perspective and thus enables a wise person to understand and a righteous person to act. The reality is always there, ahead of us, within us and awaits our assuming this as a plan. This ultimately

brings about collaboration. Thus the plan acts within us like a projectile that pierces the reality and expands our possibilities. Things are never completely determined. We must never rush the infinite possibilities that are within us. Everything, the reality and our own individual lives, await our decision. Therefore, with intelligence, boldness and enthusiasm we have to know how to move toward the future that our plans anticipate.

To speak about planning is to speak about the **future**, and to speak about the future is to speak about hope. What is my personal plan? How is our community plan? What is our plan as a Congregation or as Church? As we respond to these questions we also uncover our level of **hope**.

It is within this context of planning and the future and trust and life that we have to read the ideas presented in this section. For example, *we are called to dedicate time to plan the details of our common life with special attention to preparing our prayer and sharing its fruit together*. Do we truly believe in the abilities of our community and in the value of praying together that ultimately enables us to grow in our vocation and our mission? Why is it so difficult for us to share the fruit of our prayer and the ways in which we live out our faith? Does the spiritual dynamic really impel us to live in service of the Kingdom of God?

In the same line of hope, the Assembly offers the following call: *we are called to cultivate co-responsibility in community life and called to care for those missionaries in need*. Missionaries are the primary value in each community. In each one of us palpates a distinct measure of trust in the Lord, of faith in the mission, of love of our vocation, of integral health and a determined vital attitude. For this reason to invest in personal qualities is to invest in vocational and missionary qualities. To invest in all of this is to invest in the future, in planning and in hope.

If, throughout the entire document, the references to vocational promotion and to the attitude toward the candidates are repeated, it is because the Assembly is looking toward the future. One could think that this reference is motivated more by a pessimistic concern in face of a possible dearth of vocations, rather than by a hopeful outlook with respect to new candidates. It is that outlook, however, which should be given consideration. The insistence on relationships with the candidates is evoked, because we are convinced of the vitality of the Vincentian charism and because the desire to be faithful motivates us: *called to develop an effective vocational promotion program, welcoming into our community life... possible candidates to be missionaries, providing them with formation for and in community*, etc. In every case it means planning, orienting, preparing, etc. More than in any other field, it is in the vocational

proposal and in the preparation of the candidates where one cannot proceed by improvisation or impulse. Here it is necessary to project, to plan, to organize, to create channels and systems, to provide resources, etc. It is because we believe in the proposal and are convinced of the quality of what is offered, that we give guarantees that this is a journey of happiness for life.

d) *The importance of formation*

Without a doubt the importance of formation is one of the very clear axes in the development of the whole document. This aspect was so fundamental for the delegates that they considered dedicating a separate section to gather together all the different proposals in this area. Nevertheless, it seemed better to allow this concern for formation to run through all the separate areas of this *looking* toward the future. This would enable the decisiveness of the theme to be perceived in all the different areas.

As we know, today formation is a point of particular interest for society and the Church. In all the different areas of knowledge and culture formation processes are thoroughly planned — initial formation as well as ongoing formation. Formation is one of the urgencies of our time. Here we are dealing with one of the **demands of our vocation**. For us, formation is not simply something that is required because of the new advances in knowledge but is one of the dimensions of the dynamics of our vocation. Initial formation means providing a solid foundation to a Vincentian. Ongoing formation guarantees the growth of a missionary that corresponds to the gift that one has received. It is true that there are many purely human reasons for ongoing formation, for example, the realization of personal progress, continual up-dating, ministerial effectiveness. These reasons are assumed and made more specific by the theological motivation that appears in *Pastores dabó vobis: permanent formation is a requirement of the priest's own faithfulness to his ministry, to his very being.... But it is also an act of love for the People of God, at whose service the priest is placed. Indeed, an act of true and proper justice* (John Paul II, *Pastores dabó vobis*, 25 March 1992, n. 70).

In this perspective it should not surprise us that the first proposal of this third part of the Document establishes the orientation of the missionary's formation: *we are called to provide initial and ongoing formation, following the example of Christ, the Evangelizer of the poor, deepening our knowledge of our Vincentian identity....* Formation, therefore, must be concerned about enabling the missionary to conform his life to that of Christ, the Evangelizer of the poor. This is the key to our Christian identity and upon this foundation we must build our life and our evangelizing mission.

As seen in this proposal, formation does not pretend to create educated and erudite individuals who are re-created in their own knowledge. Formation is an indispensable instrument to form one in the Vincentian character and situate the missionary in the area of community and mission. Certainly this must be a serious, balanced, solid and open formation... a formation anchored in *looking* toward Christ the evangelizer and in a concern for the poor whom we desire to serve. Thus it is Christ and the poor who form the two inseparable poles of this one axis that sustains our life and that is our Vincentian vocation.

Because we are dealing with a formation that prepares us for the mission and not for speculation, the Document formulates a proposal of great interest: *we are called to provide an initial and ongoing formation able to meet the demands which society places on our apostolic work.* Here we find various essential elements that enable us to understand the meaning of formation: formation never ends, but embraces every moment and phase of our life. Formation must be attentive to the events of history for in this way we become aware of the challenges that society places upon us. Finally, formation should provide a focus to our apostolic activity.

It is good to retain this panorama and make it a part of our formation programs. Programs must also take into consideration the outlines of our specific spirituality and of our vocation. These programs must also be sensitive to the ecclesial circumstances and social events (especially as these circumstances and events relate to the poor) and must also be sensitive to the most effective missionary responses from the vision of our mission and apostolate.

Affirming these principles of formation that have been defined and made concrete, the Assembly, after each one of the **missionary commitments** in relation to the formation of the laity, the formation of our own members, and formation for community life, highlights the need *to offer them [the Vincentian Family] a solid Vincentian formation, put renewed energy into the formation of those charged with the formation of our own members, provide in our communities formation for our candidates so that they learn how to live in community.*

Without a doubt these proposals contain an implicit call to collaboration on all levels: interprovincial, ecclesial, social and with the Vincentian Family. This very collaboration is in itself formative since it prepares us to work together and cooperate with one another as a team. This collaboration also enriches the content of these programs with the different perspectives of the individuals who participate. In all of these cases of collaboration we become aware of the importance of a good formation that provides for vocational growth and guarantees our commitment to the mission.

Conclusion

It is curious that the Assembly Document concludes in the same way that it began: with the call of the Pope, who in the name of the Church tells us *to put out into the deep*. This will inevitably lead to strengthening our charism, creative fidelity, a hopeful look toward the future and good formation. We feel called by Christ, the Evangelizer. We know that we are sent to evangelize the poor. Let us be aware of the greatness and the beauty of our commitment: a commitment with Christ and the poor. Let us be aware of the power of the challenge: *to put out into the deep*. Let us joyfully embrace this challenge. Let us give a clear and courageous response to this challenge. In doing this we will open paths that will lead the Congregation into the future and we also make our evangelization of the poor more effective.

(CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M., translator)

A Reflection on the Postulates and the Decrees Presented at the 2004 General Assembly

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Introduction

The 40th General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission (2004) focused, among other things, on 39 postulates and five decrees. The content of these postulates and decrees was rather varied. In the present article, we do not intend to analyze such content from a juridical point of view (the juridical difference between a postulate and a decree), neither do we propose a judgment on the content, but we shall limit the analysis to the goal of responding to the following question: “What Congregation is ‘hidden’ behind the postulates and decrees that were presented at the last General Assembly?”

Analysis of the Postulates and Decrees

For the analysis of the 44 propositions (39 postulates and five decrees) considered, the following questions will help us: *a*) what subject do they concern? *b*) from which geographical area do these propositions come? *c*) what are they asking? Is it a return to the past? Is it simply updating institutional structures and the text of normative regulations? Is it the introduction of something new?

The Subject

As has been said, the subject is rather varied. The list of the proposals could be articulated around the following themes:¹

- The need for a new procedure in the election of the Superior General (32, 35),

¹ The numbers in parenthesis refer to the postulates (and respectively to the decree when preceded by a d), as listed in *Vincentiana* 48 (2004) N. 4-5, pp. 343-351.

- Formation of a commission to work on the Statutes in view of the next General Assembly (33),
- Collaboration among provinces (3, 15),
- The advisability that the Congregation of the Mission intervene publicly in the face of great events of global nature, which touch the life of the poor (5),
- The statute of the laity who live in our communities (9),
- Enhancement of the Vincentian places (21, 24),
- Creation of a special office at the Curia for Africa (28) or an African Assistant General (27) or, in a more general sense, an Assistant General for each of the five major regions of the world (34, 36),
- Reformulation of the Statutes concerning: vows (7, 10, 16, 17, 22, 28), mission (8), end (11), requirements for appointment or election to an office (23), the relationship between the local superior and his council (29),
- Collaboration within the Vincentian Family (2, 4, 37),
- Formation of formators (19) and formation *ad gentes* (26),
- Work with youth and vocational promotion (14),
- Relationships with Islam (18, 19, 20),
- Support of priestly ministry (12),
- The virtues proper to the Congregation of the Mission (6),
- Restoration of the office of the admonisher (12),
- Rights and duties of confreres who return to the province from foreign missions (13),
- The prayer for vocations (25),
- Active and passive voice of confreres engaged in international missions (31),
- Modification of the Miraculous Medal (39).

With regard to the five *decrees*, they concern:

- Proper law (d 1),
- Fund for the missions *ad gentes* (d 2),
- Limits to the extraordinary expenses of the Superior General (d 3),
- Representation of coadjutor brothers at the General Assembly (d 4),
- The method of consultation in view of the election of the Superior General (d 5). Moreover, this subject is already contained in some way in two of the postulates (cf. 32, 35).

In order to group the broad subject into similar units, we could synthesize them as follows:

- a) The proposals of juridical-normative nature (e.g., modification of the Statutes or introduction of new articles into them):
 - Creation of a commission to draw up new Statutes (33),
 - Addition of a fifth Assistant General (34),
 - Explicit proposal to modify some Statutes (7, 8, 10, 11, 16, 17, 22, 23, 29, 38),
 - Introduction of a Statute for the laity who live in our communities (9),
 - Determination of the rights and obligations of confreres who return to their provinces of origin (13),
 - Proposal to review the right of active and passive voice of members of the international missions (31),
 - Proper law (d 1).
- b) Proposals to promote a better *internal* organization of the Congregation of the Mission:
 - Introduction of a consultation method for the election of the Superior General (32, 35, d 5),
 - Collaboration among provinces (3, 15) and within the Vincentian Family (2, 4, 37),
 - Representation of coadjutor brothers at the General Assembly (d 4),
 - Enhancement of the Vincentian places (21, 24),
 - Representation of each region in the General Curia and in the General Assembly (27, 28, 36),
 - Formation of formators (1) and *ad gentes* (26),
 - Work with youth and vocational promotion (14),
 - Preparation of an instruction on the Vincentian virtues (6),
 - Restoration of the office of the admonisher (12),
 - Preparation of a new prayer for vocations (25),
 - Determination of the expense limits of the Superior General (d 3),
 - Modification of the Miraculous Medal (39),
 - Continuation of the monetary fund for the missions *ad gentes* (d 2).
- c) Proposals to promote the life and *external* relations of the Congregation of the Mission:

- Declaring publicly our position as a Congregation in the face of events of a global nature, which concern the life of the poor (5),
- Support of formative institutes, houses and programmes to promote Vincentian witness in relationships with Islam (18, 19, 20),
- Support of priestly service in the Church (30).

A quick, first analysis of the subject so far articulated could yield the following considerations:

- More than half the postulates and decrees are oriented *ad intra*; that is, to seek motivation for the renewal of personal and community life itself, whether through the recovery of the personal dimension, (e.g., through formation, prayer, virtue, etc.) or through a better organization of the internal resources, from those that are institutional (like the case of the election of the Superior General or representation at the General Assembly), to those that are financial (continuation of the mission fund, solidarity among provinces) and, finally, to those that are human (collaboration within the Vincentian Family, care for vocational promotion, etc.);
- Almost one third of the postulates and decrees expect a benefit at the level of personal life (reformulation of the Statutes on vows), of the local community (the determination of the Statute of laity living in our communities), of the province (the determination of the rights and obligations of the confreres who return to their province of origin), of the Congregation (the request for an Assistant General representing each of the regions of the world) from perfecting the juridical system;
- Only a small part of the postulates and decrees (5 out of 44) single out the *ad extra* source of the renewal; that is, in opening up to major problems and phenomena of the global world: the relationship with Islam, the taking of an official position as a Congregation in the face of poverty on the worldwide level, the support of priestly ministry in the Church (which seems to make an implicit reference to the context of the secularization of the world which threatens it).

The Origin

The distribution of the data according to the origin of the 39 postulates presented gave the following results: 13 from America (of which only two come from the United States, notably, the Midwest Province), 11 from Europe, seven from Africa, six from Asia, none from Oceania, and two from the General Curia.

Taking into consideration then the three-way grouping presented with regard to the contents, we can point out that the proposals coming from Africa all belong to the section that we have defined *ad intra*; that is, that directed to the recovery of the personal dimension and internal organization. On the contrary, there are no proposals of juridical-normative nature coming from this geographical area.

The proposals that we had recorded in the section *ad extra*, that is those that are particularly sensitive to the major problems and events of the global world, come four-fifths from Europe and one-fifth from a province of South America (Chile).

A large part of the proposals of the juridical-normative character come from the American Provinces (five in the Spanish-speaking provinces and two from the Midwest), a part from the European provinces (four), and a part from the Asian provinces (three).

The two proposals coming from the Curia seem to be an attempt to give expression to proposals that emerged verbally during Assembly itself.

The interpretation of this small data seems, above all, to permit the affirmation that the African provinces do not nurture big expectations from the modification of the Statutes, but rather from choices of pastoral type or internal organization of the Congregation itself.

However, with regard to the mentality of the juridical-normative type, this seems to be typical of the western (Europe and North America) and Latina (South America) tradition.

Asia is distributed equally between the juridical-normative orientation (three postulates) and that addressed to the internal organization and personal renewal (three postulates). As in the case of Africa, in the Asian provinces we do not find postulates of the orientation that we defined as *ad extra* either; rather, what it asks of the Congregation in the upcoming years is a particular attention to major social processes in a world viewpoint.

The Latin American Provinces, (perhaps, more precisely, we should say the Spanish-speaking ones) are located in an intermediary position between the two preceding, as if they were in a transition situation from the first position (that typical of Africa and Asia) to the second (that typical of the western countries).

Returning to the sources or the search for new paths?

The third series of questions adopted concerns the orientation assumed by the postulates in question: are they oriented to a recovery of the past? or rather to the present time? or directed to the future? In more explicit terms, the postulates presented can be

distributed according to those proposing a return to the sources (or, in any case, to a past deemed authentic), or those which seek explanations and integration on actual normative dispositions or constitutional order, or, finally, those that stimulate the search for new ways. The outline of the three-way grouping thus results as follows.

- a) Return to the sources:
- Enhancement of the Vincentian places (21, 24),
 - Return to the only end (11),
 - Promotion and support of priestly ministry (30),
 - Restoration of the office of the admonisher (12),
 - Modification of the Miraculous Medal, in such a way that the image and symbols respect the writings of St. Catherine Labouré (39).
- What impels us to place postulate 30 (promotion and support of priestly ministry) in this category is the third motivation brought by the one who proposed it (an individual confrere) to support his request and which reads like this: “Support for and promotion of the priesthood *since the time of St. Vincent*” (italics are ours).
- b) Explanations and integration on norms and present order:
- A new procedure for the election of the Superior General (32) and his council (35, 36),
 - A commission to modify (redo) the Statutes (33),
 - Addition of a new Statute for the laity living in our communities (9),
 - The request for an African Assistant General (27) and a new office in Rome for Africa (28),
 - Addition of an Assistant General so that there will be one for each for the five major regions of the world (34),
 - Integration of what was said constitutionally about the vows (7, 10),
 - Explicit reference to the missionary end of our vocation, common life and apostolic activity (8),
 - Modification of the order of listing the vows (16, 17),
 - Modification of the Statute regarding the vow of poverty (22),
 - The requirements for the validity of appointment or election to offices (23),
 - The relationship between the local superior and his council (29),

- Modification of the Statute on the Vincentian Associations (37),
 - Drawing up an instruction on the five virtues (6),
 - Explanations on some conflictual situations among provinces (31),
 - And on active and passive voice on the international missions (31),
 - An explanation of our vow of obedience (38).
- c) Search for future paths:
- Re-enforcing solidarity among provinces (3),
 - Taking an official position on the part of the Congregation of the Mission in the face of the great poverty of the world (5),
 - The attribution of extraordinary powers to the Superior General in order to promote collaboration among provinces (15),
 - Promotion of the growth of the collaboration of the Congregation of the Mission with the Vincentian Family (2, 4),
 - Regionalization of the formation of the formators (1) and the formation *ad gentes* (26),
 - Attention to the relationships with Islam (18, 19, 20),
 - Work with youth and vocational promotion (14) and the preparation of a new prayer for vocations (25).
- The attribution to this category of promoting work with youth and vocations (which of itself could be considered also a traditional ministry) is due to the motivation expressed by the one who proposed it; it reads in these terms: “Viendolo como una prioridad para *el futuro* mismo de la CM [seeing it as a priority for *the very future* of the CM] (italics are ours).
- With regard to the decrees, three were confirmed (1, 2, 4), while the third was modified, but the modification does not concern so much the substance as the limits of the expenses of the Superior General. It is only five which is new, but it is simply a question of the conversion of a postulate into a decree, presented by the outgoing Superior General, Fr. Maloney, to acknowledge the request that emerged in the course of the General Assembly itself to furnish the members of the next Assembly with a list of the confrere candidates for the office of Superior General with relevant information on their persons and availability.

- The postulates classified in the section “return to the sources” are six (two come from Europe, two from the Province of Venezuela, two from individual confreres). There are 12 postulates classified in the section “Search for new paths”: in large part they come from the countries of the south of the world or, nevertheless, poorer (three from Nigeria, one from the Conference of Visitors of Africa and Madagascar (COVIAM), two from Chile, one from India, one from Venezuela). Only four come from Europe: three concern the question of the relationships with Islam (and all come from the two German-speaking provinces) and one from Poland, but that has a very specific and limited content (the request to formulate a new prayer for vocations). Much better represented are the countries that propose postulates inserted into the section “Integration or modification of the present normative and institutional order”: there are 21 postulates coming from all the major regions of the world (with the exception of Oceania, from which — as has been noted — no postulates arrived).

Conclusive Considerations

At the end of our analysis, we shall take up again the question from which we started: What Congregation is “hidden” behind the postulates and decrees that were presented at the last General Assembly (July 2004)?

Renouncing the pretense to make definitive and exhaustive judgments (which, moreover, lies beyond the intentions of this reflection) we limit ourselves to listing some conclusive considerations of an interlocutory character, which we propose for the reflection and dialogue of the confreres.

Perhaps we should conclude realistically that we have not succeeded in “revealing” the Congregation which is behind the postulates and decrees presented at the last General Assembly. In fact, it is certain that the Congregation in its richness remains “hidden” behind them, even if they can be considered useful indicators of a rich and dynamic reality, which cannot be easily summarized in rigid outlines. Having made this premise, we present our conclusions.

- The provinces of that part of the world which sociological literature calls the countries of the developing world (Africa and Asia) seem to be concerned with internal problems, linked especially to their quantitative and qualitative growth.
- The developed provinces of the western world (Europe and North America), perhaps also in connection with the evident symptoms of internal crises (secularization, decrease in

vocations, etc.) seem more sensitive to the world situation and, consequently, more open to a global vision of the needs of the Congregation and the strategy which it is called to put in place in the coming years.

- For correctness, it should be pointed out that some of the postulates, mainly number five (coming from the Vice-Province of Nigeria) and number 15 (coming from the Province of South India), make explicit reference to a world vision of the Congregation: in the first case, it underlines the end of “re-enforcing our universal character” and, in the second case, of “creating a global Vincentian dynamic.” We wondered, in this regard, if such expressions should be considered as sufficient indicators to call into discussion or at least to weaken the rather categorical affirmations which we made, distinguishing between the developing countries and the developed and western countries (which, nevertheless, in some aspects, we could define as “in crisis”). The response which we think could be given to such a question, with the consciousness that it is obviously linked to the reading of the one who gives it, is that in these two postulates appear implicitly the functioning of the global vision of the Congregation in the solidarity and collaboration among provinces, in terms of resources, whether human, material or economic. In the hypothesis that such a reading is correct, the motivation for such requests would be connected more to the internal necessities of the proposing provinces than to the universal character of the Congregation or of the social processes in action in today’s world.
- The marked prevalence of the proposals of juridical-normative type is striking compared to those of a strategic type in the context of the so-called “new evangelization” that characterized a large part of the pontificate of the recently deceased Holy Father. The remark made becomes even more surprising if one thinks of the fact that the General Assembly considered it more important to dedicate itself to the “great challenges” proposed today to the entire Congregation from the evolutionary processes in action on the global level.
- On the whole, a dynamic Congregation emerges, not at all dulled by its stereotype visions, but, on the contrary, diversified in the orientations, conscious of its own difficulties and its own resources, attentive to its own needs and to seeking solutions for them. The quantity and quality of the postulates analyzed are indices of a liveliness and a creativity that can be important and decisive factors for the future orientations of the individual provinces and the Congregation as a whole.

- A last note. Big internal tensions, unhealthy conflicts among the diverse mentalities, worrying contrasts of a cultural nature do not appear in the analysis. This will be seen, I believe, as a factor of stability and strength in the Congregation itself. In an epoch in which serious internal differences in big worldwide organizations can activate internal weakening processes and shattering phenomena, that is something. There is, therefore, a good balance among the particular needs of the different regions of the world and the needs of the Congregation overall. Such balance appears clearly in the Final Document of the General Assembly itself. In that look at the past, the present and the future, “general” orientations and “regional” lines of action alternate in a creative and promising balance.²

(LINUS UMOREN, C.M., translator)

² Cf. Final Document, *Our Vincentian Identity Today in Light of the Constitutions: Evaluation and Challenges* (Rome, 29 July 2004).