

## **5. Reconfiguration**

### **RECONFIGURATION IN AND FOR THE C.M.**

**JOSÉ MARÍA NIETO VARAS, C.M.**

Assistant General

#### **Introduction**

I have been asked to participate in this roundtable discussion on reconfiguration. I want to make it clear that even though I am a member of the General Curia, my comments are not an official expression of the position of the Superior General and his Council, but rather they are my personal opinions that have been further clarified through dialogue with the General Council and with Missionaries from different provinces.

Reconfiguration is one of the themes presented in the Consultation Document that was sent to you. There we find a description of the concrete experience of reconfiguration and its impact on different levels of community organization

At the same time, reconfiguration is an intra-community theme (interior reorganization) and an apostolic theme (how to fulfill our mission in a better way).

Reconfiguration in its intra-community dimension is a transversal theme, that is, it cuts across many dimensions and can affect various realities of our Vincentian life: the individual person of the missionary, our local communities and provinces, our regional conferences of provinces, the whole international community, that is, the Congregation of the Mission as a whole.

The intention of my presentation is to propose a way to approach this theme and above all, to stimulate a dialogue in the Assembly that will enable us to look for some points of reference and enlightening criteria in the process of reconfiguration that the Congregation might have to confront in the coming years.

## I. SEE AND LOOK AND LEARN

### 1. Reconfiguration: some terminology and a description

#### *Terminology*

When speaking about this theme it might be helpful to use other words that are similar to reconfiguration: restructuring, reorganization, reconversion, transformation, etc. But more important than the words is the content of the theme and above all, the result of the process.

#### *A possible description*

Reconfiguration in its fundamental and basic meaning could be described as:

- a profound transformation (a structural, systemic change)
- of an entity/unit of the Congregation of the Mission (province, vice-province, region)
- that affects all or many of its dimensions (apostolic, community, institutional administrative, financial, juridical)
- and becomes a new institutional entity within the Congregation of the Mission (birth of a new province, union of provinces, direct dependence on the Superior-General, dissolution, disappearance, etc.)
- through a process of Vincentian discernment that involves the community and dialogue.

It seems to me, however, that reconfiguration, in the sense that I have indicated, is not, in every case, the same as interprovincial collaboration and it is not limited to interprovincial collaboration but presupposes and promotes this reality as it also moves toward a new reality that goes beyond interprovincial collaboration.

Reconfiguration, in a less restrictive but very important sense, could be described as an internal transformation that is promoted within an entity/unit of the Congregation of the Mission that does not terminate in a new institutional reality but in a consistent reform and renewal of its community, apostolic and structural dimensions.

This is a description of only two possible movements of reconfiguration — there are many other possibilities. I invite you to look more deeply at this reality, make it more precise, change it, compliment it, disagree with it, but do not make it vague or dilute it because not every transformation becomes reconfiguration.

## **2. Reconfiguration: a past, present (and future) reality in the Congregation of the Mission**

### *Past history of reconfiguration*

Our General Catalogue can help us recognize the different way in which reconfiguration has occurred in the Congregation of the Mission. There in the catalogue on the pages where each Province is listed, there appears one or several dates after the name of the Province. For example, we see the Province of Rome listed with the dates 1642, 1703 and 1825. These dates highlight important moments in the history of this Province and highlight true intra-provincial and supra-provincial reconfiguration.

There are Provinces that at one time existed and that today have disappeared; other older provinces continue to exist in some way in some of the present provinces.

### *Reconfiguration for expansion (birth, growth, "reproduction...")*

In the Congregation of the Mission there exists at least two forms of reconfiguration: reconfiguration for expansion and reconfiguration for retrenchment.

The following dates might not be completely accurate but in the past twenty years reconfiguration has taken place on several occasions for reasons of expansion:

- 1991: birth of the Province of the Congo that was previously a region and a Vice-Province of Belgium;
- 1997: birth of the Province India (South) and India (north), previously one Province of India;
- 1998: birth of the Vice-Province of Nigeria which previously belonged to the Province of Ireland;
- 2001: birth of the Vice-Province of Saint Cyril-Methodius, previously an international mission;
- 2006: birth of the Province of Saint Justin de Jacobis, previously a Vice-Province (1992) and before that, part of the Naples Province (1982).

It is possible that in the not too distant future other areas of the Congregation of the Mission will engage in this process of reconfiguration as a result of expansion and thus become Vice-Provinces and Provinces: Nigeria, Vietnam, Cameroon, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi.

This form of reconfiguration, “for expansion” produces joy and enthusiasm but also causes pain and difficulties. The Superior General and the various protagonists of this path (Missionaries of the Province of Saint Cyril and Methodius) can offer their experience and testimony in this regard.

*Reconfiguration for retrenchment (union with, reduction, disappearance...)*

- 1991: the Province of Belgium disappeared as a province and became a region of the Province of the Congo;
- 2010: three Provinces of the United States (Midwest, West, and South) no longer exist as individual Provinces but after thirty-five years of different histories and after several years of discernment have become a new distinct Province (Western Province of the United States).

It is possible that in the near future, because of retrenchment, other provinces of the Congregation of the Mission will move toward reconfiguration with various results: union of several provinces, disappearance, a regions dependent on another Province or the Superior General or something else.

*Initiatives of the Superior General and his Council with regard to reconfiguration*

The Superior General, Rev. Robert Maloney (1998-2004) seems to have had in mind some form of reconfiguration for several provinces. In different ways, Rev. Gregory Gay has invited some provinces to think about an interprovincial reconfiguration with a view toward possible union of provinces.

Here are some examples:

- June 24, 2005: letter to the Provinces of Germany, Austria, Holland and Belgium;
- June 2009: consulted various Provincial Assemblies about the way to strengthen interprovincial collaboration and to receive input with regard to their thinking about eventual interprovincial reconfiguration, understood as the joining together of Provinces. He consulted the four provinces of Spain (Barcelona, Madrid, Salamanca, Zaragoza), the three Provinces of Italy (Naples, Rome, Turin) and the two Provinces of France (Paris and Toulouse);

- In the Project of the Superior General and his Council 2006-2010, Convictions, Objectives and Lines of Action (cf. *Vincentina* #1-2 [2007], pp. 18-25), in the section on the international community (#20), it is stated: *Promote, in dialogue with the provinces and on the various continents, a presence of the Congregation that, restructuring and expressing better all our resources, strengths and persons, can give better service evangelizing the poor.*

*“Internal” reconfiguration of the provinces*

In a certain sense all the Provinces are reconfiguring themselves when they open or close houses or communities. Thus the provincial question concerning the revision of ministries, works and houses can be viewed in this manner. It is significant that when a Province considers a possible revision of their works, there are missionaries who want to close some houses, but very few missionaries are willing to close the house in which they are living and working. The majority of the missionaries prefer that the reform begin with their neighbor’s house and not with their own house.

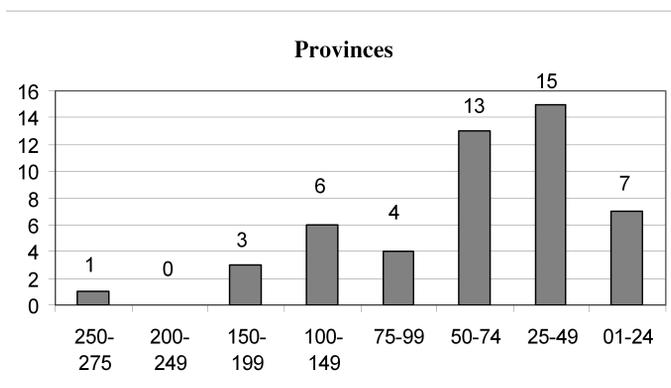
Perhaps the same way of thinking could be applied to the Congregation as a whole. Imagine this situation. In the Congregation is it necessary to maintain the 49 present Provinces or would it be better to have fewer Provinces, to dissolve some in order to respond to our mission in a better way? Perhaps many missionaries think: yes, it is true, we have to engage in reconfiguration, but this should not affect the reality of my Province.

In reality there are Provinces that reconfigure themselves through expansion (opening houses) and others through retrenchment (closing houses). This reality can be seen very clearly by looking at the catalogue and comparing the Provinces from one year to the next. Southern India and Nigeria, for example, are provinces that are expanding; on the other hand, Ireland and Madrid are provinces that are in a process of retrenchment. The Superior General and his Council are very aware of these types of interprovincial reconfigurations when they are consulted about opening or closing some community house (cf. *Constitutions* 125, 3).

*A profile of our provinces: number of missionaries*

Of our 49 provinces, 22 (44%) have less than 50 missionaries; and only 10 provinces (20%) have more than 100 missionaries.

# Missionaries	Provinces	%
250-275	1	2,0
200-249	–	–
150-199	3	6,0
100-149	6	12,2
75-99	4	8,1
50-74	13	26,5
25-49	15	30,6
1-24	7	14,2
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>99,6</b>



### 3. Various contexts of interprovincial reconfiguration

*Our organizational history and reality: centralization/provincialism*

In the history of our Congregation there have been different organizational models that have accentuated one or another vision of the congregation. Father Etienne could represent the most significant expression of the centralized model. After Vatican II the Constitutions of 1984 provided a model of decentralized organization that is

characterized by notable provincial autonomy. In this organizational model, the Superior General certainly continues to be the center of unity for the Congregation of the Mission and simultaneously the Visitors enjoy important competencies.

After the approval of our new Constitutions (1985) two Superiors General (Rev. Richard McCullen and Rev. Robert Maloney), with their respective Councils published two important documents with regard to this situation: *Unum Corpus, Unus Spiritus In Christo. Considerations on the Unity of the Congregation of the Mission* (1987) (cf. *Vincentiana* #3 [1987], p. 224) and *Powers of the Superior General and the Visitors in relation to the Missionary Commitments* (1993) (cf. *Vincentiana* #6 [1993], p. 537).

What reasons motivated and justified the study of this theme and the publication of these documents? Is it perhaps necessary to introduce some reform into our present organizational structure? We formulate these questions and invite you to look for some answers.

*The international dimension of the Congregation of the Mission and interprovincial collaboration*

Since 1992 there has been an increased awareness of our international dimension and the desire for interprovincial collaboration and solidarity. The situation of the present world (new forms of poverty, globalization, massive immigration, rapid and almost instantaneous communication) and the Congregation itself (inter- and multi-cultural, growing importance of Regional Conferences of Provinces, international mission, CIF) have contributed to a greater desire for actions that involve interprovincial and international collaboration. We are perhaps at the beginning of a long journey.

*An ecclesial context: we can learn from others*

In the Church different congregations have traveled or are traveling on the path of reconfiguration. The Daughters of Charity have embarked upon this journey in France where they moved from six provinces to two. This theme is also being discussed in other countries such as Spain and the United States. The theme of their reorganizational plan is attractive: Charismatic impulse. New Organization of the Daughters of Charity in Spain. Their goals in this process include: 1) revive and revitalize the charism; 2) open ourselves to the new; 3) practice discernment.

The Redemptorists, 5,500 members in 78 countries, held their last General Assembly in Rome in November, 2009 and the theme was that of restructuring. This theme was expressed with the words:

Preach the Gospel in a new way! Renewed hope, renewed hearts, renewed structures for the mission. In that Assembly they approved principles to guide the discernment and the carrying out of a restructuring process for the mission.

Other Congregations or Institutes (the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Marist Brothers, Jesuits, the Salesian Brothers, etc.) have organized or are organizing their Congregations by reducing, more or less significantly, the number of their provinces, especially in the United States and Europe.

Can we not learn from the experiences and the processes that other congregations have lived or are living?

### *Other contexts*

Certainly other contexts could help us see more clearly the distinct aspects of reconfiguration. What might these contexts be?

## **II. SEEK, JUDGE AND DISCERN IN CONTEMPLATION**

### **1. Some criteria from our guide for life: Constitutions and reconfiguration**

- Number 2 of our Constitutions: *With this purpose in view, the Congregation of the Mission, faithful to the gospel, and always attentive to the signs of the times and the more urgent calls of the Church, should take care to open up new ways and use new means adapted to the circumstances of time and place. Moreover, it should strive to evaluate and plan its works and ministries, and in this way remain in a continual state of renewal.*
- Number 9 of our Constitutions: *Moreover, our vocation — that is, our purpose, nature, and spirit — should direct the life and organization of the Congregation.* Our organization, which is regulated in the third part of our Constitutions, includes two crucial themes, government and almost all our provincial institutions and structures (province, local community, assemblies, councils, superiors, etc.) and temporal goods.
- Number 107, 3 of our Constitutions: *Besides the faculties granted him by universal law or by special concession, it is the function of the superior general having consulted the interested members, and with the consent of his council, to set up, join, divide, and suppress provinces, observing the norms of the law.*

## **2. Objectives and principal guides for our reconfiguration**

Reconfiguration must begin with and direct itself toward:

- Our Vincentian vocation and charismatic identity;
- Apostolic and missionary vitality: we are a Society of Apostolic Life born of and for the mission;
- The promotion of the internal, spiritual and community vitality (quality of community life, spiritual life, formation, animation and government, economic resources...);
- The unity of the CM, mutual solidarity and coresponsible solidarity;
- The viability (non-viability) of each one of the entities/units (Province, Vice Province, region);
- A diversity of forms and models of reconfiguration because the situations are distinct;
- The first and the last, the poor and the abandoned.

### **III. CARRY OUT RECONFIGURATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF OUR VOCATION AND MISSION**

#### **1. A previous question**

Are we willing to accept reconfiguration because we view it as a true value and a challenge for the International Congregation and for different regions in the world or do we prefer to put off consideration of this question, viewing it as secondary or something on the margin because it is a difficult question to confront? Do we desire this or not? Should this not be one of the commitments of the Congregation of the Mission during the next six years?

#### **2. In acting, examine the real viability of each Province**

If we view viability as the ability to make real our Vincentian identity, the ability to fulfill the Vincentian mission and the ability to sustain a healthy life in community and the mission, then we can ask: what realities make a province viable and, in their absence, make a province non-viable?

Viability is a sign of community and mission well-being while non-viability is a sign of fragility and deterioration. It could be useful and might clarify things to translate viability into its three principle concrete dimensions.

- Is this province (vice-province, region) viable, that is, does it have the ability to sustain and continue the Vincentian mission (apostolic activity, Vincentian ministries, attention to the Daughters of Charity and the Vincentian Family)?
- Is this province (vice-province, region) viable, that is, is it able to carry out the basic elements of our Vincentian community and organization (a qualitative common life, a clear sense of belonging, initial and on-going formation of the missionaries, adequate formators, healthy institutions of leadership, encouragement, local government and provincial government, sufficient financial resources for the mission)?
- In summary, is this province (vice-province, region) viable, that is, does it have a minimum and sufficient number of missionaries and candidates, the missionaries of our future, to respond to the two key elements of viability that were previously indicated, the mission and community? In the final analysis, without missionaries there is no mission or community to sustain.

On the other hand, is this province (vice-province, region) in a fragile position and therefore perhaps non-viable? What are the most important signs of this reality? On various occasions during these past six years I have asked this question with regard to some concrete provinces (which I will not name here) and I now invite each one of you to ask this question about the viability or non-viability of your own province and the provinces of your continental region.

Reconfiguration has to begin with a sincere question concerning provincial viability or non-viability. If viability is weak or in the balance, then perhaps a process of reconfiguration is needed in order to revitalize and recreate a province.

Nevertheless, interprovincial reconfiguration would be of little use if the end result of this process were that of maintaining the viability of one or several provinces for only a few years. This would be an artificial prolongation of community and missionary life that is on its deathbed. In such a case it would not be worth the effort to promote a reconfiguration that would be the announcement of a death already proclaimed. The ethical questions surrounding the beginning and the end of life are burning themes in the present cultural debate and can help us in our reflections on the reconfiguration, the birth and the possible death of some of our provinces.

### 3. Facilitators and paths of reconfiguration

#### *Facilitators of the path of reconfiguration*

- An intense and active participation of each Province in its regional conference.
- A greater awareness of the vocation and regional mission of the Congregation of the Mission on its own continent and then in light of this to make said mission concrete in the Province. We are dealing here with a global way of thinking (regionally and continentally) in order to act in a better way on the local level (provincially).
- Inspiration and movement that comes from Regional Conferences of Provinces and from its different zones... they can serve as “teachers of reconfiguration.”
- A pro-active rather a passive attitude in confronting this reality. The community (the Congregation of the Mission, Provinces, local communities) ought to confront the present reality and ought to anticipate the future by making intelligent decisions instead of passively allowing the reality to impose decisions on us, decisions that can mortally suffocate us. My feeling is that today in some provinces there are various situations that are choking us in our community and apostolic dimensions and we are not being pro-active nor acting boldly.
- Dialogical interaction between diverse provincial cultures (values, history and tradition, lifestyle) in the context of charismatic fidelity and fraternity. The theme of culture or provincial culture seems to be of special and enormous importance. We can say that each province has its own Vincentian culture. Any reconfiguration will be blocked if a provincial culture is not able to respect, open itself to, dialogue and integrate itself with other provincial cultures.
- Adhering to a Vincentian utopia as the inspiring and transforming principle of our structures. It is most important that there be clarity with regard to the goals that we hope to obtain in order to ascertain the right paths that we must travel and thus achieve the final goal.

#### *Paths toward reconfiguration*

In the process of reconfiguration, where does one begin? What does this process lead to? What paths must be travelled? What stages are involved? What are the timeframes? Here are various responses.

- Interprovincial collaboration and all that it involves: exchange of missionaries, mutual assistance, etc....
- Interprovincial unity on the level of initial and on-going formation of incorporated members and priests: interprovincial seminaries, interprovincial programs of on-going formation; interprovincial meetings of young priests....
- Interprovincial unity of some interprovincial ministries and the establishment of interprovincial communities.
- A progressive interprovincial consensus on the legislative and executive level: provincial norms “quasi” interprovincial, Provincial Assemblies in common, interprovincial meetings of Visitors and their councils....
- The progressive cessation of some of the autonomous provincial competencies and the consequent increase of the interprovincial competencies of an entity/unit which is greater than the province. As a result, the institution and the figure of the Province and the Visitor will have to undergo some changes.

#### **4. Difficulties and resistance in reconfiguration**

- Fear of change and loss of identity. Change implies risk which in turn implies difficulties that generate fear. More profound changes imply greater difficulties and fears. On the other hand we can overcome these resistances if we place our provincial identity in the perspective of belonging to one single Congregation rather than belonging to one particular province.
- Prejudice toward others, those who are different, our brothers in other provinces.
- A provincial attitude that is incapable of seeing beyond our own horizons. This mentality thinks: the tower of the Church of my people is the best tower in the world.
- A provincial and centralized conception of the Congregation of the Mission and its provinces. Such a conception might be justified at times (a suffocating centralization, a uniformity for the sake of uniformity) but most often such an attitude is based on unjustifiable reasons (provincial individualism, excessive exaltation of what is mine, forgetfulness of the common good).

#### **5. The hidden grace in reconfiguration**

What is the grace that the Lord wants to give to us through reconfiguration? Why is it worth the effort to seek and to desire reconfiguration? How does reconfiguration affect and better our

living out of the charisma, better our community life, our formation and evangelizing mission? It is most important to seek a personal, community and provincial response to these questions, a search and a response that desires to perceive the grace that the Lord is offering us in this transforming process. A casual encounter with this grace will immediately help us justify the meaning of our journey and help us bear with the fatigue that is inherent in the journey. Without the desire, the search and the encounter with the Lord's grace, it is impossible to engage in the adventure of the journey: reconfiguration can only come about if it begins in our own heart. What treasures and values are hidden in reconfiguration?

#### IV. FINAL REFLECTION

1. Reconfiguration (intra-provincial and interprovincial), is a reality that has occurred and will continue to occur in history and in the present era of the Congregation of the Mission. It would be good to confront this reality with the conviction that only the Lord, Jesus Christ, is the same yesterday, today, and always and that only the Church is indefectible. The Congregation of the Mission and, even more, its provinces are not indefectible; even though they have existed until now, one or another can cease to exist.

2. Reconfiguration is an important theme, a theme for the present and the future of the Congregation, a place in which we form our fidelity to our vocation, community and mission.

3. For the next six years the theme of reconfiguration can be one of the specific commitments of the whole Congregation (cf. *Directorio*).

4. The path of interprovincial reconfiguration requires a clear analysis of the financial situation of the Congregation and also implies a profound international reconfiguration of finances.

5. Reconfiguration through expansion is lived with a more positive and euphoric spirit than reconfiguration through retrenchment. Hope is based on new birth and expansion, while established habits and fear raise barriers in the way of the path of reconfiguration through retrenchment. But reconfiguration through expansion is not free from difficulties and dangers (cf. Vice Province of Saint Cyril and Methodius) and reconfiguration through retrenchment need not be lived as mere resignation to the fact or from the perspective of loss of identity (cf. New Province of the United States, West).