

RECONFIGURATION IN FRANCE

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First of all, it is possible to insist on the importance of remembering the history of our two provinces in France; but this should not lead us to some form of sterile nostalgia but rather should allow us to live the present challenges of the contemporary world. At the end of the XVIII century France had seven provinces but it is also important to remember that a province was created in France to counteract the influence of foreign countries. This is part of our history that we ought to accept calmly.

How are we going to live the process of reconfiguration so that we move forward and open new perspectives that are mindful of the present context? The configuration of the two French Provinces returns us to 1953 and represents an important stage in our awareness of the Vincentian charism. In place of the French word *re-configuración* we prefer the Italian word *ricofigurazione* which seems to us to communicate greater joy and dynamism than the very technical French word. It is in this spirit that we wish to present you with some elements of our reflection.

1. Situation¹

Toulouse

At the present time we are 61 missionaries. In 1953 we numbered 183 and that number does not include confreres serving on the missions *ad gentes*. The decades of 1970 and 1980 represent a difficult period during which time we had to leave the apostolic schools and diocesan seminaries that we administered and were responsible for. Our Provincial Plan has been revised.

We are still present in Iran and another notable reality that has occurred during recent years has been an opening to the Interna-

¹ Sources: 2010 Catalogue.

tional Community, helping different provinces throughout the world and accepting student-confreres and later priest-confreres. Today, because of the presence of 9 different nationalities, we rejoice in a rich international experience within our province.

Paris

The Province is officially composed of 166 missionaries and they live in very different realities in distinct countries:

- In Turkey, where the Congregation has been present since 1793, there are no French missionaries. The direction of the San Benoît School (with some 800 students) has been assumed by the laity who accompanied us.
- In Greece, in the whole northern part, there are two Greek missionaries and three Polish missionaries. We hope to have an even greater international presence that will take into consideration the missionary requests that we have received from the different immigrant groups that have settled in this country.
- Quebec: one year ago two missionaries renewed our presence in this Canadian Province where we work in collaboration with some married deacons and the Vincentian Family. In the coming years we hope to continue this insertion in union with the local Church where we continue to develop our charism.

The Province accompanies the missionaries of two regions that are especially dynamic because they mobilize so many different elements:

- Vietnam where there are now 54 missionaries. Very soon this region will become a Vice-Province and certainly this is a source of dynamic missionary activity.
- The region of Cameroon which has 33 missionaries has developed both within the country itself and has been able to send three missionaries to Bangui in the Republic of Central Africa. At the present time this area is being organized around a regional superior.

Algeria should also be mentioned here because in that area there is an interprovincial community (Paris and Toulouse) of three missionaries and this community needs to be reinforced.

2. A collaboration that has been lived for many years...

It is clear that our numbers in France have declined very noticeably: in the area of provincial administration a number of missionaries were involved. At the present time the Visitors and Provincial Economes are practically alone. If there have been backward movements, it is important however to take new initiatives and today it is important to point out the importance of the presence of missionaries from throughout the world. The international and intercultural dimensions of our Province have allowed us to confront and live new challenges.

In reality, on the level of the French state there is only one autonomous province in France. Very quickly our common formation represented a point of convergence for the two provinces. Many years ago the occasions for collaboration multiplied. We can point out the following specifics:

- The Interprovincial Council meets three times a year;
- Collaboration between the two economies in order to address financial questions and secure investments;
- Attention to vocations has led us to take on new initiatives with the Daughters of Charity (Belgium, Switzerland and France);
- Initial and on-going formation of the missionaries (in particular the regular meetings of young confreres);
- Services which are social in nature;
- Interprovincial communities;
- Yearly programmed retreats;
- Publications (GRAV – Group of Vincentian Investigation and Encouragement).

3. What is in play for us today?

In this process of reconfiguration we are dealing with priorities and are not focused on administration or carrying out a strategy of concerted retrenchment. Thus we see this movement as a way to enter into a process of deeper reflection and take new initiatives on the pastoral and missionary level: *to better the ways in which our charism can shine forth in the world today*. In this environment it will be possible to encourage and stir up reflection on the itinerant Mission where we attempt to organize periods of time for a more powerful and more explicit proclamation of the Good News. Such reflection allows us to undertake and engage in new

initiatives: for example, encouraging faith development in the various Vincentian institutions that are presently directed by laymen and laywomen.

Any consideration of reconfiguration implies an openness to the questions and the opportunities of our contemporary world: this is not a process of closing in upon ourselves but one of confronting, with other individuals and/or groups, the challenges of our present era. In this sense it would be good to recall two aspects:

- Collaboration with the Vincentian Family and with committed lay people in service of those persons who are most poor, the heritage that has been given to the branches of the Vincentian Family, branches that are autonomous and well organized. At this time the new context invites us to invent new responses that perhaps had been considered previously: the Jubilee Year was particularly enriching as a result of a small coordinating committee that was constituted for this purpose and we hope that this committee will continue to function.
- The second aspect that appears to us to be very enriching is the international and intercultural openness: both of these realities represent an opportunity since we see this not as some form of impoverishing foreign countries for our own benefit but rather a way of living these exchanges.

4. Recent initiatives

As we look at the reality of reconfiguration we see that this offers us the opportunity to adapt the organization to the reality in which we are living. This is not a question of dreaming but rather a question of understanding how we can invent new responses as we become more and more mindful of our itinerant character and the need to insert ourselves into the local reality. In the present situation of our provinces we are able to engage in:

- A process of interprovincial reflection on the itinerant mission which leads to a new missionary endeavor that can be undertaken with the collaboration of the Vincentian Family and is an occasion to invent new forms of presence. We are able to extend ourselves further in the elaboration of innovative community plans.
- A deeper process of reflection among the two Councils (decision to prepare some common times during our Provincial Assemblies).

5. The present process

1. Our Provincial Assemblies (August 30 - September 4, 2009): Each province formed a preparatory commission and followed through on the decision of the Interprovincial Council. These commissions were formed in order to organize the Assemblies which met in the same place and during which there was ample time for common searching, listening and participation.
2. During the time of preparation we chose as a basis for our reflection the letter of the Superior General to the missionaries and the members of the Assembly (June 23, 2009). In this letter the question of reconfiguration was explicitly addressed in terms of "allowing us to make a greater commitment to our mission of evangelizing the poor and making better use of all our personal and institutional resources."
3. This has permitted us to respond in a formal way to these questions and also enabled us to take a step forward. The positive response of the members of the Assembly has allowed the Interprovincial Council to establish a Commission of Reconfiguration.
4. Finally, an Interprovincial Assembly will be celebrated in January, 2011. The objective of this gathering is to come to a better awareness of and make more precise the reference points of our journey together, that is, to give witness to our confidence and our hope in the proclamation of the Good News rather than to dwell on our fears with regard to the future.

In Conclusion

We are committed to a process that affects each missionary: following the example of Saint Vincent and mind of our present situation and our desire to follow Christ, Evangelizer of the poor, how are we going to invent a response for today?

Translation: CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.