

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)