

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).