

GENERAL CURIA

Rome, 24 January 2006
Feast of St. Francis de Sales

*To the Visitors of the Congregation of the Mission
To the Local Superiors*

Dear Brothers,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill our hearts now and forever.

I want to briefly present to you a topic that is very important for the community: absences and departures from the Congregation of the Mission.

1. Some data about departures from the Congregation

In the last six years (1999-2004) 122 confreres have ceased being members of the Congregation of the Mission. Every year, on the average, some 20 missionaries leave. Some are Brothers or students (13.1%); but the great majority are priests.

The departures have been granted either by dispensation or dismissal.

Type of Departure	N°	%
Dispensation from vows for Brothers or students	16	13.11
Dispensation from vows for reasons of incardination into a Diocese or congregation	30	24.60
Dispensation from the obligations of the priestly state (AOO)	26	21.31
Automatic expulsion (usually for civil marriage)	37	30.32
Expulsion from the CM after going through a process	13	10.65
Total	122	99.99

There are many motives for these departures. Without going into an analysis, we can acknowledge the influence of personal, affective, formational, community, apostolic, institutional and socio-cultural factors, etc.

2. Some data about absences from the Congregation

At the end of 2004 there were 185 men absent from the Congregation (cf. "General Curia, Annual Statistics, 2004", *Vincenziana*, 2005, p. 25). Of this number 171 were priests, 10 deacons, 3 Brothers and 1 student. At the end of 1997, the number of absences was 105. In seven years the number of absences has increased by 80 confreres.

Of these 185 absences, 67 (36%) are legitimate absences, i.e. they have permission from the Visitor or the Superior General for the absence. On the other hand, 115 (64%) are absent illegitimately: their permission has terminated and has not been renewed.

By regions the distribution is as follows:

Region	N°	%
Latin America	104	56.20
Europe	44	23.80
USA	14	7.60
Africa	12	6.50
Asia - Australia	11	5.95
Total	185	100.00

There are provinces especially affected by these absences. Two provinces have more than 20 absences each, and three others have more than 10 each. These five provinces account for 75 absences.

3. Orientation given in 1996

Since many new Visitors have taken office since 1996, let me remind them of a few paragraphs from a letter which Fr. Robert Maloney, the former Superior General, wrote to the Visitors on 15 April 1996:

Such irregular situations, which frequently lead to departure from the Congregation, can often be traced to personal factors

such as emotional immaturity, difficulty in living with others in community, lack of commitment to prayer, sexual involvement with others, and problems in dealing with authority. The “problematic” confrere himself, as is evident, bears much responsibility for dealing with these factors in his life. At the same time, it is also important for us to recognize that at times factors within the Congregation may have contributed to the development of problems; e.g., first assignments where a confrere lived in isolation, conflictive situations within local houses, reluctance to renew apostolic or community plans within a province.

Today, along with the members of the General Council, I ask all the Visitors while remaining attentive to the norms of the Church and those of the Congregation of the Mission, to try to help missionaries who are in irregular situations to find a prompt solution by offering them possible alternatives. In that light, I remind you of the following:

- 1. It is the role of the Visitors not only to observe the principle of Christian charity with relation to these confreres (C. 72, § 1), but also to apply justly the norms of the Church and of the Congregation of the Mission.*
- 2. When examining a particular confrere’s situation, in which you find some difficulty out of the ordinary, be certain that we in the General Curia are happy to receive any observations you might have and to help in any way we can, while leaving to the province the immediate responsibility for handling the matter.*
- 3. If after a reasonable period of time a confrere in an irregular situation (e.g., illegal absence, concubinage) does not respond positively to the call addressed to him, the Visitor with his Council should start the process of expulsion, following carefully the norms of the Church and of the Congregation of the Mission (C. 72, § 2; 74, § 2). To help you in this matter I am sending you a brief report on the steps to follow in case it is necessary to resort to the said proceedings. At times, confreres in problematic situations will be willing to cooperate “amicably” in a canonical process (e.g., by remaining silent); at times, others will make canonical appeals against the process.¹*

¹ Afterwards in 1998 the *Practical Guide for the Visitor* was published, and in 2005 the second edition appeared. The contents of the guide alluded to here can be found in the *Practical Guide for the Visitor*, 2nd edition, nos. 169-181.

4. *If a confrere has contracted marriage or attempted it, the Visitor with his council should promptly make the declaration of fact described in C 73, § 2. Cf. attached example.² Please note that some documentary evidence is required; “common knowledge” is insufficient.*
5. *If a confrere is living and working “ad experimentum” in a diocese, he is automatically incardinated after five years, unless the bishop decides otherwise (cf. Canon 693). This fact should be formalized in writing, by correspondence between the Visitor and bishop, and by obtaining a written dispensation from vows from the Superior General.*
6. *Permissions to live outside the Community granted by the Visitor according to Art. 67 of the Constitutions can be given for only one year, not renewable, except in the three cases mentioned in the article. It is evident that many such permissions expired long ago. In these instances, the confrere is in an irregular situation and should be contacted by the Visitor, so that an appropriate remedy can be found.*
7. *In any case, given the irregular circumstances of some confreres, we should try to avoid their remaining in such situations indefinitely. Unresolved cases sometimes cause great harm to the Congregation; some provinces have already suffered serious damages to the morale of the province as well as its finances because of the actions of confreres living in irregular situations (e.g., suits involving sexual problems or automobile accidents; the payment of large medical expenses in old age).*

4. Observations and Recommendations

Why do these absences and departures happen in our province and in our Congregation? These situations should be occasions to ask ourselves, on the personal and community levels, about, among other things, our way of living out the charism, our fidelity, our community

We should be very clear and attentive in this matter: “official” absences and departures are not the only ones that can happen. In our own communities — do we not sometimes feel that there are confreres who physically present, but spiritually, communally and apostolically absent? What does this situation ask of us on the personal and community level? We, our local and provincial communities, can and should do something in the face of this reality.

² *Practical Guide for the Visitor*, 2nd edition, Appendix n. 5.

The absences and departures, frequently enough, are the final step of an ongoing process to which the community should pay attention.

The charity of Christ who had compassion on the crowds (C. 11) should be our guide for acting. We should seek the good of our confrere (absent or in the process of leaving the Congregation); but we should also seek the good of the local and provincial communities, the good of the confreres who are trying faithfully to live out the Vincentian charism within the community.

I recommend to the Visitors that they be very careful and even demanding in granting permission for legitimate absences (cf. C 67). Could we be granting them too easily? On the other hand, we should be making an effort to redirect the illegitimate absences, which represent almost two-thirds of the total. These latter cases are especially delicate and, if we are not attentive to them, they can cause serious harm to the province and the Congregation.

In recent years and for different motives, the cases of confreres accused of sexual abuse of minors have increased, especially in some provinces. The Visitors must take special care with these situations. *A Practical Guide for the Visitor*, 2nd edition, has incorporated some useful and practical advice for dealing with this matter (cf. *PGV*, nos. 193-195 and Appendix 9).

I ask the Visitors, together with their councils, to take the most appropriate steps in these cases of absences and departures. In this regard, I recommend that they and their councils dedicate time to the study of the following texts and keep them in mind when they must take action:

- Constitutions, no. 67 and nos. 68-76
- Statutes, no. 14; no. 25 according to the version of the 1992 General Assembly; and no. 35
- *PGV*, 2nd edition, nos. 123-203
- *PGV*, 2nd edition, Appendices 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9

I would also like to say something to the superiors and local communities. Make the topic of the absences and departures from the Congregation a topic for your own personal reflection and for dialogue within the community. Moreover the *Practical Guide for the Local Superior* speaks of the relationship of the local superior with those confreres who do not live in the house (*PGLS*, 40) and with the individual members of the house. It is the specific mission of the local superior to be in continuous dialogue, both through informal conversation and structured dialogue, with each man in the house. I urge all the confreres and especially superiors to take up with enthusiasm this practice of structured dialogue or “communication,” following the *PGLS*, 70-73. This is not an outdated practice and it

should not be marginalized in our communities. On the contrary, I feel sure that each confrere and each local community will obtain abundant fruit from it if it is done with a respectful and evangelical spirit.

5. A special meeting

The Superior General and his council, under the leadership of the Procurator to the Holy See, Fr. Varghese Thottamkara, are planning a special formation meeting to train confreres from different provinces in the work of helping the Visitors, in their own provinces and in others, to work on cases of absences and departures. This meeting will take place in Rome from 10-16 January 2007. More information will be forthcoming.

I ask the Visitors to send a copy of this letter to each local community.

Please pray personally and as a community for those confreres who are experiencing difficulties, for those absent from community life, and for those who, in recent years, have left the Congregation. I commend myself to your prayers and I assure you of mine.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General