

Confreres in Situations of Difficulty in the CM

Absences, Departures, the Actual Situation

by José María Nieto Varas, C.M.

I. FATHERS AND BROTHERS: CONFRERES

1. This is about all of us.

We cannot forget that life, the life of us all, implies difficulties more or less and that when we speak of confreres “in situations of difficulties” in a way we are speaking of us all without exception.

But there are difficulties that can become more serious and that can place in danger, even grave danger, our life, our ability to love and our ability to act. In this reflection I would like to refer to these more serious difficulties.

2. This is about “my/our” confreres.

Behind every difficult situation, or any serious difficulty there is a person, a confrere, (or some confreres) who may be suffering and whom we need to do our best to deeply understand.

It can be helpful, in order to deal with the difficult situation and the confrere, to ask ourselves a few questions. What has been the cause or what has led this confrere to this “difficult situation?” What has been his personal story, his formation within and outside of the Congregation, his ministries (especially his first one), his relationship with other confreres of the local community and with both local and provincial authority? What have been his personal ministries, apostolic projects, his hopes, his crises, his struggles, his victories, and his defeats? In this way we are asking about a confrere, his interior life, with some possible understanding of what has been made manifest on the outside.

II. THE DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

II.A. Active Confreres who are enduring or struggling with difficulties

These confreres are active and integrated in community life and in the apostolate and are going through difficult situations. The types of difficulties are diverse and all of them are difficult to handle. We can group them in the following categories:

a) Personal difficulties

- Physical illness or sickness
- Psychological, affective, or sexual imbalance
- Difficulties with members of their own family
- Difficulties with the spiritual life
- Difficulties in living the vows of poverty, chastity, stability, and obedience.

b) Difficulties in living community life

- Struggles in the local community (with the local superior or confreres) of their assignment
- Difficulty in carrying out an internal community ministry (Visitor, Provincial Treasurer, local Superior)
- Difficulty in finding a sense of meaning or belonging in the local community.

c) Difficulties in their ministry

- Physical exhaustion or excessive work or activity
- Disappointment, burn-out from a particular ministry
- Risk of the ministry itself (some ministries are so difficult as to risk one's life)
- Lack of preparation or qualification to carry out a ministry, whether in the area of formation (seminaries), or in pastoral ministry (popular missions).

I think that our confreres who go through these difficulties and struggle to face and work through them deserve our respect, our solidarity, and our support, so as to help them carry the heavy load.

II.B. The “Present but Absent”

In this group the confreres live in community, but in reality, are spiritually, and to a great extent, physically and/or emotionally, absent from the community. They are assigned to a house, live in it, but are not interested in or committed to the life of the confreres. They are “present but absent” or if you will, only present physically. These confreres are suffering from difficulties, at times serious difficulties, that cause difficulties for the confreres in community, sometimes so difficult as to create other confreres “present but absent.”

If we are honest, we can admit that these confreres exist in every province. We all know who they are and know their history of difficulty. Some are passed from one local community to another. Some provinces even have special houses where confreres are sent where will be less destructive or where their negative impact on others is diluted.

When we speak of statistics, the “present but absent” are invisible and unknown to the international CM. Certainly the Curia has no idea or statistics about this reality. But my fear is that we do not give importance to this evasive group who really present a dangerous threat to the Congregation and who deserve our serious attention.

Sometimes the difficulties stem from past difficulties and other times these are confreres who are on their way to a true absence from the Congregation. Using the image of the iceberg, we can say that the “present but absent” have recognizable problems above the water, but below the surface have serious difficulties that are invisible.

Some of our confreres, “present but absent,” lack honesty and courage to take a leave or seek dispensation from the Community. I am present because I do not have the coherence or the strength to leave. They often conduct their lives that lead to sickness or death of the community. St. Vincent, for sure, had strong words for this type of confrere.

Some situations with respect to these confreres would be:

- Confreres who live in isolation.
- Confreres who live on the margins of the community and the way they want to.
- Confreres who live unaware of their difficulties or of their own behavior.
- In summary, a comfortable situation for the confrere, but uncomfortable for the community.

II.C. Absences from the Community

1. Absences during the last 11 years.

Year	Total	Priest	Deacon	Brother	Student	Reference
1996	84	82	0	2		VT (1997, 2) p. 77
1997	105	102	0	3		VT (1998, 2) p. 83
1998	100	92	1	7		VT (1999, 2) p. 106
1999	107	103	1	3		VT (2000, 4-5) p. 278
2000	120	118	0	2		VT (2001, 6) p. 498
2001	139	135	0	4		VT (2002, 3) p. 126
2002	171	168	0	3		VT (2003, 3) p. 131
2003	166	162	1	3		VT (2004, 2) p. 78
2004	185	171	10	3	1	VT (2005, 1) p. 25
2005	162	153	8	1		VT (2006, 1-2) p. 33
2006	184					Sec. Gen: 31/12/2006

Since 1996, the number has increased gradually with ups and downs. In the last ten years, the number has increased by more than 100, passing from 84 in 1996 to 184 today. Sometimes it is difficult to count and perhaps, due to this, there are years when the increases and decreases are more pronounced. For example, in the year 2002 the number of absences increased by 31!

2. How many are actually absent?

On 12/31/2006, 184 confreres were absent. After checking over the list, I believe that there are likely more, perhaps close to 200 of a total 3391, which is 5.42%. If we think in terms of provinces, the absent confreres would make up the second largest province in the Congregation, second only to Poland (269). The absent confreres are larger than the other largest provinces Paris (174), USA East (168), Colombia (154), USA Midwest (131), Zaragoza and Madrid (124) and the Philippines (100).

3. Age of the Absent.

Age	Total	% of 184
20-29	1	0.54%
30-39	52	28.20%
40-49	69	37.50%
50-59	37	20.10%
60-69	12	6.52%
70-79	11	5.97%
80-89	2	1.08%
90-99	0	
Total	184	99.84%

65.7% of the absent confreres or 121 confreres are between the ages of 30 and 49 but most of these are between 35 and 49 years old. There are 49 confreres between the ages of 50 and 60 years of age that make up 26.6%.

4. Provinces of Origin.

This phenomenon extends through many of the 52 provinces and vice-provinces, but there are some quantitative distinctions.

There are five Provinces that have ten or more absent confreres which add up to 76 confreres or 41.3% of all those absent from the Congregation.

Colombia	30 absent of 154 total (19.4%)
Mexico	15 absent of 96 total (15.6%)
Poland	11 absent of 269 total (4.0%)
Central America	10 absent of 48 total (20.8%)
Philippines	10 absent of 100 total (10.0%)

There are four provinces that have between five and nine absent confreres and make up 28, or 15% of all absent confreres: Ecuador 9/32 (28%), Curitiba 7/72 (9.7%), Rio de Janeiro 6/79 (7.59%), Puerto Rico 6/66 (9.09%).

5. Numbers of Absent Confreres by Continent.

Region	Number	% of 184	Total: 3419	CM %
Africa	13	7.06	285	8.33%
Latin America	104	56.52	806	23.57%
Asia + Oceana	11	6.52	371	18.85%
Europe	43	23.36	1503	43.96%
USA	12	6.52	371	10.85%
Total	183	99.98	3336	

6. Type of Absence: legitimate - illegitimate

A closer analysis of the diverse kinds of absences would take much more time. Clearly those absences which are legitimate, that is, granted with conditions by the Visitor or the Superior General, are fewer than the illegitimate ones or those without permission.

Legitimate absences, depending on the permission, are of two kinds:

- Granted with permission by the Visitor for one year (C. 67)
- Granted with permission by the Superior General for three years (C. 70). The Superior General often grants these permissions for one major reason: possible future incardination into a diocese. He does this so that the confrere can work “ad experimentum” in a diocese for a trial period. During this period it is clear that the confrere is still a member of the CM

7. A few very personal observations.

I am of the opinion that in the CM we are making use of paragraph 67 of the Constitutions too easily, being somewhat lax in our reading of it in regard to the one-year leave granted by the Visitor. This type of permission should comply with specific requirements: assignment to a house, exercise of the rights and responsibilities as clearly stated in the permission, for a just reason, granted for one year. If the absence is for more than one year, it must be for one of the following reasons: poor health, studies, or an apostolate of the CM.

67. - § 1. - *A member who has obtained permission, either from the Superior General or from the provincial with the consent of their respective councils, to live outside a house or community, should be attached to some house or community, so that he enjoys rights and is held to obligations in it according to the norm of the permission granted to him.*

§ 2. - *This permission, however, should be granted only for a just reason, and not beyond a year, except to treat an illness, to study, or to serve in an apostolate in the name of our Institute.*

Although legitimate, sometimes the absences, rather than a medicine to address and cure the actual situation, seem to be more of a morphine, to slowly induce the confrere into a kind of euthanasia, or a toboggan shoot towards an illegitimate absence that leads to his permanent separation from the CM. The “legitimate absence” then, seems to be de-legitimized by the one to whom it was granted, because once the permission is given, there is no adequate follow up or a real accompaniment of the confrere.

II.D. Departures from the Congregation

1) The term “departure” does not refer to confreres who have left the community to live outside of it, for these confreres continue to belong to the CM but are absent from the community. Departure designates those confreres who have truly left the CM and no longer form a part of it.

2) Letter of the Superior General of 24 January 2006:

“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.”

These departures have been granted by dispensation or expulsion:

Type of Departure	Nº	%
Dispensed from vows – brothers and students	16	13.11
Dispensed from vows to incardinate in a diocese or congregation	30	24.60
Dispensed from the obligations of the priestly state (AOO)	26	21.31
Automatic expulsion (generally for civil marriage)	37	30.32
Expulsion from the CM through process	13	10.65
Total	122	99.99

The motives for the exits vary. Without doing an analysis, we can recognize the influence of different factors of a personal nature, affective, formative, community, apostolic, institutional, socio-cultural, etc.

3) To continue, I will give you the figures of the last 10 years. The annual exits average almost 20 confreres per year.

Year	Exits	Percentage	Median Age
1996	20		949 years; 47.45
1997	20		927 years; 46.35
1998	14		601 years; 42.92
1999	13		
2000	22		
2001	25		
2002	23		
2003	20		
2004	21		898 years; 42.76
2005	17	of 3395 - 0.50%	726 years; 42.70
2006	21		1.057 years; 50.33

4) In *Vincentiana*, Father Modesto López did a four-year study from July 1992 to June 1996. During these years, 124 confreres left the Congregation, with an incredibly high average of 31 confreres per year.

5) I have not verified this extreme situation, but if we carry out the same percentages and the percentages of exits from 2005-2006 it would look like, civil marriage (30), incardination (25), dispensation AOO (21), dispensation from vows by the Superior General (13), expulsion through process (10).

III. IN THE CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION

What happens to these confreres happens to them being members of the Community, and in a way, it happens to the whole Community. In this third and last part, I would like to point out some aspects of community.

1. Confreres in difficulty and communities in difficulty.

Personal relationship — community, community — person. We have to think of the “confreres with difficulties” by looking at the community in which they reside, where they suffer from difficulties or where they create them. Confreres with difficulties contribute to creating difficult communities and vice versa.

There are difficult confreres that bring about in themselves difficult situations, but there are also communities that provoke these difficulties of the following types: vocational, ministerial, affective, etc. Frequently, our candidates and our young confreres, although they can be inconsequent, prophetically denounce the sins of our communities. It is not uncommon that those who aspire to honestly live the CM vocation become disillusioned and are led into difficulty by a community which is less than exemplar.

2. The vocational impact of the “confreres with difficulties” (absences and exits) and of the “community in difficulty.”

Just as exemplary missionaries and communities inspire new candidates and new vocations, absent missionaries and disbanded communities can not promote vocational growth, instead, they either temporarily or in the long run take the joy out of one’s vocation.

3. Rights and responsibilities of a confrere in community.

The absent confrere has rights which should be respected, as well as obligations with which he must comply. The community, for its part, has obligations towards the confrere, but also has rights which it should not give up, or it may suffer serious consequences. The good of the person, as the center of the universe, is the good to be sought after, but as well the common good of the community should not be placed at risk. Here there is a delicate equilibrium that must be maintained by leaders who accompany confreres in these situations.

4. Mutual relationships between the CM and the local Church regarding confreres in difficulty.

How do we relate with the local Church in the cases of our absent confreres? How do we, who represent the CM, relate to bishops in these cases? I will leave this theme open for a possible dialogue among you.

5. What can the CM (local community, province, Congregation) do for these confreres?

1) Preventative action: formation, well-prepared formators and profound initial formation. A good process of accompaniment in the beginning stage of formation, in vocational discernment, during initiation to the community is a base for prevention of many difficult situations.

2) Specific treatment: There exist “basic and general lines” of action, but each person and every situation requires its own specific treatment. Remedies that help one person are not necessarily helpful to another confrere in a different situation, and vice versa.

3) Some basic Vincentian lines are indicated in:

- Constitutions, Community Life 19-27
- Constitutions (65-76)
- Statutes (14, 1) Confreres obligated to live alone because of ministry
- Statutes (14, 2) Confreres who are struggling with problems
- *Practical Guide for the Visitor* (2005), 123-203.
- *Practical Guide for the Local Superior* (2003), 69-73, *Vincentiana* (2003, n. 4, p. 215-216)

4) Prayer. Prayer for Vocations (*Expectatio Israel*) applies not only to new vocations and to candidates, but also to confreres “present but absent,” absent, and to ourselves.

5) Local Community. The local community (the superior and the confreres as well) plays a fundamental role (initial and ongoing) in the accompaniment of confreres with difficulties, inside and outside of community. Let us remember that “absent” confreres should be assigned to and belong to a community (*Guide for the Local Superior*). The local community is the umbilical cord between the confrere and the Congregation.

6) A confrere friend, a tutor, a companion. The province may use the service of a confrere who is a close friend of a confrere who is absent as a bridge between the confrere and the Community. He may perform many functions (frequent visits, dialogue, accompaniment, spiritual help, etc.) and may be very useful on numerous occasions to aid the absent confrere, as well as help the Community.

7) Seriously seek the recovery of the confrere, as soon as possible, and through adequate means, without counting him as a

lost cause. Some means may be: a sabbatical, helpful ongoing formation, medical assistance, psychological therapy, etc.

8) In case he chooses to leave, help him and orient him in the transition process that applies (incardination, petition of dispensation, AOO, etc.) and then on his new life journey (help him to find work, to resituate himself in the Church, in society, etc.).

6. What should the CM (local community, province, Congregation), not do with confreres in difficulty?

1) Ignore him or fail to pay attention, not dedicate time to him, not address the situation (look the other way, do nothing, leave him for the next one in charge, allow an indefinite amount of time to go by) by which the situation gets worse and worse. This especially applies to the Visitor.

2) Think of the confrere as “outside” of the CM before he leaves, quickly, and at times, unjustly. The absent confreres can feel (or even desire to be) treated as confreres who no longer belong to the CM. We do not have the right (neither the Visitor, nor the local superior, nor the confreres) to mentally erase these confreres from our common world.

There have been cases where it was preferred to remove a confrere, who had been absent for a while, from the *Catalogue*, rather than face and resolve the situation and, as a consequence, “slam the door closed” and “prefer that he not return” because he will create more problems for me and for the Community.

3) Not anathemize, persecute, or make him a “scapegoat” of our own sins (he is the one who is bad and we are right), nor beatify or sanctify him (we are bad and he is the good one). Let us leave the judgment to the Lord and, meanwhile, work with love and trembling for our own salvation.

IV. BIBLIOGRAPHY

“Statistics of the CM,” in *Vincentiana* (various years).

ROBERT P. MALONEY, “Letter to the Visitors (5 April 1996)”.

MODESTO LÓPEZ, “Difficult Cases, Dispensations, A.O.O., Dismissals, etc.,” in *Vincentiana* 40, n. 4-5 (1996), 353-362.

G. GREGORY GAY, “Letter to the Visitors and to the Local Superiors (24 January 2006),” in *Vincentiana* 50, n. 1-2 (2006), 3-8.

V. REGARDING THE “SYNTHESIS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRES”

Questions that would be good to read would be: 2 and 3. Of less importance are questions 1, 13, and 14.

Regarding the second Questionnaire, the most important questions are 21, 22, 25, and 26. It would be good to read the other questions of this questionnaire (19, 20, 23, 24) because they are the voice of our absent confreres and confreres who have left the CM.

(THOMAS J. STEHLIK, C.M., translator)