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Father Richardson: An Appreciation

BY

ROBERT P. MALONEY, C.M.

I have been asked to write briefly about Father James W. Richardson's contribution to the world-wide Congregation during his twelve-year mandate as superior general. I am very happy to do this. But first, I will begin with some personal experience.

Father Richardson had a reputation for being very direct, a straight-shooter who could be tough. In fact, I experienced his ire personally on two occasions and witnessed it on a number of others. But I liked him very much. Once near the end of his mandate as superior general, he was visiting the United States and came to stay at our major seminary in Northampton, Pennsylvania, where I was the local superior. One evening I went to his room to see if he needed anything, and I asked him how his visit to the States had been. He said to me, "It was good, Bob, very good. I didn't get angry once. You know, I have a very bad temper, but I like to say things clearly, and I know that if I hurt anyone, I can apologize to him afterwards and he'll forgive me." That was the way Jim Richardson was: very honest, very clear, and very humble.

In his last years I found him quite mellow, though his directness, which could at times be disarming, was still very much there. When I was visiting Saint Thomas Seminary in Denver, Colorado, where he went to live with our students after his stay in Kenya, we were in a group together, sharing our prayer and our faith in regard to the vows. He said to the students, "I thank God that he has helped me to be faithful to my vow of chastity for more than sixty years. I am not boasting. I say this to encourage you." That was "vintage" Jim.

Let me outline what I regard as his most important contributions to the world-wide Congregation.

With the resignation of Father William Slattery, Father Richardson took on the responsibility for guiding the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity in assimilating and implementing the documents of the Second Vatican Council. He did this with great care and exactness. His expertise as a canonist enabled him to exercise considerable influence in the formulation of the new constitutions of both communities

founded by Saint Vincent. He was very concerned that Societies of Apostolic Life would find their rightful place in the renewed Code of Canon Law, and he exercised great attention in defining the nature of our Community clearly in our own constitutions. He had the same concern for the Daughters' constitutions. His very incisive mind enabled him to discern the key juridical elements in both companies and to set them out in clear, concise terms. The constitutions of both companies form part of his lasting testament to us.

Father Richardson was the first superior general to take significant advantage of the availability of rapid transportation. None of his predecessors traveled as he did. His journeys took him to most of the provinces of the Congregation and to many of those of the Daughters of Charity. In that sense, he set a new style, with new expectations, for the office of superior general. He believed that the superior general should listen carefully to the opinions and the needs of confreres and sisters throughout the world. He saw his trips as an important means for doing that.

As he stated in a radio interview in Dublin in November 1973, Father Richardson handed over to the Daughters of Charity as much of the administration of their own Community as possible, retaining only what they specifically asked him to retain. It was only at the end of Father Slattery's mandate that the Daughters began to hold general assemblies, in the sense that we understand the word today. Father Richardson presided over the second session of the first such assembly, in 1968-69. During his twelve years as superior general he left much of the administration of the Daughters to the mother general and to the directors general, Father Joseph Jamet and Father Michel Lloret. At the same time, he was a staunch, active defender of the creative character that Saint Vincent had given to the Company of the Daughters of Charity: their exemption from the authority of local bishops, their annual vows, their distinctive form of apostolic life and community. He labored strenuously to have all these matters clearly defined in the legislative documents of the Daughters.

He carried on a prodigious correspondence. He wrote faithfully to many and was assiduous in responding to the letters that he received. In his earlier years as superior general he did much of this letter writing on his own. I remember that when I came to the general assembly of 1974 I was asked to serve on a commission with a mandate to examine and make recommendations about the work of the general curia. During our inquiries, one of the things that struck me

most forcefully was that Father Richardson stayed up late into the night typing letters himself (I recall that one of these, which had arrived in my own province shortly before the assembly, had so many typographical errors that we had to redo it before passing it on to the members of the province!). Our commission recommended that the superior general receive more secretarial help. Shortly after that two Daughters of Charity, Sisters Mary Ellen Sheldon and Eleanor McNabb, came to work in the general curia. Father Richardson's typing improved remarkably upon their arrival!

While Father Slattery took the historic step of moving the general curia to Rome, it was Father Richardson who found a stable residence for the curia and built the house where the members of the curia now live and work. This was no easy task. Numerous sites were examined. He faced considerable obstacles because of the laws regarding building in Italy, the political atmosphere of the time, and the constraints imposed upon those unwilling to pay bribes. Nonetheless, the new general curia was completed under his leadership.

While some perceived Father Richardson as a "law-and-order" man (and he surely did have a great respect for the law), it is my own judgment that, in fact, he helped create an atmosphere of great openness within the world-wide Vincentian family. In this regard, I find two facts striking.

First, the constitutions of both the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity, to which Father Richardson contributed so notably, are remarkable documents. They are quite liberating and have provided ample material for deep reflection over the decades in which they have been the charter of the two families Saint Vincent founded. They provide broad opportunities for input on the part of all members. Both constitutions, particularly that of the Vincentians, have opened the way for significant decentralization. They have promoted a delicate balance between the rights of the individual and the well-being of the two companies, in both their life and mission.

Secondly, at the end of his mandate, at the age of seventy-one, Father Richardson, with remarkable personal courage, went off to Kenya! Given his background, his previous experience, and his age, few would have guessed that he would make this choice to go to a newly founded mission. Personally, I found it a wonderful example of the freedom to reach out toward a new option even at a later stage in life. In Africa the seminarians instinctively revered him as an elder, but what touched them most of all was that they felt he loved them.

They saw in him a holy man and a father.

His last years were a time of diminishment, above all through his loss of memory. His mind, as it faced the present, remained clear and sharp, but it had little support from recollections of the past. He was aware of this, but faced it with tranquility. He told one of the confreres at Denver, "For a long time now, the Lord has given me the grace to accept whatever situation I find myself in." As his memory failed, two things happened: he trusted himself to others to get him from one building to another, often with simple and gentle humor, and his deep humanness became transparent. In his "weakness," he touched many hearts. In that period he used to accompany Father Hugh O'Donnell to participate in a group called "Faith and Light," for the handicapped and their families. Father Richardson's simplicity touched them and they came to love him deeply.

His life was marked by great faithfulness to the life of prayer customary in the Congregation. That was the external side of a much deeper reality. I think that his prayer was most of all characterized by a trust in providence and fearlessness, a readiness for any situation. Even spiritually, he was a Texan, tall in the saddle. But there was a humble, modest side to his spirituality, which showed itself in the way he tackled languages. He was not afraid to speak foreign languages, even if he knew that confreres had many a laugh, at his own expense, at the linguistic errors he made. His prayer, he once related to Father O'Donnell, was that the Lord would give him enough linguistic ability to be understood and to understand the other in this particular situation. His prayer life bore fruit in a wonderful ability to share from the heart with real simplicity. He often did this with the confreres in his later years at De Andreis House.

Father O'Donnell, who was his superior in Denver, recently recounted to me two anecdotes that I want to share with the reader. He wrote:

During my years with him at De Andreis I would check out with him if I was going to give a talk or go for a meeting or be away for the afternoon. He always had the same thing to say to me. He would say, "Do good." That was Jim Richardson's life. It reminds me of the verse from Acts about Jesus: "He went about doing good."

Thanks for the chance to reflect on Jim's grace in my life. I can't tell you what a blessing he was to me late in life. I

went to see him to get his blessing in Perryville just before coming to Taiwan. He stood up, as a Texan would, and prayed over me, rocking back and forth on his shaky legs, praying for several minutes. I swayed with him ready to catch him. But he was oblivious to that. He was praying and his prayer had the form of no periods, no commas, sort of a constellation of thoughts, hopes, feelings, prayers that somehow fitted together.

One might say much more about Father Richardson's accomplishments as superior general. I leave that to future historians.

For the present, I want simply to express my deepest appreciation for Father Richardson both as a man and as a leader. He won my affection and my profoundest respect.

O my God, grant that I may speak this word or do this action for your glory and your love.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity,
16 August 1640)*

As soon as ever suspicion enters the mind of anybody whomsoever, good-bye to esteem which engenders respect! Good-bye to union and charity from which holy cordiality proceeds. God preserve us from these suspicions.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity,
conference #17)*