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Father Richardson: An Appreciation

BY

RICHARD McCULLEN, C.M.

It was during the weeks immediately preceding the general assembly of 1968 that I first met Father James Richardson. He along with the other delegates from the provinces of the United States had come to London to attend a meeting of the English-speaking delegates in Saint Mary's, Strawberry Hill. He was then vice-visitor of the vice-province of Los Angeles. We were a group of approximately twenty confreres, if I recall correctly. The elected secretary of the group was Father Joe Dirvin—and the meetings were chaired successively by the visitors of the provinces. I happened to be sitting beside Father James during a number of those meetings. What struck me at the time was his seriousness of purpose. He was assiduous with his pen. He seemed to write down every observation that was made, even those of trivial importance. I interpreted it at the time as his devotion to the principle learned in the seminary: *Age quod agis. Do what you are doing.* Give yourself wholeheartedly and totally to the task of the moment. I took it also as James Richardson's way of showing his respect for the person. Every intervention held a nugget of wisdom, however small. Hence all fragments were to be gathered up.

That same characteristic I noted subsequently at general assemblies. He seemed to write down the remarks of every speaker. And they were legion in the course of lengthy sessions of general assemblies in Via Ezio, Rome. One of the delegates of my own province, Father Michael Prior, had remarked to me at the 1980 assembly on Father Richardson's assiduity in noting the points made by different speakers. When later at that assembly I found myself once more sitting beside Father James at the presidential table, he was still carefully noting in his writing pad what each speaker was saying. So when the Irish delegate spoke on the place of the communications media in programs of evangelization today, curiosity overcame me and throwing an eye across to what had been entered into the notebook, my eye caught "Fr. Prior: Importance of Radio and TV."

During the first session of the general assembly of 1968-1969, Father James was elected one of the four or five moderators of the

assembly. It was then that delegates began to note his expertise in canon law and the seriousness of his concern to give due weight to every point of view expressed during the discussions and debates. At times his office of moderator demanded an immediate ruling on a point or on the order in which amendments were to be taken, and he consistently displayed a clarity and fair-mindedness which reflected that integrity of character which was such a prominent feature of his life. In the fullest sense of the Biblical term he was *a just man*.

He made two visits to our province during his years as superior general. During his second visit I accompanied him to Nigeria. One evening we were both invited to have supper with an Irish bishop. We were three at table, and the bishop was rather voluble. Father James courteously and respectfully listened, as the bishop spoke at length on a wide variety of topics. Then close to 11:00 p.m. Father James looked across the table to me and said, "Father, do you not think it is time for us to allow the bishop to go to rest?" Recalling the visit to some confreres a few days later, he referred to the occasion, while throwing a glinting eye across to me, as *the night when your superior general did all the talking. . . .*

As superior general I came to an ever deeper appreciation of the contribution Father James had made to the life and apostolates of the Vincentian Family. Of his many achievements I had reason to be grateful to him for what he had done to reorganize the administration of the Congregation in the light of the decrees of the Second Vatican Council and the interim constitutions that had been sanctioned at the general assemblies of 1968-69 and 1974. It was during my own years in Rome that I came to an ever fuller recognition of the very formidable task he had undertaken and carried through. Not only did he preside over the revision of the constitutions and the work of two very significant assemblies in the history of the Congregation, but he also supervised the transfer of the general curia from the Via Pompeo Magno to the Via di Bravetta, or Via dei Capasso as it is now known. He was ably assisted in those tasks by Father Rafael Sainz as vicar general and his dedicated assistants and the personnel of the curia. The voluminous folders of the minutes of the meetings of the general council are testimony to the multiplicity and complexity of the decisions that as superior general he was called upon to make during the years 1968-1980. Weekly during that same period he received from Paris the minutes of the council meetings of the Daughters of Charity. He studied them conscientiously and journeyed to Paris for the meet-

ings of the council at which more important questions concerning the Company of the Daughters of Charity were to be decided. The members of the sisters' council often expressed their gratitude for the guidance he gave them when their present constitutions were being drafted. They were particularly appreciative for the tenacity of purpose which he showed vis-à-vis the Roman congregations in securing the secular identity of the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Indeed it must be recorded that Father James Richardson was one of the key figures among a small group of superiors general who met and worked to have established the distinct identity of the Societies of Apostolic Life. It was this group of superiors general to whom no small credit is due for the recognition that was finally accorded to the Societies of Apostolic Life in the present Code of Canon Law.

In the litany in honor of Saint Vincent our holy Founder is saluted as *simplex, rectus ac timens Deum*. Each of those epithets sits very easily on James W. Richardson. They were the salient features of his spiritual physiognomy. If his directness of approach and reply were not always seen as stemming from his virtue of simplicity, it can be said that he labored hard to file down what might occasion offense, so that those who knew him, as I did, in the last fifteen years of his life, could not fail to note a gentleness that can only have sprung from asceticism and a constant contemplation of Christ who asked us to learn that gentleness from him, which Saint Vincent constituted as one of "the faculties of the soul of the Congregation." (*Common Rules*, 2:14)

Of the missionary zeal of Father Richardson, his decision to give a number of years to the establishment of the Congregation in Kenya after the expiration of his mandate as superior general, speaks louder than any tribute that will now be paid to him. After some time in Kenya he wrote to me and told me that it was his wish to die there and that he had chosen the spot for his burial. With equal generosity he agreed to return to Saint Louis when his visitor, Father Hugh O'Donnell, suggested that he could make a contribution to the life of the province of Saint Louis. His obedience was blessed by the Lord, for during a few years he did very fruitful work in the diocesan tribunal as well as in one of our houses of formation until his failing powers called for specialized care in the infirmary of Perryville.

So the cycle of the life of Father James Richardson completed itself in the house of the Congregation where he started as a seminarian more than seventy years ago. "The just will flourish like the palm tree . . . Planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts

of our God, still bearing fruits when they are old." A fitting epitaph surely to the Vincentian and priest whom we knew as James W. Richardson, twentieth successor of Saint Vincent de Paul.



Father Richardson at about the time of his ordination.