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## Father Richardson: A Human Perspective

BY

RAFAEL SAINZ, C.M.

I lived in Rome for twelve years with Father James Richardson, from 1968 to 1980. In 1968 he was elected superior general of the Congregation of the Mission, and I was elected vicar general.

They were years of close friendship and loyal collaboration. Undoubtedly others will recount what he did and said during the years of his term, years that were not easy in view of the changes, experiences, and updating of the Congregation, beginning with the general assemblies that could be called "constituent" and whose purpose was the adaptation of the original charism to the conditions of today's world and of the Church in that world. It can be said that Father Richardson's entire term unfolded under the sign of renewal in a seamless fidelity to Saint Vincent.

Others will deal with all that. I wish to approach Father Richardson by recalling some aspects of his human profile.

What always impressed me most about Father Richardson was his courage: he was a complete man, all of a piece, without any concession in his mind and spirit to what was not the truth, loyalty, responsibility, and discharge of what he thought he ought to do. He never tried to look good or to cut a fine figure. In everything he looked for effectiveness. In this he could sometimes be rather demanding, but he was also first and foremost demanding of himself.

In the depth of his heart he was humble and had given of himself unconditionally. He sought no pedestal. Shortly after his election, at one of the community recreations in the curia, someone commented on the pope's suppression of some honorific titles that the Holy See had formerly granted. Immediately we saw that the "Most Honored" had disappeared from the nameplate on his door, and there remained only "P[adre] James W. Richardson."

After a concelebrated mass in the church of the Leonine College, some weeks after his election, before a select group of priests and sisters, he delivered a homily in Italian that he had written personally. As can be imagined, the homily was not a model of linguistic perfection. It was, however, an act of valiant humility. When it was over, I

congratulated him for his courage. He replied, "What do you want? One appears before others as a stammering child."

He loved the truth, he always sought it. He was a man who reflected deeply on the matters requiring study and decision. And he was tenacious in not yielding in what he considered to be just and right. But when he was finally convinced that the truth was in what others were proposing, he accepted it completely, no matter whom it came from. I recall many occasions when Father Richardson called me to his room in order to explain to me what he was thinking and to see my reaction. On one of these occasions, after he had been responding to all my observations, and even objections, to a decision he was proposing, I said to him, "Look, Father Richardson, you have asked my opinion, which I have given you with all openness, and I have nothing more to add. It is now up to you to decide. I want you to know that as of now I accept what you have decided and that in it you will have all my cooperation." That is how we ended in a very friendly way our long conversation, because it was indeed long. The next day he said to me, "I have thought about everything you said to me, and I see that you are right: it is better not to think about it for the time being." In the same way, in meetings and conversations with one provincial or another or a group of confreres, with all simplicity he made his own the observations and even the comparison that came from any of the assistants, even when they were present.

He was very much a worker. Meetings and trips made no difference to him. Rather, he seemed to delight in the long meetings, hours and hours long, of the general council, meetings that he prepared in every detail. How many notebooks were written in his characteristic hand!

And his austerity! He was a very austere man in every way. He was never known to have a preference for this or that food. I was once visiting a province in Latin America, and Father Richardson, on his way to Cuba, wanted to stop for two days in that province in order to meet the confreres and the Daughters of Charity. While we were waiting for the arrival of the plane that carried Father Richardson, the visitatrix of the sisters told me that a gentleman who worked for Air France in Rome had introduced himself to her as a good friend of Father Richardson. He claimed that Father Richardson frequently visited his house and dined with him and wife, and that his wife would prepare a dish that was a favorite of Father Richardson's. The sister must have noted in my demeanor a total skepticism, to the point

that she asked me, "What do you think about all this?" "Well, sister," I replied, "I think that you are speaking about some other superior general, not ours." In fact no particular dish was Father Richardson's favorite. He ate anything and everything. He did not go out to dine, except with an occasional classmate who arrived from America, and this very few times during his twelve-year stay in Rome. This particular man, who claimed to be a friend of Father Richardson's, turned out to be a nameless and common swindler.

He very much loved the Little Company, the Daughters of Charity, the entire Vincentian Family. To them he devoted long hours of work each day. He thought continually about them and nothing else.

He was a serious man but profoundly pious, faithful to all the spiritual practices learned and intimately assimilated since his years of formation.

In sum he was a man faithful to God, to his confreres, and to the poor.

How meritorious it is, my dear sisters, to suffer for justice's sake!

*(Saint Louise de Marillac to the Daughters of Charity at Angers, 18  
June 1651, letter 310)*

It is only reasonable that those whom God has called to follow his son should try to become holy as he is holy and that their life should be a continuation of his.

*(Saint Louis de Marillac to Sister Jeanne Lepintre,  
22 September 1651, letter 328)*