

Summer 1996

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Recommended Citation

Sheldon, William W. C.M. (1996) "Remembering Father Richardson," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 17: Iss. 2, Article 5.
Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol17/iss2/5>

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Remembering Father Richardson.

BY

WILLIAM W. SHELDON, C.M.

The recent death of Father James Richardson, C.M., former superior general, is an occasion for those who knew and admired him to travel down memory lane. I welcome this opportunity.

The time during which I got to know him was limited—from 1974 to 1980. I do not pretend to have gotten to know him well nor to have become a close friend. I offer my recollections, such as they are. They may prove interesting and useful, especially if added to others' recollections—like strokes which coalesce to form a portrait.

I had met Father Richardson once before 1974 in Emmitsburg, but my acquaintance with him began with his letter of September, 1974, inviting me to come to the general curia in Rome and serve as procurator general at the Holy See. Upon arriving in Rome I learned that I was also to serve as postulator general for our causes of beatification and canonization. Father Richardson admitted that his letter would probably come as a surprise and shock to me—he was right on target! In mentioning that he would be awaiting my reply, hopefully affirmative, he added, if we try simply to seek and carry out the will of God, everything will work out for the best. My reaction was, how can a confrere say no to an invitation put in this way? In living with him I learned that this was not only advice he gave to others, but that by which he lived himself.

He was an indefatigable worker, doing many things himself, which he could have called on others to do. He worked late into the night—I thought that he did not allow himself enough sleep; I saw this as a part of his asceticism. During a visitation, when conversing with confreres or daughters in recreation after the midday meal, he would frequently nod and fall asleep. Confreres would call me aside and ask if he was well. We who accompanied him had to assure them not to worry—mother nature was just catching up with him. I heard Fathers Rafael Sainz and Florian Kapusciak, who worked with him for twelve years and admired his dedication and hard work, say that if he were not a man of prayer, he could not work as he did. They also gently urged him to take time off once in a while. They were sometimes

successful when they could tempt him to go to a house of the Daughters of Charity near the sea shore. Father Richardson would acquiesce, for he loved to swim.

I remember him as a superior general who did a remarkable job during a transitional period. He succeeded Father William Slattery just as the Second Vatican Council was coming to a close and communities were struggling to implement the aggiornamento proposed to them. Much was done during his two mandates. Although our new Constitutions and Statutes were completed during the 1980 General Assembly as Father Richardson finished his second mandate, the work of proposing, experimenting, and refining the articles that composed them was done under his leadership. He dialogued with officials of the then Congregation for Religious, explaining the nature of our Vincentian vocation and finding acceptable canonical terminology to describe our place among religious communities. He did the same work for the Daughters of Charity. He proposed and chaired meetings of societies of apostolic life in Rome whose members contributed much to the revision of the draft of the 1983 Code of Canon Law. They requested that a member of a society of apostolic life be appointed to serve on the sub-committee which would revise the draft. Father Cecil Parres did a competent job in fulfilling this important role.

During Father Richardson's mandates the new general curia house was constructed and inaugurated. He continued to internationalize the personnel of the curia.

I find that most of the characteristics which I observed in living with Father Richardson were accurately summed up in the interview he gave to Father José Oriol Baylach, editor of *Vincentiana* (1980, 155-167, printed elsewhere in this issue). He admitted that his administration had a juridical, canonical orientation: something not surprising since he was an excellent canon lawyer. He also admitted that he could come on quickly and sharply in dialoguing with people. Father James Murphy, his secretary, recounted how he would say things to draw Father Richardson out. He concluded, "and then I was shot down in flames." But if Father Richardson descended on someone too harshly, he would return to that person later in the day and apologize.

He had a great love and devotion for the Daughters of Charity. One could not say anything critical of them in Father Richardson's presence—unless he was joking. And one had to be sure that he understood you were joking. He was painstakingly careful in seeking

capable confreres as their directors. More than once I heard him say that after the office of visitor (provincial superior) in the province he considered the office of the director of the Daughters as next most important. He would not hesitate to choose a key confrere for this office, even when this left the visitor with additional personnel problems.

One knew that Father Richardson was a man of God, who gave himself completely to the work God called him to do. I am grateful for the opportunity of having worked with him and learned from him. Recalling his tenure as superior general, I think that God providentially sent our Congregation the right man for the right job at the right time. Our Community should be grateful to God for this. I know that I am.