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## Interview: Very Rev. James W. Richardson . . . Confesses!

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## Interview

### Very Rev. James W. Richardson . . . Confesses!<sup>1</sup>

BY

JOSÉ-ORIOI BAYLACH, C.M.

It is very easy for the director of *Vincentiana* to interview the superior general. Our offices are on the same floor, separated by only a few meters, and Father Richardson's availability is amazing. Regardless of the hour, his welcome is immediate, if no more urgent matters are at hand. His availability of mind and heart is evidenced by his smiling welcome and the attention he gives to the most varied questions. He acquiesced very simply to "make a confession" without making any objections to the curiosity of the reporter.

J-OB *Your Circular of May 3, the feast of St. James the Less, your patron saint, addressed to the confreres and the Daughters of Charity, and your report on the state of the Congregation, prepared for our general assembly, have enabled us to know some of your sentiments and attitudes in regard to the approaching end of your mandate as superior general. Now on the eve of our assembly, can you disclose some of your personal impressions, share with us some very human details which you are experiencing now or which have been a part of your period in office?*

JWR: Surely. I will attempt to say something quite personal about whatever points in particular you think may interest the readers of *Vincentiana*. It will be, as much as possible, in the style of what I would say in a group of confreres asking me these questions.

J-OB *One would imagine that you would have experienced different sentiments in 1968 (at your first election) and in 1974 (being the first superior general to be reelected) and now in 1980 (being the first superior general who completes a fixed mandate); what were your sentiments on these three occasions?*

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<sup>1</sup>This interview originally appeared in *Vincentiana* 3 (1980):155-67. It has been edited to bring it into conformity with American style and spelling.

JWR: On the first of October and for the remaining days of the assembly that year, I was slowly readjusting myself from being just a member to becoming the successor of our venerated Father [William] Slattery. Called upon to accept the election, I first asked him if he would be willing to stay for a while to help me become accustomed to what was expected of me. He agreed. Then I accepted as one plunging into the unknown, with a strong confidence that the members of the assembly must surely know what they are doing; and with an unlimited confidence in God, who undoubtedly guided the procedure of the election. In 1974, I had the unique experience of being experienced and eligible and quite free to give the assembly the reasons that convinced me that someone else should be elected this time. I was disappointed that a majority of the members didn't agree with me, but I did not resent this expression of their optimism. I realized by this time the great value of having a very competent vicar general with the right of succession who would take over in any of the possibilities foreseen in our new constitutions. In 1980 my outstanding preoccupation is to clear up current business and to leave the new superior a somewhat orderly situation. I did realize that in 1968 I was the first of the new, limited-term, "minor superiors general" [*sic*]; in 1974, the first one whom the confreres had boldly reelected; in 1980 the first one to know that the assembly will necessarily terminate my holding of the office. You speak of impressions—these were complex. I had innumerable regrets in 1974 and I have them again in 1980: some of the first magnitude, others much smaller. Only one regarded the future: the termination of contact with the great number of priests, brothers, and Daughters of Charity whom I had come to know, leaving me indeed with happy memories, but mixed with human reactions at the separation.

J-OB *Were your objectives diversified in these three stages?*

JWR: Of course, especially in emphasis. The continued vocation and mission doesn't change. You begin, conscious of how much you must learn that is quite new. You recommence, resolved by God's grace to do better and to do more. You will conclude, thanking God for what he has done and especially for the liberation, and you commit the past to his great mercy and providence.

J-OB *Did you feel pulled in two directions, being superior general of a Community of men and at the same time of a Community of women (in round figures, 4,000 on one hand and 38,000 on the other) established on all the continents?*

JWR: Yes, certainly. In beginning, my span of attention was concentrated on what surrounded me at the Assembly, the Congregation of the Mission. Very shortly, it had to stretch out—with very significant differences—to include the Daughters of Charity.

J-OB *What do you think of this juridical and historical fact?*

JWR: I have had very few a priori attitudes in regard to this combination. I had been aware of it, in a detached way and with my “number one” sister a Daughter of Charity. It never occurred to me to question it seriously, neither on my own initiative nor by complaints of others. Shortly after being in office, an important official of the Holy See—not the Holy Father—asked me “why this arrangement” or rather “this anachronism,” as he called it. I suggested that he would get a more satisfactory answer from the Daughters of Charity themselves. In 1974, I was asked in our assembly: “Why not have another vicar general for the Daughters of Charity, who would handle all of the practical work?” I answered that they already have a director general who keeps very busy. As the two Assemblies of 1979-1980 were being prepared, I became aware that some Daughters of Charity were raising the question and that some confreres were prepared to encourage them. I called this to the attention of the general council in Paris, telling them it was a question for them to answer. If the “equal rights for women” movement was taking on this form in their Company, it was my conviction that they had the full capacity to answer it themselves. In Paris, they assembled texts from Saint Louise and those that expressed the approval of the Church and brought all this to their general assembly. Perhaps the group (commission) meetings effectively settled this matter, which occurred in only a small percentage of the domestic and provincial assemblies. In the general session at Rome (which I attended), the question was answered almost as soon as it was raised. Someone asked for my view; I told them approximately what I am saying here. Personally, my criterion remains that the key elements are the Company of the Daugh-

ters of Charity and the Holy See. I am confident that both will continue to respond to any true sign of the time with an enlightened discernment.

J-OB *How have you arranged your life to take care of these two tasks?*

JWR: I have always given first attention at Rome to the affairs of the Congregation of the Mission, without neglecting the matters that are referred to me by the Daughters. Looking back, I estimate that about half of my time and effort goes to each of the two communities. The Daughters of Charity have a much larger community, but they also have their superioress general, a Vincentian director general, eight general councilors, a large staff in their secretariat and economat in Paris, and a comparable curia with a provincial director in each of the provinces. They appear to be satisfied with the limited number of affairs that are referred to the Vincentian superior general.

J-OB *Sometimes it is said that Saint Vincent succeeded better with the women (Daughters and Ladies of Charity) than with the men (Vincentians); have you followed different "tactics" in working with "them" and with "us"?*

JWR: Perhaps that is so. The success of Saint Vincent and the durability of his three foundations—the Confraternity of Charity (1617), our Congregation (1625) and the Company of the Daughters (1633)—is evident in history and in today's reality. I have never felt adequate to make a comparative judgment of the relative success between 1617 and 1633 and 1625, as these matured up to the death of Saint Vincent. And from 1660 to 1980? I am only an amateur historian and a fledgling in sociology and psychology, unable to offer an interesting judgment. You also ask if I have followed different "tactics" with "them" and with "us." No person in his right mind would use the same approach in dealing with women and with men. Saint Vincent's own style is most evident in his respective letters and conferences to confreres and to the Daughters. The distinction today would be less pronounced in conferences: for example, in vocabulary and in presentation of theology. Yet it would seem a mistake to attempt a substantial modification in the "little method" as variously used by Saint Vincent with "them" and with "us."

- J-OB: *Your office has taken you throughout the world. Have you witnessed directly something or experienced some situations which have been a shock to you in such a way as to modify your comportment?*
- JWR: I recall two situations particularly: the confrere on mission ad gentes, isolated by an apostolic assignment given to him by superiors; and the face to face encounter with poor, dirty, hungry children. The shock of the first convinced me of the importance of the disciples going "two by two" in the gospel, or the "rule of three" of Cardinal Lavigerie.<sup>2</sup> The second became an unforgettable vision which pressed me to talk and to attempt living real poverty in community and in personal conduct.
- J-OB: *The twelve years of your mandate have taken place during an exceptional epoch (the post-conciliar period). Among your joys, which are most comforting?*
- JWR: Joy one was the experience of the Church at every level, obviously pressed on by the Holy Spirit to seek the renewal described by Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI, with the Second Vatican Council. Joy two was to observe the same evidence in the Congregation of the Mission, in the Daughters of Charity, and in the Association of Charity. Joy three, more particularly, was to have a brief participation of the missions to the poor and ad gentes with our "double family." Joy four perhaps the strongest emotionally, was the marvel of the smiles and the tears manifesting supernatural faith and hope in confreres and sisters beyond what we call "the iron curtain."
- J-OB: *And among your sufferings, what caused you the most pain?*
- JWR: I would say failures in communication: for example, by ignorance of language and customs or by conflicting ideologies; also witnessing personally those in the two communities who did not persevere in their Vincentian (and priestly) vocation. Other frustrations are difficult to classify or summarize.
- J-OB: *It is said that you are always busy, hold to your own opinions, and respect the smallest requirements of canon law or the constitutions in regard to the confreres. If this is so, is it your temperament, a result of your formation, or rather a norm desirable in government?*

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<sup>2</sup>Founder of the White Fathers.

JWR: To answer this question, I will need to take the two tendencies separately. (1) The tenacity (and, let me add, joined to a sharp irascibility) comes from a strong tendency of temperament, commented on by members of my own family. It has certainly been modified by Christian and Vincentian formation. The activity of "government" has also affected it, sometimes softening it by experience and—unfortunately—at other times accentuating and exaggerating it. (2) The approach often labeled "juridical," as far as I am able to recognize and describe it, comes not so much from an innate tendency or family environment, as from a strange series of events that resulted in finding myself sent to Rome by the Community for the study of canon law, at a certain time, with certain professors and superiors, and subsequent assignments in teaching and administration. In all honesty, I must admit that I have been overly juridical and must apologize for it. Perhaps in my worst moments, the tenacious and irascible temperament reinforces the acquired formalism. I consider it an undesirable and not a necessary by-product of long exposure to juridical activity. To complete my comment, however, I think I should advert to the current unpopularity of the juridical norms of the Church and of the Community; and to the post-conciliar phenomenon of contrasting "pastoral" and "juridical" as mutually exclusive. This is not the traditional sense of the Church, as affirmed, for instance, by Pope Paul VI. Let us see what comes out in the new text of Canon Law, which the Holy Father is now studying with the cardinals of his commission. It will surely not satisfy everyone, but it is our Church that gives it to us.

J-OB: *What are your three first reactions when you receive something (a document, report, letter, etc.) whose contents are contrary to your thoughts and your hopes?*

JWR: In answering this question, I prefer to say first what is my ideal and frequent reactions under the control of virtue: (1) The effort to understand the full sense of what is written; (2) By reflection and memory, to sympathize, as far as possible, with the person or group that writes; (3) To ask the Lord to guide me in what I say or write or do about it. I do not find a uniform pattern of my actual emotions, except that too often they tend to be unruly.

J-OB: *Faced with certain difficulties, have you sometimes regretted having accepted your office of superior general of two such large Communities?*

JWR: There have indeed been difficulties that have puzzled and discouraged me. In one particular circumstance, I recall projecting a possible outcome that might convince me, with my advisors, to resign from the office. Yet, I have not regretted having accepted it.

J-OB: *What are the spiritual, intellectual, and social resources upon which you have drawn in order to continue to the end of your mandate?*

JWR: The spiritual resources can be summed up in the word prayer. I have very frequently expressed my convictions about the absolute primacy of God. Intellectual resources are reading and reflections and conversations at that level. Socially there are the confreres and Daughters, as well as comparable people whom I have known to a lesser degree. All of these I have found in our community life, particularly here in our own curia house, and, I think, increasingly with the passing of the years.

J-OB: *Have you been able to distract yourself with some "hobby"?*

JWR: I can distract myself fairly well with walking, calisthenics, and working with tools. Some of the visits I have received here have been wonderfully distracting.

J-OB: *It is known that no serious illness has interrupted your activities. With your frequent changes of horarium, menu, etc., during your trips or in the ordinary daily life of the Curia, have you followed a special rhythm of work and nourishment?*

JWR: I do have a certain rhythm in the work that I undertake; perhaps it would be exaggerating to call it precise. For meals, I follow the recommendation of a competent doctor and manage to stay within the weight limits he has counseled.

J-OB: *Have you often worked late into the night?*

JWR: Yes, I have worked late at night occasionally to complete urgent business or something that needs continuous concentration; but in more recent years I find I cannot do this successfully two nights in succession.

J-OB: *Your mandate has taken place during the pontificates of Paul VI, John Paul I, and John Paul II. Can you give your opinion of each of these popes in a concise manner?*



- JWR: My answer must be disappointing because I cannot manage to make it concise, except by limiting it to an outstanding trait of each of them: Pope Paul VI, the boldness of his *Populorum Progressio* and *Octogesimo Adveniens*; Pope John Paul I, the simplicity and transparency of his style; Pope John Paul II, his unhurried attention to people.
- J-OB: *You have often had dealings with the Holy See, the bishops; as superior general, what was your line of conduct?*
- JWR: With the Holy See, many of my contacts have involved respectful attention to learn what is expected of our Community in particular instances; more difficult has been retaining this same attitude, combined with persistence in maintaining what I have believed to be the particular identity of our Community. With the diocesan bishops, it has most frequently been to uphold the well considered projects of the visitors [provincials], in cases where the bishops have found reason to object. As you know, there is a recent instruction of the Holy See concerning such occurrences, with the significant title: *Mutuae relationes*.
- J-OB: *You have often participated in meetings with other superiors general. Have you drawn support from them?*
- JWR: Thank you for this question, which allows me to extend one of the other answers. Yes, the meetings of the Union of Superiors General and other contacts with several of them in particular have proved to be an enormous support. This has helped to broaden my own limited point of view, to have a sense of the rich resources of the Church in the various communities of men and women and to talk to confreres about collaborating with them in numerous ways.
- J-OB: *In the present liturgical reforms (mass, breviary, etc.), does any one of them give you cause for particular joy?*
- JWR: The Holy Eucharist, the mass liturgy, not only should be the preference, but existentially it is the outstanding success of this reform: the revealed Word of God; the four eucharistic formulas; the chant; the concelebration; almost everywhere I have gone there has been this new and vigorous, renewed central work of our worship in harmony with the Church all over the world.
- J-OB: *Do you prefer to read Saint Vincent's letters or his conferences? If you have no preference, why is this?*

JWR: It depends. I like to receive good letters and I like to hear good conferences, for different reasons. Saint Vincent's letters, written to people he knew, are very personal and warm; I like that, and I didn't get very much of it until I had a set of Coste<sup>3</sup> near me at the curia to read myself, and to hear these letters read. The conferences to the confreres are familiar from the time I entered the Community. I like them; they take up some subject and illuminate it rather completely according to the "little method"; they are lively and spontaneous, as his reflections in meditation must have been, but they tend to be more impersonal and less concrete than the letters.

J-OB: *During your generalate there has been in the Vincentian family a renewal of studies on our Holy Founder and their diffusion. Has this contributed to the renewal of the Vincentian family?*

JWR: We all know that we have had this increase of studying Saint Vincent, in using among ourselves what we have studied, and in offering it to others. Where this has been done, it has made a very distinct contribution to the renewal in our Vincentian family, because the history of our canonized founder and the record of what he said and what he wrote is at the heart of our authentic mission in the Church and in the world today. I keep repeating what Pope John XXIII wrote to Father Slattery for the tercentenary of Saint Vincent's death: we need him today and the Church looks to us to show him to the world.

J-OB: *As superior general, you have continued to be a citizen of the United States. Has this fact afforded you advantages or inconveniences, and if so, what are they?*

JWR: I suppose everyone is at least a silent ambassador of his native country, and this has advantages since there are values in every culture. The United States passport that I have carried and renewed regularly has allowed me to travel wherever I needed to go except in one case, where the Vatican provided the entry. Some people like the USA, still more are interested in what goes on there. But in Latin America, there is a well founded suspicion about the motives of commercial and diplomatic activity of their cousins to the north of them. I have not been to Russia. However, I have not been conscious of any

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<sup>3</sup>*Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, C.M., 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926).

serious impediment for me to communicate with members of the Double Family, wherever I have been.

J-OB: *If you could recommence your twelve years as superior general, what aspect of the government of the Congregation of the Mission would you maintain and what modification would you endeavor to introduce?*

JWR: It seems to me that the grace of office does not continue at the end of the twelve years, and it is impractical for me to make a useful judgment about what should be done at that time. I hope no one doubts that our government as described in the constitutions should be retained, and in its entirety. On the other hand, I have great expectations that the new superior general will go much further than I did in promoting the actualization of what the 1980 assembly leaves to us.

J-OB: *Among the books or articles which you have read during this period, are there any which you would consider outstanding?*

JWR: For "books" I would count the encyclicals already mentioned, together with *Marialis Cultus*, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Catechesi Tradendae*; *33 Giorni—Un Pontificato*; Roger Heckel, *The Social Teaching of John Paul II*; *Redemptor Hominis*; René Laurentin, *Catherine Labouré*. For articles, I think of those in *Vincentiana* written by Father Cid. If you insist on "just one," then I choose *Populorum Progressio*.

J-OB: *You have had to exercise a new type of superior role, to be the animator of the Community; how have you done this?*

JWR: I do not consider being an animator a "new" type of superior. Since I joined the Community, the superior general was always considered as an animator, and we looked forward to his January circulars. I have known Father [Charles] Souvay and Father Slattery personally and regarded them chiefly in that light, and as considerably more effective than I. The instruments of animation remain the same, as far as I can see: personal example, talks, conversations, circulars and personal letters. It is true that the liturgy offers new opportunities, especially in the increasing use of the homily.

J-OB: *If you were to classify your circulars to the Congregation of the Mission in order of their importance in your opinion, which ones would you place as the first three?*

JWR: I do not have a list of these circulars, but from memory I would mention the one on the ministry of the clergy, that on

Saint Justin de Jacobis, and the recent one reporting the state of the Congregation. You give me an opportunity to call attention to the fact that the one last mentioned was a highly cooperative work, though I was requested to sign it. In varying degrees practically all of the priests of the curia, at one time or another, have assisted in the composition of the circulars.

J-OB: *It is said that you are going "on mission in Africa" when your mandate has been completed, what motives prompted this decision?*

JWR: Let me mention the special character of the mission in Africa which interested me. The bishop of the diocese of Marsabit in Kenya asked one of his priests to invite our Congregation to assist in the establishment of a major seminary there to prepare young men from the nomad tribes for the priesthood, with the intention of exercising a specialized apostolate to their own people. The number would be small, the course of study would be adapted to this urgent need, the language would be English. As a young priest I had volunteered several times for China, I kept an active interest in the confreres in various missions, and I have been encouraged to think that I may be able to have a part in this particular

J-OB: *With your experience of twelve years at the head of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, what would you say to the new superior general immediately after his acceptance of his election?*

JWR: "Please do not hesitate to undertake this office. God will surely give you the grace to carry it out."

J-OB: *Henceforth you are a historical person in the Vincentian family. Give a biblical phrase which, according to you, synthesizes your term at the head of the government of our two Communities.*

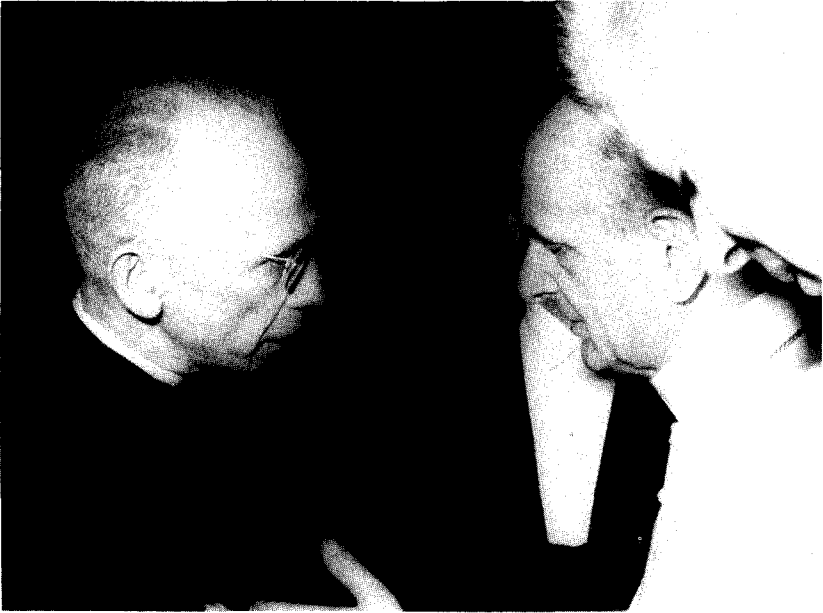
JWR: I offer a slightly adapted biblical phrase: "I have been a useless servant; I have done only something of what I was obliged to do; without the Lord, I could have done nothing."

J-OB: *Thank you for your availability in this interview.*

JWR: And I thank you for your interest in all of this.

P.S. *This "confession" places the person of the Very Reverend James W. Richardson in a different light. Hopefully, some will find herein "consolation" for themselves and "sympathetic understanding" towards this superior general who is approaching the completion of his mandate. Undoubtedly, it will evoke gratitude in the minds and*

*hearts of all the confreres. In the name of Vincentiana and of its readers, thank you, Father Richardson, for your tireless devotion all during your twelve years as superior general of the Congregation of the Mission.*



Father Richardson with Pope Paul VI. Date unknown.