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Letter of the Superior General: On Learning Languages in the Congregation of the Mission (March 30, 1999)

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March 30, 1999

To the Visitors of the Congregation of the Mission

My very dear Brothers,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

St. Vincent was very concerned about the need for missionaries to learn languages. He told the confreres:

Now the diversity of languages is very great, not only in Europe, Africa and Asia, but also in Canada. For we see by the reports of the Jesuit Fathers that there are as many languages as there are tribes. The Hurons do not speak like the Iroquois, nor the latter like their neighbors. And a person who understands one group of Indians does not understand the others.

How then can Missionaries, bearing these differences of language in mind, go throughout the world announcing the Gospel if they know only their own language? (SV XII, 26-27).

Today, missionary mobility and the frequency of international meetings make it all the more necessary for confreres to know languages.

1) For that reason, with the unanimous consent of the members of the General Council, in accord with Article 107, 2_ of our Constitutions, I am enacting a general ordinance which has the force of law for the Congregation of the Mission; namely, that

**all of our students, during the time of formation,
will study a second language (English, French, or Spanish)
with the goal of being able to understand and speak it.**

This ordinance mandates that those students who know none of the three languages mentioned above will study one, and those students who already speak English, French, or Spanish as their first language will study one of the others as a second language.

Of course, although this ordinance applies only to our students, I want to encourage all confreres to learn languages. They are a wonderful missionary asset. The vast majority of the appeals that we receive for personnel require that a confrere know at least English, French, or Spanish.

2) In our General Council, we made a second decision which we hope will eventually foster greater mobility and mutual understanding. At future international meetings of the Congregation, like the General Assembly of 2004, we will provide simultaneous translation in English, French, and Spanish only, trusting that confreres will, as time goes on, become more and more proficient in those three languages.

I recognize that these two decisions will create burdens for some, particularly for those who must begin to study a second or third language. I trust, however, that what is presently a burden will eventually be a gift for promoting greater mobility and better communication in the worldwide Congregation.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General

