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An Historical Overview of CLAPVI: The Latin American Conference of Vincentian Provinces

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Not a few articles have been written about this topic.¹ I will limit myself to speaking about three points: the development stages, the mechanisms for promotion and the leadership of CLAPVI in these 31 years of its existence.

CLAPVI was born at a meeting called for that purpose by Fr. Luis Antonio Mojica, Visitor of Colombia, who had the idea at the General Assembly of 1968-1969. He consulted the Superior General, Fr. James Richardson, without forgetting to share the idea with his Latin American colleagues. Fr. Luis Vela should also be considered a co-founder for his specific contribution in the beginning.

The Visitors of Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Peru and Puerto Rico, as well as representatives from Central America and Mexico came to the initial meeting at the retreat center of the Capuchins, Tranquilandia in Santandercito, Colombia, from 21-24 September 1971. The then Vicar General, Fr. Rafael Sáinz, was present at the first meeting, beginning a channel of contact between the General Curia and CLAPVI which has continued up until the present.

1. The Stages: (Three can be mentioned)

First Stage: The Foundation Process 1971-1980

During these nine years the refrain from a then popular song: "Traveller, there is no road, the road is built as you travel," seems to have been the theme. The first steps were inspired by the four fundamental objectives: creating a vision for the Latin American Vincentian, renewal of works and the missionaries themselves, organization of ongoing formation and interprovincial cooperation.

Very soon the membership was consolidated: to the nine founding provinces were added the Vice-Province of Costa Rica and the Panamanian Mission of the US Province of Philadelphia in mid-1972 and the three Brazilian Provinces at the Assembly in Rome in 1974. The Cuban Province joined at the Assembly in Mexico in 1977.

¹ **León M.**, "La Provincia de Venezuela en el contexto de Clapvi": *Clapvi* 83 (October-December 1995) pp. 283-299; **Bastiaensen A.**, "Clapvi, 25 años: la historia detrás de la historia": *Clapvi* 93 (October-December 1996) pp. 238-244; **Quevedo Á.**, "Breve historia de Clapvi": *ibid.* pp. 357-366; **Varios**, "Historia": *Clapvi* 100-101 (September 1998-February 1999) pp. 87-110.

After a visit to all the provinces by the newly named Executive Secretary in 1972, CLAPVI was guided toward two directions which have characterized it: the publication of a bulletin, which quickly became a magazine, and the formation courses for the confreres.

Second Stage: The Consolidation Process 1980-1995

The point of departure was the Assembly of 1980 in Rome, which coincided with the General Assembly of the Congregation, which was a new and important factor.

In 1983 the nature of the representative of the Regional Superior of Honduras for the Barcelona Province was made official and in 1990 the one for the Zaragoza Province in the same Central American country.

The important innovation during these 17 years consisted in the change of method to achieve the same goals: the meetings — a type of workshop — which are shorter, from two weeks to ten days, instead of courses for ongoing formation; and the openness to the presence of the Daughters of Charity and lay Vincentians.

Third Step: The Maturation Process, Since 1999

Several factors permit us to speak about a third moment in these last three years: for the first time four Visitatrices of the Daughters of Charity (Central America, Chile, Bogotá, Ecuador) spoke at an Assembly;² a non-Colombian Executive Secretary, Emilio Melchor, a Spaniard but from the Province of Ecuador, was named; the headquarters of the Executive Secretary moved from Bogotá to Maracaibo; following the conclusions of the last General Assembly and the desire of the Superior General, annual courses of formation for formators are organized in three areas: CLAPVI-North, CLAPVI-South-Spanish language and CLAPVI-South-Portuguese language; it was suggested to the Visitors of the United States that they name a representative because of the work of the North American confreres with Latin American immigrants.

Two defined policies arose at this time: the collegial role of the Executive Council and respect for the autonomy of the different branches of the Vincentian Family.

During the last three years the progress of CLAPVI has concentrated on achieving three objectives: ongoing formation of the confreres, sharing of experiences and interprovincial cooperation. This has been inspired by: the

² CLAPVI Assembly in San José de Costa Rica on 17 July 1999.

present-day situation, preferential option for the poor, the universality of the Vincentian charism, the refoundation of the Congregation on the continent, a sense of belonging to the CM and the Vincentian Family, the ecclesiology of the protagonism of the laity and the poor, the inculturation and updating of the charism.

The project, promoted by the President and the Executive Secretary together, has emphasized the meetings and the formation courses for formators. The former have covered pastoral topics: education, missions, ministry with indigenous people and the formation of the clergy. They have been combined with a youth meeting and also with a popular mission, for the first time outside of Latin America, in the United States.

2. Mechanisms for Promotion

The Statutes and the historical situation have highlighted three: the assemblies, the meetings and the magazine.

a) The Assemblies

The most recent Assembly, the 11th, was held in Curitiba for the opening of the centenary of the province. The first, celebrated in San Miguel, Argentina, in 1973, studied the proposals from the confreres as a result of the foundation of CLAPVI. Since the second Assembly, at Rome in 1974, and the fifth, at Funza in 1983, the Assemblies in even-numbered years have been celebrated to coincide with the General Assemblies of the CM and the Assemblies in odd-numbered years with the inter-assembly meetings of the Visitors, with the exception of the last two.

The Superior General, the Vicar General and the Assistants can participate with voice and vote. In fact we have always been able to count on the presence of one of them. For example, Fr. James Richardson with the Vicar General, Fr. Rafael Sáinz and two of the assistants, Frs. Zico and Sylvestre, were at the third Assembly held in Mexico in November 1977 to reflect on the vocation problem; Fr. Richard McCullen with the Vicar, Fr. Miguel Pérez Flores, two assistants, Gaziello and Pires de Almeida and the Secretary General, Paul Henzmann, were at the fifth Assembly held at Villa Paúl, Funza, from 7-10 January 1983, immediately before the first world meeting of the Visitors, which approved the Statutes.

b) The Meetings have a double content: doctrinal and experiential.

The meetings have tried to share the teaching of St. Vincent de Paul and the magisterium of our superiors and General Assemblies, as well as the

meaning of the great figures of the Vincentian Family around anniversaries or important celebrations,³ and the papal magisterium and that of the Latin American episcopate, CELAM, especially Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979) and Santo Domingo (1992).

On the experiential level these have been a forum for sharing the reality of Vincentian pastoral activity on the continent, viewed with the lens of Liberation Theology and the formation of our students. These two guides have produced an important document: *The CLAPVI Manual for Missions*, a Latin American re-reading of the *Ratio Formationis Vicentianae*.

c) **The Magazine**

The magazine began as a bulletin, but soon moved up a category to become a key means to promote memory, reflection and communication. It finished its 28th year and 113th issue with the publication of the January-February 2003 issue.

Its most important function has been to collect the content of the assemblies, the courses and the meetings. But it has also been the bearer of the history of the provinces and their perspectives, especially when it was their turn to edit the issue. It has served as a forum for the sharing of ideas, not by experts or technicians, but by those concerned with theology, pastoral practice or Vincentian topics.

It has addressed two topics especially: Liberation Theology and New Evangelization. Clearly the largest portion of its pages has gathered experiences and reflections about vocational ministry, the formation of our students and the evangelization of the poor. Its most important contribution has been historic.

3. The Leadership

The tradition, consecrated in the norms, has emphasized the leadership of the Presidents and the Secretaries. The statutes support this as well.

- a) **The Statutes** were approved at the Fifth Assembly on 25 January 1983. After a short, historical introduction and a preliminary chapter about the name, nature, constitution and headquarters, there are three other chapters

³ In 1980, the 150th anniversary of the apparitions of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal to St. Catherine Labouré; in 1981, the fourth centenary of the birth of St. Vincent de Paul; in 1983, the 350th anniversary of the AIC and the sesquicentennial of the SSVP; in 1984, the beatification of the Martyrs of Angers; in 1987, the 250th anniversary of the canonization of St. Vincent de Paul; in 1988, 20 years since Medellín; in 1991, the fourth centenary of the birth of St. Louise de Marillac; in 1992, 500 years of evangelization in Latin America; etc.

about: ends, members and administrative structures, and a conclusion with final dispositions referring to economic matters and lesser concerns.

- b) Twelve Visitors have been **Presidents** up until the present: four from Colombia, three from Mexico, two from Chile and one each from Venezuela, Rio de Janeiro and Curitiba.
- c) **The Executive Secretary** has played the key role in the history of CLAPVI, and to a certain degree has determined its stages of development:
- **Luis Jenaro Rojas** formed the foundational structures and participated in them from the beginning. To him we owe the first steps along the road to objectives, activities and mechanisms;
 - **Álvaro Juan Quevedo** marked the Conference with a strong tendency towards Liberation Theology and Vincentian topics;
 - **Hernando Escobar** helped CLAPVI breath the air of the Vincentian Family and was especially concerned with the formation of our students;
 - **Emilio Melchor** sped up the move of the office to the Province of Venezuela and blessed the marriage of CLAPVI with computerization and has untiringly supported the courses of formation for the formators.

Antonio Elduayen, who defines himself as "the Executive Secretary who lasted just three months," deserves a special mention. With his energy, in that short time, he managed to edit number 64 of the magazine in Chile and began to move the offices to Santiago.

Conclusion

CLAPVI is intimately tied to the Second Vatican Council and the immediate reaction to it that arose in the CM. Influenced by the "nouvelle théologie," the Council changed many models of ecclesial life. Latin America is the continent which most quickly and enthusiastically accepted the Council and the Congregation is one of the ecclesiastical institutions which accepted it with judgment and balance.

The secret of this radical impulse is rooted in two fundamental affirmations: what the Council said to the Church about itself in *Lumen Gentium* and what it said about its relationship with the world in *Gaudium et Spes*.

From a Church which had been strongly centralized it moved to a clear affirmation of the communion of sister Churches. With the image of the People of God, it highlighted its charismatic and pilgrim character instead of the static

and bureaucratic institutional image. This opened up two unexpected roads: the collegiality of the hierarchy and the ever-increasing desire for the presence of the laity in the life and structures of the Church.

The relationship of the Church to the world is perhaps the conciliar theme most developed in Latin America, thanks to the assemblies of CELAM in Medellín in 1968 and Puebla in 1979. But, its origins are in the words of John XXIII at the opening of the Council when he spoke about the "Church of the poor."

CLAPVI has been a home to and a school for the ecclesiology of communion and the theology of liberation, for example in its references to the so-called bases. These two telling historical data can be mentioned on this point: it is the only one of the five conferences of the Congregation which is not for the Visitors, but the provinces; the delegates from Latin America to the General Assemblies of the CM are members, with voice and vote, to the Assemblies of CLAPVI when these are held at the same time.

A legitimate offspring of this theological focus has been the theology of liberation which has guided the theological reflection and, even more, the pastoral thrust of CLAPVI.

It is not pretentious to affirm that when the present Superior General invited us to be aware of the reality of the Vincentian Family and the last General Assembly moved us toward unity with humility, Latin America had already followed along a more or less lengthy road, for example in Mexico, Peru, Brazil and Colombia. Fr. Robert Maloney recognized this at the opening of the meeting that CLAPVI had in Rome on the eve of the General Assembly of 1998: "It was during a meeting of CLAPVI in Mexico that I began to appreciate the importance of the Vincentian Family. As you know, this question has come to have a great impulse in the Congregation and it is the theme of the 1998 Assembly. Thank you for that."⁴

(JOHN PRAGER, C.M., translator)

⁴ Cf. *Clapvi 99* (May-August 1999) p. 198.