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The Visitor as Administrator

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The function of the Visitor, in the Congregation of the Mission, is very well defined in no.123.1 of our Constitutions: "He is put in charge of a province to govern it according to the norms of universal law and of our own law". This responsibility is accompanied by the recognition of a power such that "the Visitor is a major superior and an ordinary, with proper ordinary power" This last assertion "with proper ordinary power" (that he exercises proper ordinary power") is repeated twice (nos. 122 &123) in order to recall that the authority of the Visitor is that of a power attached to his office by virtue of the law itself and which he exercises himself and not by delegation or concession.

1) The responsibility of the visitor:

This insistence reflects the spirit in which our last Constitutions were drawn up. The intention was to moderate the centralisation of the Congregation and to insist on the particular role of the Visitor. In the 1954 Constitutions, the chapter on Visitors was quite short and came after the instructions with regard to the various assemblies, which in itself was symptomatic. Today it comes just after the central administration and has as its title: 'Provincial and local administration'.

A) A function which is primarily a spirit:

The Visitor is thus described as an administrator, even though the word itself is not used apart from the title. This, however, should not allow us to forget that administration, however important it may be, is not what primarily defines a congregation in terms of its identity or its activity.

In the Constitutions, organisation is dealt with last and comes after the section which deals with 'Life in the Congregation' as if to indicate in what spirit the administration of the Congregation or a particular province should be dealt. We can't forget this if we recall the way in which authority should be exercised in the Church according to Canon Law: 'Superiors will exercise in a spirit of service the power they have received from God through the ministry of the Church'. (canon 618)

B) The Visitor in the Constitutions:

Our Constitutions sum up the function of the Visitor in a legal terms. Here is what is said in n°.123.2:

THE VISITOR

Striving for the active participation of all the members in the life and apostolate of the province.

Should allocate members and resources for the service of the Church **according to the purpose of the Congregation**

Should foster the ministry of the Houses.

Should show that he is solicitous for the personal development and activity of each confrere and thus *procure* life-giving unity.

We note that the beginning and end of the text, starting with either an adjective or verb, are linked to underline the purpose of the work of the Visitor. He must have, as his care, the animation of the life and apostolate of the province while encouraging the active participation of all, which must lead, in the end, to a union that is life-giving. The verbs used are in the subjunctive to indicate at one and the same time, a hope, an encouragement and an order. They sum up the responsibilities of the Visitor, to know how to act, to foster and to show himself attentive, which we could translate as to direct, organise and develop a province. These three points also sum up, as we will see, the elements of a good administration.

C) **Fidelity to the Congregation**

However, the central point, 'according to the purpose of the Congregation', remains primary since it gives a certain tone to the text by orienting the activity of the Visitor. It is located in the centre of the declaration both to unify the different functions of the one in charge of the province and to give them a constant point of reference. If we do not take account of the purpose of the Congregation, then we set aside the identity of our institute, neglect its charism and, eventually, threaten its unity.

The 34th General Assembly was well aware of this (Vincentiana, 3-4, 1969, p.113). It was here that this insertion was made in the review of the Constitutions and Statutes "ad experimentum" which took up almost word for word the formulation of the preparatory schema of 1968, called the 'livret noir' (little black book) (Schemata Constitutionum ac Statuorum Congregationis Missionis, Rome, 1968, no.222). It is this text which we still have. The present Constitutions, set out in 1980 by the 36th General Assembly, made only one change, that of putting a comma rather than a full stop after 'according to the purpose of the Congregation'.

N° 123.2 is thus made up of one single phrase centred on this insertion, which gives the text a strong unity and particular breadth. The Visitor has the duty, even in the simplest acts of his work as administrator, to have as his objective the full realisation of the purpose of the Congregation which is "to follow Christ, Evangeliser of the Poor".

2) Giving direction to the apostolic work of the Confreres

The Visitor, who has the duty of allocating confreres and resources to the work of the Church, has a management function. To direct the province, he must both direct the work of the confreres with the concern to serve the church and manage temporal goods in the same spirit.

A) The visitor's points of reference

The Congregation of the Mission, the Constitutions tell us, has the task of evangelising, a task which is "its own grace and vocation and expresses its deepest identity". (no.10) Here explicit reference is made to Paul VI's apostolic exhortation "Evangelii Nuntiandi" where the same expression characterises the mission of the Church. The Visitor has the duty of entering into this perspective, but according to the specific conditions of his Province, which already has an orientation which is shaped by its history and formed by the people who are part of it. It is, therefore, normal that the first responsibility of the Visitor is to "promote the observance of the Constitutions, Statutes and Provincial Norms" (125) expressed by the establishment of a Provincial Plan or Project in agreement with his Council (statute 69).

The Provincial Plan and the Council: these are the two points of reference on which the Visitor must rely, according to the official texts of the Congregation. The Provincial Plan is more concerned with the animation of a Province which has total freedom to develop it in its own way. On the other hand, the Visitor's council is well defined in terms of its make up and its responsibilities. It is primarily an organ to which the Visitor must refer quite often, even if, according to our law, he has named its members (Statute 74.1) These have the duty of helping him "by their labour and advice in the government of the province".

B) The provincial council

The problem of the Provincial Council has already been dealt with by Fr. Peres Flores during the meeting of Visitors in Rio de Janeiro in July 1989 (Vincentiana,4-5, 1989, pp.425 445, french translation in the Bulletin des Lazaristes de France, no.127,1991, pp 23-33). The term Provincial Council is one unknown in our Constitutions which speak of the Council of the Provincial (in french 'of the Visitor'). It is not an organ of government since it cannot itself make decisions. Nevertheless it remains an indispensable and sometimes obligatory element in the government of a Province. According to the Constitutions and Statutes, the Visitor is obliged to seek its consent in 19 cases or its advice in 14 circumstances.

The activity of the Council is not limited to these points only. It is comparable to an administrative council with all that that entails. That is why, even without referring to the times of meeting (often themselves the result of consensus) it is usual for the councillors to have the agenda and to be able to be 'au fait' with the principal matters in advance of the meeting. It is not merely a statutory meeting but a time for reflecting

together which requires some preparation in order to allow each of the participants to take part with a clear understanding and freedom of conscience.

According to Canon Law "in order that an act be valid, it is necessary for the Superior to obtain the consent of an absolute majority of those who are present, or to ask the advice of all". (c.127.1) This means, according to the most common interpretation, that the Superior does not have the right to vote with the others, not even in cases of a split vote (cf *The Canonical Year*, 30, 1987, p.464). This may appear more understandable if we consider that, for us, the Council is not that of the Province, but that of the Visitor. The application of such a rule may be more difficult where there is an even number of consulters.

The Provincial Assembly plays a role similar to the Council since it is "a consultative organ of the Provincial" (143.2) It has, however, a greater power in light of its capacity to establish norms for the Province. Nor do we stop there since the Visitor, while being President of the Assembly, only exercises the authority of the one who oversees its proper proceedings.

C) The financial management of the Province

On the other hand, the Visitor exercises full responsibility for the financial management of the Province. It is an important part of his administration. St. Vincent, who knew this well, does not fail to state it. Writing to Antoine Durand, whom he had just named superior, he gives the rules for a perfect superior with this precision: "You must not merely deal with what is revealed, such are the duties which pertain to spiritual matters, but a superior, who represents in some way the extent of the power of God, must also undertake to take care of the smallest temporal matters". (Coste, XI, 350).

He never misses an occasion to recall that the superior is the one primarily responsible for temporal matters; "It is the custom with us, he says to the Superior at Genoa, that all public undertakings done for the Community are done in the name of the Superior and not that of the procurator". (Coste, VII, 421 & 423)

To tell the truth, today, the Visitor is the one responsible for goods but not for their direct administration. N°128 of the Constitutions is clear: In each Province there must be a Treasurer to administer the goods of the Province under the direction and vigilance of the Visitor and his Council". The Daughters of Charity seem to place more faith in the abilities of the Visitatrix who "administers the goods, both fixed and movable, of the Province (Stat. 44). It is the same for the Sisters Servant who "administer the temporal goods of the local community" (Cons. 3.45) without necessarily having a bursar (Stat. 56) while, with us, the local superior cannot administer his house without a bursar (Stat. 79.1)

The vigilance of the Visitor with regard to the financial administration remains always entire, since it is always up to him to look after the good management of the Province. He shows this responsibility when he signs the house accounts. One could also ask if, in certain provinces, it might not be a good idea if the Visitor was helped and

guided by a finance committee, following the example of the diocesan bishops who are obliged to do so.

3) Organising the apostolate of the Province:

Our Constitutions (123.2) correlates well the life and apostolate of the Province with the service of the Church. This is one of the main responsibilities of the Visitor who must promote "a true communion of apostolate and life" (97.1) and equally assure unity within the Province and the unity of the Province with the different external ecclesiastical groups with which it is linked.

A) In union with the Superior General

Normally the Visitor should be in direct contact with the Superior General who has nominated or confirmed him in his appointment. Since the latter exercises an ordinary power over each and all (const. 103) his is a responsibility of the first order, despite the internal autonomy of each Province. His role is precise: "centre of unity and coordination of the Provinces, (the Superior General) will also be a source of spiritual animation and apostolic activity" (102)

Relationships with him are many and of different kinds even if some go through an intermediary at the central administration whose members have a recognised responsibility without in anyway affecting their proper authority. These communications may be limited to a simple notification, as for the nomination of a Superior (Con. 125.4), incorporation or vows (Stat. 69.10) They may relate to a consultation for the erection or suppression of a house (Con.125.3) or a major work (Stat. 69.2)

On the other hand, approval is vital in order to relieve a superior of his post (Con.133), name a regional superior (Con.125.5) or name a local superior after his second triennium (Con.130.1), establish provincial norms (Con.143.1) not to mention the various administrative and economic affairs which relate to his mandate (Con.155) Finally, the tradition of the Congregation calls for us to "send to the Superior General reports on the affairs of the Province". (Stat.69.6)

B) Relationships with the Bishops

Relationships with the bishops are drawn from the general law which were taken up, in 1978, by the *basic directives on relationships between bishops and religious in the Church* (the document *Mutuae relationes*). For our part, we cannot forget the reference which St. Vincent urged from his confreres towards "Our Lords the Most Illustrious and Most Reverend Bishops (*Common Rules V.1*) always remembering "how our Lords the prelates carefully guard their authority and dependence on them". (Coste II,418)

Our Constitutions require the same respect of us (n° 38.2). They call on the Provinces to insure that "their pastoral activity may be incorporated into the pastoral activity of the local Church, in conformity with the documents and instructions of the Holy See, the episcopal conferences and the diocesan bishops" (n° 13) always preserving our right of exemption (n° 64 & 99)

According to the directives given in *Mutuae Relationes* (n° 57), we should maintain the importance of distinguishing between works proper to the Congregation, where we keep complete autonomy, and those works confided to us by the Ordinary of a place. In these latter cases it is important to establish a written contract "in which will be set down, amongst other things, all that concerns the fulfilling of the task, the religious who will be employed in it and financial matters".

C) The Archives

"The matter of archives is an important one for good administration, a lot more than certain people seem to think, judging by how often they are kept and maintained" (F. Contassot, "**St. Vincent de Paul, guide for superiors**", Vincentian Library, Paris, 1964, p.245) In the very year of his death, St. Vincent took care to send a circular to the Superiors in which he gave precise instructions on this subject (Coste VIII, 388-390) In a written culture like ours, it is a duty to keep documents carefully, some of which have a major value in proving our rights. Moreover, we have the express obligation to keep proof of a transfer (Stat.33) and the acts of the Provincial Assemblies (Stat.83).

It is with good reason that the Statutes require the Visitor "to take care of the Provincial archives, either personally or through competent people" (Stat.69.11) It is important to keep the record of our history in order to preserve our spirit and develop the sense of our community identity. In visits to the houses, it would be desirable that the Visitor should keep an eye on the existence and up-keep of the archives. It is not simply a question of keeping administrative documents but also of keeping the memory of important events. It is good, St. Vincent says, "_to take note during the year of the most important things, both spiritual and temporal, which occur in your house" (Coste VIII,389)

4) Developing a province:

A Visitor cannot limit his efforts to managing his Province and insuring its good administration. Our Constitutions require him to foster the apostolic work, that is, to improve and develop it, as well as concerning himself with the progress of each (n° 123.2). Urged on by the Provincial Assemblies, guided by the Provincial Norms, supported by his Council, the Visitor must take care to encourage the progress of his Province and each of its members.

A) the authority of the Visitor

The first principle, as formulated in the Constitutions, is to call us to a renewed dynamism. "The Congregation of the Mission...should take care to open up new ways and use new means adapted to the circumstances of time and place. Moreover, it should strive to evaluate and plan its works and ministries, and in this way remain in a continual state of renewal"

(n° 2)

It is not our brief to speak of that animation of a province which occurs primarily in the visits to the houses. On the other hand, the Visitor must know his powers well, not in order to make his authority felt, but to organise the Province better, in such a way as to "prepare its apostolic activity and to encourage and help it continually". (Con.19)

That said, power is only efficacious if it is spread out. This was one of the themes of the General Assembly of 1986. The general principle is given to us by the Constitutions: "All members, since they have been called to labour for the continuation of the mission of Christ, have the right and responsibility...of working together for the good of the apostolic community and of participating in its government (n°6). That is why our Constitutions speak of "sharing" (n°.46) of "cooperation" (N°96) and of coresponsibility (n°,24.2: 37.2. 149)

The primary responsibility of a superior is to make each one responsible in his own area. This is called the principle of subsidiarity, of which the Constitutions practically give a definition without actually using the term: "for this reason those matters which can be managed by individual members or lower levels of government should not be referred to higher levels of government". (n° 98)

B) Renewal

One cannot possibly give all the sources which may encourage the dynamism and development of a Province. Our Constitutions, however, emphasise certain points for us. It is up to the Provinces to "decide the forms of apostolate to be undertaken" (n° 13) They should know that "whatever we use for the apostolate, however modern and efficient, should not be ostentatious" (n° 33) "make prudent and moderate use of communication media" (n° 24.4) "know more thoroughly the needs of the world, and strengthen our wills to respond to them more effectively" (n° 43) give "a suitable place...to the technical media of social communication". (Stat.12)

Even given that the Constitutions (n° 23 & 129) lay great emphasis on the local community, the Visitor, throughout the community, should encourage the personal talents and evaluate the initiatives of confreres..."in this way the individuality and charisms of each member come together to foster community and make the mission effective" (n° 22)

On these lines, one of the most important responsibilities of the Visitor is the formation of the young and the not-so-young, because the future of the Province depends on them. He is, in fact, chiefly responsible for this, since admission to the different stages of formation depends chiefly on him (Con. 125.8:9:10) This concern must reach out to all the confreres given that "the formation of our members should be continued and renewed all through life" (n° 81)

In order to reinforce the dynamism of a Province let us also mention the laity. We are called to devote ourselves to "motivating and suitably preparing lay people for the pastoral ministries necessary in a Christian community" (Con.15) We need to recognise, however, our difficulty in organising real groups of lay associates, unlike

other congregations. Perhaps our collaboration with the Daughters of Charity has distanced us somewhat from this concern.

It is not just about getting help from, or being assisted by lay people of good will, but, rather, it is about communicating to them our spirit in order to make them real partners in the apostolic work which we undertake. We are recommended to "teach clerics and laity to work together" (Con.15), yet we are reticent about doing it ourselves.

Our meeting takes place in the light of the last Assembly General, the 38th of our Congregation. The Superior General, Father Maloney, summed it up in a phrase in his closing homily: "May our service be competent and creative" (Vincentiana, 4-5,1992, p.329). Competence and creativity, these are, without any doubt, the two principal qualities of the Visitor in his role as administrator.

(Translator: Eugene Curran, C.M.)