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PREPARATION FOR THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF 1998

*Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General*

Our next ordinary General Assembly will be held in June or July 1998. Today I ask your help in beginning to prepare for it.

As you know, the General Assembly is the supreme authority in the Congregation of the Mission. As such, it has the right (C 137 and S 84)

1_ to protect the heritage of the Institute and to foster appropriate renewal in accord with that heritage;

2_ to elect the superior general, vicar general, and assistants general;

3_ to enact laws or Statutes, and Decrees, for the good of the Congregation, with due regard for the principle of subsidiarity. Statutes which are not explicitly abrogated remain in force. Decrees must be explicitly confirmed in order to remain in force;

4_ by a two thirds vote to request changes from the Holy See in the Constitutions approved by it;

5_ to interpret authentically the Statutes; the authentic interpretation of the Constitutions, however, belongs to the Holy See;

6_ to make declarations which have doctrinal force and the character of an exhortation.

This morning I am asking your assistance in regard to three matters particularly: 1) the selection of the preparatory commission, 2) the selection of the theme of the General Assembly, 3) the revision of the directory, which contains the rules by which the General Assembly is run.

I. Naming of the Preparatory Commission

Statute 88 states the following: "Before the convocation of the General Assembly, the superior general, with his council, having heard the provincials and paying attention to different regions and works, should appoint a preparatory commission at an opportune time." (Statute 88, § 1)

A frequent complaint at General Assemblies has been lack of continuity between the work of the preparatory commission and the work of the Assembly itself.

Sometimes this is inevitable, since the Assembly decides to take a different direction from that originally proposed by the preparatory commission. The Assembly has the clear right to do this. At other times, however, some members of the preparatory commission might not actually be elected to the General Assembly and, as a result, might not have the opportunity to communicate clearly to the Assembly the rationale behind the huge amount of work that has been prepared. As a result, some Assemblies start all over from the beginning and, after many weeks of work, wind up with results that may be only marginally different from what the preparatory commission had already achieved.

One way of assuring that the members of the preparatory commission are present at the General Assembly is to name, as its members, some of the Visitors who will, ex officio, be present in 1998. I offer that to you as a possibility as you reflect upon your own suggestions in regard to the membership of the preparatory commission.

I am distributing, right now, a small questionnaire in which I ask you to suggest names for membership on the preparatory commission. We will break up into continental groups later this morning so that you can discuss these candidates together. I ask each group to suggest two or three confreres as possible members of the preparatory commission. Individual Visitors can also suggest additional names if you wish. You should feel completely free to suggest people who are not here among us today or people who are here.

We will then use your suggestions in the General Council very soon as the basis for naming the preparatory commission.

II. Theme of the General Assembly

The preparatory commission will surely be contacting you during the coming year about the theme for the Assembly. Today, however, I would like to have some initial input from you, as Visitors. Most of you will be present at the General Assembly, so it is very important that the theme be of significant interest to you as a group.

What themes do you think it most important for the Congregation to discuss? Here during this meeting we have reflected on inculturation, and under that heading on:

- vocation and formation
- the vows and virtues of the Congregation
- communal prayer
- popular missions
- formation of the diocesan clergy and laity

foreign missions
community living
relationships with bishops
interprovincial collaboration

Another theme about which there is at present much discussion in the Congregation is the Vincentian Family, with particular emphasis on the Vincentian lay groups.

I am distributing a small questionnaire now asking for your suggestions in regard to the theme. We will break up into continental groups. I ask each group to suggest three themes for the General Assembly in order of preference. Individual Visitors can suggest other themes if you wish. We will compile these during the next few days and then, when you have seen the suggestions of the other groups, I will distribute another questionnaire, asking you once again, next Friday, to indicate your priorities.

III. Revision of the Directory

The General Assembly is a very large group. It has more or less 120 voting members, plus a facilitator, translators, secretaries, and other assistants who help it run smoothly. But you already know, as Visitors, that it is not easy for large groups to function harmoniously, especially when the members have different languages and different cultural backgrounds. In that light a good directory is important. The evaluations of the last General Assembly contained much criticism of the directory. For that reason, immediately afterwards, we began, in the General Council, a process of revising it.

Here is what has taken place so far.

October - November 1992

We drafted a complete revision of the directory of the General Assembly guided by three criteria: 1) the evaluations made by the members of the General Assembly of 1992, 2) former directories, 3) our own experiences during the past several General Assemblies.

January 5 - 15, 1993

The members of the General Council discussed this first draft, revised it once again, and translated it into three languages.

April 15, 1993

I wrote to all of the Visitors presenting this revised draft of a new directory, along with a questionnaire. Each of you has a copy. I asked the Visitors to give their reactions to the principal changes. The most significant changes between this directory and that of the General Assembly of 1992 are as follows:

1. Paragraph 5
PROBLEM: the choice of Moderators _ sometimes those elected had little experience in running large meetings.
SOLUTION: the draft states that they will be chosen *before* the Assembly and that the principal criterion for the choice will be their skill in running meetings.
2. Paragraphs 14 and 15.1
PROBLEM: the election of the Superior General _ many felt that a better process should be designed for getting to know more about the candidates before voting.
SOLUTION: the draft states that the preparatory commission will gather, and publish, factual information about each member of the Assembly, his specialized formation, his experience, his assignments, his responsibilities. The goal here is to be of service to those who want more information about the candidates whom they will be electing. In fact, this had actually been done by Fr. Alejandro Rigazio prior to some of the previous assemblies.
3. Paragraphs 15.2, 15.3, 15.4, and 15.5
PROBLEM: the election of the Vicar General and the other three Assistants _ a clearer process is needed.
SOLUTION: the second draft suggests a process that, I think, corresponds to what often really happens "underground" during General Assemblies; namely, the linguistic or regional groups will propose criteria and names prior to the elections.
4. Paragraph 16
PROBLEM: the treatment of postulata _ much time was wasted in treating postulata of lesser importance, which created confusion in the Assembly.
SOLUTION: the draft provides that a special commission would study the postulata *prior* to the General Assembly and would make a recommendation as to how these

postulata should be treated, always safeguarding the right of the Assembly to do what it wishes.

5. Paragraphs 20 and 21

PROBLEM: the writing of propositions and documents _ because of the deficiencies of the directory in this regard, we had to supplement it on several occasions with more detailed instructions. These instructions were usually given to the Assembly orally and created a lot of confusion.

SOLUTION: the draft provides for a careful process of submitting amendments and modi. We have relied on previous directories for supplementing the steps to be used in regard to approving amendments and modi.

6. Paragraphs 22 and 23

PROBLEM: some felt that the Documentum Laboris could have been the basis for the final document, rather than writing a completely new one.

SOLUTION: The draft provides for the possible use of the Documentum Laboris as a basic text, if the Assembly wishes.

June 14 - 17, 1994

When the reactions of the Visitors had arrived, the General Council decided to examine the draft once again. A subcommittee was named to review all of the Visitors comments and to propose a new draft for a future session of the General Council.

May 3, 1995

The subcommittee reported that the Visitors were almost unanimous in their approval of most of the changes made in the directory. A number of Visitors, however, questioned the wisdom of one of the changes made in article 5 concerning the moderators. This article, in its draft form, read as follows:

Three MODERATORS will be chosen before the Assembly by the Superior General with the consent of his council; even those who are not members of the Congregation may be chosen. The principal criterion for choosing them will be their skill in running meetings. They are not voting members of the Assembly, unless they are elected or ex officio members.

Thirty Visitors approved this paragraph. Four were opposed. Many, however, added in their comments that they felt that moderators should not be chosen from outside the Congregation. At our meeting of May 3, 1995, we decided to omit the phrase, "even those who are not members of the Congregation may be chosen."

Soon the preparatory commission for the General Assembly of 1998 will once again request your comments on this revised draft, especially on the six points mentioned above. I ask you to work closely with the commission in examining it once more and perfecting it. I would like to avoid long discussions of the directory during the General Assembly itself. In the past these have proved terribly frustrating. Many have felt them to be a waste of time. Rather, I would like the preparatory commission to be able to say to the Assembly, "Here is a fully revised directory that has been well prepared over the last six years and has the full support of the Visitors." The Assembly could then confidently approve the draft at the outset and get on with its business.

I am launching the preparation for the General Assembly here in Salamanca because I want the Visitors to be involved right from the start. The Assembly is the representative body of the entire Congregation (C 137). Its effectiveness depends on the full active participation of its members. Almost all of us here will take part. I hope that, together, we can make it an effective instrument for animating the Congregation in the service of the poor.