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Dealings with bishops

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Introduction:

This is certainly a complex topic. Since Vatican II, the Church sees herself in a new perspective. There have also been cultural innovations. All of this has brought different situations and problems in our dealings with Bishops.

Without doubt, the realities we face are very diverse and therefore situations will be varied. For our part, we have not seen great differences in our dealings with some Bishops of Rome, of the Latin American Episcopal Conference, with some Episcopal Conferences where we have relationships and work in their dioceses. Bishops are always Bishops that belong to a special group. In any case, there can be different experiences.

The place which religious, secular institutes and societies of apostolic life have in many parts and their quantitative and qualitative contribution also has an influence in these relations. We can think of certain African or Latin American dioceses where more than half the clergy is not diocesan; its way of being and acting is therefore different. In other places, the diocesan clergy is very strong and there is greater closeness of bishops to their priests; many times this calls for humility.

Vatican Council II set down a series of normative principles about dealings with diocesan bishops and the exercise of apostolate and other activities. Later on, these principles were developed by M.P. *Ecclesiae Sanctae* and the *Directory Mutuae Relationes* of 1978.

Then too there have been meetings and assemblies where the following has been asked:

- a) What do bishops expect of us?
- b) What do we expect of bishops?
- c) What means can be used to obtain a rich collaboration between both on the diocesan level and on the national and international level?

From the response to these questions, the document *Mutuae Relationes* was written, which is important for our topic: it is taken into account here and other documents are cited; the renewal principles coming from Vatican II are brought together and new reflections are made.

Recently, important reflections were made at the Synod of Bishops about "Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World", Rome 2-29, October 1994.

Taking into account all of the above, we will make our presentation. We believe that what is important are doctrinal foundations, the criteria by which these are practiced and the missionary practice proper to our charism.

I. Doctrinal elements

1. Fidelity to the Plan of God

According to Vincent de Paul, the Congregation of the Mission exists by the will of God. If unresponsive to God's wishes, it should disappear.

It was divine providence that finally led St. Vincent, through the events of his life, to dedicate himself to the salvation of the needy. In this perspective we find the origin of his own vocation and that of the Congregation of the Mission.

Our birth is like that of the "New people, who enlivened by the Spirit, come together in Christ to reach the Father" (Cfr. Ef. 2:18). The individuals that compose this People are brought together from all the nations and come together in intimate unity (LP. 9). It happens that only in this transcendent perspective can mutual relations among diverse members of the Church have an exact understanding. (MR, 1). The vision of Christ sent by the Father to evangelize the poor became the center of the life and the apostolic work of our Founder, but it is Christ who brings about our unity and intercommunion as a people. His Holy Spirit enlivens and produces organic cohesion to give great fruit (LG 4) and give vigor and strength to the Mission.

Our relationship and communion with the bishops ought to have as a first source and model the Trinitarian life itself of God. In the Trinity, we have the equality and diversity of persons; among them different relationships exist; each has his way of acting in the history of salvation: the Father sending the Son, the Son becoming flesh, dying and rising, and the Holy Spirit sanctifying us and animating us.

We are called to have relationships with our bishops, in different circumstances, not of uniformity but of unity and diversity. Each one has its place in the plan of God.

God raised up the Congregation in a moment of problems and disorientation in the Church in order to respond to urgent needs[fo1] imitating Jesus Christ. (RC 1, 1). This new work[fo2] wished by God is something we ought to preserve; the contribution to the Church of our charism brought about by God's design.

2. With Ecclesial Communion

We are all members of the Church, Body of Christ, People of God, and "All the members, pastors, laity and religious, participate each according to his way in the sacramental nature of the Church. In the same way, each according to his role ought to be

sign and instrument of union with God and of the salvation of the world" (MR 4). And all must fulfill the double vocation to holiness (LG. 39) and apostolate (AG, 1; 2; 3;4; 5).

First of all the Church is communion flowing from the Trinity. As St. Cyprian writes, she is "a people gathered through the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (LG. 4; PL 4, 553). But as the III General Conference of Latin American Bishops said to us, participation is also necessary in the sense of contributing from one's own role for the good of all. (Puebla, 211-219). From this point of view, just as among persons of the Trinity there can be no subordination, neither can there be in the Church. In our relationships with bishops, we believe it is important that our ecclesial communion with them take into account the ecclesial communion which flows from the Trinity, is inspired by it and tends toward it.

Hierarchical communion is important for visible and historic continuity with the Apostles and through them with the historical Jesus (Apostolic Succession). But communion with the People of God and especially for us with the poor is also important. And all communion cannot lose sight of the greater good of communion with God. Jesus always wants to show us the way to God through the dynamism of the Spirit.

Our relationships with bishops cannot do without what the theologian Chenu called true "architecture of the Church." In this structure, the poor have to be important[fo3], these are the ones to be served following Jesus. In this architecture, the priest has a special orientation. St. Vincent expressed it boldly this way:

"The priests of this time have great reason to fear God's judgements... and God will shake them through punishments he sends because they do not oppose as they should the plagues like.... war, hunger and heresy."[fo4]

As followers of St. Vincent, we are called to be missionaries who work to free the needy spiritually and materially. This is can never be denied. The laity join in this task through the demands of their Baptism; St. Vincent led them masterfully in this service.[fo5]

We must always be aware that the organic communion of the Church, in its spiritual aspect as in its hierarchial dimension, flows jointly from Christ and his Spirit (MR 5). Christ is the head and the Spirit promised by the Father is like the soul of the body (LG 5 and 7).

The bishops in hierarchial communion with the Roman Pontiff and surrounded by their priests have the presence of Jesus and are, in the place of the same Christ, teacher, pastor and pontiff, acting for him (LG 21; PO 1, Ch. D, 2) and in the name of "Christ the Head" (PO 2). In a unified way, in favor of the community of the faithful, they exercise a triple ministry of teaching, sanctifying and governing (Ch. D. 12-22; PO , 4-6).

This is communion [fo6]in a descendent and ascendent sense. It is important that this view be present in our relationships.

3. From Our Own Charism

We have already said that the soul of the body of the Church is the Holy Spirit: "No member of the People of God, whatever ministry he exercises, possesses in an isolated way all of the gifts, functions and ministries, but rather ought to be in communion with the rest. The different gifts and functions of the People of God come together and are reciprocally complimented in one communion and mission (MR 9).

We too are a special gift given to the Church (LG, 43). It is from that perspective that we give our collaboration and offer our vocation (PC 1; 2). Our charism reveals itself as "An experience of the Spirit" (EN 11), which must be lived, deepened and developed within a church in change and growth. Our own character demands that we be about a style of apostolate that we can never renounce without losing our own identity and becoming ambiguous.

It is up to us to show the bishops our genuine originality from fidelity to the Lord and in docility to the Spirit. From this perspective, we need to know how to interpret the signs of the times and respond to new needs.

In this same sense of our own spirit, our superiors must exercise their function of service and guidance. Their authority also comes from the Spirit of the Lord in connection to the hierarchy. Following the Magisterium, they must fulfill their functions of teachers who teach, priests who sanctify, pastors who govern the Congregation in the internal area and for the enrichment of the Church. We are born in the Church and we are for her from our own proper spirit according to the demands of the times.

We must always remember that the charism of St. Vincent is a particular gift which the Holy Spirit gives for the good of the Church, constitutes a particular way of discovering and following Christ, and of continuing his mission of Evangelizer of the Poor. [fo7]

Today as well, it is our role to follow Christ, evangelizer and servant of the Poor; like Vincent, we are to follow God and serve the material and spiritual poor. The spirit in which to do so is to take on the apostolic virtues of simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification and zeal for souls. Fraternal life helps this very mission and vocation. The Evangelical Councils of Chastity, Poverty, Obedience and Stability, are appropriate means for our gift to God and in order to be available for service. A true service of the Church and relationships with bishops must be realized from the nucleus of our charism.

4. For the Mission

The mission has a special importance for the Congregation of the Mission, but we must remember that the mission of the People of God is unique and constitutes, in a certain way, the nucleus of the whole ecclesial mystery. And the mission of the Church by its own nature is nothing other than the mission of the same Christ prolonged in the history of the world (MR 15).

The mission, however, is developed in different cultural conditions. It is important also to take into account to whom the mission is directed, and for us this is the poor. This certainly has an influence in our relationships with bishops, who ought to respect our specific mission. Balance between the values of universality and singularity is important; it demands discernment. For true unity and specific service, variety is necessary. This is not opposed to unity. According to Vatican Council, unity "comes before and is the basis of every charismatic and ministerial distinction." [fo8] In fulfillment of the mission there must also be coordination with the Holy See, Episcopal Conferences and the Diocese. This way the mission is most effective. In this coordination dialogue and common discernment of the will of God are important.

Ignorance about our charism and mission can produce problems. Mutual understanding and sincere dialogue are always helpful.

For our part, we must see our Founder as a man of the Church concerned about the urgent needs of his time. He had a commitment with Jesus Christ and his cause; he acted as a son of the Church. He related adequately with bishops in order to be able to accomplish in the best way his mission with the needy. He felt and acted in communion with the Church.

II. Some principles

The principles which ought to guide our dealings with bishops are found implicitly or they come from the doctrinal bases set out above. We will now go over some of them.

1. The Principle of Subordination

Notwithstanding what has already been said, there are specific activities which are submitted to the jurisdiction of bishops in each diocese in Canon 768, activities relative to the saving of souls, the exercise of public cult and apostolic works are spoken about. Other activities such as sacred preaching, religious education, catetchetical instruction and liturgical formation of the faithful are regulated by the code of Canon Law, principally in Book III.

It seems important to understand this well. Submission and respect for the power of the bishops should not let us forget that we are also subject to the authority of the Congregation. For St. Vincent, this subordination came from the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. About this he says to us: "First of all, we owe reverence and loyal and sincere obedience to our Father, the Pope. We also owe obedience with humility and constancy according to the demands of our Rule, to the reverend Bishops in whose diocese the Congregation is established".

The ideal is to forge a common agreement between bishops and superiors. It is important that these agreements be written and well worked out.

2. The Principle of Collaboration

We are called to cooperate with bishops, but also to collaborate with other Institutes and the secular clergy.

It is important to remember that "The Congregation of the Mission is a clerical society of apostolic life and pontifical right." (Constitutions 3:1). This is the basis of our relationships. We enjoy an autonomy proper to universal law and also by exemption." Nevertheless our Constitutions tell us: "The Congregation of the Mission, according to a tradition which has its origin in St. Vincent, exercises its apostolate in intimate cooperation with the bishops and with the diocesan clergy" (Const. 3:2).

In this collaboration we must integrate other aspects and not forget that we are for service and the common good. The provinces must judge the forms of apostolate they should assume in fidelity to the Spirit and example of St. Vincent.

In our mutual relationships, we must not oppose the charismatic and the institutional; "Both elements, that is, the spiritual gifts and ecclesial structures, form only one, though complex, reality (MR 34; cfr. LG, 8).

Bishops and superiors as authorities should promote participation in the local church according to the norms and current ecclesial dispositions, which they ought to know.

3. Principle of Coordination

In this same way, under the direction of the diocesan bishop, coordination of the works and apostolic activities ought to be done "respecting the character, and basic laws of each Institute." According to the mind and spirit of St. Vincent, our relationships with bishops ought to be "in accord with universal law and that proper to our Institute." The Church herself wants us to realize our own apostolic end. In this way we integrate our apostolic activity in the pastoral work of the local church.

The multiple relationships ought to be handled by agreements in particular things. About formation we are asked: "In this way then, bishops and superiors, each according to his own competence but in mutual agreement and perfect unity, give a true precedence to the responsibility of formation (MR, cfr. V). By common agreement prayer and vocation ought to be promoted. It would be desirable to take on joint initiatives in the field of writings, formation and gatherings. From the stages of formation we should be prepared for these relationships: mutual understanding will later help the coordination of these dealings which also ought to extend to the fields of social communications, social problems, economy and politics and other fields.

As was said in preparing the Synod of the Bishops, the exercise of the ministry of bishop "is developed according to the principles of the unity of faith and government, the division of

apostolic tasks and offices, of sincere reciprocal help and complementarity" (Instrumentum Laboris, 75).

III. Orientation for our practice

We are all members of the same body and we must fulfill the mission which corresponds to us within the Church. This lives through the Spirit and is founded on Peter and the Apostles and their successors.

On the other hand, the Church is also mystery, people of God on the move. In the convergence of these perspectives we find the demands presented to us, the obligations and responsibilities on the operative level and the appropriate coordinations.

Flowing from this we wish to make reference to some aspects of our practice. What we are going to say not only takes into account doctrinal aspects and principles but also flows from the experience we have had in relationships with bishops on different levels. We can say that these relationships ought to have especially the following aspects:

1. We cannot respond only to current immediate necessities and forget specific reference to our charism. Charism, spirit and purpose are permanent. There inculturation and renewal can be new. We and the bishops ought to respond to current cultural conditions which are in strong flux but do so without forgetting the permanence of who we are.
2. We must feel ourselves true members of the Church, of the diocesan family, from our charism and specific mission. And in this perspective our dealings with bishops occur.
3. In consequence, from all that has been said, it corresponds to us to attend to the needs of the bishops, fill their vacancies, but serve them within our possibilities according to the end of the Congregation of the Mission.
4. Because of our charism we have a special responsibility to give importance to all that favors reciprocal confidence, apostolic solidarity, and fraternal relations between diocesan clergy, religious communities and bishops (cfr. *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, I, 28). This contribution seems to be in line with the wish of St. Vincent. It helps strengthen the sense of the local church and it is a necessary service and cooperation today.
5. Many times bishops ask that we take over parishes for which they have no diocesan clergy; now we know that this was not one of the apostolates most esteemed by St. Vincent. Today we take parishes or missionary zones with a missionary sense. Our opinion is that this ought not to be our predominant work and collaboration. More direct mission work ought to have primacy over the parish.

6. Even though situations and needs are very distinct in different places, we think that there is much to be done in formation and attention to the clergy in the classic sense and especially in new ways. There are many needs of formation and spiritual help. This is extensive to the laity as well. Connection with bishops and dealings with bishops and the renewal of these, along with clergy reform, was something important to St. Vincent[fo9]. In some places this need is a very felt one..

7. Especially in mission countries poverties exist about which it is very important to cooperate with the bishops. There is no one prepared for this work and therein could be new forms of direct or indirect service. Discernment must be done about each case.

8. There are also new apostolates for mission. Such is the case of the Social Doctrine of the Church, means of social communication, inter-religious and ecumenical dialogue, the Sects. These and other works can be new forms of mission.

9. A privileged field of cooperation is vocational ministry. This is very joined to mission. Because of this we ought to favor local church vocations and our own directing the vocation of young people in freedom. This way there will occur plurality, enrichment and the building of the Church.

10. Bishops and superiors, in dialogue, can discern and seek out new fields of apostolate which are in line with our charism. It will also be important to renew existing commitments. As St. Paul tells us, we must "examine everything and retain what is good". Continued evaluation and humility are important therefore to correct, suspend or redirect what has begun. It will be very positive if confidence exists reciprocally between bishops and superiors in the realization of these tasks.

11. In all of these relationships it is always important to have an attitude of goodwill, of avoiding conflicts and competition, of overcoming ambiguities, of not falling into justifications and of firmness in terms of identity and commitment.

12. As the Synod of Bishops proposes, every praxis should take into account "The organic communion of the Church, characterized by common presence, diversity, and complimentary aspects of the vocations and conditions of life of the ministries, charisms and responsibilities" (Lineamenta, 34).

We ought to be disponible, but this must be understood in conformity with our own charism, our own end and the correct autonomy of life and government, to express itself in the pastoral needs of the local church, in a spirit of sincere collaboration with the local clergy and laity. (Instrumentum Laboris, 74). In this way we will be living in conformity with our purpose.

Final words

In ending I wish to emphasize that this topic is broad and has many different levels of relationship: diocesan, national and universal. There are also many particular aspects; our relationships with bishops are different when the work is our own, or the bishop's or mixed. I have wished not to be too detailed but to present a general orientation and spirit about our dealings with bishops.

Without taking away the importance that the juridical has in all of this, I think that the more important emphasis is the moral, spiritual and pastoral. The Episcopal Conferences have little juridical force but some have a great strength and moral influence. Would that our own contribution be the same. I think more important than defending our norms is to be a moral, spiritual and pastoral strength by what we are and what we do and how we do it.

In the last Synod reference was also made to the topic of relationships with bishops. In the preparatory document *Lineamenta* and the *Instrumentum Laboris* we find the bishops complaining about the excessive mobility of religious who work in their dioceses. On the other hand, these last fear the excessive stability that diocesan institutions impose on them and the danger of losing their own identity.

Certainly this problem and other difficulties exist. Some think that these are based principally on how we insert ourselves in the pastoral plans of the Church according to our identity and in how the bishops respect what we can give according to our vocation and mission.

In the concrete we find ourselves also with questions or particular problems coming from the way of acting of each bishop, the Visitor and confreres. To this we must simply give a practical and realistic orientation so that in the best way possible juridical, human and ministerial relationships can be developed. Examples are not lacking in which commitments and contracts are not fulfilled faithfully by bishops and cases where extraordinary efforts must be made to maintain good relationships. Nevertheless, the panorama should not be seen in a negative way. Certainly dialogue and very positive collaborations exist to different degrees. We must make this grow in order also to increase its fruits. Formation and conviction about the importance of good relationships, the valuing of cooperation in the ways laid out here, reciprocal confidence, respect for competencies, a spirit of sharing and fraternity is the way to continue to be together Church-Sacrament of salvation in the world and culture of today.

This is my contribution. It is open to dialogue and enrichment.

(Translator: James E. Claffey, C.M.)

[nota1] Cfr. ALVAREZ, J., *La vida religiosa como respuesta a las necesidades de la Iglesia y del mundo*, en *Vida Religiosa*, 50 (1983), 152.

[nota2]Cfr. METZ, J.B., **Las Ordenes Religiosas**, Barcelona, 1988, p.12.

[nota3]Cf. VV.AA., **Vida y reflexión**, CEP, Lima, p.16.

[nota4]V 568 / V 541.

[nota5]Cf. CORERA, J., **El signo de los tiempos, Contribución a una teología vicenciana de la liberación**, Madrid, pp. 90-93.

[nota6]Cfr. CODINA, V., **Eclesialidad de la Vida religiosa**, en VV.AA., **Retos de la vida religiosa hacia el año 2000**, Bogotá, 1994, p. 257.

[nota7] QUINTANO, F., **El carisma a inculturar**, en **Ecos de la Compañía**, nº 12 (1995), p. 401.

[nota8] FORTE, B., **Laicito e laicità**, Torino 1987, p.20.

[nota9]Cfr. GONZALEZ, J.J., **La Iglesia**, en **Diccionario de espiritualidad Vicentina**, Salamanca, 1995, p. 301.