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Documentum Laboris: 39th General Assembly

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**CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION
PCGA 1998**

**DOCUMENTUM LABORIS
39th GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

**The Worldwide Vincentian Family and the
Challenges of the Mission in the Third Millennium**

The "*Documentum Laboris*" of the 1992 General Assembly encouraged the Congregation of the Mission to examine the contradictions of our world and to blaze new paths to respond to the world's dilemmas. It invited us *to open our eyes* to the realities which the poor confront; *to open our hearts* to love the poor as God loves them; *to open our arms* to evangelize and serve the poor as St. Vincent taught us to do; *to open our way of thinking* so that we can collaborate with others in the knowledge, love and service we give to God by our knowledge, love and service to the poor.

The 1992 General Assembly¹ was known as a pastoral assembly. The delegates shared their apostolic experiences to animate the Assembly itself and to encourage the Congregation to assume apostolic commitments in view of the needs of our time.² It did not intend to draft a very comprehensive document, rather a simple personal letter from brothers to confreres.³

Our 1998 General Assembly, at the turning point between the second and third millennium, *will also be a pastoral assembly*. Taking into account the recommendations of the provinces in their responses to the Consultative Document, the Preparatory Commission suggests that the 1998 General Assembly begin where the 1992 General Assembly left off.

We now know the theme of the 1998 Assembly as a result of the preparations realized in the Domestic and Provincial Assemblies: *The Worldwide Vincentian Family and the Challenges for the Mission in the Third Millennium*. We are invited to *open the horizons of the Congregation of the Mission* toward the new day that is dawning, conscious that in the world many Christians, and the number is growing, strive to follow

¹ The 1992 General Assembly adopted as a theme the words of St. Paul "*transform yourself by the renewal of your mind*" (Rom 12:2).

² Cf. *Vincentiana* (1992) 271-391; 392-531; 556-585.

³ The dynamic of the Assembly centered on the interchange of experiences of the apostolic work of the delegates themselves or of their provinces. The final letter of the 1992 Assembly to the confreres recognized: "*To tell the truth, we were able to make experience the 'key' of the Assembly.*"

Jesus Christ along that road taken by Vincent de Paul and his disciples, such as Louise de Marillac and Frederick Ozanam.

In order to develop the theme of the General Assembly, the PCGA '98 thinks that the Consultative Document, which inspired the celebration of the Domestic and Provincial Assemblies, continues to maintain its usefulness as a point of reference.⁴ Thus, gathering up the sense of the responses of the provinces, the PCGA '98 now proposes as the DOCUMENTUM LABORIS, a blending of *convictions and commitments* that can help the General Assembly to make some decisions.

I. First Part: Convictions

1. *As we approach the new Millennium, we feel the responsibility toward the Mission to be even stronger.*

As Church and in the Church,⁵ we, the members of the Congregation of the Mission are *on our way to the third millennium*.

The Pope has presented to us the decisive objective of the Jubilee and the common basic theme of the coming years: *"Everything ought to focus on the primary objective of the jubilee: the strengthening of faith and of the witness of Christians. It is therefore necessary to inspire in all the faithful a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and personal renewal in a context of ever more intense prayer and of solidarity with one's neighbors, especially the most needy."*⁶

The Domestic and Provincial Assemblies have gathered the *challenges* that we must live with at this moment in history.

We are well aware of the many problems of today's world. We barely scratch the surface of some problems, when other new ones strike our heart:

- The world of poverty is constantly growing wider and the number of the poor continues to grow.
- Poverty threatens every day in new ways and presents itself with new faces.

⁴ The PCGA '98 did not want to go back and repeat here the Consultative Document that, according to the province reports, helped the reflection so much. In this present *Documentum Laboris*, the PCGA '98 has remained faithful to the proposals of the Provincial Assemblies in their responses to the questionnaire that accompanied the Consultative Document.

This *Documentum Laboris* ought to be read in conjunction with the other instruments prepared by the PCGA '98: synthesis of the responses of the provinces to the Consultative Document; postulata and recommendations for their discussion; suggestions for the dynamic of the General Assembly; proposals for the Directory.

⁵ Cf. Constitution 20.

⁶ *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 42; cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 21.

- Due to the violent changes arising from neo-liberalism, shifting ideologies, and a certain type of death culture,⁷ even more complicated problems confront us. We find it difficult to discover the appropriate solutions. We are urged to an increased creativity.

We discover that our world:

- *Finds itself in need of God*, due to secularism, due to the loss of human values and Christian principles, due to indifference, due to attacks of fundamentalism. The moral and spiritual heritage of many of our people "runs the risk of being dispersed under the impact of a multiplicity of processes, including secularization and the spread of sects."⁸

- *Finds itself in need of love*, solidarity, the generous response of men and women willing and able to volunteer,⁹ not for war, hatred, and violence, but rather for peace, justice and love; persons who work for and concern themselves with accepting, assisting, directing, helping, sustaining and raising up all those citizens and brothers and sisters that society has impoverished and abused.

- *Finds itself in need of our witness and dedication*: "The world is calling for evangelizers to speak to it of a God whom the evangelists themselves should know and be familiar with as if they could see the invisible. The world calls for and expects from us simplicity of life, the spirit of prayer, charity towards all, especially towards the lowly and the poor, obedience and humility, detachment and self-sacrifice. Without this mark of holiness, our word will have difficulty in touching the heart of modern man."¹⁰

We are convinced that at this historical moment, the Church calls us to *intensify our missionary commitment*. Given that *love is creative unto infinity*, we must pursue and tune our responses in favor of the poor. "The whole Church, Pastors and lay faithful alike, standing on the threshold of the Third Millennium, ought to feel more strongly the Church's responsibility to obey the command of Christ, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation' (Mk 16:15), and take up anew the missionary endeavour. A great venture, both challenging and wonderful, is entrusted to the Church _ that of a *re-evangelization*, which is so much needed by the present world."¹¹

⁷ *Evangelium Vitae*, 12.

⁸ Cf. *Christifideles Laici*, 34.

⁹ Cf. *Centesimus Annus*, 49.

¹⁰ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 76.

¹¹ *Christifideles Laici*, 64.

2. ***We, the members of the Congregation of the Mission know that in all the world, the Vincentian Family strives to live out faithfully their following of Jesus Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor.***

During the celebration of our Domestic and Provincial Assemblies, we lived through the experience of a *joyful discovery*. We discovered that together with us, the members of the Congregation of the Mission, there are many other persons and groups in the Church that are on fire with the same spirit and the same zeal that animates us. There are a great number of persons inspired by the charism of St. Vincent de Paul who labor in the evangelization of the poor.

A recent study identified 268 groups that can find their place on our *family tree*.¹² Many other persons are involved in the works of evangelization and service to the poor with the members of the Vincentian Family, even though they do not pertain juridically to any of the groups: professors in our seminaries or education centers, alumni, collaborators, benefactors, ex-confreres, lay missionaries, catechists.

In a like manner, the members of these groups *challenge us to respond jointly to the cry of the poor*.

During the 1998 General Assembly, *we will celebrate the gathering of the Congregation of the Mission with other groups of our Vincentian Family*.

- We will give thanks to God for the gift of the Spirit that fills the Vincentian charism and is spread in the world through many outward expressions.

- We will share, with the members of the various Vincentian groups, the challenge to promote, among ourselves, new attitudes that will make our collaboration, our familiarity, and our coordination more effective: at the local level, at the provincial and interprovincial level, at the continental level and at the world level.

- We will accept some realistic commitments with a projection toward the future in order to respond together to the challenges of the mission as we look toward the third millennium.

II. Second Part: Commitments

The responses of the provinces have insisted that the General Assembly formulate some concrete and effective commitments.

¹² Cf. Betty Ann McNeil, *Monograph 1: The Vincentian Family Tree*, Vincentian Studies Institute, 1996. 61.5 % of these groups still exist (165). These groups were either founded by St. Vincent de Paul, or adopt the rules of St. Vincent de Paul or simply find their inspiration in him, or possess a spirituality based on St. Vincent de Paul.

To respond to our vocation and mission, the members of the Congregation of the Mission, at the threshold of the third millennium, commit ourselves:

1. *To promote the coordination of the Vincentian Family.*

Together with the members of the Vincentian Family, we can become a most effective force for the service of evangelization and for the works of charity in the Church.

Coordination is a stable way of working that assumes a common thrust. It is familiarity, it is fondness, it is motion in the same direction. It implies a thrust forward. It creates a style, a habit. It requires humility, because it means others are also necessary.¹³

1.1. In the next two years and for the new millennium, we will make every effort to acquire in each one of us and in each one of our communities, a change of heart and attitude that will enable us to feel with a new heart and to see with a new vision each person and each group of the Vincentian Family.

1.2. In each one of those places where the Congregation of the Mission is established, the local superiors will take the first steps to establish levels of coordination with the Vincentian Family of that place. The Visitors, the Conferences of Visitors, and the Superior General will also move forward in this same way.

1.3. In each one of those places where the Congregation of the Mission is established, the local superiors will promote common prayer, preferably liturgical prayer, with the members of the Vincentian Family of that place: it should be a vibrant prayer, faithful to the Vincentian tradition, creative and beautiful for God and for the youth.

1.4. Knowing that coordination is not always easy to achieve, we will be open and disposed to facilitate it, at the local level, at the provincial and general levels; and we will never say "no" nor will we give up on the attempts to come together and to coordinate (however great the difficulties and problems may be).

1.5. A register should be opened in the General Curia of the Congregation of the Mission that will contain the inscribed groups that pertain to the Vincentian Family: a) the institutes founded by St. Vincent de Paul; b) the institutes inspired by St. Vincent de Paul and approved by the legitimate ecclesiastical authorities, or by the Superior General or by the Visitors within the context of their own

¹³ This is the concrete expression and confirmation of a communal ecclesiology. Cf. Synod of Bishops, 1985.

provinces. This register is to be updated each year and shared with all the provinces.

1.6. Statute 7 will be modified in such a way that it includes the term Vincentian Family, and that it express clearly our commitment of coordination, mutual collaboration, and service to formation.

Do you believe that the Congregation of the Mission will be able to fulfill each one of these obligations?

2. *To respond in a meaningful way to the calls of the poor.*

The perspective of the Third Millennium invites us to face, with renewed missionary effort, the vast "territories" where Christ is still not sufficiently present as Redeemer and Fullness.¹⁴

The Vincentian Family Tree sinks its roots in the discovery that the poor are *our lords and masters*, they represent Our Lord himself to us, and it assures us that we should consider done to the Lord that which we do to the least of our brothers and sisters.¹⁵ How will we be able to celebrate the bi-millennium of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the missionary of the Father and the Evangelizer of the Poor? The poor will not be able to make pilgrimages to Rome nor to the temple in Jerusalem.¹⁶ The missionaries can journey with the poor toward a new millennium of solidarity and service to the temple that is the human person;¹⁷ we can make ourselves one with them, and share our lives with them because they are the *special members* of our family.¹⁸ Thus, the Jubilee will be Good News and a new hope for the poor.

2.1. In the upcoming years, each one of us missionaries and our local communities desire to strengthen the dimension of charity in our own lives and in our ministries.

¹⁴ Col 1:19. The responses of the provinces have presented numerous experiences of new poverties, of the new "areopagi," of the efforts at new evangelization. Cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 37. The recent teachings of John Paul II on these themes are abundant. Cf. *Vincentiana* (1996) 221.

¹⁵ "To serve the poor is to serve Jesus Christ" (SV IX, 252). Cf. also SV XIII, 808-810; XI, 32. For this reason, it is necessary to serve the poor just as Our Lord served them (SV IX, 594) and therefore, we must put on the same spirit (SV XII, 107).

¹⁶ Jubilees have been celebrated with pilgrimages to the *holy places* (cf. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 55). Referring to the Grand Jubilee of 2000, John Paul II has noted that it "will be, in a certain sense, like any other. But at the same time it will be different, greater than any other" (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 16).

¹⁷ "In Jesus Christ God not only speaks to man but also seeks him out. The incarnation of the Son of God attests that God goes in search of man" (Cf. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 7).

¹⁸ "Cooperating in missionary activity means not just giving but also receiving" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 85).

2.2. *Each one of us missionaries and our local communities will intensify our presence and work among the youth, and we will cultivate Vincentian youth groups and young volunteers.*

2.3. *For the year 1999 and beyond, each one of our local communities of the Congregation will study the possibility of involving itself with other members of the Vincentian Family in a special project for the development of the poor.*

2.4. *The popular mission teams of each province or group of provinces will discuss ways to make possible and effective the participation of the members of the various groups of our Vincentian Family in our common missionary projects. They will carefully study the particulars of incorporation of the members of the groups (time period, social security, work possibilities for the future) and provide for their adequate formation.*

2.5. *For the year 1999 and beyond, each Visitor or Conference of Visitors will promote a significant project for the advancement of the poor with the participation of other members of the Vincentian Family.*

2.6. *For the year 1999 and beyond, each Visitor or Conference of Visitors will create a Justice and Peace Commission. Members of other groups of the Vincentian Family can also be admitted to form part of this commission.*

2.7. *For the year 1999 and beyond, the Superior General and his council will promote on each one of the continents a specific project for the development of the poor with the participation of the other members of the Vincentian Family.*

2.8. *In the year 1999, to commemorate the Year of Charity, the International Center for Formation (CIF) will propose some methods that the Conference of Visitors can use to organize short courses on the theology of charity, on all the continents and with special invitations to all the members of the Vincentian Family.*

Do you believe that the Congregation of the Mission can assume each one of these obligations?

3. *To work in the formation of the members of the Vincentian Family.*

The Vincentian Family is multifaceted. St. Vincent himself perceived the plurality of situations and gave a plurality of responses. The Holy Spirit inspired different persons with the building up of diverse institutions at various moments in history. Each institute

(priests, consecrated men and women, laity), flowing out from the center of the Vincentian charism, has given its own unique response to the call of God in favor of the poor.

It is precisely at this time in history when lay people are assuming a pronounced presence in the life of the Church that we mention frequently St. Vincent as one of the saints who offered and continues to offer to the laity ways of Christian living and service to the poor.¹⁹ The lay people of the Vincentian Family have every right to expect that we, the missionaries, assist and help them.²⁰ *"But for the laity to take up actively this noble purpose (to see that human and Christian values are firmly acknowledged and rightly esteemed)..., it is not enough to exhort them. They must be offered a proper formation of a social conscience, especially in the Church's social teaching, which contains principles of reflection, criteria for judging and practical directives."*²¹

3.1. Each one of the missionaries will be available and will respond quickly to collaborate in the formation and spiritual animation of the members and groups of the Vincentian Family.

3.2. In the coming years, each province and each local community will make the strong effort to organize groups of Vincentian laity where they do not exist; they will revitalize those groups that are weak; and animate and accompany those that are active and alive.

3.3. We will all work to increase the members of the Congregation and of the groups of the Vincentian Family.

3.4. Each province or group of provinces will establish a formation team for the members of the Vincentian Family. These teams will be entrusted with the mission to: design the elements of a common formation for the various members of the Vincentian Family in the country or region (history, common spirituality, appreciation for the proper charism of each group); encourage gatherings to deepen our Vincentian spirituality and the sense of belonging to the same family; foster the exchange of evangelization experiences and service to the poor.

3.5. We will open to all members of the Vincentian Family the formation programs that are already in existence for us: CLAPVI courses, gatherings of MEGVIS, Vincentian Weeks, CIF.

¹⁹ "Every activity, every situation, every precise responsibility _ as, for example, skill and solidarity in work, love and dedication in the family and the education of children, service to society and public life and the promotion of truth in the area of culture _ are the occasions ordained by Providence for a `continuous exercise of faith, hope and charity'" (*Christifideles Laici*, 59; cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 4).

²⁰ Cf. General Council of the Congregation of the Mission. "Our response with regard to the laity. Reflection theme for the C.M." (1988), *Vincentiana* (1988) 239-259. These directives continue to be very valuable for today.

²¹ Synod of Bishops 1987, Proposition 22; cf. also *Christifideles Laici*, 60. Cf. C.M. Statute 7.

Do you believe that the Congregation of the Mission can assume each one of these obligations?

4. *To provide for the formation of our members.*

The initial and ongoing formation is an expression and demand of fidelity to one's own ministry, to one's own vocation, to one's very self. *"It is love for Jesus and fidelity to oneself. But it is also an act of love for the People of God.... Indeed, an act of true and proper justice."*²²

4.1 Each missionary and local community will enthusiastically accept, as a means for our own formation, the invitations that the various groups of the Vincentian Family offer us to participate in their gatherings, courses and assemblies.

4.2. Each missionary and local community will make every effort in the next years to acquire a more profound knowledge of the theology of the laity, and to the study the history and spirituality of the various groups of the Vincentian Family. The Commissions on Ongoing Formation of each province should facilitate some concrete ways to achieve this.

4.3. Each province or group of provinces, by means of its Formation Committee, within the next two years, will revise its formation program in order to secure in all our candidates the following points:

- * Profound understanding of the Vincentian charism.*
- * Initiation into work with the poor and in the love of charity toward the poor.*
- * Development of a sense of community.*
- * The learning experience of working as a team.*
 - * Knowledge and experience of direct work with the groups of the Vincentian Family.*
- * Systematic study of the history and spirituality of the groups of the Vincentian Family.*
- * Competent preparation for the use of the modern mass media.*
- * Acquisition of some fluency in at least two languages.*
- * Quality theological formation.*
 - * Substantial awareness of the social doctrine of the Church.*

4.4. In the coming years, each province or group of provinces, through its Formation Committee, will attempt to find the ways to incorporate the active

²² *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 70.

participation of some members of the Vincentian Family in the formation of our candidates.

4.5. In the coming years, the Conference of Visitors will study the most effective ways to move forward in the interprovincial collaboration for the formation of our candidates.

Do you believe that the Congregation of the Mission can assume each one of these obligations?

5. *To collaborate jointly in the international missions.*

*"Today, as never before the Church has the opportunity of bringing the Gospel, by witness and word, to all people and nations. I see the dawning of a new missionary age, which will become a radiant day bearing an abundant harvest, if all Christians, and the missionaries and the young churches in particular, respond with generosity and holiness to the calls and challenges of our time."*²³ All of us are invited to contribute to the preparation of the new Christian springtime which will be revealed by the Great Jubilee, being docile to the action of the Holy Spirit.²⁴

5.1. Each missionary will develop personal and communal attitudes of availability that will make possible the care of the current international missions and the openness to any other new missions to which we may be called by the Superior General.

5.2. Each one of the Provinces should promote, willingly, the participation of its missionaries in the international commitments, and revise its missionary obligations in the light of Constitution 16 and Statute 5, and accept the challenges of new cultures.

5.3. The missionaries and provinces should encourage the sharing of goods, by means of the International Fund for the Missions.

5.4. The Superior General should continue to foster the international missionary dimension of the Congregation in the coming years.

5.5. The Visitors responsible for the international missions should find ways to make the participation of the members of the various groups of the Vincentian Family in our international missionary projects possible and effective. They should study carefully the conditions of incorporation of the members of the

²³ Redemptoris Missio, 92.

²⁴ *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 18.

groups (time frame, social security, work possibilities for the future) and assure them of an adequate formation.

Do you believe that the Congregation of the Mission can assume each one of these obligations?

6. *To make use of the new means of communication for the service of the mission.*

In our century, influenced by the mass media, the first proclamation, catechetics and the subsequent deepening of the faith cannot do without these means. Put at the service of the gospel, they are capable of increasing almost indefinitely the area in which the Word of God is heard, enabling the Good News to reach millions of people. ... in them the Church finds a modern and effective version of the "pulpit"²⁵ In order to be faithful to the mission that the Congregation of the Mission has received, it has to use in a competent and effective way the modern mass media.

6.1. Each missionary and each one of our local communities will take a personal interest in receiving the publications of the various groups of the Vincentian Family of the region or province, and we will offer them our publications.

6.2. Each one of the provinces or group of provinces shall assure that all the houses of formation have access to the modern mass media.

6.3. The Conferences of Visitors shall study the steps they must take to realize in each one of the countries or regions some common publication of the various groups of the Vincentian Family.

6.4. The General Council and each one of the provinces should create a continual flow of information sustained by means of modern communication such as the Internet.

Do you believe that the Congregation of the Mission can assume each one of these obligations?

Conclusion

At the threshold of the new millennium, our commitments grow from our pledge to try to understand deeply the evangelical maxims and to make them real in our lives.²⁶

²⁵ Evangelii Nuntiandi, 45.

²⁶ Cf. Constitution 49.

As we gather together our commitments, we direct our sight toward Mary. She occupies a very special place in the spiritual experience of the Vincentian Family:

* Contemplating Mary, in the mystery of the incarnation, we strive like her to be open to the transforming power of the Spirit, so that it may form in us the image of Jesus Christ and so that we can always fulfill the will of God in our lives.

* With Mary, missionary and pilgrim, we will place ourselves promptly on the road to the new millennium to bear the message of the gospel of charity to the new "areopagi."

* With Mary, with her Magnificat, we join in a song of thanksgiving to the God of history, because God has given us the grace to discover ourselves as the Vincentian Family and to enable us as Mary to renew our charism of following Jesus Christ, the Evangelizer of the poor.