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Work done by the Preparatory Commission for the 1998 General Assembly

*by Corpus J. Delgado, C.M.
Member of the Preparatory Commission*

"The Worldwide Vincentian Family and the Challenges of Mission in the Third Millennium." This is the theme proposed by the Superior General for the thirty-ninth General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission following the suggestions of the Visitors in their meeting in Salamanca.[fo1] The Superior General convoked the Assembly in his letter of October 1, 1996, indicating its dates as June 22 until July 18, 1998, and at the same time offering a program for Provincial Assemblies leading to the General Assembly.[fo2]

On this same[fo3] date the Preparatory Commission, approved by the General Council, was named: Alvaro Quevedo of Colombia, Bernard Quinn of US Western, Serafín Peralta of the Philippines, Zeracristos Yosief of St. Justin Jacobis Vice-Province, Corpus Delgado of Saragossa. The Superior General desired that the Preparatory Commission be formed of five members, one from each continent.

In the same letter the Superior General asked the Visitors and their Councils to respond to a questionnaire which would facilitate the commencement of the work of the Preparatory Commission.

I. First Meeting of the Preparatory Commission

This was convened at the General Curia on December 2, 1996, and lasted until December 17.

The Superior General reminded the Commission of what the Statutes[fo4] require of them, indicating the specific task for the first session: *To help the provinces prepare for their Domestic and Provincial Assemblies*; and to prepare information and questions to be discussed in these Assemblies.

To begin, the Secretary General presented to the Commission *the replies of the Visitors and their Councils* to the questionnaire sent them by the Superior General, and also some information relating to the Vincentian Family.

Replies had arrived from 45 Provinces (out of 48). They indicated satisfaction with the chosen theme as well as points of *special interest*: better understanding of the

Vincentian charism; establishing priorities in service (ministries) to the poor; formation of our members; inter-provincial collaboration, both regional and continental. Concerning the *Vincentian Family*: we must get to know it, coordinate and collaborate with it, establish just how we become a Vincentian Family; Vincentian spirituality; to contribute to the formation and animation of the groups that form the Vincentian Family.

The replies of the Provinces clearly indicate the levels of collaboration that existed at that time (October-November 1996) among the various groups of the Vincentian Family.[fo5]

a) Between the Missioners and the Daughters of Charity:

Five Provinces indicated a high level of collaboration, 21 enjoy good collaboration, 11 provinces have sporadic or occasional collaboration, 8 provinces report very rare or non-existent collaboration.

b) Between the Missioners and the AIC.

Good collaboration in 6 provinces, 9 provinces have missioners who work with members of the AIC as advisors or counsellors, 17 provinces are beginning to collaborate. In 13 provinces the AIC does not exist or is not contacted by the Congregation of the Mission.

c) Between the Missioners and the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

9 provinces report a good relationship and a desire to increase collaboration, 14 provinces some collaboration exists, some confreres advising SVDP groups. In 22 provinces there is no relationship.

d) Between the Missioners and the Vincentian Marian Youth.

10 provinces report good collaboration with JMV. 10 have intermittent relations, with little enthusiasm; 4 provinces are starting groups. No organized groups of JMV exist in 21 provinces.

e) Between the Missioners and the Association of the Miraculous Medal.

17 provinces maintain a good relationship, based on the collaboration of a few confreres in Marian celebrations. 28 provinces have no relationship with the Association of the Miraculous Medal.

f) Between the Missioners and other Vincentian groups:

21 provinces report some relationships (basically common liturgical celebrations) with groups in the extended Vincentian Family; 24 provinces indicate no contact with Vincentian Family groups.

g) Among the different groups themselves.

3 provinces celebrate common encounters; 5 provinces say they are beginning the process. In 26 provinces there is no such relationship. 11 provinces did not answer this question or they say they do not know how to answer it.

Concerning the *methodology* of the Assembly: Provincial replies stressed the importance of an effective participation of the members of the distinct branches of the Vincentian Family in our Domestic, Provincial and General Assemblies; for example, that we advise them of the celebrations of our Assemblies and the themes we would treat, asking their prayers for the Assemblies, inviting them to take part in some sessions, inquiring of them what they expect of us and of the Vincentian Family.

It was also decided that the General Assembly follow the same methodology begun in 1992, attempting to achieve a true experience of encounter _ prayer, concluding with exact and efficacious conclusions. It was also asked that such conclusions be reached at provincial, interprovincial, regional, continental and international levels.

On analyzing these answers, the Preparatory Commission prepared material which could guide the conducting of Domestic and Provincial Assemblies. This was sent from Rome on December 14, 1996, labeled Consultation Document.

The Consultation Document attempted to make clear the terminology of the theme proposed to the General Assembly, seen from the point of view of a methodology of see-judge-act, beginning from Vincentian spiritual experience. It concluded with some *proposals for work* for Domestic and Provincial Assemblies.

- The first set of proposals *referred to making effective the participation of the members of different branches of the Vincentian Family in our Assemblies.* Analyzing the answers concerning the level of collaboration that exists with the different branches of the Vincentian Family shows the importance of dedicating time in Provincial and Domestic Assemblies to meeting the Vincentian Family.

- The second set was made up of a *questionnaire* consisting of 16 questions on the theme of the Assembly, the strong points indicated by the Visitors and their councils, and on the very dynamics of the Assembly.[fo6]

- The Consultation Document was accompanied by a study on the Vincentian Family done by the Superior General.[fo7]

Before leaving, the members of the Commission consulted the Directory of the General Assembly and the study of the same made by the General Council and Visitors in Salamanca.

II. Second Work Session of the Preparatory Commission

The Preparatory Commission met for its second meeting at the General Curia on February 2 - 18, 1998.

On January 25, 1997 meanwhile, the Superior General had set the date and place for the General Assembly as July 6 - 31, 1998 in Rome.[fo8]

A letter of August 14, 1997 announced the naming of Sr. Germaine Price as facilitator and that she would hence forth participate in the meetings of the Commission.[fo9]

On November 5, 1997, Fr. Serafín Peralta was also named as a facilitator.

By this date all local communities and provinces had terminated their assemblies and sent their conclusions to the General Curia.

Here follows the work of the second session:

1. *Drawing up the list of participants and their substitutes for the 39th General Assembly.* This was done following the "*acta deputationis*" of the provinces, or from the minutes of Provincial Assemblies, or (when no other way was possible) by direct consultation with the Visitors.
2. *Study of the replies from the provinces and elaborating a synthesis.* 46 out of 50 provinces had answered the questionnaire.[fo10]

The compilation of the *synthesis of replies* was hard work; it required careful study in order to collect the elements contributed by the provinces. This was very enriching for all of us because it allowed us to draw close to the reality of the provinces and their expectations with regard to the General Assembly. The members of the Assembly have already received this synthesis which we think will help them "take the pulse" of the Congregation and formulate significant commitments along the lines that the Provincial Assemblies wished.

3. *Drawing up the Documentum Laboris.* Working from the replies sent in by the provinces, we began to write, in successive drafts[fo11], the *Documentum Laboris*, which would serve as a basis for discussion during the Assembly.
4. *Revision of the Assembly Directory:* The Superior General and his council had dedicated several meetings to the study of the Directory. The Visitors meeting in Salamanca had also studied the major changes. The Preparatory Commission

studied the Directory at length in order to be able to offer a text agreeable to all. As all know, it is very important that we all agree on the Directory before the Assembly begins. For this reason all participants in the Assembly received in February the Directory and a questionnaire which elicited a very good response.

5. *Organizing postulata presented to the General Assembly:* The Preparatory Commission had gathered and organized all Postulata sent to the Curia (up until February 15, 1998). Some Postulata were clearly written, either by the Provincial Assemblies or individual confreres; others were mixed in with the acts of the Provincial Assemblies. Our first job was to separate the Postulata, then to organize them, careful to present them in the language in which they were written, so they would be understood correctly. Finally we made a few suggestions to the Superior General on the way to handle them in the Assembly. All Assembly members had received the Postulata. We trust that our suggestions have been helpful to the members of the different commissions charged with studying them.
6. *Suggestions on celebrating the Assembly offered to the Superior General:* Keeping in mind the special nature of the 39th General Assembly, the Superior General had asked us for concrete suggestions to achieve the most effective cooperation of the members of the different branches of the Vincentian Family, as well as for liturgical celebrations. The Commission spent a lot of time reflecting on and weighing different possibilities, which we shall shortly present for your consideration.
7. *Making a file on each member of the General Assembly:* The Directory advises the Preparatory Commission to seek information on every member of the General Assembly, his place of origin, his ministry, his culture.[fo12] We sought, in February, from each participant, all this information, together with color photos of all members of the General Assembly.
8. *Proposal of an Agenda for the General Assembly:* Even though the General Assembly is the supreme authority in the Congregation and can organize its work autonomously, [fo13]it seemed advisable to propose an agenda which would take into consideration the time and space necessary for different matters, in order that the Assembly could pay sufficient attention to the needs of interchange, deliberations, celebrations, and rest, following the suggestions sent by the provinces.

Conclusion

In concluding our work and giving an account of the steps taken, we, the members of the Preparatory Commission, wish to share with you *our feelings*:

1. First of all, we want to thank most sincerely Fr. Robert Maloney, the members of the General Council and everyone at the Curia for their confidence, their friendly welcome, their complete availability, and their generous collaboration.

2. We also want to express our gratitude to each of the Visitors for their replies, arriving on time, to the various questionnaires which we had to send to them during this period. Several times during our work sessions we commented on the fact that almost all the provinces had replied. Moreover, in the replies, there were expressions of encouragement for the work which the Commission had done. We, members of the Commission, now feel much closer to each province and very enriched by your reflections on the reality of the Congregation and the Vincentian Family in the world and on the challenges of the moment. We were very happy to learn that for 24 provinces, by taking into account the suggestions of the Preparatory Commission, it was possible to meet with the various branches of the Vincentian Family and take the first steps toward coordination.

3. Finally, we wish all of you good work in the General Assembly. The replies from the provinces indicate what they expect of this Assembly.

They would like this Assembly to be an expression of enthusiasm, of the realization of the urgency and of the active commitment of the Congregation of the Mission in favor of the poor today.

They would like this Assembly to help see with new eyes the behavior of Jesus, evangelizer of the poor and the Vincentian spiritual experience.

They would like this Assembly to renew and stimulate our collaboration with the Vincentian Family.

They would like this Assembly to help the Congregation to open its heart and its arms to respond to all forms of the most urgent poverties at the beginning of the third millennium.

They would like this Assembly, in a prophetic spirit, to open new horizons for the activity of the Congregation in the next century.

They would like this Assembly to conclude with a short, concrete, realistic, moving, simple, practical declaration which offers serious, binding, stimulating commitments to the Congregation, to the provinces and to each missionary, in order that the Vincentian charism would be a true reality on the threshold of the XXI century.

May the Assembly fulfill the eager desires offered by the provinces and expressed repeatedly in their replies. This is also the sincere wish of the Preparatory Commission as we conclude the task confided to us.

(Translated by John Kennedy, C.M.)

(1) The meeting of the Visitors in Salamanca took place from 5-15 June 1996. Cf. *Vincentiana* 1996, 215-219.

(2) Cf. *Vincentiana* 1996, 433-436.

(3) October 1, 1996.

(4) Cf. *Statute* 88.

(5) In an appendix, there are graphs illustrating the levels of collaboration among the various groups of the Vincentian Family, from the point of view of the Visitors and Councils of the 45 provinces which replied.

(6) The first three questions called attention to the most urgent needs of the poor and to the new challenges for the mission at the dawn of the third millennium.

Questions 4 to 9 and 14 were on collaboration with the members of the groups of the Vincentian Family.

Questions 10 and 11 provoked a deeper study of some orientations concerning the formation of our own.

Twelve referred to interprovincial collaboration.

Questions 14 and 16 were on the opportunity to formulate modifications in our *Statutes* and to present postulates.

Questions 15 and 17 were on the methodology of the Assembly and the characteristics of the final document of the Assembly.

(7) Cf. Robert Maloney, "The Vincentian Family" in *Vincentiana* 1997, 117-124.

(8) Letter to the Visitors of January 25, 1997. *Vincentiana* 1997, 65-66.

(9) In this same letter, he communicated to us the invitation he had addressed to Sr. Juana Elizondo, Mr. César Nunes Viana, and Mrs. Patricia Palacios de Nava to participate in our Assembly from July 9-14, 1998.

(10) Almost all, if one considers the fact that Nigeria did not hold an Assembly and the Provinces of Northern and Southern India held theirs together.

(11) There were five very arduous drafts, which led the members of the Commission to call it familiarly "Documentum Amoris."

ANNEX

Collaboration among the various groups of the Vincentian Family (replies from October-November 1996)

Vincentians and Daughters of Charity

- * High
- * Good
- * Sporadic
- * Rarely or not at all

Vincentians and AIC

- * Good
- * Interest and some participation
- * Beginning collaboration
- * The AIC does not exist or there are no relations

Vincentians and SSVP

- * Good
- * Some cooperation (counselors)
- * very rare or non-existent

Vincentians and the Vincentian Marian Youth

- * Good
- * Sporadic
- * Beginning
- * The Vincentian Marian Youth do not exist

Vincentians and Miraculous Medal Association

- * Some collaboration
- * No relations

Vincentians and other Vincentian groups

- * Some collaboration
- * No relations

The various groups among themselves

- * Some common meetings
- * First steps
- * No relations
- * Do not know, did not reply

(12) Cf. *Directory of the General Assembly*, art. 8, 1_. Cf. also *Statute* 82.

(13) Cf. *Constitutions*, 137.