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Letter of the Superior General: Mission Appeal 1999 (October 15, 1999)

Robert P. Maloney C.M.

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October 15, 1999

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission throughout the world

My very dear Brothers,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

Each year in October I write to you about our new international missions and about other missionary needs as well, providing some news and appealing for help. This year I am doing likewise. But since so many confreres make inquiries about China, I will first offer you a longer account of my recent visit there.

CHINA

Victor Bieler and I flew to Taiwan on April 24 to join in the meeting of the Asian- Pacific Visitors' Conference (APVC). It was a very active, well-prepared, well-run meeting. We also had the opportunity to meet with the confreres and Daughters of Charity living in Taiwan. I thank God for the renewed energy that one senses in our mission there. Volunteers have arrived from Indonesia, Holland, the United States, Ireland, the Philippines, the Congo, Poland, and India. During his six years as Visitor, Fr. Hugh O'Donnell brought experience, vision, and unifying gifts to the province. Recently Fr. John Wang was named to take his place and Sr. Emma Lee became the Vice-Visitatrix of the Daughters of Charity. I am most grateful to the confreres and Daughters for the wonderful hospitality that they showed Victor and me during our stay there. On May 1, I departed for the mainland, accompanied by Fr. Augustin Cheng and Sr. Emma Lee.

This was my third trip to the continent. My main purpose was to visit the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity who are teaching English there. I also had the opportunity to see once again our elderly Daughters of Charity and confreres in the areas of Beijing and Tianjin, as well as the younger members of both Communities.

China is unique. A flood of impressions poured in on me as I arrived on the mainland. The population is huge. The people are very friendly. The young often begin a conversation on the street or on a bus in order to practice their English. They ask very direct questions: Where are you from? What do you do? How much money do you earn? I reply that I used to teach, that I come from New York, and that I am

retired. In the tourist areas you pay prices that are equivalent to those in Western Europe and the United States. Outside those places, however, you can still live very inexpensively in China. A good meal in a restaurant where the people themselves eat, for example, costs only \$2 or \$3. Housing and clothing are also very cheap for the native population. Their salaries, of course, are likewise very low. Several young women with whom I spoke receive a wage of from \$60 to \$110 a month.

Sr. Emma, Fr. Augustin, and I visited Wuhan, Chongqing, Beijing, and Tianjin. As I know you understand, I cannot give you all of the details of the trip. But where I omit information, I trust that you will read between the lines.

I was very impressed by the confreres and Daughters who are teaching English. They attest to be extraordinarily happy there in China. In fact, several told me that they would like to spend their whole life there! Their mission is one of simple presence. Apart from teaching, they can exercise no explicit ministry. But all recognize that their presence is both important and appreciated. I concur in their judgment. I sensed that the Chinese students and faculty members deeply appreciate their being at the universities.

Each has an apartment which, while simple, is more than adequate. In Wuhan, I stayed in the same building with Dick Preuss and Henk de Cuijper. In Chongqing, Augustin and I lived in Jan Ermers' apartment, which had a guest room, while Emma stayed with Sr. Katie Kline. Sr. Ann Laidlaw lives nearby. In Beijing I was not able to stay at the university itself, but was within close walking distance of the apartments of Joseph Loftus and Padraig Regan. Unfortunately, I was not able to see Paweł Wierzbicki since he had to leave Beijing suddenly, just before my arrival, to be with his dying father.

Seeing the impact of the presence of the confreres and the Daughters on the mainland and experiencing how happy they are, I would encourage anyone who is interested in teaching English there to volunteer. Knowledge of Chinese is not necessary. The commitment is for a minimum of one year and is renewable.

On this trip I had many more contacts with the "official" church than in the past. As you know, the Holy See encourages superiors to visit both the "official" and the underground churches, with a view toward eventual reconciliation. In the past such contacts were not always easily made. This time, however, I had the opportunity to meet with several bishops. The situation is very complicated, since at times both the "official" and the underground bishop are recognized by Rome. At other times, this is not the case.

Visitors like me cannot celebrate Mass publicly. When I participated at the Sunday Mass in Wuhan, I found the church packed with people of all ages. I was surprised by how different it was from the first time I assisted at Mass in Beijing six

years ago. At that time, the priest celebrated according to the old rite with his back toward the people. He did not preach. In Wuhan now, the priest celebrated according to the post-Vatican II rite, in Chinese. He preached at length and, in fact, in a very lively manner. The people were quite engaged by the homily.

Much to my surprise, I was also invited to speak at three seminaries. I found the sessions with the seminarians very interesting. They took part actively and asked lots of questions. They pray openly for the Pope and asked me all about him, expressing a hope that he would soon visit China.

In sharp contrast with what I have written above, I found life still difficult for many of those who live in the underground church (though they themselves attest that it is much better than in the past!). I met a number of confreres, three of whom I had not encountered on previous visits. One of these lives and works in relative tranquillity now, though earlier he had been in prison for 20 years. The other two were in prison relatively recently.

I had several very touching meetings with our elderly sisters. They were quite communicative. One, whom I had never met before, told me that during the Cultural Revolution she knelt in the village square with a sign hanging around her neck stating that she was a counter-revolutionary. She was beaten so badly that she thought she was about to die. Strangely, she narrated, she felt no fear at all at the time and simply waited for death to come. She survived.

I met another sister for the first time. She entered the Community in 1932 and is now 96 years of age. When I left her, she kissed me and told me that our next meeting would be in heaven!

On visits like this, one must rely very much on the judgment of those who live in the local place. On one occasion, I was able to spend a good part of the day with our younger and older sisters, praying with them, conversing and eating together peacefully. On another occasion, in meeting with a group of ten members of our family, we had to cut short our program because they felt that our situation was precarious.

In Tianjin, I visited our confrere Bishop Shi for the third time. He has built a new seminary since my last trip. I was delighted to spend several hours with the little community of Daughters of Charity that he has founded. Twenty-five of them live cramped together in a tiny house. They are really quite poor but they served us a very abundant meal. I thought that the platters of Chinese food would never stop coming. I was touched by their generosity and at the same time by the simplicity of their lives. I gave them a talk about our Vincentian Family. They were wonderfully attentive and were still asking questions when the time of our departure arrived.

One of our principal concerns in China is, as you might imagine, the personal support, encouragement, and formation of both the elderly and the young. The confreres and Daughters from Taiwan work at this very generously.

Several bishops asked about a rule of life for their priests. I hope that we can assist them in formulating one. I have made several recommendations to the confreres in Taiwan about this and other matters.

Forgive me for going on so long, but I know how interested you are in China, which has had such an important place in the history of the Congregation. There is much more to say, but I am sure you get the gist.

FURTHER NEWS BRIEFS ON THE MISSIONS

- **Rwanda** — Juan Ávila has been there since last December. The Daughters of Charity were delighted that he was able to provide them with some Vincentian formation in preaching their annual retreat this year. Rogelio Toro arrived in August and began serving a parish in Burundi. After a stay in Paris to learn the language, Alirio de Jesús Ceballos and Orlando Yesit Fonseca have just now arrived in Rwanda and the community should grow to six in the first half of 2000 with the arrival of Julio César García and William Alonso Marín.
- **Solomon Islands** — Rafael Sualdito has been there for several months now and Jack Harris is preparing to arrive towards the end of the year. However, Stanislaus Reksosusilo is planning on returning to Indonesia at the end of the year, after five years of generous service in the Solomons. The situation became very precarious this summer with ethnic tensions between the people of Guadalcanal and the people of Malaita. Our confreres were obliged to send the seminarians back to their homes. There were demonstrations and looting, especially in Honiara.
- **Mozambique** — The Vice-Province continues to suffer from lack of personnel because of the sickness and the aging of the confreres and the need for several of them to return home. They desperately need help. Fortunately, they will be getting some with the expected arrival of Miguel Sánchez Alba from Madrid before the end of this year, but even more is needed.
- **Bolivia** — In the spring, the confreres purchased land for the construction of a house in El Alto. Since then, they have met with an architect and a draft project for the construction of a pre-seminary and community house has been drawn up. In the meantime, the confreres are using a house belonging to the Parish of Santiago II de El Alto, where two of them also serve. The other three confreres serve in the field and all five come together regularly in the

parish house. The two confreres serving in the parish also do vocation work and assist with other branches of the Vincentian Family. José Antonio Ubillús visited them recently.

- **Siberia** — Alojz Letonja arrived in the spring of this year. The Apostolic Administrator, Bishop Joseph Werth, has divided this huge area into six regions and has asked us to coordinate the region near the Urals, around Svjerdlovskaja Oblast. He also has invited the Daughters of Charity to come. Daughters from the Province of Slovakia will arrive around May 2000. Józef Kapu ciak just returned from visiting there.
- **Albania** — In the fall, construction was begun on the new cathedral of Rrëshen. However, the situation became very unstable afterwards, with so many refugees arriving from Kosovo. The confreres and Daughters gave themselves in every possible way in helping with the refugees: providing lodging for some, offering health care in the camps, and channeling food and other goods to them.
- **Kharkiv, Ukraine** — A coadjutor brother from Poland joined the confreres there last year. Jacek yromski came at their request to help with the construction. Recently Jacek Dubicki returned to Poland after more than three years in Kharkiv. He has been replaced by a newly ordained confrere, Roman Kubina. The parish continues to grow. The confreres have started a charitable social center, offering computer and sewing classes for the poor, the unemployed, and lonely mothers. They would like another confrere to join them. Seven young men have shown an interest in the Congregation.
- **Cuba** — The confreres from the United States, Spain, and Colombia who have been assigned there in recent years are still unable to get visas. Some can go into the country for a couple of months on tourist visas, but then they must leave.
- **Tanzania** — Jacob Panthapally arrived some months ago, took the language and inculturation course and has now begun his ministry. The confreres have taken on a new mission in Songea, on a five-year trial basis.
- **Algeria** — The house in Algiers has been erected as an interprovincial house of the two French Provinces. Christian Mauvais has joined François Hiss and Firmin Mola Mbola there. Dariusz Górski is still studying culture and the Arabic language at the PISAI here in Rome preparing to go to Algeria.

FIRST APPEAL

Our main priority here in the General Council is to strengthen the missions we have already begun. Only in that context will we attempt to respond to appeals to begin other missions. We continue to receive many calls for help in the formation of the clergy. Below let me outline some of the principal needs:

- The various new international missions described above would be happy to have further volunteers. From my previous letters you already know some of the background and the prerequisites for these missions.
- We continue to hope to open a small missionary parish near the seminary in the Solomons. We judge that this would enrich both the seminary and the parish communities. This will entail sending two more confreres to the Solomons.
- I am quite concerned about our vice-province in Mozambique, one of the poorest countries in the world. The Vice-Visitor has written repeatedly over the last several years expressing his need for help in the internal seminary and in the staffing of the center for the formation of lay leaders. He is also seeking lay volunteers who could provide instruction in basic professional skills like carpentry, welding, plumbing, and electricity.
- The Visitor of Puerto Rico has also frequently asked for help in staffing the formation programs in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, where there are numerous vocations.
- Fr. Lazare de Gérin remains alone in Iran, under difficult working conditions. The languages are French and Persian. Unfortunately, it is not easy to obtain permission to enter the country.
- The Daughters of Charity would love to have Vincentians to accompany them in their new mission in Angola. The bishop has sent a letter inviting us. The language is Portuguese.
- The Province of the Congo has requested help in the formation of its own candidates. The language is French. Several confreres have left the country recently to go to other missions.
- The Apostolic Prefect in Jimma-Bonga, our confrere Fr. Theo van Ruijven, still needs help in the administrative side of his new service to the Church there. We were unable to find a confrere for this work from among last year's candidates.

- The Visitor of Ethiopia has requested some help in formation for a few years while his own confreres are completing their studies.
- The bishops of Papua New Guinea have asked our help at the seminary in Port Moresby. Recently the Holy See wrote to me addressing this same appeal directly to the Congregation of the Mission. The Province of the Philippines has expressed some interest in this work, but at present is not able to supply the two or three priests needed. The language is English. The needs are in spiritual direction and in the teaching of theology.

Those are some of the principal needs. I would be very happy to hear from you if you should be interested in volunteering for any of these, or other, missions. I am enclosing a sheet that provides some information in regard to the process of volunteering.

SECOND APPEAL

In the last two years I have appealed to you for financial assistance for our many missions. As you know, we already receive monies from three main sources: 1) the generosity of provinces that send us surplus funds for the poor and for the formation of the clergy; 2) large and small gifts that the Superior General receives in the course of the year, which total up to a very significant sum; 3) revenues from some funds that have existed here at the General Curia for a number of years.

But our needs in the missions are continually increasing. They are especially pressing in the area of formation since precisely those provinces that have the fewest economic resources also have the largest number of vocations. In that light, almost five years ago we established the "International Mission Fund: 2000" and two years ago we began making a special appeal to the provinces and to individual confreres to contribute to this fund. The response has been wonderful. Last year's special appeal raised US \$158,198, beyond the monies arriving from the three sources described above. Several confreres and former confreres have also expressed the intention to make the IMF: 2000 one of the principal beneficiaries in their will.

Beginning next June, the interest coming from IMF: 2000 will be available for the first time for distribution. The interest from another new source, the Mary Immaculate Seminary International Seminary Fund, was already available for us to use this past June. These funds will enable us to increase significantly our help to the various missions and poorer provinces.

Meanwhile, with the generous help of several provinces, we have decided to continue to increase the capital of IMF: 2000 by seeking further contributions to a parallel capital fund which will grow alongside IMF: 2000 for five more years and then will be merged with it in the year 2004.

As you might imagine, I am immensely grateful to all the provinces and individuals that have made such generous contributions. I encourage you, if you are able, to continue. Last year I mentioned that several of our needy provinces had written to me telling me that fund-raising agencies, which assisted them in the past, have recently told them that their funds are diminishing and that they will no longer be able to help. This sad phenomenon continues. That makes it all the more imperative that we continue to create means for responding to the increasing needs of our missions.

So I ask you, with as much simplicity as I can summon up, to reflect on whether you as an individual can make a contribution, small or large, to the IMF: 2000. I also ask each of the provincials to discuss with the members of your council whether your province might be able to make a further contribution, small or large. I am enclosing a sheet that will provide you with instructions as to how this can be done.

That is the news and those are my appeals. I can honestly say that the response to these letters over the last several years has often moved me very deeply. Many have volunteered to go to difficult missions. Others who because of their present work, or age, or background, cannot volunteer have expressed great interest and support for the missions. A very large number of confreres have sent individual donations as a sign of their solidarity. Twenty-three of the provinces, even some of the poorest, have also contributed; some of these donations have been very large. I am certain that the Lord will pour out abundant blessings on those who have given so generously.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General