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J. Ignacio Fernández de Mendoza C.M.

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## **The Constitutions: Unity in the Diversity of the Congregation of the Mission**

*By J. Ignacio Fernández de Mendoza, C.M.  
Vicar General*

The editorial council of Vincentiana decided to dedicate an issue of the magazine to the new Constitutions of the Congregation. The present Constitutions, as Fr. Richard Mc Cullen declared in his introductory letter to them, are the result of “seventeen years of study, reflection, prayer and the deliberations of three General Assemblies.” The General Assembly of 1980 formulated the definitive text which, after submission to the Holy See for approbation and slight modification in some places, was approved by a decree dated June 29, 1984. The Superior General at that time, Fr. Richard McCullen promulgated them three months later on September 27, 1984. From that moment on the present constitutions have markedly affected the life of the Congregation. For three decades they have been, and we hope they will continue to be in this new century, an unambiguous point of reference for the missionaries of the C.M.

The present constitutions were written with three fundamental criteria in mind: fidelity to Vatican Council II, to the Vincentian sources and to the signs of the times. For a little less than twenty years all the provinces and local communities have been accommodating their norms and life to the new constitutions. Furthermore, the Congregation passes into the new millennium, guided by new Constitutions in which we find a valid design for the identity of the Congregation in the present moment.

### **The Unity of the Congregation of the Mission**

The present constitutions have placed in the hands of the provinces, and thus of the respective Visitors who animate them, a series of attributions greater in number and specific weight than those which Visitors possessed in former times. An eminent Missioner, knowledgeable about the history of the C.M. and its successive organizational changes, affirmed during the eighties with a certain sense of humor that the C.M. had become a federation of independent provinces. This appreciation contained various ingredients: a description of the reality as the aforementioned missioner interpreted it and a certain dosage of fear in the face of the possible tendency towards dispersion.

It is evident that the C.M. has given itself Constitutions that decentralize to no small degree its own organization. The attributions of peripheral entities have been broadened significantly in the new Constitutions. In this area the

Congregation has done no more than follow the lead of certain ecclesial guidelines laid down by Vatican II and present day theological and pastoral thinking. There can be no doubt that pendulum swings between the center and the periphery affect the church as such and, consequently, the Congregation as well. But, given this, it must be affirmed from the outset that fears of excessive dispersion and, in the worst case, disintegration, lack any solid base. The text of the Constitutions in themselves gives no validity to this fear, nor does the actual practice of the Provinces as witnessed by their actions since the new Constitutions have become law. The understanding the Missioners have of the Congregation as such, the sense of a unified body and its juridical foundations, shared by almost all the members of the Congregation, cover all areas of life in the Congregation. I invite the reader to examine the Constitutions with me in order to take a closer look at some, though not all, of the fundamental characteristics that refer to the unity of the Congregation taken as a whole.

### **Unity Around the Founder of the Mission**

The first sign of unity can be found in the constant referral in the Constitutions to the founder of the Mission. There is frequent allusion to St. Vincent, a mixture of respect, admiration and marked affection. The Constitutions call for fidelity to the Founder (C 1), to the spiritual patrimony received from him (C 3,1), and to the design of the particular spirituality put into effect by the Saint (C 5). The Constitutions insist upon St. Vincent's vision of apostolic life (C 10), community life (C 19), his missionary understanding of the evangelical counsels and the vows (C 28), prayer life (C 41), and, above all, the Vincentian charism shared by those of us who make up the Congregation today.

The affinity of the provinces, local communities and individual confreres with our Holy Founder gives a profound sense of unity to the Congregation that today is found in numerous cultures and countries of the world. If, for example, someone were to ask any Missionary to define himself personally, our imaginary missionary would doubtlessly present himself as a Vincentian. And if, for example, our curious questioner, following up his inquiries, were to ask what the word Vincentian means, then our missionary no doubt would resort to a simple presentation of the person of St. Vincent. The Founder of the Mission unifies in his own person all the Missionaries of the Congregation. The Constitutions begin by presenting the particular end of the Congregation that cannot be achieved until all the members of the Congregation and the communities are faithful to St. Vincent. The end of the Congregation which consists in following Jesus Christ, Evangelizer of the Poor, and which was pointed out by St. Vincent from the very beginning gives to the Missionaries of the Little Company a true and authentic sense of a united family.

In summary, the constant recourse in the Constitutions to St. Vincent and to the particular end of the Congregation helps to recreate the unity of the Missionaries of the Congregation in the following of its founder. His charism, invoked continually in the text of the Constitutions and shared by the members of the Congregation affords greater solidity to the Little Company than any other theological, spiritual or juridical element.

### **Shared Spirituality Nourishes Unity**

The Constitutions bring together with a certain conciseness and not a little breadth the keys of Vincentian spirituality, a spirituality that is centered in the following of Jesus Christ in the style and manner of St. Vincent. The Constitutions begin their first page with the enunciation of a basic principle that is central to Vincentian spirituality: the end of the Congregation consists in following Jesus Christ, evangelizer of the poor. How does one achieve such an end? The text of the Constitutions offers us a series of closely linked answers that refer to certain key nuclei of Vincentian spirituality.

The Missionary must put on the spirit of Jesus Christ (C 1,1), that is, he must incarnate in his own life the great evangelical values, especially those which are closely related to the particular end of the Congregation. Everything in the spiritual life of the Missionary is centered on the end of the Congregation. Relying on the impulse of God's grace, the Missionary will try to be filled with the sensitivity and attitudes of Christ (C 4); he will try to participate in the Spirit of Christ just as St. Vincent proposes (C 5); he will try to fill himself with the intimate personal attitudes of Christ in relation to the Father, to the poor and to the providence of God (C 6). Missionaries will cultivate with particular esteem the five characteristic virtues (C 7) which occupy a privileged place in the spirituality of the Congregation.

Continuing this series of brief declarations, the Constitutions go on to indicate another key to the particular spirituality of the Congregation. The Congregation feels called by God to evangelize (C 10). The announcing of Jesus Christ expresses the nature of the Congregation—an announcing saturated with the love and compassion of Christ for the poor (C 11). The evangelical counsels, for their part, taken on by all Missionaries in imitation of Christ and for the sake of the evangelization of the poor (C 28-39), give to Missionaries a particular quality of spiritual life which is identical everywhere, thus contributing in no small measure to the consolidation of the unity of the Congregation. The Constitutions must necessarily contain a reference to a key element of Christian and Vincentian spirituality: prayer. This is a basic source in the life of the Vincentian missionary.

In summary, Vincentian spirituality, hinted at in the Constitutions and made flesh in the life of the Missionaries, is a decisive factor favoring the unity of the Congregation. If, for example, a Missionary leaves his own house and moves to another in the farthest reaches of the world, in a short time he would feel identified with the confreres he finds there because all would live and act in accordance with the Vincentian spirituality.

### **Participation Favors Unity**

The Constitutions and Statutes affect all the missionaries of the Congregation. Frequently we find in the texts of the Constitutions expressions like these: “all”, “each and every”, “we”, “the missionaries”, “the Congregation”, “the Provinces”, and a series of verbs in the plural to indicate in that way that all the members of the Congregation, with no exception, can and should feel involved and committed in the different expressions of the life of the Congregation.

The present Constitutions have opened channels along which the participation of the missionaries flows. Consultation, provided for on many occasions and at varying levels, makes possible and calls for participation. The same may be said of the recourse to election in different cases as the Constitutions, Statutes and Provincial Norms provide. At the present time, missionaries collaborate in a significant way at the moment of drawing up the different community and provincial projects and the pastoral plans in their different ministries. On the other hand the Superior General and the Provincials frequently name commissions for particular purposes. Normally these commissions open a process of consultation in order to gather the opinions of the missionaries and, given this, proceed to the formulation of a document or the carrying out of an apostolic work. Many missionaries also participate in workshops, taking into account their different works: missions, teaching, parish work, etc. Domestic, provincial and general assemblies are based upon the open participation of all the missionaries and communities. The meetings of local superiors at the provincial level, and the Visitors’ meetings in the different geographic areas, or at the level of the whole Congregation offer another platform for participation

Throughout the Constitutions certain concepts referring to the participation of the missionaries are highly significant. In regard to obedience it says the whole community should search out the will of God in a shared effort (C 37). The word “corresponsibility”, a very symbolic expression, appears for the first time in the Constitutions to show that in the Little Company responsibilities are shared. One must not wait for the others to make decisions, but rather on many occasions the active participation of everyone is called for. Another

passage of the Constitutions tells us it is the right and duty of everyone to collaborate in the apostolic life and government of the Congregation (C 96).

In reference to the possessions of the Congregation, the Constitutions call for the responsibility of all at the moment of acquiring, administering or determining the use of the temporal goods of the house and the province (C 149). Another channel for participation concerns the information offered to the missionaries about economic affairs at the different levels: general, provincial and house (S 103, 1).

In summary, today participation is a real possibility, a right and a duty. The text of the constitutions calls for participation to a greater degree and with greater insistence than in past times. Participation of itself can spark the interest of the missionaries in regard to everything that has to do with the life of the Congregation; it increases unity and strengthens the sense of belonging. On the other hand, taking shortcuts in the participative process engenders a lack of interest and inhibition. In these cases the unity is more apparent than real. The present Constitutions, attentive to the ecclesiology of communion and the ethico-social value of participation, so highly regarded in advanced societies today, have opened up areas of corresponsibility for the missionaries in everything concerning the life of the Congregation.

### **Vincentian Formation Strengthens Unity**

The purpose of formation is to prepare missionaries to carry out with competence the mission of the Congregation (C 77,1; S 40). This means, of course, an integral formation: human, spiritual, intellectual, pastoral and specifically Vincentian. With regard to the philosophical-theological formation of aspirants to the C.M. we adhere to the laws of the church (C 78,3; S 45,2). On the other hand, Vincentian formation for all missionaries, younger and adult candidates, is carried out by the Congregation. The present Constitutions lay down fundamental guidelines for the Internal Seminary (C 82-86), the Major Seminary (C 87-90), the formation of Brothers (C 91-92) and continuing formation (C 81). In line with the principles inserted in the Constitutions, two documents that appeared later on have had positive effects on the formation of our candidates: the Ratio Formationis for the Internal Seminary (1982) and the Ratio Formationis Vincentianae for the Major Seminaries of the Congregation (1988). Thanks to the Constitutions and these two documents, today the Vincentian formation of all our candidates is virtually identical in all the provinces of the Congregation. Because of this we can safely say that with regard to Vincentian formation the unity of the Congregation has been strengthened.

Bear in mind as well that present day Vincentian formation has received a strong stimulus, coming in good measure from the numerous and frequently high

quality publications, as well as from the frequent study weeks and congresses. From the time of the approbation of the Constitutions a whole series of means has helped to foment the unity of the Congregation in the minds of the missionaries. Today the seminarians, students and missionaries of the C.M. all speak the same language because of Vincentian formation that is everywhere alike. It has come to us through the Internal Seminary, through the basic course of studies, and later on through ongoing formation.

### **Interprovincial Collaboration Fosters the Unity of the Congregation**

Collaboration and mutual assistance are a sign of the unity of the Congregation. Of themselves they express and at the same time fortify the already existing unity. The Constitutions and Statutes in many places call for interprovincial collaboration in the area of economic aid (C 152), personnel (S 3), the mission “ad gentes” (S 5, 1-3), pastoral strategies (S 8), Internal Seminary (S 45, 1-2) and mutual contacts between the candidates of the different provinces (S 47).

In the present decade interprovincial collaboration has received a strong stimulus in response to the call from the General Assemblies of 1992 and 1998. In accord with the conclusions of both Assemblies new channels were opened and interprovincial collaboration is taking place as a matter of course. This has been consolidated in the areas of the missions “ad gentes” and of formation in both the Internal and Major Seminaries. The number of interprovincial novitiates grows daily, as does the movement of formators from one province to another. Another area of collaboration is the growing participation of missionaries from different places in interprovincial organisms, created for the purpose of mutual aid: in missions, in formation and in the spiritual attention to the Daughters of Charity.

National and continental Visitors’ conferences meet regularly. The provinces that are economically able to come to the aid of more needy provinces. Another means for interprovincial collaboration has also begun by means of sistering arrangements between two provinces. Pastoral services with and for the Daughters of Charity and Vincentian lay groups in many areas are giving birth to close collaboration between missionaries from different provinces.

In short, the method of interchanging interprovincial information in use up to now using newsletters and other publications will increase because of the ease which modern means of communication offer, viz. e-mail and the internet.

Collaboration is a manifestation of charity and makes clear the unity of the C.M. which, over and above cultural differences and the uniqueness of each province, is one body. In speaking of this topic, two extremes must be avoided. It

is just as bad for missionaries to close themselves off in the small world of their own province as to try to make of all the provinces a shapeless mixture. Missionaries need their own house which welcomes them, their own province, but without succumbing to the danger of isolation. The collaboration, the interchanges and the interprovincial assistance provided for by the Constitutions and the General Assemblies, invigorate the unity in diversity of the C.M.

### **The Superior General, Center of Unity and Coordination of the Provinces (C 102)**

The Constitutions and Statutes have drawn up with precision the mission and areas of competence of the Superior General, at the service of the Congregation. With clear allusion to our Founder and the subsequent historical succession, they identify the Superior General as the “successor” and “continuer” of the mission of St. Vincent (C 101). “Together with the whole Congregation” he shall do everything possible so that “the charism of St. Vincent always stays alive in the church.” (C 101). Therefore the Superior General has the primary responsibility for the conservation, development and adaptation of the Vincentian charism in the circumstances of a changing world.

Immediately afterwards the Constitutions describe the Superior General as the “center of unity and coordination of the provinces” (C 102). They also ask him to be the “source of spiritual animation and apostolic activity” (C 102). Let these citations serve to remind us of some basic points about the ministry of the Superior General.

At the beginning of the third millennium, the missionaries can be found in the service of the poor and engaged in various activities in more than seventy countries. This multiplicity of situations requires a visible center of unity who, according to the Constitutions, can be none other than the Superior General.

Afterwards the Constitutions and Statutes complete the previous affirmations with a new attribute: the Superior General “governs all the provinces, houses and individual members of the Congregation with ordinary power according to the norms of universal law and of our own law” (C 103). This is one more service the Congregation expects to receive from the successor of St. Vincent. His authority to govern everything at the service of the Congregation is explicitly recognized. Where a difficulty might arise is not in the recognition of his authority, but rather in its restrictions and in the way of exercising it, since the provincials also have attributes in the governance of their respective provinces.

The principles of government provided by the Constitutions for all who exercise governing functions affect the Superior General as well as all



missionaries in positions of authority. They are to exercise that authority “having ever before their eyes the example of the Good Shepherd who came not to be ministered to, but to minister” (C 97,1), and remaining open “to dialogue with the members” (C 97, 2). The purpose of this dialogue is to discern the will of God, reach mature decisions and fruitfully serve the missionaries of the Congregation.

In the Constitutions, articles 107 and 124, and in the Statutes, articles 51 and 91 are found the principal faculties of the Superior General, and even the manner in which he should exercise them in the service of the Congregation. In practice the Superior General carries out the ministry prescribed for him in the Constitutions in two complementary ways. In the first place, through spiritual and Vincentian animation, fostering our charism and trying to augment the missionary spirit of the Congregation. The Superior General’s other task is administrative: assignments, permissions and approbation of Provincial Norms. In carrying out his functions the Superior General makes use of ordinary means: advice, written documentation and visits to the Provinces.

The figure of the Superior General enjoys the affection, respect and veneration of the missionaries of the C.M. In his person and what he represents the provinces and houses of the C.M., spread throughout many countries of the world, are held together. The Superior General is also recognized as the real and visible symbol of the unity and universality of the Congregation. The Constitutional texts which refer to the Superior General as the center of unity do nothing more than put in written form a reality widely felt and recognized by the members of the C.M.

The unity of the Congregation is a gift from God. The task of all confreres is to preserve and increase it. One enemy of this unity is the preference given by superiors, whether Superior General or Provincial, to particular groups. The law of the gospel recognizes only one preferential option, the one that draws us to the poor, whether they be within or outside of the C.M. The poor are always first.

### **Unity in Diversity**

The present Constitutions were drawn up in the light of Vatican II. In a moment in which new winds were blowing and a reaction against uniformist and centralizing tendencies was in the air, certain values considered novel at that time enjoyed the unconditional support of the majority of the confreres: participation, corresponsibility, decentralization, dialogue and subsidiarity. In light of this, the normative legislation of the C.M. gathers together these aspirations and gives them written form in the Constitutions and Statutes.

More than a few passages in the Constitutions, Statutes and the approved documents of the last three General Assemblies place in the hands of the provinces and local communities a considerable number of faculties. The C.M. has conferred upon itself a somewhat decentralized organization in which, without lessening the attributes of the Superior General over the entire Congregation, the provinces have ample room for maneuvering. For the sake of brevity, we shall limit ourselves to recalling a few articles in the Constitutions and Statutes that lay down guidelines favoring the decentralization and autonomy of the provinces and houses. In the Constitutions see the following passages: Art. 13 on the forms of the apostolate; Art. 23 about the due autonomy of the local community; Art. 27 which speaks of the local community project; Art. 37 which calls for a spirit of corresponsibility; Art. 83, 2 about the time for the Internal Seminary; Art. 124, requiring the appointment or confirmation of the Visitor; Art. 126 in which the province decides whether or not to have an assistant Provincial; Art. 130, 2 on the naming of the local superior; Art. 143 on the Provincial Assembly; Art. 146 which determines who participates in the Provincial Assembly; and Art. 150 on the ownership of material goods.

Article 98 speaks of the principle of subsidiarity in support of decentralization: “All members, in accepting assignments given to them by the community, have the authority necessary to carry them out. For this reason, those matters which can be managed by individual members or lower levels of government should not be referred to higher levels of government”. This principle favors the autonomy of the provinces and houses. On the other hand, subsidiarity by itself does not place in doubt the unity of government or allow for individualism.

The Statutes repeatedly refer to the attributes which favor the autonomy of the provinces. Let us recall some passages: Art. 9 refers to the approbation of norms governing social action; Art. 17 speaks of the practical norms on poverty; Arts. 22,2 and 23 which allow the provinces to decide on some aspects about Good Purposes; Art. 26,4 on the suffrages for the deceased; Arts. 41-42 on formation; Art. 43 on the location of the internal seminary; Art. 69, 2-3 on the way of electing the Visitor; Art.74,2 protecting the right of the province to propose its own method of naming provincial councilors; Art. 91 which deals with the value of the norms emanating from the Provincial Assembly; Art. 97 which refers to the participants in the Provincial Assembly.

Article 125 of the Constitutions and Article 69 of the Statutes bring together the principal attributes of the Visitor with regard to the governance of the province. In truth, these are many and of greater weight than those possessed by the Visitor in times past in the Congregation.

## **Conclusion**

From what has been said it can be seen that the Constitutions protect the unity of the C.M. We have alluded to the factors that protect: the end of the Congregation, indicated by our Founder, which holds together the missionaries; Vincentian spirituality shared by all the members of the Congregation; the participation of the missionaries in the life of the C.M.; specifically Vincentian formation, interprovincial collaboration and assistance and, finally, the figure of the Superior General as center of unity of the C.M.

But it is also true the C.M. has given itself a more decentralized organization than in past times. The art of governing will consist in combining the responsibilities of the Superior General over the whole Congregation with the attributes of the Visitors, provided for in the Constitutions, with regard to their own provinces. It will also be a question of harmonizing the interventions of the Superior General with the plans of the provinces. The organization of the Congregation, at once unified and also decentralized and diversified, just as the Constitutions confirm, should be considered the most adequate for the C.M. at the present time.

During the General Assembly of 1992 there were several voices in favor of granting greater power to the Superior General. Behind these were a concern and a desire to introduce small change in the fundamental law of the C.M. for the sake of greater missionary efficacy. That General Assembly did not judge it opportune to introduce any change in the Constitutions. Nevertheless, it approved the following postulate: “the Superior General at a time and in a way he deems most fitting should promote a study in order to determine exactly his own power and that of the Visitors to foster solidarity in missionary ministers” (Decree 1, AG/92). In fact, as a consequence of this decree, the Superior General approved a document\* in which, without lessening the Constitutional and Statutory attributes of the Visitors, reformulated the breadth of his own powers to call on the provinces to participate in particular interprovincial missionary projects.

Bearing in mind the globalization prevailing today and, especially, the needs of the missions “ad gentes”, it should be considered opportune that the Superior General give a greater stimulus to interprovincial collaboration with a view to the mission of the C.M.

The vitality of the Congregation will depend, among other things, on unity in diversity. The unity, which is a good in itself, should not weaken the diversity or the degree of autonomy that the Constitutions grant to the Provinces. These, for their part, should not shut themselves off, going so far in the worst case, as to break in practice their relation with the rest of the C.M. which is one body.

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\*” The Powers of the Superior General and of the Visitors in Relation to Missionary Commitments”. Cf. *Vincentiana* 190, No. 6 (November-December 1993), pgs. 536-540. (Text only in Spanish).

Openness to new horizons and breathing missionary air enrich the life of the provinces. On the other hand, shortsightedness impedes the flow of stimuli and breath each province can and should receive from the C.M.

The unity in diversity of the C.M. works itself out within prescribed limits. Both values, unity and diversity, remain firm if they find support in a structure that protects them. This structure is the Constitutions and Statutes. Of course, times change and the practical interpretation of the texts depends in large measure on individuals and even groups. Therefore, it would be prudent to remain in on guard in order to defend the unity of the C.M., and at the same time the areas of autonomy provided by the present Constitutions. It would also be wise to be alert so as to impede any step backwards to centralization and uniformity. However, it should be considered normal to have a policy of keeping the doors open to possible new interpretations, as seems most advantageous at a given moment, that facilitate the harmony between the unity and the diversity of the C.M., between the coordination of the apostolic life of the whole Congregation and respect for the autonomy of the provinces, between the central government of the C.M. and the provincial government.

(JOSEPH V. CUMMINS, C.M., translator)