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Vincentian Ministry at the United Nations

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The C.M. at the UN

In his address to the General Assembly in July of 1998, the Superior General, Fr. Robert Maloney, indicated that the Congregation had begun the process of seeking "recognition at the United Nations as an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) so that we might participate on the many committees at the UN that treat questions that interest us as Vincentians." As examples of such issues, Fr. Maloney cited "poverty, famine, war and peace, health care, education and human rights."

On 21 May 1998, the Congregation submitted its formal application for recognition by the UN as an NGO associated with the UN's Department of Public Information (DPI). The application described for the UN basic information about the Congregation — its international structure, its objectives, its means of communication, its international officers and an overview of its planned activities for 1998. From the UN's point of view, NGOs associated with DPI are useful precisely as instruments for disseminating information about the UN and its programs and activities as broadly as possible.

On 2 December, the Committee on NGOs of the UN Department of Public Information met and approved the Congregation's application for association with the DPI. This approval entitled the Congregation to designate two individuals as official representatives of the Congregation to the DPI. Two confreres with full-time ministries in the Eastern Province were selected. Fr. Richard Devine is a professor of theology at St. John's University in New York and Fr. Joseph Foley is a member of the Hispanic Ministry team in St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As official representatives of the Congregation, these two confreres have full access to all open meetings of UN bodies, which they can attend as observers. In addition, they are invited to attend the regular Thursday NGO briefings organized by DPI, which feature UN officials, delegates and other experts. They also receive monthly mailings announcing UN conferences, seminars, briefings and other events.

From the standpoint of the Congregation, official recognition of NGO status offers the possibility of our involving ourselves with issues which resonate with our mission. Thus we can involve ourselves with issues such as economic and social development, peace-making and human rights. As Fr. Maloney pointed out in the official application, "our main interest is to work with the DPI

in raising consciousness about the poor in various nations and in helping to implement programs that will work toward eradicating poverty.” The Congregation's representatives will now have to learn how best to draw upon the resources of the UN to achieve this goal.

How is this then a ministry?

Many confreres — and others — may find it difficult to view this work at the United Nations as a ministry. To some the United Nations is simply a bloated bureaucracy. To others, it may be an impotent colossus that is clearly a tool for the major powers to work their will on the rest of the world.

How, then, is this a ministry? Begin with some of the objectives of the most prominent UN programs: to eradicate poverty, to end discrimination based on race, religion, age or gender, to promote social and economic development for all peoples, to cherish and protect the environment, to end the arms race and find peaceful means to settle conflicts between peoples — certainly these resonate well with Vincent’s charism!

Some criticize the "glacial" pace that often characterizes the implementation of the UN's goals. Clearly the size of this international body and the many-layered levels of responsibility and authority make it unwieldy at times. How often its best intentions are frustrated by the self-concerns of member states! Frequently, too, its programs never see full implementation due to the failure of the UN to secure adequate financial support from the very members who pledged to fund its many projects. But if the UN were to be dissolved, what other voice could speak to all the nations of the world about wiping out poverty, about the freedom and equality of all peoples, about the obligation to promote the social development of all men, women and children, about peace for all people?

The UN is a very imperfect human institution. For the most part, however, its values and its goals are clearly in harmony with those of the Gospel. Surely they echo the concerns of St. Vincent de Paul for the poorest, the most abandoned, the most rejected. If the Vincentian presence in its midst can in any way promote its work on behalf of the poor, surely there is a ministry for Vincentians there!

How the United Nations works

Well, imperfect or not, how does the UN work? Unless they have been exposed to UN activities or events, most people have no idea! While the UN is a huge bureaucracy, its basic procedures are quite simple. Since a large number of issues are presented to this world body every year, most substantive questions

submitted to the General Assembly are routinely referred to one of its six committees. Individuals from the various national delegations serve on these committees.

Thus questions regarding disarmament, the proliferation of weapons and weapons systems and international security in general are placed before the First Committee. Understandably, international conventions regarding weapons and verification procedures fall to the responsibility of this Committee as well.

The Second Committee focuses on economic and financial issues. In addition, environmental questions are part of this Committee's responsibility. It goes without saying, then, that it always has its "plate overflowing." Issues such as the eradication of poverty, the promotion of development and technical and economic cooperation between nations — especially developing countries — are among its most sensitive concerns. Economic issues such as corrupt financial practices, illegal fund transfers and the complex question of world debt defy any easy or quick solution on the part of this Committee.

The Third Committee wrestles with questions involving humanitarian, cultural and social issues. This is the Committee which must respond to charges of human rights violations. Current examples include countries such as Rwanda, Myanmar, Kosovo, Iraq and seven or eight other nations. Related questions such as torture, inhuman punishment, racism, the right to self-determination, refugees and displaced persons also claim its attention. Of special concern to it are the rights of women and children, especially the girl child. Finally the Committee tackles such international questions such as drugs, crime and corruption, and discrimination through its ability to organize cooperation among nations.

The Fourth Committee considers political questions (not dealt with by the First Committee) and the issue of decolonization. It is the responsibility of this Committee to oversee the implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. This explains its concern for a number of newly independent countries in the Caribbean and South Pacific areas. It was through the Fourth Committee that the UN intervened — among others — in the recent dispute regarding the independence of the people of East Timor from Indonesia. Issues such as international law and the establishment of an International Criminal Court are other questions which lie within the responsibility of this Committee.

The Fifth Committee concerns itself entirely with the administrative and budgetary matters which are internal to the UN itself. Thus it prepares the world body's annual budget and supervises the assessed contributions requested from member states. The Fifth Committee is also responsible for the financial support

of UN peace-keeping activities in areas such as Kosovo, East Timor and Sierra Leone.

Finally, the Sixth Committee concerns itself with international legal matters. Thus it shares responsibility with the Fourth Committee on issues of international law and the International Criminal Court. It has jurisdiction as well for the UN's program against international terrorism, for the UN's relations with its host country (USA), and for questions concerning the UN charter.

A Developing Ministry

For the present, then, the Congregation's representatives have been busy putting into place a system for sharing an understanding of the UN and its works with confreres around the world. As a first step, they have set up an NGO information site on the Internet. In connection with the website of the Congregation, members of the various provinces can inform themselves of what is happening within this world organization and how its projects are faring around the world at www.famvin.org/cmngo.

The future is open to many possibilities. For example, as opportunities develop for influencing the direction being taken by UN bodies through involvement in their decision-making process, this will surely be attempted. The possibility of actively advocating on behalf of the poor is also a long-term goal. It may not happen today or tomorrow but there is no doubt that it can be done. Others are doing it. Why should not we? For example, a Dominican NGO received word from their mission in Pakistan that Christian villages had been destroyed, apparently by fundamentalist extremists. Because of the firsthand information from their confreres in the field, the representatives of the Dominican NGO knew how many churches were destroyed, how many homes laid waste, how many schools reduced to rubble. A vigorous protest to the Pakistani delegation at the UN — who had not yet even heard of the event — resulted in profuse apologies. Meanwhile a high-level representative of the Pakistani leadership arrived at the villages to organize official assistance in rebuilding the devastated villages. Another example — while the UN was reviewing its programs on behalf of children, Caritas International, another NGO, distributed to the assembled diplomats its position paper setting forth its Christian understanding of family and children.

As the Congregation's representatives at the UN gradually familiarize themselves with the way "business is done," they invite confreres around the world to contact them at the CMNGO website with suggestions for their work at the world body, indicating how the UN might be helpful to confreres in their work and beneficial for the people they serve. They can also be directly contacted via the Internet at deviner@stjohns.edu and jpfc@netscape.net