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The Vincentian Local Superior

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The Preparatory Commission for this meeting has asked me to speak to you about the “Vincentian Local Superior.” I will try to fulfil the conditions laid down by the Commission, that is to say “do not give a conference but make a presentation on the theme using as a frame of reference some articles in the *Constitutions and Statutes* and in the *Practical Guide for Visitor*; be concrete, bring out the principal elements of the theme and do not go beyond the allotted time of 20 minutes.”

I. The Local Superior — an important figure in the history of the Congregation

Since the beginnings of our Congregation, the office of Local Superior has always had great importance. It is enough to recall briefly some facts which clearly bear this out.

The office of Local Superior was frequently mentioned by St. Vincent as much in his spoken as in his written words. In the *General Index* of the 14th volume of the *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents* of St. Vincent in Pierre Coste’s edition, the list of references dealing with this office occupy three entire pages (and these are only the direct references); there are in all 200 references. Fr. Felix Contassot¹, on the basis of these texts, has written a book entitled *St. Vincent de Paul: Guide for Superiors*, which is about 200 pages long.

In the Codex Sarzana² of 1653, a manuscript containing the first version of the *Common Rules* of our Congregation, we find a large sixth section, divided into eight chapters, setting out the particular rules referring to the Local Superior.

In the definitive version of the *Common Rules of 1658*, we do not find such a section dealing only with the Local Superior, but the superior-subject relationship is dealt with in 63 of the 142 articles, as Fr Robert Maloney, the Superior General, has underlined in his recent study on community life.³

As always in the Congregation, the necessity of having particular rules for the different offices became apparent and that is why a very important document

¹ Felix Contassot, *saint Vincent de Paul, Guide des Supérieurs*, Paris, 1964.

² Cf. “Codex Sarzana” in *Vincentiana* 4-5 (1991) 379-393.

³ Cf. Robert Maloney, “As Friends Who Love One Another Deeply” in *Vincentiana* 4-5 (2000) 341.

was quickly born; the *Constitutiones et Regulae Visitoris Inferiorumque Officialium Congregationis Missionis*.⁴ In one of the first versions of this document, printed probably before the General Assembly of 1668, we find one complete part entitled, *Regulae Superioris localis*, made up of six chapters unfolding over 42 pages! These *Regulae officiorum*, revised and modified by successive General Assemblies or by Superiors General,⁵ remained in force, in practice until the period before Vatican II; in fact, their last revision was done by the Superior General, William Slattery, in 1961.

In the *Constitutions* of 1954, updated in particular for the part concerning the administration of the Congregation in conformity with the 1917 Canon Law, the affairs of governance occupy almost half of the document and precede the vows and ministries. Chapter 16, made up of nine articles, is given over entirely to the description of the office of Local Superior.

It is necessary to add that some Superiors General have also been very sensitive to this topic and their circulars have often touched on various aspects linked with the exercise of the role of Local Superior. Fr Fiat, in his *Manual for Superiors of the Congregation of the Mission*,⁶ published in 1901, included a good number of these circulars.

Reading these documents, even quickly, evokes the image of the Local Superior as “an almighty father.” According to the established rules, he intervened directly in all aspects of the daily life of the community, of work and of problems which touched on the personal life of each confrere, including the problems of conscience. And everyone had to believe that “the will of God is expressed by the will of the Superior.”

II. The Vincentian Local Superior in the New *Constitutions*

After Vatican II, we know, many things changed, in the Church and also in our Congregation. Among others, the manner of understanding authority changed; we moved from a model which was sometimes monarchical to a more participative model which favored dialogue, exchange of views, consultation, communication, information, co-responsibility and communion. This change is also operative in our new *Constitutions*, approved by the Holy See on 29 June 1984, and which came into force on 25 January 1985.⁷

⁴ Archives of the Maison-Mère, *Constitutiones et Regulae Visitoris Inferiorumque Officialium Cong. is Miss. is*, ms registre 650, p.173-236.

⁵ *Regulae Officiorum Congregationis Missionis*, t. 1-2, Paris 1850; 1891.

⁶ *Manuel des Supérieurs*, Paris 1901, p.108-162.

⁷ Cf. Yves Danjou, “The Government of the Congregation according to the New Constitutions” in *Vincentiana* 4-5 (2000), p. 382-390.

1. General Principles

This is outlined principally in the chapter on Community Life (art. 24, 2°-27) and especially in the first section of the third part of the *Constitutions*, where the general principles of government of the Congregation are set out (art. 96-100). Allow me to cite two fundamental ones:

The first principle: *“All members, since they have been called to labour for the continuation of the mission of Christ, have the right and responsibility, according to the norms of our own law, of working together for the good of the apostolic community and of participating in its government. Consequently, members should cooperate actively and responsibly in accepting assignments, undertaking apostolic projects and carrying out commands”* (art. 96)

The second principle: *“Those in the Congregation, who exercise authority, which comes from God, and those who have part in this exercise of authority in any way, even in assemblies and councils, should have before their eyes the example of the Good Shepherd, who came not to be ministered to but to minister. Hence, conscious of their responsibility before God, they shall consider themselves servants of the community for furthering its own purpose according to the spirit of St. Vincent in a true communion of apostolate and life. They should, therefore, engage in dialogue with members, while retaining the authority to decide and command what is to be done”*(art. 97 §1 and 2)

These principles, in particular the second, are very clear and also concern the local superior. His office is described especially in articles 129 to 134 of the *Constitutions* and in articles 78 and 79 of the *Statutes*.

2. Juridical Aspects

Almost all of these articles have, by their nature, a juridical character (C. 130-133; S. 78-79). But we also find some basic elements which allow us to outline the human and spiritual profile of the Local Superior. Among others, we can describe his important role in the community. Let us remain with these points for a moment before passing on to others.

a. Necessary juridical prerequisites

Our particular law fixes the conditions that the Local Superior must fulfil and these are described in articles 61 and 100 of the *Constitutions*. They are: 1) that he be “incorporated into the Congregation for at least three years and twenty-five years of age,” and 2) that he be “in Sacred Orders.” This latter condition, however, is not absolute since an incorporated brother can become a Local Superior, if the situation requires it and if the Superior General obtains

permission for it from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. We have already had one such case in one of the provinces of the United States.

b. Means of Designation

The *Constitutions* envisage two possible procedures for the nomination of a Local Superior.

- 1° He may be named by the Visitor, or by the Superior General for communities which are under his jurisdiction, with the consent of their respective Councils (C. 125, 4°; 107, 8°), and after consultation with the confreres of the house or local community (C. 130 § 1).
- 2° It is also possible for a Provincial Assembly to determine another method for the designation of a Local Superior (C. 130 § 2). It seems that, until now, no province has used this second option.

c. Term of Mandate

The Local Superior is named for a three-year period. Under the same conditions, he may be named in the same house or local community for a second triennium. After the second triennium, if it is necessary, the Visitor must have recourse to the Superior General (C. 130 § 1). While the *Constitutions* do not state so explicitly, it is very important and suggested by the canon lawyers, that the Visitor — in order to avoid eventual confusion — state in writing how the term of mandate is determined: the date of nomination or confirmation, the date of installation or the moment of taking over the office.⁸

d. Powers of the Superior

In conformity with our particular law, “the local superior has ordinary power in the internal and external forum for members and others living in his house day and night; he can delegate this power to others” (C. 131).

e. Rights and Duties

The document of the Holy See on relations between bishops and religious in the church, *Mutuae Relationes*, of 14 May 1978, suggests that it would be useful to adapt the obligations of the authority of Religious and Societies of Apostolic Life, according to the triple function of priestly ministry: to sanctify, to

⁸ Cf Miguel Pérez Flores, *El Superior local de la Congregación de la Misión*, Draft, p.59.

form and to govern. The *Constitutions* do not follow this guideline but specify concretely what the Local Superior must do. A complete list of his duties is formulated in article 78 of the *Statutes*.

f. Removal from Office

The *Constitutions* foresee that the Superior may be removed from office (C. 133) but do not specify in what cases. They limit themselves to stating what could happen if the Visitor, with the consent of his council and the approval of the Superior General, “judges that there is sufficient and just reason.” According to our canonists, these just and sufficient causes may be of a personal, community or ecclesial nature.⁹ Therefore, they deal with cases very different from those described in common law and Canon 194 of the Code of Canon Law (that is, abandoning the clerical state, public renunciation of the Catholic faith, a cleric who has attempted civil marriage).

3. The Nature of the Office and the Spiritual and Human requirements for it

The *Practical Guide for the Visitor* (268-269) underlines the importance of the choice and nomination of Local Superiors, but no mention is made of what must be his human and spiritual attributes. In number 270, mention is only made that they must be “appropriate” to the plan of the Visitor.

The new *Constitutions*, unlike those preceding them, make no mention of the human and spiritual qualities needed to be a Superior. However, the manner in which the office is described, even if only briefly, allows one to deduce what should be the qualities of one so nominated.

The Local Superior is defined as “the centre of unity and animator of the life of the local community.” Moreover, it is stated that he “should promote the ministries of the house and be ... concerned with the personal development and activities of each confrere” (C. 129 § 2).

1. Being the centre of unity requires a constant dialogue with each confrere and the whole community (cf. C. 24, 2°). At the same time, as the *Constitutions* stipulate, the Local Superior retains the “authority to decide and command what is to be done” (C. 97 § 2). These last two terms, “decide” and “command” are very strong. Deciding, and then ordering, might easily block communication. It could also happen that those who are not in agreement with the decision taken and the order given might feel themselves discriminated against and little by little distance themselves. The Superior must be conscious of this and must know how,

⁹ *Idem*. p.60.

with discernment, to maintain the balance between dialogue and the authority to decide and order what must be done.

2. Being the animator of the community is the principal task of the Superior. St. Vincent recognises this when he says: “As the soul and heart are to the body, so is the Superior to the Community” (XIII, 144). But this task must be understood and interpreted in a different manner with different people. I believe that we here have very different understandings of this subject.

If we wish to find inspiration in St. Vincent, he will tell us that: “The Superiors are like pilots who must guide a ship on the seas” (X, 262).

Fr. Richard McCullen,¹⁰ successor to St. Vincent, in a conference to local Superiors held in this house some years ago, said, among other things:

At the risk of proposing too broad a view of the duty of animation, I think ... that good animation does not solely consist of good administration but a gentle leadership of the community towards a better understanding and greater fidelity to the ideals of St. Vincent, such as they are formulated and authentically interpreted in our Constitutions and Statutes, which have been given to us in our time and for our time.

... Good animation of a community will imply also knowledge of the talents and gifts of the confreres within the local community, a knowledge that is accompanied by encouragement on the part of the Superior to use them, particularly those gifts and talents which the Superior may not possess himself or does not, in fact, possess” (cf. C. 129, § 1 and 2).

We share, entirely or partially, this interpretation of the role of animator. We cannot deny that to be the animator of the community, apostolic and spiritual life, as well as being the centre of unity, implies that the Superior must have certain human and spiritual qualities.

3. Human and Spiritual Qualities. Fr. Pérez Flores, in the draft of a *Practical Guide for Local Superiors* which is in the process of preparation, presents a detailed description of these. Due to lack of time, I will merely list the principal ones.

The Local Superior must be; **humanly mature, sociable, responsible, simple, humble, patient, prudent, peaceful, respectful towards others, sensitive to the needs of elderly and sick confreres, well-organised, a man of**

¹⁰ Cf. Richard McCullen, “Mission au cœur de la Mission. Le Supérieur local” in *Bulletin des Lazaristes de France*, April 1988, 108.

faith and prayer, faithful to the Vincentian spirit and charism and possessing a *sensus Ecclesiae*.

While this is equally set out in the *Practical Guide for the Visitor* (n° 268), often the Visitors, due to lack of personnel, do not have a great deal of choice or cannot find “ideal” candidates for the task of Local Superiors, but perhaps it is necessary that they keep conscious of the advice of St. Vincent in this regard.

According to our Founder, not suitable are: *those who seek this position* (IV 545), nor *young people* (V 351), nor *the holy, the wise or the old as such* (IX 517, 668; XII 48-50) *but rather those who add to knowledge the spirit of understanding and good judgement* (XII 50) and *have a love for the rule and for their vocation*” (XIII 356).

With these few words from St. Vincent, I must end for my time is already up. Many thanks for you attention and your patience.

(EUGENE CURRAN, C.M., translator)