

5-2003

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Recommended Citation

Zakreta, Arkadiusz C.M. (2003) "The European Conference of Visitors of the Congregation of the Mission - CEVIM," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 47: No. 3, Article 9.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol47/iss3/9>

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The European Conference of Visitors of the Congregation of the Mission - CEVIM

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I. Founding

The idea of founding the Conference dates back to 13 July 1989. This was one of the resolutions that the European Visitors took during their meeting in Rio de Janeiro at the time of the international meeting of the Visitors of the Congregation of the Mission. At that time, it was decided to create the Conference and to schedule its first meeting for 24-25 April 1990 at the Maison-Mère in Paris. Three visitors, Frs. Carlo Braga (Rome), José Mulet (Barcelona) and André Sylvestre (Toulouse) were chosen to develop the program.

The three Visitors met on 1 December 1989 in Toulouse to develop jointly a first draft of the program for the meeting of the Conference.¹ The replies received from the Visitors of the Conference to the previously developed questionnaire² were the starting point and the basis for this meeting.

Consequently, the Conference came into being, according to plan, on 24 April 1990 in Paris and took the name European Conference of the Visitors of the Congregation of the Mission, abbreviated CEVIM, on the model of CLAPVI, the Latin American Conference already in existence. It consists of all the European provinces, with the Middle East, today amounting to twenty.³ During that same meeting in Paris, statutes were prepared and approved. They consisted at the time of eleven articles defining the existence, the goals and the running of CEVIM.

CEVIM was thus the second Conference of Visitors in the modern history of the Congregation. While the international meeting of Visitors in Rio de Janeiro surely contributed to its creation, it was the Latin American Conference, already in existence and functioning beginning in 1971, that played the leading

* The new Executive Secretary is Luboš Kaščák (He was elected in the meeting of Naples, on May 2003).

¹ Cf. C. Braga, J. Mulet, A. Sylvestre, Letter to the Visitors, 1 December 1989.

² Cf. Report of the meeting of 13 July 1989 in Rio de Janeiro. The subjects broached in the questionnaire referred to the major problems of the provinces, to possible interprovincial collaboration in the area of formation and sharing, to fraternal help among provinces, to the challenge posed by the opening of Eastern Europe, and to the acceptance of the proposals put forth at the time of the meeting of the Visitors in Rio de Janeiro.

³ Cf. art. 1. The articles of the statutes of the Conference are cited here according to their present numbering.

role. It was to this Conference that the European Visitors turned in Paris, acknowledging it as an example of interprovincial collaboration.⁴

II. The goal and the tasks of the Conference

The creation of the Conference is already a mark of collaboration among the provinces of the European continent, and it constitutes an answer to the need of undertaking common initiatives in order to work more purposefully. We need to note here that it is equally as important and, following the principle of *primum esse deinde agere*, even more important, that the meeting of the Visitors contribute to deepening the sense of regional unity and identity with the entire Congregation of the Mission. The participation by the Superior General or by his representative in all or a part of the meeting contributes a great deal to it.

As early as the meeting in Rio de Janeiro itself, at its very beginning, the goals of the Conference were determined. They constitute at the same time the reasons for its existence and for its functioning. For example:

- a better mutual knowledge among the provinces;
- the study of common problems;
- carrying out of joint projects;
- fraternal help among the provinces.⁵

In view of these goals, the Conference drew up its statutes, and determined that it would have as its goal *better information and collaboration among the provinces in the areas of formation and Mission*.⁶ With this goal as a starting-point, CEVIM set forth two tasks for itself:

- *to look toward greater awareness of the Vincentian Family, and to a deepening of the Vincentian spirit through promoting contacts and exchanges in the areas of formation and mission activity, as well as through methods and means to initiate youth into the Vincentian spirit;*⁷
- *to promote all kinds of pastoral collaboration among the provinces, in the launching of new initiatives at a European level, such as missionary projects, language study, etc.*⁸

⁴ Cf. Minutes of the meeting of the European and Middle-Eastern Vincentian Visitors, Paris 1990, p. 1. The founding of CEVIM confirms the thesis of J. M. Nieto that the initiative of the Conferences of Visitors has arisen not “from above” but “from the base.” (Cf. J. M. Nieto, “The Visitors’ Conferences,” *Vincentiana* 3 (2002), p. 233).

⁵ Minutes of the meeting of 13 July 1989 in Rio de Janeiro.

⁶ Art. 2.

⁷ Art. 3. This article was originally part of Article 2. As can be determined from its content, this repetition helps to organize the statutes, since it emphasizes the goal and the tasks that result from them.

⁸ Art. 11. If we look at the logical order, it would be better to introduce this article immediately after article 3.

The experiences that CEVIM has had up to now show that the time of the annual meeting of the Visitors has been above all consecrated to the study of a prepared topic, and the presentation of the hosting province and of its works. The meetings have also been the occasion for launching cooperation between certain provinces, especially those that are neighbors geographically, and the offer of help in men and materials to provinces in some difficulty.

Speaking of goals, we should also note the importance of the Conference for the Visitors themselves. The community of Visitors, built up during several days and renewed yearly, allows a sharing of experiences and a coming to know of the problems that exist presently in various provinces. This strengthens the feeling of common responsibility concerning the activity of the Congregation of the Mission in the region in question. In this way, the meeting also becomes an element in the continuing formation of the Visitors.

III. Organization and functioning

The meetings of the Conference are held yearly. They take place during the second week after Easter, each time in a different place, except for the years when the date and place coincide with the General Assembly or of the international meeting the Visitors.⁹

From the beginning of the Conference, it adopted its present method of preparing the meeting. Three visitors, members of the Conference, called the troika, are asked to give their advice; they include the Visitor of the province where the last meeting was held, and the Visitor of the province where the next meeting will be held. The Visitors jointly name a Secretary for the Conference, someone who is not already a Visitor.¹⁰

The troika is responsible for preparing the meeting of the Conference.¹¹ In practice, this means that the three Visitors and the Secretary meet several months in advance in the province hosting CEVIM. At the time of the meeting, details of the organization are discussed, such as the main theme, the program, the speakers and the dates. When these decisions have been made, a questionnaire is drawn up which treats of the main theme of the meeting, and this is sent to all the Visitors. Their responses are shared with all the participants in

⁹ Cf. art. 6. For a while, the meetings were held earlier, but it was decided to hold them later on because of the meetings of MEGVIS (Mitteleuropäische Gruppe für Vincentinische Studien) on Vincentian spirituality, held just after Easter.

¹⁰ Cf. art. 4. In practice, the third Visitor acts as a volunteer. A Secretary was chosen for the first time in 2000, during the Madrid meeting. Previously, one of the Visitors acted as the secretary. In 2001, in Dublin, it was decided that the term of the Secretary would be three years, renewable once.

¹¹ Cf. art. 5.

CEVIM and serve as a basis for studying the problems that have surfaced, and for drawing up a common final document.

The meeting brings together the Visitors and the Vice-Visitors of the provinces and vice-provinces participating in CEVIM. For important reasons, they can be replaced by the assistant of their province or by a member of their provincial council.¹²

Since the *ius proprium* of the Congregation of the Mission does not foresee the existence or the organization of Visitors' Conferences, CEVIM enjoys a moral personality founded on the principle of mutual recognition.¹³ For this reason, the juridical situation of the Conference and the decisions it makes are limited. Their ratification is subordinated to the approval of the respective provincial councils, who maintain complete autonomy vis-à-vis CEVIM.¹⁴ The moral character of collaboration relative to the application of common decisions is reinforced by the juridical obligation of having a simple majority, and a two-thirds majority in the case of modification of the statutes.¹⁵

To conclude, it should be noted that the Conference works only occasionally, although the statutes foresee the existence of a secretariat, with, therefore, a permanent character.¹⁶ The Conference takes up this theme more and more often to assure an even better running of its affairs.

IV. The history of the meetings and their main themes

The meetings of CEVIM have taken place in a different province each year. The idea guiding the choice has been to know better the hosting province and, in the long term, all the provinces of the Conference. From this perspective, we have lengthened the time of the meeting, currently lasting about five days. Beyond the possibility of coming to know certain works of the host province, the program of the meeting includes common prayer, the Eucharist, and especially discussions about the theme proposed in advance.

Year	Place	Topics
1990	France - Paris	Organization of CEVIM, statutes, common Vincentian formation of students

¹² Cf. art. 8. Experience shows that this principle, which should exclude every other confrere who is neither an assistant nor a consultor, is not rigidly adhered to.

¹³ At the time of the meeting in Graz, one of the decisions was to confer a moral personality on the group of Visitors, understood from the choice and approval of the name CEVIM: "A name was chosen and approved to designate our group and to confer on it a moral personality." Minutes of CEVIM, Paris 1990, p. 1. Cf. art. 10.

¹³ Cf. art. 10.

¹⁴ Cf. art. 9.

¹⁵ Cf. art. 7.

¹⁶ Cf. art. 10.

1991	Austria – Graz	Revision of the statutes; opening of Eastern Europe; pastoral work for emigrants; Islam; Vincentian formation
1992	Italy – La Verna <i>General Assembly</i>	Development of the Vincentian session for the students at Dax (August 1991); vocation ministry; ongoing formation
1993	Spain – Salamanca	Lay participation in the works of the Congregation; collaboration with lay volunteers; relations of Vincentians with Daughters of Charity
1994	Poland – Zakopane	Situation of the Church in Eastern Europe; Vincentian identity; vocation ministry; Vincentian formation
1995	Ireland – Dublin	Spiritual direction; formation of clergy and laity; Vincentian lay volunteers
1996	Spain – Salamanca <i>International Meeting of Visitors</i>	The ministry of Visitors; acculturation of immigrants; interprovincial collaboration; international missions
1997	Germany – Niederprüm Holland – Panningen	Interprovincial collaboration in view of the Vincentian presence in Brussels; care for elderly and sick confreres; awareness of the work of Kirche in Not, Königstein
1998	Italy – Rome <i>General Assembly</i>	Vincentian Family
1999	Lebanon – Alountoun	Formation of formators; vocation ministry; pastoral work for refugees; Vincentian presence in Brussels; Vincentian book of prayers
2000	Spain – Madrid	Vocation ministry; interprovincial formation; popular missions; modern means of communication and the New Evangelization
2001	Ireland – Dublin <i>International Meeting of Visitors</i>	Support of local communities; revision of Statutes
2002	Poland – Krakow	Interprovincial collaboration in view of the enlargement of the European Union
2003	Italy – Naples	Pastoral work for emigrants; collaboration with the Vincentian Family

We should also note that at the time of the meeting, each Visitor can present the history and the current situation of his province. During the discussions, we likewise take into consideration the suggestions of the Superior General sent for this purpose to the Conference. At the end of each meeting, we draw up a final document, sent later to the General Curia, along with some brief information about the meeting.

V. Initiatives taken by CEVIM

As we can see from the outline of the topics discussed, the main concern, in fact at the heart of the Conference, is vocations and Vincentian formation. Currently, all the provinces of CEVIM are suffering either a lack of vocations, or at least a decrease in their number. Evidently, the main goal of a province's activity is not the care for the number of vocations but the desire to remain faithful to the mission for which the Congregation was founded. This conviction goes hand in hand with the hope that, if we remain faithful to the spirit of our founder, God will take charge of future generations of missionaries ready to serve the poor, who are always with us, as he himself assures us.

Nonetheless, the Conference perceives the need of undertaking a pastoral mission for vocations. Without this, all discussion about formation will be meaningless. As to the promotion of vocations, the Conference has not begun any general initiatives, but it constitutes an important source of information about the possibilities of such initiatives, and it always tries to encourage them.

As to the question of formation, the Conference has much larger possibilities. This issue appears every year, either as a main topic or as a parallel topic. The common means of all the Visitors together are much more important in this area, both for initial as for ongoing formation.

During the first meeting of CEVIM in Paris, those present decided to organize a course of formation for our students to be held at the Berceau. Since the beginning, these annual meetings enjoyed a great popularity. They allowed the students to discover the places associated with the history of the Congregation of the Mission, and this led them to a deepening of the spirit of St. Vincent. They also give them a greater possibility of knowing each other better and sharing their experiences.

One other example of the initiatives undertaken by the Conference in the area of formation was the meeting of formators, which took place at the Berceau, 27 August to 2 September 2000. Its topic was "Vincentian Formation, today and tomorrow."¹⁷ In their final document, the formators thanked the Visitors, and emphasized the usefulness of meetings of this type, noting the need to organize others in the future: "The meeting that we have experienced is the sign and the desire of a work of mutual collaboration. The spirit of St. Vincent, common to all of us, invites us to be collaborators: 'What is seen elsewhere concerns me.'

¹⁷ Thirty-seven confreres from Austria, Spain, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lebanon, Poland, Portugal, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, met for a sharing of experiences and a reflection on Vincentian formation at different levels, interprovincial collaboration, and Vincentian identity.

This is why, in order to pursue, deepen and broaden our common mission, we want to renew this type of experience.”¹⁸

VI. Futures plans of CEVIM

Although the Conference, as a meeting of the Visitors of Europe and the Middle East, acts collegially at certain times, it is tending more and more to establish an institution with a permanent character. In 1999, at the time of our meeting in Lebanon, we discussed at length the possibilities of Vincentian presence in Brussels.¹⁹ This then came back in the final document of the Kraków meeting, in 2002, in which the accent was placed on the modern thrust of the proposition of the Superior General. The Congregation of the Mission could in this way speak out, in the heart of the European Union, in the name of the poor, and look to the adoption of laws to protect them. Given the imminent enlargement of the Union, the presence of the Congregation of the Mission in Brussels could be even more important.

During the Kraków meeting, 2002, the question was raised of establishing a permanent secretariat for CEVIM. We talked about a possible site in Trier, Germany, because of its nearness to Brussels. This would allow the secretariat to join its activities to a possible Vincentian presence in Brussels, the capital of the European Union. We are still looking at the possibilities of organizing such a secretariat, along with the tasks, or rather the hopes, associated with it.

The need to set up, within the framework of CEVIM, a permanent institution comes from the need of coordinating its works to more efficiently fulfill the initiatives already undertaken, and of communicating better within the Conference (a newsletter).

It should be noted that, until now, each of the planned formation meetings has taken place, despite the great diversity of languages. This shows that the will to work together and to undertake initiatives for the good of the European continent allows the conquest of difficulties stemming from language barriers and the multiplicity of provinces in the meeting. We should hope that it would be the same in the pursuit of initiatives, present since the beginning, and in the start of new initiatives proposed by the visitors of CEVIM.

¹⁸ The Final Document of the Session of Formators of Europe and the Middle East (27 August – 2 September 2000), p. 4.

¹⁹ The Superior General indicated this possibility in his letter of 1999 written to CEVIM. In it, he asked the following question: “Is there something that we can do to make the ‘European voice’ of the Congregation of the Mission express itself more clearly in Brussels?” Robert P. Maloney, “To the members of the European Conference of Visitors” in *Vincentiana* 3 (1999), p. 148. The Conference was in favor of collaboration with the permanent secretariat of AIC, already existing in Brussels, or even for the establishment of a representation from the entire Vincentian Family. No matter what solution is adopted, it is important to designate a confrere for Brussels.

(JOHN RYBOLT, C.M., translator)