

7-2004

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Recommended Citation

Maloney, Robert P. C.M. (2004) "The Role of the Superior General," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 48: No. 4, Article 12. Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol48/iss4/12>

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The Role of the Superior General

by Robert P. Maloney, C.M.

Superior General
9.VII.2004

I have been asked to speak this morning about the role of the Superior General in order to provide you with background as you enter into the process of choosing a new one.

The Superior General's principal task, Article 101 of our Constitutions tells us, is, as the successor of St. Vincent, to govern the Congregation in such a way that the charism of St. Vincent will always stay alive in the Church. He is to animate the Company to deepen its spirituality and, in the footsteps of Christ, to be mobile and missionary, going even to the ends of the earth. He is to call the Company to contribute competently and creatively to the formation of the clergy and laity in order to lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor. He is, according to Article 102, to be the center of unity and coordination of the provinces and to be a source of spiritual animation, calling the Company to be genuinely prayerful, to live the five Vincentian virtues and the four Vincentian vows in a profound, integral way. He also, according to Article 103, governs the provinces, houses and even individual members of the Congregation with ordinary power. At the same time, he is subject to the General Assembly and therefore is to carry out, in obedience, whatever the General Assembly asks him to do. Article 107 spells all this out in great detail, as do Statutes 51 and 53 of the Congregation of the Mission.

But today, I thought that it might be useful to you if I spoke more concretely. So the question I will address is this: what does the Superior General *do*? Even more concretely, how does he use his time?

I recognize that the use of time will vary greatly from one Superior General to another, depending on his priorities and even on his personality. Much too will depend on the team of persons elected along with or chosen by the Superior General. Each team will be different, with the members having diverse talents. This will result in different ways of distributing the labor of the Curia. In these reflections, therefore, I will tell you merely how I used my own time. This is only one way of doing things; there are surely many others.

1. The Superior General's first priority, as I see it, is to be the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, not of the Daughters of Charity, nor of the Vincentian Family, even though these are very important aspects of his job. Personally, I am convinced that, in order to work effectively as Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, one must spend a lot of time in Rome. Each year, on the average, there are 35 council meetings. Though the Constitutions allows the Superior General to be absent, in practice I took part in almost all of them. Moreover, there are four *tempo forte* council sessions each year, which last five days each. The *tempo forte* council meetings are very significant moments. At these meetings, long-range planning takes place and decisions are made about the ongoing formation of confreres, the opening of new missions, economic questions, and structural solutions for problems that face the Congregation. These meetings must be prepared very well. Proposals must be distributed in advance, in writing, to all the council members so that they can digest them ahead of time. After these meetings too, there is lots of follow-up work to be done. So, in practice, council meetings alone demand being in Rome almost three months a year.
2. As you can imagine, the Superior General receives numerous invitations. In addition, Statute 51, 2° states that he should, either personally or through a delegate, make an official visitation of each province once every six years. This obligation stands in tension with the need to be in Rome and with many other obligations that the Superior General has. Sometimes I have thought that there should be two people: the administrating Superior General and the traveling Superior General. Using the liberty granted by Statute 51, 2°, I have opted to ask the Assistants to make the longer visits to the provinces, while I myself have made shorter trips. My trips often were a response to an invitation to some special event in a province (an important meeting, an anniversary, etc.). For such a visit, I judged that five or six days was sufficient. I usually met with the members of the Provincial Council, with all the confreres in one or two groups, spent a half-day with the Daughters of Charity, and held a meeting with representatives of other branches of the Vincentian Family. The visits of the Superior General and the Assistants are important not just to the province; they enrich us too. They expand one's vision. They give one firsthand knowledge of the confreres and their works. In the past three years I was away from Rome an average of three and a half months each year and made 16 journeys each year.
3. The Superior General gives very frequent talks. Their preparation takes much time, since I chose not to use a "speech-writer." Over

the years I have come to the conclusion that publishing is an even more effective means of communication than simply talking. A talk usually reaches a small group, perhaps 200 or 300 people. An article, if published in *Vincentiana*, the *Echos*, and perhaps a book might reach 30,000 or 40,000 people. I sometimes write for *Review for Religious* and *America* magazines, which have a very wide circulation. When I am in Rome I try to spend my evenings reading, with a view to writing. I owe this habit, with much gratitude, to a suggestion made by Fr. Miguel Pérez Flores.

4. The correspondence of the Superior General is enormous. It reaches around four thousand letters a year and, with e-mail, is multiplying every day. Over the years, I received wonderful help from the secretariat at the Curia, but still the Superior General must read the letters — something which gets harder and harder — and respond. Will the day arrive when an administrative assistant will pass on to the Superior General only the most important letters? In my first term I discussed that with the General Council, but ultimately that solution was rejected. Anyway, reading the correspondence gives one a very valuable firsthand knowledge of what is going on in the Congregation and in the wider Vincentian Family.

The correspondence of the Delegate of the Superior General to the Vincentian Family is also very large.

5. Though financial matters do not take a big percentage of my time, I think it crucial for the Superior General to focus on them from time to time, with the Treasurer General. In fact, regular dialogue with him is, in my judgment, very important. I have had extraordinarily competent Treasurer Generals. Establishing a sound financial base for the works of the Congregation is essential. The poorer provinces and missions need lots of help. We have been fortunate, in recent years, that significant benefactors and very generous provinces and confreres have assisted us so much. I have sometimes asked myself whether a fund-raiser for the Congregation should be appointed.
6. The Vincentian Family occupies an increasing amount of the time of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission. Fr. Richardson, when he was Superior General, once said that the Daughters of Charity occupied 50% of his time, but for recent years I would put that figure at 25%, though last year it was higher because of the General Assembly of the Daughters of Charity and the revision of their Constitutions, which involved a huge amount of work. Over the last decade, however, the other groups of the Vincentian Family, particularly the youth groups, have come to occupy another 25% of my time. Especially since

the last General Assembly, the Superior General's work with the various branches of the Vincentian Family has become very demanding. Participation in the General Assemblies of JMV, MISEVI, AIC, and the Religious of St. Vincent de Paul, writing or approving statutes for the various groups, and carrying on an enormous correspondence with the members takes a much greater proportion of the Superior General's time than in the past.

That means, as Fr. Richardson indicated, that the Congregation of the Mission gets only about 50% of the Superior General's time!

7. It may be helpful to say a brief word about the Superior General's role in regard to the various lay groups.
 - a) JMV - The Superior General is the Director General of JMV. In that capacity, I have tried to assist at all the meetings of the International Council. I thought that this was very important at the beginning of JMV's life as an International Association. Now, however, things are moving ahead smoothly. In the future, it may not be necessary for the Superior General to take part in all the meetings of the International Council. The Subdirector, who is Pedro Castillo, can take his place.
 - b) MISEVI - The Superior General is also the Director General of MISEVI. Since MISEVI too is in its initial stages, I have tried to take part in its international meetings and keep abreast of its activities. In the future, however, this too may be less necessary. Felipe M. Nieto, who is a member of MISEVI's International Coordinating Team, already represents me at many of its meetings.
 - c) The Association of the Miraculous Medal - The Superior General is the Director General of the Association of the Miraculous Medal. Since the International Association has just come into existence, I have taken part in all the meetings of its International Coordinating Council. There is, however, an International Coordinator, Charles Shelby.
 - d) AIC - The Superior General has no juridical responsibility in regard to AIC, though he has a symbolic role and, in fact, contacts have been frequent and very rich.
 - e) The Society of St. Vincent de Paul - The Superior General has no juridical relationship at all with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, though many of its members look to him symbolically as the representative of St. Vincent.

- f) The Archconfraternity of the Holy Agony - The Superior General is the Director General of this group too. It is really a very tiny group that exists mainly in Paris. Once a year, around March 25, I celebrate the Eucharist for the group. Other than that, there is very little else that the Superior General must do.
8. Of course, there are other things. There are meetings of the Union of Superiors General, though lately I have not been a very active member. At times the Holy See asks for one's service. I was asked to take part in two synods. That means dropping everything else for a whole month. I was asked also to preside at the General Chapter of the Religious of St. Vincent de Paul. With preparation and follow-up, that too also took a month. Over the years, at various times, the Holy See has also asked me to be a member of Cor Unum, of the Council of 18, and also of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. These groups meet only occasionally.

As you can see, there is plenty to do. But I am convinced that there are many confreres who could do the job well. The most important thing, it seems to me, is to rely on the Lord — it is ultimately his work — and to ask the Lord for *anima*, soul, life, spirit, enthusiasm, creativity, so that one might be of genuine service in helping the Congregation to deepen its spirituality and to deepen its apostolic mission.