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Ignacio Fernandez Mendoza C.M.

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The Office of the Vicar General

by Ignacio Fernández Mendoza, C.M.

Vicar General

16.VII.2004

The Preparatory Commission of the General Assembly asked me to make a brief presentation in order to inform the delegates about the office of the Vicar General. It is a pleasure, therefore, to offer at this particular time, these reflections. Keep in mind that very soon the Assembly will elect a new Vicar General.

Before writing these reflections, I consulted a magazine that is published by the Federation of Superiors General located here in Rome. In the particular issue that I examined, three Vicar Generals wrote about their own experience. I immediately noticed that, in each case, the role of the Vicar General was quite distinct, depending on the Constitutions of each Institute. The Congregation of the Mission has also expressed in its Constitutions the principal responsibilities that refer to the office of the Vicar General. Therefore, this presentation is based on our Constitutions and my own personal experience.

The Vicar General of the Congregation of the Mission is elected by the General Assembly. He fulfills a ministry that has two complementary dimensions. In order to fulfill his role, that is, in order to fly like an eagle, the Vicar General must move both wings, since he is at one and the same time Vicar General and Assistant General. Our Constitutions state: "The vicar general is elected by the General Assembly according to the norm of our own law. The one elected vicar general automatically becomes also an assistant general" (Constitutions 109).

What are the functions of the Vicar General? The Vicar General "helps the superior general and substitutes for him when he is away or impeded, according to the norm of our own law" (Constitutions 108). According to these words, the Constitutions assign the Vicar General two functions: to help the Superior General and to substitute for him in two cases, when the Superior General is absent and when he is impeded. In both cases he does this according to the norm of our own law.

What happens in the case of the absence of the Superior General? Article 110 of our Constitutions establishes that "in the

absence of the superior general, the vicar general has the authority of the superior general unless the superior general has reserved some matter for himself" (Constitutions 110). Allow me to make two observations. The Constitutions refer to the possible absence of the Superior General for a certain period of time and merely some passing momentary absence. I want to say that during the past 12 years the Superior General, whenever he was absent from the General Curia, never reserved any matter for himself. It is also important to state that during the absences of the Superior General, the Assistants, chaired by the Vicar General, met in council as often as necessary. They studied and made decisions concerning ordinary matters of government. As Vicar, I never undertook new initiatives in the absence of the Superior General. Furthermore, on some occasions, I decided to delay action on certain important matters until the Superior General returned. I believe that the missionaries of the Congregation are pleased to see the signature of the Superior General on the documents they receive from the General Curia.

What happens in the case when the Superior General is impeded from fulfilling his responsibility? We find the answer in Article 111 of our Constitutions: "If the superior general is impeded, the vicar general substitutes for him with full authority until the impediment ceases." The article that was just cited contains an interesting addition: "The judgment concerning the impediment is made by the general council, without the superior general, but with the vicar general present."

Another possible hypothesis: the office of the Superior General is vacant. How then to proceed in this situation? Article 112 states: "When the office of superior general is vacant for whatever reason, the vicar general automatically becomes the superior general until the completion of the six year term."

From what has been stated, we might conclude the following: first, the Vicar General is always to help the Superior General and, secondly, in two particular cases is to substitute for the superior general — in the case of his absence and in the case when he is impeded. The proper law of the Congregation has outlined very precisely the duty and the role of the Vicar General in order to avoid, if you will, "a power vacuum" in case the office of the Superior General becomes vacant for whatever reason. Remember that our Constitutions have provided for something similar in the case of the Visitor and the local superior (Statutes 72, 79).

The Constitutions and Statutes also consider the situation that could arise in case the office of the Vicar General becomes vacant (Statutes 55) and the procedure to be followed to name a substitute (Constitutions 113).

Having explained some fundamental ideas about the right of the Vicar General, I now offer some complementary considerations.

The Vicar General is not entrusted with some particular or specific aspect of governance nor is he assigned specific tasks, tasks that in certain Institutes are referred to as assignments. As an Assistant, he helps and advises the Superior General in governing the Congregation of the Mission. This being the case, it is the Superior General who distributes the work. He does this by taking into consideration the needs of the Congregation and the qualities and expertise of each Assistant. In the Congregation of the Mission, the Assistants are not given a specific geographical area or cultural group. No Assistant represents the missionaries who speak a specific language. With regard to this last point, it is noted that there is some confusion on this matter in the Little Company. Frequently one hears the confreres speak of this or that Assistant for some particular continent or for this or that part of the world.

The relationship of the Vicar General to the Superior General ought to be one of closeness and confidence, faithful at all times, available and open to possible insinuations, loyal, and at the same time free — in summary, the relationship should be one of spontaneous collaboration. The Vicar General ought to be clear that the Superior General governs the Congregation of the Mission. It is not the Vicar General or the Assistants who govern. Also the missionaries of the Congregation want to be governed by the Superior General and not by other persons. Therefore, it is good that the dialogue and information flow smoothly between the Superior General and the Vicar General. At times the Vicar General will have his own personal criteria on a particular subject. In those situations it is best that he explain them openly and simply, while always respecting the opinions and decisions of the Superior General.

In summary, the Vicar General as Assistant, since in reality that is what he is, ought to be mindful that his primary duty is to help the Superior General in the discernment process in order to encourage him and allow him to make the best decisions for the Congregation. Thus he is ever mindful of the fact that it is the Superior General who decides.

Having said this, allow me one further reflection. The Vicar General must be careful to avoid placing himself in a situation of opposition to the Superior General. The Vicar has the duty of assuming the plans and the decisions of the Superior General, even when he is not in agreement with what has been decided. The Vicar General must also keep the Superior General in a good light, always concerned for the fact that he be esteemed and valued. Nothing would scandalize the missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission more than to see a negative attitude toward the Superior General, an

attitude formed by the Vicar General or some of the Assistants. The Vicar General must accustom himself to know how to walk with the one who is primarily responsible for the Congregation. The Vicar General must be like John the Baptist, in second place, pointing toward Jesus Christ, or, speaking of the Congregation of the Mission, pointing toward the Superior General.

I have omitted here a description of the other activities of the Vicar General as Assistant. Another member of the General Curia will address this issue.

Thank you.