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Vincentiana, July-October 2004

Presentation of CIF at the General Assembly

by Hugh O'Donnell, C.M.

Director of CIF

19.VII.2004

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today. Fr. Julián Díaz and I are grateful to Fr. Maloney, and now Fr. Gay, the General Council and the Planning Commission for putting us on the agenda. We are here today, neither to present the program nor to make a progress report, but only to take advantage of times outside your formal meetings, when we will be available to talk with you about the participation of your confreres in future sessions. We want to work with you in any way we can for the good of your confreres and for the future development of CIF as an International Center of Formation.

I would like to address four points briefly: the value of CIF, the success of CIF, the challenges of CIF and the future of CIF.

The Value of CIF

St. Vincent and the confreres at the First General Assembly of the Congregation (1642) wanted something like CIF, a program of renewal and recommitment after a number of years on the mission, but it turned out the time was not right. In the century it was tried again with brief success. But now it has become a reality, thanks to the initiative of the General Assembly of 1992, the firm resolve and enthusiastic support of Fr. Maloney and the General Council, the generous collaboration of the Province of Paris and the goodness of the confreres at the Motherhouse.

CIF focuses on the most important asset in the Congregation of the Mission, the confreres themselves. It has been and will continue to be valuable, because confreres come away feeling valued: valued by their provinces through the gift of time and money; valued by all those they meet in the program; and valued by the gift of time they have, free from other responsibilities, to pray (again), to rest, to read, to listen, to share, to discover confreres from other parts of the

world, and to know Vincent and our vocation in a new way, and perhaps, as the poet says "for the first time." The program is not therapeutic, but it does not mean that it is not healing. In the short time I have been with the program I have seen the gift of healing and reconciliation at work in the lives of the participants. Time and distance for some have proven to be a great grace.

The Success of CIF

The program is evaluated on a regular basis. Each week the participants are invited to evaluate the week just gone by. At mid-term and at the end of the session, in addition to the written evaluation by each participant, we also hold a meeting of participants and staff to discuss what was worthwhile, what could be improved and what might be added. The results of these evaluations have been overwhelmingly positive. Most of the improvements in the program over time have been made on the basis of this process of feedback and evaluation.

Participants testify to the benefits of the program in terms of personal renewal, experience of community, knowledge of Vincent, contact with our history, appreciation for vocation and a clearer sense of mission.

I would like to highlight one aspect of the experience. It is the experience of the international community at the interpersonal level. The community has been international from a geographic point of view for a long time. What has been happening in the past dozen years in the Congregation is that we have been becoming more international at the level of "dear friends." The number of confreres who personally know confreres from other provinces, countries and parts of the world has grown significantly. CIF is an important part of this development.

The Challenges of CIF

The two challenges facing us are **enrollment and finances**. These two are **linked**, because the program is financed entirely through the fees paid by the provinces for the confreres who come from their respective provinces. There are some indirect subsidies. I will come to that in a minute.

Enrollment. The Ongoing Formation Program has held 18 sessions with 368 participants. The average number of participants per session is 21. The highest has been 35 (session VII September-December 1997) and the smallest group was this past spring (session XVIII February-May 2004) with 7 participants. The quality of the program is not at all diminished when the group is small. Small

groups do not regret that they are not larger and, in fact, have a wonderful community experience. The large groups have also been content and preferred not to be smaller. The problem is financial. The program has certain fixed costs, for example, the bus, the speakers and the translator, and the cost is the same whether we are seven or 35. Other expenses like room and board vary with the numbers of participants. We need at least 18 to break even, but more realistically 20. Our goal is to have 20-25 per session. An interesting statistic that deserves the attention of everyone interested in CIF is this: the 11 sessions prior to the year 2000 averaged 24 participants in each session, while the 7 sessions starting in 2000 averaged 14 participants in each session.

Our immediate goal these days is to bring to your attention the five sessions ahead of us in 2004-2005. Heritage VII in September in Spanish and Italian is already filled. Heritage VIII (10 October to 6 November 2004) in English is still open. In 2005, Ongoing Formation XIX (20 February to 19 May) is open for both English and Spanish speakers. Heritage IX (6 June to 1 July) is open for English speakers. Ongoing Formation XX (11 September to 9 December 2005) is open for French and English speakers.

Finances. We have an annual professional audit, which goes to Fr. Bauer and through him to the General Curia. He usually visits us twice a year. His recent visit brought us face-to-face with the impact the strong euro has had on the program. In effect, the relatively small surplus that we had is gone.

The program depends almost entirely on the fees paid by the provinces that send confreres. For some it is easy enough, for some it is a real burden and for some it is not possible without outside funding. The Curia gives us money for scholarships, which is used only as a last resort. Provinces are expected to apply to funding agencies for scholarships. One of the wonderful things is the way some provinces help other provinces, without letting the right hand know what the left is doing. It is always heartwarming when we at CIF become aware of this kind of interprovincial generosity.

Has the time come to create a Scholarship Fund to help provinces that want to send confreres, but have limited funds? A Scholarship Fund could provide half scholarships or full scholarships. A half scholarship would be 2,500 euro and a full scholarship would be 5,000 euro at the present time. We think half scholarships are preferable, so that the province still has a responsibility to provide the other half. At the same time some provinces cannot do without full scholarships. The granting of scholarships would be governed by available resources and the needs of each province. Has the time come? We hope to prepare a proposal for the Superior General and his council.

How would such a Scholarship Fund be funded? We could seek outside funding or it could be funded through the provinces. You might be surprised to know how little it would cost. An average of 1,000 euro annually from each province would pay great dividends. When I say "average" I am thinking contributions could be made on a sliding scale, say between 2,000 and 500 Euros. It could even be on a voluntary basis.

The Future of CIF

The key to CIF's future will continue to be the Ongoing Formation Program for confreres from 35 to 50. This is the bedrock program. We will also continue to serve confreres over 50 in the Heritage Program as long as it meets a need. But, are there other ways of using our roots and heritage in the service of specific groups of confreres? Your suggestions are most welcome. CIF is at the service of the Congregation.

We have heard the following suggestions: a special session for superiors based on the new *Practical Guide for the Local Superior*; a gathering of prison chaplains to reflect on Vincent's experience in captivity and ministry to those held captive; a workshop on Vincent as leader for Vincentian leaders; a gathering of spiritual directors and formators to reflect on Vincent's way of spiritual guidance. What about St. Vincent as a man of peace in a time of war?

During these days Fr. Julián and I hope to hear from you about how CIF can serve your needs and in what direction CIF might grow. We also welcome any ideas you have later: write us or call us.

Thank you.