

**General Custodian
Report to the
Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity
XV General Cenacle**

Providence seems to be sending a message. Recently, the liturgy of the hours and the Sunday scripture reading for this week both cited Philippians 4:6, “Dismiss all anxiety from your minds.” It is a message I need to take to heart since I do have some anxieties. You might share them as well. Are we doing all we can to recruit good vocations? Are the formation programs fulfilling their function of preparing men to live as vowed, religious missionaries? Do the missions that we staff operate in a way that promotes the charism? Is there adequate spiritual and community support for the men in the local mission so that they can live happy and holy lives? Will our fund-raising efforts be adequate to support our missionary efforts among the poor? Are our elders provided what they need to live a fruitful senior ministry? Anxieties about the Cenacle family, the Church and the world would lengthen the list considerably. Even St. Paul in another epistle, confesses that he isn’t always able to heed his own advice: “Leaving other sufferings unmentioned, there is that daily tension pressing on me, my anxiety for the churches. Who is weak that I am not affected by it? Who is scandalized that I am not aflame with indignation” (2 Corinthians 11:28-29).

The cure for such anxiety, the apostle suggests, is to see things the way that God sees them. “Your thoughts should be wholly directed to all that is true, all that deserves respect, all that is honest, pure, admirable, decent, virtuous, or worthy of praise” (Philippians 4:8). When I look at our brothers the anxieties abate. The dedication of the men in vocation and formation work, the zeal of the men staffing even difficult missions, the common desire to grow spiritually among the membership, the creativity and initiative of the staff at the Mission Procure Office, the kindness and charity evident at Father Judge Missionary Cenacle in Adelphi all are worthy of praise and deserve respect. There is cause for rejoicing here.

With that as backdrop I offer you this report on my ministry of leadership for the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity. This report will share with you what I see as the current reality of the congregation and pose questions to prompt our reflection about where God is leading us. I have heard the complaint, “But we have talked about these things before.” Yes, we have. But the call to conversion demands that we continue to talk about them. As in the previous report to the General Cenacle, I have shaped this one around the headings of the Constitution, approved thirty years ago. Living up to the ideals of the Rule of Life and Constitution will ensure a vibrant future for the Missionary Servants.

Let me observe immediately that whatever good that has been accomplished these past four years is largely due to the efforts of the General Council. They have more than compensated for my many inadequacies (language being only the most obvious.) The counsel I received from Domingo, John, Rafael and Dennis reflected their profound love for you, our confreres, and a deep devotion to the charism. Many of you have experienced first hand their fraternal ministry. I would ask you to extend a word of gratitude to them.

NATURE AND PURPOSE

At General Cenacle XIV there was considerable discussion around the efforts of the previous administration to situate all that we do, our missions and our formation, very specifically and intentionally around the charism of Father Judge. At that time we focused on “our chief effort” which is to develop a missionary spirit in the laity in those areas and among those people who are spiritually neglected and abandoned, especially the poor. These past four years we have refined that understanding of the “core of the charism” to include what the Rule of Life calls “our specific mission” – the preservation of the faith. Hence, the theme of this General Cenacle: Forming apostles to preserve the faith. What we do is work for the preservation of the faith. How we do that is by developing a missionary spirit in the laity. This emphasis is now to be shared by the whole Church according to the vision of Pope Francis the “missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity” (*Evangelii Gaudium* #15). The Holy Father goes on to say, “I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort in advancing along the path of pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are” (*EG* #25).

The previous General Cenacle recommended the formation of a Mission Committee. The initial committee consisted of John Skrodinsky, Mike Barth, Guy Wilson and Francisco Valdovinos. Mike left the committee when he went on sabbatical and Angelica Otero and Marta Vega joined. The Mission Committee has provided to the General Council insight and analysis on the Mission Plans of our various works. They are working to develop a Congregational Mission Plan which will be discussed at the General Cenacle. And they have provided advice to the General Council on the opening and closing of missions. One question from the Committee: how can parish ministry be shaped in a way that promotes the charism? Would other ministries be able to incarnate the charism better? The “job description” of the Mission Committee is a work in process. (For example, personnel decisions are the purview of the General Council but obviously have a huge impact on individual missions.) The Mission Committee is very helpful to the General Council so I would recommend that the Committee continue its work.

One endeavor we have not been able to bring to fruition is opening a ministry in Haiti. Since the charism is attracting vocations from Haiti it seems there is a potential for it flourishing among those beautiful, but hurting, people. In addition, developing a work among people from Haiti will help us as we discern which young men might have a Cenacle vocation. For a mission to succeed there, however, requires much thought and planning, preparation in dealing with language and culture, the proper fit of missionaries who will be able to collaborate and, of course, the necessary resources. An exploratory committee has been formed to help us think through these diverse elements. The next administration will determine the feasibility of opening such a mission.

This year is the one hundredth anniversary of Father Judge coming to Alabama. It serves as a reminder of the Founder’s vision for the Missionary Cenacle Family. The reality of the Family does not quite meet up to this ideal. We have not yet found the proper structures or systems which respect the autonomy of the branches while at the same time promote collaboration and communion as a family. The Missionary Cenacle Family Council, the Family Area Councils, the Missionary Servant Council, the Missionary Cenacle Family Spirituality Commission are working toward this end. All the effort has not yet born the fullness of the

desired fruit. As one member observed, “Father Judge envisioned us as brothers and sisters sharing the family farm. We have become more like kissing cousins.” The General Cenacle should decide on the emphasis that should be placed in the family ideal and provide some guidance to these efforts.

What does our specific mission of preservation of the faith mean in the reality of your mission?

Are there missions we should be exploring where the charism would come alive?

How do you understand the importance of the Missionary Cenacle Family for us?

SPIRITUAL LIFE

During Visitation I would always ask about one’s spiritual life. Everyone understands that a religious without a deep spirituality will soon find himself in trouble. Everyone also acknowledges the basic components of a spiritual life: personal and communal prayer, participation in the Eucharist, the sacrament of Penance, spiritual reading, meditation, faith sharing, annual retreat, spiritual direction, etc. The challenge comes in not letting the needs of the mission overwhelm the time and energy required to have a vibrant spiritual life. One encouraging development – men who are in isolated or distant missions have been able to utilize modern forms of communication (skype, for example) in order to have regular spiritual direction.

The Missionary Cenacle Spiritual Exercises continue to be central to the ongoing renewal of the congregation. The Exercises are, at heart, prayerful reflection on our spiritual tradition. Many have found that returning often to repeat the Exercises helps to deepen their spirituality. While some have critiqued one or the other aspect of the Exercises (e.g., the keeping of silence) I am convinced that they are an essential element in the ongoing conversion in the Cenacle spirituality. The Committee responsible for their implementation (and their ongoing revision) now includes the entire Cenacle Family. Many thanks to Dennis Berry and John Seymour who headed up this effort for many years and now to Gary Banks and Raul Ventura who have assumed leadership roles.

The congregation’s own Spiritual Life Committee has not functioned as effectively as I would have hoped. For example, there has been a call for retreats using other models besides that of the Exercises. However, trying to pick a time, place and topic which fits for a significant number of confreres to make such a retreat has proven difficult. While many avail themselves of diocesan retreats, private retreats or retreats in local houses of prayer, we do benefit when we pray together on retreat. In addition, the Advent and Lenten Regional Days of Prayer have not been as regular as they are intended to be. I would suggest that the next administration emphasize the Spiritual Life Committee.

This General Cenacle will be asked to approve the Book of Customs. According to the Constitution #22.1 “the confreres shall reflect frequently on the Book of Customs and strive to make the virtues, practices and devotions of the Missionary Cenacle operative in their lives.” This Book will equip us to deepen our “devotional knowledge” in the charism. In addition, after

many years the biography of Father Judge written by Dr. William Portier is in the final stages leading up to publication. Many thanks to Gary Banks for shepherding this effort to the finish line. I would be remiss not to thank Steve Vesely and his intrepid band from the entire Cenacle Family who continue to make the *Cenacle Ordo* available to us.

How important to you is the emphasis placed on the Missionary Cenacle Spiritual Exercises?

Are there ways that you might improve the life of prayer in the local Cenacle?

What would you like to see a Spiritual Life Committee emphasize for the coming years?

VOWED LIFE

For many years the leadership of the Missionary Servants has been active in the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM). Participation in this pontifical organization has provided the opportunity to see the richness and diversity of religious life. My time as president of CMSM brought me “up close and personal” to many religious congregations and apostolic societies. I am left with the impression that what religious share even with all our diversity is a commitment to the common life. Not just monks and conventuals but apostolic communities see the need to stress fraternity in the living out of their mission. The experience of Missionary Servants confirms this observation. Greater attention to our life together as brothers makes for a more effective mission. Pope Francis has asked religious to “wake up the world” during this Year of Consecrated Life. The best way for us to do so is by modeling a shared life of prayer together for the sake of the mission.

Pope Francis also holds out some challenges for us as religious as well. He says in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “Today we are seeing in many pastoral workers, including consecrated men and women, an inordinate concern for their personal freedom and relaxation, which leads them to see their work as a mere appendage to their life, as if it were not a part of their very identity” (*EG* #78). The Holy Father is worried that a “heightened individualism” might weaken the fabric of religious life. Missionary Servants should examine our lives to make sure that we do not fall into an inordinate individualism. A healthy Cenacle will do such an examination together as brothers.

The reality of religious life today includes what demographers call “defections” – those who have decided that they will no longer live in religious life. Currently we have six confreres who are in the process of leaving the congregation (three of whom are seeking incardination in a diocese) and one confrere who is in “exclaustration” as he discerns his vocational calling. It is painful to say good-bye to any brother who has shared our life from many years. Even more, the fact that five of this number were less than five years ordained is cause for concern. The Vocational Development Committee has been given the task of stressing that our vocation is as religious. Do those taking final vows and being ordained have sufficient spiritual and communal supports for their vocation? The mentoring program under the current leadership of Jesus Ramirez works diligently to support the neo-ministers as they develop their identity as Missionary Servants. Shared prayer and fraternity on the local mission is the greatest support.

In addition to the attention given to those just starting to live the vowed life, the

congregation also gives special emphasis to those who have “born the day’s heat” of ministry and are now in “senior” status. Edwin Dill and now Loughlan Sofield along with their team of Bill Coombs and Anselm Deehr provide a healthy and prayer-filled atmosphere at Father Judge Missionary Cenacle for those in Senior Ministry II. A previous General Cenacle recommended that a “health and wellness” office be established. The local Health Care Team and the Vicar for Personnel have been able to provide proper support for our senior confreres up to this point. However, I would recommend that future administrations continue to explore establishing such an office should the need arise.

What elements do you find important in creating healthy community life? What might be lacking in your local Cenacle?

How does the departure of our brothers impact you?

Do you have any suggestions to improve senior ministry in the congregation?

MINISTRY OF AUTHORITY

The current structure of General Councilors having other ministries has certain advantages. They are in touch with the local and regional realities in the areas where they work and bring that experience to the Council table. The disadvantage is that some of the tasks of leadership can “slip through the cracks.” The next administration should consider having at least one or two full time Councilors. The previous General Cenacle suggested that a Vicar for Personnel be named. Domingo Rodriguez has filled that office admirably. I would recommend that a Vicar for Personnel continue to be part of our structure. As technology makes travel less necessary there will be more “virtual” meetings in the future.

The practice of holding annual meetings of the local Custodians has been of great benefit. The reality that the men on the local mission are dealing with helps in the formulation of community-wide policies and programs. The mutual interchange among the custodians seems to be helpful to all concerned. I would recommend that this continue. The regional structure is not as strong as it could be in every area. This is often a function of geography. For example, the confreres in Puerto Rico can meet regularly because they are relatively close. Perhaps the former description of the regions should be revisited and local gatherings where the confreres can reasonably be expected to attend should be encouraged.

Besides the elected leadership, the congregation has been greatly served by Jordan Baxter as the Treasurer General, Steve Vesely as the Secretary General, Ralph Frisch, assisted by Hilary Mettes, as the Archivist, Roberto Mena in the Communication Office and Domingo Rodriguez, and now Steve Giorno, as the Mission Procurator along with their lay collaborators. The infrastructure these men have provided makes the work of the men on the missions possible. Many thanks for their generous service. In the future these offices and positions will look different than they do today, given our changing demographics and membership. The firm foundation which has been developed will make those transitions possible.

At the last General Cenacle we were just emerging from a time of financial tightening.

Things have gotten better over these past few years due to the efforts of Pat Regan and the entire Mission Procure Office staff. But for the foreseeable future the revenues will continue to be below the historical average. Happily, the foresight of setting up the two charitable trusts has helped to close the budget gap. The old system of relying on direct mail for support is gradually be replaced by a “culture of philanthropy.” The benefactors are being invited to come to know us and to have an awareness of how they share in our work. Electronic media are a great help in this but there is no substitute for the personal touch. Thus, each Missionary Servant should be aware of the need to invite those we know and work with to support the missions. Let me re-iterate my comment from last year: by means of this financial crunch God has provided us in our current situation an opportunity to examine whether we are in fact living simply, whether having a “common table” is our reality, whether we are in solidarity with the poor. Even without severe budget constraints this should still be our mentality.

One task that this General Cenacle will have is to make plans for the following General Cenacle. I would ask you to consider, given our geographical, cultural, linguistic and demographic diversity, whether the current model of thirty members is adequate in helping the congregation discern together where the Holy Spirit is guiding us.

What suggestion would you have for a leadership structure?

How has the financial situation of the congregation impacted you and your mission?

Are the efforts of the Communication Office effective both internally and externally?

MEMBERSHIP

According to the CARA study that Domingo commissioned in 1996 we are currently at our “low water mark” of membership. It is projected that it will not be until 2020 that the numbers will begin to rise again. Added to that reality is the linguistic and cultural shift in the congregation. Of those age 60 and over (fifty-nine confreres), only three were born outside of the USA. Of those younger than 60 (sixty-five confreres), only three confreres were born inside of the USA. The reality of numbers, culture and language has profound implications on the where and the how that we do mission. Every international congregation must deal with this reality and we are no exception. Choosing where the charism can make the greatest contribution to the Church will be more important than ever.

Vocation efforts continue to be important in thinking about our future. We have four vocation promoters working in Colombia, Central America, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Haiti and the United States. Many thanks to Mark McGuthrie who served as the US Vocation Director for the past six years. Thanks to Diovany, Carlos, Gerardo and Allen for the willingness to serve in this ministry. Just a reminder to all of us – the most effective vocation promotion is a personal invitation from a respected priest or Brother. It is not simply the promoters’ job but all of ours to invite young men to share our life as missionaries.

The Vocational Development Committee (VDC) oversees the vocation and formation programs. John Seymour served as chairman or co-chairman for many years and he successfully steered the programs through many transitions. Rafael Pisso now serves as chairman. The VDC

uses the five “pillars” of formation to provide context for their programs – human, spiritual, intellectual, apostolic and community development. Curriculums are being developed so that there will be continuity between the levels of formation. When that process is completed, the VDC handbook will be revised. This implies that the schooling that the men in formation receive is not sufficient in their development as Missionary Servants. Supplemental programs are being developed to ensure a well-rounded formation process.

The General Council had the experience of having the VDC chairman not as a member of the Council and then as a member of the Council. There are advantages and disadvantages with either option. The one thing that is clear – this is a full time job and the VDC chairman should have no other responsibilities.

There was an initial effort to create an Ongoing Formation Committee. The idea was to provide resources to help all the confreres in their life-long chore to grow in the charism. This effort bogged down because the committee did not have a clear mandate on what its responsibilities should be and how it was to interact with other committees. I would recommend that an Ongoing Formation Committee be established.

Given our limited personnel and resources, where should the congregation put its energies?

How can we better instill the Cenacle charism in our candidates and men in formation?

What would assist you in your ongoing formation?

CONCLUSION

Let me end this report with a word of thanksgiving for each of you. The challenges of the ministry of leadership was offset by the constant support and concern that I felt from each of you. I leave office with a grateful heart for the confidence you placed in me. I beg your forgiveness for any way in which I failed to be a true servant.

I began this reflection by mentioning St. Paul’s admonition to avoid anxiety. Let me end it by affirming the confidence that he had in God’s work in your midst. “I am sure of this much: that he who has begun this good work in you will carry it through to completion, right up to the day of Christ Jesus. It is only right that I should entertain such expectations in your regard since I hold all of you dear... My prayer is that your love may more and more abound, both in understanding and wealth of experience, so that with a clear conscience and blameless conduct you may learn to value the things that really matter” (Phil. 1:6-7, 9-10).