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Reorganization of Provinces

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Visitor of USA-East
15.VI.2001*

My task is to share some thoughts on a particular issue in the overall theme of interprovincial collaboration, the reorganization of Provinces. I would like to do that by first talking about the idea itself, secondly by describing the pursuit of that possibility which is currently underway among the five Provinces in the United States, and thirdly by giving you some of my own reflections from my experience as Visitor of one of the US Provinces.

1. The Idea

The idea of reorganization is simple enough. It centers around this question: would it be a worthwhile thing to combine or split provinces into some new configuration? I will address myself only to the first possibility since combining is the experience from which I speak. Joining entities represents perhaps the ultimate step in interprovincial collaboration: provinces melding their individual selves to form a brand new entity — and a new identity. Because both the possibilities and the costs of such “ultimate collaboration” are substantial, it is a step which requires clear analysis, disinterested (“holy indifferent”) thinking, and most particularly, building a wide consensus.

What would motivate Provinces to consider such a ground-shaking step?

On one end of the spectrum is simple survival. A province could get to a point of threatened viability. It could shrink so much numerically and its personnel get so elderly that it could no longer sustain its vital elements; e.g., leadership pool, a real prospect of new members, ability to staff its major works, financial independence, and other marks of continuing life. It just cannot survive without linking up with another province.

At the other end of the motivation spectrum is improved mission; that is, the prospect of doing the Congregation’s mission more effectively in a given region. A particular province could carry on its governance and works into the foreseeable future, even with somewhat diminished numbers. But for a number of reasons, joining with neighboring provinces holds out the prospect of giving better gospel service in a certain territory. This province can survive on its own and perhaps even prosper. But the question arises: Could it make more of an evangelizing impact if it combined forces with one or more surrounding provinces?

My reading in the US is that we find ourselves at different places along this spectrum, with no one province being a pure instance of either side. All of us are

diminishing in numbers and rising in median age (as with most all USA Congregations). To a greater or lesser extent, all can continue for the immediate future. But some are closer than others to the viability point and this puts us at slightly different psychological starting points. There was an acknowledgement of this at our recent meetings of all the councils. Be that as it may, mission enters into the deliberations of every one of the five provinces — and in fact our discussions have kept returning to this master notion. As we reach for the deeper motivation for why reconfiguration would be worth the considerable efforts and indeed pain involved in a move of this size, we find ourselves grappling with the very reasons we as a Community are in existence in the first place. Will such a move let us do our fundamental mission better? I will have more to say on this all-important point at the end of the talk.

2. Toward the Reconfiguration of the United States Provinces

In a discussion among the five provincials at their 1997 meeting, the question of reorganization came to the table. In the years immediately preceding there had been talks between individual provinces about joining together, but no decision had been made. The provincials now thought there were growing reasons for looking at the issue on a national scale, mainly because of the desire to carry out our mission more effectively in the US and also the nationwide fall-off in religious vocations. Consequently, they asked the Superior General (attending the meeting) to compose a kind of mandate for them to investigate possibilities.

In a letter written on 19 November 1997, Fr. Maloney asked them “to pursue the goal of uniting the provinces.” The shape of such a configuration, in his words “will depend largely on your analysis of your concrete situation and on your creativity in envisioning possible forms of unified government.” Pursuing this question rested on a projection about the Congregation’s future in the US and how the best works there could be sustained and strengthened as numbers diminish. Fr. Maloney said he had offered similar thoughts about the need for consolidating resources in several other countries where the Congregation serves. Finally, he shared his judgment that even though the actual outcomes cannot be proved ahead of time, that “in these circumstances, common government and planning will enable us to mobilize our personnel better, to organize a unified program of formation, to conserve on the number of people involved in provincial administration, and to use our financial resources more effectively.”

With this in hand, the provincials appointed a five-man committee and charged it to: 1) gather and share information about the provinces, 2) research similar efforts already made by other US Congregations, and 3) recommend ways of engaging the confreres of all five provinces in the discussion. Taking the lead from Fr. Maloney’s suggestion to be creative in envisioning possible forms of unified government, the hard-working committee decided on a “models” approach to stimulate the dialogue. In addition they retained a consultant, a member of the

Oblates of Mary Immaculate who had been at the center of this Congregation's planning as they combined their five US provinces into one.

In consultation with the confreres, they drew up different scenarios of how reconfiguration might happen, which included geography, leadership structures, numbers, formation concerns and collaborative mechanisms. Then, with the Visitors' input, they circulated five of these "tentative models" among the nearly 500 members of the five provinces. One key strategy of this stage was to hold "town meetings" in 12 different regions across the country which members of the committee ran and then reported on to the Visitors. Even though the data was plentiful and a challenge to synthesize, the committee presented useful recommendations.

The next step was to arrive at more "firm" models which would provide the basis of discussion for eventual gatherings of each of the provinces. An important part of this stage was a meeting of all five Provincial Councils to air opinions and listen to one another. From the beginning many confreres had insisted that for any successful rearrangement, it would be essential for the members of the provinces to get to know one another better. Only in this personal face-to-face setting would the natural resistances to change have the chance to soften. (To this end, the first US national Vincentian convocation is now being organized for this coming January. Its topic is evangelization North America.)

This week here in Dublin, the Visitors of the US provinces have decided on the final proposals to be sent out as the framework for the country-wide discussion to be held during this coming fall. Not final answers to the question, they are models of what could be, which are meant to elicit the confreres' best thinking about the pros and cons of reconfiguration. The results of all the deliberations — individuals, provinces, Reconfiguration Committee members, councils, and provincials — will be sent to the Superior General early next year. As we know, by our Constitutions any decision about realigning Provinces is in his hands.

3. Some Reflections

I have left out a number of details, but can respond if anyone is interested in further information about how we proceeded. My intention now is to offer a few reflections on what has happened so far or, in more personal terms, "what I learned on my trip along the road to Reconfiguration!"

3.1. Mission as Central

As I mentioned earlier, the idea of mission has come to predominate our deliberations. It was right there in the beginning intuitions, was the center of Fr. Maloney's reasons for encouraging the discussion, and has reappeared in force at the end as we are forced to weigh the concrete benefits of reorganization against the

costs of actually doing it. There was much energy spent along the way in considering the how of reconfiguration (models, governance possibilities, time tables, etc.), and that was necessary because people wanted to know as concretely as possible **what** it was we were deciding on. But as we approach the time of making a recommendation, the **why** of it, the motivation for doing it in the first place, moves more to center stage.

In a general sense, our mission is clear. It is right there in the beginning of the Constitutions: “to follow Christ evangelizing the poor” (C 1). “...we are called by God to evangelize the poor” (cf. C 10). But when the concept of mission gets more particular, in what I will call its operational sense, roads can begin to diverge. That is to say, when faced with concrete decisions — about common life, prayer practices and especially about apostolic works — there can be a big difference in the way provinces interpret mission. For instance, in one province, *its* understanding of mission operates to have it withdraw from a certain work, put more money and personnel into another, or begin a certain new one. But another province, because of *its* other “operational appreciation” of the meaning of mission, would come down in a quite different place on its apostolic decisions. Not that this is necessarily or even always the case, but looking at a given province from the point of view of the criteria by which it actually makes its decisions can reveal considerable dissimilarity in spirit and outlook between two provinces who follow the very same general mission.

My point is that even though there can be strong agreement that the fundamental reason for reorganization is more effective mission, there are different “operational understandings” of what mission entails. Using the same words does not always translate into the same practical meanings. Pulling off a successful reorganization entails building those shared meanings, hammering out roughly equivalent criteria for making important apostolic, community life and governance decisions.

3.2. Surfacing the Losses and Fears

It did not come as a surprise to read in the testimonies of other communities that resistances to reorganization are considerable. The prospect of reconfiguration raises not only hopes, but also apprehensions. One might even talk about a subterranean discussion that goes on, a parallel and often hidden conversation about the losses people fear will happen. And even though things like control, long-time traditions, and self-determination figure in here, I agree with those who say the most basic of the possible losses is identity.

A person’s sense of himself comes in no small measure from his sense of how he fits into the group to which he is closely related. For instance, I get many of my basic bearings from my position in the family — uncle, brother, son; unifier, polarizer, reconciler, rebel or outcast; wisdom figure, family clown, eccentric, one

who gives shelter or one who needs it. I come to know how I “fit in,” and this inner map helps to firm up my psychic place-to-stand in life.

A confrere gets many of his bearings from how he fits inside a province. The group has a shape, a cast of interrelated characters, a pecking order, an imaginative grid on which a man places himself. When this shape is called into question, so are the identities of those who make it up. When the province speaks of dissolving and then reemerging in some new form (configuration), it jolts the familiar places in the world its members have taken for granted all along. I heard a man ask explicitly, “in this new reconfiguration, who will I be?”

An added dimension of this are the fears which can surface in provinces which are considerably smaller than the ones with which they might join. Will we be absorbed and taken over by the larger group which will impose its spirit, its culture on us? Again, a threat of loss of identity.

It is the opinion of a number of North American confreres that so far we have been only partially successful in bringing such fears to the general table. Other lesser suspicions stemming from past strains in relationships between different provinces are also at work. Undoubtedly they would be better dealt with if they were openly acknowledged and somehow discussed. I hope we will be able to do this in the months ahead.

3.3. Keeping the Discussion on Point

Perhaps it is the strength of the resistances which underlies this next phenomenon, but it has struck me how difficult it sometimes has been to keep the purpose of the reconfiguration discussions in mind. It can easily slip to the side.

For one thing, the ultimate decision is not up to the provinces but rather to the Superior General. While this is not in dispute constitutionally, there is a way in which the opposite presumption slips into the deliberations and one proceeds as if the vote on a given model will decide the issue once and for all. I am sure the Superior General will want to take into account the numerical weight of the positions argued for. But it is also my understanding that the cogency of those arguments will count at least as much when he and his council enter into their discussion.

In an intervention at the joint council meeting, a confrere with a background in law commented that what was needed to be presented to the Superior General was a kind of “brief” setting out the case for and against a particular position on reconfiguration. His remark struck me because it focused on the nature of our discussions as an attempt to explain to (perhaps persuade?) another the compelling reasons for any such move.

Secondly, the precise thing to be explained also has a way of slipping off center. The question again? How will this reorganization make us more responsive to the evangelizing needs of the poor in this region of the world? In what ways and under what respects will it let us do the mission better than we are doing it now? The more clearly the discussions are directed to this underlying point, the more the chance of “making the case” for change.

And so, the Committee and the Visitors have decided to be as specific and concrete as possible in the way that question is put to the confreres. Not simply, “how will this arrangement allow us to do the mission more effectively?”, but more pointedly:

- how will it let us **deploy our personnel** better (strengthening certain works, de-emphasizing others, initiating new ones)?
- how will it help in **economizing** on the number of confreres in internal **administration**?
- how will it let us mount higher quality **formation and ongoing formation** programs?
- how will it help us use our **money** more efficiently?
- how will it encourage us **to spread the practices** in our **most effective** ministries to other parts of the province?
- how will it make us more attractive for **vocations**?
- how will it increase the chances of enhancing our **communal and prayer life**?
- how will it encourage us to look in fresh ways at our presence in the US?

My point? A key task is to keep the purpose focused and not let it get blurred by secondary, though interesting, issues. The whole reconfiguration question has struck me as a kind of corporate Rorschach test. It holds up a blurry image of what might be and evokes from the confreres a wealth of hopes, fears, creative ideas, suspicions, and desires. Just because of the range of those feelings and thoughts, I think it is doubly important to bring clarity and discipline to the discussion and try our best to keep it on line.

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of someone presently involved in the issue, I have offered you more reflections on combining provinces. I spoke of the general idea, the process which we in the USA have been using, and gave a few of my impressions of how things have gone.

I could have developed other points: things such as the increasing body of literature that has been coming out in the US from other Congregations who undertook this task, the concern and skills for building consensus, the climate among the confreres (at least of my province) as they address the issue in earnest,

the interesting reasons why the US Provinces were divided originally, the imaginative governance, apostolate and geographic structures suggested, the challenge for the provincials to work more closely than they had before, the strong desire for more collaboration between the provinces despite the eventual outcome, the frequent mention (and fear) of different “cultures” in each of the provinces, the vocational possibilities, the concerns for finances and care of the elderly in a new set-up, and so on. But that is for future discussion.