

INTERVIEW – Gregory Gay

July 8, 2010

Few hours after re-election the Chronicler of the General Assembly, Fr. Celestino Fernández interviewed Fr. Gregory Gay, Superior General. We all know him, but that day was a special opportunity to ask Fr. Greg about his feelings, reflections, hopes and expectations for another six years of his Generalate. As always he spoke from the deep of his heart, simply and directly. His well known smile accompanied him. This is what he said, surprisingly in moments:



Celestino Fernández: *Did the re-election surprise you?*

Gregory Gay: No. Because I have tried to act in a very clear and simple manner during these past six years and I have given the confreres the opportunity to see if they want to walk in this direction or not. After listening to the different dialogues in the Assembly Hall I have seen that the things that I consider important continue to be important for the confreres. I am not going to mention here things that refer to the future of the Congregation but you can read about this in the report that I gave at the beginning of the Assembly.

C.F. : *How are you feeling at this moment?*

G.G.: At this time I am feeling good and I expressed this to everyone. The feeling now is not the same that I experienced six years ago when I did not know what it meant to be Superior General. Now I know that this is a tremendous work that demands much energy but I am willing to continue with my idea of redistributing the work among the members of the Council and the Curia. At the same time, as I said after the election, there are certain constants in my life and these have not changed. I refer here again to my love for the Congregation, my love for the Vincentian Family and my love for the poor. This has not changed and I feel encouraged to continue in this line.

C.F. : *You are beginning a new stage. How are you encouraged?*

G.G.: I do feel encouraged and I believe that it is very important for this General Assembly to choose a good team so that we can work together, distribute the work as is necessary and for the good of the Congregation and redistribute the other responsibilities that we all have with regard to the Vincentian Family.

C.F. : *Have these past years presented you with many unpleasant things?*

G.G.: I believe that it is normal within the context of a great responsibility, such as being Superior General, that one would experience unpleasant moments. Perhaps one of the things that I find most displeasing is when I observe the absence of zeal that one ought to have as a Vincentian. I am especially displeased when I see that we are not what Saint Vincent would desire, when we are not transparent in what we say and when we lack charity and do not speak directly to the person about what we are thinking. Many times we do not express what we are feeling to an individual but then express these feelings to others. I have experienced this and this is most unpleasant and displeasing to me: when we

do not speak directly to the person because of some fear that we might not be accepted. The lack of simplicity is very upsetting.

C.F. : *And joys?*

G.G.: Many joys. Perhaps the opportunity, as I said in my report, to experience the charism as it is being lived in different places, whether in the Congregation, among the Daughters of Charity or in other branches of the Vincentian Family, especially when individuals are working together and working with much enthusiasm. For example, I felt great joy when Spain celebrated the Congress of the Vincentian Family; the level of enthusiasm and the desire to move forward as a Vincentian Family was very real. Another cause of great joy is when I travel from one country to another and I experience this same enthusiasm, many times in very difficult situations.

C.F. : *How do you see the Congregation at this time?*

G.G.: I have much optimism and much hope. Here in this Assembly we have listened to a presentation and in 2004 I listened to this same presentation and I believe it was the same person. I refer to the fact that our numbers are diminishing. This is only one side of the Congregation. What is interesting for me is the other side of the Congregation, that which the Superior General and the Assistants see, namely that we are a young Congregation and that there are places where the Congregation is growing. I like to look at that reality because we ought to assure them of good leadership. I am not saying that we should not be concerned about the Congregation in other parts of the world but that perhaps we ought to refocus our energies that have been centered on one part of the world and that now need to be centered on a part of the world where there is growth.

C.F. : *And what do you say to the pessimists?*

G.G.: I believe that one of the difficulties arises from a lack of experience on the international level because then it is very easy to take on a pessimistic attitude. If we are only looking at our own reality and if that reality is not going well, if we are losing heart or if we are diminishing in number, we can then become overly concerned about maintenance instead of promoting creativity that will enable us to move forward. This can also occur when we experience certain difficulties with young confreres who might take on a lifestyle that is somewhat independent I believe that it is better to broaden our horizons and look at the Congregation on an international level. This can have a positive effect and can also encourage us in our present situation. I have listened to Sister Evelyne Franc speak about this when she said that we are all part of one eternal reality, in our case, the Congregation of the Mission. We ought to feel proud of those places where the charism is strong and having positive effects. We ought to feel proud about our service and evangelization. This can be a way to help us in the process of conversion and renewal in those places where we are weak and where, perhaps, we have diminished a little.

C.F. : *What are your hopes for this Assembly?*

G.G.: First of all I hope that we continue with the process of dialogue. It is very clear that there are different mentalities with regard to the Assembly. There are two groups here: one with the idea of the Assembly as a legal body that is concerned about good order and themes such as the Statutes and the Postulata and all the arguments for their approval or rejection. Another attitude that I see and that is more relevant now is that of an Assembly that is more concerned about dialogue, concerned that we speak about those matters that are important to us, for example, what are the poor telling us? It is there that we must go

during the next six years. We had to cancel a part of the Assembly which for me would have been most interesting: different workshops on various important themes, on present situations that are of interest to the Congregation in different parts of the world. I am going to propose that this be treated in the meetings with the new Visitors and also in the meeting of all the Visitors which will take place in three years, themes of importance such as sexual abuse, the question of aging of the confreres and of the provinces ... What can we do to confront these situations, what do we do with our property and how can we manage our goods in a more just manner. We still have to discuss a matter that is going to be very difficult but it is important for me to listen to the dialogue so that I can get some guidance in this area and here I am referring to the question of reconfiguration and greater collaboration among the provinces. I believe that we ought to delve deeper into some of the Statutes which in my understanding contain interesting material that the confreres want to speak about. What upsets me is that we begin to fight over words and forget that which is most important, the theme. Today I have learned much and it is good to see that there are some people who like to see things done according to the law and others who prefer to be more flexible with the law ... we have to allow space so that the Spirit might guide us along those paths that we ought to travel.

C.F. : *The Assembly is now preparing to elect a Vicar General and Assistants General, explain to me your criteria on this matter.*

G.G. : It is very important to choose a good team, a good General Council so that we can carry out the work that the General Assembly places before us as a task to accomplish during the six year years. Therefore I have several criteria: that we be attentive to what the Constitutions say with regard to an Assistant General: they “assist” the General in fulfilling what is requested by the General Assembly and that they work together. Even though we are decreasing in some places we are increasing in other places and we have to be sure that we choose leaders who understand this situation and who can help by being mindful of this situation of growth of the Congregation. We also need Counselors who are not afraid to work. I have spoken about a redistribution of work among the Curia and the Council because things are too centralized in the person of the Superior General. This demands that the person be in good health. No, he does not have to be young, but he has to be a constant worker. Obviously it is also important that this person loves God, loves the Community, and also loves the poor and that this is manifested by his actions, for example, when he is in the Curia or traveling that he prays with the community, participates in community activities, and demonstrates a closeness to and a sensitivity for the poor. Finally one has to be a Vincentian who lives the characteristic virtues, especially, simplicity.

C.F. : *What was your first thought when the Assembly manifested their warmth with a thunderous applause?*

G.G.: Something that I tried to repeat there and that was: thank you for your love and your support. I feel that a great number of confreres respect me, love me and are willing to support me. This made me feel good and gave me the courage to continue.