

Zaragoza

January 9, 2007

Confreres, thank you for being here this week to participate in the ongoing education project in finance, sponsored by CEVIM. As Peter said when he gathered with Jesus and companions at the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, and as I am sure you have heard repeated many times: “Lord, it is good for us to be here.”

Special thanks go out today to Padre Corpus Delgado for his leadership in organizing and hosting this meeting. Also a special thanks is extended to the planning committee that worked with Padre Delgado: Padre Santiago Azcarate and Pere Philippe Lamblin. Their suggestions, their efforts, and their competence are evident in the program arranged for us this week.

Not to be forgotten, as we continue our thanks, are the translators. They make a significant contribution to this meeting. I personally am very grateful to them. Unfortunately, I begin my new assignment with a major obstacle: my language skills are quite limited. I beg your indulgence. My priestly ministry over these past 36 ½ years has not required my learning a new language for conversational purposes, but I am doing the best I can with the talents I have, despite, as we say in Italian, *la mia vecchiaia*, that is to say, my relatively old age for undertaking this office in the Congregation.

Finally, today we also have an opportunity to thank my predecessor, Fr. Elmer Bauer, who is with us. We thank Elmer, who took on, at a relatively young age, a huge set of responsibilities that required careful thinking and concentrated effort. For your eight years of faithful and competent service, thank you, Fr. Elmer.

I am pleased to be with you this week. Let me tell you why: this meeting provides us with an opportunity to meet each other. You and I share a common task in the Congregation: we have been entrusted in our respective ministries with the administration and custody of the patrimony of the poor. As our Constitutions state so clearly, “The Congregation of the Mission possesses temporal goods for pastoral and community needs. It uses them in support for the service of God and the poor, according to the spirit and practice of its Founder; it administers these goods, however, as the patrimony of the poor, with solicitude, but with no attempt to grow rich” (Art. 148.1).

Clearly, the Visitors in the respective provinces, and the Superior General with respect to the worldwide Congregation, have primary responsibility for exercising stewardship over the goods of the community. Nonetheless, the Constitutions also single out that it is the treasurers who, under the direction and vigilance of their respective superiors, administer and account for the goods of the Congregation. In short, local treasurers, provincial treasurers, and the Econome General all play a key role in safeguarding that portion of the patrimony of the poor Divine Providence has entrusted to the Little Company.

Now, in this common task of stewardship, as mandated by the Constitutions, you and I are expected to interact in our common ministry. And isn't it your experience that it is much easier to interact through mail, e-mail, or telephone contact when you can associate a face with the person with whom you are communicating? Therefore, it is the opportunity to meet you this week that explains why I am pleased to be with you. May this meeting be the beginning of many opportunities for mutual contact.

Our week in Zaragoza offers us a number of opportunities, both formally and informally, to develop in our service to the Congregation. Formally, we are fortunate to

benefit from the presenters who are with us; their input can stimulate our thinking and sharpen our insights into our ministry. As often happens when attending a conference like this, a light goes on in the middle of a presentation, and we say: “Ah, now I understand it.” Informally, a great benefit offered by a week such as this is the opportunity to talk with one another – in the sessions, at meals, and in the corridors. We have a chance to talk about the concrete issues that challenge us daily.

I recall how grateful I was during my time as provincial treasurer to be able to attend regional and national meetings of congregational treasurers, as were the other treasurers with whom I associated. Their gratitude was evident in their comments. For example, some treasurers would mention how few there were in their respective communities to talk to about finances. Their confreres may have been sympathetic, but they simply did not understand, or to be honest, had little interest in financial questions. Attending meetings of treasurers, they found people in a similar ministry whom they could speak with; someone who understood the questions, someone who faced the same challenges they faced.

There’s another advantage to our coming together. At meetings of treasurers of religious congregations, it does not take long to discover that other treasurers are about as prepared for the work as we are. They too, like many of us here today, have had little, if any, formal education in the field of finance. Instead, they learned to be treasurers the same we learned – by our experience on the job. They learned by swallowing their pride and by saying to themselves, “So what if it sounds like a dumb question, I need to ask it.”

Finally, one more reason why it is good for us to be here: these meetings can be great opportunities for us to observe and to exercise generosity. My experience with religious treasurers has introduced me to many who have willingly shared with newer

members whatever expertise they have gained over the years. They have made themselves available to any who wanted to speak further with them.

I was actively involved with a national association of religious treasurers in the United States. The membership was always generous in sharing information to the fullest extent possible, without violating confidentiality. One example of their generosity was the setting up of an e-mail list among themselves. It took a lot of work to initiate this program, but it has been successful, especially for many new treasurers.

It worked this way: If a matter came across your desk and you didn't understand it, you went online to the E-mail list and asked: "Has anybody out there had to deal with this issue?" I remember one particular instance, when I was experiencing terrible frustration trying to make a spreadsheet do what I wanted it to do. The spreadsheet had a mind of its own and would not cooperate. Finally, I went out on the treasurer's e-mail list and cried help. Within an hour, I had a response from a nun in Chicago, who willingly came to my aid in Philadelphia.

I'm not advocating that we develop an e-mail list here, although I am not opposing it either. I am simply pointing out that meetings such as this one can be great occasions for experiencing and practicing generosity in helping others.

Finally, if I may, I would like to add one more advantage to our being here this week. Today we need to recognize the importance of our becoming professional in our work. We have little choice in this matter. Furthermore, being professional is the best way for us to be fair to the poor, as we oversee their patrimony. From what you read, it seems evident that the public is going to demand greater accountability from those to whom they have entrusted their charitable contributions.

We priests from the United States and other places as well, I am sure, know what it is like to be attacked by the press. We have been significantly embarrassed by the sexual scandals that occurred. The press pursued this topic vigorously. Journalists knew they had a story that people would read. Many now speculate that the press will continue to find dark tales to tell about the Church. What's the new issue they are pursuing? The issue is financial mismanagement.

Just last week I read on the Internet of a recent survey. Allegedly, as the press reported it, over the past ten or twenty years 80% or more of American dioceses have had at least one incident of embezzlement. And please note: the misbehavior was not just on the part of lay people. The clergy have been involved in this scandalous activity as well. The press makes a case for the public's "right to know," and many like these "right-to-know" stories. The pressure is on us to be professional.

Of course, it is not fear of the press that should motivate us to be professional; rather, it is a moral sense of responsibility to those whose funds have been entrusted to us who encourage us to be professional. A sign of our professionalism is our openness with those who have a right to the information we harbor. Gone are the days when the treasurer might be able to keep the province's financial picture hidden from everyone. I have heard stories, and maybe you have too, of treasurers telling the Visitor: "Don't worry about the books. I'll take care of the finances." I have heard of treasurers refusing to write a check for their provincial superior. That kind of attitude should set off an alarm bell. We have no choice today but to work together with frankness and mutual respect as treasurers and superiors so that we might together be transparent in our accounting and responsible in our stewardship.

It's a difficult assignment we treasurers have, and the world of the religious treasurer today is becoming increasingly more complex. Part of the complexity lies in the attempt to understand the many issues that come into our offices. Just look at how many areas we cover in financial ministry: double-entry accounting; cash flow; employment laws, trust laws, tax laws, the intersection of church and state, and all of these topics, in some cases, in more than one country. Then we are expected to handle conversations on investments or participate in or maybe even chair investment committees and finance committees.

Of course, we get involved in budgeting: preparing budgets and reviewing budgets. If that is not enough to do, then we give over a portion of our day to maintenance problems. The treasurer is asked to oversee ordinary maintenance and extraordinary maintenance, as well as the contractors and employees who do this maintenance work.

Then we are asked to get involved in major projects and long-range planning. We may find ourselves reviewing or even drawing up building plans. We could hand over a day to discussing the care of our senior confreres. Then, of course, we might be asked to review our risk management program. Actually, I believe that topic is on our agenda this week.

Not to overwork this point about our overwork, but, as you know, we also occupy ourselves preparing and reviewing financial statements. They can be challenging. A prominent Jesuit once commented on the burden of reading financial statements. He said for him, at one time, they were like reading abstract theological documents. Why? Because they led him into the world of mystery and they offered him little by way of revelation.

Finally, I would like to mention just one more area we have to deal with in our work: interruptions. Does this happen to you? You are totally focused on an issue and people keep coming to the door with their questions: “Father, the hot water is off. Can you get someone to come fix it?” “Father, the front-door window broke.” “Father, could I get a reimbursement for this? I need it by this afternoon” “Father, I had a little accident with the car, can you drive downtown and pick me up? “Father, when is the computer person coming to fix my computer?” This list could take our whole morning. But you know the kind of issues to which I am referring – the interruptions that we complain about because they keep us from our work. May I say this about interruptions? Somewhat brought this thought home to me quite forcefully when I was complaining about not being able to get my work done because people kept stopping by the office. The person said: “Father, those interruptions are your work.”

Now, if I may, I would like to switch to another point and look down the road a little bit. It seems to me that whenever someone steps into a new position, it helps if that person has a vision of what he might want to pursue in that position – that is, that the person have a sense of what he might like to accomplish. I do have some ideas cooking in my head, but today I want to focus on only one issue. That issue is financial reporting; specifically, the financial reporting the provinces are asked to make to the Superior General.

I don't think I need to convince you that financial reports are important. Reports are the medium through which treasurers and superiors interact professionally. Reports are also the medium through which the Congregation makes itself transparent and holds itself accountable for the administration of its patrimony.

I wonder, though, about these reports. During these past few months of apprenticeship under Father Elmer, I have had an opportunity to review the 52 reports the provinces sent to the Superior General. At the end of the review exercise, I asked myself two questions: “John, (I call myself John), what benefit did those who prepared these reports receive from their effort in bringing all that information together?” “Furthermore, what story did each treasurer pick up about his respective province from the report he prepared?”

Both questions interest me. Are these reports beneficial or are they simply exercises we dread having to do every year? I personally do not believe in people doing a lot of work with the attitude that they just want to get it off their back. Why do work that renders little benefit, or even little feedback, for that matter? It would seem to make more sense to spend our time on productive work.

I would like to hear from you on this issue of reporting to the Superior General. Is the preparation of these reports productive for you? Would you be willing to offer some ideas on how these reports could be of benefit to you? As a matter of fact, I would like to hear what you want the Superior General to derive from these reports when you send them to him. Your comments would be very helpful to me in deciding whether I should expend energy studying and seeking advice on this matter of reporting

The other question is this: Do those who prepare and read the reports let the numbers tell their story? That question originated for me from an experience I had years ago with our investment committee. The lay members of the committee, some of them presidents of major investment firms on Wall Street, had requested copies of our financial reports so they could better understand our monetary needs. They thought that

understanding our needs better would help them offer better advice on investing our resources and on properly drawing down on them.

We complied with their request by showing them, for example, the annual audit we had prepared for us by a professional accounting firm. We also let the committee read the reports from the various houses. One committee member, after having glanced through the reports, offhandedly made this remark: “Well, it looks to me like you have some houses that are spending more money on the missionary than on the mission.” His comment created some silence. The observation was sobering, if not embarrassing. More impressive, however, was the fact that he was able to zero in on that observation so quickly, simply by letting the numbers in the report tell him a story.

Our reports too should be more than just numbers; they too should tell a story. I think that means we need to spend more time digging out the story, more time interpreting the numbers we have put together.

What story, you may ask should we look for in the numbers? Let me try to answer that question by raising a number of questions. Do the numbers, for example, tell us whether the Province is becoming financially more stable or financially less stable? Could we answer that question better if we included another set of numbers in the reports? What is that further information?

We might look for this story: Is the Province making progress in becoming more self-sufficient and in securing its self-sufficiency? What are the numbers telling us about the Province’s commitment to live the spirit and vow of poverty? Do the numbers give us a story about how effective our management is in certain areas? I recall as a superior reviewing the salary costs as reported at one of our houses. They seemed disproportionately high. A few questions quickly uncovered that some employees were

getting huge overtime pay, when there was no need for overtime. No one was supervising the workload. The numbers brought out that story.

Another question: From the reports do we have a clear picture of how the Province supports its current ministries and what resources are available to support those ministries into the future? Another story: Reports can also tell us about the Province's level of generosity with its resources as well as whether the Province is exercising charity reasonably and responsibly.

Numbers tell stories. They tell where the money goes and where it comes from, and they tell whether the coming and the going of the financial resources are where the Visitor and his Council want them to be. The numbers tell a Province whether it is headed for trouble.

My hope, my vision, is to develop in this area. I look to you for help in telling the story we continually create as separate provinces in the one Congregation. Your straightforward ideas and your observations are most welcome.

“Lord, how good it is for us to be here.” Thank you.