

Visitations

In the religious life a visitation is a canonical term indicating that one is visiting a special area in accordance with a mandate from the Brother Superior General of the congregation. As each Assistant General had been named for a specific area at the General Chapter it became important for him to visit his assigned area and keep the Superior General and his Councilors informed. These visits were intended to be a follow-through on the decisions of the General Chapter and were to keep the Superiors informed of the needs and progress of each Province or mission. With so many Provinces and many missions it was imperative that the Brother Superior General be kept aware of the conditions of the whole order.

As Assistant General I would draw up a plan to visit the various sectors in my charge and then have the Superior General and his Council approve of the plan. This became the responsibility of each of the Assistants General. The visits were to be an occasion to find out whether all the Brothers were following the directives of the last Chapter and whether they were happy in community life, prayer life, and apostolic work. It was an occasion to study whether there were enough candidates to maintain our work and to increase in our growth in professional studies and apostolic life. Visitations were intended as fatherly visits where one became more specifically aware of the needs of the Brothers and determined whether they were able to fulfill their obligations to the students, the parents, and the parishes and to assure the future of the congregation. We needed to keep informed on the efficiency of the teachers and our relations with the local clergy and the parents of our Province.

For the Assistants General it was imperative to check on the living conditions of the Brothers to find if they were properly provided for. The interviews with all the Brothers gave us a fair assessment of the progress being made in each school and let us assess each community's contribution to the parish and to the area. We set aside times to meet with the parents of our students and needed to be assured of the peace of soul of the Brothers in their work, not only in their health, but in their growth in their religious life. Visitations were mainly occasions to listen and to offer help or advice. As an outsider we sometimes could see that some Brothers might be overworked while others might not be carrying their fair share of the community work. The prayer life, health, and social life of each Brother are always important to assure teamwork and peace in any community. Some Brothers needed help for health problems. Some needed to confide in a father figure and get advice on some of the problems they have as a result of the work and study.

There are problems that a Brother may hesitate to make known to those he is living with, yet be able to confide in a visitor. In this way just the presence of someone from the General Council was a tremendous help to those individual Brothers who needed to be encouraged, listened to, and offered advice. Although we could not offer solutions to all problems, we could gently remind the Brothers that it is important that each one of us knows that he is part of a team, a larger family, and that he has to cooperate with the team. A Brother may be under pressure and require someone to listen to his problem even if there is nothing much that an occasional visitor can do, and there was surely a lot of listening to be done. At all times the main concern of the Assistant was to be of help, to try to smooth over some of the lesser problems, and to seek boldly solutions for major problems. I found that Brothers everywhere worry about their professional efficiency and have a strong concern to do a right job with their students and their community. They seek to live as a family.

At times some Brothers were overworked while others found themselves bored for not having enough to do. Community was a family and a home, and these elements had to be assured and provided. The Assistant had to be a good listener, show a keen interest, and be anxious to help. It was necessary at times to listen to much criticism and negativism and still be able to point out some positive aspects and to give credit where it is due. Conversations always needed to remain positive and creative, and the Brothers needed to look together to find a way to get some benefit and create a positive result. The Assistant General could not be dumbstruck by some powerful anger where there was no workable solution to offer. One needed to remember that an individual was still our Brother. We needed to express the personal concern that we should feel and that is expected of a superior who has come to help. We had to always offer to be sympathetic and be positive in what we suggested.

One thing I learned when I was an Assistant General was that there would be occasions, even if very few, where a confrere was desperate, seemed to have reached his limit of endurance, and is ready to give up his vocation. I always reminded myself not to interrupt during the account of a problem, to thank the individual for his confidence in sharing, and to offer my prayer and concern. Sometimes there was nothing much else that could be done. But it was necessary to listen, to be sympathetic, and to try to suggest some genuine relief for the problem. I soon found that not all problems could be solved by an interview, but I could show interest, sympathy, and make an earnest effort to seek a solution.

One incident I recall on visitation at first floored me, but after some prayer I was able to come up with some possible solutions. It was long ago and was a local as well as a personal problem that involved a really old, retired Brother whom I shall call Brother X. Brother X was in his 70s and was not on good terms with the Brothers of his community. They tended to innocently tease him, and their behavior was not well-accepted. He tended to see them as attacks. He also accused them of all sorts of actions that were not intended as attacks on him or, sometimes, did not happen at all. Anyway, by the time he spoke to me he had had it; he asked me to give him the form requesting dispensation from the congregation. I was dumbstruck. He was in his 70s and had devoted his whole adult life to the vocation.

After a long period of silence on my part where I offered a few personal prayers, I asked the Brother if he was willing to pray with me. He accepted and placed his hands in mine. While I explained to him that this had come to me as a shock, I knew that he had the right to request what he did, so I told him that I felt the need to pray over this. Anyway we never carried those forms on our person; they were kept at the Mother House. This request was never taken lightly, and any request needed prayer before a decision could be reached. I asked him if he had thought of an alternative, for the Superiors would surely ask him that, and I felt the need to check this further. I knew that he wanted out of the community because he felt that they were against him. I explained that some things at times are done in teasing, and the Brothers were never intentionally against him. It was their way of sharing with him. After a short prayer together I told him that I did not have any forms with me and urged him to examine some other possibilities.

There were several possibilities short of leaving the order. He could be assigned to another house where there would be mostly older Brothers, or he could go to a nursing home as a Marist Brother. I could obtain permission for him to retire with his family if he felt that he would be happy with that. And finally, if none of the above pleased him, I told him that I would send him a form to apply for dispensation. I was leaving the country in two weeks and told him that if he still chose to leave then he should request the form from me in writing at that time. In the meantime, I spoke to the Director and to the few Brothers involved and asked them to please try and show him that they cared, and requested that they be careful when they teased him even in jest. Before I left to return to Rome, I inquired of the Director, who assured me that everything was now all right and that there would not be any need for dispensation. I understood the reality of the problem. I was pleased we had found a solution. God had come through; we had not lost our Brother.