



November 14, 2020

To the Confreres of the Region of Kenya,

May the grace of Jesus Christ evangelizing the poor be with you always!

I hope that you and your families are well during this pandemic. As you take up the process of nominating the next Regional Superior, I wanted to write you and offer my encouragement. I have asked Fr. Pat McDevitt, our Visitor, for permission to share some thoughts on this very important task. I do so as a senior confrere who has shared Vincentian life with you and who wants to see our mission in Kenya succeed and prosper.

The appointment of the next Regional Superior is a pivotal moment in the development of the Region of Kenya. The confrere appointed to this task will be entrusted with a number of important tasks: with the everyday administration of the Region; with further developing its missionary identity; and with leading the confreres as they take up the challenges and opportunities of life as a vice-province. Our *Regional Norms* carefully describe the process by which the regional superior is to be selected. The *Norms* call for the appointment of an electoral commission which organizes the timetable of the process. This is followed by discussion and discernment among the confreres. There is the balloting process. When a confrere is selected, his name is recommended to the Provincial who affirms the choice after conferring with the Superior General. I have been asked to assist you by offering some discernment resources to complement the process laid out by the *Norms*. I am happy to do so.

But first I would like to reflect on my own experience of participating in the election of community leaders. I have been in the Community for a long time and have participated in many elections. I have voted for provincials, for provincial council members, for the regional superior, for regional council members, even, on one occasion, for the superior general. I have typically approached elections as opportunities to promote confreres whom I deem best in some category: the best leader or the best communicator or the best listener or the confrere who best understands my vision of the future. I hate to admit it but, often, my focus when voting has been on *me*. Unconsciously, perhaps, I have tended to look for the candidate who will best look after me and my interests.

This is human nature, I think. It natural to view elections as a time to support the one who best represents my hopes and dreams, my needs and wants, my agenda for the future. Maybe this has been your experience, too.

In recent years, however, I have begun to rethink this approach. I have come to appreciate Pope Francis's understanding of discernment and its creative role in the life of the Church. Discernment, as Francis explains, has potential for helping us rethink the future mission to which God calls us. Discernment can also enrich the ways in which we seek the Vincentian leaders we need.

According to Francis, the process of discernment invites us to ask the all-important question: How is the Holy Spirit speaking to us at this moment? We do not focus solely on who, according to our best lights, is the best leader, the best listener, the most visionary, or the confrere most in tune with the needs and challenges of the Region. This kind of reflection is important, of course, but not sufficient. Rather, in discernment we consciously listen to the Holy Spirit. We allow God to speak to us about the future; we allow ourselves to listen to him and his desire to provide for us good and faithful leaders. We presume that the Spirit has a plan for our future as Vincentians. We also believe that he will provide the charism of leadership to guide us. And so, we enter upon a time of genuine, prayerful discernment so that our hearts and minds can be directed by God, not simply by our own insights, preferences, and opinions.

Pope Francis has illustrated this dynamic process of discernment in his writings on the synodality of the Church. A synodal Church, he says, is a community of discernment. A synodal Church is a discerning Church. It is a community that walks together, listens to one another, and learns from each other. In a synodal Church all the baptized are called to a prophetic vocation and are charged with sharing the good news. Moreover, in a synodal Church all of us are called to listen to the Spirit as he calls us to discern the missionary path that the Lord points out to us. As Francis writes: "Every Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are called to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the "peripheries" in need of the light of the Gospel" (EG, 20). This synodal identity calls us to move together as a community of discernment. Through the practice of discernment, we are equipped to walk together, listen to each other, and grow in God's call to follow Jesus evangelizing the poor. In all things, discernment helps us discover the voice of the Holy Spirit leading us forward. And we learn never to fear. There is no issue so complex and difficult that, listening to the Spirit, we cannot walk together as brothers. The fruits of communal discernment can be seen in the early Church. Early Christians learned to face the difficult question of the relationship between Jewish and Gentile members. Walking together and discerning the voice of the Spirit, they could resolve an issue that threatened to irrevocably divide them (Acts 15).

Pope Francis notes that there are certain qualities that characterize a community of discernment. One of them is openness. This is the community that values everyone, no matter his background, place of origin, level of formal education, or accomplishments. Another characteristic is humble listening. This is the community whose members know how to quiet themselves so that they can hear the voice of the Spirit who speaks through others. We who are priests and teachers often have a hard time listening to others. A third characteristic is the ability to speak boldly. This is the community which encourages its members to be strong and confident in speaking their minds, for we never know how the Holy Spirit wants to use us to speak to the wider community. Openness, humble listening, and the willingness to speak boldly are essential elements of a discerning community. All of these, of course, need to be offered in a prayerful and grateful spirit.

This practice of discernment is essential to us as we engage again the process of selecting the next Regional Superior. None of us can anticipate now that measure of faith, Vincentian identity, love for the mission, administrative skills, and care for the confreres that will be needed to assume the awesome tasks of leading the Region of Kenya. But the Holy Spirit knows. That Spirit who is always wise and provident will inspire us to choose the right confrere if we are open to listening to his voice calling us at this hour.

I invite you, my brothers, to put aside any fear or discouragement. Let us open ourselves to that conversation, that love for the mission, and that listening to the Holy Spirit who will help us discern the confrere whom God is calling to the ministry of leadership. May Saint Vincent DePaul intercede with us. And may we walk together, listen to each other, and grow as one, allowing the Spirit to guide us in this and all things.

To support you in the process of electing the new Regional Superior, I will offer resources on discernment that may be helpful to you in your prayer and discussion. I look forward to journeying with you.

May God bless us in our discernment and may Saint Vincent DePaul pray for us.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

Thomas Esselman, C.M.