

## Being a Vincentian, Being a Formator

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.

Our Constitutions define the purpose of the Congregation of the Mission not as a particular concrete work, such as giving popular missions, or staffing seminaries, or laboring in missions *ad gentes*, but as a way, a pilgrimage, a journey: the following of Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor. Our lives, both as individuals and as a corporate body, should have that guiding purpose. This purpose, the first article of the Constitutions adds, has three *realizations*; that is to say, the Congregation is fully alive when its members:

- 1° *make every effort to put on the spirit of Christ himself (CR I, 3) in order to acquire a holiness appropriate to their vocation (CR XII, 13);*
- 2° *work at evangelizing the poor, especially the more abandoned;*
- 3° help the clergy and laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelizing of the poor.

In the past I have written about each of these realizations of the purpose of the Congregation. In this article I offer some further reflections on the third. Following a methodology I have often employed, I will proceed as follows:

- I. Formation in the life and writings of St. Vincent
- II. The changing context and some challenging contemporary calls
- III. The Vincentian today as formator

### I. Formation in The Life And Writings of St. Vincent

Historians have often highlighted St. Vincent's organizational skills. He did not, however, merely organize; he *formed* the groups and persons that he assembled. In fact, the letters, documents, and conferences in the fourteen volumes of his extant works are, for the most part, aimed at the formation of those whom Vincent had gathered together in the service of the poor.

Below, I list, with a few brief comments, some of his principal formational activities.[fo1]

- \* The sons of Monsieur Comet

In 1595, Vincent went to Dax to study at the Collège des Cordeliers. While studying reading, writing, grammar, and Latin in preparation for beginning his studies in theology, he caught the attention of Monsieur de Comet, a lawyer at the Presidial Court in Dax, who invited Vincent into his home as a tutor for his children. Thus, at the remarkably young age of 14 or 15, Vincent began, in a sense, his career as a teacher and formator.

\* The Academy in Buzet

Two years later he went to Toulouse to begin his studies in theology, remaining there for seven years. When his finances ran low, he took up teaching in a small academy for boys in Buzet, a village about 21 miles from Toulouse. He earned the reputation of being an excellent teacher and because of his popularity was able to transfer the school to Toulouse itself where he continued to instruct boys until he finished his studies.

\* Clichy

During his 16 months as pastor at Clichy, in 1612-13, Vincent became very aware of the need to offer more adequate training to candidates for the priesthood. He opened a school where he began to form a dozen youngsters who wanted to become priests. Among these was his future faithful companion, Antoine Portail. At this early date, Vincent's interest in the formation of the clergy is already evident.

\* The De Gondi household

Around 1613 the De Gondis hired Vincent as the tutor for their son Pierre. Vincent had full responsibility for his intellectual, moral, and religious formation. He was also in charge of the household staff and gave them religious instruction. In addition, he taught catechism and evangelized the peasant farmers on the De Gondi estates. At the same time, he became spiritual director of Madame De Gondi. In a sermon, given probably in this period, he spoke of the "infinite usefulness"[fo2] of the catechism in forming others.

\* Folleville

We all know the story of the bedside conversion of a peasant in 1617 that had such an influence on Vincent's future. Vincent always regarded the sermon he gave the next day, January 25, 1617, as the first sermon of the mission. What is important to note in this context is that the popular missions preached by Vincent and his newly founded community were a *formative* experience. Catechesis, or basic Christian instruction, played a very significant role in the course of all the popular missions. In fact, late in his life, Vincent wrote to a Priest of the Mission: "I have been deeply saddened by the fact that, instead of giving the regular catechism instruction in the evening, you have given sermons during your mission. This should not be done: (1) because the person who preaches in the morning might have difficulty with that second sermon; (2) because the people have greater need of this catechetical instruction and derive greater profit from it; (3) because, in giving this catechetical

instruction, it seems there is, in a certain sense, greater reason to honor the manner Our Lord Jesus Christ used to teach and to convert the world; (4) because it is our custom, and Our Lord has been pleased to bestow immense blessings on this exercise, which offers a greater means to practice humility." [fo3]

Vincent insisted that there be two catechetical sessions each day during the missions, one around midday ("le petit catéchisme") and another in the evening ("le grand catéchisme").[fo4]

\* Châtillon-les-Dombes

Later in 1617, Bérulle asked Vincent to accept the parish in Châtillon because the negligence and scandalous lives of the local clergy were paving the way for conversions to Protestantism. Seeing the poverty of the local people, Vincent formed the first group of Ladies of Charity. Many other groups followed. Throughout his life Vincent accompanied these groups as their principal formator, writing rules for them[fo5] and addressing them individually or communally on numerous occasions.

\* The Visitation Nuns

Shortly before his death, Francis de Sales asked Vincent to take over the direction of the Visitation nuns. From 1622 on, he gave regular conferences at their monastery and was one of the principal counselors of Jane Frances de Chantal. Unfortunately, we have no copies of Vincent's talks to the Visitation nuns.

\* The Congregation of the Mission

Vincent also gave regular conferences to the members of the Congregation of the Mission. These were one of the principal means for the ongoing formation of the community from its foundation in 1625 until Vincent's death in 1660. They have become, along with the Common Rules he composed, one of the principal sources for the heritage of the Congregation through the centuries.

\* The Daughters of Charity

From 1633 on, Vincent also gave frequent conferences to the Daughters as part of their formation. Many of these were transcribed in one way or another. They form one of the principal fonts for understanding the life, mission, and spirituality of the community. The principal elements in the Common Rules of the Daughters also come from Vincent's pen, though they were finally edited, approved, and published by his successor, René Almérás, in 1672. Vincent often talked to the Daughters of Charity about the need to teach the catechism. [fo6] He encouraged them to open schools for poor girls. Numerous such "little schools" were opened in France during his and Louise's lifetimes, [fo7] as well as one in Poland.

\* The formation of the diocesan clergy

I have written elsewhere at length on this subject. [fo8] Vincent's work for the reform of the clergy included retreats for ordinands, the Tuesday Conferences, retreats for priests, and seminaries. His influence on diocesan priests and on future bishops in France was enormous. He founded 20 seminaries. He took part in the Council of Conscience for a decade, advising the king on the selection of bishops. Many of the great spiritual leaders of the time took part in the Tuesday Conferences which he organized. Abelly states that more than 12,000 ordinands made their retreats at St. Lazare during Vincent's lifetime. Numerous others made post-ordination retreats there and in other houses of the Congregation.

\* Spiritual Direction

Above, I mentioned Madame De Gondi and Jane Frances de Chantal. One must immediately add, of course, Louise de Marillac. There were many others. A large number of Vincent's letters are, basically, spiritual direction for his priests, brothers, sisters, and friends.

## **II. The Changing Context And Some Challenging Contemporary Calls**

Much has changed since St. Vincent's time, but the call for help in formation is as persistent today as it was in his day. If anything, it is even more so. Here in Rome in recent years I have heard no call more frequently. These appeals have their own contemporary flavor. Significant modern day factors have given them a new context and content.

### 1. The expanding Church in Asia, Africa, and Latin America

During the pontificate of Paul VI, the face of the Church changed significantly. For the first time, she found the majority of her members living in the southern hemisphere. At the dawn of the third millennium, the areas of her most rapid growth are in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This is what Walbert Bühlmann calls "the coming of the third Church." [fo9] It is really only in the 20th century, as Karl Rahner often pointed out, that the Catholic Church is a "world-Church." [fo10] Most religious communities experience this change dramatically. Vocations are sparse in the United States and Western Europe, where formerly they had been plentiful. They are numerous in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where formerly they had been small in number.

The many letters that cross my desk include numerous appeals from the southern hemisphere for help in formation. Bishops and provincial superiors write that, even more than lacking financial resources, they lack well-trained, mature personnel for forming their many candidates. Sometimes they plea eloquently: "If you could only help us for five to ten years, while we form our formators, the future will be well prepared!"

### 2. Crises among the clergy in the "old" Churches

Many Congregations and dioceses in the northern hemisphere experienced a period of robust growth in vocations in the middle years of the 20th century. Numbers began to decline in the mid-60's and, some attest, are leveling out at present. In many of our provinces priests and brothers are not only fewer in number today than they were in the 60's, but also significantly older. On the positive side, the phenomenon of diminishing vocations to the priesthood and brotherhood has been accompanied by the emerging role of the laity in the Church. On the negative side, the personal impact on confreres has been heavy and at times discouraging. They may legitimately feel: "There are fewer of us, our median age is much higher, and there is even more to do!"

With the diminishing number of candidates for the priesthood, many seminaries closed. Entire seminary faculties were dispersed, sometimes without sufficient planning for how their gifts might best be used. Some felt themselves discarded, disillusioned.

On top of that, there have been scandals. Newspaper headlines have told, sometimes in great detail, the sad stories of priests involved in pedophilia and of bishops hiding a mistress or a child. In some countries, journals express fears about the number of "gays" entering dioceses and communities today.

As is evident, discouragement and concerns revolving around sexuality and celibacy - as well as around other issues like simplicity of life within a consumer society - provide huge challenges not only for initial formation today, but also for ongoing formation.

As a Congregation with a long and rich heritage in the formation of the clergy, the contemporary situation presents us with a formidable challenge.

### 3. A renewed interest in the "Vincentian Family"

Over the last five years the many groups that share in the charism of Vincent de Paul have become increasingly conscious of being members of a "family." From the international to the local level, we have begun to meet much more frequently, to collaborate in projects among the poor, to pray with one another, and to discuss others ways in which we can be more closely united, while preserving the distinctive characteristics of each group. In this context, the call for mutual assistance in formation has rung out loud and clear. The Vincentian General Assembly of 1998 addressed this issue specifically, asking each province or group of provinces to respond to the many appeals from the different branches of the Vincentian Family for assistance in formation. The Assembly spoke of collaborating in the initial and ongoing formation of members of the wider family, of offering them spiritual assistance, of establishing a formation team that would focus on common elements in the formation of the members of our various groups and would promote gatherings for deepening Vincentian spirituality and strengthening a sense of family. It also encouraged us to open our existing ongoing formation programs to other members of the family, when this is possible. [fo11]

At the meeting in January 1999 the heads of some of the principal branches of the Vincentian

Family spoke of a number of formation projects:

- a. a book that would articulate the foundation stones of Vincentian spirituality as lived out by lay men and women and would concretize these from the experience of the laity;
- b. the use of Internet as a formation tool;
- c. a document prepared by AIC for the spiritual advisors of their groups, one of whose principal roles is formation;
- d. a pilot project undertaken by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Italy for the Vincentian formation of lay leaders.

Few calls are as loud as the call for formation coming from the various branches of our family: AIC, the Daughters of Charity, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the youth groups, the Miraculous Medal Association, and many others.

#### 4. The rapid growth of the Vincentian Marian Youth groups

These groups now number about 200,000 members in 40 countries. The spread of the groups in recent years has been striking. On February 2, 1999, the Holy See approved the first set of International Statutes for the JMV. In August of 2000, in Rome, they will hold their first General Assembly, with delegates coming from all the continents.

In some countries, such as Spain, these groups have a very well developed formation program. Other countries are struggling to create one. But on all sides, the call for formation is eloquent.

One of the offshoots of the JMV has been MISEVI, whose International Statutes were approved by the Holy See on April 7, 1999. MISEVI prepares lay Vincentian missionaries for work in the missions *ad gentes*. It offers them formation, an apostolic placement, a community setting, spiritual and material support, and assistance in reinsertion into their homeland upon their return from the mission. As is evident, the initial and ongoing formation of its members is a new and considerable challenge.

#### 5. Changes in methodology

Today we emphasize a new methodology that is adapted to the person of the oppressed,

[fo12] where the educator and those being educated learn mutually, where teachers not only evangelize but are evangelized by the poor. Contemporary documents note that persons must not only be the *objects* of formation, they must be *subjects* within the formation process.

Today too we speak of the need to assist the poor in "self-promotion." The *Final Document* from the recent General Assembly of Delegates for AIC, held in Querétaro, Mexico, November 17-23, 1998, speaks of assisting others "to become multiplying agents" of actions aimed at transforming social structures.

Finally, papal documents in recent years have continually highlighted the need for inculturation. A deepened understanding of anthropology and of the values and disvalues within the various cultures that interface with the gospels allows Christianity not only to purify cultures by performing its prophetic role in denouncing the evil that has roots therein, but also to be enriched by cultures, finding new ways in which genuine human and Christian values can be expressed.

### **III. The Vincentian as Formator - Ten Characteristics**

When we look at the life and works of St. Vincent and at the recent documents of the Congregation, it is evident that being a formator is not incidental to our vocation; rather, it is very much at its heart. That is why our Constitutions place formation work right in the very first paragraph, which describes the purpose of the Congregation of the Mission: "This purpose is realized when the members, individually and communally, ... 3E help the clergy and laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelizing of the poor." In writing this paragraph the members of the General Assembly of 1980 were quite aware that they were expanding the statement of purpose which St. Vincent had written in the Common Rules in 1658: "... 3E to help seminarians and priests to grow in knowledge and virtue, so that they can be effective in their ministry." In the wake of Vatican II, with a heightened consciousness of the mission of the laity and of the need for developing a variety of lay ministries, the Assembly saw this new statement of our purpose as an organic development of St. Vincent's original founding insight. He himself had wanted to gather young and old, rich and poor, clergy and laity, men and women "to lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor."

Reflecting on the Vincentian as formator, one might be tempted to focus only on two themes: our role in the formation of the diocesan clergy and our role in the formation of our own candidates. Both these works are extremely important. St. Vincent saw formation of the diocesan clergy as crucial for the reform of the Church and for the ongoing evangelization of the poor, especially in rural areas. He saw the second, formation of our own, as indispensable

if the Company is to be fully alive. But it is not only those who engage in those two works who are formators; our Constitutions call *all* Vincentians to be formators as a realization of the purpose of the Congregation.

Notice that the motivation of our Constitutions is very clear: "to lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor." One of our goals as formators, therefore, is to mobilize the huge energies of this enormous family, with its millions of members. The Lord calls us to be an army, so to speak, in the service of the poor, battling to break down the structures that oppress them, offering them relief in their present distress and seeking with them to eradicate the causes of their poverty.

If we are to prepare all Vincentians to be *formators*, this will make new demands on our own programs of initial and ongoing formation and also on other works. Looking to the future, one hopes that our own Vincentian seminarians will learn to catechize and preach well, skills necessary not only for the work of the mission, but also for formation ministry. One hopes that the seminaries we sponsor for the training of diocesan clergy will help them acquire the skills needed for re-evangelization, which is so necessary in so many dioceses. One hopes to form priests who, as "Vincentian alumni," will be able to animate truly missionary parishes where an evangelizing and catechetical process is ongoing and where outreach to the poorest of the poor is an integral part of the preaching of the gospel. One hopes that we will sponsor pastoral institutes or centers for lay formation that train lay men and women to become "multiplying agents" of their faith, hope, and charity. One hopes that our Vincentian Family's schools and universities, which train more than a half million students, will be places where the poor will always find a seat, where there are outreach programs to the most abandoned in the local community, and where the social teaching of the Church is an important part of the curriculum. One hopes too that our family will continue to sponsor health-care and social institutions like hospitals, clinics, rehabilitation centers, and centers for the basic formation of women and children (offering formation in nutrition, reading, home care).

Let me suggest ten characteristics of the Vincentian as formator. Today, "to help the clergy and laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in evangelizing the poor," the Vincentian, as formator, must be:

1. *Deeply rooted in the person of Jesus*

This seems so obvious, but there is nothing more important. In our context, all formation leads toward "putting on the Lord Jesus Christ." [fo13] The formator must not simply know *about* Christ; he must have personal experience of the Lord himself. It is only the person who is genuinely filled with the Spirit of the Lord who is able to communicate that Spirit to others.

## *2. Fully immersed in the Vincentian charism*

St. Vincent has given us a wonderful gift. Our charism remains strikingly relevant today as the forms of poverty multiply and the gap between the rich and the poor grows continually wider. The formator must know Vincent himself, the history of the Congregation, our spirituality, our mission, our foundational works, our concrete and effective love for the poor. It is these elements especially that the formation process aims at transmitting to future servants of the poor.

## *3. In contact with the world of the poor*

If we are to form others and lead them to a fuller participation in evangelizing the poor, we must ourselves know the poor and their world. The good formator has reaped before he sows, he has been evangelized by the poor. He has experiential knowledge of the most abandoned. He has heard their stories and been shaped by them. His personal experience of the Lord is not an abstract one; rather, he knows Christ especially as he reveals himself in the person of the poor.

These first three characteristics might seem immediately evident, but they are too important to be presupposed. The formator must know Christ. He must know Vincent. He must know the poor.

## *4. Capable of being a guide on the spiritual journey*

Not everyone who makes the spiritual journey is a good guide. A guide needs experience and training to sharpen his natural gifts. He knows the paths wayfarers tread in the course of the journey: the high roads, the low roads, the pitfalls, the traps. Good guides have fallen and risen many times. They know how to reanimate those who are discouraged and to temper with experienced counsel the impatience of the overzealous. The best guides walk *with* those they are forming, at times quickening the pace, at times slowing it down, at times pausing for rest.

## *5. A good listener*

St. Vincent would be quick to say that every formator must be humble. Is there any virtue about which he talked more frequently? The wise formator reaps before he sows. He listens to his students' needs. He allows himself to be evangelized and changed by them.

Many a good formator has found himself saying: "I think I got more out of teaching this course than my students did!" One hopes that both students and formators are mutually transformed in the process.

*6. A good communicator, skilled in using contemporary means for engaging others in the formation process*

After listening, the formator must also speak. His language, however, need not be exclusively verbal, especially today. In a visual age, it is very important that the formator use modern means of communication. Such means engage the various senses of the students and draw them more fully into the learning process. Today films, music, computer presentations, and a variety of other audio-visual aids are ready at hand for the formator.

Pedagogy is both a science and an art. It is crucial that we engage the students themselves in the learning process so that they become active agents in their own formation. They themselves, after all, have the primary responsibility for their own formation. One hopes that they become "multiplying agents," able to pass on to others the gifts that they have received. In order to achieve these goals, the good formator must know how to work not just with individuals, but with groups. He must be able to stimulate the students to help one another in the formation process.

*7. Knowledgeable about the social teaching of the Church*

Recently I wrote at length on this subject. [fo15] While the Church has proclaimed her social teaching eloquently for more than 100 years, it remains largely unknown for many, even most, believers. This social teaching has particular importance for our Vincentian Family, since it focuses especially on the most needy. In fact, it is the foundation for the Church's "preferential option for the poor." I suggest that all Vincentian formation programs should impart a healthy dose of this teaching. It should be well-packaged, so that students can learn it and then transmit it to others.

*8. In dialogue with the life of his students and with lay life*

Every teacher should know his audience. The Vincentian formator relates with many varied groups: priests, brothers, sisters, lay men and women. Since there are millions of members in our lay groups, it is imperative that we have a concrete sense of their daily lives. This requires much dialogue. Since so much of our heritage has been formulated within the community circles of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, we face the challenge today of translating what St. Vincent said into contemporary language and applying it to lay men and women, married and single, living in their own homes, often with

their own families, and working in the "marketplace."

#### 9. *In touch with the various groups in our Vincentian Family*

These groups have a common heritage but at the same time distinctive charisms. It is important that we appreciate both the common and the distinctive elements within our family tradition. We have a long healthy history in this regard with much cooperation among the members of the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, AIC (formerly the Ladies of Charity), the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Miraculous Medal Association, the Vincentian Marian Youth groups and, most recently, MISEVI. Besides these, many other groups share in our tradition. In recent years we have had increasing contact with the Religious of St. Vincent de Paul, the Federation of Sisters of Charity in France, Germany, Austria, Italy, and India, the Charity Federation in the United States, and numerous others.

#### 10. *Truly missionary*

The true missionary has a global point of view. He knows that beyond the surrounding mountains lie other towns and villages where the gospel must be preached. He knows, as he views the ocean, that its waves break on other continents, on other shores, where the poor also live and labor. St. Vincent himself, in an age where travel was difficult and communication was limited, looked beyond France both to the East and the West and to the North and the South. By the time of his death, his family was already quite international. Today, with rapid transportation and almost instantaneous communication, it is even more imperative that our formation process draws us toward a global vision. Even as I write, it is heartening to see how quickly members of our family in distant countries are responding to the crisis in Kosovo.

St. Vincent was a wonderful formator. People gathered around him eagerly and were captivated by the vision he communicated. My hope is that we, his followers, can revitalize the formation ministry that he has handed on to us. One might describe being a Vincentian in many ways. Being a Vincentian means following Christ the Evangelizer of the poor. It means being a missionary. It means living in simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and zeal.

The thesis of this article is that being a Vincentian also means being a formator. Besides our own ministry in preaching the gospel to the abandoned, we are called to "help the clergy and laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor."