

Some Qualities of a Good Formator

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9.VII.2002

I. 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. 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 and the need for well-prepared formators

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 Buhlmann calls "the coming of the third Church."¹ It was really only in the 20th century, as Karl Rahner often pointed out, that the Catholic Church became a "world-Church."²

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 lay ministers, sisters, and priests. 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. A renewed interest in the "Vincentian Family"

Over the last seven years the many groups that share in the charism of

¹Walbert Buhlmann, *The Future of the Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1986) 4-5; cf., W. Buhlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church* (Slough, England: St. Paul Publications, 1976).

²Karl Rahner, "The Abiding Significance of the Second Vatican Council," in *Theological Investigations* XX, 90-102; cf. also "The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future," in *Theological Investigations* XX, 103-14; cf. also, "Aspects of European Theology" in *Theological Investigations* XXI, 83.

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.

At their meetings in 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002 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. the preparation of a similar document for the spiritual advisors of JMV, which you will be discussing in these days;
- e. this meeting here in Paris for the spiritual advisors of our lay groups.

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.

3. The rapid growth of the Vincentian Marian Youth groups

These groups now number about 75,000 members on all the continents. 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 held their first General Assembly, with delegates coming from 46 countries.

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. It held its first General Assembly in January of 2001 with the participation of 70 persons coming from 16 countries.

4. Changes in methodology

Today we emphasize a new methodology that is adapted to the person of the oppressed,³ 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.

II. Ten Characteristics of a Good Formator Today

Let me begin with a brief citation from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians:⁴

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image....

Paul marvels at the work of the Holy Spirit who transforms believers into the image of Christ, who himself is the image of the Father. This fundamental grace of the New Covenant is offered to us not only in baptism, but again and

³Cf. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

⁴2 Cor 3:17-18.

again throughout our lives. We are called to continued conversion to the Lord, to ongoing formation in Christ. Moved by grace, we lay ourselves open to God's work of transformation. We make ready a dwelling place for the Lord in our hearts, so that he might transform us. It is this openness to transformation that we call "formation."

Let me suggest ten characteristics of the good formator today.

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."⁵ 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. A good formator breathes in and breathes out the Spirit of the Lord.

2. *Fully immersed in the Vincentian charism*

St. Vincent has given us a wonderful gift. The charism of the Vincentian Family 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 branches of the Family he or she accompanies, their spirituality, their mission, their works, their 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 been evangelized by the poor. She has experiential knowledge of the most abandoned. She has heard their stories and been shaped by them. His or her personal experience of the Lord is not an abstract one; rather, the good formator 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 good formator must know Christ, must know St. Vincent, 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

⁵Rom 13:14.

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 the needs of those in the formation process. 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. Her 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, Internet 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 formees 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 formees to help one another in the formation process.

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

A few years ago I wrote an article on this subject.⁶ While the Church has proclaimed her social teaching eloquently for more than 100 years, it remains

⁶Cf. "Ten Foundational Principles in the Social Teaching of the Church" in *Echoes of the Company* N° 4 (April 1999) 129-137.

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. *Capable of relating and working as a member of a team and of cooperating with others as a team member.*

In our Vincentian Family we are called to serve not simply as individuals, but as members of a Family. Especially when we work at formation, it is essential that formators represent and in some ways "sacramentalize" the family spirit and capacity for team work they seek to hand on, rather than projecting themselves as individuals.

They should be capable of working with other formators of our lay groups, standing at their side, being at their service, promoting their gifts, multiplying formation agents among them. Teamwork is essential.

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. As a Family, 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 mission-oriented formator 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 speak, it is heartening to see how quickly members of our family in distant countries are responding to the campaign against hunger.

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 our formation ministry in his spirit.

Like St. Vincent, the good formator today teaches much more by his witness than by his words, much more by his life than by his lessons, much more by his person than by his plans. The good formator is able to articulate deep rootedness in God and deep rootedness in the sufferings of the poor. He is able to connect the soul of the Vincentian Family with the soul of the world. He is able to express a creative, contemporary sense of our charism in shifting, complex, contemporary circumstances. He is able to look painful reality in the face and communicate hope at the same time. He is able to draw wisdom out of our tradition and express it in an updated, concrete way. He is able to stare at data that is sometimes depressing and find patterns for a promising future. Like St. Vincent, he is able to draw others to believe deeply and enthusiastically and to make their belief real through concrete, effective, practical charity.