

VINCENTIAN FORMATION IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT¹

My brothers, it is good that we are here. This is the first such meeting, on African soil, in the history of the Congregation. It is a sign of how important Africa has become in the life and the mission of the Company.

SOME FACTORS INFLUENCING WHAT WE SAY AND DO

Our context is very important. St. Vincent loved Africa. He himself sent the first missionaries here. But this huge continent is quite different in our day from the Africa he knew. Let me mention three factors that profoundly influence what we say and do today.

1. *The shift from the North to the South.*

During the fifteen-year pontificate of Paul VI, a striking shift took place in the Church's statistical center of gravity. Striking though it was, few actually noticed it. The turning point arrived in 1970: fifty-one percent of the Catholic population was living in the southern continents. By the year 2000, seventy percent of all Catholics will be in the southern hemisphere.² Walbert Bühlmann calls this the "coming of the third Church."³

In an existential sense, Catholicism is becoming truly a "world-church," as Karl Rahner pointed out on many occasions.⁴

Many religious communities are experiencing this dramatically. In our own Congregation, for example, while there are few vocations in western Europe and North America, where formerly they flourished, the Company is growing not only in Poland, but also in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Nigeria, Zaire, Mozambique, Madagascar, the Philippines, India, Indonesia, Colombia, Mexico, and Central America.

For the Congregation, the opportunities and the challenges are enormous. The confreres from these countries enrich the Congregation with their own cultures and religious traditions. They often, for example, bring us an experience of life lived out continually in intimate contact with the poor. Such provinces frequently have active, even thriving, programs for ministerial formation among both the clergy and the laity. But they also express two striking needs: 1) the need for trained personnel to carry on the work of our own formation; 2) the need for further inculturation of the gospel, so that the Christianity and culture might interact with one another at a deeper

¹Opening discourse at the Conference of Visitors of Africa and Madagascar in Kinshasa, June 24, 1994.

²W. Bühlmann, *The Church of the Future* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1986) 4-5.

³Cf. W. Bühlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church* (Slough, England: St. Paul Publications, 1976).

⁴K. 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.

level, both enriching and purifying each other. Rahner points out that the *globalization* of theology is one of the greatest needs of the Church in the years ahead. He notes that up to the present there has been an unfortunate tendency to "canonize" what was really only a manifestation of the thought patterns of western culture.⁵

Right now, many growing, younger provinces, and particularly those responsible for formation within them, face the difficult challenge of teaching philosophy and theology (so often formulated in a European context), while searching for new categories in an African or Asian setting. Similarly, they search for the appropriate forms for expressing poverty, chastity, obedience, and life-long commitment to the poor within cultures very different not only from St. Vincent's, but also from those of the writers of most of the philosophy, theology, and spiritual reading books written up until recent times.

Along these same lines, the place of women in society and the social mores in relating to them vary greatly from north to south and, in both hemispheres, from continent to continent. To talk with a woman on the street may be as "natural" in Los Angeles as it is "scandalous" in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.

2. *The Church has just celebrated the first special Synod of Bishops for Africa, Madagascar and the Islands.*

Its focus was on: "*The Church in Africa and her evangelizing mission toward the year 2000: _You will be my witnesses_ (Acts 1:8)," under five subheadings: proclamation, inculturation, dialogue, justice and peace, and means of social communication. It treated the inculturation of faith, women's roles and status, and dialogue with other churches, with Islam, and with traditional religions. It examined the roles of priests, religious, laity, families, African theologians, catechists, and others. Both the fact of the meeting and the lively participation of African representatives are a vivid sign of how deeply the Spirit of the Lord breathes on this continent.*

The synod sounded an eloquent call to communion and inculturation: "*It is the Church as family which manifests to the world the Spirit which the Son sent from the Father so that there should be communion among all. Jesus Christ, the only begotten and beloved Son, has come to save every people and every individual human being. He has come to meet each person in the cultural path inherited from the ancestors. He travels with each person to throw light on his traditions and customs and to reveal to him that these are a prefiguration, distant but certain, of him, the new Adam, the elder of a multitude of brothers, which we are.*"⁶ Our purpose here is not to examine the conclusions of the synod in detail, though this will surely be one of the most important future agenda items for all of our provinces and missions here in Africa.

⁵Cf. citation in Bühlmann, *The Church of the Future* 193.

⁶*Origins*, May 19, 1994 (Vol. 24, No. 1) 5.

3. *Africa is experiencing the pains of terrible turmoil and violence.*

I cannot leave unmentioned today the pain that the world, the Church, and our own Vincentian family is experiencing here on this continent so rich in faith and varied cultures. Our own Vincentian Family shares in this pain and has suffered from this violence, recently in Rwanda and Sierra Leone, and over the years in Burundi, Cameroon, Mozambique, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Zaire. But these are only the most dramatic examples. Overt or hidden structural violence ravages Africa. The synod reminded us that the Lord has given us two great gifts of the Kingdom, which he is in person. These are justice and peace. It demanded greater justice between North and South. It called for an end to presenting Africa "*in a ridiculous and insignificant light on the world scene after having brought about and maintained a structural inequality and while upholding unjust terms of trade!*"⁷ It remembered the dozens of millions of refugees and displaced persons in Rwanda, Sudan, Mozambique, Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and parts of Central Africa, and it called upon the United Nations to intervene in order to reestablish peace. It pleaded for a stop to arms sale or the flow of the instruments of violence from the northern hemisphere to the southern. It asked for a substantial, if not total, remission of the continent's debt. At the same time the synod encouraged the churches of Africa to examine their own conscience on the question of financial self-reliance and urged them to do everything to bring this about, particularly through transparent management and a simple lifestyle consonant with the poverty, even misery, of many of Africa's own people.⁸

FORMATION IN AFRICA

Our own meeting focuses on formation in Africa, a topic that the synod too treated. The synod emphasizes several key elements in regard to formation:

1. It envisions the integral formation of people who are well-inserted in their milieu, and who witness therein to the kingdom which is to come.⁹

2. It states that this is to be done by means of evangelization and inculturation, of dialogue and involvement in justice and peace, as well as by means of a presence in the new culture constituted by the world of the mass media.¹⁰

3. It declares that programs and houses of formation, especially seminaries and novitiates, should reflect the concern manifested by the synod to see inculturation and the social teaching of the Church taken very seriously.¹¹

⁷*Origins, ibid.*, p. 7.

⁸*Origins, ibid.*, p. 8.

⁹"Final Message of the Synod for Africa," *Origins*, May 19, 1994 (Vol 24, No. 1), § 49.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*, § 50.

4. It thanks God for the gift of vocations which are increasing everywhere in Africa but calls upon the Church in Africa to receive this gift with responsibility, being concerned with the quality of vocations, the discernment process in identifying them, and the setting up of criteria for admission, and the offering of a rich formation.¹²

5. It calls upon the Church to prepare formators well.¹³

6. It tells formators: "*On the quality of your life and on your fidelity to your commitments depends the credibility of what you are teaching the seminarians and the success of the formation that you are giving them. If your intellectual competence is not put at the service of a holy life, you will be increasing in the Church the number of priest functionaries who will not give to the world the only reality that the world expects from them: God.*"¹⁴ Formators should be genuinely holy - role models for our students.

7. It tells religious: "*You will succeed in inculturating religious life in Africa only by assuming, as it were, by representation and anticipation, the profound values that make up the life of our cultures and express the end pursued by our peoples. In this way you will give spiritual hospitality to Christ, chaste, poor and obedient, who has come not to destroy but to fulfill.*"¹⁵

8. It tells seminarians: "*Be convinced that spiritual formation is the key to the whole of your formation. An intense prayer life and a generous spiritual combat will enable you to properly discern your vocation and to grow as witnesses....*"¹⁶ It encourages them to strive after the simple lifestyle of laborers for the Gospel in solidarity with the poor of the continent.¹⁷

VINCENTIAN FORMATION IN AFRICA AND MADAGASCAR

What should seminary formation be like in Africa when the Gospel and the Church are truly to be inculturated here? There is always the danger that the buildings and the ideas of another world will be simply transported to Africa. Our great missionaries, like Justin de Jacobis, recognized from the start that this is insufficient. The gospel must take root and blossom within the deepest values of African cultures. At the same time it must transform what is not of God and what violates the human person.

¹²*Ibid.*, § 51.

¹³*Ibid.*, § 51.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, § 52.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, § 58.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, § 60 and 61.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, § 61.

In each African country, there is a need for communion with the larger worldwide Vincentian family and, at the same time, genuine rootedness of the Congregation within Africa. Toward that end, formation is crucial.

Let me place before you a series of challenges, while being very conscious that you have already generously begun to labor at them.

1. I ask you, in dialogue with one another, to make *real* for our seminarians the five Vincentian virtues. We know what these virtues meant for St. Vincent. There are many studies in that regard. What do they mean in an African context?

a. Simplicity involves communicating the truth as it is, without dissimulation. How can one best express here the core of Jesus statement that our yes should mean yes and our no, no?¹⁸ How can simplicity be expressed here? How do the relationships of the speaker and the listener (superiors, elders, the young) affect communication?

b. Humility for St. Vincent involves a grateful recognition that all is gift. It involves a consciousness that we are God's creatures, that we depend on him, upon one another, and upon the created reality around us. It involves an awareness that we are sinners too and that we need God's forgiveness. How will this consciousness be expressed in the African context? What concrete forms will humility take?

c. Meekness entails gentleness, warmth in relating, non-violence. The Church has surely had little success in proclaiming that "*the meek shall possess the land*"¹⁹ in Europe, Asia, and the Americas, as well as in Africa. What can be done to remedy this for the future? What can African formation do to wipe out strife, especially violence for instance between tribes?

d. Mortification involves renunciation of certain goods in order to pursue other more important ones which we have freely chosen. It involves disciplined labor in the service of the gospel. It involves the sacrifices necessary for keeping our commitments. What concrete forms should mortification take in Africa? What are the concrete areas in which seminarians should learn to become disciplined men?

e. Zeal is love that is on fire. It involves burning love for the person of the Lord and a "*new ardor*" for a "*new evangelization*." It implies hard work, the attitude of a servant. Its enemies, St. Vincent tells us, are sloth and indiscreet zeal. What forms do zeal and its enemies take in Africa at the dawn of a new millennium?

2. What is the concrete meaning of the Vincentian vows in Africa today?

a. What are the challenges for living out the vow of poverty? How should it be lived out concretely in societies where families may make increasing demands on their sons as they become better educated and take on a prestigious societal role?

¹⁸Mt 5:37.

¹⁹Mt 5:5.

What constitutes a simple lifestyle in this context? How can we live in greater solidarity with the poor?

b. Celibacy has its own particular challenges in Africa. Africa is not alone in this regard. Celibacy is difficult. Each culture in each part of the world has experienced struggles and trials as it labored to find the ways of living out this gospel value genuinely and with great simplicity. What are the obstacles to celibacy in each country? How should it be lived out concretely in a context where generativity is held in such high esteem?

c. How does one live out dialogue and obedience concretely in a context where authority structures have been traditionally different from those in other parts of the world? Where wisdom figures, like elders, play a very significant role? How can candidates be formed to express their views directly to superiors?

d. St. Vincent regarded stability as a keystone in the life of the Congregation and as crucial for the service of the poor. What are the values within African society that support it? What are those that work against it?

3. Tribal structures, which play a very significant role in African societies, have the potential for mutual enrichment or for profound division. How will our formation programs help our candidates to recognize the richness of their various heritages, and those of others, while at the same time living out profoundly the deeper, more universal bonds that unite us as the people of God in the body of Christ and as members of the family of St. Vincent? How can we avoid tribal rivalry and strife?

4. What form will community living take in Africa? What will be the structures of dialogue? How will our lifestyles and our houses give witness to the simplicity to which the gospels call us? What are the ways of living together as "*brothers who love one another deeply*"?²⁰ What will our local community plans be like?

5. What are the most appropriate prayer-forms for Africa? The Church in Africa is already developing a liturgy that is well inculturated, with their own styles of prayer, of song, of dance, of symbols, of gestures. Are there ways too in which our community prayer spaces, as well as our prayer forms, can truly reflect the African culture? Mental prayer, for example, was very important to St. Vincent. He proposed a method for meditating that flowed from the culture in which he lived. What are the methods that are most useful within the African culture, for listening to God, reflecting on his gifts to us, and speaking with him?

Formation is crucial, my brothers. Our evangelizing mission in Africa depends on it. Our community life will be vital only if we are well formed as

²⁰CR VIII, 2.

members of an African apostolic family. Our prayer will be genuine only if it takes forms that touch the African heart.

I place these challenges before you with great confidence. Our Congregation has a long, rich history in Africa. Many wonderful missionaries have come here and many of them are still here. Many generous young African candidates have entered our Company. This gives me reason for great confidence. I offer you these challenges today because I trust that you will receive them with open hearts, with creativity, and with responsibility. The Church and the Congregation have a great future here in Africa. It lies in your hands and in your hearts.