

Inculturation of the vincentian charism

Formation of diocesan clergy and laity

*P. Aurelio Londoño, C.M.
Visitor of Colmombia, C.M.*

1. The inculturation process in the church

The topic of INCULTURATION has been emphasized by the project of New Evangelization. In *Gaudium et Spes*, however, it was already explicit and feeds all the council documents, which look to the new conditions and forms of life in the Church.

Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandii* teaches the "need to assimilate the gospel message, to express it in language people can understand and announce it in that same language." The churches of different continents make efforts at inculturation in practice as well as in theory.

The search for adequate processes of inculturation demands much in terms of knowledge of the cultural ambiance, political, social, and religious traditions, institutions and the anthropology that sustains the life of the communities. The reflection that begins from the grassroots and ends in the centers of decision-making requires much wisdom and dedication to find valid conclusions for evangelization.

Formation of clergy and laity receives a very important innovative impulse in the second half of the twentieth century.

The prevailing conditions of the Church and of the world call for a lay apostolate much more intense and open in order to respond to the growing autonomy of many sectors of human life: "The whole people of God, by baptism, is committed to the mission."

2. The Vincentian Charism and the Formation of the Clergy and Laity

The biographers of St. Vincent and historians of the Congregation have treated the topic well: in *Vincentiana*, *CLAPVI*, *Anales*, rich articles have appeared to illustrate that.

The missionary desire of Vincent led him to grasp the sad situation of the Church of France, characterized by poverty, ignorance, divisions, wars, the lack of zeal in pastors and priests.

Still at an early age, Vincent involves himself arduously in pastoral ministry in Clichy and in Chatillon-les-Dombes. Contact with good people led him to discover ways to alleviate miseries of sickness, poverty and sin. To attend to these, he turned to the people around him, whom he called, formed and organized. With the laity he began founding works which have lasted till today with great vitality.

In 1617 the Charities are born in Chatillon and a few months later their association is consolidated with the approbation of the archbishop of Lyon. The first was exclusively feminine and had autonomy to administer its goods. He wanted the missionaries to found them wherever they did catechetics or the preaching of missions. They multiplied very much.

Along with them came the Daughters of Charity, who were not religious but women given over to God for the service of the poor living in community.

Vincent sought ways to alleviate so many needs, whose cause, according to him, was in the priests:

"...it is extremely clear that the depravation of the ecclesial state is the principal cause of the ruin of the Church of God. Yes, it is the priests, we are the cause of this desolation which is ruining the Church, of this deplorable reversal which is suffered in many places."

This consciousness led him to offer opportune remedies:

* The missions, besides the conversion of people sought to reach the ecclesiastics to encourage them to change their life. "Mons. Vincent wished that, during the time of the mission, his missionaries would attempt, as they did, to lend all the services possible to the ecclesiastics of the area in which they worked..."

* The retreats to the ordinandi were a second remedy for the problems of the clergy. He wanted to reach the younger men with a new methodology and a favorable atmosphere. They were a type of intense spiritual and professional course, about the virtues they needed to practice and about the knowledge necessary in moral, liturgy and theology. They were free of charge and the participants carefully selected in order to produce a permanent effect in the life of many priests.

* The Tuesday Conferences became an experience of ongoing formation growing out of the desire to be together of some priests who had those pre-ordination retreats. Vincent received it [sic] through Louis Abelly and supported it with great enthusiasm. They were periodic gatherings of a spiritual type that sought pastoral promotion and service of the poor.

* Seminaries were, in Abelly's phrase, "after the ordination retreats and the Tuesday Conferences, the way to assure formation of a virtuous and competent clergy, as

Cardinal Richelieu asked. They were organized for those who had entered or soon would enter holy orders; so that they would be practice, during a year or two, virtue, prayer, divine service, ceremonies, song, sacramental administration, catechism and other ecclesial ministries, as well as learn conscience cases and other necessary parts of theology; in a word, to prepare them not only to work for their individual perfection but also to lead souls on the roads of justice and salvation."

* Retreats for priests came along with the ordination retreats and the seminaries and as a work proper to the Congregation according to the Bull Salvatoris Nostri.

* His presence in the Council of Conscience served to orient the appointment of bishops who would support Church Reform and pay greater attention to priests and care in the election of candidates for orders.

Each of these works and presences of Vincent had particular characteristics: conversion to Gospel life, to the virtues of simplicity, humility and charity; creation of a community atmosphere and the enlightening of doctrinal concepts through a practical vision of Christian life and of priestly ministry.

3. The formation of the clergy from st. Vincent to our time

The period following the death of the Founder was the time of greatest activity in the founding of seminaries. Fr. Cid divides his study in three parts.

Chapter I. Till the French Revolution, the Congregation directed 106 seminaries in Europe and one in Goa, Macao and Peking.

Chapter II. During the 19th Century seminaries were established in America, Africa, Middle East, Philippines and China.

Chapter III. The 20th Century is a time of expansion until 1950 when the crisis begins for seminaries.

DATA ORGANIZED BY FATHER CID

SYNTHESIS

Fr. Cid in doing his final resume in his article in *Vincentiana* (2) 1979, pp. 101-113, offers the following reflection about the reasons for directing seminaries:

- * values the bishops saw in the Congregation
- * virtues and defects, crisis and rebirth of our seminaries
- * requests from local churches

Although they are general observations, it is worthwhile to look to them and do a deeper analysis of the causes of the actual situation. Why not take advantage of the present ecclesial moment to return to this ministry?

Fr. Sylvestre in the last edition of *Vincentiana* offers an interesting article: *Priest of the Mission, for What?* He presents the evolution of the French provinces from 1810 to 1960.

He analyzes these numbers and seeks the causes producing the growth and decline.

CAUSES OF GROWTH: * the community joins the renewal effort of the Church of the 19th century: it was present in reorganization and evangelization efforts, in clergy formation and in openness to foreign missions. Many diocesan priests joined the community.

* the Congregation reveals a clear identity: its objectives and ministries are well defined and in agreement with the needs of the Church. It also has confreres in the vanguard of intellectual investigation.

* the apostolic schools insure a significant number of candidates for the internal seminary.

CAUSES OF DECLINE: * After the crisis caused by the separation of Church and State at the start of the century, missionaries return to France in 1919 and return to old works, but they failed to renew contents and methods in the direction of seminaries and missions.

* The Company isolates itself, lives apart, does not participate or collaborate in the birth of any of the great apostolic or charitable movements which distinguished the Church of France between 1920 and 1970.

* handing over seminaries brought with it a "loss of gray matter"

* urban parishes were taken without the necessary preparation and many missionaries left the Company

* foreign missions diminished and with them the missionary attraction.

These two studies, recent and on target, ask serious questions about the actual behavior of the Company in relation to the formation of clergy: many are still alive who participated in seminary work: what could they tell us about their life in this ministry? Our young have not been formed in the seminary, explicitly, from the perspective of missionaries: why such little emphasis on this ministry?

In terms of the history of Vincentian Laity, especially the Confraternities of Charity, notes P. Jose Maria Roman, CM, "which multiplied in the life of St. Vincent: in Vincentian documentation references are preserved to some 60 parish charities. There were many more. A true network of charities covered almost all of France. Abelly, the saint's first biographer, says that the Confraternities "were founded in so many places that their number is unknown." In the century and a half following St. Vincent's death there is very little information about these Charities, although we know that they were founded beyond the borders of France, thanks to the Daughters of Charity and priests of the Mission.

In the 20th century, after the French Revolution, they became strong again.

In 1971, "the associations of different countries decided, in coherence with Vincent's teaching, to change their methods and structures, giving themselves an International Statute, according to the demands of the times." They then adopted the name A.I.C. (International Association of Charity). With the motto "to act together against the poverties" the AIC converts itself into a network of worldwide projects, inserted in the life of the great international organisms, with particular attention to the problems of women.

The St. Vincent de Paul Society is founded on April 23rd, 1833, directed by Emmanuel Bailly, counted six other students, among them Frederick Ozanam who had just turned twenty years old. The conference was born and developed close to the Paris Motherhouse and had the Vincentian influence of that renowned Daughter of Charity, Sr. Rosalie Rendu.

The Vincent de Paul Society has had a rapid and universal growth, is found in 106 countries, with 875,000 members, spread out among 46,000 teams or conferences. Following the death of its founders the Society has affirmed itself as an apostolic movement of charitable and social action, supported by a strong spirituality. It has always preserved its lay character.

The Sons and Daughters of Mary and the Miraculous Medal Association constitute other lay forms of the Vincentian charism, movements born in the first half of the last century, inspired in St. Vincent's charism and based on the apparitions and devotion to the Miraculous Medal. Both are directed towards the Christian formation of youth and service of the needy. The Sons and Daughters of Mary are now the Marian Youth.

In some countries the Vincentian Youth Volunteers (VOLJUVI) have arisen, whose objective is the living of the Christian vocation of the young through a work of integral promotion of those in need, particularly the elderly.

4. Steps for an inculturation process in clergy formation

4.1 To affirm with St. Vincent that clergy formation belongs to the vocation of the Company: "when the fullness of time came, we were called to help form good priests, to give pastors to the parishes and to teach them what they need know and practice. What an important task! How sublime! How beyond us!"

The Constitutions keep alive, with the same expression of St. Vincent. this purpose of the Congregation. The General Assemblies since 1974 have continued to insist on this end.

What can we enliven this ministry? The growth in parish work is a surprise, in provinces where previously seminaries flourished, without the missionary dynamism having grown as would have been expected. Has not the moment arrived to promote a return to formation of the clergy, as we are returning to foreign missions?

4.2 To reactivate our service to clergy, let us begin by a vital insertion in diocesan presbyterates through works which commit us pastorally to them.

* affirming our identity as followers of Christ Evangelizer of the poor, with simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification and apostolic zeal, working in community;

* assuming attitudes of pastoral leadership and of renewal of missionary vitality;

* presenting ourselves as organized apostles, capable of elaborating, executing and evaluating pastoral plans, in a team. This requires us to be men of knowledge, of study, of reflection. Neither identity nor leadership nor organization are improvised: they require serious doctrinal and methodological bases;

* taking on attitudes of ongoing formation and accompaniment of young priests, so that we are available to direct encounters, to give conferences, to hear confessions, to give spiritual direction and to create an atmosphere of friendship and welcome in our houses and parishes.

4.3 Major Seminaries call us to renew formation methodology. One way is to organize the FORMATIVE COMMUNITY of the seminary with the participation of the bishop, the presbyterate, formators, professors, administrative and auxiliary personnel, parents, the natural and irreplaceable educators of their sons, and students, responsible and true protagonists of the formation process for ordained ministry. The formative community creates an atmosphere of communion and participation, of small community, which fosters adhesion to Christ, which gives testimony of a more evangelical life in the people of God, which challenges the egotistical and consumerism roots in society and makes more explicit the vocation to communion with God and with the brethren.

4.4 The planning of the seminary, educative community developing itself, as an educative process of persons and of the group, as well as of the community, is a privileged instrument to carry out the mission of the seminary; to prepare it to work in

team, to take stock of human realities and the needs of evangelization, taking advantage of human potential, individual and communal.

This Planning creates a process which integrates the distinct dimensions of priestly formation: human-affective, spiritual, intellectual, community and pastoral; it is a progressive movement, harmonious and dynamic for personal maturity, and avoids a fragmented formation, partial and improvised. In its elaboration, execution and evaluation, the will of God is discerned, the face of an evangelizing Church, the priesthood and type of formation we wish to promote, are sought.

Experience has taught us that Planning creates more fraternal relations between formators and students and favors processes of solidarity and subsidiarity which the Church needs--communion of Vat. II: "establish close union of spirit and action and form between them (rector and formators) and with students, a family and foster in the students the joy of their own vocation."

4.5 Accompaniment of seminarians during formation has been one of the characteristics of our method of formation. It is interesting to read the Directory for Major Seminaries of P. Fiat (1896) and capture how the most important chapter revolves around the personal obligations of the directors and later treats the relations to be maintained with superiors, confreres, seminarians and people outside the seminary. The method is directive and insists on vigilance, but the whole context reveals a pedagogy of closeness, of support, of respect, of accompaniment.

The Council ratifies, in a new perspective, the need to foster mutual confidence between educators and students to establish efficacious dialogue, so that decisions which by right pertain to superiors are made after a reasonable search for the common good. In a word, the seminary must cultivate interpersonal relations distinguished by familiar confidence and fraternal friendship.

Formation for a life in which the greatest vigor comes from pastoral activity must be incarnated in the formator-pastor. Theory will be enriched by experience, as was the case with St. Vincent, who oriented the formation of ecclesiastics for life and ministry. The seminary is to be part of all the pastoral activity in the diocesan plan. It will become a pastoral laboratory for the diocese, attracting the concerns and questions of its priests. In this way we will overcome the complaint so often heard, that seminary formation is very theoretical.

The formators, because they live in the seminary, through their office of professors, directors, confessors and celebrants, feel the weight of their work and try to escape their mission as pastoral companions of the students. The Planning calls for the full integration of all the formator's activities.

5. Steps for inculturation processes in lay formation

Formation of laity is a principal concern of the Church today. The documents calling for it are well known: *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* are founding texts on the need to work with the laity. Directly related is the Decree "The Apostolate of the Laity." Throughout the Council we find an active presence of laity, called to be conscious of its vocation to mission and to be formed to make the Reign of Heaven effective through their own apostolate.

Perspectives on lay formation are broadened with recent documents like *The Lay Faithful*, *The Family in Modern Times*, *The Social Concern of the Church*, *Human Work* and others that offer us paths to accompany the laity in the growth of their missionary conscience.

Closer and better known to us is the spirituality that comes to us through the life of St. Vincent, from reflection and from the experience that the Congregation has had. The laity, especially those joined to the branches of the Vincentian Family, ask us to be spiritual teachers in order to maintain the direction the charism indicates. Without solid knowledge and a personal and community experience of our spirituality, we will be unable to respond to this search by our brothers and sisters.

The Vincentian Volunteers and the Vincent de Paul Society have very much enriched their spiritual experience, their capacity for service and encounter with the poor, in the light of Vincent's charism and have elaborated formation material, in their own language, adapted to objectives they have set down. The fundamental document of the AIC with its motto "to act together against the poverties" and the lines of action they have formulated in recent assemblies propose formation, communication, solidarity and the struggle against social marginalization by means of the defense of human rights of the most poor, to gain a culture of solidarity and self-promotion, respect and peace.

The Vincent de Paul Society has been very active seeking the causes and remedies for social ills and has evolved in its institutional organization, has widened its services of the poor, and has improved their quality, through the spiritual and professional growth of its members.

Beginning in June 1995, Father General has begun a process of integration of the four principal branches of the Vincentian Family, which soon will be five with the Vincentian Marian Youth. Communication and information create union, help us prepare common projects, validate mutual help in formation, in vocational promotion and inculturation of the charism: these are seeds which begin to grow; if we take care of them, they will give abundant fruit.

(Translator: James E. Claffey, C.M.)