

International Formation Center: Saint Vincent de Paul

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Introduction

Thank you, confreres, for the welcome you have given me the last few days during this important meeting. I hope that the whole experience will be as important for you as it has been interesting for me.

My remarks will treat first the lived experience of our program of on-going Vincentian formation, and second the finances of the program. At the end, there will be time for questions and discussion.

Program

My training has been as a teacher, so I would like to begin with some notes about our history. Where did CIF come from? Past general assemblies have commented on the need for on-going formation. Indeed, the Constitutions, paragraph 15, mention participation in the on-going formation of clergy as one of our works; and paragraph 81 reads: "The formation of our members should be continued and renewed all through life." Statute 42 calls the provinces to promote common and personal continuing formation. Yet the precise point of on-going Vincentian formation does not appear there, and this shows that CIF is just part of a larger effort in the Congregation. No less a figure than Pope John Paul II commented favorably in 1986 on the possible "establishment of . . . an international centre for Vincentian studies." These and many other calls led Father Maloney and his council to found what they later named the International Formation Center: Saint Vincent de Paul--known from its French initials as CIF. It opened in September 1994.

A team of three directors was chosen: myself, a member of the Midwest province of the United States, Jean-Pierre Renouard of the Toulouse province, and Luis Alfonso Sterling of the Colombia province. In the three of us the three major languages of the Congregation were represented, and we do our best to try to become more proficient in all three of them. The team began with formal meetings in early 1993.

During these meetings, we made major decisions concerning our goals and methodology, the location of the center (the Motherhouse in Paris), the languages to be used, and the physical changes in the Motherhouse required by our presence. You have received in your packets a copy of the statutes of CIF. We base our work on them. I say this because it is fundamental that all of us understand the formal purpose of the program: on-going Vincentian formation. Consequently, we do not offer personal, theological or ministerial formation strictly so-called. These are best left to others.

What is our actual experience in practice? First, we have chosen our Constitutions as the basis for our work. To a certain extent this rules out the risk of presenting mere theories or opinions about Vincentian life. The Constitutions, approved by the Church, detail our identity and mission, our work, our life, our formation and our government. We try to select experts to treat the major sections of the Constitutions. (You have in your packets a list of the names of these speakers.) They usually speak of the development of the articles in question (such as the teaching of Saint Vincent, the Common Rules, the history of the Congregation), and then bring in their own experience to illustrate how the theory is put into practice. You have also in your packets copies of the calendars for the Fourth Session (just completed) and the Fifth Session (to begin in September). You can see how the sessions progress from week to week, and how we have organized the work. Each session always includes visits to important Vincentian sites, and the annual retreat held at the Berceau. We conclude the retreat with the renovation of vows.

You should also note how each week is arranged. We normally begin the week with eight hours of conferences from the speakers. Then the participants meet in small groups, divided by language. At the end of the week, they bring back to the large group the results of their discussions and participate in teaching the others. We also try to bring in occasional speakers on particular topics, always on Vincentian themes.

A final part of the program is a written analysis of the participant's own apostolate or community life. We offer a model for this analysis to help them do so. We ask our confrere participants to examine their life carefully from a Vincentian perspective, basing it on all they have studied and experienced in the preceding months of the program. Many have found this exercise to be extremely fruitful for their own personal life.

You will notice that I have called the confreres on the program "participants." We searched for a word that would avoid the idea of these mature men being called "students," or "the young confreres." We have had nearly 100 of them already, and they represent all facets of the Congregation's work: pastors, teachers, missionaries, directors of the Daughters of Charity, superiors of houses, a former provincial, members of provincial councils. These men are hard-working brothers, deacons and priests. Often, for the first time in their lives, they are receiving from you, their provincials, the opportunity to leave their work for a while and spend time seriously thinking about their life and work.

We have had to limit the number of participants to about 30 for two main reasons: we have room for only that number, and any more than that would be difficult from the perspective of group dynamics. We also limit the age to between 35 and 50, since it is at this age that the confreres generally find that they need to take a break from their work and examine anew their commitments. In English, we speak of a "mid-life crisis" which often occurs. We have also been enriched by having members from another congregation, the Vincentian Congregation of India. They share our spirit and mission, and have been welcome among us. Other communities may come in the future. You will find in your packets a list of the provinces which have sent candidates to the first

four sessions, and lists for the next two sessions. These lists will, I hope, encourage you to limit your choices so that we can receive the 30 confreres whom we can accommodate.

We have also asked you or your predecessors in office to send us only those confreres who can profit from the program. What does this mean? It certainly means that you should not send us your problem confreres in the hopes that we might be able to do something for them. No surprises, please. It also means that you should avoid sending confreres unable or unwilling to profit from the program because of their previous work: they may already be experts in everything we have to give them, for one example.

Future participants should also be able to communicate across languages and cultures. Some have felt isolated because they cannot do so easily. Our research has shown that the most commonly used languages in the Congregation of the Mission are English, Spanish and French. For this reason, we concentrate on these languages and provide simultaneous translation for our speakers and during the plenary sessions. Languages less commonly spoken are Polish, Portuguese and Italian. We offer courses less often for these language groups. We will also offer occasional sessions in German. Thank you for the responses you have sent to me, in which you have assigned confreres for the next eight sessions, through the year 2000. This does not mean that the program will cease at that time, nor that the superior general expects you to send every available confrere before that date.

A major part of our work involves evaluating the sessions. We ask the participants to do a written evaluation twice each session. The team then reviews them and reports to the General Council, with the help of Father Griffin, our liaison. The Council then reviews the results and sends us their comments. We also ask the speakers to do an evaluation; many of them do so, and we add this information to our other report. In general, the reports have been very favorable, particularly concerning the structure, organization and basic idea of the program. Many of their suggestions have provoked changes in details of the program. We ask the participants to rate the speakers as to their knowledge and presentation of the subject, and as to the importance of what they had to say for each participant. Some speakers rated low for various reasons. As we are still in the initial stages of our development, we are still searching for the very best available speakers. In your packets you will find a very tentative list of speakers whose names have been suggested to us. The members of the CIF team would appreciate it if you could review the list and make comments on it, and also suggest other names for the topics presented.

What difficulties have we faced? There are two significant ones: the problem of communication among the participants or with the speakers (because of language, culture, theology, levels of previous formation and apostolic experiences) and the problem of being away from home (community, family and friends, culture, daily routine, food). Others have had problems with the basic idea of the program itself: on-going Vincentian formation, or with being open to personal change on the basis of our common heritage and the call of the Constitutions.

We are planning to contact past participants after our first three years to ask again for their evaluation of the program and comments on how it has affected their lives, if at all.

Finances

Now to finances. To begin the program, the General Council took responsibility for the finances. This involved some of the construction costs, purchase of simultaneous translation equipment (helped by external funding), furnishings and other items. The Province of Paris and the Motherhouse also participated in rehabilitating part of the building for our use. The seminary students moved from their former location and gave up two large corridors for our participants. The confreres of the local community also experienced some changes in their daily routine because of our presence. For all of this we are very grateful. The Province and the Motherhouse have been very welcoming and helpful.

The principle adopted by the General Council is that the Center should finance itself. We do this by trying to balance our income and expenses. You have in your packets a very brief report on our financial condition at the end of 1995. Unfortunately, our accounts were not in the condition that we can offer you a full financial report. This will be available for 1996. You will notice that after meeting our expenses for 1995, we had a small surplus. SICAV, mentioned on the financial report, refers to the bank shares we purchased to put some idle funds to work. This means that at the end of 1995 we had about 5.000 F surplus plus about 68.000 available in the bank shares. In addition, however, we had several bills to pay in 1996 from our Session III, 1995; however, this is balanced by some income that should be applied also to 1995, but which arrived in 1996. We will have a professional audit of our accounts at the end of 1996.

Let me give you the main points of our annual budget. The main items of *expense* are the monthly room charges (1450 F per month), and meals (124 F per day). We also pay: for our speakers (travel to Paris and return, room and board, and a stipend); for the members of the team (board, insurance, personal expenses, travel to the province once a year); for the translator or translators (a stipend paid by the hour.) There are also program expenses: telephone/fax, photocopier, newspaper and magazines, library books, automobile. We have significant banking expenses for checks received and foreign exchange. Lastly, we have other costs, such as accounting and depreciation of equipment.

You will notice that we do not supply scholarships. That is the province's responsibility. Some provinces pay for their men, while others seek full or partial funding from elsewhere. These external sources have been, up to now, funding agencies (principally Aid to the Church in Need, Oeuvre d'Orient, and the Oeuvre Bienheureux Perboyre); other provinces who have generously funded their brothers who need the help; and a small fund established by the General Council. Perhaps during this time together you could make plans to share resources with others to allow them to participate in the program.

Some have raised the issue that the program is too expensive, and they have sought reductions in the price. We have been able already to lower the price from 30.000 to 29.000 F. You can see, however, from the brief account of our financial condition, that we are just barely covering our expenses from our income. The major ways of reducing our expenses in any significant way involve either paying less for room and board to the Motherhouse, or shortening the program. I say this because the room and board charges amount to 60% of the income for each participant. The other 40%, therefore, goes to everything else. We have already begun to negotiate with the Motherhouse, but we understand, too, that they have their expenses for personnel, electricity and gas, maintenance, insurance, etc., something each of you understands.

The team is also aware that 29.000 F is not the entire cost to you, since you have to pay for travel between Paris and your home province, and for other small expenses (postage, small purchases, haircuts, telephone, fax, photocopies, entrance fees to places not covered by the program, medicines, or medical-dental care.)

The main item of our *income* is the amount which you pay. A tiny amount comes in from services which the team members render and for which we receive a stipend. This income goes to the program, and we have agreed that 50% will be handed back to the team members for their own use.

Conclusions

In general, our experience has been that we have very good confreres in the Congregation of the Mission. It is exciting to meet these men and to share in their lives and experiences of being Vincentians today. We also have been able to share in their difficulties and sorrows. In your packets you will find lists of comments excerpted from the final meeting of two sessions. Despite any problems which the confreres may have at times during the session, they generally express gratitude for their experiences at the end. You can judge them as you will.

From the four sessions held already, we on the CIF team have discerned four themes which I would like simply to mention for your reflection.

First, the confreres are concerned about being faithful: as Christian believers, as Catholics, as Vincentians, as priests, deacons or brothers. They wonder about how they are to live amid the many changes they see all around them.

Second, they are very concerned about the quality of their community life, and they seek to improve it.

Third, they are examining carefully the Vincentian character of their work, and are especially interested in continuing the work of the popular missions, both individually and on a provincial level, and in examining the meaning of having "missionary parishes."

Fourth, they agonize over the problem of vocations--that is, the lack of vocations--either in their own province or elsewhere in the Congregation.

Lastly, thank you for your attention and support of CIF. The members of the team, Jean-Pierre Renouard (now returned to his province), Luis Alfonso Sterling and I value highly the opportunity of being able to serve your provinces in this important undertaking.