

## Some key points about the formation of our members today

by Kazimierz Stelmach CM

Formation is a topic which has always been discussed in our Congregation. For St Vincent the formation of the clergy had even been one of the reasons for which he founded the Congregation. He was alert to the needs of his day and realised that this was precisely the point at which the real renewal of the Church had to start. And, I think, he also wanted to renew the whole of society by this means. These points emerge clearly in a conference to the confreres in September 1655.

The Church is going through a critical period at present. It is living in the midst of a society which, in many ways, reminds us of that of St Vincent's time. This means that in the face of such a situation we have to ask ourselves, as St Vincent did in the conference referred to above, what we ourselves have to do. Or, better still, how to prepare ourselves, and how to prepare our students, to be able not just to face up to such a situation and to respond better to the needs of the time, but also how to share in the ongoing renewal of society and the Church.

In this short contribution I do not intend to answer all the questions which are being asked, but merely to draw on my limited personal experience to highlight at least some of what I consider the more important aspects which need to be emphasised today in formation, or rather in how and for what we are preparing our students. Neither is it a "doctrinal" report, but more a reflection on our everyday life and the urgent calls arising from it.

The *Ratio Formationis Vincentianae* puts human development first. With regard to this "development" I want to stress just one point which the *Ratio* mentions in this section. The documents says: "... to open oneself to others, to other than self even when accepting others becomes difficult". <sup>(1)</sup> In my opinion this is one of the problems most often generally encountered with today's young people. In my own experience it has been one of the most obvious problems I have met with as a formator.

The world today, more than ever, needs men who are able to "meet", in every sense of the word. When dealing with our young members there is need to underline, insist on, teach, that in a "meeting" it is not merely a matter of accepting the "other" passively. This point is brought out by St Vincent himself. For him, to meet a poor person meant "to give oneself" completely for him. And this training to be men for "meeting" begins back in the seminary. We can say that if I am unable to accept my brother with whom I am living, then it will be difficult for me to put this virtue into practice when I am on mission. This means that the mission to be undertaken could be limited, superficial, or merely "chosen".

The first task, then, of a formator will be to observe, to get to know the students well, and then to act. This is by no means easy. Every formator has to find a suitable way for enabling the students to learn how to get on with others.

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<sup>1</sup>. *Ratio Formationis Vincentianae pour le grand séminaire de la Congrégation de la Mission*, VINCENTIANA 2 (1988), p 222.

Another point which seems to me to be very important concerns prayer in general. Our seminaries should be well organised as regards the spiritual life. But this "organised" seminary life carries the danger that when we are by ourselves we are not always capable of organising our spiritual life. This is nothing new. But I think it is a point we have always to keep in mind. I don't think that everything in our seminary timetable should be organised, laid down. There is need, every so often, to leave it to the seminarists themselves to organise "the spiritual day" so that not only will they pick up the ability to pray but will even experience not just the need but above all the "delight" of the spiritual life. To my way of thinking, this leads the seminarist towards responsibility, and the basic thing here is not just responsibility in prayer but later in all senses when he will be a missionary in the future.

The period of formation includes study of theology. The *Ratio Formationis*, when it deals with the scope of intellectual formation in §31 says that this should be: "... to help the acquisition of the ability to know how to evaluate the values and counter-values of today's world, the causes of poverty and the obstacles to evangelization". <sup>(2)</sup>.

It can often happen that the study of theology is considered as just something "to be got through". Today's young people want to get down to work right away, and that is very positive. So formators have to discover how to convince the young people that the world today is not simple, and in fact it never has been. That is why that in order to get down to work, to serve the poor in an effective way, some preparation is needed. St Vincent stressed precisely this at a conference: "He strongly recommended them to study hard... so as to serve God better and to serve the neighbour more effectively" <sup>(3)</sup>. One thing must be made absolutely clear to them: we are not mere "social workers"; we must be missionaries, because that is our vocation.

To end up I would like to emphasise one other aspect of formation which concerns both the Congregation as a whole and community living. The mistake we most frequently make is to treat the Congregation, or rather to look at it, as something which is there for us, and accordingly "owes us something". This is an attitude I have often noticed. It is obvious that the whole thrust of the formation process should be not just to tell them but to show them in a concrete way that our Congregation is our family, and that in it I am "at home". And if that is the case, then "I" must be for that family. And that is not easy, neither for the seminarists themselves nor for those in charge of formation.

The *Ratio Formationis* says that the formation period should lead the students "... to integrate themselves into a fraternal and missionary community, should be the means for living according to the gospel, and the prophetic sign of the Kingdom of God"; that the formation period should lead them "to contribute in an active way to the building up of the community". In brief, it will be my home, my community in which I will be enabled to be, first of all, "for" it. The family can serve as a model for us. The father, the mother or the son do not return there just to sleep, but are there to live.

These are just some points which, in my opinion, are very important for the formation of our seminarists, and which I have noticed both in my experience as a formator and in conversations with missionaries in general. I think every formator will find other points, because of different places and

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<sup>2</sup>. idem, 227.

<sup>3</sup>. SV XII 63.

different individuals. It would be interesting to compare such experiences at inter-provincial level. This would be not merely an enrichment for each one, but above all it would be a help.

Thomas DAVITT cm, Translator