

THEME:

Commentaries on the Ratio Formationis

Preamble and Chapter 1

General Reflections and Directives for Formation

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After a lengthy process of writing, reflection, and dialogue, the Superior General and General Council has authorized publication of the *Ratio Formationis* for the Congregation of the Mission. This was done in response to a proposal approved during the 2010 General Assembly, namely, “to revise to *Ratio Formationis* and develop a practical guide for formation”.

Responding to the requests of the delegates at the various General Assemblies, the Congregation of the Mission developed a *Ratio Formationis* for the Internal Seminary (1982) and a *Ratio Formationis Vincentianae* for the Major Seminary (1988). Those documents contain guidelines as a basis for the development of formation plans on the provincial and interprovincial level. Confreres responsible for the ministry of formation have valued those documents, which grounded the formation of the younger generations of our Congregation in the Vincentian life.

In recent years, at both meetings of confreres dedicated to the ministry of formation and at Visitors’ meetings, a desire was expressed to see a revision of the *Rationes* of the Congregation for four basic reasons:

- A number of years had passed since their initial redaction, and it seemed that now there was a need to gather together more scientific findings in this area of study along with recent documents of the Church on this topic;
- In recent years, the reality of the candidates and seminarists had changed, in particular, their personal, cultural, social, religious, professional realities;
- It seemed opportune to define more clearly the responsibility of each of the protagonists in the process of formation (seminarist

or student, spiritual director, formation team, local community, province;

- And finally, from the perspective of general principles, convictions, and lines of action, it also seemed opportune to highlight formation of the whole person, thus expanding the established confines of the previous *Rationes*.

During the Visitors' Meeting in 2007, it was requested that the Congregation develop a document for the on-going formation of the confreres. It seems to me that this new *Ratio Formationis* has as its starting point these shared desires of the Congregation. I was asked to write on the Preamble and the first chapter of the *Ratio (General Reflections and Directives for Formation)*, I decided that I wanted to highlight the fact that we are dealing with a **new Ratio**.

1. The *Ratio Formationis* and the *Practical Guide for Formation*

The General Assembly of 2010 asked for "a revision of the *Ratio Formationis* and the formulation of a practical guide for formation". The *Ratio Formationis* of the Congregation of the Mission offers us the contents that are proper to a *Ratio* and at the same time proposes elements that are more appropriate to be included in a *Practical Guide for Formation*. This is one of the primary novelties that we discover in this document.

The *Preamble* presents the *Ratio* as a **vision** and a **plan**. It is also presented as a **guide** intended to help the provinces develop their own *Ratio*.

- The *Ratio* contains the insights of the Congregation and the Church regarding formation, present and past ideas whose primary sources are the Congregation and the Church.
- Its' starting point is the experience and the on-going reflection of the Provinces.
- As a goal, it proposes living **the Vincentian missionary life** in an authentic manner, and it highlights the characteristic elements of our identity.
- For each stage of the formation process, the *Ratio* offers precise guidelines for the formators, candidates, seminarists, confreres, and the local communities.
- The *Ratio* illuminates the path that must be traveled, and presents in each stage of the formation process, a profile of the candidate, seminarist, or the confrere.
- It gathers together broad outlines of Vincentian formation, and suggests a manner to inculturate formation in a way attentive to new realities of person, place, and present era.

The formators, local community, and Congregation have a defined formational plan that is to be followed by candidates, seminarists, students and confreres in formation.

2. Formation in the Congregation of the Mission as a following of Jesus Christ, evangelizing the poor

In the first chapter, the *Ratio* explains and gives precision to the proper objective of each stage of formation, one that is discovered in living as missionaries who follow Jesus Christ, evangelizing the poor. The affirmations in our Constitutions are quite demanding: “*Our formation... should have as its purpose that the members, animated by the spirit of St. Vincent, become suitable to carry on the mission of the Congregation. They should therefore grow daily in the knowledge that Jesus Christ is the center of our life and the rule of the Congregation*” (C. 77.1, 77.2).

The path of formation is one of following Jesus Christ, who gives a dynamic to the formation process. Its goal is Christ, who becomes alive and takes form in us. Thus, we reveal the fullness of Christ: “*The time of formation, as well as our whole life, should be so ordered that the charity of Christ urges us more and more to attain the purpose of the Congregation. As disciples of the Lord, members will attain this purpose by self-denial and by continual conversion to Christ*” (C. 78.1).

Vincent de Paul places before us the activity of Jesus Christ as a point of reference. In various chapters, the Common Rules and the Constitutions invite us to encounter in Christ as the reason for our existence, our way of life, our different relationships, and for evangelizing the poor as a way of prolonging the mission of Christ.

The first chapter of the *Ratio* places before us the purpose of the Congregation, *to follow Christ evangelizing the poor* (C. 1). Our Vincentian vocation is constituted as **the axis** which sustains all other dimensions of formation. Like the hinge on a door, **the axis** (the Vincentian charism) creates a dynamism, among the multiple dimensions of formation.

3. Formation, a life-long journey

The *Ratio* utilizes the image of the life cycle of a tree to highlight the unity of the formation process, and the movement from one stage to another. It presents a conviction based on human and social sciences, the documents of the Church, and our own experience. Formation is a process or a journey that continues throughout one’s life in order to *refine the candidate’s values and growth* (Chapter 1, section 3A).

To make Jesus Christ the Rule of our life and activity, to participate in the same spirit as Christ, to clothe oneself in the same attitudes and sentiments as Christ; these are lifetime tasks that involve every dimen-

sion of the human person and all the varied circumstances and stages of one's existence. Our Constitutions reiterate the conviction that formation is a journey continuing throughout life: "*Our formation is a continuous process*" (C. 77.1); "*the time of formation, as well as our whole life*" (C. 78.1); "*the formation of our members should be continued and renewed all through life*" (C. 81).

The principle of on-going renewal (Cf. Constitutions, #2) demands that all Vincentians maintain attentive to this reality throughout their lives, and do so with an attitude of discernment. In this way, they will be able to respond in an adequate manner to the urgent needs of the Church and the world. In this dynamic of fidelity and on-going renewal, formation is a path that one travels along throughout the whole of one's life.

4. The stages of formation in the Congregation of the Mission

The *Ratio* is qualitatively **new** because it integrates all the various stages of the formation process. Up until the time of the publication of this document the Congregation had a *Ratio Formationis* for the Internal Seminary and a *Ratio Formationis Vincentianae* for the Major Seminary. The new *Ratio*, as stated in the Preamble, *can be viewed as comprising seven Rationes with one introductory chapter*. Examining the index of the *Ratio* enables one to appreciate the introductory character of the first chapter (*general reflection and directives for formation*) and the seven stages of formation that are addressed in the following chapters: chapter 2 (*vocation ministry stage of invitation, inquiry and discernment*); chapter 3 (*formation at the stage of the pre-internal seminary*); chapter 4 (*formation at the level of the internal seminary*); chapter 5 (*formation during an internship year*); chapter 6 (*formation of brothers at the post-internal seminary level*); chapter 7 (*formation at the level of the major seminary*); chapter 8 (*ongoing formation*).

The image of the life cycle of a tree that helps us to understand the unity of the formation process at the various stages should also remind us of the following:

- The Provinces (through their Formation Commissions) or a group of Provinces that share the same Formation Plan are invited to concretize the stages of formation in accord with the reality of the individuals, cultures and various situations.
- The proposal with regard to the various stages of formation responds to multiple realities in the Congregation of the Mission and provides a well-defined content that addresses various situations in which our Formation Plans are to be developed.
- In the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission as well as in the *Ratio* there is a clear distinction between the two types of

individuals who are journeying along the path of formation: the **candidates** (sometimes called aspirants, postulants, and discerners) and the **missionaries** or confreres (admitted seminarists and students).

The *Ratio*, as it takes up the request of the Visitors of the Congregation, dedicates a chapter to the theme of ongoing formation (chapter 8). Our Constitutions, grounded on the general principle that formation must be continued and renewed throughout the one's whole life (C. 81), do not make an explicit reference to ongoing formation. Statute 42 entrusts the responsibility of ongoing formation to a Commission: "*Individual provinces, through the help of their formation commission, should organize and promote both common and personal continuing formation*".

In order to serve as a guide for formation in the Congregation of the Mission, the *Ratio* dedicates specific chapters to *formation during an internship year* (an experience valued by many Provinces) and the *formation of brothers at the post-internal seminary level* (a request made by the Brothers during their meeting in Paris (2010) and included as a line of action (III.1) of the 2010 General Assembly. Before addressing the issue of the formation of our members (which begins with admission to the Internal Seminary), there are two chapters: one for vocation ministry and the other dedicated to the time of invitation, inquiry and discernment.

The Constitutions make a clear distinction for formation of our candidates that occurs during those stages prior to admission into the Congregation of the Mission. Our Constitutions view the time of discernment and accompaniment and stages prior to admission into the Internal Seminary as part of the vocational discernment process. This clear, precise distinction in our Constitutions and Statutes differentiates formation plans of the Congregation of the Mission from formation plans of Institutes for Consecrated Life. As a result of the mixing of our "religious language," we often use imprecise language when referring to them as candidates, seminarists, or students.

Statutes 38-39 state there is a process that occurs before candidates are admitted into the Congregation, and begin what is properly termed the formation of our members. The distinction between candidates and admitted members is not based on the type of studies they are engaged in (philosophical, theological or professional), but on their commitment to the Congregation.

Beginning with the first chapter, the *Ratio* distinguishes between candidates and confreres (admitted or incorporated members, seminarists, and students). The fact that the stage of discernment and the stage prior to the Internal Seminary require participation of the individual in the life and the apostolate of the community (cf. S. #39),

should not lead us to forget the essential difference between the situation of candidates and that of confreres. The wording in each chapter of the *Ratio* has been carefully chosen¹ – and it intentionally avoids that which is utilized by the Institutes of Consecrated Life.

5. The center of formation: the person on a journey

The *Ratio* points out the fact that the human person is the primary agent in the formation process. That affirmation, which we find in this chapter, is further concretized in chapters that follow and which refer to specific stages of the formation process. Therefore, at the end of each chapter we find a profile that describes what is expected of the candidate or confrere when that particular stage of formation is completed.

As confreres come together to share their thoughts on formation, certain questions arise: how do we form true missionaries for today's world? How do we engage in this ministry of formation so that the future Vincentians remain faithful to what our Constitutions describe as our proper spirit? The *Ratio* gives us a profile that can be used to verify the quality of the formation that candidates or confreres have assimilated during the various stages of formation.

In several articles, our Constitutions and Statutes refer to the person and process of personal growth and maturity. They are consistent in highlighting the need to adapt the process to the individual: “According to his level of formation and ability” (C. 78.4); “pedagogical norms should be applied according to the age of the students in a way that, while gradually learning self-discipline, they become accustomed to using freedom wisely and to working with initiative and diligence, thus reaching Christian maturity” (C. 78.5); “in accordance with their age” (St. 39); “in special circumstances, and with regard for the degree of human and Christianity maturity of the seminarists, the provincial can make suitable adaptations” (St. 44).

6. Formation in community and for community

The Constitutions point out that we Vincentians “live in common as brothers by following their own rule” (C. 3.1). “Community life has been a special characteristic of the Congregation and its usual way of living from its very beginning. This was clearly the will of St. Vincent...

¹ Our Constitutions refer to those individuals who have not been admitted into the Congregation as “candidates”. When referring to the formation of our members we are referring to those who have been admitted into the Congregation: “seminarists” during the stage of the Internal Seminary and “students” during the stage of the major seminary.

This fraternal life together, continually fostered by the mission, forms a community which promotes both personal and community development, and renders the work of evangelization more effective” (C. 21).

Since the common life is proper to members of our Congregation, and as it fosters personal growth and development and our service for the mission, formation among us can only be achieved in the community and as a community. The words that we find in our Constitutions and Statutes are to be understood precisely from the perspective of the common life:

- Participation in pastoral ministry should occur, *“especially in association with their moderators, including going to the poor and experiencing their condition. In this way, each will be better able to discover his own specific vocation within the Community in accord with his own personal talents” (C. 78.4).*
- Formation for community life enables individuals to respond to God’s call and to do so from a perspective of the richness of each person, as we see, *“members, responding to the call of God within the Community, should learn to live a Vincentian community life during the time of formation. The community should foster the personal initiative of each one throughout the whole process of formation” (C. 79). “In houses of formation a family lifestyle should flourish and a fraternal spirit should be fostered among students of the same province” (St. 45.3).*
- Responsibility for the members of the community in formation demands, *“seminarists should be an integral part of the provincial and local community in which they live, where their formation is a common responsibility under the direction and animation of the director of the internal seminary” (C. 86).*
- Care with regard to community life when formation is done outside the province: *“Care should be taken that they [our students] lead a common life according to the customs of the Congregation and that they receive a suitable Vincentian formation” (St. 45.2).*

In the introductory chapter, the *Ratio* highlights the role of the local community in the process of formation and offers detailed proposals as it describes the formation for community life that corresponds to each stage of formation.

7. Formation in the mission and for the mission

As a Society of Apostolic Life, the Congregation of the Mission exists for the mission. (cf. C. 3) The Constitutions point out the characteristics of our participation in the ministry of evangelization: *“A clear and expressed preference for the apostolate among the poor; attention to the realities of present-day society; some sharing in the condition of the poor;*

genuine community spirit in all our apostolic works; readiness to go to any part of the world; striving to live in a state of continuous conversion both on the part of each individual member and on the part of the whole Congregation..." (C. 12).

The general principle of continual conversion and renewal demands attention to the signs of the times and the mediation of the poor: *"The Congregation of the Mission, faithful to the gospel, and always attentive to the signs of the times and the more urgent calls of the Church, should take care to open up new ways and use new means adapted to the circumstances of time and places. Moreover, it should strive to evaluate and plan its works and ministries, and in this way remain in a continual state of renewal"* (C. 2).

That principle is concretized in the Constitutions and the Statutes when referring to formation of our candidates: *"Going to the poor and experiencing their condition"* (C. 78.4); *"acquire a suitable and concrete understanding of people, especially the poor, of their needs, their desires, and their problems"* (C. 85.1); *"the formation of our students should not lose sight of the reality of society, so that their studies will lead to the acquisition of a vision of the modern world and critical judgment of it. Students, through a conversion of heart, should begin to involve themselves in Christian work for the restoration of justice; more and more they should become conscious of the roots of poverty in the world and lay bare the obstacles to evangelization"* (C. 88).

The *Ratio*, in accord with recent methodological findings, as well as with the spirituality of systemic change, emphasizes that *"those who live in poverty are significant and active agents in our formation, mediating the presence of the Lord as we journey through Vincentian life and ministry"* (Ch. I, Sec. 2f).

8. Formators and moderators for the formation process

The Constitutions and Statutes make reference to the participation and the responsibility of formators and moderators in the formation process. Several articles outline their various contributions to this process (cf. C. 93-95; St. 49-50).

The *Ratio* presents the formation team and its specific ministries: director of formation; spiritual director, director of apostolic formation, professor, director of human formation², local superior. The experience of the individual province will be crucial when entrusting these ministries to various Vincentians: wherever possible a team of forma-

² Because of differences with regard to cultural sensitivity, some will certainly find it difficult to accept the presence of so many individuals who have the title "director". In my experience of accompanying young men I have found it more helpful to use the word "ministry/minister" and/or "service".

tors, structured as outlined above, would be ideal (certainly the number of available formators and those being formed must also be taken into consideration). In those situations where the group of formators and the number of candidates/confreres is smaller, it is very probable that the director will have to assume ministries that the *Ratio* assigns to others.

The *Ratio* offers a detailed profile of the formator. I believe that this profile can be used by the formator for self-reflection, so that those entrusted with this ministry will clothe themselves in the characteristics that are presented. This profile should also be used by the Visitor when assigning confreres to engage in the ministry of formation. This profile will be useful for those confreres who are preparing for this ministry and confreres already engaged in this ministry.

9. Formation Plans and Formation Commissions

The Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission point out the need to coordinate the various formation plans for our members, thus guarding the organic unity between successive stages, so that the pastoral purpose, proper to the Congregation, might be achieved.

The Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission demand that each Province develop a formation plan *“which will be in conformity with the principles already established, with the documents and directives of the Church and of the Congregation of the Mission, and which are more in accord with their abilities”* (St. 41.1). The Statutes ask the Visitor to *“establish a formation commission to draw up and revise the formation program and to deal with all those things which pertain to the entire course of training”* (St. 41.2). It is taken for granted that those Provinces that cooperate in one or more stages of the formation process will develop such a plan together and will establish joint meetings of their Formation Commission.

In the first chapter of the *Ratio*, it is clear that an invitation is being extended so that each Province or group of Provinces might adapt and integrate this material into their own formation plan. In the *Preamble* we see the *Ratio* is presented not as the final word, but *as a guide to the Provinces as they work out a Ratio particular to their own circumstances and cultures.*

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The 2010 General Assembly established the following as one of its lines of action for the next six years: *“To create formation programs that strengthen our fidelity to the vocation and our response to the needs of the twenty-first century”*. The *Ratio* provides a foundation that enables the Congregation, its local communities, and the Provinces to engage in such a task.

My initial reading of the new *Ratio Formationis* created feelings of profound gratitude to those confreres who were directly involved in writing this document. That gratitude includes the Superior General and the members of the General Council who animated that work. Indeed, we have been presented with a most valuable instrument for the formation of Vincentians for the twenty-first century. The *Ratio* provides much material that formators, candidates, and confreres in formation should reflect upon. Many thanks!

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