

## Chapter 2

# Vocational Promotion Ministry in the Congregation of the Mission

Carlos Albeiro Velásquez Bravo, C.M.  
*Province of Colombia*

### 1. Reason for the second chapter of the *Ratio*

The recently revised second chapter of the *Ratio Formationis* deals with the theme of the ministry of vocational promotion. In fact, the chapter is entitled: *Vocation Ministry Stages of Invitation, Inquiry and Discernment*. Because of the importance of this theme for the whole Congregation it should be viewed in all seriousness as a commitment of every confrere and as a service (ministry) of those who have been requested to promote vocations to the Vincentians.

What we have continually called *Vocational Ministry*<sup>1</sup>, like every other form of pastoral ministry, has an underlying theology. Such a ministry can only be understood and adequately promoted if it is grounded in a Christology, an ecclesiology, and in a theology of mission.

I believe that here we must say something about the meaning of this pastoral ministry for the life of the Congregation of the Mission. Every historical era demands a specific methodology to extend an invitation to one who wishes to follow Jesus Christ, the evangelizer of the poor. For example, we recall that Vincent de Paul, despite the increase in the number of works, was not concerned about the number of aspirants to the community. His firm trust in Providence led him to affirm in a very clear manner that “*it is for God alone to choose those whom he wishes to call... we have a maxim, namely, never to urge anyone to embrace our state... one Missionary given by his fatherly hand will do more good by himself than many others who would not have a true vocation*”<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> This ministry has been referred to in various manners: vocational promotion, vocational cultivation, vocational pastoral ministry... this last phrase is broader highlights those aspects of discernment, accompaniment and directing the call of God toward some specific way of following the Lord and serving in order to build up the Church.

<sup>2</sup> VINCENT DE PAUL, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translators: Helen Marie Law, DC (Vol. 1), Marie Poole, DC (Vol. 1-14), James King, CM

Therefore, such unwavering trust in Providence is necessary. The Congregation, similar to the Church, has learned how to cultivate vocations, and is aware that a helping hand must be extended to the Lord of the harvest. Such assistance consists of not only prayer and witness, which later we affirm as irreplaceable, but a need for an organized and serious pastoral ministry.

Vincentian vocations are in function of the fulfillment of the proper purpose of the Congregation and thus, if one loves the Congregation, then one must accept the responsibility of inviting new members, but not in the sense of self-preservation, but rather from the perspective of an evangelizing heart. In other words, the ministry of vocational promotion which we undertake is not done for the purpose of survival, but rather so that we might be faithful to the mission that God has entrusted to us... *evangelizare pauperibus misit me*. Evangelization of the poor demands evangelizers. I believe that throughout its history the Congregation has never lacked admirable witnesses who have made explicit the invitation to join the ranks of the evangelizers of the poor. The apostolic zeal of Vincentians has fascinated and attracted many. A vocation is an eminently communicative event. Therefore, no confrere should excuse himself from the commitment to extend to others an invitation to follow Jesus Christ, the evangelizer.

## 2. The journey of the candidates (missionary disciples)

The evangelizing activity of Jesus was not limited to calling and sending forth those persons who followed him. His mission was evangelical and vocational. The *Aparecida Document*<sup>3</sup> has a focus that gives a unity to the whole document, namely, “*disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ so that our peoples may have life in him*”. The formative journey of the missionary disciples proposed in that document high-

---

(Vol. 1-2), Francis Germovnik, CM (Vol. 1-8, 13a-13b [Latin]), Esther Cavanagh, DC (Vol. 2), Ann Mary Dougherty, DC (Vol. 12); Evelyne Franc, DC (Vol. 13a-13b), Thomas Davitt, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), Glennon E. Figge, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), John G. Nugent, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), Andrew Spellman, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]); edited: Jacqueline Kilar, DC (Vol. 1-2), Marie Poole, DC (Vol. 2-14), Julia Denton, DC [editor-in-chief] (Vol. 3-10, 13a-13b), Paule Freeburg, DC (Vol. 3), Mirian Hamway, DC (Vol. 3), Elinor Hartman, DC (Vol. 4-10, 13a-13b), Ellen Van Zandt, DC (Vol. 9-13b), Ann Mary Dougherty (Vol. 11, 12 and 14); annotated: John W. Carven, CM (Vol. 1-14); New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume VIII, p. 342; future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [CCD] followed by the volume number, followed by the page number, for example, CCD: VIII: 342.

<sup>3</sup> Here we refer to the final document of the V General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (June 29, 2007).

lights five fundamental aspects that appear in diverse ways in each step of the journey, aspects that are intimately related to and nourish one another. I believe that these five aspects need to be emphasized even before an individual formally enters into the formation process. Indeed, these aspects should be highlighted during the process of inviting, discerning, and accompanying a candidate who aspires to the Congregation:

- a) **The Encounter with Jesus Christ:** *Those who will be his disciples are already seeking him* (cf. John 1:38), *but it is the Lord who calls them: "Follow me"* (Mark 1:14; Matthew 9:9). This encounter must be constantly renewed by personal testimony, proclamation of the kerygma, and the missionary action of the community. The kerygma is not simply a stage, but the leitmotiv of a process that culminates in the maturity of the disciple of Jesus Christ.
- b) **Conversion:** It is the initial response of those who have listened to the Lord in wonder, who believe in Him through the action of the Spirit, and who decide to be His friend and go with him, changing how they think and live.
- c) **Discipleship:** The person constantly matures in knowledge, love, and following of Jesus the master, and delves deeper into the mystery of His person, his example, and his teaching.
- d) **Communion:** There can be no Christian life except in community: in families, parishes, communities of consecrated life, base communities, other small communities, and movements.
- e) **Mission:** "As they get to know and love their Lord, disciples experience the need to share with others their joy at being sent, at going to the world to proclaim Jesus Christ, dead and risen, to make real the love and service in the person of the neediest, in short, to build the Kingdom of God" (Aparecida, 2007, N. 278).

I mention those aspects because today we meet many young people who are seeking to discover their vocation but have not had sufficient experience of the Christian life. They have been influenced by the epochal change and historical turn of events characterized and defined by profound and rapid change. These changes have, in turn, "impacted in a cultural manner the subjects of our vocational pastoral outreach. Here we refer to those individuals, especially young people and those institutions that mold and form their life, for example, family and school. The movement behind those events is the extraordinary and formidable advance of social networks"<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, the Ratio refers to situations that should be analyzed, known and accepted.

---

<sup>4</sup> GABRIEL NARANJO, CM, *Second Continental Congress on Vocations* (2011), *Working Document*, p. 23.

The vocational experience begins with that which we would call “amazement”. Paraphrasing the famous expression of Benedict XVI, we could say that “embracing a specific vocation is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (Deus Caritas, 2005, N. 1).

Those persons who encourage and promote vocations (and that includes us as members of the Congregation), ought to be grounded in Jesus Christ. This is not just another theory. This means that we share our personal experience of Jesus Christ with those who are searching for their vocation. We should not be afraid to speak with the candidate about the person of Jesus Christ, about an encounter with Jesus Christ who gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. Pope Francis refers to this reality of a personal encounter with the Lord in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*:

*“It is impossible to persevere in a fervent evangelization unless we are convinced from personal experience that it is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it, and not the same thing to contemplate him, to worship him, to find our peace in him, as not to. It is not the same thing to try to build the world with his Gospel as to try to do so by our own lights. We know well that with Jesus life becomes richer and that with him it is easier to find meaning in everything. This is why we evangelize. A true missionary, who never ceases to be a disciple, knows that Jesus walks with him, speaks to him, breathes with him, works with him. He senses Jesus alive with him in the midst of the missionary enterprise. Unless we see him present at the heart of our missionary commitment, our enthusiasm soon wanes and we are no longer sure of what it is that we are handing on; we lack vigor and passion. A person who is not convinced, enthusiastic, certain and in love, will convince nobody”* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, No. 266).

### **3. Awaken, discern and accompany**

The validity of our charism for the today is undeniable, not only because it responds to the needs of the Church and of our people, but also because many continue to feel called to incarnate that charism and to live it with enthusiasm in a radical commitment on behalf of the liberation of the poor. Some years ago, in order to renew this ministry on the level of the Church, a process was proposed that is composed of three elements: awaken, discern and accompany. This triad coincides with the phases of the discernment process that are set form in the *Ratio: initial invitation, active discernment and application for admission*.

**a) To awaken:** Here, we can speak about planting the seed in an initial invitation. The vocational pastoral ministry is initiated with the action of planting seeds. Such activity must be situated in the context of general pastoral ministry and to be developed throughout the various stages of an individual's growth in faith. This activity of planting seeds creates the conditions that allow the seed of a vocation to be sown in the good soil that exists in the heart of all people. This seed is called the vocational kerygma<sup>5</sup>.

Vocations are awakened by:

- Living that which is proper to the Vincentian vocation with joy and integrity and authenticity. Witness ought to attract and create an enthusiasm in young people;
- Creating an interest in vocations in those places of mission where we and the Daughters of Charity minister. In many places, Daughters often collaborate in vocational promotion;
- Offering without fear our charism to the larger Church;
- Proclaiming in an explicit manner the person of Jesus Christ;
- Making a direct and personal call to the young person, inviting that person from the start to reach out toward those who are poor and to enter into a relationship with them. Our charism should be presented in a clear manner, and not as just another nice theory;
- Entering into the various cultures of young people;
- Creating an awareness of this ministry among the laity and integrating them into this ministry of vocational promotion (we will refer to this matter later in this presentation);
- Organizing events that promote vocations (retreats, days of prayer, vocational weeks, visits to the houses of formation, times for reflection, etc.).

**b) Discernment:** Planting seeds for a vocation should lead to a concrete invitation. In fact, the ministry of vocational promotion should always include that element. Through means of the activity of inviting and motivating an individual in a direct, personal and explicit manner, it is hoped that the person will show himself to be listening and willing to embrace the Lord's call. All of us should be spokespersons who present this call to another individual. This task consists of inviting people to reflect on their life from the perspective of this call, and to show how the Lord is present in their own life. We must give them guidance that helps them give meaning to their life. The invitation extended to another must be clear, and made in a respectful manner.

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf., *Second Continental Congress on Vocations, Final Document*.

At the same time, we must be willing to engage in dialogue once the invitation has been made.

- During this phase, it is important to be attentive to the motivations that the candidate expresses. In every struggle to come to know one's vocation is an underlying motivation which requires dialogue for a person to have clarity. Some motivations are valid, and others will have to be purified and clarified. The same could be said when speaking about the mission: a vocation is incarnated in individuals with human limitations.
- In all of this, a prayerful providential attitude should be assumed. Every local community and each candidate should be invited not only to pray "for" vocations but should also pray "about" their vocation. The Congregation has a precious jewel in its prayer for vocations, the *Expectatio Israel*<sup>6</sup> which has biblical, Vincentian and vocational roots. There are other prayerful practices that should be taken into consideration.
- Personal on-going dialogue with the candidate is most important, as is dialogue among the members of the vocational promotion team and formation team.

**c) Accompaniment:** Once the seed of a vocation has been planted, we need to cultivate the seed. This cultivation is accomplished through a process of personalized accompaniment, beginning with acceptance of the proposal. It concludes when a vocational decision is made. Vocational accompaniment is a ministry that consists of pedagogical assistance (instrumental and time oriented) that an elder brother in the faith and in ministry offers to a younger brother so that he, after initially hearing the invitation, might be able to clarify, discern and respond to that call in a free and responsible manner.

- What is said in regard to discernment can also be applied to this stage of accompaniment.
- Accompaniment has to address three questions: *the clarity of the vocational awareness of the candidate* (recognize the authenticity of one's vocation); one's authenticity (prove rightness of intention and the validity of one's vocational motivations); one's suitability (show that one has the gifts and the abilities that enable one to respond to the call in a coherent and faithful manner). In the *Ratio* this element is mentioned in the last section of chapter two, in the *profile of discerners acceptable for admission to a pre-internal seminary program*. Each Province can enrich this process

---

<sup>6</sup> Father Antoine Fiat (1878-1914), in his letter dated June 13, 1909, established the obligation to recite this prayer for vocations (cf. *Circular Letters of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*, vol. V, pp. 771-780).

with the selection of other more specific criteria. *“Despite the scarcity of vocation, today we are increasingly aware of the need for a better process of selecting candidates to the priesthood. Seminaries cannot accept candidates on the basis of any motivation whatsoever, especially if those motivations have to do with affective insecurity or the pursuit of power, human glory or economic well-being”* (E.G., N. 107).

- Accompaniment can be done by one individual or by a team that is sufficiently prepared and secure in their own vocational experience, and utilizing auxiliary sciences, which enables one to measure the candidate’s personal growth and vocational affirmation.
- The family, the first planters of the seeds of vocation, ought to be a point of fundamental support in the process of accompanying the young person. Therefore, members of the family should be involved in this process in a very active manner.
- The process of accompaniment should have times in which both the personal and the community dimension are emphasized. Therefore, weekends for apostolic activity, sharing experiences with other young men from the same area, community celebrations, popular missions, are all important because they often create an interaction that enables us to know the candidate on a deeper level. It should be noted here that our communities must have houses whose doors are open to those who desire to enter into our midst.

#### **4. To create the possibility for Vincentian vocational ministry**

I do not pretend to offer here an instant remedy. Rather, I want to communicate some aspects of our experience in the Province of Colombia with regard to this ministry, which has been a priority since we were established as a province. For example, in those early chronicles and in the written material that has been preserved one can read about the efforts of the first Lazarist Missionaries who arrived in Colombia to cultivate native vocations. This concern led to formation structures that have been reflected upon and cultivated and developed with much zeal.

**Convictions:** in addition to continual prayer for vocations and to an awareness of and a commitment to promote vocations, we would add here the following convictions:

- *There are vocations and God continues to call people* (cf. National Congress on Vocations – 2012). Today one frequently hears in ecclesiastical circles the followings complaint: *there are no vocations today!* The lack of vocations is without a doubt conditioned by the new cultural situation that has become a reality is various

places, by fragile relationships that develop as a result of the so called “liquid society”, by the family crisis, by models of the church, by the many options in the religious marketplace, and numerous other factors. As these factors are taken into consideration, we must not lose hope in promoting vocations. I cannot resist citing the words of Pope Francis: “*Many places are experiencing a dearth of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life. This is often due to a lack of contagious apostolic fervor in communities which results in a cooling of enthusiasm and attractiveness. Wherever there is life, fervor and a desire to bring Christ to others, genuine vocations will arise*” (EG, N. 107).

- “No one is better suited to evangelize young people than young people themselves. Young students who are preparing for the presbyterate, young men and women who are undergoing formation as religious or as missionaries, personally and as communities are the first and most immediate apostles of vocation in the midst of other young people” (Pastoral Guidelines for Fostering Vocations to Priestly Ministry [2012] published by the Congregation for Catholic Education). It has been beneficial and fruitful to involve the individuals who are in formation in direct ministry on behalf of vocations.
- The fruitfulness of vocation promotion ministry depends on unity and communication among members of the vocation ministry team and the formation team.
- Here we are not only dealing with pastoral strategies, but also with a spirituality that nourishes and gives life to all our activity on behalf of the promotion of vocations. This element is central to the life and the mission of all members of the various teams involved in this ministry. Such a spirituality is biblical, and grounded on prayer for vocations, one offered so that the Word might be heard and wholeheartedly embraced. This, in turn, will enable people to enter into a process of vocational discernment.
- We can refer here to a great risk that we see in many cases in which the process of invitation, examination, and discernment culminates when the young person is approved and enters for the first time into one of our houses of formation. In such situations, we must be careful about maintaining the bond between the responsible person (or the responsible team) of the vocational promotional ministry and the responsible person (or team) who accompanies the person in this initial stage of formation. In our experience this collegiality has been a very important element.

**The local community and the promotion of new life:** The *Practical Guide for the Local Superior* clearly states that the superior as well



as the other members of the community are to engage in this ministry of promoting vocations to our way of life:

*“The superior and the members of the local community should concretize how they will promote vocations to the priesthood and brotherhood and help in the formation of candidates for the Congregation of the Mission. Mindful of the corresponsibility of all the members of the province in this regard, the local community plan should specify such matters as:*

- *how the confreres will search out and encourage vocations to the priesthood and brotherhood in the Congregation (Statutes, #37.1);*
- *how they will provide ongoing guidance and support to interested candidates (Statutes, #37.2);*
- *who, among the members of the local community, will have a special responsibility for coordinating vocational promotion;*
- *when the community will pray together for vocations (Matthew 9:37; cf. Statutes, #36);*
- *how interested young people might participate and be accompanied in the mission of the local community (Statutes, #36, 37.1);*
- *how, if the Visitor should send to the local community some of those who are already in initial formation, they will be integrated into and accompanied in our life and mission” (Practical Guide for the Local Superior, 2003, N. 109).*

The role of the local community is key because it is the visible face of the Congregation that creates a *culture of Vincentian vocations*. In our houses of formation in Colombia there are vocational committees that make real the words of the *Guidelines for Fostering Vocation to Priestly Ministry*, namely, “that young students preparing for the presbyterate, young men and women undergoing formation as religious or as missionaries, personally and as communities are the first and most immediate apostles of vocation in the midst of other young people”.

**The Vincentian Family and Vocational Ministry:** Moving beyond the environment of the natural family and the parish we encounter, the Vincentian Family constitutes another element in vocation promotion. Experience has shown us that we must move from a vocation ministry developed and carried out from a perspective of “recruitment” to a ministry that involves discernment, accompaniment, and channeling the call of God toward a specific way of following the Lord and building up the Church. We must also minister on behalf of lay vocations. Often we are asked by youth groups in our Vincentian Family to accompany them in a process of vocational discernment. Indeed, our pastoral ministry must take on a vocational dimension.

**To utilize adequate structures and means:** The *Ratio* reminds us that this ministry supposes the utilization of those means that are available to us. Today the electronic media provide us with a marvelous opportunity. Yet, we must be careful here, since the virtual face is no substitute for the real face of the person. It is true that as a result of various search engines, many young men find the Congregation of the Mission and are encouraged to knock on our doors. Nevertheless, there are also human means that must be utilized. Some forty years ago the Province of Colombia created a local community that was dedicated to the ministry of vocational promotion<sup>7</sup>. This community continues to move throughout the country, animates the ministry of vocational promotion throughout the province, promotes communication, organizes and leads workshops and vocational gatherings, encourages the group of “vocational godfathers”, stimulates prayer for vocations and accompanies and advises the Vincentian Family.

May this *Ratio* help us renew the gift of vocation to those the “Vincentian trenches” and enliven the heart of everyone with a missionary commitment to awaken, discern, and accompany those who experience the Lord’s call! We entrust our ministry to the Lord of the Harvest, to the One whom we request to send laborers into the harvest. We also pray that the Lord may preserve those who have been called in his name and that they may be made truly holy.

Translated by CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.

---

<sup>7</sup> Actually this local community is referred to as the house of Vocational Pastoral Ministry – Ministry on behalf of the Vincentian Family and the house is organized like any other local community. Its seat is in the Motherhouse and is composed of four members. As a result of the 1998 General Assembly the Province integrated the ministry of vocational promotion with that of ministering as advisors to the larger Vincentian Family. This enables the members of this house to minister on two apostolic fronts. At the same time this new organization confirms less clerical and more ministerial vision of vocations and also provides greater ecclesial significance to the Vincentian charism which is sown and planted among the laity.