

Chapter 3

Formation at the Stage of Pre-Internal Seminary

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Evangelization of the poor is the focal point of Vincentian Charism. St. Vincent gave equal importance to formation of clergy because he realized that, without holy and committed priests, the work of evangelization would not be effective. So his creative mind thought out ways and means of forming the clergy of the time. Besides the Tuesday Conferences meant for the clergy, and retreats for the ordinandi, he developed a program of formation for young candidates who would be future priests of the Mission. Vincent took up the directives of the Council of Trent for priestly formation, and made necessary modifications to meet Mission requirements. Thus, he passed on to posterity a rich legacy of priestly formation, which he considered as one of the most important priorities of the Congregation of the Mission.

Today, the work of evangelization is being carried out in different parts of the world by members of the Congregation who come from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, our formation program is being reviewed and updated to be relevant and effective.

First, we must take into consideration the human maturity and educational level of candidates aspiring to become members of our Congregation. This may vary from country to country. In many of the Asiatic and African countries, the “Pre-Internal Seminary” stage is operative where aspiring young men are brought together and guided to discern their vocation and strengthen their values and convictions.

The goal of this stage of formation is to help candidates discern their vocation from convictions based on Christian values, and to lay the foundation for a Vincentian way of priestly life. This should be in concert with their academic pursuit. Both need to go hand in hand and contribute to the all round growth of candidates. The structural details are well worked out in the *Ratio Formationis*, which allows for adaptations and variations.

Section 2A gives detailed directives with regard to the six-fold objectives of this orientation phase of Vincentian Formation and the strategies for achieving these objectives. These six-fold objectives for formation: Vincentian, human, spiritual, intellectual, apostolic and

community, are not to be compartmentalized, but integrated so as to contribute to the overall development and character building of the candidate. Practical means are suggested for a gradual progress in this direction.

As tools we have at our disposal biographies of St. Vincent De Paul, the Common Rules, and characteristic virtues of the Congregation, self awareness programs, which lead to psychological and emotional insights, Christian virtues marked out in the Gospels, the search for God through prayer and sacramental life, and compassionate consideration of the poor in a lived-in community context. The methodology to be followed consists in information gathering through personal reading and classes, programs of exposure to these realities, followed by personal and shared reflection, and integrated assimilation, which will be duly translated into an appropriate life style. This is also a time for developing relational skills and absorption of varied cultures and learning of new languages, which will facilitate apostolic work among various ethnic groups.

Section 2B speaks of an associate phase of Vincentian formation. The purpose of this phase is to further widen knowledge and deepen convictions of candidates in all six aspects mentioned above, enabling them to make a mature decision of petitioning for acceptance into the Internal Seminary. At this phase, secondary level of schooling will be completed, which will serve as a basis for further academic studies. Candidates should also have a fair knowledge of modern tools, such as information technologies, so that they will fit into the society they will serve.

The objectives to be achieved and the strategies employed remain more or less the same at the initial stage, but the range of observation becomes wider, reflection gets deeper, and application goes to a higher experiential level, keeping pace with the transition that is taking place in the growing youth with the passage of time.

Section 3 deals with the agents of Formation. Neither the formators nor the candidates should forget the fact that the initiative comes from God and that God is the prime agent of formation. The effort of both the formation team and the candidates should be to discover the plan of God and to cooperate with the Lord in its faithful fulfillment. Like Eli and Samuel of Old Testament times, the formation team should enable the candidates to discern the voice of God in the midst of confusing voices coming from all corners.

The candidate has the most vital role in the whole formation program. Not only should he co-operate with God and the formators, but he should also transform himself gradually making the best use of all means made available. By the time he completes the orientation phase, he should have acquired a basic understanding of the life of St. Vincent and Vincentian charism, an adequate standard of self discipline and a

spiritual foundation, an ability to be flexible and adjust to community life, a willingness to learn and to be guided by the formators, and a sincere love for the poor and readiness to help them.

The provincial administration has to be involved in the process of formation. It should provide a general framework of the formation program, provide competent and exemplary formators, be familiar with candidates, and with occasional visits and interact with them. Together with the formators, they have to properly evaluate each candidate at every stage before promoting them further.

The complexity of formation ministry and the need for a firm foundation at the initial stage demand competent and committed team of formators at this important initial stage of formation. It should be headed by a formation Director, who co-ordinates and closely collaborates with his team members. Both the initial and associate phases can be combined or separated according to the availability of place and personnel.

Right in the midst of sweeping changes taking place in the world today, formation of priests has indeed become a very challenging task. The sincere and committed work of our formators can contribute to lasting results in the long run. The candidates thus formed can confidently continue through the next stages of their formation and be effective evangelizers in the footprints of St. Vincent who faithfully followed Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor.