

Chapter 4

The Internal Seminary

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Chapter four of the *Ratio Formationis Congregationis Missionis* is dedicated to the formation that occurs during the time of the Internal Seminary. The purpose of the *Ratio*, well-articulated and coherent, is to organize and develop the content of the Constitutions (#83-85) in three sections:

- Finality and content.
- Objectives and strategies.
- Profile of the seminarian who completes formation in the Internal Seminary.

It seems to me that the desired result provides a very good roadmap to concretize the provincial and interprovincial *Formation Plans* that deal with this decisive stage of formation and that concerns the life of a Vincentian. In these pages, I propose to highlight some elements that appear to me as important from my own personal experience in the ministry of formation.

1. To initiate the Internal Seminary at the opportune moment

The *Ratio Formationis*, in chapter 3, section 3B, outlines *the profile of the candidate upon completing the entire pre-internal seminary program*. The Congregation understands that there is a process that the candidates must engage in (cf. Statutes, #38-39) before they can be admitted into the Congregation.

Thus the words that Vincent wrote to M. Deville (January 6, 1657), who had sent three candidates from Arras to become members of Congregation, are clarified: “*The two years of probation are not for discerning whether they have the requisite dispositions – this should have been done beforehand – but to strengthen them in them, to build on this foundation the virtues that make a good missionary*”¹.

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

The phase, time, or program prior to the Internal Seminary allows the community to know the candidate, his maturity, his vocational motivation, his aptitudes for the life of a Missionary, and his spiritual dispositions... this same period of time allows the candidate to become familiar with the life of the community, its spirituality and its mission.

Some of the persons who seek admission into the Congregation are adults who have had many lived experiences, due to their studies, professional, and social life. There can be a thought to shorten the time due to a candidate's age, or because he has completed his theological studies.

It is not advisable to shorten the length of time of some stage of formation. Admission into the Congregation at the initiation of the Internal Seminary ought to take place after a sufficiently prolonged period of accompaniment. It should occur after a period of time when the individual has been enriched by experiences provided him with knowledge about the community, and when the candidate has been able to participate in an effective manner in Vincentian life.

On the opposite extreme, we find the situation in which some candidates are unable to enter the Internal Seminary until the time when they should make a definitive commitment through vows and/or Orders. This situation often arises when there is not a sufficient number of candidates who are eligible to enter the Internal Seminary or when the Vincentian process of formation becomes subordinate to the academic program.

The time of the Internal Seminary should not be delayed as if one were dealing with a perennial candidate. True growth of the person does not occur in one specific dimension of life while other dimensions are passed over *sine die*. Each dimension is equally important, for example, the experience of belonging to the Congregation, participation in the life and the ministries of the Community and above all else, deepening one's Vincentian spiritual experience which is very specific to the time of the Internal Seminary.

(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 VI, p. 175; 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: VI: 175.

2. Grounding the life of the Vincentian

In order to present that which is specific to the formation that is proper to one's experience during the time of the Internal Seminary, the *Ratio* uses the image of a tree that grows and develops deep roots. Throughout this chapter, there are frequent expressions of this image, such as, *firm, solid, root, foundation*, etc.

The formation proper to the Internal Seminary supposes that those who have been admitted have sufficient knowledge of the life, the spirituality and the mission of the Congregation. In the words of the *Ratio*, the Internal Seminary is a time:

- To begin to live *in a whole-hearted manner* the life of a Vincentian;
- To experience in Jesus Christ the reason and the impetus for one's *firm and unwavering dedication to the Mission*;
- To acquire *a solid spiritual foundation* that enables the individual to live the Vincentian vocation in *a consistent and joyful manner*;
- To understand and to affirm the demands of *the vows* and *the five virtues*;
- To make a decision to continue the formation process *with the intention of committing oneself* to the following of Jesus Christ, the evangelizer of the poor... and doing this *for the whole of one's life* and as a member of the Congregation of the Mission.

When Vincent wrote to M. Samson Le Soudier (July 29, 1640) to inform him about the path that his brother had traveled, he provided us with some insights about the experience that is to be achieved during the time of the Internal Seminary:

"Oh! What a good young man he is! Your father tried to tempt him; he stayed as firm as a rock. He told me that if he were ever so unfortunate as to leave, he was asking God to let him die at the door. He has finished his two years in the seminary and is going over his philosophy with M. Dehorgny so that he can study theology" (CCD, II: 96-97).

3. To know the spiritual experience of St. Vincent de Paul and to make it one's own

The Constitutions tell us that: "The spirit of the Congregation comprises those intimate personal attitudes of Christ which our Founder recommended to the members from the beginning: love and reverence toward the Father, compassionate and effective love for the poor, and docility to divine providence" (Constitutions, 6); and "the Congregation tries to express its spirit in five virtues drawn from its own special way of looking at Christ, namely, simplicity, humility, gentleness, mortification, and zeal for souls". Speaking of these five virtues, St. Vincent said:

“The Congregation should pay special attention to developing and living up to these five virtues so that they may be, as it were, the faculties of the soul of the whole Congregation, and that everything each one of us does may always be inspired by them [Common Rules, II: 14]” (Constitutions, 7).

The time of the Internal Seminary marks a before and an after in the life of each Vincentian. This is true not only because the individual moves from being a candidate to a confrere, but also because that same individual comes to know the spiritual experience of St. Vincent de Paul and makes that experience his own. He learns to understand and follow Vincent’s example of making Christ the *Rule of the Mission*. He understands and clothes himself in the attitudes that Christ proposed to those who journey along the path that the Holy Spirit inspired Saint Vincent, our Founder, to follow. Here we recall the words of our Constitutions:

“Our formation... should have as its purpose that the members, animated by the spirit of Saint Vincent, become suitable to carry on the mission of the Congregation” (C. #77.1); “members should be trained in the word of God, sacramental life, prayer both communal and personal, and Vincentian spirituality” (C. 78.2).

When referring to the objectives that are to be achieved during the time of the Internal Seminary, the Constitutions state:

“In order to achieve this, the seminarists should take special care to reach an understanding of the special character, spirit, and functions of the Congregation by returning to the sources, especially to the life and works of Saint Vincent, to the history and traditions of the Congregation, and to an active and fitting participation in our apostolate” (C. 85.2).

To know the spiritual experience of St. Vincent, and to make that experience one’s own guarantees our missionary identity and our identification in the Church. It provides a foundation for membership in the Congregation: “The very charism of the Founders appears as an ‘experience of the Spirit’, transmitted to their disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth... The specific charismatic note of any institute demands, both of the Founder and of his disciples, a continual examination regarding fidelity to the Lord; docility to His Spirit; intelligent attention to circumstances and an outlook cautiously directed to the signs of the times... Especially in our times that same charismatic genuineness, vivacious and ingenious in its inventiveness” (Mutuae Relationes, #11, 12 and 23).

4. Verify the documentation and clarify the right and obligations of the seminarist

4.1. At this stage of formation in which the individual moves from being a candidate to a confrere, it is necessary, at the beginning of the Internal Seminary, to verify the documentation of the seminarist, that is, the documents that are kept in the provincial archives.

The *Ratio* mentions some of the documents that the candidates ought to present in order to enter into the program prior to the Internal Seminary (chapter 2, section 4B). The Constitutions and *A Practical Guide for the Visitor* list other documents that are necessary for the admission of a candidate into the Congregation of the Mission (Constitutions, #53; *A Practical Guide for the Visitor*, chapter II, article 2.1). These documents should be sent to the Director of the Internal Seminary, especially if the place of the Internal Seminary is in a province distinct from the province of origin of the candidate.

The documentation that I refer to and which should be verified at the beginning of the Internal Seminary is the following:

- The handwritten letter in which the individual requests admission into the Congregation of the Mission and a copy of the favorable response of the Visitor, a response that is given after having listened to his Council (cf. Constitutions, #53.2, 125, 8; Statutes, #20; Provincial Norms; CIC 735 and 2 and 642-645);
- Baptismal and confirmation certificate;
- Birth Certificate;
- Declaration of the freedom of the candidate (CIC 645 and 1);
- Report from the Visitor or from the person responsible for the stage of formation prior to the Internal Seminary in which it is stated that the candidate has achieved the foreseen profile (cf. Chapter 3, section 3B of the *Ratio*);
- Psychological and medical reports that can be helpful in accompanying the seminarist.

The timely remittance of a copy of the documentation of the seminarist is of great help to the formation team. Such documentation will continue to be useful in later stages of the life of the confrere (their historical value should never be overlooked). If at some time in the life of a Vincentian a difficulty should arise, documentation, carefully filed, will be of great assistance.

4.2. As we have already stated, at the stage in which the individual moves from being a candidate to being a confrere, it is necessary to clarify the rights and the obligations of the seminarist at this time of his admission into the Congregation, when he begins the Internal Sem-

inary... rights and obligations of this individual until the time of his incorporation through the taking of vows.

The seminarists enjoy all the spiritual benefits of the Congregation of the Mission (cf. Constitutions, #59 and 1). Provincial Norms can give precision to some rights and obligations that are specific to those persons being admitted (cf. Constitutions, #59, 2). For the good order of the local community of the Internal Seminary it would be good to clarify some other aspects:

- The manner in which the seminarists are expected to participate in community meetings and assemblies;
- The way in which the material needs of the seminarist will be provided for and the opportunity to obtain some form of periodic stipend;
- Recreational opportunities and medical care that is specific to a particular province;
- The times of the family visit;
- Other matters that, as a result of experience, are seen to be important.

This clarification of the rights and the obligations of the admitted Missionaries prevents possible confusion and contributes to community co-responsibility.

5. Interprovincial collaboration in the Internal Seminary

The Internal Seminary, according to the needs, may be Provincial or Interprovincial (Statute #43). It seems to me that to be effective there is a need for collaboration in the Internal Seminary.

- Magnanimity on the part of each of the Provinces involved in such an effort so that together they might seek out and provide the most capable persons and the most adequate resources for formation ministry;
- Agreement on the method that is to be used in order to organize the Internal Seminary so that all the candidates can achieve the profile that is established by the *Ratio* and concretized in the *Formation Plan*;
- The formation team should have the confidence of the Provinces and the Missionaries;
- Openness of the seminarists to the international dimension of the Congregation of the Mission, that is, acceptance of the diversity of cultures, regions, and provinces;
- Acceptance on the part of the formation team, of the community and of the seminarists of the individuals and the plurality of their cultures.

Interprovincial collaboration in formation, especially during the stage of the Internal Seminary is a very clear expression of the dynamism of the Vincentian charism and of our *creative fidelity to the Mission* (General Assembly 2010).

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