

Chapter 5

The Relevance of the Apostolic Year During Initial Formation

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Introduction

I am fascinated by the way that Jacques Dupuis interprets the “hermeneutical circle” as “a progressive back-and-forth continuous interaction between the present contextual experience and the witness of the foundational experience entrusted to the memory of Church tradition – and vice versa”¹. But this back-and-forth or fruitful interaction between “text” and “context” always needs the existence of an ecclesial community for interpretation (a community that contains the candidates for Vincentian missionary life). Taking into consideration “the interpreter”, it happens within a hermeneutical principle; a passage from circularity to interactive triangularity². Now a fruitful interaction between the text, context and interpreter has to be considered.

I would like to take advantage of this key for reading³, by explaining more particularly the concept of triangular interaction and the concept of experience⁴, to understand the relevance of the fifth chapter of the *Ratio Formationis*, devoted to “formation during the Apostolic Year”. I propose to understand this period as an opportunity given to seminarians at a certain point in their formation to experiment in their vocational journey direct consequences of the interaction of the different aspects involved in the initial formation.

a) The hermeneutical triangle of the Vincentian formation or the mutual and fruitful interaction between the candidate, the foundational experience and the historical context

Through the hermeneutical triangle, the Vincentian formation may be conceived as an organic system within which interact several components: the candidate (the one who is called or the interpreter)

¹ JACQUES DUPUIS, *Frontiers in the Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*.

² Jacques Dupuis’ in *Frontiers in the Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*.

³ Read CLAUDE GEFFRÉ, *Le Christianisme au risque de l’interprétation*, Paris, Cerf, 1997, pp. 65-90.

⁴ The most important thing during the apostolic year is the pastoral experience.

with his personal motivations, the foundational experience (or text, that is to say, the charism of the Congregation) and the historical context of the lived experiences of the vocation. That is what I mean by the “hermeneutical triangle” of Vincentian formation.

As in the hermeneutical theology or the interaction between “text”, “context” and “interpreter” contributes enormously to the success of the reflection (in Vincentian formation), the interaction between the original motivation of the candidate, the foundational experience and the historical realities. All these are essential for the maturation of a vocation to make a responsible missionary commitment. In other words, during the initial Vincentian formation, the candidate lives the *back-and-forth* of the hermeneutical triangle through the articulation (or the interaction) of his personal experience (identified as the original motivation for his vocation), the fundamental content of formation, (what the Ratio means by foundational experience with theoretical and practical dimensions), and the context within which we live the personal donation of self as a response to the Lord’s call. This context is generally characterized by the complexity of socio-political, cultural, and religious realities, experienced by the local church; it is, in short, of the existential situation or of the daily experiences of the poor.

In this perspective, the probationary or apostolic period is a necessary step in the formation of confreres as a time of direct confrontation of the original foundational experience entrusted to the memory of the Congregation (that is, the fundamental principles of formation through which we transmitted the Vincentian charism and the social doctrine of the Church), and the challenges of the context where we exercise the Vincentian mission. Such a confrontation takes place in a back-and-forth between the different interactive experiences. These mark the formation of future confreres, contributing greatly to the emergence of the missionary vocation.

It would seem that it is through such continuous interaction between the original motivations, the fundamental aspects of formation, and the direct pastoral experiences that bring about needed transformations; even better, a conversion for a realistic and balanced Vincentian formation. It is a formation which involves the determination and sincerity in the commitment to serve the poor. From this point of view, taking into account its specific objective, the probationary or apostolic period is defined as a time of direct pastoral experience of a year’s duration, as suggested in the Ratio Formationis. It remains an important moment in the formation of all future Vincentians.

b) Specific Objective and recipients of this time of apostolic year

Before talking about the target and recipients of this time of the apostolic year, let us recall with insistence the fact that the Ratio highlights a Vincentian orientation and unity in all stages of formation within the Congregation. Indeed, in each step, formation within the Congregation of the Mission must always engage Vincentian charism. All steps marking initial formation are equally united to the extent they relate to each other in a symmetrical fruitful interaction (such is unity of formation in various stages). Therefore, the year of internship (a normal period of Vincentian formation), as the Ratio notes, “can be attached to or be part” of any step in the formation of our candidates. Therefore, it is up to each Province to determine these times according to its priorities, but not without taking into account the profile or even of personal evolution of each candidate.

Nevertheless, whatever step to which it is attached or time when it occurs, it is still true across the board for all candidates, Vincentian formation in the year of internship is meant to pursue common and specific objectives, including helping candidates discover our missionary charism and developing missionary skills. This can help them see their vocation as a concrete response to the challenges of evangelization and the existential needs of the poor. This occurs in a pastoral experience, made directly in an open, lively Vincentian apostolate and community (chaplaincies, parishes, educational, etc.). In other words, this time is a special period of discernment, enrichment, and deepening the Vincentian vocation from one or more pastoral experiences.

In the light of this objective, it is consistent to see that the Ratio “considers profitable” such a pastoral experience for all Vincentian candidates, including those preparing for priestly ministry, brotherhood candidates, and even those who are hesitant to permanently commit to their vocation in the Congregation. It should be specified where and when this apostolic experience should be done to make it as beneficial as possible.

c) In relation to the places and at the time for the beginning of this experience

Of course, if the specific objective fixed in the Ratio Formationis concerning the year of internship highlights the relevance of such an experience for all, the places and times to begin this experience will vary according to the diversity of contextual realities, needs, or mission priorities of each Province and the pathways of each candidate. In a general way, the Ratio targets places of lived experience in this pastoral experience for a year, in Vincentian communities and apostolates that are alive and open. The pastoral character of this experience is

present in all Vincentian communities and through all forms of ministries exercised by confreres and communities within a Province. It is important to avoid tensions in the transmission and reception of candidates in non-apostolic communities. Therefore, in the spirit of the Ratio, all Vincentian communities and apostolates can accommodate confreres who need to deepen or discern their vocation in the Congregation from a given pastoral experience given.

However, to make it a truly profitable experience for the Province and confreres, the choice of place and time of the apostolic year should not be done arbitrarily. On the contrary, it must submit to objective criteria relating to the priorities of the province and the Congregation, to the needs of the poor, to the type of Vincentian being formed for these purposes, and the personal profile of each confrere in formation. Hence, there is a need to connect this dual choice (of place and time) with the various elements, especially with the candidates or student and the director who accompanies them. This dialogue allows each Province to determine the time of formation for all candidates in a pastoral experience, which will possibly be tailored for individual cases.

To succeed, a certain human, spiritual, intellectual, and community-minded maturity is required from candidates. For that reason, it is preferable that this probationary period be linked to a stage of training where the candidate has acquired a degree of maturity enabling him to deepen his appreciation of pastoral work or sharpen his discernment as it applies to his vocation. In any event, this must also be a goal of interprovincial formation

d) The lived experiences of the unity of formation during the apostolic year

The concern of the Ratio to explain this chapter appears very clearly, and it is bolstered through in the second section devoted exclusively to objectives and strategies of formation in the apostolic year. The apostolic is also a year of deepening the formation in each of its dimensions (also called 'axes'): Vincentian, human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral community. The student and director must ensure that the pastoral character of this experience is consistent with the unity of formation. One of the possibilities to achieve this is to be attentive to the way the different axes of formation are integrated into the life of the student. Maintaining unity in formation through the organic experience of these different axes remains an indispensable factor for a harmonious deepening of one's vocation and a successful pastoral experience.

e) Appreciation of the student

Naturally such an important moment in formation, such as the pastoral year, must its end have an evaluation of how it functioned in lines with the stated objectives. It is here that the Ratio suggests some criteria or a framework that can serve as evaluation grid of the student after his pastoral experience. It is interesting to note that as an evaluation, it appears to be global in that it takes into account almost all dimensions of formation: personal, community, and human maturity highlighting a spirit of openness and dialogue. In other words, the time of the pastoral experience should point toward deep vocational discernment and encourage a more mature response to the call of the Lord.

At this step, it is essential that the student situate his vocation in relation to the foundational experience and historical context with the help of his director and the local community that welcomed him. At the end of the period of apostolic year, the student should come to appreciate the effects of the triangular interaction on his life and vocation. Otherwise, the experience will be worthless. To this end, the role of the director is necessary as seen in this chapter of the Ratio. It is still important each Province could take it into account in its own Executive Board: to help the Directors of the apostolic year in their role as guides, to clearly define their functions and specify the nature of their mission during this time of pastoral experience.

We could also think to determine, in this same process of discernment, of enrichment and deepening of the vocation, the degree of responsibility of the local and ecclesial community that welcomes the student.

Conclusion

I have used the hermeneutical triangle to locate the Vincentian formation in a dynamic of reciprocal interactions between the subject (candidate), the content of the formation and the historical context. In this dynamic, the apostolic year that the Ratio proposes, with its specific objective as time of pastoral experience intended to all candidates for the mission, I found the curriculum of this formation of our candidates as a privileged moment – but not separate from the other steps of the formation. The goal is similar: to deepen, enrich and discern a missionary vocation from its interaction with the existential reality of the poor.

Beyond adaptations that place to the principle of contextualization as applicable to the Ratio, the general guidelines insist on the necessity of this time for all students and confreres being formed to have a Vincentian orientation in this period. It is meant to be an effective integration of the student in the life and in the mission of his host community, and unity of his formation during the apostolic year by highlighting

the pastoral dimension of each 'axis'. However, if the principles of orientation of the life of the student during this time are sufficiently shown here, the role of the Director and the host community requires a more intentional, personalized approach in each province to avoid being caught in the trap of letting the confrere or student to conduct his life and apostolic endeavors in a solitary manner, thus depriving him of effects of community on his discernment as well as the enrichment and deepening of his vocation.

This step of initial formation is necessary for the candidate who is discerning his vocation, the provincial community who accompanied him in discernment, and is familiar with the candidate, and the Congregation who expects him to give of himself fully in the evangelization and service of the poor. The continuous accompaniment of the student in this time of pastoral experience is indispensable; it remains an imperative, a requirement of Vincentian formation.

Translated from French by NARCISSE DJERAMBETE YOTOBUMBETI, C.M.