

Chapter 6

Formation of Vincentian Brothers After the Internal Seminary

Célestin Farcas, C.M.
Province of Toulouse

This chapter six of the new *Ratio Formationis* of the Congregation focuses on formation of lay brothers after the Internal Seminary, and before taking Good Purposes. It is a crucial period in the life of the Brother, insofar as his vocation is concerned, and a fundamental time in coming to terms with his future commitment to the Congregation. Chapter 6 is composed of four essential sections which are important for the preparation of brothers during their formation. Let us examine these more closely in this chapter.

The *Ratio* in the first section of this chapter reminds us of the identity and vocation of the Brother over the history of the Church. Since the early centuries, following the teaching of Jesus, every baptized person is a brother or sister and is responsible for one another. With the appearance of monastic orders, congregations, and most recently societies of apostolic life, the concept of the lay brother opens new perspectives on commitment. Today, without delving too much into the history or focusing on canonical terms, we can say simply that the Brother is a lay person who makes commitment with vows to follow Jesus Christ and puts himself at the service of the Christian community.

According to Saint Vincent, there is no doubt about the nature of the vocation of lay brothers. They are dedicated people and authentic missionaries, and even if they are not clerics, they are apostles. Through their service as brothers, they cooperate to the ministry of the church. *“So, gentlemen, whether the Brothers are those who work for the Gospel, or pray for the conversion of the people, do penance, whether they are fasting and are working for the sanctification of the clergy and of people, it may mean that they are participants and cooperators of the good that is done in the missions, seminars, ordinations, pensions, and so on”* (XII, 98).

Brothers are true missionaries; St. Vincent valued them and their work. He gave them jobs to go along with their personal qualities and skills. Our Constitutions tell us that, “Lay persons, who among us are called brothers, are destined for the apostolate of the Church and the Congregation. They carry it out by the work that is appropriate to their status” (C. 52 §2).

St. Vincent often used the word “lay” to characterize Brothers, that is, to show the importance of their identity in the Congregation, and promote through them the condition of the laity in the Church. There justification about the vocation of the Brother emerges from the baptismal commitment, along with a call to contribute to the work of evangelization in a special way. This in turn is an enrichment of our faith in Jesus Christ.

The *Ratio* presents us with the goals and context of formation. It is primarily to help a brother discover his future commitment in the Congregation according to his personality and skills and to help him to find his place in the Congregation so that he can flourish spiritually and humanely. To accomplish that, the *Ratio* gives him the means for professional formation in the light of his physical and intellectual abilities, to prepare for his future apostolate in the Congregation.

Our Constitutions state that, “Brothers should be gradually introduced into the apostolate, so that they learn to view, to judge, and to do all things in the light of faith, and, through their actions, to develop and perfect themselves with the others” (C. 92).

If we questioned our senior brothers about their professional formation, they will often use these unfortunately revealing phrases: “*I learned on the job*”, or “*It was another Brother who taught me*”. Their wonderful commitment shows that this form of transmission was functional for a time. With the decreasing number of Brothers today, and especially with the progressive disappearance of the number of professionals, the old training style does not and should not work. Over the past forty years, the apostolate of the Brothers has changed. Formerly, in some larger houses of the Congregation, there were five or six Brothers, and each one specialized in a particular field: cooking, tailoring, shoemaker, carpentry, nurse, etc. Today, brothers have transitioned from what was once solely “domestic duties” to pastoral activities. They manage to still combine both as well: for example, from the kitchen in the morning, visiting the sick or people in the afternoon and ending the day by teaching to a group of catechesis in the evening. These diversifications of the apostolate bring new challenges, but also new requirements to insure that the Brothers receive good formation.

The *Ratio Formationis* is innovative in that it promotes the possibility of setting up a support and training more suited to the person’s skills. We move from the concept “formation” used by the Constitutions to the concept that one “has to be formed.” We no longer have to learn on the job, because the world in which we exercise our mission requires more professionalism. For that reason, the time of formation is a favorable period for Brothers and it must bring forth the benefit of a solid and good formation.

To do this, in the third section the *Ratio* describes the objectives and strategies to be followed. They are orientation bases to help in the

spiritual, apostolic, and human formation of Brothers. They are similar to important lights at the roadside to help us at night to see clearly. These important formations are: Vincentian, human, spiritual, intellectual, pastoral and community. All these lines are crucial during and after the formation.

– **The Vincentian axis of formation:** This is the continuity of Vincentian formation, which we have received the basis of during the Internal Seminary. It involves a deepening of the understanding of our charism, and finding ways to promote its practical application. As a Brother, I am often asked to explain our charism, or to direct speakers or groups in the way of our charism, and that requires not only knowledge, but an exemplary awareness of its meaning and value. Taking time to deepen our awareness of the charism, trying to understand our commitment through the vows, endorsing the spirit of availability for mission, are beneficial for ourselves, for the Congregation and for the people we will work with. We must use this time of grace well to deepen our spirituality so we can more easily live his wealth and benefit others.

– **Human formation:** to support the importance and necessity of this dimension of formation, I refer here to a recent key document of the Church to summarize my thoughts:

“The human and fraternal dimensions of the consecrated life call for self-knowledge and the awareness of personal limitations, so as to offer its members the inspiration and support needed on the path towards perfect freedom. In present day circumstances, special importance must be given to the interior freedom of consecrated persons, their affective maturity, their ability to communicate with others, especially in their own community, their serenity of spirit, their compassion for those who are suffering, their love for the truth, and a correspondence between their actions and their words” (Vita Consecrata 71).

“Being at peace with yourself”, being right with yourself and others, feeling good about one’s abilities and limitations is a life-long process. Human formation allows Brothers to discover themselves outside the realm of their families, in a large environment such as the Congregation, where the focus is centered on the mission. With the guidance of formators, the Brother can adjust to the demands of the mission, both in the ways of being and doing.

– **Spiritual formation:** *“If the Congregation, with the help of God’s grace, is to achieve what it sees as its purpose, a genuine effort to put on the spirit of Christ will be needed. How to do this is learned mainly from what is taught in the Gospels: Christ’s poverty, his chastity and obedience; his love for the sick; his decorum; the sort of lifestyle and behavior which he inspired in his disciples; his way of getting along with people; his daily spiritual exercises; preaching missions; and other ministries which he*

undertook on behalf of the people. There is something on each of these in the chapters which follow” (RC I. 3.).

Following the recommendations of our Holy Founder, each confrere is called to make the spirit of Jesus Christ his own. Our life is a perpetual assimilation to Jesus, but especially during this time of formation, where Brothers have an opportunity to focus more on the spirituality of our Congregation. If we make good use of these practices and traditions of spiritual life, we can then live a well-balanced life between the spiritual and the material.

– **The intellectual formation:** taking in consideration of the evolution of the apostolate of the Brothers in the Congregation today requires to study and reflect on theology and spirituality, and to receive some professional formation in these areas. Some Brothers join the Congregation with a background of professional or theological formation, while others came without any formation. The *Ratio* encourages the chance for seeking professional formation according to the capabilities of the person and the needs of the Mission. However, there is a need for some basic theological formation. Both are necessary for the Brother so to feel comfortable in future ministries.

In the time of St. Vincent, Brothers had many varied responsibilities in the temporal domain, such as Brother Alexander Veronne, who was in charge at St. Lazare of the chapel, its organ, the pharmacy, infirmary, kitchen and laundry. We have all known some Brothers who had similar responsibilities throughout their lives, but they are exceptions today. In our current configuration of the Congregation, Brothers are often called upon to change their apostolate to move from material to pastoral responsibilities and vice versa.

– **Pastoral formation:** We are in the action area of applying the practical pastoral aspect. As Vincentians, we must confront the reality of the Church, society, and the poor we are called to serve throughout our lives. This time of formation helps the Brother and his formators to discern and take directions for future engagement in pastoral work. Our congregation has a multitude of ways to serve the poor that a Brother can undertake, such as schools, support for migrants, visiting the sick, working with travelers and the homeless, visits to the hospital, prison, or the places where the poor congregate or live on the margins. These activities, along with serving in parishes as catechists or accompanying various church groups, should give Brothers an idea of how wide the range is and the many opportunities available. Brothers can be fortunate in having such a chance to delve in many types of pastoral ministry, even if we have to ‘learn on the job.’

– **Community formation:** *“We try to live our community life animated by love, particularly with the practice of “the five virtues,” so that*

it will be a support to our apostolate and a sign to the world of the newness of evangelical life” (C. 24).

St. Vincent wanted communities to be centered on Jesus Christ so they could serve the poor, living in simplicity and humility with fraternal charity and mutual support. The community is our “home,” where we need to feel good and ensure that our confreres feel welcome. Being good in his community is the key to greater fulfillment in the apostolate. Living in a community is not easy, it takes time to adapt, work on your personality and reflects on the reasons of why and how of we are called to live and adapt to community life. The Brother in formation has the opportunity to discover a community in the Mission, to adapt himself to the ambiance of community life, and to live with the other confreres in a positive experience. These six axes of the formation of the Brothers are helpful for the good preparation to the missionary life and our lay brothers have all the necessary to carry out their future ministries.

The fourth section of this chapter presents some few criteria for the evaluation of this formation program and establishes the profile for becoming a Brother. Indeed to understand the success or failure of this program, it is important to give time for the evaluation both of the candidates but also the method of formation. During the time of training, the Brother is brought to acquire certain attitudes, ways to do and be, knowledge and be open minded.

This profile is there to help him to self-evaluate and together with his formators to project the future. To conclude I give thanks to God for this well elaborated Ratio Formationis, which provides a context for future brothers to achieve an adequate formation in vocation and mission.

Jean-Pierre Renouard said in a retreat he preached for Brothers: “I fear that we have still had a simplistic point of view about the vocation of brother, because by experience we knew them as gardeners, cooks, shoemakers, tailors, cleaners...”. In other words, we have been more attentive to what they did than to who they are. In the very nature of their vocation, we must be attentive to the fact that they are first of all missionaries, and that their action must be in priority apostolic... and secondly dedicated to the material tasks.

This time of formation will allow the Brothers to better understanding of the vocation which is theirs, to deepen their identity and find their place in their apostolate, to feel appreciated for who they are and for what they do. Daily in community, we pray the Expectatio Israel, our community prayer for vocations. I would like to end with this prayer for vocations, and in particular, to promote vocations to the Vincentian Brotherhood. At a time when it may appear that the vocation of the Brother is disappearing from our Congregation, let us pray

to the Lord, through the intercession of Saint Joseph, to raise up zealous brothers to join us in the Mission.

Saint Joseph, as you watched over the Holy Family, watch over us. Through your example of living humility, charity, zeal and courage, as did Jesus, give us vocations of lay brothers in our Congregation of the Mission, for the service of the Church and our fellow human beings. In so doing, may this bring peace to our hearts, and transform us as people of loving servants like Jesus in a world affected by hatred. We bring all these intentions, to you who is our model of humble, loving service, and ask you to present them to Jesus your adoptive son, who lives and reigns with the father and the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

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