

Chapter 7

Formation at the Level of the Major Seminary

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We can say that the major seminary is the last step in the initial formation of our confreres. It is the passage between the secular state to the clerical state of the seminarian. That is why we must give importance at this training stage.

As it is the last step, there may be a temptation to take risks, both from the side of either the formator, or from those under formation. Formators may have a tendency to question if they are dealing with fully-formed adults, so they will often have the temptation to control even the small errors of seminarians, not only to correct them, but rather to exert their own authority, or in a worst-case scenario, to find reasons to dismiss them. In human psychology, there can at times be the tendency to be more sensitive to the faults of others than to their qualities. But the new Ratio Formationis will help to correct that tendency.

In the same context, but in another opposite way, formators could too rely too much on the maturity of these young people, leaving them alone, with the notion that this is a self-formation process worthy of adults. When this occurs, they will not take the time to be present and attentive to the needs of the formation house. Gradually, this can come across to those being formed as a lack of commitment, a passive presence replaces an active formator. In this case, knowing the lack of commitment of a formator, those in formation may have a tendency to not showing their true identity, which, as with all human beings, has both positive and negative aspects. Consequently, during their time in the major seminary, they can hide (in a hypocritical way) their true personality until after ordination, when the revelation of their true identity surfaces. Of course, by that time, it would be too late for correction.

Another difficulty that can occur is that these young confreres could believe that as adults, they are on the end point of their formation, and no longer need to be corrected. Or perhaps they could be deluded into believing they might know all they need to for completion of their formation, and as a result lack curiosity, especially in undertaking

theological learning and research. I such as case we might recall an aphorism attributed to St. Augustine: "Search as someone who must find, and find like someone should who should search again". This refers to the need for a continue thirst for knowledge, in which the effort is never in vain. It also is a challenge for the person to never be fully satisfied until one reaches total perfection. As Saint Vincent might have stated, it would the quest to always "*do more*" (*davantage*).

In fact, the temptation can be to believe that the formation of the Internal Seminary is enough to know St Vincent and the charism of the Congregation. But the notion of service to the poor must be understood in context, relating to time and in space. In this way, a Vincentian must be versatile to respond to the calls of the poor, which differ from one time and place to another. It is essential not to have a fixed, inflexible idea of service to the poor. It is not appropriate that we consider the poor as our property, or the care of the poor as our exclusive talent. The whole Church, following Jesus Christ evangelizer of the poor, is called to engage in this service.

In view of this complex situation, it may be beneficial to initiate the idea with our students of taking their responsibilities in formation more seriously, both individually, and for that of their peers. In fact, students are often more open among themselves than to formators and can possess a mindset for creating a place of healthy, fraternal formation. This idea can be juxtaposed with this other mentality: *here we are all students in formation, so who could claim to correct his colleagues? If I reveal the mistakes of my brothers, do I bear responsibility for the consequences of their dismissal?* If this fiction were true, it would appear that everyone would manage to finish his formation years without problems. But, what a pity!

For that reason precisely, it is necessary to always engage in formation, from the study in college of philosophy, through the years of the Major Seminary. This will appear in these places according to stages and methods of approach that facilitate a realization of necessary, progressive stages of formation to promote human maturity in all areas. In cultures and places such as Africa, where mutual respect is a prime principle, this fits well in the secular tradition. The idea to consider stages of formation should be implemented without hesitation or even in light of the challenges it may present to a specific cultural or ethnic group.

To create a sense of mutual respect and encourage young people to take responsibility for their formation, they should be given a strong sense of duty and the freedom to carry it out. If a young confrere in formation realizes or knows the risk of deviations from proper living of the goals of formation in the life of one of his brothers, he is responsible to share with him what he saw. If the confrere heeds his advice, he has succeeded in his mission and he can wait in humility for others

to come and offer him fraternal correction. Otherwise, he has a duty to notify the formators, so that they can take appropriate and timely action. But if he refuses to take action and accepts in quiet the error of others, he is wrong, and should question whether he should continue in formation. On the opposite end of the spectrum, if a student-confrere runs to his formators at the slightest mistake of another of his brothers without first engaging in fraternal correction with his fellow student-confrere, he is wrong. This type of petty behavior can ruin the atmosphere of the community, and work against achieving any meaningful formation.

It is important to insist that a confrere's life as an ordained priest does not begin only at the time of his ordination. Indeed, as was previously mentioned, it can sometimes happen that seminarians wait for the time of ordination to pass before they fully reveal what they are really like as persons. After that time, it is too late to correct them, even if they have accepted fraternal corrections. In truth, some dare to say that as they are no longer in the seminary, they do not want to be told what to do. One can hear this type of mentality expressed: *"I am no longer in the seminary; now, we are all priests, so it is not appropriate to criticize each other again"*.

It is also important to emphasize the meaning attached to the background of young confreres from their family of origin and ethnic and cultural traditions to understand and contextualize what it means to become a Vincentian priest. In fact, it is also appropriate to explain the meaning of this dynamic specifically in regard to the vow of obedience. Indeed, there is a clear difference between slavish and noble service; the differences are interpreted differently between men, and this affects their understanding in a spiritual and religious context (between the person and God) on the other hand. By servile service, it is meant to be an obligation of duty, done often against his will to fulfill his responsibilities to the community or apostolate. But the higher ideal, that of noble service, is done in love and joy, without expecting anything greater.

In sum, it is not easy to take on the mission of the training our young confreres in the major seminary. Thus, one can understand the refusal of some when they are asked to undertake this difficult apostolate. Others may make conditions after being trained as formators. Good will to serve as a formator is not enough; we need educated confreres with the right qualifications. This last requirement is often lacking, due to a problem of finding the right personnel in the province.

In terms of the recent emphasis by the General Assembly and Superior General and Council on the issue of systemic change for those living in poverty, I feel the Ratio Formationis does not have a clear development about the matter. It would then be important to develop the subject in detail as part of an integral formation process. In the

major seminary, it will be useful to include study of the social doctrine of the church and canon and civil law to learn how to counter the injustices suffered by those living in poverty. This should occur not only in structured classroom learning, but also in the formation house to apply our Vincentian charism in a practical manner.

It should also be noted that nowhere in Chapter 7 is there mention of the inculturation of the Vincentian charism. Since Vatican II, we know that inculturation is a necessary component of evangelization. And the mission of the Congregation, which as its center point is to evangelize the poor, will be present everywhere. Sometimes it is a common misconception that the concept of inculturation applies only to provinces and regions located in what we call the “developing” (“Third Church”) world. However, it must be noted that the “Third Church” has become increasingly important in the whole Church, including the Congregation, so a discussion and some reflection on the concept of inculturation is a significant issue.

Yet, often our thoughts are focused on the Northern Hemisphere with realities such as the lack of vocations and decreasing numbers of confreres, requiring reconfiguration of Provinces. These are undeniable realities of the moment, but this should not prevent us to see other realities. However, would it not be possible to look at things differently than to always send people to serve where there are no vocations? Thus, it may be possible to have a joint formation program where vocations are flourishing, and to send confreres to serve in places where there is a need.

Indeed, in some places where vocations are flourishing, we are obliged to limit recruitment of young people because of lack of resources to support formation. In other places, the lay members of the Vincentian Family are called to help to overcome a lack of missionary priests, without making a call to other provinces where they can have missionaries sent. One could imagine that in all these flourishing provinces, the men who are also members of our Congregation would without hesitation send missionaries wherever the need. So would it not be too difficult to imagine an openness to simply sharing he missionary spirit with others. We do so already by interprovincial cooperation, but we can go further, to aim for a global way in the Congregation.

It is important to notice that our young people should be aware of financial resources that are being expanded for their time of formation, sharing with them the income and expenditures of the Community. Yet, there is a need to cultivate during the formation a realistic mentality when it comes to temporal goods. Often our young student-confreres can expect everything from the province, without making real effort to contribute or to participate in the life of the community. Why not require them to engage in manual labor, or to produce material

goods for the house, and during the holidays, engage in some other paid activities so they will contribute to the good of the apostolate? When done in such a manner, the idea of self-financing will not seem too strange to them. In addition, it will be easier for them to understand the economic realities of managing a house or an apostolate in places where they will go after ordination. Otherwise, they can end up being ignorant of the proper management of community funds and temporal good, which can be dangerous for them and for the Province

Briefly, formation in the major seminary should help candidates realize that priestly life is not only in their future, but in the present, especially during the time of the major seminary. This would justify the importance of teaching responsibility to our young student-confreres today, so they can be well prepared for the future. Knowing that they are in this critical stage of initial formation, and need regular guidance from their formators, we have to strike the right balance in the responsibilities given them. That is not to say that we tolerate letting them do whatever they want. We need young people who have decided to be committed to their own formation. In this, the frank teaching of Jesus will be the rule. "Anyone who would come after me let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me" (Lk. 9:23). But remember too that when we truly love, we can demand everything, even the most difficult tasks.

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