

Chapter 8

Ongoing Formation

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The year 1992 was a significant one for addressing the issue of ongoing formation in the Congregation of the Mission. In that year, the General Assembly made recommendations on how to implement a program of ongoing formation, and Father Maloney and the General Council acted on it, resulting in the start of the Centre International de Formation, (otherwise known as CIF). Thanks to the creative efforts of three confreres who designed and implemented the program, CIF opened its doors in Paris in 1994. It had a specific audience in mind, namely, confreres between thirty-five and fifty years old with ten or more years in ministry. Some might say that it addressed the challenges of a group in mid-life. Subsequently, a special month-long program was added for confreres over fifty. Post initial formation had been tried twice before, in the time of Vincent and in the eighteenth century, but each attempt lasted just a short time.

I was privileged to succeed Father Rybolt and to spend six years directing CIF. Due to my time at CIF, I have been asked to reflect on ongoing formation in the *Ratio Formationis*. It was a time of blessing, because I was able to live with confreres from around the world and witness the good effects of their participation. CIF gives confreres a time to slow down, to reflect and pray, to be with confreres from around the world, and to walk in the footsteps of St. Vincent.

Before the Second Vatican Council there was no distinction between initial formation and ongoing formation, because initial formation was all there was. Formation was completed at ordination for priest confreres or with perpetual vows for Brothers. The distinction between initial and ongoing formation came about with the shift from behavioral to developmental understandings of life and ministry. Vocation is now understood as a developing journey in a changing world. We are called to be lifelong learners. Conversion is not just a one-time event. We are called to ongoing conversion. Discipleship is a journey of transformation.

Aggiornamento was one of the by-words of the Second Vatican Council. Pope John XXIII first used it and Pope Paul VI later embraced it as the meaning of the Council. It signaled the need to update the church and come abreast of the times. Immediately after the Council, ongoing

formation practically speaking meant assimilating and promoting the teachings and the vision of the Second Vatican Council. There was a tsunami of workshops, seminars, lectures, conferences, and retreats. There was also much attention given to reading “the signs of the times” and looking to the future. This was not the only response to the Council. There were others who heard the Council calling the church to go back to its roots in the Scriptures and the Church Fathers. Rather than *Aggiornamento*, they spoke of *Ressourcement* (going back to the sources, traditions and living symbols of Catholic Tradition). In both cases, there was a great deal of education and formation to be done. It was a new day.

But it was about more than “catching up” and “coming abreast of the times”. It was about a new way of being in the world. The Council’s embrace of pilgrimage, culture and personhood gave a temporal, cultural and human setting to the eternal truths of earlier times. These are the coefficients of grasping and appropriating the fullness of the Mystery of Christ in our times. After all, this is what ongoing formation is really all about.

One of the most popular retreat themes, I discovered, is the theme of *journey*, or, *pilgrimage*. Everyone is on a journey. We are on the road, but we have not arrived yet. We are not perfect, at least, not yet. On this journey, maybe we are stalled, or maybe we have lost our way, maybe we have found an oasis, and maybe we are moving forward at full speed, but we still are on a journey. It is the opposite of the perfectionist behavioral standards some of us knew in our youth. In this context, ongoing formation for pilgrims is food for the journey.

There are many ways of presenting the story of Saint Vincent. I have found that dividing his story into “Vincent One” and “Vincent Two” helps people focus on Vincent’s journey. “Vincent Two” (1625-1660) is the Famous Vincent from age 45 to his death at 80, who at his death was said to have transformed the face of the church in France – more to be admired than likely to be imitated. “Vincent One” is the Pilgrim Vincent journeying from financial ambition at the time of ordination to radical evangelical freedom at age forty-five when he unconditionally embraced his vocation to the poor and founded the Congregation of the Mission. People love to identify with Vincent as he finds his way, makes friends, shifts directions, endures his crisis of faith, finds God in events and people, and gives his life to the poor. His journey not only clarifies his vocation but also brings him to the freedom to wait on Providence. We can identify with Vincent’s journey, because it is a lot like ours. Neither he nor we are born free or holy – we grow into evangelical freedom and apostolic holiness by stages.

Did Vincent experience Ongoing Formation? Formally, no, but that is not my point. Actually, he had a lot of teachers and mentors, from Berulle and Duval through Madame de Gondi to Louise de Marillac,

his greatest companion, and Francis de Sales, his greatest mentor. However, the most important thing was that he *was a lifelong learner*. He learned from all these people, and he learned habitually from events, persons, and circumstances believing that God was present in and through them. He was on a true pilgrim. We cannot really understand Vincent apart from a developmental view of his *story*.

Bernard Lonergan, S.J., one of the outstanding theologians of the twentieth century, was asked in an interview to sum up his life as a theologian. He answered, "I spent my life introducing history into theology". Without history, everything we know is two-dimensional, timeless, abstract, as our theology was for a long time. It is taking history seriously that privileges development and growth and dynamically shapes our horizons and way of thinking. Ongoing formation means taking history and time seriously as human persons, as priests, as brothers, as missionaries – in our journey of transformation.

By embracing a developmental view of our lives in relation to persons, events and circumstances, *experience* becomes central. Adult models of ongoing formation evoke, honor, respect, engage and build upon the experience of the participants. Sometimes in the past the experience and experiences of the participants were taken for granted because they were presumed to be common to everyone, but today serious attention is paid to life experience and what people have learned along the way. It is our experiences lived and shared that give life to our lives. Yet, sharing experiences is not the whole story. Experiences once shared have to be understood and sorted out, then processed, so we can come to affirm what is real and true in them and to know our own rock-bottom truth. It is the way of coming home to ourselves.

Sharing our spiritual and apostolic experiences in community is the key to the renewal of the Congregation according to paragraph 46 of our Constitutions. This paragraph is found in the chapter on prayer, because it speaks of sharing the Word of God, but it deserves to be lifted out and put in a place where it attracts attention at the beginning of the Constitutions. Paragraph 46, along with the discernment of *the signs of the times* in paragraph 2, gives us the process key to the transformation of the Congregation as a contemporary apostolic community. It reads:

46. – *In community prayer we find an excellent way of animating and renewing our lives, especially when we celebrate the word of God and share it, or when in fraternal dialogue we share with one another the fruit of our spiritual and apostolic experience.*

In this very brief paragraph, the Constitutions give high priority to sharing and fraternal dialogue as the keys to renewal. The English text reads, "In community prayer we find *an excellent way* (Latin: *optimum*)

of animating and renewing our lives". Some would translate *optimum* as "...the best way...". What is important is that the Constitutions privilege sharing and fraternal dialogue as the way of "animating and renewing our lives".

What are we called to share? We are called to share the Word of God and our spiritual and apostolic experiences.

We are expected to celebrate the Word of God and share it with one another. This has a direct link to proclaiming the Good News. Vincent's use of the Scriptures shows how deeply the Scriptures penetrated his life and way of speaking. They had become second nature to him. We used to have the practice of reading a chapter of the New Testament every day. Perhaps many still do. Paragraph 46 calls us beyond our individual devotion to the Scriptures to corporate celebration of the Word and fraternal sharing in community. Recently a young diocesan priest arrived on one of our missions full of knowledge and love for the Scriptures. He has attracted crowds of people, who are even willing to reschedule their lives to listen to him. The hunger and longing of our people for the Scriptures is profound and often unmet. Therefore, this paragraph ultimately leads to apostolic fruitfulness and transforms not only our relationships in community but also our missionary relevance. *I was hungry and thirsty and you gave me to eat and drink.*

We are also called to share the fruits of our spiritual and apostolic experience. For some this may be easy, but for many it is not. In some cultures, it is even more difficult than in others. Nevertheless, the potential, the power, and the promise of this are great. Three factors, when present, will liberate communities to do this, namely; freedom, trust, and need. No one can be forced to this level of fraternal sharing; it must be done freely, and so the freedom of each not to share must be respected. Secondly, it calls for a tangible level of mutual trust in the group. Distrust and sometimes cynicism or other streams of negativity will be the death of efforts in this direction. Thirdly, it works best where there is a felt or even urgent need for it, for example, where the local community is trying to find its way in a new and difficult apostolate. When a community is content with all its answers, this kind of sharing will become academic.

In this connection, the Provincial is called to provide this kind of sharing opportunity at least once a year in the new Ratio. It reads:

He will gather confreres as a province at least annually (in a meeting, convocation, or provincially assembly), to share their lives, aspirations, struggles, and vision of the province and its manner of living in community for the mission today.

This paragraph honors and validates the experience, insights, and wisdom of the confreres as our way of doing things. We are called to share many things – ordained as some of us were long ago to the title

of “the common table” – but ultimately and simply, as this paragraph says, “...to share our lives”.

This same dynamic of growth through sharing is found in the section on Spiritual Formation, where we read:

...(Each confrere) will share his spiritual journey with other confreres, especially with a Spiritual Director or other confrere with whom he can speak with openness concerning the joys and challenges of his life.

The **Ratio** is detailed and thorough in its treatment of the Vincentian Axis and the five areas of formation: Spiritual, Intellectual, Apostolic, Community and Human. They are self-explanatory and need no further commentary. I would like, however, to raise up three growth areas for comment: prayer, leadership and human formation.

Prayer: There has been a revolution in prayer in the Catholic Church over the past fifty years: centering prayer, Charismatic Renewal, liturgical prayer, *lectio divina*, Christian Meditation à la John Main and John Cassian (*maranatha*)... We have, I think, been beneficiaries and participants, but not leaders in the movement, with a few exceptions. The disciples said to Jesus, “Teach us to pray”. When people today want to learn to pray and are looking for someone to teach them, do we come to mind? I suggest this is a growth area for ongoing formation.

Leadership: In both church and society today, many yearn for good leaders. As a community, we have been aware of this need and have taken some steps to encourage and enable good leaders. Would I be mistaken if I observed that there has been a tendency for confreres to avoid leadership roles, especially, those of local superior or even local apostolic leader? Sometimes we have been characterized as “reluctant leaders”. Maybe it has been motivated by “Vincentian humility”. Hopefully we are leaving this reluctance behind. We now know that leadership can be learned and everyone is capable of leading in some way. We can learn to be good, solid, even exceptional, value-based collaborative leaders. It is about working with people based on shared values and a shared vision or common direction. We can learn to be leaders that listen to the people we work with and serve. It is a real gift to our not only organization or community, but actually to us too. What am I going to do for ongoing formation? I am going to learn to lead or to improve my leadership.

Human Formation: Everything begins and ends with being truly human. Emotional and relational maturity are expected of us. This is especially true of new candidates. But it is easier said than done. It turns out that there are many cultural and social factors that contribute to deferred maturity in these areas. So, ongoing formation is an

opportunity to continue our human development, first for ourselves, of course, but equally for the people we serve and companion.

Conclusion: Let us thank God that our community has embraced ongoing formation as an integral element in the development of our personal, community and apostolic lives. May it be a blessing for each confrere, especially when the time is right in one's own Vincentian journey.