

The Collaboration of the Congregation of the Mission in the Formation of the Clergy

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To write about the collaboration of the Congregation of the Mission in the formation of priests is to refer to a reality that was present from the very beginning of our community and that pertains to its purpose. Such was the intention of our Founder. We run the risk of thinking that we are dealing with a secondary purpose, something that is derived from that which is primary and fundamental. Such a conclusion results from a superficial reading of Vincent's writings. What I am about to write should remove us from any such erroneous position and, furthermore, should lead us to the historical truth and the authentic objective.

1. The inspired vision of Vincent de Paul

Vincent de Paul first exercised his ministry as pastor in Clichy, a village near Paris with about 600 faithful. Today this village would not be referenced if it were not for the presence of this admirable Gascon who served as pastor there from 1612-1613.

In those early days of his pastoral service, there appears a flash of this ministry, which some have not noted sufficiently. Vincent was concerned about the formation of a group of some 12 young men who aspired to the priesthood. Among them, we find Antoine Portail (with his customary discretion). Portail would become one of the first missionaries, a faithful disciple of Vincent who would serve as the first "Director" of the Daughters of Charity. He died in 1660, a few months before his admired teacher. It should be noted that we are referring to events that took place in 1612, five years before the inspired insight that occurred in Folleville, where he preached his famous sermon on general confession and where the first popular mission was preached.

Many years later, in December 1658, we hear our Founder proclaim the following words: *In the beginning the Company was concerned only with itself and the poor ... God allowed that this was all*

*we seemed to be doing, but, in the fullness of time, He called us to assist in the formation of good priests, in providing good Pastors to parishes.*¹

We can see that what appeared as a blossoming idea in the apostolic mind of Vincent de Paul, at the time that he ministered in Clichy and before the establishment of the Congregation, was transmitted as a congregational charism and, in 1658, was explained as a reality that was developed *in the fullness of time*. The insight was present from the beginning and developed over the course of time.

It is interesting to note that Vincent, as he explains himself, enables us to realize that this insight was not just a matter of chronology but was a biblical-theological matter, one that was rooted in God's plan of revelation. That fact explains the words that he spoke later in the same conference: *We can say that coming to evangelize the poor doesn't simply mean to teach them the Mysteries necessary for their salvation, but also to do what was foretold and prefigured by the prophets to make the gospel effective* (CCD:XII:75). Vincent understood those words, *to make the gospel effective*, not in the way that we understand them, that is, not as some form of social promotion on behalf of the poor but rather as a demand to correct the faults that were so prevalent among the clergy (just as there were faults among the priests of the old covenant).

All of this is behind my use of the words *inspired vision*. The formation of the clergy is not some fortuitous derivation from the primary purpose. Rather we are speaking about the very center of Vincent's vocation, something that was there from the very beginning and that was developed *in the fullness of time*.

Another fact that should not be overlooked is that during his brief tenure as pastor in Châtillon-les-Dombes (1617), Vincent, through his example more than through his words, reformed the lax customs of the six "chaplains" who had lounged around town and had not provided pastoral services to the people who had been entrusted to them. We also know that two centuries later, in the neighboring town of Ars, a humble, zealous saint and admirer of Vincent de Paul would attract thousands of pilgrims.

¹ *Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, translated and edited by Jaqueline Kilar, DC; and Marie Poole, DC; et al; annotated by John W. Carven, CM; New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014; volume XII, p. 74; future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [CCD] followed by the volume number, then the page number, for example, CCD:XII:74.

2. The original implementation of the inspired vision

How did the initial inspiration become reality? We all know the story. At the invitation of the Bishop of Beauvais, Augustin Potier, Vincent preached a retreat to the ordinands and that event ignited a fire. This occurred in 1628, when the Congregation was still in its infancy, and when Vincent was still near the area where the community was established, namely, the de Gondi estate.

Given the sorry state of the clergy, some people might have viewed those retreats as an inadequate solution. Preaching a retreat to the ordinands of a specific diocese could be seen as prescribing a pill for a gangrenous wound. Nevertheless, those retreats provided the spark for a fire. Those retreats were followed by other retreats in other dioceses throughout France and then in Rome itself. Then there were retreats for priests already ordained. There were gatherings of priests in Saint-Lazare, Paris that were called the *Tuesday Conferences*. Then, in response to the concern that was expressed during the Council of Trent, seminaries, which were called *conciariae*, were established. All of this resulted from the inventiveness of Vincent and the fidelity of his Missionaries.

It should be noted that *the fullness of time* came about little by little, almost imperceptibly following the initial inspiration. Therefore, in accord with the Vincentian tradition and in light of an increased awareness on the part of a Congregation that had just come into existence, *the gospel was made effective*. Those words, *to make the gospel effective*, should not be cited out of their context. They were intended to highlight the fact that Vincent wanted to provide the poor country people with evangelizers, with the pastors that they needed. This was not an exclusive task of the disciples of Vincent de Paul and, in fact, there were many other individuals, who were concerned about the situation of the Church in the 17th century. Nevertheless, despite Vincent's characteristic humility, he not only understood what he was doing, but also understood the role he was asked to play with regard to the reform of the clergy. *The secular clergy are receiving a great deal from God at present. They say that our wretched Company has made a great contribution to them by means of the ordinands and the gathering of priests in Paris. There are many people of rank embracing this state right now* (CCD:II:37).

3. The growth of the seed

When speaking about “growth” I refer to the spread of the “Vincentian method” to other places in France and to the multiplication of requests that the Congregation received. At the same time, I also refer to the fact that the places and the systems for collaboration with regard to the formation of the clergy became more diversified with the passing of time. The retreats for ordinands began in France and then spread to Italy and, later, to Poland, and then wherever the Congregation became established.

At a very early stage in our history, the motherhouse (Bons Enfants) was not only a residence for the missionaries, but also was a place where we see collaboration in the ministry of the formation of the clergy. During the last 25 years of Vincent’s life, a series of experiments (many of which were disappointing) took place there. This was quite normal during this era in which the norms from the Council of Trent were being implemented. The disappointment was very noticeable in those institutions (minor seminaries) where young adolescents were being educated for the priesthood. From the beginning, Vincent realized that these institutions would not produce much fruit and it was the lack of positive result that prompted the French bishops to move very slowly with regard to the establishment of seminaries as decreed by Trent.

It could be stated that the experiments could be classified according to three models:

- formation house/parish: for example, Bourdoise, where the candidates lived in a rectory because these candidates were viewed as collaborators with the pastor who was ministering in the parish;
- seminaries/convictorio²: a place where the candidates went to receive some formation courses in the area of liturgy and morals; nevertheless, their philosophical and theological studies were taken at various university centers;

² This is an extremely difficult phrase to translate in a way that makes sense in English; there is no one word that adequately translates this phrase which according to the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* was used by the Jesuits to designate that section of the building which housed the students who were studying for the priesthood.

- seminary college: in these places the candidates received an integral education that included spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation.

We must state here that at the beginning the majority of the seminaries that the Congregation administered were of the “convictorio” type and always undertaken at the request of some bishop. The request was followed by drawing up a contract and it is interesting to note some of the conditions that the Congregation established. For example, the community should have control of the administration of the seminary; and the missionaries involved in formation would also be involved in the preaching of popular missions, a ministry proper to the Congregation (that condition was easy to accept because many of the bishops throughout France wanted popular missions preached in their dioceses). The contract was intended to provide stability to this ministry lest a bishop, at a given moment, decide he no longer wanted the services of the missionaries.

The formation team was composed of priests, sometimes clerics, and brothers. The presence of brothers should not surprise us; first, they were active collaborators in the popular missions. It should also be recalled that the duties in the seminary offices and kitchens were not entrusted to women and that the brothers were well trained in technical matters. The team was directed by the superior, a person with intellectual ability who was often called upon to give conferences in the area liturgy and morals. We remind our readers that the office of superior was not limited to six years (as occurs now). There were superiors who held that office for 40 years.

The employees were not simple salaried workers, but were viewed as house personnel, who received instruction in order to live a good Christian life. At the same time, it should be remembered that they were not contracted for a whole year, since the seminarians were at the institution for different time periods throughout the year. Also, remember all the employees were men.

Something more should be said about the physical condition of the building in which these young men resided. We should not think about some new institutions grandly constructed (as occurs at the present time). In fact, the places that became known as seminaries were former convents and rectories. Thus there was a chapel and an adequate place for conferences, as well as rooms for the formators and

for those who were being formed. It can be stated here that the needs of such individuals in the 17th and 18th centuries were not as great as the needs of later individuals. Even in the palaces of that era, the toilets and washing facilities were quite rudimentary.

4. The stature of the seminarian

In our present day educational institutions, where future priests are formed, besides the Basic Norms from Rome (Ratio), with their equivalent from the episcopal conferences, we can also speak about community plans, statutes, educational directives. Yet when we speak about the era between the 17th and 20th centuries, there were rules and customs and enough material to enable us to understand what these institutions hoped to achieve.

With regard to the manner of administering the houses entrusted to our Community, there is an entity that does legislate for our diocesan seminaries throughout the world. Here I refer to the General Assemblies of the Congregation. Its decrees are a source of information that no longer serves us today, because that is no longer the competent authority. Sometimes, however, we do have recourse to them, as well as to the Superior General of the Community, in order to discern the validity of certain regulations and how to act in situations of doubt.³

4.1 Objectives

We have already pointed out above that the primordial objective was not to prepare young aspirants to the priesthood philosophically and theologically. For that there were – when one looked for them – colleges and universities in Paris, Rome, or Saragossa. What was sought, above all, was to instruct in the practice of virtues and teach the indispensable skills for the exercise of ministry, like the celebration of the sacraments. Recall the disorder Saint Vincent saw in one church: seven priests “saying” the mass at the same time on side altars with each one doing it in a different way; and what was worse, cases of crass ignorance like the one Madame de Gondi came across in a priest she approached for confession and who gabbled in home-cooked Latin a formula for sacramental absolution which he did not know. There were no seminaries or places for diaconal or priestly formation.

³ A source of much information in this regard is the work of Father F. Contassot, CM, *Documents sur les seminaries confiés à la Congrégation de la Mission* (Paris, 1960).

And so we understand better what could be proposed in a seminary of the 17th or 18th century. Certainly the objectives were frequently formulated in a very Vincentian manner: “to honor the priesthood of Our Lord and to form ecclesiastics in virtue and knowledge” (this formulation is the one used in Bons Enfants).

4.2. Demands

Let us look at what was demanded of someone who wished to be admitted to one of our seminaries, e.g. Bons Enfants: a) to be admitted by a bishop; b) to bring a surplice, biretta, breviary, bible, the book of Kempis (as the *Imitation of Christ* was called), a theology book like Abelly’s; c) to follow the following schedule:

5:00 a.m.	Rise
5:30 a.m.	Meditation
6:00	Angelus, Litany of the Holy Name, reading of a chapter of the New Testament
8:00	Mass in community
8:30	Breakfast
9:00	Class or lecture in Theology
10:30	Review of the lesson that was explained
11:00	Particular examen, lunch, visit to the Blessed Sacrament, free time
13:00	Singing class
14:00	Praying the breviary
16:00	Moral conference
17:15	Praying the breviary
18:30	Particular examen, dinner, Angelus, free time
20:15	General examen
21:00	Go to bed

The maintenance of the seminaries demanded expenses. Therefore, the seminarians normally paid a fee, although there was the possibility of some kind of scholarship. But cases were known of debtors who were brought before civil courts to oblige them to pay their debts.

4.3. The Dimensions of formation

Spiritual Dimension

One can already see in the schedule transcribed above something of what was sought. In the morning the seminarians went to chapel, usually after certain acts of personal piety such as prayers of adoration, thanksgiving, morning offering. In chapel, common prayers were prayed, as was the so-called “meditation” according to a method very similar to the one we seminarians from before Vatican II knew, with its steps for the purgative and illuminative life and some so-called ecclesiastical virtues. Above all on Sunday, the Vincentian repetition of prayer was done. There were some classic meditation books, which were read aloud as a guide.

Anyone who reads the rules and customs will discover fairly easily that the steps for meditation are very similar to those Saint Vincent pointed out: to place oneself in the presence of God, ask for the grace to pray well, bring to mind the subject (or object) of the meditation, reflections, affective acts with regard to the subject, resolutions, thanksgiving. At times one feels tempted to make some comparisons to the present day steps of *Lectio Divina*.

There was a custom of making retreats, for example, a one-day retreat, upon entering the seminary. But what is most striking is the similarity of the schedule with that of our Community in an earlier period with its examens, general and particular; the Angelus. And what about confession and communion?

Communion was regarded as “frequent” when it was received once a week, generally on Sunday in the Mass known precisely as the “communion Mass.” Visits to the Blessed Sacrament, at different moments, were highly recommended. Sacramental confession (and for the priests as well) was made at least once a week, always with the priests of the seminary and only rarely with others from outside.

And spiritual direction? It was known as “interior communication” and was done with a director, normally every month, or two, with an outline similar to this: duties towards God, relationships with the neighbor (close and distant), temptations, bad habits, and most habitual faults.

I say all this to end with a somewhat surprising reflection; the direction was to contribute to illustrating a new theme (sic), that of the *vocation*. At that time, vocation was a theme for monks or religious, but it was not a theme for priesthood. To see the priesthood as a vocation? The seminaries contributed to that; it was about studying oneself within a call, which was made by God and demanded a responsible answer.

Academic Dimension

We must not forget the existence of centers for specialized studies. A seminary was a resource not conceived as especially for that. In any case, there were lessons or conferences on moral (theology) or sacred scripture. Scripture was taught by way of Sunday conferences based on some passage, and never in a methodical way.

What was taught academically in the seminaries directed by the Congregation followed the indications of the Founder: to follow a text or manual. This did not sit well with all the professors who liked to lecture from their own notes, but it had the advantage of giving a certain security to the teaching, which could otherwise stray from orthodox doctrine.

There was another thing: the studies in the seminary had a control: the examination at the end of each tract: the Saturday session, i.e., weekly questions or expositions to detect knowledge. Sometimes public theses were presented by the students at the end of a course. It never failed that one of them wandered a bit from sound doctrine to the point of provoking the annoyance, for example, of the Superior General, when the news reached him.

The way to examine the knowledge of moral publicly was normally through the so-called “cases of conscience,” which allowed for interesting debates in front of all the directors.

The liturgy was perhaps the principal concern of the seminaries, for the reasons we have already seen. They had to do exercises in ceremonies and rubrics. In the time of Father Alméras, the second

Superior General, a manual of ceremonies was prepared, which had to be followed in our seminaries. One could look in a pejorative way upon this kind of concern; that would be the product of the excellence of the means we have today in our specialized Institutes for Liturgy. But it was only at the beginning of the 20th century that we had a Pius X and the liturgical movement which prepared the *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Previous eras already had sufficient admiration for Pius V to dedicate the breviary and the missal to him. They were the fruit of Trent and were truly beneficial.

One must say, without any kind of complex, that our Congregation, from Saint-Lazare and Bons Enfants (after Saint-Fermin), was much appreciated for its liturgical splendor, which later gave us such well-known figures as Bugnini or Braga.

There is no liturgy without a concern for singing. The style of our seminaries was Gregorian chant; there was no room for elaborate music or other musical instruments aside from the pipe organ.

Pastoral Dimension

The liturgy and song have already introduced us to the theme. The clear objective of our seminaries was to form good pastors. Today this might be an obvious truth; but it was not that way in previous centuries.

The years spent in the conciliar institution with its rules, prayers, and retreats had to contribute to that.

4.4. A judgment about Vincentian collaboration

Now to finish this work I allow myself to invite you to reflect upon two historic facts, which contributed to evaluating the collaboration of the Congregation of the Mission in the formation of priests throughout the world. I will pass over the critical judgment the Jansenists made at one time about the mentality of the Lazarist formators; it is the same one they made about the founder and which managed – so they say – to hold up his beatification for a few years. That judgment was very negative and, up to a certain point and for the same reason, honors the Vincentian formators.

The first fact I allude to is the great number of seminaries that were entrusted to the Congregation of the Mission, especially in France. Even in those formative years, bishops like Blessed Alain de

Solminihac recognized the quality of what was beginning to be offered. In his Diocese of Cahors, the bishop himself got involved in the work. It was with good reason that he became close to Saint Vincent and became his rival in holiness. If in the early days – those of our founder – there were not many houses of formation – about five – by the end of the 17th century they had multiplied: 32 in France, six in Poland and two in Italy. The 32 in France constituted 42% of the seminaries in France (almost half!); that was a sign of the great confidence in the quality of what the Vincentian missionaries were offering.

But the most convincing fact was the quality the graduates of these seminaries showed. For example, the bishops formed there; but, above all, the solidity of their faith and their fidelity to the Church. It is said that the great majority of the priests formed by the Lazarists in France avoided the persecution, first of the Gallicans, and later of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy promoted by the French Revolution. “By their fruits you will know them.”

Saint Vincent, in his conference to the missionaries on 5 August 1659, can respond to some of the curiosities about the way seminaries ought to be directed. As always, “one must go to the practical” and start from experiences. For example, what happened to Father de la Salle: *I was giving a mission with M. de la Salle, a great Missioner. The late Bishop of Beauvais used to say about him that he had never met a man better at reasoning. When that good Father was in Villiers-le-Bel, he met a woman who asked him to hear her confession, but first she asked him to solve a problem she was having – I think it concerned the reality of the Blessed Sacrament or Communion under both species. Since he had studied only a little philosophy and something else, he found it very difficult. When this was brought to our attention, we gave some conferences on these topics, and God granted us the grace to provide an answer to all the problems that might be proposed to us. That good Father had received grace from God to convince people of anything he wished. If His Divine Goodness were pleased to grant us this grace, Messieurs, how happy we'd be! It's one thing to give conferences on preaching and catechizing, but what's most important is practice, which we'll be doing, with the help of God* (CCD:XII:238-239).

Turning the page

In the times of Father Etienne and of Father Fiat, the Congregation flourished with new foundations. In America, beginning with the

Southern Cone, our land was sown with seminaries directed by the Vincentians. Truly they made us fail against modesty with the praises that were made about the formation received in them and the multiplication and quality of the priests formed in them.

If we approach the *Catalogue* of Provinces, Houses, and Personnel 2014-2016 of the Congregation of the Mission we find data such as these:

Provinces: 46 Vice-provinces: 4 Regions: 6 Houses: 512
Incorporated confreres: 3,202
Admitted confreres: 586

So then, we will see in this list not just that there is an almost tragic diminution in the number of missionaries from 50 years ago, but there has been a notable change in the adoption of works: in various provinces, seminaries have been changed for parishes and mission works for schools and sanctuaries. Although it is true that the diminution in numbers frequently coincides with what has happened in other communities, we can look around to see if the drop in numbers also corresponds with a change in works in certain provinces. In this there may be a matter of true identity.

Translated: Joseph V. Cummins, CM and Charles T. Plock, CM