

**On The Formation of Formators**  
**(A study document used in the General Council to implement some of the  
recommendations of the General Assembly of 1998)**

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**Importance of This Theme**

There is little need to recall the prominent place that our recent community documents have given to formation. Our Constitutions and Statutes (77-95), as well as all of the recent General Assemblies, note how crucial it is. The letter addressed to the confreres by the General Assembly of 1992 states the following:

*Community renewal itself requires an integral formation, initial and ongoing, of its members. The principle of this formation is: "following Christ, the evangelizer of the poor." Therefore, we commit ourselves to an energetic program of integral formation in which each confrere will be responsible and accountable regarding formation for the mission. We also commit ourselves to preparing with care true animators of Vincentian communities.*

Of course, if formation is important, then formation of the formators is essential. It is all the more imperative in provinces where the number of young candidates is large.

The General Assembly of 1998 dedicated several paragraphs to the theme "Formation of Our Own Formators":

*1) Because formation is so important and decisive a means for personal and community renewal, each province should show a special concern to provide the best possible preparation for its future formators. In particular, it should work to secure adequate financial support for the integral formation of its members.*

*2) The provinces should have a sense of their co-responsibility for formation and be open to interprovincial cooperation by:*

- a) encouraging and facilitating the mobility of their formators,*
- b) sharing their economic resources,*
- c) welcoming confreres from other provinces who need specialized training in formation.*

*3) The Superior General and his council should study the possibility of creating in one or more places:*

- a) an international center for the formation of our formators,*
- b) an itinerant team of formators who would offer their services to*

*formators in different provinces.*

*These programs should train the participants in Vincentian spirituality, teaching methods, and multicultural sensitivity so they might work effectively in different parts of the world.*

In the light of the document of the Assembly and many subsequent discussions in the General Council, we have decided to make the formation of our formators one of our principal objectives for the next six years.

### **The Present Day Situation — Three Formation Elements**

Formation work has been an essential ministry of the Congregation from its inception. To continue forming our own members well, each province must select, support, and train formators who can prepare the future of the province. The confreres chosen must be integral men — not simply academically inclined, nor merely congenial, nor just spiritual. They should be whole, mature, and dedicated to the Congregation and its mission of service to the poor.

In the past, many provinces of Europe and North America, which were at that time rich in vocations, gave much attention to the formation of formators. Often this took the form of providing prospective formators with a *specific academic formation*. Many, for instance, came to Rome to obtain licentiates and doctorates in dogma, moral, canon law, scripture, Church history, philosophy, etc. Today, many of the "newer," rapidly growing provinces in Asia, Africa, and Latin America find themselves in the same position. Each year we see 20-25 confreres, many now from the southern hemisphere, residing at the Collegio Leoniano and studying at the Roman universities. Other confreres receive similar academic preparation at other centers on the various continents.

But today we are also conscious that, besides specialized preparation in an ecclesiastical field, those responsible for formation will profit greatly from formation *in formation skills*. For example, it is very helpful if they have some training in giving spiritual direction, in working with groups, in knowing some of the fundamentals of psychology, etc.

We have become increasingly aware too that, besides specific academic preparation and the acquisition of formation skills, formators for the Congregation of the Mission also need a specifically *Vincentian formation*. Participation in a CIF program can play some role in this, but further Vincentian formation for formators would surely be helpful. The principal formator need not be an expert in any particular aspect of our Vincentian heritage, since he can call upon others to help, but he should have a rich Vincentian background.

In summary, it is evident today that, if they are to be adequately prepared, formators

need, among other things:

1. specific academic formation, particularly if they are to be teachers on the level of the major seminary;
2. specific training in formation skills, so that they might be able to aid individuals and groups in their developmental process;
3. specific Vincentian formation, so that they might be equipped to transmit the rich heritage of our Congregation.

The last two types of specific formation are especially important for directors of the internal seminary and directors of students. Specific academic preparation is also necessary if a formation director is at the same time a seminary professor.

The goal of all this is that the formator might be experientially rooted in the mystery of God's love, might be deeply immersed in the charism of St. Vincent, and might become a wise guide for others on the spiritual journey.

### **Responsibility For Forming The Formators**

In this matter, as in so many others, the primary responsibility for his own formation lies with the confrere himself. Only through his initiative, cooperation with others, and diligence, will his formation be truly rich.

Still, his province can, and indeed must, aid him significantly. He must be given the time, resources, and accompaniment that will enable him to engage actively in a formation process. A great number of provinces are quite generous in offering formation opportunities to the formators.

It goes without saying that the person chosen to be a formator should already be living the different aspects of our Vincentian life in an integrated, generous way. Programs for "forming the former" presume a mature subject.

### **Some Models For Forming The Formators**

Below I offer three models for forming the formators. The various provinces might find one or another of these to be suitable for their purposes, depending on their widely diverse circumstances.

Each of the models that I propose contains the three formation elements described above. The models are distinguished from one another by the response to this question: Which of the three elements provides the context for the others?

## 1. *The academic specialization model*

This is the model which was used most frequently in the past and which is still used, to a significant extent, in the present. Following this model, a confrere is sent to study a specific academic subject, like dogmatic theology, or scripture, or canon law, and then is also asked to be the director of students. As is evident, such a confrere returns to his province with academic qualifications (though this does not always make him a good teacher) but his grasp of formation skills and his knowledge of our Vincentian heritage might be quite limited.

If this model is to work, therefore, the prospective director of the internal seminary or student director should also have the opportunity to take part in a formation institute, like those described below, where he will receive some skill-training in assisting others toward personal integration, spiritual direction, working with groups, etc.

Such a confrere should also have some opportunity for participating in a program that focuses specifically on our Vincentian heritage, as noted below.

## 2. *The formation skills model*

On almost all the continents there are well-established centers for forming the formators. These often have titles like "The Institute for Religious Formation" or "The Interdisciplinary Center for Seminary Formators." Such programs commonly offer courses in spiritual direction, teaching others to pray, psycho-spiritual integration, the psychology of young people, religious life today, priestly spirituality, discernment, working with groups, and sexual integration. Sometimes these programs have varying emphases. Some focus more on the scriptural background and history of Christian spirituality. Others focus more on formation tools and psycho-sexual development. As is evident, such programs do not concentrate on the particular charism of any individual institute since members of various institutes come to participate in them. They may, however, be influenced by the spirituality or tradition of the institute that sponsors the program (some, for instance, emphasize Ignatian discernment, etc.).

These programs vary in length. The Rulla Institute sponsored at the Gregorian University in Rome, for instance, lasts for three or four years; the same university also offers an annual four-month program for formators. The Institute of Religious Formation at St. Louis University in the United States is basically a one-year program. The Institute for the Formation of Educators of the Clergy (IFEC), organized by the French bishops in collaboration with the Sulpicians, offers a year-long program for the formation of formators and for new spiritual directors. The Institut Catholique in Paris offers a two-year program. The Salesianum in Rome offers a program of similar length, as does the Teresianum. There are comparable institutes in Ireland, Peru, Colombia, etc.

Programs like these are very helpful to future directors of the internal seminary and

directors of students since so much of their ministry will consist in assisting others in personal formation.

If a prospective formator were to engage in such a program for one or two years, then it would also be very useful if he were to supplement this specific type of formation (in formation skills) with further formation in our Vincentian heritage. Participation in a session of CIF in Paris would be of help in this regard, at least as a starter.

Naturally, if a confrere engaging in a program emphasizing formation skills will also be a teacher on the major seminary level he will need some specific academic formation. This can be obtained in any number of centers on all the continents.

### 3. *The Vincentian heritage model*

As noted by the General Assembly of 1998 this is an area of weakness within the Congregation since, other than CIF, there are at present no "international centers" for doing studies in our Vincentian heritage. Such studies would be of great help to directors of the internal seminary and directors of students. Could we think creatively about some way in which a confrere could engage in a concentrated one-year program that would sharpen his knowledge of and focus on our Vincentian heritage? At a *tempo forte* session of the General Council on March 15-19, 1999, we approved a number of proposals which we hope will be helpful in this regard. These are explained in the next section of this article.

If a focus on Vincentian heritage is the primary element in an overall program for forming a particular director, then it will also be good for him to supplement this with a program that would furnish him with formation skills, particularly something that would help with the theory and practice of spiritual direction, the psychology of young people, teaching others to pray, etc. The courses mentioned above in the second model might be helpful.

As also mentioned above, if a particular director of the internal seminary or student director is also asked to be a teacher in the major seminary, then it will be necessary for him to have some specific academic preparation.

### **In Search of Better "Formation of The Formators" — Some decisions made in the General Council of March 15-19, 1999**

Since there already exist, on the various continents, many institutes that provide academic formation and preparation in formation skills, we judged, in the General Council, that our own particular responsibility lies in providing programs for the specifically Vincentian formation of our formators.

For discussion purposes, we found it helpful to distinguish five realities:

A. *CIF*

The International Formation Center: St. Vincent de Paul (CIF) is already providing a very valuable service in regard to specifically Vincentian formation. "The Vincentian Ongoing Formation Program" at the Center is open to all confreres between the ages of 35 and 50 and can be very useful in providing a basic foundation for those who will be forming our own. More than 200 members of the Congregation have participated in the program and have evaluated it most positively. Following the outline of our Constitutions and Statutes, this program provides a time of study and reflection on the purpose and nature of the Congregation, its apostolic life, community life, prayer, vows, etc. Recently we have received a number of proposals to provide a shorter program for confreres over the age of 50 which would also focus on our Vincentian heritage. After much dialogue with the CIF team in Paris, we decided on March 18 to sponsor three one-month programs for this age group in 2000-2001, one in English, one in French, and one in Spanish (sessions for other language groups may follow).

B. *An "International Institute for Specialists in Vincentian Studies"*

It is very important that the Congregation have some specialists in our Vincentian history and heritage (a role fulfilled in the past and present by confreres like André Dodin, Raymond Chalumeau, José María Román, Luigi Mezzadri, and John Rybolt).

In order to meet this objective, we examined a concrete hypothesis:

1. An "International Institute for Specialized Vincentian Studies" would be centered in Paris.
2. Its duration would depend on the background and objectives of the participant, but one year would be minimal.
3. Presuming that the number of participants will be small, any number would be acceptable. In other words, the program would be offered if there is one confrere focusing on advanced Vincentian studies, as well as if there were five.
4. The method would be guided research. A mentor would meet regularly with the confrere-students. The confrere-students would do the rest of the work on their own.
5. A mentor would be assigned in collaboration with the CIF team and the participant, and a contract would be designed.
6. Before beginning, a detailed syllabus for a one-year program would be drawn up. Much would depend on the confrere-student's previous training.

7. The costs would be handled as with the present CIF program. These would entail mainly room and board in Paris, plus some other expenses. Scholarships could be sought.
8. The program would be offered to all the Visitors, who could send interested confreres to take part.

This hypothesis was approved. The concrete program is now being designed in dialogue with the CIF team and will be offered soon.

C. *Regional Centers for the formation of formators*

On March 18, we also decided to ask CLAPVI, ASPAC, and COVIAM to organize regional centers for the specifically Vincentian formation of our own formators.

How might one envision the structure of such "centers"? That would be up to the Visitors' Conferences. But, as a possible model, one might foresee something like this:

- a. All the formators (present and prospective) of that particular region would gather once a year,
- b. during the summer (i.e., the time of the long vacation in the northern or southern hemisphere),
- c. for two or three weeks.
- d. Someone (or a committee) would be responsible for organizing the program of Vincentian formation over that period of time. This program would involve: 1) study, 2) sharing of experiences and concerns as formators, 3) their community life and prayer together during that period.
- e. This program would be offered every summer, but the topics treated and the concerns discussed would change each summer so that the same formators could participate in an ongoing way in these sessions (as, for example, the topics change every year for the Salamanca Week in Spain).

Since the circumstances for the Visitors' Conferences in North America and in Europe (CEVIM) are so different, we decided to consult further with the Visitors of those regions in order to determine what formula they would recommend for improving the formation of their formators.

D. *The use of Internet in aiding our formators*

On March 18 we also decided to ask SIEV, beginning in September 1999, to guarantee the posting of an article once very two weeks on our web page in three languages (if possible), for the use of formators. The use of the WWW and our page in the service of formation suggests many possibilities which have yet to be explored.

E. *A Vincentian Month for the formation of those who offer formative assistance to the various groups in our Vincentian Family*

On March 18 we decided to co-sponsor, along with the Daughters of Charity, a Vincentian Month in the year 2002 for the "asesores nacionales" (spiritual directors, councillors, chaplains) of the various Vincentian lay groups (AIC, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Vincentian Marian Youth Groups). The participants will be Vincentians, Daughters of Charity, and lay spiritual advisors.

I often look back with much affection and gratitude on all those confreres who helped me prepare for ministry in the Congregation. They were very dedicated and, using the methods of their time, made a significant impact on me. Are there any among us who cannot say much the same about the confreres who were our formators? As we look to the future, our responsibility is clear: we must make a concerted effort to continue to provide our students with good formators.