

St. Vincent de Paul, Formator of Priests

by Stanisław Wypych, C.M.
Province of Poland

Introduction

The example of life and the words of St. Vincent have influenced well-known persons in the Church and in society, as well as different groups, in a notable way — his closest collaborators, candidates for the Congregation of the Mission, and even lay people who asked him for spiritual direction. It would be interesting to see what influence he had on the formation of different groups and communities: for example, the Charities, the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity, and the Visitation nuns.¹ We are convinced that Vincent was one of the masters of the spiritual life, and one of the most noted formators. The character of this article, however, obliges us to limit our reflection and present the saint as a formator of the clergy. This reflection takes its place among, and must be considered within the context of, all the articles presented in this particular issue of *Vincentiana*.

As we begin, it is important to remember the profound conviction of Vincent that the Spirit of the Lord is the first and principal formator of persons. The Spirit calls, gives grace and strength, and continues to unfold his role as Spiritual Director whether in persons or in communities.² To this task, so noble a one that St. Gregory the Great refers to it as *ars atrium regimen animarum* [the art of arts, the care of souls], Divine Providence, in its profound charity, calls unworthy missionaries, who first should take on themselves the Spirit of Christ and continually ask themselves what Christ would do in a similar situation.³

1. Formation by Example and Counsel

We recall here the influence of the example of Vincent on Catholic priests and on Protestants at Châtillon-les-Dombes: he got up at five in the morning, spent a half-hour in prayer, spent many hours in the confessional, in visits to the sick, especially of those poor and in need of help, all in a well-organized way.

¹ Cf. J. Corea, “San Vicente de Paul, Formador,” in *Vincentiana* 28 (1984), 667-678; “La Formation,” in *Au temps de St.-Vincent-de-Paul . . . et aujourd’hui*, Cahier 38, Bordeaux, 1986; L. Mezzadri, *La sete e la sorgente*, Roma 1992, I, 69-71.

² Cf. SV I, 26; II, 356; VII, 613.

³ Cf. SV XI, 348.

His manner reawaked the consciences of Catholic priests and was a challenge for Protestants.⁴

We wish to mention a very significant activity: the spiritual exercises run at the house of *Saint-Lazare*. Beginning in 1635, the Vincentians welcomed into their house those who desired to discover in a serious manner their vocation and to grow in it. The poor and the rich, young and the old, students and doctors, priests, those who worked in the Parlement and in the court system, businessmen, artisans, soldiers and servants, all sought to stay there for a while. From 1635 until 1660 we calculate that about 20,000 people took part in what the house offered. These were not retreats organized and directed by someone, however, each participant could ask some counsel from the confreres, or from the candidates to the priestly state. The presence of the saint created an ambience of peace and trust. One of the participants confessed that he remained under the spell of the personality of Vincent, and could not express with what love he welcomed him into the house.⁵ In fact, Vincent received numerous signs of gratitude whether from priests or from lay people who had experienced his hospitality.⁶

We should remember here Vincent's concern for the nomination of worthy persons to the responsible tasks of the Church during the period that he was part of the Council of Conscience, from 1643 until the death of Louis XIII. His influence on the choice of worthy candidates for nomination as bishops contributed much to the reform of the Church in France during the 17th century, even though the not easy relations with Cardinal Mazarin did not make this task easier.

2. Motives to Commit Oneself to the Work of Formation

Now we shall describe the organizational methods of the formation of the clergy, which had great influence in the renewal of religious life in France during the period of time that concerns us. Vincent followed divine Providence step by step, wishing neither to retard nor hasten the steps indicated by it.⁷ Seeing the state of the religious life of country people, he was convinced that divine Providence was calling him to the evangelization of the poor country people, abandoned, and without the knowledge of the fundamental truths of faith necessary for salvation. Very quickly he arrived at the conclusion that, to maintain the good fruits of the missions that were preached, there was a need for priests who were well prepared and full of zeal. He was equally convinced that

⁴ Cf. J.M. Román, *San Vincenzo de' Paoli. Biografia* (trad. Italiana) Milano 1986, 108.

⁵ Cf. SV XIII, 134.

⁶ For a very detailed description cf. J.M. Román, op. cit., 310-315.

⁷ Cf. SV I, 68.

the renewal of religious life in the Church had to begin with the reform of the clergy. The reform of priests, in fact, begins in their formation. After years of rich experience, he confessed: *At the beginning, we thought of nothing less than of serving ecclesiastics, we only thought of ourselves and the poor.... At the beginning, as well, the Company only occupied itself of its own life and the work with the poor.... God permitted that it only seem this way to us, but, in the fullness of time, he called us to contribute to the formation of good priests, to give good pastors to parishes, and to show them what they must know and practice* (SV XII, 83-84).

In view of this need, three means of formation were created: retreats to ordinands, the Tuesday Conferences, and seminaries.⁸ These activities entered rather quickly among the principal ends of the Congregation. The saint wrote that our institute has two principal ends: the teaching of the poor people of the countryside and the formation of the clergy.⁹ Both the one and the other have equal importance, and we are obliged to both.¹⁰ Thus, if some confrere were to say that he was charged only with the evangelization of the poor country people — affirms the saint — and were not ready to take upon the task of the formation of the clergy, he would only be half a missionary, since he is charged for both tasks.¹¹

3. Retreats for Ordinands

A. Poirier, Bishop of Beauvais, asked St. Vincent to preach a retreat to the ordinands of the above-named diocese in September 1628. Having seen the excellent results of these retreats being lived out, the practice of organizing them was introduced in Paris, and then in the other dioceses of France, and even outside the borders of this country, that is, at Genoa and Rome. In the bull *Salvatoris nostri* these retreats are listed as one of the principal activities of the Congregation. Vincent was profoundly convinced that divine Providence had given this work to the community to prepare well the candidates to the priestly state. Well-prepared priests will preach the Gospel as agents of pastoral care, pastors and even bishops. The saint accepted this work in the spirit of humility. He wanted the confreres to preach the conferences in a spirit of simplicity, without the researched elements of rhetoric, convinced that simplicity edified the candidates, and that truths presented in a simple form were received willingly.¹²

⁸ On this theme much has been written, e.g., M. A. Roche, *Saint Vincent de Paul and the Formation of Clerics*, Fribourg 1984; J.M. Román, “La formation de clergé dans la tradition vinctienne,” *Vincentiana* 27 (1983), 136-153; C. Sens, “La formation du clergé,” *Vincentiana* 31 (1987) 751-762; and J.M. Román, *op. cit.*, 317-336; R. McCullen, “Ministry to Priests and the Vincentian Charism of Service to Clergy, Yesterday and Today,” *Vincentiana* 34 (1990) 220-229.

⁹ Cf. SV III, 273.

¹⁰ Cf. SV V, 489.

¹¹ Cf. SV VII, 561.

¹² Cf. SV II, 339.

During the retreat, which lasted from 10 days to 2 weeks, Vincent did not wish to give a synthesis of theology, since he was convinced that the candidates were already well instructed by our confreres: “they are not impressed by the learning, or by the beautiful things that are said to them, because they are wiser than we are... that which touches them: the virtues which they must practice” (SV XI, 11). The purpose of the retreats was thus the immediate and practical preparation for the sacrament of the priesthood. During the sessions, the candidates, in an atmosphere of prayer, of the sacrament of Penance, and of dialogue, must assure themselves of their vocation to the ecclesiastical state, and enter this service with a pure intention, that is, for the glory of God and for their own salvation.¹³ Vincent helped them to deepen their spirit of prayer, to take note of practical theology, to learn how to administer the sacraments. He taught them with words, but above all with the example of prayer and the exemplary manner of the celebration of the Eucharist. In the formation of candidates, all confreres took part, including the brothers.

At the beginning, Vincent prepared the plan of the retreat. Then (in 1634-1635), four confreres prepared a well-elaborated plan. One confrere, nominated as director, organized the retreat, and the other confreres collaborated with him. On the day of the arrival of the candidates, the confreres of the community welcomed them, showed them their rooms, and explained to them the program of the day.¹⁴

In the morning, the fundamental principals of moral theology, the Decalogue, Canon law, sacramentology and the Apostles’ Creed were explained. The program foresaw as well the explanation of the ceremonies of the seven sacraments, above all the celebration of Mass. Since there were 75-90 participants at each retreat, they were divided into groups of 12-15 persons after each explanation and, guided by a confrere, they discussed the themes presented during the presentation, be it a lesson or a conference. The program provided for the celebration of Office in common and community prayer. From the first day, the candidates prepared themselves for a general confession of their whole lives, or, at least, from their last general confession.

Vincent gave witness that God blessed this work. The priests, prepared for ordination in this manner, remained faithful to meditation, to the exemplary celebration of Mass and the other sacraments, and even to the practice of the examination of conscience, to the visits to the sick in hospitals, in the prisons where they taught the truths of faith, the conferences, and where they heard the confessions of prisoners. The participants in the retreats lived in an exemplary

¹³ Cf. SV XIII, 141-141.

¹⁴ Cf. J.M. Román, *op. cit.*, 320-322.

manner, and many of them took up posts of notable responsibility in the Church.¹⁵

4. Tuesday Conferences

This was the fine continuation of the positive experience during the retreats and is a very interesting example of how to do ongoing formation. Vincent confessed to having known the existence of meetings in which the participants made reflections on theological themes, above all on moral theology; in others they discussed cases of conscience; but he did not have any knowledge of meetings in which the virtues of the ecclesiastical state were discussed, the exemplary life of a priest and the solid realization of priestly duties. In the meetings organized by the saint the participants reflected on motivations for acquiring the virtues linked to the ecclesiastical state, to their essence, their manifestations, and on the necessary means to practice them. They also reflected on the duties of the clergy, both toward God and toward the neighbor.

In the rule for the Tuesday Conferences we read: *The Company of gentlemen who are ecclesiastics... has for its purpose to honor Our Lord Jesus Christ, its eternal priest, his holy family, and his love for the poor. Thus, each of them must try to conform his life to Jesus, to procure the glory of God in the ecclesiastical state, in his family and among the poor, even among those of the country, according to the office and the talents that God has given him* (SV XIII, 128). Thus, the end of the Conferences was the formation of the participants in the eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Family, and also in his love for the poor. The participants made themselves aware of the needs of the poor, whom they had to serve; they also prepared themselves to preach missions.

The group of coordinators was composed of: a director, a prefect, two assistants, and a secretary. In the meetings priests, deacons, and subdeacons took part. Before accepting a member, those who were in charge asked for information about him. After being accepted, a candidate made an eight-day retreat and a general confession. The members met every Tuesday at the house of Saint-Lazare or in the College de Bons-Enfants. All were obliged to participate in all the meetings. The praying of the “Veni, Creator” began each meeting, which ended with the Marian antiphon. The theme of the meeting, announced in the previous reunion, was about the approaching liturgical feasts, current events, abuses and problems of society. The conferences and the discussions unfolded according to the Little Method, animated by simplicity. Each of the participants, in a humble and simple way, in writing or out loud, shared their thoughts about the practice of the virtues. The Eucharist, daily meditation, the Liturgy of the Hours, the reading of the New Testament, the

¹⁵ Cf. SV I, 204.

examination of conscience at midday and evening, all also constituted themes for reflection. On Holy Thursday, the participants renewed their baptismal promises and their promise of obedience.

The members of the Conferences, as we have said, made themselves aware of the needs of the poor. From 1641 they preached the missions to the galley slaves, in the hospice of small houses outside of Paris. The mission preached in 1641 in the quarter Saint-Germain-des-Prés had extraordinary fruits. There were conversions, reconciliations, and restitutions, repairing of scandals, surprising changes of life. Here there is the hand of God, the protagonists of that incredible adventure said. We can say that the hand of God guided the trusting and humble works of Vincent.¹⁶

From 1633 until the death of the saint, over 250 names of participants in the Conferences were enrolled. Many of them held important roles in the Church: 40 doctors of theology, 22 bishops, founders of religious communities, representatives in the Parliament, chaplains in the royal court, canons, and pastors.

The Conferences were founded at Puy (1636), Pontoise (1642), Angoulême (1647), Angers, Bordeaux, and in other cities whose names are not noted.¹⁷ They were also founded in Italy and in Ireland.¹⁸

5. Seminaries

The organization and direction of seminaries had made a very important contribution to the reform of the Church in 17th century France. The bishops had already tried to organize seminaries in the 15th century: In Italy (Pistoia, Florence, Bologna, Venice, Rome) and in France (Rheims, Aix, Châlon, Avignon). These efforts did not, however, bear the expected fruits.

Seeing the necessity of a solid preparation to the priesthood and the introduction of some discipline to the clergy, the Council of Trent, on July 15, 1563, had ordered the foundation of seminaries. Vincent was convinced that this decree came from the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ In France, however, the Tridentine reform was introduced with a notable delay. The French Parliament accepted the ordinances of Trent on July 7, 1615.

¹⁶ Abelly, I, part 2, cap. 3, 261-264, quoted by J.M. Román, *op. cit.*, 335.

¹⁷ Cf. J.M. Román, *op. cit.*, 331.

¹⁸ Cf. SV I, 537; II, 491.

¹⁹ Cf. SV II, 459.

In the work of renewal of the ecclesial state, noted persons of the time gave themselves to the task i.e. de Bérulle, Charles de Condren, A. Bourdoise, J. J. Olier, A. Duval, and Vincent de Paul.²⁰ The first attempts to organize seminaries did not succeed, above all because of the difference in the ages of the candidates. It was very difficult to prepare a good program that would respond to such different ages. Vincent divided the candidates into two groups. For the younger candidates he founded minor seminaries and for the older ones, who were preparing directly for the priesthood, major seminaries.

Among the major seminaries there were three types: the parochial seminary which prepared candidates for priestly service in a practical manner; the live-in seminary in which the students lived while they received their intellectual formation in universities or in colleges; and, finally, the seminary-college for intellectual and spiritual-liturgical formation. The seminaries directed by the Vincentians were of this third type, with the accent placed on pastoral preparation.

The first two seminaries given to the confreres were founded in Annecy and in Alet, and then in Marseille, Périgueux, and Montpellier. Other bishops also asked the saint to organize a seminary in their dioceses. In the year of the death of Vincent, the confreres directed 16 seminaries in France. J. M. Román, quoting H. Kaman, affirms that *the most important work of Vincent and the most decisive influence he had for the reform of France was his contribution to the formation of the clergy: change the Christian people by changing for this their ministers.*²¹

Vincent often underlined the importance of the spiritual formation of the clergy, he drew attention to the daily practices of piety: prayer, participation in the Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours, meditation and examination of conscience. He wrote that formation consisted “particularly in the interior life, and in the practice of prayer and of the virtues; because it is not enough to demonstrate for them chant, ceremonies, and a little moral theology; the primary thing is to form them in a solid piety and devotion” (SV IV, 597). The sacrament of Penance and the Eucharist held the principal post. The saint underlined the necessity of the virtues necessary to the ecclesiastical state, in a special way of obedience and chastity: *“That which I wish to recommend to you, in the name of Our Lord, is to carry those in your charge to the interior life. They will not lack knowledge if they have virtue, they will not lack virtue if they give themselves to*

²⁰ Cf. L. Nuovo, “Seminarios”, in *Diccionario del Espiritualidad Vincenciana*, Salamanca 1995, II, 563-565 (with the selected bibliography); also L. Mezzadri, “La Chiesa di Francia nel XVII secolo,” *Vincentina* 31 (1987) 438-456; J. Dukala, *Organizacja Studiów I przygotowanie do kapłaństwa alumnów w Seminariach Diecezjalnych pod zarządem Zgromadzenia Księży Misjonarzy w Polsce w latach 1675-1864* (doctoral thesis) Kraków 1975; L. Mezzadri, J.M. Román, *Historia Zgromadzenia Misji* (Polish translation) Kraków 1995, I, 245-288.

²¹ *op. cit.*, 331.

prayer, that being well and exactly done, it will unfailingly introduce them to the practice of mortification, of detachment from goods, the love of obedience, zeal for souls, and the rest of their obligations” (SV VIII, 3). The intention was to introduce the students to good participation in the liturgy, in ecclesiastical song, and in the teaching of the Catechism. Then, taking into consideration their age, they had to study different subjects.

Vincent was convinced that the purpose of formation was not so much intellectual formation, but rather spiritual and pastoral formation. From here comes the accent on the importance of pastoral practices. The saint wished to educate good pastors who would know how to preach, catechize, administer the sacraments and resolve cases of conscience. Summing up, he wished to form good pastors, pious, virtuous, and zealous.

For this reason, Vincent accepted parishes in the area of the seminary to give the students the possibility of some pastoral experience: *“but experience has helped us recognize that, where there is a seminary, it is good for us to have a parish to give the seminarians a place to work so that they can better learn priestly functions by practice as well as by theory” (SV VII, 253-4). The students also took part in the giving of missions to country people.*

Vincent was aware of the great importance of the work that Divine Providence had given him. He said that the candidates for the priesthood constitute the most precious treasure of the Church, and that their formation is the noblest task in the Church, but also the most difficult. One time, he said to the confreres: *“O my Savior! How much must the poor missionaries give themselves to you to contribute to the formation of good ecclesiastics, for this work is the most difficult, the most taxing, and the most important for the salvation of souls and for the advancement of Christianity!” (SV XI, 7-8). For this reason he assigned to this work the best and the most prepared confreres. He was convinced that we have to acquire the values ourselves and then share them with others. “And for this, Father, we must be the first to be filled with them, because it would be almost useless to give instruction about them to the students, without being living examples of them. We must be like filled up basins to make our waters flow without exhausting us, and we must possess this spirit with which we wish that they be animated, because no one can give what he does not have. Let us ask this of our Lord, and let us ask him ourselves for the grace to conform our conduct and our actions to his.... We will learn from Our Lord how our duty must be always accompanied by humility and grace, to attract to him the hearts of men and not to turn anyone away from him” (SV IV, 597). He also wrote: “I can only help you imagine, on the part of the Lord, that he wants them to be good and perfect ecclesiastics, that he wants them to do all in their power to become such, not putting aside prayer, sermons, exercises, or good example. See, Father, the treasure of the Church is there that God has confided to you, and the*

field where you must know how to value the graces that he has given to you” (SV VII, 30). This must be an ongoing commitment, full of seriousness, humility, and animated by a spirit of profound faith.

Conclusions

Many means and forms utilized by Vincent retain forever their freshness and value. We wish to mention a few of them here: distinction between minor and major seminary, formation by example and word, working together of the whole community, work in groups, accent on spiritual, pastoral, community and intellectual formation, retreats before ordination, pastoral practices, good preparation for the worthy celebration of the sacraments, good preparation for teaching Catechism.²² But in a special way we must underline the necessity of ongoing formation of priests and of the members of institutes of religious life for one’s whole life, put in evidence with such force both in papal documents as well as those of the respective Roman dicasteries.²³

One among the fields of making concrete the end underlined in our present Constitutions is that of the formation of the clergy: *“The purpose of the Congregation of the Mission is to follow Christ evangelizing the poor. This purpose is achieved when, faithful to St. Vincent, the members, individually and collectively... help the clergy and the laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelizing of the poor” (C 1).* We are thus invited to help clergy and laity in their formation and to get close to them for their participation in the evangelization of the poor. In the chapter on apostolic activity, we read: *“The formation of clerics in seminaries, a work of the Congregation from its beginnings, is to be effectively renewed where needed. In addition, members should afford spiritual assistance to priests both in the work of their ongoing formation and in promoting their pastoral zeal. They should work to encourage in them the desire of fulfilling the Church’s option for the poor” (C 15).*

In the history of the Congregation many provinces have written a beautiful page on the formation of the clergy. Now, we must confess that the number of confreres engaged in this service is not sufficient and, sadly, is diminishing. The Superior General informs us that there are bishops who, above all in mission countries, ask the confreres to teach in and run seminaries. From countries on other continents these requests do not come. But I am convinced that the bishops will ask us to be capable and prepared as spiritual directors, both in seminaries

²² Cf. *Pastores dabo vobis* (exhortation of John Paul II) Vatican City 1992; also the document of the Holy See *La formazione negli istituti religiosi “Potissimum institutioni,”* Vatican City 1990.

²³ The following cites these documents, analyzes them and presents the means of this type of formation: A Zakreṭa, *La formazione permanente dei religiosi. Studio giuridico-teologico* (doctoral thesis) Rome 1998.

and in regions of the diocese, as confessors of priests and seminarians, as preachers of spiritual retreats and of conferences for ongoing formation.

We can seek to find other ways to help the clergy in their formation, for example: organizing centers of ongoing formation; creating in our own houses (perhaps even with us) the possibility of making a retreat, or days of retreat; giving priests the possibility to celebrate the sacrament of Penance; welcoming priests into our houses; being concerned about older priests; teaching in seminaries; collaborating in an exemplary way with the clergy of the diocese as we take part in their various initiatives. The value of the example of our lives always remains valid. We can also write books and articles on priestly spirituality, and, finally, we can pray for their apostolate and their holiness. Even here, the famous expression of our saint can find realization: “*love is infinitely creative....*” (SV XI, 146)

(ROBERT J. STONE, C.M., translator)