

Chapter 1

General Reflections and Directives for Formation

SECTION 1

GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND STRATEGIES OF FORMATION

The first article of the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission states the purpose of the “little company” succinctly:

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:

1. *make every effort to put on the spirit of Christ himself (CR I, 3) in order to acquire a holiness appropriate to their vocation (CR XII, 13);*
2. *work at evangelizing the poor, especially the more abandoned;*
3. *help the clergy and laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor.*

In stating this purpose, the Constitutions also indicate the overall goals of formation within the Congregation. To fully grasp these goals, it is necessary to recall their ecclesial context.

A. The Goals of Vincentian Life and Formation in their Ecclesial Context

The whole Church is called to follow Christ, who describes his mission in Luke’s Gospel in a clear, focused manner: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; to proclaim ‘Good News’ to the poor he has sent me” (4:16). This calling is given to every Christian at baptism. The vocation of the Vincentian is to embrace this baptismal calling, draw strength from the whole community of the baptized, and then be a sign to what life in Christ is meant to be. At the same time, the Vincentian vocation is a calling to follow Christ specifically:

- in the ministry of evangelizing the poor and assisting both clergy and lay persons to embrace this particular commitment to Christ’s mission;
- in giving one’s life and energy to this calling full time;

- in community with others who share faith, prayer, insight, labor and creativity so that all may be more effective than any individual could be alone;
- as a missionary, like the “Son of Man,” to go wherever sent, having “nowhere to lay his head.”

Three corollaries of the Vincentian calling warrant immediate reflection in this *Ratio*. Since the purpose of the Congregation is to follow Christ in evangelizing the poor, we see ourselves primarily as Vincentian missionaries. Being a brother or priest is secondary, and simply describes the way in which a member of the Congregation engages in this missionary vocation. For this reason, except for the stage of post-internal seminary formation, Vincentian formation will be the same for brother and priest candidates, who are equally called to “follow Christ, evangelizing the poor.”

Secondly, our focus on following Christ evangelizing the poor permeates our understanding of priesthood. We are not united under the leadership of a particular bishop, nor restricted to the geographical confines of a diocese. Rather, we give ourselves in community under the guidance of a Visitor and General Superior, specifically to bring Christ to the under-privileged of society and to lead others to follow Christ in this mission. It is important to highlight these differences for candidates in the major seminary, especially if they receive their theological formation at a diocesan seminary or live with diocesan seminarians.¹

Finally, the goals of formation require a careful understanding of our Congregation’s specifically *Vincentian* missionary character. This inspired the expansion of the Congregation and determined which ministries would be undertaken. The early Congregation extended itself first in preaching popular missions, and soon after in the ministry of formation of the clergy. Later, confreres were sent to countries beyond France and beyond continental Europe, to Madagascar, and eventually throughout the world.

This sense of mission leads the Congregation today to develop new ministries on behalf of the poor, to labor in new ministries of formation, and to be ready to serve wherever we are sent.² It affects our formation at every level, and requires candidates, confreres, and the Congregation itself, to:

¹ In a similar way, it will be important to highlight the differences between the Vincentian way of life and that of religious, particularly in those situations where our candidates are formed at institutes run by religious.

² The *Ratio Missionum*, 3.3.3.1., offers clear criteria for the selection of new ministries in the Congregation’s efforts to respond to the multiple calls for missionary expansion.

- foster the alleviation of poverty and economic disparity among peoples and nations;
- respect cultural diversity, support persons and communities marginalized because of their culture, and foster processes of healthy enculturation;
- form clergy and all Christian people to follow Jesus in evangelizing the poor;
- work with organizations which are dedicated to overcoming injustice and poverty;
- work with other religious denominations to overcome inhumanity and faithlessness;
- work with all members of the Vincentian Family in our common mission in Christ.

Recognizing contemporary challenges and opportunities, the Congregation will also seek to:

- use technology in ways that facilitate its ministry in all places and at all levels throughout the world;
- embrace “systemic change” as a way of alleviating poverty and of empowering the poor.³

B. Living According to the Five Virtues and the Goals of Vincentian Life

Vincent himself, and the foundational community of 1625 to 1660, provided recommendations, guidelines and structures to support individual confreres and the entire Congregation in living out their vocation. Foremost are the “five virtues” most suitable for the missionary: simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and zeal. Each has a human and spiritual component. These virtues challenge Vincentians at each stage of formation. Each stage requires its own reflections on the virtues and effort to embrace them.

³ Systemic Change aims not only to serve the immediate needs of the poor (by providing food, clothing, etc.), but also to assist the poor to develop strategies by which they can emerge from poverty. Its goal is to change a whole complex of structures that form a particular social system within which the poor live. It focuses on designing projects that have a holistic vision, addressing a series of basic human needs – individual and social, spiritual and physical, especially jobs, health care, housing, education, spiritual growth – with an integral approach toward self-help, sustainable development, and the training of local leaders.

C. Living According to the Four Vows and the Goals of Vincentian Life

Another set of “structures of Vincentian life” are the four vows underscored by Vincent for following Christ in bringing Good News to the poor: stability (a life-long commitment to serve the poor within the Congregation), celibate chastity, poverty, and obedience. Vincentian formation necessarily attends to the values and the challenges of these vows. They lead the member to grow in giving himself to Christ, in freeing himself for the mission of the Congregation, and in sharing life in Community. Consideration of these vows is necessarily included in each stage of formation.

D. The Axis and Five Dimensions of Formation: Objectives of Formation

The goals of formation become reality only by developing multiple dimensions of the individual’s life: the human, spiritual, intellectual, communal, and apostolic. Growth in each dimension is necessary for embracing a Vincentian way of life. In each dimension, the candidate or confrere seeks to express the Vincentian charism.

The Vincentian charism can be thought of as an “axis” which supports the five dimensions of formation, much as an axle supports five spokes of a wheel. Just as physical energy flows from an axle through the spokes of a wheel leading to action, so the Vincentian charism provides energy for an individual’s development in the five dimensions of formation. In describing each stage of formation, this *Ratio* first treats the Vincentian axis and then each of the five dimensions, articulating specific objectives and ways that their development can be fostered.

E. Strategies in Formation

Formation is a complicated task, requiring specific, concrete steps to achieve its goals and objectives (the axis and five dimensions). These steps are necessary for any aspirant, associate, admitted member, or incorporated confrere to reach the full measure of his calling in the “little Company.” Therefore, this *Ratio* details realistic strategies and norms for each stage of formation. To lead the individual smoothly from one stage to the next, it will be necessary to assess his skills and readiness at each stage. For this reason, this *Ratio* also offers an expected profile of the person in formation at the conclusion of each stage.

SECTION 2**AGENTS OF FORMATION****A. The Trinitarian God: The Primary, Transcendent, Agent of Formation**

The primary agent of formation is God: the Father who sends Christ to us; the Son who gives us a missionary model to follow; and their Spirit, who comes upon us as upon Jesus, sending us to bring Good News to all who are abandoned. The primacy of God's presence and action will be acknowledged at every stage of formation both by the candidate or confrere in formation, and by formators.

B. The Person in Formation

The principal human agent in the process is the person in formation himself. It is his responsibility to seek the light of the Lord at every stage of formation, from his discerning a vocation to his senior years within the Congregation. It is his task to listen to the many voices of formators at every stage, weigh them, and put into action the call of the Lord that emerges from them.

C. The Visitor and the Provincial Community in Formation

The provincial community provides the clearest examples of the living charism which St. Vincent entrusted to the Congregation. It is in meeting the confreres, in enjoying their life together, in seeing and hearing them at prayer, and in experiencing them active in their ministries, that discerners will be touched by the Spirit and find themselves attracted to the community.

The Visitor encourages all confreres to take an active interest in promoting vocations. He calls them to welcome young persons into their houses and to aid them in their discernment. He meets the candidates as early as their first year of pre-internal seminary formation, and visits them so that he comes to know them. The Constitutions require his intervention at significant times along their journey: candidates seeking entrance into the internal seminary; members petitioning for good purposes or vows; and confreres seeking permission for ministries or major orders.⁴

The Visitor also needs to know the confreres engaged in the ministry of formation. He discerns their capacity to do formation, assigns them

⁴ In this regard, he will pay special attention to the evaluations of candidates prior to their petitioning for entrance to the Internal Seminary, as well as evaluations prior to petitions for advancement to subsequent stages of formation.

to their work, and provides for their adequate formation as formators. He needs to understand the processes of formation as they are viewed in the contemporary Church. Finally, the Visitor establishes, supports, and communicates effectively with the provincial Formation Committee, whose tasks are described below.

D. The Local Community in Formation

The local community plays an influential role in formation. It witnesses to the vitality of the Vincentian charism, the vibrancy of community life, and to missionary zeal. It is in their experience of the confreres in the local community – praying, living, and working together – that men in formation will find the charism credible and attractive. It is within the local community that they will acquire a sense of belonging and a realistic appreciation of how the Congregation extends itself to those in need.

E. The Persons Entrusted with the Ministry of Formation

1. SPECIFIC ROLES AND MINISTRIES OF THE FORMATORS

The Formation Director has the central role among the formators. He presents the objectives of the particular stage of formation to the candidate or confrere.⁵ With the other formators, he models the charism of the Congregation for the person in formation, walks with the individual personally, and assists him to integrate the directives which he is receiving from the other formators. He coordinates the ministries of all the formators, affording the individual a balanced, unified experience of formation. Finally, it is his role, after consulting the other formators, to present to the Visitor an evaluation of the candidate's suitability in moving toward full commitment to ministry as a Vincentian.

The Spiritual Director assists the candidate or confrere in formation to grow in the spiritual depth necessary to live the Vincentian vocation, and for moving forward in the overall formation program. He helps the individual to keep in focus the ways in which his relationship with Christ animates and takes expression in all the other dimensions of his journey (human, pastoral, communal, academic).

The Director of Apostolic Formation guides the individual in understanding his apostolic ministry – its specific goals and objectives –

⁵ In this section (E.1.), the term “confrere” is intended to include both admitted and incorporated confreres, beginning with their entrance into the internal seminary until their completion of initial formation.

as well as aiding the individual to recognize the action of Christ and his Spirit in ministry.⁶

Professors come to know and guide the individual in his understanding of whatever subject they teach, so that the individual can assimilate that teaching and perceive ways in which it will lead him and others to human and Christian maturity. They present doctrine intelligibly, faithfully, and show its relevance.

The Director of Human Formation assists the candidate or confrere to understand better his own personal gifts, strengths, and weaknesses. He guides the individual in all aspects of human development.⁷

The Local Superior animates and supports the local community in its Vincentian life and ministry, and therefore supports the formators in their ministry of formation. He should know and understand the many dimensions of formation. He encourages the confreres of the house to be credible, attractive examples to the person in initial formation.

⁶ With variations in accord to the respective stage of formation, the Director of Apostolic Formation:

- a) Assigns the candidates or confreres in initial formation to specific ministries for the poor in conjunction with those who are regularly engaged in this ministry, and arranges for their onsite supervision.
- b) Helps those in formation integrate the insights gained through their apostolic experiences into their prayer-life and into the process of discerning their Vincentian vocation.
- c) Leads those in formation in the practice of communal theological reflection.
- d) Arranges for periodic discussions with the onsite supervisor to gain a fuller appreciation of the candidate's or confrere's capabilities and struggles. He uses these observations in conversations with the candidate or confrere and also shares them with the formation team.

⁷ With variations in accord to the respective stage of formation, the Director of Human Formation:

- a) Is expected to be familiar with the psychological evaluation of each of candidate which has been required prior to his admission to the stage of formation. He meets with the candidate to discuss the report, and works out with him strategies for dealing constructively with its observations and suggestions.
- b) Meets occasionally with the candidate to follow up earlier meetings.
- c) Understands the differences in accompanying candidates in varying age groups.

2. THE FORMATION OF THE FORMATORS

Formation is a specialized ministry. No formator has all the skills needed for this ministry by nature or personal temperament. Each confrere who takes on formation ministry should be offered specific formation for that ministry. Formation Directors will be educated in this ministry by other Formation Directors; Spiritual Directors will avail themselves of formation for Spiritual Directors; the person who oversees human formation will need initial training in psychology and the ongoing professional assistance of a certified psychologist; Directors of Apostolic Formation will participate in programs specifically directed to assisting formators in this ministry. Each formator will also benefit from ongoing communication with others who share a similar ministry.

3. A PROFILE OF THE FORMATOR

Given the responsibilities and challenges of formation ministry, the Visitor will need to identify confreres to undertake these ministries who are:

- deeply rooted in Jesus and able to communicate their personal experience of, and love for, Jesus;
- immersed in the Vincentian charism, imbued with a genuine Vincentian missionary spirit, knowing Vincent and the history of the Community;
- in touch with the poor, having met Christ in meeting and journeying with them, so that their knowledge of, and love for, the poor is real and not simply ideal;
- men of prayer, able to share the ways prayer and ministry nourish one another;
- capable of understanding and guiding persons on their journey of formation;
- aware of the ways that young people think, appreciative of their struggles in being faithful to Christ and the Church, and able to communicate with them effectively;
- in touch and able to work with various groups of the Vincentian Family;
- appreciative of cultural diversity.

Those who are to serve as Formation Directors will also be persons:

- who understand well the stages of human growth;
- skilled in guiding persons of varying personality types to understand their gifts and limits, and deal with them constructively;

- experienced in having served as an Associate Formation Director or in other formation ministry.

Those who are to serve as Spiritual Directors will also be persons:

- skilled in discerning the movements of the Spirit in their own lives and in the lives of others;
- well grounded in their ability to relate the life of faith to life in the world and human growth;
- experienced in offering spiritual direction in wider contexts of ministry.

Those who are to serve as professors will also be persons:

- well trained in the field in which they are to teach;
- able to communicate their subject matter to students with a variety of needs and learning abilities;
- able to relate their teaching meaningfully to Vincentian life, to the world of today, to following Christ, and to the needs of the poor.

4. THE FORMATION TEAM

Effective formation requires a team effort. Provinces will have a Formation Team for the stages of initial formation comprising the Spiritual Director, Director of Apostolic Formation, professors, Director of Human Formation, superior of the local community, and the Formation Director. Members of the team complement one another in their specific roles, personalities, and gifts. It will be necessary for members to meet regularly to discuss: (1) the ways they are working for the benefit of the overall program; (2) the challenges which they may be facing in their own area of formation; and (3) the progress of each of the individuals under their care.

a) Interior formation and observable performance

Formation focuses on the individual's commitment to embracing the Vincentian calling, as manifested in observable action. We can know where another's mind and heart are by the way he behaves and meets specific objectives. But some may function seemingly well for a long time without interiorizing the values and the patterns of life which the Congregation proposes. Candidates can deceive formators and even themselves, thinking that because they function well, they have done the inner work necessary to serve fruitfully over a lifetime. For this reason, accompanying the person in formation involves sharing of interiority as well as observable action.

b) *Internal - external forum*

For centuries the Church has distinguished these two foci – shared interiority and observable action – as the “internal forum” and the “external forum”. The distinction has led to a restriction of interiority to the spiritual direction relationship, even warning persons in authority in the external forum (seminary rectors, superiors of houses of formation, and deans of discipline) not to enter into the internal forum. This restriction, while often useful, can limit a formator’s knowledge of the person he is to guide and evaluate.

The contemporary Church expects formators to develop a personal relationship with the individual in formation. The best way of expressing the character of that relationship is one of accompaniment: walking together in learning the goals, life patterns, and ministry of the Congregation while also discovering together the gifts, strengths, limitations, and weaknesses of the individual as he responds to his calling.

The need to distinguish “internal forum” from “external forum” often raises the question of whether a Spiritual Director should participate in meetings which focus on individuals in formation. The concern is to preserve the confidentiality of the internal forum. This *Ratio* affirms the importance of Spiritual Directors’ presence in these meetings, as listeners rather than as speakers. Spiritual Directors need to be aware of how others evaluate and guide those under their care. Listening to others will enable Spiritual Directors to support the efforts of the team more fully, and will protect Spiritual Directors from being misled by their directee’s sometimes faulty recounting of his performance and/or interaction with another team member.

F. The Poor as Agents of Formation

We sometimes think of persons who live in poverty as passive recipients of our service. We may limit their role in formation to making us aware of the deprivation and injustices they face. Such awareness does shape our consciousness of the realities of the lives of poor and challenges us to respond to their needs and change society to help eliminate poverty. The goal of Vincentian formation, however, also calls us to build bonds of communion with the poor: sharing, learning, and enjoying Christ’s presence and love together.

The poor are our brothers and sisters; they are images of Christ. We are called to live among them, and come to know them more deeply. We may discover in them a vibrancy of faith, constancy of hope, generosity of love, and steadfastness of trust in God. We may also find them difficult, demanding, or uncooperative. They may try our patience or present us with what seem to be insoluble problems. Here, too, we are urged, in the spirit of Saint Vincent, to meet Christ.

For these reasons, it is important for candidates and confreres at every stage of formation, not only to study about the needs of those who suffer poverty, but also serve them and build interpersonal bonds of Christ-like faith, hope, and love with them. Those who live in poverty are significant and active agents in our formation, mediating the presence of the Lord as we journey through Vincentian life and ministry.

SECTION 3

STAGES OF FORMATION

While formation proceeds over a lifetime in identifiable stages, it also has an underlying unity.

A. A Model for Understanding the Unity of the Stages of Formation

The life-cycle of a tree offers a helpful model for the unity of the process of formation and the movement from one stage to another. It begins with the planting and nurturing of a seed. This corresponds to the planting and nurturing of the seeds of a vocation in the inquiry and discernment stage of formation.

The next stage in the life-cycle of a tree is the sprouting of new life. Young sprouts require special care and nurturing with light, water, fertilizer, and rich soil. Similarly, the stage of pre-internal seminary formation offers young candidates the fundamentals of Vincentian life so they can appreciate them as their own.

The third stage of a tree's life-cycle is the sinking of roots deep into the soil. Roots are necessary for the tree to find nourishment for becoming mature and strong, stable in the midst of winds, rain or scorching sun. The internal seminary provides similar support for the candidate's growing in Vincentian life through prayer, service, and Vincentian studies. He begins to see himself as rooted in the Congregation's life and history.

The fourth stage of the life-cycle of a tree is maturation. The tree, well-rooted in soil, is pruned and nurtured to become fruit-bearing. This stage corresponds to the major seminary for those preparing to be priests, or further apostolic and professional formation for those preparing to be brothers. Pruning and maturation at this stage of formation takes the form of refining the candidate's values and growth to obtain a more nuanced understanding of Vincentian life, and adjusting to the realities of adulthood as candidates' roots are tested by life in an imperfect, though loving, community.

In the last stage of its life-cycle, the tree reaches maturity, bearing fruit for many years. The tree is well-formed but still needs care.

And so it is with confreres who have been productive over many years as Vincentian missionaries. They follow Jesus evangelizing the poor in multiple ministries, knowing the joys and withstanding the hardships of Vincentian life and ministry. Nevertheless, these confreres do not “stand alone” in their life journey. They too need, and deserve, ongoing formation.

B. The Stages of Formation and the Provincial Formation Committee

Each province needs a provincial Formation Committee to assure the continuity, consistency, and progressive development of the stages of formation, and the multiple dimensions which run through them. The committee will include the provincial Vocation Director, the chairperson of the Formation Team of each stage of formation, and the Formation Directors of each stage of formation. It will make recommendations to the Visitor with regard to the location of the houses of formation and the relationship to other institutions (such as universities or seminaries) which may complement the Vincentian formation programs. The provincial Formation Committee will also exercise general oversight with regard to the vocational growth of candidates, and assess the effectiveness of the province’s formation program as a whole.

C. The Stages of Formation and the Advancement of Candidates

A careful articulation of the goals, objectives, and strategies appropriate to each stage of formation is of critical importance. To provide criteria for assessing an individual’s readiness for advancement, this *Ratio* offers a profile of the candidate or confrere which he will be expected to meet as he completes each stage of formation. It will be the task of each province, its provincial Formation Committee, and the provincial Formation Teams at each stage of formation, to refine the expected outcomes that will constitute the criteria for advancement from one stage to the next.

The articulation of expected outcomes also applies analogously to ongoing formation. Each confrere needs to continue to grow in his interiority, community life, and ministry. It is important that confreres be transparent in, and accountable for, their performance and service.