

## Chapter 2

# Vocation Ministry Stages of Invitation, Inquiry and Discernment

### SECTION 1

#### GOAL AND CONTEXT OF VOCATION MINISTRY

##### **A. The Goal of Vocation Ministry**

The goal of this stage of formation (vocation ministry) is to lead potential candidates to consider a Vincentian vocation and support them in discernment. This is the stage of “sowing seeds.” The sower spreads seeds far and wide. Some fall on good ground and yield thirty, sixty, and a hundred fold; some are trampled along the path; some take no root; some are choked as soon as they sprout. There is a need to distinguish carefully the ground upon which seeds fall (the context) in vocation ministry.

##### **B. The Context of Vocation Ministry**

Vocation ministry is conducted in a world of youth seeking meaning in a particular culture.<sup>8</sup> Some cultures are significantly religious, where youth easily find a place in the Church and receive religious formation. This environment facilitates their openness to vocations within the Church. In more secular cultures, respect for authority and the Church has broken down; sexual freedom, preoccupation with wealth, and promise of power are very enticing. Nonetheless, youth often desire to do something meaningful and to embrace a life of service. These characteristics can be nurtured so young people may be open to a vocation in our Congregation. Vocation ministers should understand each culture’s strengths and liabilities in assessing the full range of candidates whom the Lord invites.

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<sup>8</sup> The world of youth does not necessarily mean persons younger than 21. Some provinces dialogue with young people prior to secondary school. Others speak with persons of secondary school, university, or post-university age. An older person should not be excluded simply because he is approaching, for example, 40. But it is reasonable to establish an “age boundary” to assure that the candidate has sufficient time after initial formation to engage fruitfully in the Vincentian mission. Whatever the age, vocation ministry has the same basic structures and phases of progressive discernment. Only the strategies for approaching the person will differ according to his age level.

### **C. The Context of Vocation Ministry and the Phases of the Discernment Process**

The process of “sowing the seeds” of a vocation unfolds through three discernible phases. The first phase is **initial invitation**. Vocation ministers invite youth to learn about, and share in, Christ’s mission. In doing so, some of the young persons may begin inquiring about Vincentian life. The second phase is **active discernment**. Persons at this phase seek human and Christian growth with some openness to a vocation within a society of apostolic life. Vocation ministers provide inquirers with the information and witness they need to understand the Vincentian vocation, and assist them in discernment.<sup>9</sup> The third phase is **application for admission** to a program of formal formation. After one or two years of inquiry and discernment, persons may seek to enter a Vincentian house of formal formation.<sup>10</sup>

## **SECTION 2**

### **THE AGENTS OF VINCENTIAN FORMATION SPECIFIC TO THE STAGE OF INVITATION, INQUIRY AND DISCERNMENT**

#### **A. The Inquirer – Discerner – Applicant – Under the Action of the Holy Spirit**

The first task of every inquirer or discerner is to open his mind and heart to the movement of the Holy Spirit. In this process, he needs to receive an understanding of the Vincentian way through both word and example, and be assisted in discernment by competent confreres. It is the inquirer’s task to bring what he receives to prayer, and to open his heart in a willing surrender to the Father’s call.

#### **B. The Vocation Director**

The Vocation Director has a special role of announcing God’s word and offering an example of Vincentian life. He ought to be full time, for he will have to sow seeds at each of the three stages in which vocations may be found. He will have to come to know inquirers, discerners, and those who seek admission to a house of formation, and aid them in the application process.

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<sup>9</sup> This can take place through periodic (perhaps monthly) meetings while the discerner lives in his own home, in a formally constituted discernment house, or within a local community house under the guidance of a confrere.

<sup>10</sup> The length of time may vary in individual provinces and with individual circumstances.

### C. The Associate Directors and the Vocation Committee

To be present and active throughout the geographical area of a province, the Vocation Director will need the aid of Associate Vocation Directors in spreading seeds of vocations, and Discernment Directors who will journey with inquirers. Together they form a Vocation Committee to support one another in this ministry.

### D. Other Persons in Formation

Candidates who have already made the transition from inquiry to formal formation are a significant resource for planting seeds of vocations among inquirers. They understand the concerns and apprehension of inquirers. Their witness alleviates much of the darkness in the steps which inquirers are thinking of taking.

## SECTION 3

### THE OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES OF VOCATION MINISTRY AND OF THE PROCESSES OF INQUIRY AND DISCERNMENT

This *Ratio* offers strategies for the phases of invitation, discernment, and admission to a program of formal formation. Provinces should adapt them to their respective cultural contexts.

#### A. The Invitation Phase: Strategies for Promoting Inquiry into the Vincentian Vocation

In leading youth to inquire about a Vincentian vocation, the Vocation Director and his associates:

- **Use traditional and modern media to promote vocations.** These include publishing pamphlets and brochures which offer a brief understanding of a Vincentian vocation, a monthly newsletter on Vincentian activity, and using electronic media such as Facebook.
- **Visit places where youth are found with some of the candidates in formal formation.** These include parish youth groups, groups in the Vincentian Family (such as Marian Youth groups), schools (including retreats), and vocation workshops.
- **Meet with young people who attend a minor seminary not run by the confreres but who have manifested some interest in a Vincentian vocation.**

- **Visit families.** Parents play an important role in a person's consideration of a religious vocation.<sup>11</sup>
- **Elicit the assistance of other confreres.** This could be done by encouraging confreres in local Vincentian community houses to welcome inquirers and discerners to visit them.

### **B. The Vincentian Axis: The Image of a Vincentian to be Presented to Inquirers<sup>12</sup>**

From the beginning, vocation ministers help inquirers appreciate the calling to deepen life with Christ and share his ministry to the poor. The dominant image of the Vincentian which they present is that of a missionary. This includes both being a priest and a brother. The inquirer may be unsure of, and need not decide on, which of these paths of ministry he desires to follow. It is important for him to understand that both brother and priest are fully Vincentian and fully missionaries. At the same time, it is helpful for the inquirer to understand the differences between the ministries of the priest and the brother.

### **C. Human Formation for Inquirers and Discerners**

The objective of human formation is to help the inquirer-discerner grow in the maturity needed for a Vincentian vocation. In that light, he will be guided to:

- listen attentively to others while presenting his own views humbly and clearly;
- share his experiences with openness appropriate to his age;

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<sup>11</sup> Parents may support a genuine Christian and Catholic vision of life. In other cases they may view a vocation as a way for their children to acquire resources for the family. Some parents may discourage a religious vocation because they wish to have grandchildren. Vocation ministers need to nurture the spirit of the parents as well as that of the inquirer.

<sup>12</sup> In provinces where there is a large number of young persons inquiring about a Vincentian vocation, it may be necessary to screen them before allowing them to continue their discernment. The Vocation Director may: seek letters of recommendation from the inquirer's pastor; visit the home of the inquirer's family; request a letter from the inquirer declaring his desire to enter a discernment program and committing himself to following the program's stipulations; administer preliminary tests to ascertain the inquirer's basic academic ability; and request copies of the inquirer's Baptismal and Confirmation certificates. It may also be wise to require the inquirer to participate in the discernment phase for two years before applying for admission to the pre-internal seminary stage of formation. It would be helpful if this phase of vocation ministry were conducted in a residential setting under the supervision of a Discernment Director.

- contribute generously in the discernment program's community and apostolic projects.

The Vocation Director, or his associate, will reflect with the inquirer-discerner upon his strengths and weaknesses, and his gifts and needs.

#### **D. Spiritual Formation for Inquirers and Discerners**

The objective of spiritual formation is to provide the inquirer-discerner with an understanding of the fundamentals of Christian and Vincentian spirituality. The individual will be helped to:

- make Christ the center of his life;
- develop a practice of personal prayer including participation in the Eucharist and the
- Sacrament of Reconciliation;
- commit to living a moral life and to be truthful, respect the reputation and property of others, and love others chastely.

#### **E. Intellectual Formation for Inquirers and Discerners**

The objective of intellectual formation is to lead the inquirer-discerner to the conviction that learning is necessary for a Vincentian vocation. He shows that conviction by the discipline he brings to his current studies and the grades he earns in his courses. If he is otherwise qualified for admission to the pre-internal seminary but has academic difficulty, the Vocation Director may recommend avenues of scholastic assistance.

#### **F. Apostolic Formation for Inquirers and Discerners**

The objective of apostolic formation is to give the inquirer-discerner an appreciation of Christian service. The Vocation Director may encourage him to engage in service on a weekly basis, in conjunction with his parish or in other placements. It would be helpful for the inquirer-discerner and the Vocation Director to receive an evaluation of the service performance from the placement supervisor. The Vocation Director, or his associate, should reflect with the inquirer-discerner on his service, individually or within a group. Questions such as how he experiences God in service, how he experiences himself, his comfort or struggle, his joy or disinterest, can lead to fruitful discussion and aid the inquiry-discernment process.

## **G. Community Formation for Inquirers and Discerners**

The objective of community formation is to have the inquirer-discerner relate to peers with a similar interest in the Vincentian vocation. The Vocation Director or his associate arranges meetings of inquirers-discerners, and plans workshops, retreats, and/or other group dynamics, such as apostolic experiences in which they participate together. These events could include a presentation on vocational discernment, time for prayer, one-to-one conversation with the Vocation Director or associate, and time for inquirers-discerners to interact with candidates in formal formation and confreres. A professional psychologist may be used to conduct some of the group meetings. The Vocation Director will help inquirers-discerners evaluate their comfort within these group experiences as an indicator of suitability for moving forward in formation.

### **SECTION 4**

## **THE PROCESS FOR APPLICATION AND ADMISSION TO THE PRE-INTERNAL SEMINARY PROGRAM**

### **A. Profile of Discerners Acceptable for Admission to a Pre-Internal Seminary Program**

To be accepted into a pre-internal seminary program, the discerner should show that he possesses:

#### **1. Aptitude for Vincentian Formation.** The discerner:

- manifests honest appreciation of the centrality of Christ for living the Vincentian life;
- strives to grow in understanding of, and commitment to, ways of following Christ;
- desires to grow in appreciation of the struggles of the poor and of the ways they can be served;
- has the capacity for living the vowed life of the Congregation.

#### **2. Aptitude for Human Formation.** The discerner:

- is ordinarily between the ages of 18 and 40, and free from canonical impediments to living in a society of apostolic life;<sup>13</sup>
- has adequate physical health so as to contribute to community life and apostolic service;

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<sup>13</sup> In provinces that conduct pre-internal seminaries in which candidates complete their secondary education, the discerner may be as young as 15.

- has emotional balance and deals well with the challenges that his status in life presents him with.<sup>14</sup>

**3. Aptitude for Spiritual Formation.** The discerner:

- has received the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation;
- is faithful in joining in the celebration of the Eucharist;
- participates regularly in the Sacrament of Reconciliation;
- spends time in daily prayer appropriate for his age and growth;
- has lived chastely for at least two years prior to his application.

**4. Aptitude for Intellectual Formation.** The discerner possesses a level of intellectual ability necessary for conducting careful discernment and serving in future ministry wisely and responsibly.<sup>15</sup>

**5. Aptitude for Apostolic Formation.** The discerner:

- has had some experience of service to the poor and service within the Church;
- offers an account of how this experience has affected his consideration of a vocation to the Vincentian Community.

**6. Aptitude for Community Formation.** The discerner:

- maintains good interpersonal relationships with his peers;
- works congenially with others, and can follow the leadership of others as well as contribute to the group by taking helpful initiatives;
- possesses willingness to learn from the guidance of the Vocation Director and his associates.

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<sup>14</sup> A discerner who is a recovering substance abuser should participate faithfully in a recovery program for at least three years preceding the time at which he applies to a formal house of Vincentian formation. He will be expected to continue the recovery program throughout his formation.

<sup>15</sup> In those provinces where the pre-internal seminary admits persons of secondary school age, the candidate will have shown by his achievements in primary school that he has the intellectual capacity for succeeding in secondary school. In provinces that admit only persons who are beyond secondary school age, the applicant will have completed secondary school and will produce a verifiable diploma or its equivalent which will enable him to begin further studies.

## **B. Role of the Discerner in the Application Process for Admission to a Pre-Internal Seminary Program**

When applying for admission to a house of formal Vincentian formation, the discerner will:

1. Write a letter in his own hand stating his motivation for seeking to become a Vincentian.
2. Complete an application form for admission.<sup>16</sup>
3. Request that original baptismal and confirmation certificates from the appropriate parishes be sent directly to the Vocation Director.
4. Request transcripts from each of the institutions of education which he has attended.
5. Request that letters of recommendation be sent directly to the Vocation Director by:
  - the pastor of his home parish or director of a base community in regions where this is applicable;
  - two professional persons (e.g., his past teachers or employers);
  - the pastoral supervisor who has guided his apostolic work;
  - two personal references (for example, from friends who know him well);
  - one family member;
  - the rector or formation director of all seminaries which he may have attended.
6. Take a physical examination, which will include a report of his physical health, signed by a certified physician. He will have the report sent directly to the Vocation Director.<sup>17</sup>
7. Sign a consent form (provided by the Vocation Director) giving the Vocation Director permission to conduct a criminal background check.
8. Sign a form (provided by the Vocation Director) giving the Vocation Director freedom to receive and share with the Admissions Team, the results of the psychological exam which he will be required to take.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> An example of an application form for admission to the pre-internal seminary can be found in the appendices to this *Ratio*, and may be adapted by provinces for use in their respective cultural and situational contexts.

<sup>17</sup> An example of a physician's report form can be found in the appendices to this *Ratio*, and may be adapted by provinces for use in their respective cultural and situational contexts.

<sup>18</sup> An example of a release form can be found in the appendices to this *Ratio*, and may be adapted by provinces for use in their respective cultural and situational contexts.

When the discerner has provided all of the required documents, he will meet with the Vocation Director, the superior of the house of formation which he is seeking to enter, and the Formation Director of that house. These interviewers will discuss with the discerner his aptitude for embracing the different dimensions of formation. They will assess his readiness and suitability for the next stage in the formation process.<sup>19</sup>

### **C. Role of the Vocation Director and the Admissions Team in the Application Process for Admission to a Pre-Internal Seminary Program**

1. The Vocation Director has the responsibility of guiding the discerner through the application process. He undertakes the following tasks:
  - Assesses the discerner's capability of meeting the standards delineated in the "Profile of Discerners Acceptable for Admission to a Pre-Internal Seminary Program," described above. He will share that assessment with the Admissions Team.
  - Gives the discerner a list of the required documents with instructions for obtaining them.
  - Gathers and presents all the documentation to the Admissions Team.
  - Enlists an agency to conduct a criminal background check on the discerner and includes the report of that agency in the documentation required for admitting him.
  - Arranges for the discerner's psychological examination from a certified psychologist. He will include the psychological report in the documentation required for admitting the discerner.
  - Arranges for the discerner's interviews with the members of the Admissions Team.
2. After reviewing the documentation and conducting the final interviews with the discerner, the Vocation Director and the members of the Admissions Team decide to accept him into a house of formal Vincentian formation, accept him conditionally, delay his acceptance, or reject his application.

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<sup>19</sup> Some provinces may also require a letter from the applicant's parents in which they give their consent to having their son enter the formation program, and state that they will not ask for anything from the Congregation if their son chooses to leave the program. Some provinces may also require the applicant to submit a letter stating that he enters the house of formation freely, and will ask for nothing from the Congregation if he decides to leave the program.

3. If the discerner is not accepted into the house of formation, the Vocation Director will inform the discerner of the decision and the reasons why. He may discuss options for the discerner which include continuing to discern while dealing constructively with the reasons for delaying his acceptance, or ending further consideration of a possible calling to the Vincentian Community.
4. If the discerner is accepted, the superior of the house of formation (or the Visitor, if it is the province's practice), will write a letter of acceptance to the discerner indicating the date and the time when the discerner will begin his residence at the house of formation, and offering any other details which will enable the discerner to make a smooth transition to this stage of formation.