

# Formation, a Life Process

“He grew in grace and age and wisdom before God  
and all who knew him”

by Hugh O'Donnell, C.M.

## I. - FORWARD TO BASICS

Thank you for your invitation to speak about lifelong education and ongoing formation in the Congregation of the Mission. I see it as an invitation to reflect on our common and personal vocation to grow for our whole lives as human beings, disciples of Jesus, followers of Vincent, missionaries, confreres of one another, friends of poor people and friends of priests. I claim no expertise in this area, though formation has been a large part of my life in the Community. I imagine I have been invited because of my present responsibility as Director of the CIF program. Knowing the confreres from around the whole Congregation has been a great blessing for me and I hope that what I have to say will in some way express what I have learned from them of their hopes and aspirations, not to mention their satisfaction with the opportunity to come to CIF. Still, I am not speaking specifically about CIF today, but rather about the call we all have to grow to the end of our lives. Since I am not here as an expert, I have chosen to speak out of my experience and share with you my convictions. I hope I can be concrete and specific, not so you will agree with everything, but so you will have something specific to stimulate your own reflection and evoke your own experience and convictions.

**A new generation of leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.** You are a new generation of leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I was present at the last General Assembly in 2004, not as a delegate, but to report to the Assembly on CIF. I had a great surprise when I got to the Assembly. Having been a member of the previous five General Assemblies, I expected to know many or most of the members of the 2004 Assembly. But I discovered on my arrival that many of the provincials and most of the delegates were participating in their first Assembly. It was by and large an Assembly of names and faces new to me. After I got over my surprise, I realized that the leadership of the Congregation had passed into new and younger hands, which

made me happy. The Assembly of 2004 being the first General Assembly of the 21<sup>st</sup> century made me realize we have a new generation of leaders — yourselves — for a new century in the life of the Congregation.

The opportunity of participating in five General Assemblies gave me a perspective on the evolution of the Community over the past 40 years, which I would like to share with you, because I think it gives a context for the work of this gathering. The journey of the Congregation since the Second Vatican Council has been a graced one. Knowing where we are coming from and “what has been going forward” will help put the theme of Lifelong Learning and Ongoing Formation in perspective, and may help to contextualize the way forward.

**A graced journey.** The first two General Assemblies after the Council, 1968-1969 and 1974, were a time of struggle, conflict, a clash of world views and hopes for the future. It was a time when confreres struggled to know one another and one another's situations, one another's way of thinking, to learn that words prized by one group had a different and often negative meaning for another group. Frankly, it was a time for getting over false impressions, stereotypes, prejudices and projections. There was a shift too in centers of influence. English language dominance in 1968-1969 gave way to Spanish, French and Italian convictions about Jesus the evangelizer (and liberator) of the poor — the agenda prepared by the provinces for the 1974 Assembly was thrown out and the Assembly dedicated itself to pastoral exhortations to the confreres. It was my first Assembly and for me it was marked by mutual misunderstanding as well as serious efforts to overcome the misunderstandings. In hindsight, I believe it was the first phase in becoming an international and global Community, not only geographically, which we already were, but relationally, corporately and as missionaries.

The next phase in our evolution as an international Community with a global mission happened in the 1980 and 1986 Assemblies. For nine weeks in the summer of 1980 the General Assembly worked at writing the new Constitutions and Statutes. There seemed to be a new level of understanding and dialogue, new efforts to communicate and understand one another. The Assembly was stalemated for weeks over whether the Congregation had one end or three ends, but we finally resolved the question in a manner acceptable to the whole Assembly. The image of Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor was embraced as the proper expression of the end of the Community with the clear understanding that it was realized in a threefold way. The final document belonged to a united Assembly and a united Congregation. Six years later the General Assembly of 1986 deepened this bond through its theme, “One Body, One Spirit in Christ.”

The third phase in our post-Conciliar evolution moved us from internal unity to global mission and Vincentian outreach. The Assembly of 1992, in which Father Maloney was elected Superior General, mandated inter-provincial collaboration and a new missionary initiative. The Assembly of 1998 directed the Congregation to reach out also, this time in active collaboration with the incredibly large and increasingly active members of the Vincentian Family.

This journey from conflict and mutual incomprehension (1968-1969 and 1974) to unity and understanding through struggle and dialogue (1980 and 1986) and then on to the expansive missionary outreach of the international missions and engagement with the Vincentian Family (1992 and 1998) was not something anyone planned. It is only seen in retrospect and so, I believe, must be attributed to the Holy Spirit. Naturally, it leads to the question: where do we go from here? Whatever theme will be chosen for the next General Assembly, I do not know, but I presume Lifelong Learning and Ongoing Formation will inevitably be a key component of any future strategic direction you choose.

### **What is Lifelong Formation all about?**

Here are some of the factors that have to enter into any discussion of Lifelong Formation. You may add others.

**Growth.** Ongoing formation is about a frame of mind and a commitment to grow for the rest of our lives. Initial formation is only an introduction to our way of life and a foundation for what is to come. Years ago initial formation was also final formation, except for a few who went on to specialize in some academic area. But, today ongoing formation is an integral part of our lifelong journey.

**Transformation.** Formation aims at transformation. This is Rosemary Haughton's insight long ago. The real goal is transformation, which engages the freedom of the individual person responding to the Holy Spirit. Formation provides the context and the materiel for transformation. We may form people in the limited sense of socializing them into the practices, customs and way of life of the Community. But an authentic formation process aims beyond itself, where in fact it cannot go, that is, into the world of the individual's freedom and the action of the Holy Spirit. It seems to me the grandeur and limitations of formation are found in locating formation as significantly more than socialization and significantly less than transformation.

**Journey.** Ongoing formation makes a great contribution to the journey from the false self to the true self, from generosity to love, from knowing who we are to giving our lives for the brethren, from poverty in the third person plural (other people are poor) to poverty

in the first person singular (I am the poor one, like Vincent). It fosters the journey from prayers to contemplation, from social conformity to self-authority, and from indirect discourse (repeating what others have said) to direct discourse (speaking the Word of God which has become my own).

Someone comparing the disciples of rabbis with the disciples of Jesus, noted several key differences, among which was that disciples of rabbis hope to eventually be rabbis themselves, whereas disciples of Jesus never graduate. We are lifelong disciples, learners. Our journey is into the ineffable mystery of God's love mediated to us through the *anawim* whom God has made our lot.

**Holiness.** It has become customary to speak of conversion, not as a single, life-changing event, but as an ongoing reality, ongoing conversion. We are converted not only once, when we respond affirmatively with our whole heart and soul to the invitation of Jesus to come and follow him; after our initial response to the proclamation of the Gospel and the invitation to follow Christ evangelizing the *anawim*, there is the daily invitation to conversion or transformation in Christ. If we speak of conversion or *metanoia* in the Christian world, the East speaks of enlightenment as the goal of this journey.

**Competence.** Initial formation introduces us to the life and mission of the Community and puts or advances us on the road to holiness. Vows confirm our commitment to evangelizing the poor for the whole of our lives, and priesthood or brotherhood identify our role in evangelization. But this is a point of departure. We will certainly have to grow in ministerial competence and perhaps also develop professional skills and competencies. The new image of priesthood emerging gradually from the Second Vatican Council calls for a whole host of new competencies, especially competencies in proclaiming the Word of God and evangelizing the *anawim*. The primacy of baptism, the emergence of the laity and the development of lay ministries all call for community building skills, listening, collaboration and dynamic leadership. Leaders, they say, are made not born, including clerical and religious leaders.

**Being abreast of the times.** Pope John XXIII said the Second Vatican Council was about *aggiornamento*, because he sensed the Church had fallen behind the times. I do not know if we have caught up yet or not, but it is incumbent on us to relate to our contemporaries and be in touch with what is happening today. There is no value in being behind the times. Saint Vincent was abreast of his times. I will come back to this later.

**A Goal-Oriented Vision.** When John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council in 1962, he said, "Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relationships...." He later explained that it is

an order in which people will resolve their difficulties and differences without violence. Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II have both spoken about creating a civilization of love. Here we have a Gospel and ecclesial vision that animates our ongoing formation. When this new order of human relationships and this civilization of love is centered on the least in our society and upon their sacerdotal servants it has a Vincentian face.

I believe the goal of ongoing formation deserves special attention. Thomas Merton has said that we live in a world of perfected means and confused ends. We can know a great deal about process, if we only knew where we were going.

### **What is the basic dynamic of Ongoing Formation?**

1. The basic dynamic of ongoing formation is the same as the dynamic challenge of the Second Vatican Council, namely, 1) “*ressourcement*” and 2) responding to “the signs of the times.” We were called to go back to the sources, to the charism of the Founder, and bring it forward into contemporary settings through discerning the signs of the times.

2. “*Ressourcement*.” I think the community can congratulate itself on our journey back to the sources since the Second Vatican Council. Coste is available in Italian, Spanish, English, and Polish. Studies, journals, study weeks, workshops, seminars, websites, SIEV and CIF have all contributed to our knowledge of Vincent. The human and historical dimensions of Vincent’s vocation and journey to holiness have replaced a hagiographically distant Vincent. We are all delighted with the results. Vincent has come alive for us within the community and the larger Vincentian Family in ways undreamed of. There is, of course, more to do, and we seem ready to do it. Parenthetically, SIEV is seeking to foster a new generation of Vincentian scholars.

3. “The signs of the times.” The Constitutions and Statues of 1980 were our best effort to express the meaning and way of Vincent for our times in the light of Vatican II and what we were learning of Vincent. But, we were immediately conscious that it was the beginning and not the end of our rediscovery of our roots. The second paragraph of the Constitutions, which was overshadowed by all the attention given to the first paragraph on “following Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor,” points to the future challenge and dynamic of ongoing discernment and conversion. It reads:

*2. With this purpose in view, the Congregation of the Mission, faithful to the gospel, and always attentive to the signs of the times and the more urgent calls of the Church, should take care to open up new ways and use new means adapted to the*

*circumstances of time and place. Moreover, it should strive to evaluate and plan its works and ministries, and in this way remain in a continual state of renewal.*

More than any other paragraph in the Constitutions, this is our mandate for lifelong discernment and continual renewal. The first two paragraphs establish the fundamental dynamic of our vocation: following Christ evangelizing poor people in contemporary circumstances. It is at the heart of our vocation that we be in touch with our times, in touch with what is happening, what is going forward. But this is not merely about information and the news, it is to be done in faith. Discerning the signs of the times means to regard them with the mind and heart of Christ. "God so loved the world..." Only the love of God which is at the heart of our vocation will keep us from retreating to secure surroundings from the contemporary world, but will give us the sympathy to appreciate the good that is happening and the challenges before us.

### **Forward to Basics**

More than twenty years ago, one of you here was invited by the Midwest province to give us a day of prayer and reflection in preparation for a provincial assembly. I still remember the talk. Our province was divided between confreres who were insisting on going back to basics and confreres who wanted to go ahead to new works. The speaker said that each group was right, but not entirely, perhaps each group was half right. It had a unifying effect on us. Afterwards, I thought the title of his talk could have been: "Forward to Basics." The basics of faith, prayer, love, communion and sacrifice are absolutely necessary, but we will not find them by going back to the 50s or to a world that has passed away. We will only find them as we go forward by engaging the challenges of today and tomorrow and the new world that is being born.

These comments have been a general orientation to ongoing formation. This evening I would like to reflect on the ongoing formation of the individual confrere, and tomorrow on the ongoing formation of the community.

## **II. - VINCENT'S JOURNEY AND OURS**

Going back to the sources has revealed the human side of Vincent's holiness, has shown us the richness and warmth of his relationships, has placed him in relationship to his society and the events of his times, and, in general, has touched our hearts and left

us with a profound appreciation of the real person that Vincent was. I would like to single out three dimensions of the life of Vincent that are relevant to our ongoing formation.

### **The Way of Vincent**

1. Vincent's journey to holiness was gradual. One of the things participants in CIF appreciate most is the discovery of the human side of Vincent. There is great joy in learning about Vincent's road to holiness, that is, in knowing the human and historical dimensions of his journey from financial ambition to becoming the Apostle of Charity. Vincent discovered the goodness of the people in Clichy, his own poverty in his trial of faith, the spiritual poverty of the people on the de Gondi estates in Folleville, the needs of the sick poor in Châtillon, the human goodness of Francis de Sales, the burden of his failed mission to his family and release from it, the synergy of working with partners in mission (Louise, etc.). Vincent's journey to poor people was at the same time a journey to freedom, true evangelical freedom.

2. Vincent found God in history, events circumstances and people. This is what, I believe, definitively separated him from Bérulle. Bérulle's focus was on the heavenly liturgy and he saw the priest as a reflection of that otherworldly holiness. Vincent, on the other hand, found God present in this world: in events, in circumstances, in experience, in people, in the poor. The Jesus of Bérulle was the Risen Lord; the Jesus of Vincent was the earthly Jesus of Nazareth known in the mysteries of his historical existence. For Vincent "God is here!"

André Dodin took delight in saying Vincent did not have a spirituality, but rather he had a Way, a Way that was based on experience. He found God in experience and events; for example, in his encounter with Francis de Sales, or the offer of Marguerite Naseau to aid the Ladies, or the challenge of the Huguenot in Montmirail about the neglect of the poor country people, or the loss of the farm at Orsigny. Dodin identified Vincent's Way in three steps: first, experience, second, reflection in the light of the Gospels and third, action governed by faith and clear criteria. Vincent was not an ideologue, nor did he start from ideas, concepts, dreams and plans. He dealt with events and discerned God's presence in them. This leads us to acknowledge that our world today is different from Vincent's, so that the events he responded to are not the events we experience. God speaks to us in the events of today. We are called to respond with his charism. This makes Vincent's charism perpetually contemporary.

3. Vincent was a man of his times. We like to quote Vincent's words about being inventive to infinity. But the first thing we have to imitate in Vincent is being abreast of our times. Vincent was abreast of his times. There was very little that happened in France that Vincent didn't know about (or respond to).

Because Vincent was a man of his times, we are invited to be men of our times. Because Vincent found God in history, in events, and in people (rather than in theories and ideologies) Vincent's Way is enduringly relevant. His times are not our times, but fidelity to his way means for us relevance to our times — to be men of our times. And this is what we undertook in writing the Constitutions and Statutes in 1980.

We know that Pope John XXIII believed that the church had fallen behind the times and needed to come up to date. That is the meaning of "*aggiornamento*." Some people say that the "*aggiornamento*" phase is finished and that we are in a new phase, called "re-founding" or "re-inventing." Perhaps without knowing it, that is what we did in writing the Constitutions in 1980. We re-defined ourselves and what it means to be Vincentian for the present and the future.

The Constitutions have a future thrust. Yesterday I quoted the remarkable second paragraph of the Constitutions. This is the charter for ongoing formation in relationship to the realities of our society and culture and the events of our times. It is one of the two pillars of the Constitutions. It calls for:

- Attention to the signs of the times
- Attention to the more urgent calls of the Church
- Opening up new ways
- Using new means
- Adapted to the circumstances of time and place
- Evaluating and planning works and ministries
- In this way remaining in a state of continuous renewal.

This paragraph links us to what is going forward and sets a framework for growth, development and conversion for the community and for the individual. It is in continuity with paragraph 77 which states:

1. *Our formation, in a continuous process, should have as its purpose that the members, animated by the spirit of St. Vincent, become suitable to carry on the mission of the Congregation.*
2. *They should therefore grow daily in the knowledge that Jesus Christ is the center of our life and the rule of the congregation.*

In the same vein paragraph 81 says:

*The formation of our members should be continued and renewed all through life.*

This insistence on lifelong formation and continuous growth in relation to contemporary needs and events is new.

In 1980, we re-invented ourselves. It was a long time before I understood the Constitutions and Statutes of 1980 as a re-invention of ourselves, but that is what they are. The difference between the 326 years (1658-1984) when we followed the Common Rules and the present Constitutions is that Saint Vincent wrote the Common Rules and we have written the Constitutions and Statutes. There is a second difference also. The Common Rules were based on experience and reflected the actual life of the Congregation. The Constitutions and Statutes express our aspirations for the future, what we believe we are called to be. The consequence of this, which is a third difference, is that we are called not only to fidelity to what already is, but we are called to fidelity to the future, which some have called “creative fidelity.”

1. We authored the Constitutions and Statutes. This implies responsibility. Implicitly we accepted responsibility for defining the shape and thrust of Vincentian life in this new era. Vatican Council II directed us to do it, and the Holy See approved and confirmed our Constitutions, this is true. Still, the responsibility for living the charism of Vincent in our time is ours. And, as we do, we are discovering a richness and depth in the Constitutions beyond what we thought we put there. This is certainly the experience of confreres who come to CIF and the experts as well.

2. They bear upon the present and the future. Although Vincent said that the Common Rules contained nothing that the community was not already living, we cannot say the same thing about the Constitutions and Statutes. They express, not necessarily our way of life today, but rather values, goals and norms that we believe embody the charism of Vincent and that we seek to measure up to in new circumstances.

3. They call for “creative fidelity.” Our fidelity is not only to what is already given in the past, but it is also to the future, that is, to “opening up new ways and new means adapted to the circumstances of time and place” (C. 2). Our challenge is to “creative fidelity.”

It is very common to quote Vincent’s words, “God is creative to infinity.” The Constitutions and Statutes are our means of imitating the creative side of Vincent’s charism.

### **III. - CHOOSING LIFE: RESOURCES FOR MOVING FORWARD**

- A. Appreciation of where we have been and the good that is happening**
1. Acceptance of our mission: “following Christ evangelizing poor people”
  2. The feeling and experience of belonging to an international community
  3. A tangible sense of the unity of the Congregation worldwide
  4. The goodwill and goodness of the confreres
  5. The inculturation of the Gospel on all continents
  6. Indigenous leadership throughout the Congregation
- B. The recognition that the confreres are the greatest asset of the Congregation**
1. Jesus says of the disciples, “I thank you for those you have given to me... they are your gift to me”
  2. Each confrere, as well as each poor person, is God’s gift
- C. An appreciation of the potential benefits of ongoing formation**
1. The confidence that we are in touch with our times
  2. The sense of relevance to our society and our people
  3. The joy of being life-long learners — “Abide in my truth!”
  4. A deepening Vincentian identity and the desire to share it
  5. The reality of being men of prayer who are at home with interiority
  6. Confidence and trust that the Lord is leading us in our present circumstances
  7. Generativity — the release of personal and corporate energy in the service of the poor and the clergy
- D. A positive attitude toward change and conversion (humility)**
1. Authenticity calls for ongoing conversion
  2. Conversion is spiritual, moral, intellectual, affective, social and political
  3. Conversion is from the false self to the true self, from self-interest to self-sacrifice, from ego to authenticity and freedom

**E. The cooperation and goodwill of the confreres**

1. Recognition of the confreres and their abilities
2. A positive program of growth and development
3. A community culture of affirmation and encouragement
4. Ultimately the self-gift of the confreres

**F. The large number of people of good will with whom we might collaborate**

1. In the Vincentian Family and our Vincentian works
2. In the world — networking and collaboration

**IV. - KEYS TO THE FUTURE****A. Forward to Basics**

1. Continue studying Vincent and appropriating his charism
2. Be men of prayer and interiority
  - the relationship of prayer and poverty
  - Giuseppe Toscani, *La Mystique des Pauvres. Le charism de la Charité* (Saint Paul, 1998). Also, translated by Myles Rearden, *The Spirituality of the Poor* (privately published, 2006)
3. Self-sacrifice and unconditional commitment
  - Listening with an open heart
  - Poverty of time
4. Fraternal communion under contemporary conditions
5. Rejoice in being the “Little Company” (abandon the “gleaners” mentality)

**B. Basic choices**

1. Start from our own experience
2. Honor the good will and experience of the confreres
3. Choose to lead (setting the agenda and real expectations)
4. Challenge the confreres, communities and provinces to grow
5. Educate for the challenges of our time
6. Use available resources within and outside the community
7. Create learning experiences that lead to behavioral change
8. Evangelize the culture of the Congregation — starting with ongoing formation

- Ongoing formation is a way of evangelizing the community, ourselves
- Individually and corporately

**C. Identify the strategic challenges to the community in the world**

1. Poor people on our doorsteps; the growing gap between rich and poor
2. The prevalence of war and violence and the longing for peace and reconciliation; Saint Vincent, a man of peace in a time of war
3. The hunger for meaning, values, faith and prayer
4. The need of priests for support, welcome and friendship (Imagine new ways of being brothers to priests — houses of hospitality?)
5. The longing of lay people to volunteer and to serve