

Synthesis of the Theme of Ongoing Formation

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INTRODUCTION

From 4-15 June 2007 the international meeting of all the Visitors of the Congregation of the Mission was held in Mexico City.

The first week centered on the theme of ongoing formation. Hugh O'Donnell CM led the reflection for the first four days, offering us very valuable material on the theme based on his profound knowledge of the Congregation's journey in these last decades. Patrick McDevitt CM, aided by his assistant, María José Pacheco, facilitated the reflection and the interchange both in the plenary sessions and in the work groups.

Daniel Vásquez CM, Visitor of the Province of Colombia, ended the week with a half day of spiritual retreat, and led the Visitors in a meditation on ongoing formation centering on the two poles of the Vincentian vocation: Jesus Christ and the poor.

BASIC ASPECTS OF VINCENTIAN FORMATION

The meeting led the participants to deepen the different aspects of ongoing formation, individualizing the fundamental perspectives, the basic dynamic principles, the objectives to be reached, the operative levels, aptitudes and resources, and the obstacles (cf. C. 1; 25, 2^o; 81).

Fundamental perspectives for ongoing Vincentian formation

The *following of Christ*, Evangelizer of the Poor, constitutes the principal axis of all Vincentian formation. Christ and the poor are the essential and indispensable poles and the source of ongoing formation: it is necessary to love Jesus Christ ever more in order to love the poor ever more, just as one needs to love the poor ever more in order to love Jesus Christ ever more.

The *identity* of the Vincentian missionary is not given once and for all; rather it is the result of his daily relationship with Christ, with the community to which he belongs, with the world and with the poor.

We are convinced that formation is not an acquired state, but rather a *way*: initial formation is only an introduction to this way which lasts all life long. This way renews itself in a process which, from day by day, leads to a profound transformation of the personal identity of the missionary, in order to configure him ever more with Jesus Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor (cf., C 77-78).

Fraternal life in community is the dynamic ground in which the relationships with Christ and the poor are nourished, sustained and verified.

Basic dynamic principles of Vincentian Formation

The *Christological* principle: it is not enough to imitate Christ; it is necessary to enter into his mystery in order to conform ourselves to Christ, Evangelizer of the Poor, and to participate in the life of the Trinity.

The principle of *Vincentian experience*: we are to discern in the daily events of our life the will of God and to respond to it with action.

The *mystical* principle: openness to the action of the Holy Spirit, which shapes our person in an open, available and joyful way.

The principle of *Vincentian humanism*: formation consists in becoming ever more a “humanized” person in all its dimensions (human, intellectual, spiritual, communitarian, apostolic), permeated with the Vincentian dimension which gives them form and dynamism (cf. C 9).

The *community* principle: the community is the formative agent par excellence, the school of ongoing formation.

The *relational* principle: whether in the contact with the poor person or in the ability to relate with others in a flexible, cordial and mature way.

The principle of *Christian realism*: having the capacity to relate to reality, recognizing it as showing God’s providential design for our life.

The principle of *unity in diversity*.

The principle of *progressive evolution* of the various stages of maturity.

The objectives to be reached

The first objective of ongoing formation is the *holiness* corresponding to the life of the missionary: a holiness acquired through daily interior conversion and transformation, which leads to “putting on the spirit of Christ” (CR I, 3; C 1).

Joined to this fundamental objective is that of *continual growth on the human and professional level*, which leads the missionary to acquire an ever-deeper capacity for relating with others and competence in the proclamation of the Word and in the practice of charity.

The Vincentian missionary is therefore called to *be always in tune with the times* and to allow himself to be intimately touched by what goes on around him, knowing how to discern in daily events the mission to which God calls him.

This leads him, in fidelity to the gospel, to adapt his own ministry to the real demands of the people, learning to be *flexible and creative in his apostolate*. Such apostolic creativity will be mature and efficacious the more it is lived in the sphere of a fraternity which frees one from individualism and loneliness in the ministry.

The operative levels (these should not be read in chronological succession, but rather in a circular relationship)

At the *personal* level, the missionary takes responsibility for his ongoing formation; it cannot be delegated to or substituted by another person or strategy.

At the *local* level, the community constitutes the primary area of formation in which each confrere is constantly challenged to grow.

At the *provincial* level, the Visitor is called to create, where it does not exist, the commission for ongoing formation and to empower it in order to assist in developing in all confreres the personal motivation and conviction of the importance of ongoing formation (cf., S 41-42).

At the level of *Conferences* of Visitors and Provinces, formative meetings, interchanges and evaluations are indispensable today.

At the level of the *Congregation*, there is a need to develop some lines of specifically Vincentian ongoing formation (a *Ratio Formationis* or *Lines of Action*) that outline the general framework in which the other levels (CIF, SIEV, Vincentian Months, etc.) operate.

Aptitudes and Resources

The responsibility in formation at the various levels is nourished by a profound and enduring aptitude for reading *the signs of the times* which constitute a constant stimulus for personal and communal growth. The discernment of such signs requires a continual *comparison with the sources* of our spirituality (writings of Saint Vincent, Constitutions and Statutes, Vincentian tradition, etc.).

Our present context, too, offers important resources, among which is the desire of many laity to participate in the Vincentian mission and to commit themselves to it. The *Vincentian Family* can be an important resource today for the enrichment of our Vincentian spirituality and a fruitful collaboration in the service of the poor.

Finally, the broader social context in which we live is an important resource: we can enhance the value of the *widespread need for sense and values in today's world* and contribute to creating in it a culture of solidarity and a "civilization of love" (Paul VI).

The obstacles

In the journey of formation, the missionary encounters throughout his life many obstacles, beginning with those which manifest themselves on the level of the *person*, like the weakening of the spiritual dimension, apostolic pragmatism which does not allow space for a constant and attentive reflection on the signs of the times, individualism in the ministries which indulges the desire for personal fulfillment.

On the *community* level the major obstacles assume the form of a shift to bourgeois values and lifestyle, the lack of formation projects and concrete operative plans, the difficulty in relating to one another in a mature way and the distance from the poor which makes the knowledge of their reality proportionately difficult.

Finally, at the *cultural* level, the principal obstacles to ongoing formation include aspects of consumerism, fundamentalism, relativism, weakening of the truth, etc. All this is in contrast to living, seeking and witnessing to the truth with simplicity and humility which constitute the first steps in the following of Christ.

PROCESS OF DRAFTING A POSSIBLE FORMATION PLAN

Should the process of drawing up a possible formation plan proceed from the bottom up, vice versa or in parallel?

It must happen in a parallel way because, from the top, we receive the light which unites and inspires us in the same spirit and nature of the Congregation by way of its spirituality, its Constitutions

and Statutes. From the bottom, the base incarnates the essence of the Vincentian spirit in a concrete context that, in its turn, enriches and renews the being of the Congregation in time.

The problem of balance between general lines of formation and the demands at the regional and provincial levels

It is necessary to focus on the foundation and essence of the Congregation: "To follow Christ, Evangelizer of the Poor." We must allow for both the unity of the Congregation along general, though not uniform, lines and the creativity and richness of plurality, respecting the diversity that enriches and strengthens us.

The problem of balance in responsibility among the individual confrere, the Visitor, and the community

The missionary is the object of the formation. That is why the Visitor, in order to maintain the balance between the individual and the community, must enhance the value and promote the qualities and abilities of the missionary, stimulating and encouraging the means which permit the development of his capacities in order to put them at the service of the mission of the local community and of the province.

The problem of balance between initial formation and ongoing formation (continuity and differences)

The fundamental principles and orientations of our vocation are the same; thus, continuity exists between initial and ongoing formation. With initial formation, the candidate is offered some tools that will allow him to respond to the challenges of his time and to incarnate the charism in a specific place. Ongoing formation, as it returns to the sources that nourish it, revising and updating the tools received in initial formation, keeps the Vincentian charism alive, deepens it, perfects it, and re-interprets it in the face of new challenges.

What models should be our point of departure and where do we want to arrive?

We move from the Christ of Saint Vincent in order to arrive at perfection and human maturity in the service of the poor.

What criteria should be our inspiration, bearing in mind what is already contained in our Constitutions?

They are: the signs of the times, the Sacred Scripture, the tradition of the Church and of the Congregation, the Constitutions and Statutes, and the other documents of the Congregation.

How can we motivate confreres to ongoing formation both on the personal level and on the professional and provincial level?

We seek creative ways to motivate them: starting from their difficult experiences with ongoing formation; organizing meetings especially in new places, asking the local communities to discuss questions and to return the results of the discussion to the Visitor or the person in charge of ongoing formation.

Other creative ways: internet, email, interactive means (for example, the online study of the Constitutions, CD), discussion groups, testimonies of persons with experience, etc.

POSSIBLE PROCEDURES

Many thought it desirable that the Superior General write a *Letter* in which he synthesizes what emerged from the Visitors' Meeting on the theme of ongoing formation and animates the confreres to follow up on this objective, while recognizing the value of previous efforts on it in various provinces.

Parts of this letter could be:

- an introduction on the meeting that was held in Mexico,
- an encouragement to continue that which is already being done (*human-spiritual dimension*),
- consequences of the lack of ongoing formation (*intellectual-Vincentian dimension*),
- benefits of formation for the improvement of the mission (*apostolic dimension*), and
- whatever else responds to the vision or to the criteria of the Superior General himself, etc.

Many found it useful to create a commission in order to deepen this topic and draft a document. Such a commission should use the inductive method in its reflection, starting from concrete reality. The commission's work also will need to have practical and concrete application.

The possible *Ratio Formationis Vincentiana* could be the fruit of this process, which could take into account the results from the survey conducted by the Preparatory Commission for the Mexico

Visitors' Meeting, as well as the already existing *Ratios* for initial formation (Major Seminary and Internal Seminary). The character of the final document could be decided by the next General Assembly (2010). It is proposed, however, that the document have a narrative literary style and that it keep present a double vision: from one side, ongoing formation; from the other, the mission.

Others were of the opinion that, instead of a *Ratio* or in addition to it, it is desirable to develop a *Practical Guide*, this also being produced by a commission. It should be a simple and practical tool, clear and concise, like an outline to which each province can then give its own form and which little by little takes on consistency through feedback and evaluation from provinces and Visitors' Conferences.

Such a *Guide* could offer to local communities and to provinces a tool for planning and developing their own ongoing formation closely tied to daily life, and thus with an efficacious motivational thrust. In addition, it could suggest to each confrere theoretical reasons for his personal responsibility toward ongoing formation, as well as practical and concrete methods, arguments, and lines of action.

This outline of a *Practical Guide* should take into consideration the fundamental aspects of Vincentian formation as they were presented and discussed at the Visitors' Meeting and also concrete ways of carrying out ongoing formation in the various provinces.

FINAL COMMENTS

At the conclusion of the meeting, it was pointed out that there was a lack of sharing of the experiences that many provinces have.

However, the meeting helped the participants to clarify what ongoing formation is: it is much more than simply professional or intellectual formation, which, while also necessary is not the most important.

We are convinced of the need for self-reflection and of developing self-formation starting from the existing *Ratio*.

The individual objectives, while they must be flexible and adapted to the people, need to be at the same time rooted in and faithful to the Gospel.