

4. Ongoing Formation

THE ONGOING FORMATION OF THE C.M.

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The idea of ongoing formation in the Congregation began during the time of Saint Vincent de Paul. In the Minutes of the First General Assembly that was celebrated during Saint Vincent's lifetime (1642) we read the following:

Next the Assembly determined two things: Henceforth there would be a second probationary period, at Saint-Lazare or wherever else the Superior General would indicate; that it would take place only six or seven years after the seminary for an interval of one year, without, however, limiting the power of the Superior General, who can always delay the six or seven years or shorten the year of probation, as he deems advisable for the good of the individual and the need of the Company (CCD XIIIa, 329; SV XIII, 295; ES X, 360).

Even though the desire of the Assembly was very clear, the time was not right to undertake such a program. Nevertheless the Assembly of 1711 believed that the time had arrived and as a result Father Jean Bonnet, Superior General, (1711-1735), with the consent of his Council, decided to initiate said program on August 15, 1712 at Saint Charles (previously a seminary on the property of Saint Lazare). This renewal seminary, (the name it was called), continued for several years but because of financial difficulties in France it had to be closed (cf. JOHN RYBOLT, "Report on the International Formation Center: Saint Vincent de Paul – CIF," *Vincentiana* 3 [2002], p. 2).

Several generations would pass until the Constitutions of 1984 would once again point out the importance of ongoing formation. Article 81 of our Constitutions states: *The formation of our members should be continued and renewed all through life.* In the same way Statute 42 reads: *Individual provinces, through the help of their formation commission, should organize and promote both common and personal continuing formation.* But it was the General Assembly of 1992 that decreed the establishment of these renewal courses.

As a result of this decision, Father Robert Maloney, Superior General, and his Council established what would later become known as the International Formation Center: Saint Vincent de Paul (CIF). The Center began to provide services in September 1994.

Since the time that the Second Vatican Council pointed out new paths for priestly and religious formation, the concept of formation in general as well as ongoing formation have evolved as a result of various experiences that were promoted by the Council. Ongoing formation implies a constant dedication and effort in the areas of spiritual, intellectual, practical and operational renewal that allows us to understand and respond to the new realities of a constantly changing world and to transmit the Word of God to women and men of our time, especially the poor and those who live on the margins of society. We are dealing with an integral dimension of the process of ongoing conversion.

It is this spirit that motivates the efforts that the Congregation of the Mission has made with regard to the ongoing formation of its members. Two signs of this concern are CIF and the International Meeting of the Visitors in Mexico (June, 2007) where the central theme, *The Continued Formation of the Missionary Today*, was discussed (cf. *Vincentiana* 3 [2007]).

In a letter addressed to the directors of CIF by a missionary who had participated in the course of ongoing formation we read the following:

[T]he time at CIF was the best experience I had in my community life. It gave me the opportunity to reflect on my ministry and vocation, it gave me the opportunity to share with and listen to the life experience and ministry of other Vincentians, and, more importantly, it gave me the opportunity to become closer to and to learn more about the charism and history of Vincent and the Congregation.... I came back renewed and with an open mind about what it means to serve the poor in many different ways as a Vincentian (cf. RYBOLT, op. cit., p. 1).

In a letter of Father Gregory Gay, Superior General, addressed to the members of the Congregation of the Mission, a letter that was written after the Visitors meeting in Mexico and that spoke about ongoing formation, we read:

The following of Christ, evangelizer of the poor, constitutes the principal axis of all Vincentian formation. Our identity as missionaries is not given once and for all; rather it is the result of our daily relationship with Christ, with the community to which we belong, with the world, and with the poor. We are convinced

that formation is not an acquired state, but rather a way: initial formation is an introduction to this way which lasts a lifetime (cf. G. GREGORY GAY, "On-Going Formation," *Vincentiana* 1/2 [2008], p. 12).

Finally, I believe that ongoing formation is a demand of our spiritual and apostolic vocation because we need to continually renew the gift that we have received. We need to keep the fire burning and refresh the permanent newness of God's gift. Following Christ evangelizing the poor implies a dynamic that requires continual nourishment and renewal. The call to follow Christ is repeated at every moment of our lives and requires of us a constant effort to progressively clothe ourselves in Jesus' attitudes. Because of our sinful state we can never think that we have fully accomplished the task of becoming new men nor can we ever think that we fully possess the attitudes of Christ. As pointed out by Father General, it is from this perspective that ongoing formation implies living a process of ongoing conversion and spiritual renewal.