

ONGOING FORMATION AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

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1. Preliminary Remarks¹

The subject in question — ongoing formation at the individual level (in other words: formation or self-formation) — is above all a question of personal initiative. The issue at stake: how can this initiative be cultivated, an initiative which can neither be forced nor predetermined nor systematised. It can be said that responsibility for the formation of personal initiative should be the duty of the community. The community should put in place structures and means which nourish the self-formation of its members. But it has to be said that if there is no desire or disposition in the individual, the best structures and means fail. It is because of this, in my opinion that the principal question in formation is: how can an individual be motivated and encouraged to desire ongoing self formation?

Self-formation is a transformation of one's self; it is a work on one's self which has as its aim the transformation of one's consciousness and one's attitude to the world and to the other. One has only to think of the transformations which St. Vincent experienced from his youth to his maturity. Without doubt St. Vincent was capable of reading the signs of the times.

Where then is this strength found which challenges me to develop myself, to transform myself and to become another person?

2. The spiritual attraction of the new man²

The apostle Paul indeed saw in what consists the essence of a permanent formation: "And while our exterior man is being destroyed, our interior man is being renewed from day to day"

¹ *Preparation of a new Ratio Formationis (suggested in the postulates)... a systemic change?*

² *Word of God, sacramental life, community and personal prayer and Vincentian spirituality (C 78 § 2). Principles: Christological, mystical.*

(2 Cor 4:16). Ongoing formation is a rebirth which has as a consequence a spiritual attraction. To underline the importance of it, I refer to a personal experience. I call to mind the Parish Priest of my village when I was an adolescent who had a great influence on my vocation — a man sixty years of age, his breviary in his hand, who was interested in theology, philosophy, music, languages, but also in old people, the handicapped, the young etc. He was, despite his age, in the eyes of one adolescent an integrated man, ageless and radiating a spiritual attraction.

3. Formation for sanctity and the Holy Spirit

The Synthesis, which the visitors made during their meeting in Mexico City (4th to 15th June 2007) on ongoing formation, remarked: “The first aim of ongoing formation is sanctity.” Because sanctity is the work of the Holy Spirit, we are obliged in the first instance to open ourselves to its initiative.

1. It is because of that, that in our self-formation we should always take into account the impossible, because “nothing is impossible to God.” Openness to God opens the possibility of the impossible, the unexpected. Formation does not depend only on us, on our faculties, on our energies; it is also the fruit of collaborating with God who can turn our life upside down, rendering the impossible possible.
2. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit leads us to integrity, as the etymology of the word suggests in many languages: “sanctity” means “integrity.” It renders a person integrated, being of one piece, neither broken into fragments nor closed to the diverse challenges of life.
3. Finally, it has to be realised that without our response to its initiative, the Holy Spirit, remains in us without fruit, without success. It is up to us to choose sanctity as a first priority. Without our free choice, the Holy Spirit remains mute. Just as nobody can live for me nor die for me, so nobody can choose sanctity for me.

Here is the foundation (spiritual, sacramental) of all self-formation which aspires to be missionary and priestly.

4. Obstacles to self-formation³

The reality is however otherwise. The initiative of the Holy Spirit is paralysed by contemporary culture which is dominated by a hidden naturalism. Naturalism suggests: "One must be as you are, spontaneous, without restraint; one has got to let go." Lightness and spontaneity become a supreme value. Just as the free fall of an object demonstrates that nature chooses always the line of least resistance, in the same way today's person chooses lightness, convenience, whatever is easiest. It is this naturalist logic of contemporary life which kills the spirit of service, provokes a decline in generosity and weakens the sense of belonging and perseverance.

It is not an abstract theory. This spirit often comes in through the door of our communities, invading us with its relativism and its scepticism, with its consumerism and silent laicisation, even with the loss of awareness of the meaning of life. Lightness of spirit is manifested when we have to choose between information and formation, between the newspaper or television and classic or spiritual reading. We turn away from formation towards information. Add to this the many obstacles which are carried in by ourselves and our communities: clichéd attitudes, conservatism or exaggerated liberalism, etc.

5. Formation comes from dialogue⁴

Personal formation is a permanent necessity. If one does not form oneself, one deforms oneself, one deteriorates. Between formation and deterioration, there is no neutral place. If one does nothing for formation, one is already deteriorating. C.S. Lewis says that if one does not fight for God, one opens by that very fact the door for the devil.

Self formation has however a privileged place: it is dialogue; it is there that it discovers a real motivation and encouragement.

³ – Obstacles presented for the community: stereotypes, conservatism of exaggerated liberalism, etc.

– Modern culture: relativism, skepticism, over-consumption, silent, laicization, loss of significance and the purpose of life (Consultation Document).

– Practical problems: Do we keep the balance between informative reading (newspapers, magazines, television) and formative reading (spiritual reading, classical works, etc.)?

⁴ *Am I able to enter into dialogue with myself, with others, with God, with the poor, with a book, with the signs of the times?*

Dialogue is not just a simple slogan, but a high school of mutual listening and service. One listens — not just to hear news, information, but in order to change oneself, to begin thinking in a new way, to see what I cannot see myself, to grow personally and become another person, a new person. Dialogue does not just inform; it transforms. It allows me to see myself through eyes of the person with whom I am speaking.⁵ The consequence of this is a personal transformation which reveals the incredible richness of my personality. From this comes a personal opening out — a blossoming and enthusiasm.

6. Dialogue with talents – Community life⁶

Permanent ongoing self-formation is therefore encouraged and motivated by a community which dialogues, in which the confreres reveal themselves and in which the richness of their personalities and talents are seen.

“I am at the disposal of your talents!” That is the saying of one of the ex-visitors which shows his way of working whereby he changed the spirit of his province. In this way, he made space for faithful and creative fidelity. A mission which succeeds is founded on the enthusiasm which generates the spirit of sacrifice and service. To help the confreres to develop their talents is not to bow to their whims; it is to use their gifts for the good of the mission, to stimulate their sense of belonging, it is to encourage them to live the mission fully. Without dialogue between the community and its members, the community remains rigid and its members blind.

In paraphrasing the Chinese proverb which says that one does not help a poor person if you give him or her a fish, but if you teach them to fish; we can say that one does not help the confrere if you tell him what the Congregation is but if you teach him to search — together with the others, in faithfulness and creativity — to find what is essential for the Congregation.

⁵ Dialogue is my willingness to look at myself through the eyes of the person with whom I am speaking; and it is the willingness of that person to look at himself/herself through my eyes. Dialogue between God and humanity is made real in the person of Christ in whom God looks at himself through the eyes of a human being and the person looks at himself/herself through the eyes of God. It is in this exchange that God discovers how he is seen by man. Man discovers there how much God respects him and loves him; God discovers how much man, i.e. human beings have need of him.

⁶ *Principles: principle of communications, principle of respect, unity in diversity, progressive evolution.*

7. To see in a different way – To see in a Vincentian way⁷

In the documentary about the lepers in India, a leper says: “Nobody wants us, nobody sees us: neither society nor our religion.” But in reality, the confreres saw them. In the eyes of our confreres, the lepers are seen as valuable in themselves. This way of looking is the result of a formation. The “product” of a formation is the transformation of our way of looking, of our way of seeing, of our consciousness, of our sensitivity and of our attitude towards the world. Let us think back to another documentary about the prostitute in which an unknown man saw first of all a means to an end, then gradually he began to see in her a value in herself.

The object of ongoing Vincentian formation is to change our way of seeing — of seeing the needs of the world and of taking on for ourselves a spirit of service. The spirit of service seeks to give without thinking of being rewarded; it seeks to give more than it receives. It is therefore a spirit of generosity, a spirit which is opposed to the contemporary culture of gratification and its principles of satisfaction which seeks to receive more than it gives. Indeed the norm of Vincentian self-formation goes further still. It takes as the norm the Lord himself: his closeness to the poor shows that he wanted to help them with his entire being, without holding back, without limit and without bounds.

8. Creative fidelity to the mission

Creative fidelity to the mission results from a constant desire to renew oneself, from an ambition to become better and more effective in one’s spirit of service. This attitude is the result of self-formation and ongoing reformation. To come to a conclusion: I consider that the essential question is one of knowing how to create and nurture the enthusiasm which is the foundation of a successful mission. In my opinion, the answer to that question is found in a community which dialogues, in which the individual is accepted with the gifts that are part of him, in which his talents are valued and used for the sake of evangelisation and charity. The community does not demand; it suggests. Evangelisation and charity are not suggested; they are demanded!

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⁷ *Principles: Christian realism, spirit of service, spirit of generosity.*