

Brothers in Difficulty in Saint Vincent's Time

by Vicente de Dios Toribio, C.M.

Province of Mexico

*The History of the Congregation of the Mission*¹ tells us that, during Saint Vincent's lifetime, there were 614 aspirants, of which 425 were clerics and 189 coadjutor brothers. However, the total number of active members must never have passed 250. There is a notable difference between 614 and 250: 364.

Why did so many fall by the wayside? We are also informed that:

- some never finished their time of formation
- many others left after some years of study or work
- others through death — life was short in the 17th century and some ministries dangerous.²

While writing this article on *brothers in difficulty in the time of Saint Vincent* we will refer to priests in difficulty, but above all to the aspirants, those in formation.

In the beginning, as is natural, the formation of the aspirants lacked proper structures. The first missionaries came from the diocesan priesthood for the most part and not all with the idea of joining a new congregation, but rather associating themselves with Saint Vincent for the work of missions and retreats for the ordinands. Little by little the number of aspirants attracted by the aura of the new institute increased.

¹ *Historia de la Congregación*, CEME 1992; LUIGI MEZZADRI - JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *Histoire de la Congrégation de la Mission*, Desclée de Brouver, Paris, 1994. José María Román supplies these numbers. They are slightly different from those that Luigi Mezzadri provides (426 priests for 196 coadjutor brothers), cf., pp. 34 and 88 in the Spanish edition and p. 65 in the French version.

² LUIGI MEZZADRI - JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *Histoire de la Congrégation de la Mission*, Desclée de Brouver, Paris, 1994, p. 65.

For this reason, in 1637, the novitiate was inaugurated, called the Internal Seminary by Saint Vincent to avoid any flavor of a religious order. Before the Internal Seminary, for ten or 12 years, Saint Vincent himself was the *formator* by means of direct personal contact, his conversations, conferences and repetitions of prayer and his letters. We can find here the origins of so many extraordinary missionaries, who carried out magnificently the work of the saint. As first director of the Internal Seminary he named Jean de la Salle, one of the original members, whom he sent to prepare himself at the Jesuit novitiate and who, unfortunately, could only have been in charge of the seminary for scarcely a year, since he died in 1639. Other equally valuable directors followed him, but Saint Vincent always kept a close eye on the seminary.³ Later he would write to Father Guillaume Delville: *The two years of testing are not to see if they have the required dispositions, since it is necessary to have recognized them before this, but rather to strengthen them in these dispositions and so that on this foundation they can construct the building of the virtues, which constitute a good missionary.*⁴

Something that strikes everyone as strange is Saint Vincent's allergy to the theme of vocational promotion. In the beginning his opposition to any type of recruitment was absolute. The only means for attracting vocations, according to him, were prayer and good example. *We have as our maxim not to urge anyone to embrace our state. It belongs to God to choose those whom he wishes to call and we are certain that a missionary given by his paternal hand will by himself do more than many others who do not have a pure vocation. Our part is to pray that he send good workers to the harvest and to live so well that by our example we give more enticement than obstacles so they might work with us.*⁵

Later his opposition softened quite a bit. In a letter to Father Blatiron, superior of Genoa, the saint explains these two moments: *I give thanks to God for the acts of extraordinary devotion that you do to ask God, through the intercession of Saint Joseph, for the propagation of the Company. I have spent more than 20 years without daring to ask this of God, believing that, since the Congregation was his work, the care for its preservation and growth should be left to his providence. But, being forced to think about the recommendation he gives us in the gospels to ask that he send workers to the harvest, has convinced me of the importance and usefulness of these acts of devotion.*⁶

³ JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *Saint Vincent de Paul-Biographie*, Editions Alzani, Paris, 2004, pp. 325-358.

⁴ SV VI, 155.

⁵ SV VIII, 287.

⁶ SV V, 462.

We remember that phrase of the saint in a letter to Father Portail: *The number of those who have joined us since your departure is six. How I fear, sir, large numbers and vocational promotion. And how many reasons do we have to praise God because he allows us to honor the small number of his Son's disciples.*⁷ Man of faith that he was, if the number had been 60 or 600, he would also have found reasons for praising God. And perhaps with even more joy.

Few or many, he never doubted, and affirmed many times, that the Congregation had to be purged of its useless and harmful members. *Purge* is the verb he uses almost always, a verb undoubtedly adequate in that time in which, for any sickness, purgation was used. Examples? There are some to choose from: concerning the incorrigible and unruly: *You tell me that we have to put up with these people at the beginning, while the Company needs men, and that in a little while the Company can be purged of them. It's true, Father, that the Company needs men, but it's better to have few than many of these unruly men and of those of that kind. Ten good men will do more good for God than a hundred of these people.*⁸ Later it seems that the saint softened his opinion: *It would be an injustice to the Company to stop cutting off its gangrenous members. But, since we have to have all of the virtues, let us exercise patience, long-suffering and even charity with the desire that they change.... Only at the end do we finally expel them, when there's no other remedy.*⁹ Remember the saint's comment to a bishop in whose presence a community was praised for never expelling anyone: *Poor community! You don't tend to perfection since people of every type are good enough for you. Saint Vincent adds: Not all of the trees that are planted are lush; nor do all of the seeds planted by the sower sprout. The Kingdom of Heaven is compared to a net which is thrown into the sea and catches good fish and bad fish. The fisherman keeps the good ones and throws the others back into the sea.*¹⁰

At that time there was no Canon Law which governed the process for the expulsion of a member. Not even the bull *Salvatoris Nostri* did so: *The government established in the pontifical approval is a government very centered on the person of the Superior General. He has full authority over discipline and direction over the local superiors, houses, persons, goods, etc. His authority is only limited with regard to the apostolate. He becomes the source of the internal law. He can give any norm he considers opportune, change it or modify it. The obvious*

⁷ SV I, 311.

⁸ SV II, 380.

⁹ SV IV, 36.

¹⁰ SV VI, 69.

*precautions exist. That means that they not contradict the sacred canons, decrees of Trent or pontifical decisions.*¹¹

Since things were that way, we should not be surprised that when the time came to purge the community of a member or two, the word of the Superior General was enough. It was presumed, clearly, and in Saint Vincent's case it is evident, that the Superior General was not going to act capriciously and without having dialogued with the interested person, or at least with his superior and companions. Since we are going to talk about particular cases, which were not few in number, it might occur to us that the Congregation of the Mission was a body which needed abundant purges. That was not the case. The *brothers in difficulties* who were expelled were few, almost the exception, compared with the number of missionaries fully integrated into the community, favorably disposed to work and suffer sickness and even martyrdom when necessary. It is interesting that, many times, when Saint Vincent told about the expulsion of a member, he continued with the details of the good state of the Company and of its seminarians and students. For example, in Saint Lazare *we are all well, thanks be to God. Some of our people are giving missions in different dioceses and the others are preparing for ordination. Our seminary is well populated. Father Berthe is the director. We also have a good number of students, some of whom study theology with Father Watebled and the others philosophy with Father Eveillard. The College of Bons-Enfants, under Father Dehorgny, is also full and the Seminary of Saint Charles is growing with the help of Father Talec.*¹²

Let us look briefly at some particular cases.

Four: *I have asked Father Lambert to expel Fathers Perceval, Le Noir, du Chastel and Le Roy. We have also purged again and again our seminary. Thirty, who behave very well, have remained, thanks be to God.* This expulsion of four missionaries is unsettling, but, judging by the short biographical notes at the bottom of letter 768, they must have been in the Internal Seminary, at least the last three, and did not meet the requirements of the saint.¹³

Three or More: Sometimes they were not expelled, but left on their own. *Father Louistre and Father Fourdim have left the Company, also Father Lescuyer and the other cleric, as well as two or three others who we have expelled.... You can imagine the pain I feel, not so much for the departure of each one, as for the victory which nature has*

¹¹ PÉREZ FLORES MIGUEL, *Historia del Derecho de la Congregación de la Misión*, CEME, 2005, p. 121; cf., LUIGI MEZZADRI - JOSÉ MARIA ROMÁN, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

¹² SV VI, 138.

¹³ SV II, 489.

obtained in these souls because there was no way to renew the devotion of their spirit.¹⁴ It is very interesting that the saint continues by writing as an expression of his attitude and feelings: *I spent a half hour at the feet of one them trying to convince him without achieving anything.*

Two: Father Fondimare and Brother Doutrelet also left. *We have to imitate the acceptance of God's will that we find in our Lord, upon seeing himself abandoned by the divine company of his Father... and that according to his will, he conducts everything for his glory and the good of the persons involved. So, then, we have to view these departures as a blessing for the Company and perhaps for them as well.*¹⁵

One by One. There are many cases: some with difficulties that they could not overcome, others with problems which they were able to conquer. Among the former were the Deacon Duhamel,¹⁶ Philippe Vageot,¹⁷ the Polish confrere Zelazewski,¹⁸ Father Liebe,¹⁹ etc. Included in the latter group were the cleric Jean de Fricourt,²⁰ Father Jacques de la Fosse,²¹ Father Jacques Tholard,²² Father Etienne Bienvenu,²³ a missionary,²⁴ etc. It is admirable how Saint Vincent continues to encourage all of them, putting his heart and soul in every line he writes to them. Reading these letters can be encouraging for everyone, those of the past, the present and those to come.

Sometimes it can be a little shocking to see the apparent double standard with which each case is handled: some with honey and others with vinegar. We cannot always guess why, but without a doubt the saint was aware of his own reasons. What he tells Father Rivet about his superior Father Vageot who *left without saying good-bye* is terrible: *I don't recognize him as a superior, or even a missionary!* (Letter 1913). To a confrere who left and asked him for a parish, he gave the appointment to another, reasoning that if he had left to do good he could have done the same in the Congregation (letter 1922). To another who, to be readmitted, said that he had saved his life (we do not know how), the saint wrote this sentence:

¹⁴ SV II, 287.

¹⁵ SV III, 378.

¹⁶ SV I, 608.

¹⁷ SV V, 419.

¹⁸ SV V, 104.

¹⁹ SV VII, 368.

²⁰ SV VIII, 111.

²¹ SV VII, 292.

²² SV VII, 293.

²³ SV VII, 315; VII, 372.

²⁴ SV V, 255-256.

Come, Father, we will receive you with open arms (Letter 2004). Letter 2920 is another example: *Let Father Caron leave, but not the young man, Chiavari, who complains about his head and stomach... nor Brother Minveille* (a long letter, worth reading).

What Saint Vincent could never tolerate was duplicity, yes and no at the same time, as he wrote to Father Almeras about the young cleric, Michel Doutrelet, in Rome, who went back and forth between staying and leaving: *If his conversion is genuine and so intense that it includes the desire to die in his vocation and to live it according to our rules with a total submission to the superiors and an indifference about places and appointments and finally with a desire to strive untiringly to acquire virtue, if after all that it seems to you that he has the necessary firmness, then I give permission to keep him or that you try him for a time. If he decides to leave, I have nothing against it in God's name; but if he continues to go back and forth between the two extremes, playing with God and the Company, being inside with only one foot, trying to do one thing and not the other.... I think we should not wait any longer and you should kindly ask him to leave....*²⁵

Nevertheless, despite other appearances, Saint Vincent was very understanding of differences in community. *A house cannot always be without faults, but as long as there are no complaints or scandals, you have to decide to support each other, doing all you can, however, to lessen the quantity and degree of these defects. After a conversion, as complete as it might be, there always remain some imperfections in the works of sinners, as happened to the apostles of Jesus Christ, who, nevertheless, had many things worthy of criticism. I see no other remedy for the general faults, which, by the grace of God, are not too big, than public or private warnings, together with prayer and patience.*²⁶

Let us enter more directly into what we call initial formation. Theoretically Saint Vincent seems to us to exaggerate when he writes about the qualities that an aspirant to the seminary should have. But as with all true love, the saint took care to be demanding and understanding. As a sign of the former, he tells Father Dupont not to send postulants without testing them himself first: *During this testing you should indicate to us his name, age, condition, studies, if he has parents, if they are poor or well off, if he has a degree or means to achieve one, if he has lived virtuously before or led a disordered life, what reasons does he have for leaving the world and becoming a missionary, if he has common sense, if he has a healthy body, if he speaks correctly, if he looks well, finally if he is disposed to do everything and suffer anything, to go to any place for the service of God*

²⁵ SV III, 515.

²⁶ SV VIII, 331.

*as holy obedience might indicate. You have to ask about everything.*²⁷ There are many other letters like this one with the same demands, beginning with the one about the aspirants coming with a desire for martyrdom.

Sometimes he relaxed his hand and the pen: *Nevertheless it is enough that they have good health, a convenient spirit and good intention, although nothing extraordinary, nor much talent for preaching. We have so many things to do that, thanks be to God, no one who wishes to work with us can remain idle; on the contrary, simple workers and the most common ones are ordinarily the most suitable for us and the most useful for the poor people.... If the missionaries are really humble, obedient, mortified, zealous and full of confidence in God, his divine goodness will be served by them in every place and will supply the qualities they lack.*²⁸

And perhaps with the same demands and understanding Saint Vincent was more concerned about the formators than those in formation, although, naturally, for the sake of the latter. To a seminary superior he wrote: *Educate them in the true spirit of their condition, which consists especially in the interior life and the practice of prayer and the virtues, because it is not enough to teach them singing, the ceremonies and a little moral theology, the primary thing is to form them in prayer and solid piety. Therefore we have to be the first ones to be filled with this. We have to be reservoirs of virtue so that we can pour out our water without exhausting our supply, possessing that spirit which we wish to share with others, since no one can give what he does not have. The biggest obstacle would be to want to act as the lords of those in our charge, disedifying and not taking care of them. This is what would happen if we wanted to treat ourselves well, look good, seek distinctions and honors, enjoy ourselves, be lazy and spend time with outsiders. We have to be firm without being hard in our actions and avoid a weak meekness which does not help anyone.*²⁹

A few loose notes: Practice for young people: *We have been at fault for not making the young people practice, so that the older members have been worn out and the younger ones have been formed too late. So then, Father Blatiron, begin to act this way: make the young ones practice all of our functions. I am doing that, for example, with the ordinands.*³⁰

Vacationers: *As soon as you give one freedom, they will ask for another. You can see that, having given two weeks of*

²⁷ SV VII, 102.

²⁸ SV VII, 237.

²⁹ SV IV, 597.

³⁰ SV IV, 114.

*vacation to your students, now some want to go to Our Lady of Savone; and next year they will want to go to Milan or some place else. This will become a custom and from one abuse they will pass to another and, finally, to disorder.*³¹

For those who want to know what Saint Vincent said to a bad formator, see VI, 385-388, letter 2330.

For those who want to know how Saint Vincent received those who repent with a good heart, see VII, 28-29, letter 2496.

For those who want to know what Saint Vincent wrote when he was annoyed, see V, 314-315, letter 1841.

For those who want to know about Saint Vincent's manner when he speaks about our bad moments, see V, 211, letter 1791.

In conclusion and in summary: Saint Vincent, naturally, was concerned about the number of members in his community, but not at any price. When only six entered he said blessed be God, etc. But, at other times, he laments the fact that he cannot attend to everything: *The Lord presents us with many occasions to render our services in places we have not worked in until now. But, we lack personnel and God lets us know in this way of our need to ask him to send laborers to his vineyard.*³²

He demands all kinds of good dispositions in the candidates. Physical and intellectual dispositions, however, are not what he most appreciated, but rather the values of an integrated personality and a firm decision.

He was a great spiritual director; his reasons were distilled from his lively faith and what he wrote moved and strengthened, although not everyone allowed themselves to be convinced or strengthened.

Humanly speaking, Saint Vincent seems to know everything, as much about communities as about individuals. He is intuitive and insightful. He easily discerns truths from lies and surely for that reason his treatment is not the same for everyone. At a distance of three and a half centuries we know very well that not everything can be imitated or even adapted, but there always remains a spirit and conduct that has to be taken into account: *We do not believe a man because he is wise, but rather because we judge him to be good and we appreciate him.... Whatever we do, no one will believe us if we do not show love and compassion to those we want to believe in us. If you labor in this way, God will bless your works. If not, you will make a lot of noise and fanfare, but produce little fruit.*³³

³¹ SV VIII, 106.

³² SV VII, 550.

³³ SV I, 295.

There are provinces in the Congregation which have the courage to keep the names in the personnel catalogue of priests, deacons and brothers in special situations, that means, outside the province, some for 20 years. There they are. The ecclesiastical hierarchy wants them to be treated with much caution. What would Saint Vincent do? I suppose he would not put up with it. In principle he would have to adjust to the present norms for the cases, but he would erase from the catalogue those whose status no one is interested in justifying, with more reason than those who disappear from the catalogue after having died faithfully in the bosom of the Congregation.

(JOHN P. PRAGER, C.M., translator)