

ONGOING FORMATION

Rome, 18 February 2008
Feast of St. Francis Regis Clet

To All the Members of the Congregation of the Mission

My dear Brothers in St. Vincent de Paul,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever!

I would like to ask a question: What might the poor expect from us?

Might they expect us to be routine, uninteresting, unstimulating men, content with what we know and how we serve? Or might the poor expect more from the followers of St. Vincent de Paul?

You know my answer. I framed the questions so you would know where I want to go. None of us would deny, I am sure, that the poor might expect more of Vincentians. They have heard of our founder. They were moved by his vision. They have heard how he found creative ways to give them hope. He made God's love present to them.

My brothers, it is part of our Vincentian vocation that we too be creative and fresh in our service of the poor. We can do no less. The key to ongoing renewal of ourselves and of our ministry is ongoing formation.

Faithful to the will of the Visitors, and with the unanimous support of my Council, I write each and every one of you to reflect deeply upon the importance of ongoing formation in your personal life as well as in the life of the local community, your province, and the Congregation as a whole.

In Mexico, our discussion on the importance of Vincentian formation led us to state clearly that **we are our best resources**; there are none better. Therefore we are morally obliged to do all in our power to assure that each and every confrere of the Congregation of the Mission is given the opportunity to prepare himself on an ongoing basis in order to be faithful to our mission of following Jesus Christ, evangelizing the poor. As Article 2 of our Constitutions states: *"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 most urgent calls of the Church, should take care to open up new ways and use new means adapted to 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."

My brothers, the Constitutions say it clearly. We are called to remain in a continual state of renewal, individually and communally in order to respond faithfully to the gospel, to the signs of the times and the calls of the Church. Moreover, our lords and masters deserve the very best from us.

It would do us well to be faithful lest we hear words similar to those that were written to the Church of Laodicea: *"I know your works that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of my mouth"* (Rev. 3:15-16). Our Constitutions are a matter of rights and obligations. If we live them faithfully and allow ourselves to be formed and reformed by them, we will be able to live our Vincentian charism with vitality and joy.

In the synthesis of the international Visitors meeting, a number of basic aspects of Vincentian formation were reflected on. I would like to highlight these aspects.

1. Fundamental perspective for ongoing Vincentian formation: Cultivate our missionary vocation

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.

2. The objectives to be reached in ongoing formation

The first objective of ongoing formation is the holiness corresponding to the life of the missionary (CR 1, n° 3; C 1). Joined to this fundamental objective is continual growth on the human and professional level, which leads the missionary to acquire an even deeper capacity for relating with others and competence in the proclamation of the Word and in the practice of charity. As stated previously, the Vincentian missionary is therefore called to be always attuned to 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.

3. The operational levels of ongoing formation

- At the personal level, the missionary takes responsibility for his ongoing formation; it cannot be delegated to or substituted by another person or strategy. In the different ages of our life (youth, adult, senior, and old age) and in whatever ministry we exercise, all the missionaries have to cultivate the constant discipline of ongoing formation.
- At the local level, the community constitutes the primary context 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 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 (Ratio Formationis, a Practical Guide for ongoing formation, or Lines of Action).

4. Obstacles encountered in ongoing formation

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, such as the weakening of the spiritual dimension, intellectual laziness, disinterest for reading and study, the abuse of modern means of communication (internet), apostolic pragmatism which does not allow space for a constant and attentive reflection on the signs of the times, and individualism in the ministries which indulges the desire for personal fulfillment.

On the community level, the obstacles assume the form of a shift to bourgeois values and lifestyle, the lack of formation projects and concrete operative plans, difficulty in relating to one another in a mature way, and a 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.

5. The values of ongoing formation

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 reinterprets it in the face of new challenges.

Ongoing formation is a significant part of helping us to perfect ourselves in the art of loving the poor. At the same time, ongoing formation provides us the tools necessary to share God's love in authentic ways with all.

I want to encourage each of you individually and communally to follow up on what is written here, specifically on the objectives that have been put forth. I recognize that in many provinces, there already exists the recognition of the importance of ongoing formation for all ages of confreres. I have been quite impressed with a number of the programs that have been created in order that the confreres might be adequately prepared for the mission that has been entrusted them. At the same time, the consequences of a lack of ongoing formation are atrocious. And those who suffer most are the poor whom we are called to serve.

Ongoing formation, when well done, can only work towards the improvement of the quality of our mission. With regard to the theme of ongoing formation, *Vincentiana* issue 2007, # 3, has been dedicated to the contents of the meeting in Mexico. There you will find the presentations that provided a foundation for the reflections of the Visitors as well as the process that marked the path for their reflection and the results of this journey as seen in the summaries that were presented by those who synthesized the thoughts of the groups.

I ask all of you to reflect seriously on what our Constitutions and Statutes tell us about ongoing formation. Accept what you reflect as a challenge to further creative fidelity. Besides C 2 already stated, I ask you to reflect and pray over C 25 § 2; S 42; C 77 §§ 1 and 2; C 78, §§ 1, 2, and 4; and C 81.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

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Superior General