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Our ministry to help form the diocesan clergy¹

--- yesterday and today ---

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.

St. Vincent loved to talk about the formation of the diocesan clergy, particularly in the later years of his life.² "At the beginning," he told the confreres on December 6, 1658, "the Company was occupied only with itself and the poor, but in the fullness of time, God called us to contribute to the making of good priests, to give good pastors to parishes, and to show them what they must know and practice."³ He speaks eloquently of the importance of this work, which he describes in the Common Rules as "almost equal" to that of preaching missions.⁴ On other occasions, he even speaks of formation of the clergy as *equal* to the missions.⁵ So fundamental is the formation of the diocesan clergy in St. Vincent's mind that he makes it a part of the purpose of the Congregation when he writes the Common Rules.⁶ Our Constitutions of 1984 carefully follow St. Vincent in this regard, while expanding formation work to include the laity: "The purpose of the Congregation of the Mission is to follow Christ evangelizing the poor. This purpose is achieved when, faithful to St. Vincent, the members individually and collectively:... 3 - help the clergy and laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor."⁷

¹In writing this article I want to express my gratitude for the life and ministry of Fr. Maurice Roche, who died recently. His work, *St. Vincent de Paul and the Formation of Clerics* (Fribourg: University Press, 1964), was a very helpful source in reflecting on this topic.

²There is a clear evolution in St. Vincent's thought in this regard. The starting point of his various foundations was the integral evangelization of the poor, but he quickly came to see that the formation of the clergy was essential if the poor were to be served effectively in an ongoing way; cf. R. Chalumeau, "San Vicente de Paúl y la obra de los Seminarios," in *Vicente de Paúl, Evangelizador de los Pobres* (Salamanca: CEME, 1973), 102. St. Vincent's terminology, too, evolves. At a repetition of prayer on October 25, 1643, St. Vincent stated (SV XI, 133): "To labor for the salvation of poor country people is the essential element in our vocation; everything else is accessory. For we would never have undertaken the retreats for ordinands or diocesan seminaries if we had not judged that they were necessary for sustaining the people and for preserving the fruits of the missions...." On July 20, 1650, St. Vincent writes to Philibert de Brandon, Bishop of Périgueux (SV IV, 42): "You have the seminary in mind and we, our obligation to give missions. Our principal aim is the instruction of the country people, and the service we render to the ecclesiastical state is merely accessory to that." By 1658, however, it is quite clear in the common rules the Vincent considers the formation of the clergy a part of the purpose (*finis*) of the Congregation.

³SV XII, 84.

⁴CR XI, 12.

⁵SV V, 489; VII, 561.

⁶CR I, 1.

⁷C 1, 3-; cf. also, SV III, 273. It is interesting to note throughout this first article of the Constitutions both its fidelity to St. Vincent's thought and its adaptation of that thought to contemporary circumstances. While the Common Rules (1658) speak of "striving for perfection," which has rather privatizing overtones, the Constitutions of 1984 speak of Vincentians "acquiring a holiness appropriate to their vocation," which lends itself to a more active missionary emphasis. While the Common Rules speak of preaching the good news to the poor "especially in rural areas," the present Constitutions speak of working at evangelizing the poor, "especially the more abandoned, wherever they may be." While the Common Rules speak of helping "seminarians and priests in their formation," the Constitutions speak of helping "the clergy and the laity in their formation and leading them to a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor."

This article will focus on our Vincentian mission to help form the *diocesan clergy*. It will, therefore, not directly address the formation of our own Vincentian seminarians, nor that of the laity. Both are very important topics, but I must leave them to another day and perhaps to other writers! Here, I will treat:

- I. The ministry of helping form the diocesan clergy, as understood by St. Vincent.
- II. Some significant changes that have taken place between the 17th and 20th centuries.
- III. Some reflections on formation of the diocesan clergy today.

As one reflects on this subject, the list of the names of confreres who have served faithfully in this ministry is striking; among them, Pierre Collet, Pierre-René Rogue, Louis-Joseph François, Jean-Henri Gruyer, Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, Fernand Portal, Guillaume Pouget, Pierre Coste, Raymond Chalumeau.

I. Formation of the diocesan clergy as understood by St. Vincent

St. Vincent's vision of the formation of the clergy was broad, and his undertakings were many-faceted. I will offer a brief sketch of his labors under six main headings: missions, retreats for ordinands, the Tuesday Conferences, seminaries, retreats for priests, and the Council of Conscience.

1. Missions

Even if this point may sometimes be overlooked, it is clear that the missions themselves were the first work in which St. Vincent directed the energies of the Congregation toward the formation of the clergy. Speaking of the missions, Abelly states: "Besides all these services given to laity, Monsieur Vincent was anxious that his missionaries do what they could for any clergy in the area. He used spiritual conferences for this purpose. In them he discussed with them the obligations of their state, the faults they should guard against, the virtues they should practice as most fitting their state, and other similar topics."⁸

In fact, the accounts of missions give abundant examples of priests whose lives were changed by the work of the missionaries. They make it evident that, very early, the formation of the diocesan clergy became a great concern of St. Vincent, since he realized what an influence for good or evil they could have in the lives of the poor. He told the community that it was his work on the missions that drew him to see how important the formation of good clergy was.

2. Retreats for Ordinands

St. Vincent often recounted how ill-prepared diocesan priests of his day were, and he lamented the disastrous influence of bad priests. He was not alone in this insight. Bérulle, Bourdoise, Olier, Eudes, and others came to the same conclusion in the early 17th century: there was a crying need for reform of the clergy in France.

⁸Louis Abelly, *La Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu, Vincent de Paul* (Paris: 1664) Book II, Chapter 1, 15.

As with other works, Vincent said that he never thought about starting the retreats for ordinands.⁹ But even at that, he surely jumped into it with great *gusto*. He regarded ordinands as "the richest and most precious deposit that the Church could place in our hands."¹⁰

Abelly tells us the origins of the retreats. Augustin Potier, Bishop of Beauvais, asked Vincent's advice about reforming his own priests. Vincent, recognizing how difficult it would be to bring about change in the lives of those who were long ordained, recommended that he begin with the young. In September 1628, accompanied by two others, Vincent preached a retreat for the ordinands of Beauvais. It was very successful. In 1631 ordinands began to come to the Collège des Bons-Enfants for retreats, and later to St. Lazare. By 1639 all clerics who lived in Paris, no matter what diocese they belonged to, were required to take part in these retreats. The exercises were held six times a year until 1643 and five times a year after that. It is said that in Paris alone during the lifetime of St. Vincent about 12,000 newly ordained priests participated in the retreats for ordinands.¹¹ They quickly spread from Paris to many cities: Richelieu, Notre Dame de la Rose in the Diocese of Agen, Troyes, Angoulême, Reims, Noyon, Chartres, Saintes, and others.¹² In Rome, the exercises were offered on a voluntary basis from 1642 on. Pope Alexander VII, in 1659, required all ordinands to take part in the exercises at the house of the Vincentians.

Between five and six hundred clerics passed each year through St. Lazare alone. Just two years after the retreats had begun in Paris, St. Vincent wrote:

*It has pleased God's goodness to bestow a very special blessing on the retreats for ordinands in a way that goes beyond imagination. The blessing is so great that all those who have made the retreats, or the greater part of them, lead the life of good, perfect ecclesiastics.*¹³

At the Collège des Bons-Enfants the retreatants faced a rather daunting schedule. They rose at four-thirty in the morning for meditation. At five they received instructions on making their meditation well. At six they prayed the Little Hours in common. A sung Mass followed. St. Vincent placed great emphasis on celebrating this Eucharist well, as a model for the ordinands.¹⁴ After Mass, they gathered for a conference on theology that lasted for an hour. They then separated into groups composed of ten or twelve persons in order to discuss the topic of the conference. During dinner, at eleven o'clock, they listened to a reading from Molina's, *Instruction for Priests*. The ordinands were then free for an hour of conversation. This was followed by Vespers and Compline (at an hour of the day that surely seems strange to us today!). After that came an instruction on the ceremonies of the Mass. At four o'clock, they took part in another hour-long conference on theology. This was followed by Matins and Lauds which were anticipated, according to the practice of the time, for the next day! Then came supper, followed by a period of conversation. At eight o'clock in the evening they joined in an

⁹SV XII, 9.

¹⁰XII, 9.

¹¹José María Román, "La Formation du clergé dans la tradition vincentienne," *Vincentiana* 27 (1983; # 2) 142.

¹²Abelly, Book II, Chapter 2, Section 5, 233-237.

¹³SV I, 204.

¹⁴Throughout his life St. Vincent was concerned that priests would celebrate the liturgy well, particularly the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Penance, and the Divine Office. Cf. SV XI, 93, 171; XII, 325ff.

examination of conscience and night prayers. After that, the grand silence was observed and all went to bed.

Along with three of his friends (Nicolas Pavillon, François Perrochel, and Jean Jacques Olier) St. Vincent drew up a manual for the retreats, entitled *Entretien des Ordinands*. It was never printed. Only manuscript copies are preserved.¹⁵ Vincent submitted it to several doctors of the Sorbonne for their comments. They assured him that it contained the matters necessary for exercising priestly ministry well.

It may be helpful here to present in graphic form the topics treated during these retreats.

Conferences to the Ordinands

Days	Morning: Moral Theology	Afternoon
1	Censures of the Church in general.	Mental prayer: reasons for practicing it, in what it consists, methods and means of making it.
2	Censures in particular: excommunication, suspension, proscription, irregularity.	The vocation to the ecclesiastical state: how important it is to be called by God.
3	The sacrament of penance: its institution, form, effects, and qualities needed in a confessor for administering it well.	The ecclesiastical spirit. The obligation to possess it.
4	Dispositions for receiving the sacrament of penance: contrition, confession, satisfaction. Indulgences.	Orders in general: institution, necessity, matter, form, effects, differences, dispositions necessary for receiving them.
5	Divine and human laws, sin in general: division, circumstances, types, causes, effects, kinds and remedies.	Clerical tonsure: obligations it imposes, qualities required.
6	The first 3 commandments of the Decalogue: duties of man toward God, in particular the 3 theological virtues, the virtue of religion and its acts.	Minor orders: definition, matter, form, functions and virtues necessary.
7	The 7 other commandments in reference to the neighbor.	The subdiaconate and the virtues proper to it, especially chastity.
8	The sacraments in general. Confirmation and the Eucharist as sacraments.	The diaconate and the virtues proper to it, in particular charity toward the neighbor.
9	The Eucharist as sacrifice; Extreme Unction; Matrimony.	The priesthood and the knowledge required to fulfill its functions worthily.
10	The Apostles Creed explained article by article according to what a priest must know, with the advice necessary in order to be able to teach it.	The ecclesiastical life, with the perspective that the ordained ought to lead a life much holier than the laity.

¹⁵SV XII, 291.

In fact, the retreats for ordinands did not remain in existence long after St. Vincent's death. They gradually fell into disuse as seminaries spread throughout France. By the time of the General Assembly of 1668, the confreres spoke of the retreats for ordinands as a thing of the past.¹⁶

3. *Tuesday Conferences*

Vincent saw the need for more than just the retreats. Beginning in 1633, he began to gather together priests who were interested in their own ongoing formation. Their discussions focused on growth in holiness and on ministry.¹⁷ The first group, which gathered on Tuesday, July 9, 1633, discussed "Ecclesiastical Spirit."

Vincent composed a rule which made provisions about the meetings and also about the lives of the members. He himself presided at the meetings and made concluding remarks.

It was not easy to gain admission to this group, since only those who led an exemplary life were accepted. Its membership included some of the greatest names of the clergy of Paris of the day. A list drawn up on October 1, 1660, a few days after St. Vincent's death, listed 40 doctors of the Sorbonne, 22 bishops, and numerous founders of religious congregations. While the conferences were geared toward growth in holiness, St. Vincent also directed the members toward a very active apostolic life: teaching catechism to children, evangelizing and instructing the poor, offering spiritual care in hospitals, and giving popular missions.

The Tuesday conferences spread to other cities, and even beyond the borders of France. They were found in Dauphiné, Languedoc, Saintes, Marseille, Alet, Metz, Angers, Bordeaux, Genoa, and Turin, among other places.

The originality of the Tuesday Conferences, and perhaps the reason for their success, was threefold. First, the meetings aimed primarily at the spiritual growth of the participants, focusing on an apostolic spirituality. In this sense, they were different from other meetings organized at that time for priests in France and Italy whose objective was the study of "casus conscientiae." Secondly, they were weekly. This meant that the members had to commit themselves, at considerable cost, to taking part regularly. Thirdly, they offered a particular type of priestly spirituality, focusing especially on the evangelization of the poor. Within that context, each of the members maintained his own secular identity, since all were diocesan priests.

Even given the originality of the structure of the Tuesday Conferences, it is still clear that much of their success depended on the personal presence of St. Vincent. Bossuet tells us: "Vincent was the soul of this pious gathering."¹⁸

By his teaching and example, Vincent communicated his "little method" of preaching to the members of the Tuesday Conferences. He was deeply convinced of the need to preach with great simplicity and instilled this conviction in the members of his own congregation and in the diocesan seminarians and priests whom he worked with and for. His efforts at the reform of preaching were eventually quite successful, as he himself recognized. In speaking about the little method, on August 22, 1655, he noted that, when someone preached well, people

¹⁶Claude Lacour, "Histoire Générale de la Mission," *Annales* LXII (1897) 326.

¹⁷Today, in an era when so much emphasis is placed on continuing formation, it is interesting to note that this was precisely the reason for the foundation of the Tuesday Conferences.

¹⁸P. Collet, *Vie de St. Vincent de Paul* (Ed. 1748), T. I, 600.

commented: "He preaches like a Missionary! O, my Savior! you have granted to the poor little Company this grace of inspiring it with a method which everyone desires to follow."¹⁹

4. *Seminaries*

In 1636 St. Vincent began a type of "minor seminary" at the Bons-Enfants, but it was not particularly successful. It is clear that by 1644 he was not very enthusiastic about taking in young boys as candidates for the priesthood. He felt that, at least in Italy and in France, such endeavors would be unsuccessful. The candidates were too young to have a clear idea about their vocation and very few of them persevered.²⁰

Vincent took a further significant step in 1642 when he began to train adult candidates for the priesthood at the Collège des Bons-Enfants.²¹ By 1647 there were 60 men preparing for orders there.

After the Bons-Enfants, other seminaries were opened in Cahors, Saintes, Saint-Méen, Le Mans, Marseille, Tréguier, Agen, Périgueux, Montauban, Troyes, Agde, Meaux, Montpellier, and Narbonne. Vincent himself attests to the success of the foundation in Cahors in a letter to the Queen of Poland written on September 6, 1651:

*We have not had seminaries for very long in this kingdom, Madame, and yet their progress is very considerable. One of the above-mentioned Lord Bishops (Alain de Solminihac, Bishop of Cahors) honored me by writing recently that he was extremely consoled to see his clergy reformed by means of his seminary, established only eight or ten years ago and staffed by four priests of our Company.*²²

St. Vincent's profoundest conviction, as he set up seminaries, was that the priest must first of all be virtuous.²³ In addition, the priest should acquire the knowledge necessary for the tasks to which he was assigned.²⁴ His views about the acquisition of knowledge were rather pragmatic. While he himself was well-educated, he was not given to flights of theory. He was more concerned that people know what they *need to know* than that they delve into other matters that they were curious about. His attitude toward study is clearly summarized in the Common Rules for the Congregation of the Mission: "St. Zeno says, *Curiosity makes a person guilty, not learned*, and St. Paul says: *Learning puffs up*. This is especially so when his other advice is overlooked: *Not to think more highly of oneself than one ought, but to estimate oneself soberly*. All of us, therefore, but especially the students, should always be alert in case undisciplined craving for learning insidiously invades our heart. We are not, though, to neglect the dedicated study which is needed for the proper carrying out of the work of a missionary, as long as our primary aim is to acquire the learning of the saints, which is taught in the school of the cross, so that we may preach only Jesus Christ, following the example of St. Paul, who also admitted

¹⁹SV XI, 287.

²⁰SV II, 459-60; cf. Chalumeau, *op. cit.*, 108.

²¹Actually, the seminary at the Bons-Enfants had been preceded by smaller undertakings in Annecy and Alet. But these were not especially successful.

²²SV IV, 247-48.

²³SV IV, 125-126; XII, 63-64; VIII, 33; IX, 28-29.

²⁴SV XI, 126; XII, 170; VIII, 32-33.

frankly, while writing to the Corinthians, that he had decided that when among them he should speak of nothing except Jesus Christ, and of him crucified."²⁵

He had very definite ideas about teaching too. He did not want professors to compose notes. Rather, he preferred that they use a good author and explain his text to the students. He mentions five texts by name: Peter Lombard²⁶ for theology, Martin Becanus²⁷ for controversy, Francis Toletus,²⁸ Peter Binsfeld,²⁹ and Martin Bonacina³⁰ for cases of conscience.

He urges students to study soberly, restraining their curiosity,³¹ and humbly,³² recommending to them the example of André Duval who, while a very learned doctor of the Sorbonne, showed striking humility. He summed up his advice in a talk to the young students who were beginning philosophy on October 23, 1658:

May the philosophy that you are going to learn help you to love and to serve the good God even more than you did previously; may it help to elevate you to him by love; and while you study the science and philosophy of Aristotle and learn all his divisions, may you learn the science and philosophy of Our Lord and learn his maxims, and put them into practice, with the result that what you learn will not serve to puff up your heart, but will rather enable you better to serve God and his Church.³³

It is important to note three characteristics of the seminaries founded by St. Vincent:

1. They were for young people who were *close* to receiving orders.
2. Consequently, they by no means offered complete programs of philosophy and theology as seminaries do today.
3. Given their brevity, they tended to emphasize the *practical*, particularly questions in moral theology and matters related to administering the sacraments. St. Vincent puts great emphasis on offering what is *useful*.³⁴ For that reason, the liturgy and preaching are high on his list of priorities.

Since he was concerned that seminary training should not be overly theoretical, but should have a practical aim, Vincent favored a kind of apprenticeship. A means he used for

²⁵CR XII, 8. Interesting too is St. Vincent's reaction to François du Coudray's proposal to work on the translation of the Syriac Bible into Latin: "Well do I know that the translation would be useful to the curiosity of some preachers, but not, to my mind, to the winning of the souls of the poor for whom the Providence of God has destined you from all eternity. It must be enough for you, Monsieur, that by the grace of God, you have devoted three or four years to learning Hebrew and know enough to uphold the cause of the Son of God in His original language and to confound His enemies in this kingdom. Imagine then, Monsieur, that there are millions of souls stretching out their hands to you and speaking in this way: `Alas! Monsieur du Coudray, you who have been chosen from all eternity by the Providence of God to be our second redeemer, have pity on us. We are wallowing in ignorance of the things necessary for our salvation and in the sins we have never dared to confess, and for want of your help we will certainly be damned.'" (SV I, 251-252).

²⁶SV I, 304.

²⁷SV I, 66.

²⁸SV II, 557.

²⁹SV II, 232.

³⁰SV II, 238.

³¹SV XI, 127.

³²SV XI, 128.

³³SV XII, 63-64.

³⁴SV XIII, 185-186.

bringing this about was to attach a seminary to a house of the Congregation, so that those preparing for the priesthood could join the missionaries and assist them in giving catechetical instructions.

As with other works of the Congregation, St. Vincent wanted his seminaries to be established on a sound financial footing. To achieve this, he united benefices to seminaries, and also provided them with revenues from chapels, as a source of support. At times, but somewhat reluctantly, he accepted money from the students for their own lodging.

5. *Retreats for Priests*

Besides providing retreats for ordinands, St. Vincent also offered spiritual exercises for priests. In fact, this is one of the works mentioned in the bull of the foundation of the Company, "Salvatoris Nostri."³⁵ It is clear that a large number of priests came to St. Lazare each year to make their annual retreat. The house was often filled with retreatants who came from all different places; this created considerable economic problems. Other houses of the Congregation too became centers for retreats for the diocesan clergy. Abelly reproduces a number of letters from priests and bishops relating how important these retreats were in their lives.³⁶

St. Vincent saw these spiritual exercises as complementary to those given to the ordinands, as well as to the formation given in the Tuesday Conferences and the seminaries. Basically, he envisioned a retreat as a time of ongoing formation and renewal. He sums up his thought on the relationship of his various works in a letter to Louis Lebreton written on February 3, 1641:³⁷

Thus God will make use of this Company: for the common people, through the missions; for the clergy who are starting out, through the retreats for ordinands; for those who are already priests, by not admitting to benefices or vicariates anyone who has not made his retreat and been instructed in the seminary; and for those who have benefices, through the spiritual exercises. May it please the Divine Goodness to grant us his grace to succeed!

6. *The Council of Conscience*

While one might consider this ministry as an aspect of St. Vincent's personal charism, rather than as a work of the Congregation, it is nonetheless very much in continuity with the inspiration that he handed on to the members of the Company; namely, that they should give themselves over to the formation and reform of the clergy.

Vincent served on this rather elite administrative body from 1643 to 1652. He recognized that the reform of the clergy in France would not perdure unless its roots were deep; the selection of bishops was, therefore, most important. In France, the Concordat of 1516 remained in force. This granted the king a decisive role in the nomination of candidates for the episcopacy and other high ecclesiastical offices. Vincent explains to Guillaume Gallais, the

³⁵SV XIII, 261.

³⁶Abelly, *op. cit.*, Book II, Chapter 4, Section 4, 284-292.

³⁷SV II, 154.

superior in Sedan, on February 13, 1644³⁸ that his role on the Council of Conscience³⁹ gave him a significant opportunity to influence questions relating to "the religious state and the poor."

This work was, evidently, a difficult one for St. Vincent. He writes to Bernard Codoing in 1643: "I have never been more worthy of compassion than I am now, nor have I ever had greater need of prayers than at present, in my new position. I hope it will not be for long."⁴⁰ The job was evidently a very difficult one, in an environment filled with political intrigue. While St. Vincent had habitual access to the queen, he also had a formidable adversary in Cardinal Mazarin, who regarded him as one of his enemies.⁴¹

II. Significant changes that have taken place between the 17th and 20th centuries

There have been huge changes in priestly formation between St. Vincent's time and ours. Here, I will mention only six.

1. There are now well-organized programs for priestly formation in many countries. Consequently, diocesan priests are usually much better educated today than in the 17th century. Bishops' conferences throughout the world have formulated "Programs of Priestly Formation" which have been approved by the Holy See, based on the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*. These programs outline the basic requirements for ordination to the priesthood under a comprehensive series of headings touching on the candidates' human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral preparation. In various countries, visitation teams evaluate seminaries in light of the criteria contained in the "Programs of Priestly Formation."

2. With the rising level of the education of the diocesan clergy, many bishops have decided to take full control over the training of their own candidates, using diocesan priests as formation directors and professors. As a result, many seminaries formerly staffed by members of Congregations are now run by the diocesan clergy.

3. Western Europe and the United States, since the 1960's, have seen a very significant drop in the number of vocations to the priesthood. This is not the place to discuss the complex religious, sociological, economic, and demographic⁴² factors that have given rise to the fall-off in priestly vocations. Here, suffice it to say that the drastic decrease in vocations has led to the closing of many seminaries. This has had striking repercussions within the Congregation of the Mission, since many highly skilled confreres, who had worked in seminaries for years, have often suddenly found themselves without a job in the field they were trained for. Provinces too, unprepared for this sudden change, have often succumbed to pressure from bishops to send these

³⁸SV II, 448.

³⁹For an evaluation of St. Vincent's role in the selection of bishops, cf. Pierre Blet, "Vincent de Paul and the Episcopate of France," *Vincentian Heritage* X (1989; # 2) 102-135.

⁴⁰SV II, 406.

⁴¹SV XIII, 137-138. These excerpts from Mazarin's diary make it evident that he had little love for St. Vincent.

⁴²Demographic factors are often neglected in the discussion of the decline of vocations, but they are extremely important. In Italy, for example, population growth is now zero. When families had six or seven children it was much easier for parents to encourage one or two to enter the seminary, but if there are only one or two children such encouragement might not be so readily forthcoming.

confreres to staff parishes. This has led, at times, to their being dispersed in placements where they live alone or in very small numbers.⁴³

While the number of vocations has gone down in western Europe and the United States, it has gone up in other parts of the world. The Congregation still receives many petitions from bishops in Asia, Africa, and South America, asking for teams of priests to take charge of seminaries, some of which have very large numbers of students, or seeking confreres as spiritual directors or professors. It is often not easy to give a positive response to such appeals, since those trained for priestly formation do not know the language or culture of the inviting country, nor the concrete life of the Church for which candidates there are being formed. These factors can make adjustment very difficult.

4. As a result of the changes mentioned above, as well as other factors, the role of the Congregation of the Mission in the formation of the diocesan clergy has changed very significantly over the last four decades. Several concrete examples will help to illustrate this. In the United States, in 1963, the Congregation staffed 12 diocesan seminaries. Today it no longer has the administration of any of these and is engaged in diocesan seminary formation in only a handful of centers, where small groups of confreres serve.

In France, in 1955, fifty-four confreres directed ten diocesan seminaries and two university seminaries. Today the Congregation administers none of these.⁴⁴

In the Philippines, in 1960, the Congregation staffed six diocesan seminaries. Today its role has been reduced to the presence of several confreres in the seminary at Cebu.

In Brazil, in the 1960's, the Congregation staffed 14 seminaries, major and minor. Today, several confreres assist in the formation of the Brazilian clergy, but the Congregation as such has responsibility only for one institute of philosophy where diocesan seminarians and others study.⁴⁵

5. In the last four decades, particularly since Vatican II, there has been an enormous amount of reflection on various ministries in the Church, including priesthood. The biblical teaching on ministry as service and on the many complementary ministries within the Christian community has received new emphasis. The Synod of Bishops held in October 1990 focused on this theme. The post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*,⁴⁶ gives a rather complete account of contemporary theological and pastoral thought on priestly ministry.

With the post-conciliar accent on the role of the laity within the Church, lay ministries and lay volunteer groups have known a new resurgence. Within the Vincentian Family, for example, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the International Association of Charity (formerly, the Ladies of Charity), and the Vincentian Marian Youth Groups have grown remarkably over the last several decades. These groups alone now number well over 1,300,000 members. If one counts other very large Vincentian-promoted groups like the Miraculous Medal Association, the number becomes very high. Some within the Church suggest that the widening possibilities for

⁴³One can only wonder what might have been the result if this very significant resource within the Congregation had been immediately redirected to other forms of priestly formation, in other countries where the needs are still great. This, however, is not as easy as it sounds, since drastic cultural and language changes are often involved in moving from one country to another.

⁴⁴Cf. A. Sylvestre, "Priest of the Mission for what purpose?" *Vincentiana* XXXIX (# 6; November- December 1995) 369.

⁴⁵It is evident that, frequently, factors beyond our control caused the exit of the Congregation from diocesan seminaries. Nonetheless, it is important for each province to ask courageously whether or not, at times, bishops, for just reasons, might have been eager to see us depart.

⁴⁶John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, *Origins* 21 (April 16, 1992; # 45) 717-759.

involvement in lay ministries has been a factor in the decrease in vocation to religious life. Others judge that it is precisely from such groups that vocations to religious life are likely to come.

6. Within the Congregation itself, since the General Assembly of 1968-69, a renewed emphasis on direct contact with the most abandoned has led to a re-evaluation of our apostolic works in almost all provinces and a consequent realignment of apostolic priorities. The results have been very positive. But at times, among some confreres, eagerness to labor in the direct service of the poor has produced some reluctance to engage in seminary work or other forms of service to the diocesan clergy. Some feel that it has even given rise to a measure of "anti-intellectualism" in the Congregation.

III. Some reflections on our role in helping form the diocesan clergy today

a. Its place in theory

On a theoretical level, the formation of the diocesan clergy retains its position as a central, foundational work of the Congregation. Our Constitutions state clearly that it is one of the ways in which the purpose of the Congregation, to follow Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor, is realized.⁴⁷ Likewise, Article 15 of the Constitutions states: "The formation of clerics in seminaries, a work of the Congregation from its beginnings, is to be effectively renewed where needed. In addition, members should afford spiritual assistance to priests both in the work of their ongoing formation and in promoting their pastoral zeal. They should work to encourage in them the desire of fulfilling the Church's option for the poor."

The meeting of the Visitors, held in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1983, treated this theme explicitly. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Visitors approved several propositions to be passed on to the Superior General. Among these were:

1. The Congregation ought to affirm, through concrete deeds, that the formation of the clergy still remains today a characteristic of its identity within the Church. In the school of St. Vincent, it ought to be inventive and participate in all the forms of helping the clergy that exist in the Church today.
2. Each province will strive to emphasize this aspect of the end of the Congregation and to encourage confreres not to abandon this Vincentian ministry. To the extent possible, the province will offer the most suitable means for the confreres to be able to respond to the appeals of local churches and churches in countries that lack clergy, through work in seminaries and in ongoing formation.
3. Each local community will consider, in its community plan, its own particular form of participating in the formation of the clergy, within the context of service to the local Church and priestly friendship.⁴⁸

In the letter written after this meeting, on April 24, 1983, the Superior General, Fr. Richard McCullen, observed that, at that time, the Congregation had the direction of 11 major seminaries, 8 minor, and 1 pre-seminary. He added that other confreres were engaged in the

⁴⁷Constitution 1, 3-.

⁴⁸*Vincentiana* 27 (1983; # 2) 189-190.

work of spiritual direction or teaching in seminaries or institutes of ecclesiastical studies whose administration was not in the hands of the Congregation. He noted, however, that the number of confreres working in the formation of the diocesan clergy had decreased because of the crisis of vocations, the consequent restructuring of seminaries, and the desire of the diocesan clergy to direct their own seminaries. But he wondered whether, besides these valid reasons for our lesser involvement in the direct formation of the clergy, we might also have failed to renew our participation in this work in such a way that our services would be genuinely desired. He added that, at the same time, the Congregation continues to receive appeals from bishops in various countries, particularly in Africa.⁴⁹

The Lines of Action of the General Assembly of 1986 sought to encourage the provinces to renew this work: "The initial and on-going formation of the clergy, as well as a spirit of hospitality toward them, will have a preferential place among the concerns of the provinces, each according to its own situations. The provinces will make creative efforts over the next six years to find those contemporary means by which our ministry on behalf of the clergy, which St. Vincent considered 'almost equal' (CR XI, 12) to that of the missions, might be revitalized."⁵⁰

At the General Assembly of 1992, in his reflection on the state of the Congregation, Fr. McCullen again addressed the issue of the formation of the diocesan clergy:

The number of confreres in the apostolate of forming candidates for the diocesan priesthood has not varied over the past six years. The number of seminaries whose administration is in our hands is small. The contribution towards the formation of the clergy tends to be made by individual confreres, rather than by communities. Given the emphasis in "Pastores Dabo Vobis" on the importance of the seminary being a community for the formation of future priests, it would seem that our Congregation with its experience of community life together with its charism for imparting clerical formation should have a greater role in the spiritual and intellectual education of future priests than it presently has. I have on occasion been struck by the strength of convictions which some Superiors General have that we, because of our charism and our history, are "experts" in the work of sacerdotal formation. It has left me often wondering what we should do to have a greater presence than we now have in this apostolate which is so crucial for the renewal of the Church today.

Today, the Congregation continues to sponsor a number of seminary programs where diocesan priests are formed: at Piacenza and Genoa in Italy; at All Hallows in Ireland; at Gda-sk in Poland; at Popayán, Garzón, Ibagué, Inzá, Betel, San Vicente del Caguán, and Restrepo in Colombia; at Cebu in the Philippines; at Chongoene in Mozambique; at Adelaide in Australia; at Curitiba in Brazil; at Malang in Indonesia and in the Solomon Islands. Confreres in various countries also participate in seminary programs that are run by others for training diocesan priests (e.g., in the United States, Fiji, Nigeria, Bolivia, Poland, Byelorussia, France and many other countries). Likewise, they serve in universities that offer programs for priestly formation (e.g., at St. John's University in the United States, at Belo Horizonte in Brazil).

b. Some general principles for renewing this work

1. *To revitalize this foundational ministry, it is crucial that we know the most urgent needs of the clergy.*

⁴⁹Vincentiana 27 (1983; # 2) 214-215.

⁵⁰General Assembly of 1986, Lines of Action, 11, 2-.

These will vary from culture to culture and from nation to nation. In some countries, for instance, the founding and staffing of seminaries is still of primary importance, since it is an urgent need. This is evident from the appeals that we receive from bishops who are aware of the charism of the Congregation of the Mission. But in other countries, the pressing needs of the clergy might be quite different. What are these?

We can learn these needs only from the people of the diocese, from the diocesan priests themselves, and from their bishops. This demands a good bit of dialogue. Sometimes bishops will tell us the needs of their clergy spontaneously. At other times, we may have to ask them. It is interesting to note that this is precisely the way St. Vincent proceeded in beginning the retreats for ordinands and in founding diocesan seminaries: he conversed with bishops, who explained their needs to him. He saw the needs and responded to them.

2. *In renewing this way of following Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor, we must be inventive.*

There is no sense in trying to alleviate needs that nobody has, nor in offering services that nobody wants. When we know the *real needs* of the clergy, we must reflect on ways of attacking them. Here, creativity is essential. Several years ago a Trappist friend of mine designed a program for priestly renewal that had remarkable success in the United States. I often reflected on how "Vincentian" this Trappist's work was!

In recent years creative programs have also been designed to help alcoholic priests or those with psychological problems. When confronted with serious problems, where solutions have not readily been found, it is crucial that inventiveness be encouraged.

It may also be necessary to urge bishops to convince priests to take concrete steps to confront the problems facing them. The stark reality is that priests, by and large, are very poor participators in needed programs of ongoing formation, since they have an unfortunate tendency to think that their formation was completed long ago.

3. *In developing creative programs, it is important to maintain dialogue, step by step, with the local bishops.*

This is a corollary of what has been stated above. We are talking, in this article, about formation of the *diocesan* clergy. As is evident, the bishop has overall responsibility for formation work within his diocese. We, as members of the Congregation, come to serve. Surely, the bishop may not have all the answers in that regard, but neither do we. Frank dialogue with the local bishop will be helpful not only in designing programs for the formation of the clergy, but also in guaranteeing that the clergy will participate!

4. *In renewing our work in the formation of the diocesan clergy, it is also important to revitalize its specifically Vincentian character.*

Our Constitutions state that, in this work, we should "lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor."⁵¹ In other words, if Vincentians run seminaries, give retreats to clergy, or conduct ongoing formation programs for priests, they should do so *as Vincentians*. The poor should have a special place in whatever we offer to the diocesan clergy. Today, this

⁵¹C 1, 3-.

should be clearer than ever, since the Church as a whole makes an explicit profession of a preferential option for the poor.

Since St. Vincent was deeply convinced of the need for five missionary virtues in the service of the poor, it seems to me that these too should have a prominent place in the spiritual and pastoral formation that we offer to the diocesan clergy. Simplicity, humility, gentleness, self-sacrifice, and burning zeal are irreplaceable elements in an apostolic spirituality among the poor.

Vincent's charism for drawing others, clergy and lay, together in the service of the poor, for team work, for organized charity should also be a part of what we offer to the clergy.

5. *As the Congregation attempts to renew this foundational work, it must form members to engage in it.*

Actually, a significant number of provinces do send confreres, on a regular basis, for specialized formation in this ministry. It is encouraging to see the younger provinces too sending members for higher studies in philosophy, theology, scripture, spirituality, canon law, psychology, sociology, and various programs related to spiritual direction.

In an era when so many of the laity are well educated, priests need a high level of preparation. "Forming the formers" is a significant challenge. A healthy by-product of specialized preparation of confreres for this ministry is that it provides significant resources for the province itself and raises the overall cultural level of the Congregation.

c. Some practical possibilities

Recalling the general principles mentioned above, I offer here *some* practical possibilities. Through ongoing dialogue other, fresh ones will certainly be generated. I outline the few below as an aid in helping the Congregation reflect on the renewal of this foundational ministry.

1. *Ministering in diocesan seminaries in one's own country.*

In various countries, as mentioned above, there is still an urgent need for this service on the part of the Congregation of the Mission. In those places, bishops are often eager to have our services. Sometimes they ask us to take total responsibility for staffing and administering a seminary in their diocese. At other times they ask us to provide a team which will work in conjunction with others (diocesan priests, members of other communities, sisters, laity) in running a seminary program. At times, they ask for spiritual directors, professors, or field education directors to work with those who form the seminary team. These, and other forms of involvement in seminaries within one's country, are a very valid way of following Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor, particularly if we bring St. Vincent's perspective to this work.

2. *Forming "national" teams to staff diocesan seminaries in other countries.*

When we receive appeals from bishops in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the challenge is to find ways of responding. One of the ways is to find a particular province which will provide a team. This is the model, for example, employed in founding the seminary at Chongoene in Xai-Xai, Mozambique, where the Province of Mexico volunteered a team. This

model has the advantage of offering a team whose members know one another beforehand and perhaps have even worked together. Naturally, they face the difficulty of adapting to a new culture and a new language, as well as a new Church situation, as they attempt to serve the needs of a foreign diocese.

3. *Forming "international" teams to staff diocesan seminaries in other countries.*

In this model, the Superior General seeks a team from among the members of various provinces. This team then engages in a period of orientation to the culture and language of the country and begins to work together for the first time. This is the model being used in the Solomon Islands (where all of the team members had the significant advantage of knowing English beforehand). An advantage in this model is that team members bring a broad perspective of ministry to a new situation, since they come from varying cultures. A disadvantage is that they may have a very different vision of ministry and very varied backgrounds. They also face the significant adjustment of coming to know one another and coming to work together as a team.

4. *Providing spiritual directors and confessors.*

The Congregation has often provided spiritual directors for diocesan seminaries. The Province of Ireland, for example, has a long tradition in this regard at Maynooth and Clonliffe. Bishops from all the continents continue to appeal to the Congregation for spiritual directors for their seminaries. Moreover, confreres in numerous provinces offer generous service as confessors and spiritual directors for individual priests.

Another possibility is to provide spiritual directors for dioceses. Some bishops are eager to have one who is available for their priests. The Archdiocese of Los Angeles, for example, recently established a House of Prayer for its priests. A team of spiritual directors is available, its members being present there on different days, to minister to priests. One of the confreres of the Los Angeles Province has just finished a three-year term as spiritual director for the priests of the Diocese of Tucson. In his ministry he traveled from place to place visiting the priests of the diocese and speaking with them individually.

Naturally, in order to engage in this ministry, the confrere, besides having the necessary personal gifts, should also have significant formation as a spiritual director.

5. *Giving retreats for seminarians and for priests.*

Bishops are often seeking good retreat givers. When we engage in this ministry, it is important that our retreats be very much geared toward an apostolic spirituality for diocesan priests. At the same time, as is evident in the ministry of St. Vincent, they should be significantly flavored by our own charism, with a special emphasis on the evangelization and service of the poor.

In the Province of Ireland, "Intercession for Priests," a form of retreat offered by Fr. Kevin Scallon and Sr. Briege McKenna, has had huge success. It has been exported to a very large number of countries.

6. *Offering programs of ongoing formation for priests.*

This is a very difficult ministry since, as mentioned above, priests are, by and large, poor participators. Creativity is essential in the revitalization of this ministry. In recent years, several priests have been able to develop "traveling workshops" of a few days' duration, which bishops have been eager to offer to their priests in ongoing formation sessions. A number of bishops are convinced that, in order to be effective, such sessions must be obligatory.

Since lay people often lament the poor quality of homilies and Sunday liturgies, preaching workshops and liturgical training – two themes that St. Vincent emphasized very strongly – continue to be among the greatest needs of the clergy.

In various countries well-formed confreres serve in diocesan or national offices for ongoing formation.

7. *Giving popular missions.*

Some of our own popular missions, reflecting St. Vincent's insight and practice, have recognized the need to minister not only to the people of a given parish or area, but to the clergy as well. They have, therefore, included, within the overall context of the mission, times of dialogue and renewal with and for the parish priests, often focusing on team ministry, leadership skills, spiritual animation, and the development of parish councils.

8. *Offering hospitality.*

In many places diocesan priests live in isolation from one another and experience considerable loneliness. The Congregation can provide a simple, but genuine service when it offers them hospitality and companionship. If our houses offer them the opportunity to find personal support, rest, quiet, prayer, a meal with others, recreation, or peaceful study, then we have been of genuine service to them.

The renewal of this aspect of the "end of the Congregation" is extremely important for the good of the Church, for the service of the poor, and for our own identity. The clergy have very pressing needs, but in recent years our own contribution to their formation has diminished sharply. Resolute, creative action is needed if we are to assist effectively in meeting this urgent need of the Church.