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Collaborating in Formation for Evangelization

The *Raison d'être* of the Congregation of the Mission and the Seminary Apostolate in California, U.S.A.

Richard Benson, C.M.

In the last thirty years there has been a lively discussion throughout the Little Company about a common understanding or lack thereof of the *finis* or "end" of the Congregation of the Mission. More precisely some have asked whether the community has an "end" or "ends." While this question may still seem open to some, to most others it has been resolved in the light of an exegesis of Vincent's writings and historical-critical research, which while admittedly leaving room for some ambiguity, point to a generally accepted understanding that for Vincent there was but a single *raison d'être* for the community, the **evangelization of the poor**.

An important motive for this same company to humble itself is that never has there been one - for it was unheard of - which had for its end that which our Lord came on earth to do, to announce the Gospel to the poor alone: Pauperibus evangelizare misit me. And this is our end, you see; that which it pleased God not so very long ago to leave us as a memorial.... (XII, 4)¹

This declaration though is hardly a dismissal or even reduction of the validity of the seminary apostolate for Vincentians. It is historically obvious that seminaries were an essential element in Vincent's singular mission to the poor in that they enabled the stability and continuity of the community's paramount mission by working within the Church's diocesan structure by evangelizing the parish priests. St. Vincent himself, clearly explains this logic in a letter to the superior of Agen (1654):

In regard to your question of how one fulfills the fourth vow which is to dedicate oneself to the salvation of the poor country people all of one's life, when one only does seminary work, I answer that it is first of all a preparation of the Spirit, being ready to go to the missions at the least mention of it; and secondly, because it is a means of working for the salvation of the poor country people to be employed in the formation of good pastors and ecclesiastics who afterwards are going to instruct and exhort them to live a good life; at least we should have this intention and this hope. (V, 81)²

Stafford Poole, C.M. reminds us that it was precisely the seminary apostolate that first brought the Little Company to the United States of America.³ The Vincentians were also one of

1 Coste, Pierre, C.M. *Monsieur Vincent: le grand Saint du grand siècle* (emphasis mine)

2 Ibid (emphasis mine)

3 "Ad Cleri Disciplinam: The Vincentian Seminary Apostolate in the United States" in *The American Vincentians*, Rybolt, J.E., ed. (New York City Press, N.Y., 1988) pp. 97-162.

the few communities that came to the U.S. for the explicit purpose of establishing a diocesan seminary.

The Vincentians first came to what is now the archdiocese of Los Angeles, California in 1863 to open a minor seminary for the diocese at the request of its bishop, Thaddeus Amat, C.M. However the seminary did not flourish and the institution quickly became exclusively a lay school. Nevertheless, the confreres remained in Los Angeles and continued serving in other apostolates. Eventually in 1926, Los Angeles' Bishop Cantwell opened a six year minor seminary which the Congregation of the Mission agreed to staff. This institution eventually became overcrowded and a new minor seminary was built in San Fernando, California and the community continued to staff and administer it until 1974 at which time the archdiocese took over full responsibility until it was closed some twenty years later.

St. John's Seminary, the major seminary for the archdiocese of Los Angeles, situated in Camarillo, approximately 100 kilometers north of Los Angeles, was opened by Bishop Cantwell in September 1939 and the responsibility for staffing and administering it was given to the Vincentians. Originally a six year program, complementing the six year program of the minor seminary, the Camarillo seminary was expanded in 1961 to an eight year program in order to accommodate an accredited four year Baccalaureate in philosophy and a four year accredited Master of Divinity ordination tract.

While until quite recently the Vincentians were principally if not exclusively responsible for the staffing and administration of the Camarillo seminaries, presently the Vincentians continue to work at the seminaries in collaboration with the archdiocese of Los Angeles in staffing and administering them. While both rectors are diocesan priests, both vice-rectors are currently Vincentians, and the seven confreres working full time at one or the other or both seminaries comprise about one fifth of the full-time formational staff.

The seminaries comprise two separate canonical houses for the Vincentians, one at the college seminary and one at the theology seminary. The confreres are engaged in a happy and mutual collaboration with their thirty five colleagues in ministry. The seminary staffs include diocesan priests, non-Vincentian religious men and women and laity. Divine Providence has led us to this situation in which rather than a diminution of Vincentian spirit, it is found to be flourishing. Within this milieu of a diverse student and faculty community the C.M. houses flourish and the charism of the community still serves as one of the guiding principles for formation. Whether it is by teaching in the classroom, doing spiritual direction, or accomplishing administrative tasks in an office, the confreres provide the vision of Vincent de Paul to students and staff alike. In collaboration with this rich formational staff the individual gifts of every member of the seminary staff, including the Vincentians, are highlighted and found valuable. In fact this living model of collaboration in ministry is made real daily for the students and staff alike.

The seminaries, with more than 150 students, serve more than fifteen dioceses in the U.S. and abroad and several religious communities, including the Vincentians of the Province of the West. The student population mirrors the multi-cultural and multi-lingual Church of the southwestern United States, with more than one third of the students being Latin-American, one

quarter being Asian-American, and the rest being either Euro-American or African-American. The formation policies of the seminary, developed in collaboration by the entire seminary faculty, similarly reflect the Vincentian influence in the seminary for more than fifty years. One clear example is that the seminaries prepare priests for the Evangelical mission, by insisting that all students engage in a full language program so that prior to ordination they can demonstrate pastoral proficiency in more than one language. The curriculum also includes multi-cultural pastoral training as well as offering a number of theology courses in Spanish along side the full English language curriculum. While many languages are regularly integrated into the prayers and music of the daily Eucharists, there is also one day set aside each week in which the entire Eucharist and the complete public recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours are celebrated in Spanish by the entire seminary community.

The confreres strive to maintain a strong identity as Vincentians while integrating fully into the heterogeneous mix of faculty and students. While committing themselves to full participation in the daily seminary horarium the C.M. community annually develops a house plan that provides time for weekly and monthly gatherings for prayer, business and recreation. All the major C.M. feasts are integrated into the seminary calendar and celebrated by the entire seminary community. Indeed a Vincentian spirit seems to pervade the entire seminary, from the beautiful stained glass window of Vincent de Paul in the chapel, to the courses on social justice and homiletics taught by the confreres. The local C.M. province sponsors an annual theological lecture with a Vincentian theme for the seminary community, seminary alumni and the laity of the archdiocese. Annually Miraculous Medals are blessed and distributed to the entire seminary community. And while the confreres try to participate fully in the life of the seminary it is common for them to take some time away together for retreat and prayer.

It is clear that when the proper balance is struck, the confreres can find a happy balance of intimate community life and rich apostolic efficacy in a diocesan seminary environment and in collaboration with non Vincentian colleagues. When that happens, the logic of Vincent's vision is made eminently clear and the confreres can say along with Vincent, "There is no greater work in the Church than the formation of good priests."