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The Formation of our Confreres in the thought of St. Vincent

Elements of a Spirituality

by Fr. Luigi Nuovo CM

While St. Vincent often insisted on presenting himself as a *scholar of the fourth form* he had nevertheless a solid theological, spiritual and also canonical formation. He knew how to respond with an assured competence to the questions which were put to him.

He was certainly not a man who reflected on knowledge for the sake of knowledge or in an academic way (it put him on his guard) – but he viewed it in the light of ecclesial and pastoral service – and for the ends of the Congregation; that is, in relationship to the formation of good priests and the evangelization of the poor.

He was motivated, then, above all by an intense sensitivity and apostolic concern. His counsels and advice regarding the formation of priests and in particular of a future priest of the Mission can be placed under three principal criteria:

1. Strive to practise the Christian virtues and "and those proper to our state," as Christ did who "first practised and then taught" (RC of the CM). The missionary is one called to model himself on Christ, to follow Christ, to conform himself to Christ. To aim at holiness of life is a priority.
2. Set about acquiring a solid and serious formation, theological and spiritual, – as the Church desired in the light of the Council of Trent – in order to be a good communicator, teacher, catechist, confessor (cf. SV M 48, pp. 150-152).
3. A good priest of the Mission ought finally to know how to join in his life a theological culture with solid virtue: "Educated and humble missionaries are the treasure of the Company, just as good and holy doctors were the treasure of the Church" (SV M 48, p. 150).

For St. Vincent the study of theology ought to lead to the Lord. He said: "If every time we enlighten our minds we seek also to inflame our wills, we can be certain that study will be a means to help us to go to God. We can hold it as a sure maxim that the degree to which we strive to attain interior perfection, will render us more capable of producing fruits in our neighbour" (SV M 15, p. 49).

The ideal for Vincent was "a man genuinely learned and genuinely humble" (SV M 48 p. 151) – and for this reason he esteemed André Duval who was "very cultured and at the same time so humble and simple" (ibidem, p. 152), – or Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle who combined culture and holiness of life, or even more so Francis de Sales who proclaimed the Gospel through his writings.

Humility, holiness of life should be specific virtues for those who were called to the formation of the clergy: "If it should please God to make us men of solid, interior virtue and

recollected, we can hope that He will use us to do a little good, not only to the people, but also and principally to the ecclesiastics" (SV M 181, p. 487).

Along these lines he exhorted those who were preparing for the priesthood to live in the consciousness that everything a priest is and has belongs to God: "Convince yourselves that if you have something of value in yourselves, be it little or much, you owe it to God, because it is God who has given it to you. Live, brothers, in this spirit: try to keep it, if you have it already; and if you do not, ask our Lord persistently for it" (SV M 191, p. 534). And yet again "while you study the science of philosophy and learn all its divisions, learn also the science of our Lord and his maxims, and put them into practice" (ibidem, p. 534).

Formation, however, ought to be the most complete possible: dogmatic theology, but also the practice in preaching well and catechising competently; moral theology, but also the solving of "cases of conscience."

Formation centred essentially around three aspects which are closely linked to each other:

- a) spiritual formation
- b) intellectual formation
- c) liturgical-pastoral formation (it was this that most distinguished the "Vincentian" seminary from others).

a) Spiritual formation was that which was closest to St. Vincent's heart. It was to be such that the seminarians would orientate themselves, in a decisive way, to the interior life, to prayer, to recollection and to union with God.

In a special way the students were to complete the formation received during the period of the Internal Seminary, by preserving and maturing its spirit, and striving through their application to study to unite faith and culture, knowledge and piety. In two letters addressed to Firmin Get in the seminary of Montpellier, he confirms these ideas: "In the education of ecclesiastics, you ought to have as a principal aim the directing of them to the interior life, to prayer, to recollection and to union with God.... It is not the work of a day, but of several years..." (VII, 593, SV, pp. 211-212). "I recommend to you to guide your boarders to the interior life. They will not be without knowledge, if they have virtue, nor without virtue, if they give themselves to prayer. If they do their prayer well and diligently, it will introduce them infallibly to the practice of mortification, it will detach them from possessions, and give them a love for obedience and zeal for souls and for all the duties" (VIII 3; SV XV, p. 250). And again to another Superior of a seminary: "You will never be without them (seminarists) if you take care to form them well in the true spirit of their state, which consists especially in the interior life and in the practice of prayer and the virtues. For it is not enough to teach them singing, ceremonies and a little moral theology; what is important is to form them in solid piety and devotion" (IV, 597; SV X, p. 521).

The different moments, such as: personal prayer, mental prayer – "according to the method of our Blessed Father Francis de Sales" –, the celebration and adoration of the Eucharist, the practice of the sacrament of penance, the reading of the New Testament, of the *Imitation of Christ* and other texts, – made up the framework of the spiritual edifice.

b) The intellectual formation was regulated by principles and norms to which the superior of the house, teachers and students, were to pay much attention. A series of valuable counsels

were given to the students.

Firstly, to pray that Divine Wisdom would instruct them; to read books, – choosing them carefully and with discernment, above all, to reflect on the reading; to study in a certain systematic way, to foresee and prepare the lecture to be given in the class-hall in its totality; finally to combine the exercise of memory and critical judgement.

These are the attitudes one is to have in study in order to extract the maximum profit from it in a way that would translate itself into a style of life.

c) The liturgical-pastoral formation, done at that time in the curriculum of studies, was for St. Vincent an important matter. His priests, whether they devoted themselves to the missions, or were destined to teaching in the seminaries, were to receive the most complete formation possible in this domain, in particular, sacred ceremonies, rubrics, chants, preaching, catechesis, celebration of the sacraments, exercises and pious practices.

St. Vincent wanted to apply a remedy to the abuses and other unseemly behaviour which he had seen so many times and which he recalled in the Conference to the Missionaries on 23 May 1659; "If you had seen, I do not wish to say the ugliness, but the diversity of ceremonies in the Mass about forty years ago, you would have been ashamed. I think there is nothing more ugly in the world than the different ways in which the Mass used to be celebrated. Some used to begin the Mass with the *Paler Noster*, others took the chasuble in their hands, said the *Introibo* and then put it on. Once I was in Saint Germaine en Laye where I observed seven or eight priests who all said Mass in different ways. One said it in one manner, another in another. The variations would reduce one to tears" (SV M 206 p. 731) or SV 12:258-259 (*translator*).

For the same reason he wanted future priests in the seminaries to be trained to keep with propriety the places of worship, so that everything would be resplendent with great dignity and nobility. On this point he writes in a letter of March 1652 to Lambert aux Couteaux in Poland: "Like you I blushed with shame when I saw what was said to you about the dirt and disorder in the churches in France and the acts of irreverence being committed in them. I am sure that, seeing just the opposite in the churches in Poland, has affected you quite differently than when you were here. It is indeed a great evil to which people do not give sufficient attention because they have become inured to it. Your letter caused me to reflect on it and I have perceived, first of all, that the solution to it is painful but nonetheless necessary. I am determined to do something about it, beginning with ourselves here, and recommending it to all our houses. Then I shall continue with ordinands, retreatants, and at our meetings with the diocesan clergy; in a word, in every way I can" (SV IV p. 326; SV 10: p. 205).

All these aspects, then, were to be bound together in such a way that the spiritual life, the theological culture, the liturgical-pastoral practice would fashion an integrated, mature and balanced priest, – whose crown would be a warm-hearted pastoral charity towards all and in a special way towards the poor.

A man of God from a burning and infectious charity.

Richard McCullen CM Translator