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The International Formation Center St. Vincent de Paul (CIF)

*by John E. Rybolt, CM
Director of CIF
and Kazimierz Stelmach, CM
member of the CIF team*

I. Presentation of Fr. John Rybolt, CM

Fr. Stelmach and I are grateful to Fr. Maloney and his council for giving us the opportunity to report to you, the members of the General Assembly, on the Vincentian Ongoing Formation Program, held at CIF, the International Formation Center in Paris. The last General Assembly called for the establishment of such a center, and since that time the center has received 196 Vincentians from 44 provinces. Of these, 4 came from the Vincentian Congregation in India. You may also be interested in knowing that we have had approximately 50 different Vincentians and Daughters of Charity as speakers or retreat givers in these last four years. Besides Kazimierz and me, two others have been members of the team: Jean-Pierre Renouard, of the Province of Toulouse, and Luis Alfonso Sterling, of the Province of Colombia. We also count on the help and advice of Léon Lauwerier and Abel Maniez (treasurer of the Province of Paris). We are grateful too for the organizational skills offered by Jerzy Fluderski (missionary in Madagascar) until his death this past spring.

CIF is a work of the General Council, and we are therefore responsible to the Superior General and his council. The council appoints confreres to staff the center, approves our financing and our contract with the Maison-Mère, reviews our statutes, and regularly oversees our performance. In *Vincentiana* you will find a report that I presented at the meeting of the Visitors in Salamanca. I would not like to repeat the details given in that report, but rather concentrate on other matters here.

However, to give you a brief idea of how we work, Fr. Kazimierz Stelmach will now report on the general outlines of the program.

As you can see from Kazimierz's report, the purpose of this program is, according to the official title of the program, Vincentian Ongoing Formation. Our purpose involves giving our participants a break in their regular routine as a brother, deacon or priest in the Congregation, to have the time to relax, to think and to pray about their commitments. Since most of the participants are in their 40s, we find that they come with a rich background. Besides, many are superiors of houses, professors in seminaries, directors of the Daughters of

Charity, pastors, missionaries, members of provincial councils, and so on. We have tried to give the confreres sufficient time and space to accomplish the goals of the program, with a minimum of structure. We always insist that the program is for them, not for Kazimierz and me, and that the participants are the ones who should make the necessary decisions concerning our routine.

Besides time and space, we also offer opportunities for renewal and recommitment. This is particularly evident towards the end of the program. We invite the participants to pray daily the special CIF prayer, the earliest prayer in honor of St. Vincent. In it, we pray for an increase of his spirit to love what he loved and practice what he taught. At the conclusion of the retreat, we invite the confreres to renew their vows as Vincentians. In the little chapel of Notre Dame de Grâce, where Vincent celebrated one of his first masses, we renew our priestly promises, such as priests do during Holy Week in the presence of their bishop. At the closing Eucharist, we renew our commitments to the apostolate of the Congregation and send one another forth on mission. We hope that these little ceremonies will positively influence the lives and future work of the confreres.

The results of the program are hard to measure. A brief glance at the list of the names of the participants has shown us, however, that although a few are absent or have left the Congregation, the large majority continue in their work. We have planned to ask the past participants for their current evaluation of the program, and we soon hope to finish this.

The participants evaluate the program weekly, and the results have demonstrated to us the basic soundness of the program: its goals, structure, rhythm, and topics. Not everyone, of course, agrees with every point, and we have learned a lot from their observations. We have as a result made some changes in the program in the last eight sessions, but not in our general approach. Other changes that we look forward to include involving past CIF participants as speakers and retreat givers, and inviting more women to speak on appropriate topics. We also look forward to having a web site, publishing our regular information for the confreres and others, together with the rich load of information in the papers presented by past speakers. Another source of information will be a guide to Vincentian France that I have nearly completed. This book began as a series of notes on our trips and now extends to all important (and some less important!) Vincentian sites in France. This guide book is intended for Vincentians, Daughters of Charity, members of the Vincentian Family, and for anyone interested in Vincent de Paul's life and work in France. St. Louise, of course, is well represented, as are our saints and blessed.

On a larger scale, we are thinking of ways to involve two other groups in CIF. One group is the older confreres, like me, older than 50. The other group would be members of the Vincentian Family.

In both cases, we foresee adding or substituting shorter programs in Vincentian formation and heritage for older confreres, 50 years old and above (perhaps for one month), and for the Vincentian Family (also about a month). These programs could be held in either the fall or the spring of the year, and would have to take into account differences of language.

You have received a very tentative plan for these two developments. This will take a lot of work to establish, but I think that the results will be worth it. During this assembly, we hope to talk to you and ask your opinion on our present program and possible new ones.

We would like now to address two issues that arise regularly. The first is the length of the program, and the second is its cost. The two issues are, of course, related.

We believe, based on our own experience and on the evaluations given by the participants, that the period of fourteen weeks is neither too short nor too long. Its rhythm or pace is good, as is the balance of time for work, study, prayer, community life and individual relaxation. The program can be shortened, certainly, but not without serious changes in its content.

The price of the program is 29.000 francs. For that amount, the participant receives food and lodging, and all program costs (for speakers, translators, staff, materials, travel during the program, entrance fees and the like, information _ newspapers, magazines, television, e-mail, etc.). It does not include individual travel to and from Paris, medical insurance, or personal expenses such as meals away from the program, telephone calls and other supplies.

You can see from one of the pages you have received where our funds go. These figures, the result of a professional financial audit, cover the four sessions of the years 1996 and 1997. Even a quick glance will show you that the largest expenses are for food and lodging. These figures represent actual costs, not just various contributed services or costs borne by others. At the same time, we have learned in the last four years how to make some economies, such as calculating the charges for the rooms, bulk purchases, temporary investment of funds in interest-bearing accounts, and the like. Some changes, such as a new telephone system, have been the result of innovations at the Maison-Mère, for which we are grateful.

Another set of figures presents the result of our activities for the last two years. When the number of participants is high enough we can meet our fixed costs and fund our depreciation. We did not do so in 1996, but we did reach our target in 1997. Some costs will increase, and consequently we may have to make changes either in the program expenses or in our income.

Let me conclude with three reflections. First _ and this is something that always comes to mind _ I am proud to be associated with the wonderful

confreres who come to the program. The opportunity to share in some way in their lives and ministry is enriching. Second, we have started to see an increasing interest in matters Vincentian. By this I mean a greater awareness of our Vincentian roots. This is shown in increasing interest in publications, conferences and seminars, as well as in the Vincentian Family. CIF is not the cause of all this, but I believe that our participants have taken a healthy interest in these areas because of their time in Paris.

Third, and lastly, I always reflect that divine providence is evident in our work: God seemingly taking care of this poor little Company of the Mission. There have been so many times that we were facing a crisis of one sort or another (schedule, speaker, translator, bus, lodging, and so on), only to have the issue resolved well. Reflection on this at the time and later has shown the hand of God here. It is wonderful to be a part of this.

Both Kazimierz and I look forward to talking with you about the program now and later during the assembly.

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II. Presentation of Fr. Kazimierz Stelmach, CM

The first point of the Statutes of CIF says, among other things: "*The International Formation Center: St. Vincent de Paul (CIF) offers to members of the Congregation of the Mission an integral program of ongoing Vincentian formation, destined to help them carry out the objective of following Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor. ... the program is geared primarily toward members of the Congregation of the Mission.... The program of the Center includes the following components: academic disciplines, personal study, research, teaching, the development of the vocation and ministry of the Vincentians, liturgical celebrations, time for prayer and a retreat, and the experience of community life.*"

I will seek now to develop very briefly some of these points to give you an idea of the program.

1. **The program in general.** The length of the course is 14 weeks. Every week has its specific theme and almost always an invited speaker – this depends on the theme. The themes are based on our *Constitutions and Statutes*. Thus, the first week has the title: "St. Vincent de Paul today." Its purpose is to be familiar with the universal state of Vincentian studies both today and in our history. For the program of the other weeks, please consult the annex below. If anyone would like more information, I can answer your question.

Normally, the sixth week, or a week in the middle of the program, we have called "personal activities." At this time the participants are asked to set their own schedule – some use this time for personal research, others for visits, etc. Many of them pass this time in Rome at the General Curia.

During every session we have a meeting with the Superior General. There is a conference, a Mass, and the chance for dialogue. There is also a meeting with Mother Elizondo, Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity. During this meeting the Mother General presents us the present-day situation of the Company with its own problems and, in particular the collaboration between the two Communities, etc.

2. The structure of the week. Normally on Mondays and Tuesdays the presenters take up the theme of the week. On Wednesday we consider the history of the Congregation of the Mission. Thursday is devoted to work in small language groups. On Friday we exchange ideas concerning the theme in the large group. On Saturday we often visit one of the Vincentian sites. We also program a visit to the archives of the Congregation of the Mission and those of the Daughters of Charity.

Every day there is prayer, meditation, and Mass in common – the "how" depends on each linguistic group. There are also common celebrations – especially those in the Vincentian places like rue du Bac, the tomb of Ozanam, Reuilly, Clichy, and also during the trip to the sites of St. Vincent.

3. I would like to present briefly our Vincentian trip, which is an integral part of the program. To know something well, you have to see and to touch. Half of the weekends are given over to a visit to some place linked to the history of the Congregation of the Mission. Always at the beginning of the program we see "Vincentian Paris" and Versailles, then Gannes and Folleville. You will find these places listed in the annex below. Every place is linked to the history of the Congregation of the Mission or that of the universal Church.

Then there is the retreat – the essential moment of the program. For every language group we invite a preacher. The retreat lasts four days. At the end we renew our vows. After the retreat, at the invitation of the confreres of Saragossa, we make a brief visit to Loyola, San Sebastian, and the provincial house.

I think that in this brief report I have been able to give, even if in a general manner, an idea about the program that is generally well accepted and appreciated by the participants.

Annex: General Program of CIF

The first week is entitled "St. Vincent Today." The purpose is to know the global state of Vincentian studies today.

Second week: "Identity of the Congregation of the Mission" (C 1-9). This comprises our juridical and theological identity today and historically.

Third week: "Apostolate of the Congregation of the Mission" (C 10-18). The Congregation of the Mission yesterday and today; in what way is it present in the world.

Fourth week: "Community Life" (C 19-27). According to St. Vincent and the different experiences in the world.

Fifth week: "The Vows" (C 28-39). Vincentian, juridical and theological points of view.

Sixth week: "Pastoral Activity."

Seventh week: "Prayer" (C 40-50). Vincentian prayer in general.

Eighth week: "The Spiritual Life, the Five Virtues" (C 4, 7, 24). Vincentian and general foundations of the spiritual life; the five virtues today.

Ninth week: "Social Action of the Congregation of the Mission" (S 9). Basis and reality today.

Tenth week: "The Vincentian Family" (C 50). The saints and blessed of the Congregation of the Mission. The important Vincentian figures.

Eleventh week: "Retreat. Major Vincentian Tour."

Twelfth week: "Vincentian Testimonies." During this week, those responsible for various branches of the Vincentian Family and Vincentian movements are invited to speak to us of their history and their activities today.

Thirteenth week: "Vincentian Themes." Different speakers present us with present-day themes, such as Islam, the great Vincentian theologians, etc.

Fourteenth week: "Analysis and Synthesis of the Personal Project" which each participant is invited to develop in the course of the session.

Principal Vincentian Sites Visited during the Session of CIF

Vincentian Paris,

Versailles,
Clichy, Reuilly,
Gannes, Folleville, Amiens,
Joigny, Montmirail,
Fain-les-Moutiers,
Major Vincentian Tour _ Retreat:
 Richelieu, Château l'Evêque,
 Lourdes, Tarbes, Toulouse, Buzet, Notre Dame de Grâce,
 Montgesty
 Châtillon, Lyon, Pérouge, Ars, Valfleury.

Presentation of Fr. Stelmach translated by Robert Stone, CM