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Collaboration in Formation **- Final document, engagement n°3 -**

J. Ignacio Fernández Mendoza, C.M.
Vicar General

In line with our times

The post-conciliar documents of the Church which refer to the formation of aspirants to the priesthood and religious life usually refer to four elements of formation: human, spiritual, intellectual and apostolic. The same can be said of the Ratio Formationis for the Internal Seminary and Major Seminary of the Congregation of the Mission. The latter, due to proper conditions, also mentions community and Vincentian formation. In the Congregation of the Mission Vincentian formation colors all aspects of formation. In correct proportion, *salvatis salvandis*, this also concerns the Daughters of Charity and lay Vincentians inasmuch as the Magisterium of the Church examines in greater or lesser degree the formation plans of the various groups in the Vincentian Family.

We will refer, often briefly, to different elements of formation, pointing out in each those parts which follow the Vincentian vision of formation.

Human formation has as its end not only a high degree of personal maturity, but a final goal of enablement for apostolic activity. The members of the Vincentian Family must develop in this area of formation above all certain values, such as: respect for persons, compassion, acceptance, and generosity. Spiritual formation leads to personal and group resemblance to Jesus Christ. Although it is common to all the faithful, the use of certain means to achieve spiritual formation such as hearing the word of God, sacramental life and prayer, in the case of a Vincentian, spiritual formation demands a quality which reflects the charism received from its founder and shared with the institution to which each one belongs. This presupposes then, that the members of the Vincentian Family, as they receive an adequate spiritual formation, will attempt above all to direct their energies to the service of charity, in order to develop an effective and practical love of the poor. Intellectual formation aims at achieving a sufficiently solid understanding of the Christian message in order to be sure of one's faith and announce the Gospel. Granted that the Vincentian knows, to a great degree, the contents of the Creed, he must also assimilate the social doctrine of the Church, the causes of poverty, and whatever refers to inculturation in the faith. Apostolic formation for the different branches of the family attempts to direct personal and group energies toward the

evangelization of the poor, especially through service and proclamation. To achieve an adequate apostolic formation reflection and study are required, faced with practical pastoral problems of poor social environments. In the same way, all Vincentians, following these norms, must develop a personal as well as communitarian missionary conscience.

Vincentian formation must be considered fundamental and absolutely necessary. Its purpose is to make all members of the Vincentian Family, following their own charism, followers of Jesus Christ, Evangelizer of the Poor. Vincentian formation is not limited to a particular moment in a person's life, but must be cultivated during a lifetime. It involves reflection, study, and in no small way the practical and concrete practice of charity. Vincentian formation, must impregnate and penetrate the entire personal and group formative process so that the entire Vincentian Family may live intensely the experience of St. Vincent. It must make sense of and unify all aspects of formation. To this end, not only theoretic knowledge, but experiences and practical love of the poor, also contribute.

Also, it is incumbent on all members of the Vincentian Family, to discover and analyze with special attention the past and present history of the institution to which they belong.

Prelude to The 1998 Assembly

Interest in the Vincentian Family greatly increased in the period between the General Assemblies of the Congregation of the Mission of 1992 and 1998, but especially during this last Assembly. The Superior General and his council, have promoted this new dynamism on a universal level. For a great number of missionaries of course this was nothing new. Many others, on the contrary, with the help of newer circumstances, have discovered a world unknown to them: that of the Vincentian Family. Both have realized that the concept and reality of the Vincentian Family have reached a level previously unknown.

Practice and subsequent reflection on the Vincentian Family in recent years have proceeded in complementary directions. Some studies have referred to criteria such as membership, description of each group, signs of post-conciliar renewal, identity of each branch and, in particular, impulse given to the life and apostolate of the Vincentian Family. In the present decade, on the threshold of the third millennium, concepts of mutual acquaintance and communion, of unity in the diversity of charism, of collaboration and of its proper mission, have circulated within the Vincentian Family. One area which has aroused much interest has been that of formation. And that is the subject of this paper.

Responsibility of The Congregation of The Mission

The three most significant communities founded by St. Vincent for apostolic purposes were the Confraternity of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, and the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Owing to its foundation and also to historical practice, we may rightly affirm that the Congregation of the Mission always assumed the responsibility of contributing to the Vincentian spiritual animation and formation of the other two groups. With the passage of the years the identical or similar role would be exercised in relation to other Vincentian lay groups which appeared from time to time. It is true that the degree of intimacy and involvement with each one of these was, in practice, unequal, due not only to the juridical bases on which these relationships were established, but also to the greater or lesser degree of empathy between the C. M. and other Vincentian groups.

Today the C. M., in its Constitutions, Statutes, and documents emanating from General Assemblies, openly manifests its convictions on its responsibilities in regard to offering a good Vincentian formation to the associations founded by St. Vincent or which manifest his spirit (C. 17; S. 7, 1; Final Document, G.A. 1992 & 1998).

Collaboration in Formation

According to the dictionary, collaboration means: working with others in a common task, helping to achieve a determined goal. Collaboration is seen, therefore, in the realization of a project, undertaken by several persons with the intention of carrying it through. There are two elements: plurality of persons or institutions, and an end or goal to be reached, which in our case is simply achieving a good specific formation for the benefit of the members of the Vincentian Family.

It is not our intention to go into excessive detail in regard to formation. But nevertheless we would like to mention a few notions, since we are treating of a complex, necessary, and urgent matter.

Formation has general and specific elements. It is a process in which a person or group grows in resemblance to Christ, realizing at the same time conformity to the charism of the institution to which each one belongs. Certain Christian values, both general and specific, are sought, at the same time respecting the multiple variety of social and cultural expressions of each locale.

On the other hand formation seeks the integral development of the person. This nevertheless, is not limited to individual aspects, but to developing the capacity to live and act as a member of a body. At the same time it tries to offer to each person a specified, solid plan, open to a society in profound transformation, always in agreement with one's vocation. Formation advances through information, through knowledge of the

founder and the history of the association, through corresponding apostolic experiences. The development of a historical and experiential sense of its particular mission is today a considerable part of formation in Vincentian institutes.

Declaration of the General Assembly

The General Assembly met in Rome from 6 to 31 July 1998. From 9 to 14 representatives of different Vincentian Family units participated in the sessions. This turned out to be a novel and very valuable tactic. The Final Document bears the title: "With the Vincentian Family we face the challenges of the Mission at the threshold of the new Millennium." The approved text contains many contributions which refer to the Vincentian Family, all based on studies undertaken during the last decade. It contains several sections: introduction, challenges, convictions, commitments, and conclusion. It is addressed directly to the Congregation of the Mission, but also, by way of a guide, and with a marked tone of invitation, to the different components of the Vincentian Family.

The Congregation of the Mission, after two or three months of relative calm following the Assembly, is now hurrying to disseminate and apply the Document in many different places and cultures within the Vincentian Family. Putting into practice a mandate of a General Assembly takes time, an adequate methodology, but above all, a political vision and a great sense of responsibility.

Making Decisions Effective

The challenges indicated in the Final Document synthesize some of the actual signs of the times which the Congregation of the Mission must keep in mind as it undertakes its missionary activities: the poor, new cultural horizons, and the new evangelization. Convictions attempt to individualize some of the evangelical and Vincentian motivations which nourish the life and apostolate of the Congregation of the Mission: the Lord sends apostles, the vitality of the Vincentian charism, fidelity in following Jesus Christ, and pastoral charity.

The commitments adopted by the General Assembly, five in all, place the Congregation in predetermined attitudes as it faces the future: collaboration with the Vincentian Family, response to the poverties of our time, collaboration in formation, international missions, and the use of mass media for evangelization. The General Assembly, through the decisions adopted and stated in the Final Document, has designed a new evangelization project for the Congregation which now it intends to actualize together with the other components of the Vincentian Family. For this reason it is no exaggeration to call the present moment a time of hope. The responsibility of putting into practice these five commitments now rests upon all the missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission; priests, brothers, students.

The Third Commitment: Collaboration in Formation

This section refers to the initial and permanent formation of the missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission and lay Vincentians. In order to overcome the possible inconvenience which the excessive homogenization of the various Vincentian branches presents, the document invites us to respect the historical experience and traditions of each Vincentian group. It also alludes to mutual collaboration in formation, without forgetting the autonomy of each group.

As is clearly seen, the General Assembly repeatedly asks that the Congregation of the Mission collaborate in formation, but always manifesting an attitude of maximum respect for the singular characteristics of each Vincentian group.

At the same time this section of the document insists, in humble tones, that it is not suggesting any great and novel changes. Its intent is to take advantage of existing situations and offer to the various components of the Vincentian Family a strong sense of belonging, as has been accentuated during the last decade. This third commitment contains, after a short introduction, three sections: formation of our own, of formators, and of the Vincentian Family.

Initial and permanent formation of our own

This section directly affects all missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission, be they in initial formation or in the latter. In general terms the General Assembly broadens the scope of our existing formation, so that from now on our programs will include all that concerns the Vincentian Family and, in particular, the relationship of the Congregation of the Mission to those entities that share our charism, in order to construct a solid edifice of mutual relations. Towards this end, on our part, nothing could be better than attempting to know better the other groups, to help them grow in a sense of belonging and, of course, opening to them the opportunity to serve and evangelize the poor.

The Assembly document goes farther. Missioners who dedicate themselves to the formation of others should at the same time get to know their subjects. Vincentian groups have much to teach to members of the Congregation of the Mission. They often help us to discover the freshness and modernity of the Vincentian charism. They can often show us new forms and manners of actualizing our charism within the many different cultural and social environments of the world. There are many examples of this which are useful to recall. Day by day an increasing number of Daughters of Charity and lay Vincentians are teaching in the internal and major seminaries of the Congregation of the Mission. At the same time their names are showing up on programs of meetings, workshops, congresses, and formation courses being offered to the entire Vincentian Family, including members of the Congregation of the Mission. And not infrequently do

we see a Daughter of Charity animating retreats directed to missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission.

The Assembly then indicates several disciplines which must be considered by the provinces in their plans of formation: causes of poverty, study of languages, Church social doctrine, participating in the CIF and similar activities. In this way the use of these means will benefit formation and, in the end, the mission itself.

Why this insistence on the part of the Assembly on the initial and permanent formation of our members? The answer should not scandalize anyone. First of all, the need we have of more formators. The lack of confreres who specialize in formation is well known in not a few provinces of the Congregation of the Mission. This is due in part, but not exclusively, to the gradual abandonment of seminaries where our missionaries used to teach. Another cause is the closing of Major Seminaries in many provinces, seminaries where our candidates received their philosophical-theological formation. Actually the greater part of the students of the Congregation of the Mission attend study centers not run by the Congregation. This fact can be considered normal and even advantageous. But what is not so acceptable is the small number of Vincentians who teach in these centers. In the same way we can attribute the lack of specialization to at least a sufficient group of missionaries in each province which offer a third factor: the option for certain specific ministries, for example parish work, for which knowledge of formation is minimal.

The General Assembly, realizing that lack of formators affects the Congregation of the Mission., invites the provinces to put into practice the necessary means to find an adequate solution. So, in order to raise the level of initial and permanent formation, there must be, above all, cooperation on the part of the provinces. It is incumbent on the Provincial Assemblies, and particularly on the Visitors and Councils, to examine the situation and arrive at decisions in agreement with those taken by the General Assembly.

The call of the General Assembly, secondly, is due to the lack, many times proven, of Vincentian formation, and very notably, of sufficient information and the sense of belonging to the Vincentian Family. One sector of missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission has in fact remained aloof from happenings of the recent past and the reality of the Vincentian Family, and consequently has little or no experience of the affective and effective closeness of the various family groups. We can see therefore the convenience of the stimulus given by the Assembly towards the formation of missionaries in order to increase relationships and collaboration with the rest of the Vincentians. Wherever we may find ourselves in the Congregation of the Mission, we must, as the occasion arises, in accord with the voice of the General Assembly, encourage everything referring to the Vincentian Family, so that all together we may undertake, with greater guarantee of success, evangelization in the third millennium.

Formation of our formators

The General Assembly addressed this topic with great clarity and decision. It is not in vain to state that sooner or later the Congregation of the Mission will depend to a certain degree on the formation of young missionaries, and that this be possible, of those who will carry out the duty of formation in the near future. The provinces are invited to put into practice all necessary means, including economic, to offer the best preparation possible to present and future formators. Furthermore the Assembly calls for interprovincial cooperation to assure the formation of formators, indicating three paths to follow: mobility and interchange of formators, providing economic help to needy provinces, that provinces accept confreres from other geographic areas. And the Superior General asks that, having examined the pros and cons and if it be judged opportune, extraordinary means be taken to insure the formation of formators. The General Assembly suggests two possible ways: the establishment of one or more international centers of formation, and a traveling team of experts which would visit provinces or geographic areas where missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission labor. No door is closed. Time and circumstances will indicate what should be done at each moment. In calling for this collaboration the Superior General and his Council, keeping in mind what the General Assembly approved, have initiated a process of discernment with the purpose of arriving at opportune decisions in this matter.

The General Assembly, without going into too many details, makes a distinction between the formation of professors and formators. Without excluding the former it makes special reference to the latter. For this reason it alludes to some special obligations of the Vincentian formator. It accompanies and supports the candidate in his integral growth: his vocation, the option for priesthood or layman, Vincentian spirituality, and missionary priesthood.

We wonder: Does the insistent call of the General Assembly to prepare formators respond to a real necessity? Is it opportune at the present time? Have we been negligent during these late decades in regard to this decisive activity, formation of formators?

Allow us to respond, based not on more or less well known preconceived theories, but on experience garnered by the writer in his post of Assistant General, and by those who have affirmed the constant and clear reality of the greater part of the Congregation of the Mission.

The Congregation of the Mission gives evidence by its own life of a novel fact. As the second millennium ends and the third is about to commence, the Congregation of the Mission is moving from the northern hemisphere to the southern. As the experts predict, during the next 25 years the Congregation of the Mission will experience a notable growth in the Latin American, African and Asian countries, contrary to what will take place in Europe and the U.S.A. In the majority of the provinces of the Congregation of

the Mission, not excluding Europe and U.S.A., the lack of formators is very evident. In every case the paucity of prepared and sufficiently motivated formators is, from every point of view much more evident in most, but not all, the provinces of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Precisely in the places where day by day the number of candidates knocking at the doors of our houses of formation is increasing.

The respective Visitors are personally experiencing the problems and difficulties of those who lack formators, and do not find an ideal formula for solving so great a challenge. Sooner or later the solution will be found right in those places where the problem exists. But for the immediate present we have, up to a certain point and in a provisional way, the solution in interprovincial collaboration. The help offered by those provinces gifted with personnel and at times also with economic means to needy provinces is decisive and absolutely necessary at this time as we establish and make firm the presence of the Congregation of the Mission in the aforementioned continents. This is one of the goals which the Congregation of the Mission must face with firm decision as we begin the third millennium.

We should not be surprised that the General Assembly, faced with so many facts and necessities, has urged the Congregation of the Mission to undertake without delay proper action. Those provinces which have no formators should give this ministry first consideration and so order their provincial plans and distribution of personnel. Preparation of a formator demands economic means and time. Its number one enemy is improvisation, especially in those provinces where the number of vocations has dropped considerably and, theoretically, they have prepared formators. The reality is different. On losing a formator, these Visitors in many cases have no confreres prepared and motivated to take up this delicate ministry.

There are many causes which contribute to the situation we face. During the three first decades after Vatican II the preferences of the missionaries were for directly pastoral ministries. The strong impulse given to reflection on Vincentian spirituality and in particular to the end of the Congregation of the Mission induced not a few confreres to think that the pastoral ministry, with care of souls, agreed more authentically to the thought of our Founder than, for example, the formation of our own. Another factor, of a different nature, must be added: parish ministry, during these final years of the century, has absorbed a greater number of confreres than at any other time in our history. Through parishes, without a doubt, a great missionary labor has been realized, frequently in truly poor areas. Nevertheless this ministry, so valid to evangelization, has brought some inconvenient results. A growing number of missionaries have felt a reluctance to accept other ministries, for example, formation of our own candidates and of diocesan clergy. Nor has another factor gone unnoticed. A missionary working in a parish often, not always, sees quickly the positive results of his pastoral efforts. Experience teaches that the same does not happen in the case of those dedicated to formation, who must wait for years to measure the fruits of their efforts. This is definitely a factor which, added to

those already mentioned, has contributed to a certain distancing and dissatisfaction among many missionaries for the ministry of formation.

Considering what we have written, and the fact that we find ourselves about to begin the next millennium, it behooves us to urge, following the word of the General Assembly, the preparation of formators. We must take advantage of this moment to take the necessary steps leading to a satisfactory solution in the area of the formation of our own.

Formation of the Vincentian Family

The General Assembly, in a change of tactics, imagines different groups, members of the Vincentian Family, knocking at the doors of the Congregation of the Mission, seeking help in their formation. In reality, this does happen frequently. The General Assembly seriously begs the provinces to take the necessary steps to answer this need. The vitality, in greater or less degree, of the different groups is real and their needs arise and are evident in their local ambience. The solution of these needs is usually in the hands of those who know, from up close, the situation. According to the General Assembly, it seems inadequate to look to entities geographically and culturally distant, when the solution really is close at hand.

Descending to details the General Assembly refers to the formation of different Vincentian groups under two headings: initial and permanent. The Assembly reminds the missionaries of the advisability of giving a hand to existing groups who may be faltering because of lack of vitality. They also invite the missionaries to accompany local groups that enjoy good health, since permanent formation must be considered opportune for all and at all times.

More surprising yet is the call of the General Assembly to set up formation teams composed of missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission and members of other groups of the Vincentian Family, Daughters of Charity, and laity. In this way the General Assembly goes beyond the era when formation of the Vincentian Family involved two groups: usually the Congregation of the Mission and the group being formed, made up of members of the Vincentian Family. The General Assembly very wisely refutes the former vision of things and opts for the creation of joint formation teams. Certainly, at the present time, and even during the next few years, the task of the spiritual and Vincentian formation of lay Vincentians will continue to fall upon, for the most part, the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.

From what has been said we arrive at a conclusion: retreat directors, missionaries, Daughters of Charity, and whoever in the future will join this group ought to know Vincentian spirituality and at the same time the peculiarities of the associations with whom they will collaborate as formators. They will make certain that the qualities and

life of these associations be based beyond all doubt on Vincentian bases, avoiding all admixture with other spiritualities.

The Final Document goes one step farther. It invites the provinces of the Congregation of the Mission to open themselves to organisms already in existence to receive permanent formation. Doubtlessly this treasure, if accepted, will be of benefit to all. Sometimes created structures feel frustrated for not being used sufficiently. The influence of new groups can contribute to revitalizing these. Even a group enjoying full realization of its objectives could be aided by the extension of its area of activity, if in this way it reaches different branches of the Vincentian Family. The Final Document invites us to consider these and other alternatives that refer to mutual collaboration.

Conclusion

The General Assembly has placed in the hands of the missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission a document in which is found the commitment, among others, to collaboration in formation. It is up to the missionaries to assimilate and put into practice these commitments. Without doubt this is a time of grace for the Vincentian Family. The Congregation of the Mission has broadened its pastoral horizons. It has explicitly assumed a particular responsibility: to collaborate with the rest of the Vincentian Family in formation. This collaboration affects the Congregation of the Mission, but at the same time it is open to the other components of the Vincentian Family. The missionary, on his part, is disposed to give of himself, but also to receive. He recognizes that he is an agent of formation, but also a recipient of the same. He faces the beginning of a millennium, collaborating closely with the Daughters of Charity and the laity. The members of the Vincentian Family, gifted with a good formation, guarantee the evangelization of the poor in the very -near future.

St. Vincent appreciated the ministry of formation. Speaking to the missionaries he invited them to contemplate Jesus Christ, who evangelized the poor, but also formed the apostles and a group of women. He told the missionaries: "What a great blessing of God it is to find ourselves in the same state in which the Son of the Eternal Father found himself, that we direct some women who serve God and the public in the best way they are of" (SV XI, 193).

(Translated by: John V. Kennedy, C.M.)

