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Forming Consecrated Life Today

by Christian SENS, C.M
Visitor of Toulouse
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There are certainly many ways to approach and present formation for consecrated life. I have chosen three axes: human formation, Christian formation, and Vincentian formation. I will obviously talk about the formation for consecrated life of the Daughters of Charity and therefore a formation for which the objective is service of the poor, the service of Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. This will be the first part of my talk. Each of these axes merits ample development. I am simply going to offer you some reflections on points of emphasis that seem to me important today, being very conscious that I am dependent on the situation of the Daughters of Charity in France and in the context of this country. In other situations, other contexts, other points of emphasis can be chosen. I do not have any more claim than you to say how to think about formation for Daughters of Charity. You have much more experience than I in that area and it will be interesting that you can share and compare within the various provincial practices.

1. Formation for the service of the poor

I am not going to develop this part at length, in that certain points will be treated later on in the talk.

“Service is for them the expression of their consecration to God in the Company and gives it its full significance.” (C. 2.1). This quote from the Constitutions allows me to clarify right away which consecrated life I am talking about here because this has an impact on formation. The consecration of Daughters of Charity is not identified with that of religious. Their original manner of living baptismal consecration is to give oneself to God for the service of the poor or to serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. It is for this reason that God created the Company.

“You should also reflect that your chief business, the one which God particularly requires, is diligence in serving the poor. Hence you should treat them gently and kindly, reflecting that it is for that purpose that God has brought you together, for that purpose he established your Company” (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 107).

Within the consecration of the Daughters of Charity, God and the poor, Christ and the poor are inseparable. One does not enter the Company to live an experience of religious life or to simply have an experience of community life, but fundamentally to serve the poor, in community, in the manner of Christ the Servant. In that capacity, their formation, both initial and ongoing, must allow them to verify the call of God and their response, to deepen their spiritual experience, but never forgetting that the poor are necessarily present within the call, the response, and the spiritual experience.

If their consecration does not make them religious, it does not have a lesser dimension of radicality, even if they renew it every year. The gift to God for the poor, the gift to God and to the service of the poor commits their whole life and their person. Vincent de Paul wrote to Anne Hardemont who was in Ussel on 24 November 1658: “You have had a hard time getting used to the region, but you will also have great merit before God for having overcome your repugnance and for having done His Will rather than your own.... O Sister, how consoled you will be at the hour of death for having consumed your life for the same reason for which Jesus Christ gave his — for charity, for God, for the poor! ... And what greater act of love can one make than to give oneself, wholly and entirely, in one’s state of life and in one’s duty, for the salvation and relief of the afflicted! Our entire perfection consists in this” (Coste, Correspondence, VII, 396). The path to holiness of the Daughters of Charity, in following Christ the Servant, passes by the road of the poor. They are called to commit themselves there totally, “in life and in duty,” in other words, both through their manner of being as by their actions, their commitment.

Formation for consecrated life includes at the same time, therefore, deepening of the mystery of God and of faith, contemplation of the Servant Christ, knowledge of the Constitutions and also a better comprehension of the world of the poor, learning their language and their culture. This better comprehension and learning are an integral part of the spiritual experience of the Daughters of Charity.

2. Human formation

In all formation plans, whether in view of an ordained ministry or the consecrated life, human formation has its place. We know well that piety and the desire to give oneself to God does not compensate for a lack of maturity or balance or a poorly integrated emotional life. The decrease of vocations in some countries, and I think of France, cannot become an excuse that would lead one to be less demanding regarding the human maturity of the candidates, their emotional equilibrium, their capacities for relationships, their sense of service, their aptitude also to assume changes in a world where transformations are rapid and profound.

I am not going to develop a human formation program here, but simply raise some points that seem important to me today. Your experience as Director will most certainly allow you to add others and above all share the way in which you live your responsibility of accompaniment to the province, the communities, the sisters in this area of human formation.

2.1. Rereading of life

I believe that human formation demands learning to read and reread one's life, one's experiences, to make them more objective and also to be able to measure progress, but also limitations, poverties, blocks, perhaps wounds caused by failures or bad experiences. It is thus that one becomes more responsible for oneself in better mastering one's life, choices and actions. Rereading carries a communitarian dimension because one must also learn to reread one's life with others, notably in community, and accept their way of seeing, their questioning, their challenges. This is done during the initial stage of formation. It must also continue all through life. Do the sisters always easily have this possibility? In what way do the provinces and the Directors address this concern and help the communities and the sisters do this rereading personally and as a community.

2.2. Learning differences

Human formation is composed of this lesson. A great deal is said today about differences, but perhaps it is because they are hard to live with and accept both on the cultural and religious levels. They can become a source of conflicts. In the imposing community establishments of yesterday, differences could be hidden or even erased. Misunderstood uniformity could lead to standardization. This could not be understood at a time where respect for the human person and human rights became strongly maintained values. It is not more possible in communities that today are generally smaller with daily and stronger confrontations with others. One does not enter a community ready made, in a sort of mold that eliminates differences. The community builds itself up daily with the richness of differences when they are recognized and accepted not as obstacles but as the richness of unity and communion. It is a question then of learning, and this learning is never finished, living fraternally with other persons not of one's choosing but with whom one shares the same work, the same consecration to God for the service of the poor. It is not about dreaming of communities without tensions and without conflicts, but rather of learning to accept them, to manage them, to move beyond them. Undoubtedly to know and welcome differences, one must learn self respect as far as, according to Monsieur Vincent, "we cannot have respect without meekness, and without meekness we cannot have charity" (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 232). Your mission as Director brings you into contact with the communities and the sisters. You

certainly witness tensions or even conflicts that can exist within certain communities, relationship difficulties of certain sisters. You are undoubtedly sometimes called on by communities to help confront a conflict, a relational problem. This is part of your responsibility of accompaniment. And undoubtedly it is up to you yourselves to learn to manage conflicting situations.

2.3. Emotional balance

One cannot talk about human formation without bringing up affectivity and the work of truth to be done in order to be celibate and live chastity. We know well that this work of truth does not stop with the initial commitment. Celibacy presents questions as well to our contemporaries; can love be distorted so as to become a simple consumer object. Yesterday, institutional walls could serve as protection. Today, communities are well inserted into a neighborhood, a street, a village and neighbors are commonplace. One does not take on celibacy; one does not live chastity in surrounding oneself with protections or repressing emotions. Chastity lived in celibacy does not limit itself to renunciations; it does not forbid loving and cannot be lived with a hardened heart. Consecrated persons are called to love, to learn to love every day because this learning is never completed. The one who can one day say that he/she has loved enough, will be admitting to the fact that he/she no longer loves or is no longer able to love. In this area of relationships, the rereading of life that I touched on previously is also a requirement. It can be done in community, but in this area, not all can be shared in community. A personal accompaniment is necessary. Within the provinces, the suggestions for reflection on the vows are certainly available to the sisters. Are these reflections exchanged, deepened in community? This undoubtedly brings up your responsibility of accompaniment to be attentive to this reflection (or process) and to bring it to the attention of the province and the communities in this sense. What I say refers to chastity, but it is equally true for poverty and obedience. The language for presenting the vows has been revised and this has effects on the way of understanding them and living them. To speak only of obedience, it is evident that today it is no longer lived under the model of military obedience that one could have known in the past, but in dialogue, without abandoning the attitude of availability. The time of formation is obviously needed to better understand the vows. The community itself can also play a role in formation.

2.4. The challenge of feminism

The recognition of the place and the role of women in society as in the Church is a challenge of our times and not only in countries like Afghanistan. The state of “submission” which in the past could be determined for women, including by theologians, is unacceptable. The human formation of Daughters of Charity must take into account the challenge of feminism and guide them to take their place in

the world and in the Church and to come there fully in their role of consecrated “women.” You are men whose mission is a service of assistance and accompaniment of women. In this service, there is certainly reciprocity and you receive also from them. In collaboration, in this partnership with the sisters, you probably measure the richness of the difference, the richness of femininity. But, in the Church, as in society, the place and role of women is yet far from being fully recognized everywhere. Your mission can only make you sensitive to the challenge of feminism and this very recognition fully validates the challenge.

3. Christian formation

“O my daughters, if you are really faithful in the observance of this mode of life, you will all be good Christians. I should not say anything more than that if I were to say to you that you would be good religious. Why do people join religious orders if not to become good Christian men and women? Yes, my daughters, look upon it as great thing to become good Christian women by the faithful observance of your rules. God will thereby be glorified and your Company will edify the entire Church” (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 113).

3.1. Choosing “the better part”

I do not intend to develop here all of the dimensions of the Christian life. I will take only one aspect. To be good Christians, it is not enough only to pray, to go to church, to sacrifice oneself in service. All disciples of Christ are called to choose, without ceasing, “the better part,” like Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus to hear his words and to put oneself at his school. The desire for formation, for deepening of faith, for a greater knowledge of the Bible is today very strong, and numerous are the formation proposals. Certainly faith is a fundamental gift of God and a response from men and women by free personal commitment. But faith without expression risks being thrust into the imaginary. And it does not suffice to tirelessly repeat methods and discourses of the past. Christians live always as humble seekers for God and in this role are invited to deepen their faith in order to live it, to speak of it and to witness to it in the measure to which they are called to take their part in the ministry of proclamation in the Church, a role which is not reserved only to those ordained ministers or to some specialists.

3.2. Honoring the spiritual dimension of service

For Vincent de Paul, service is always a corporal and spiritual service. It is there, without a doubt, in the 17th century, a typical Vincentian mark, the same as the presentation of evangelization “through word and work.” Such a definition of service shows a vision of persons in all the aspects of their humanity. We are beings of needs: bread (food), clothing, roof, health ... and in this capacity the service is corporal. But we are also beings of desire: for justice, peace, dignity,

fellowship, solidarity ... carrying also within ourselves questions on the meaning of life and death, of history and human adventure. We even believe that it is not unworthy of ourselves to ask questions of transcendence, questions of God. That is why service must have a spiritual dimension which Monsieur Vincent touches on in talking of the “good word” to say on any occasion, the “truths proper to salvation” in teaching the poor.

To be good Christians, Daughters of Charity are invited, as all disciples of Christ, to an unceasing deepening of their faith to renew it and to renew themselves. The quality of their service in its spiritual dimension can only be to their advantage as well as to that of the poor. I do not make any claim here to give you a course on dogma. Allow me simply to touch upon the question of God. Can we talk about God today by simply taking the words, expressions and the discourses of yesterday, in a world that no longer has any need for God to understand itself, others, and to many of our contemporaries, simply to live? We no longer turn towards a higher authority to get answers to unresolved questions. Today, presenting a needed God carries the great risk of relegating him to a category of usefulness. Now God is revealed as the God of the Covenant, the God of gratuitousness. He is the God of love, always appealing to humanity’s freedom. The philosopher Lévinas talks about the grandeur of God that “set up a being capable of atheism.” God is well beyond the concepts of useful and necessary, of useless and not needed. We cannot confine God to our images and that is why we must unceasingly probe the mystery in contemplating the face of Jesus Christ. Let us add that today, notably in the area of ethics, of bioethics, new questions are being asked. Obviously, one cannot become a specialist in all areas. But accepting to enter into a process of ongoing formation, biblical, theological, spiritual, ethical is a demand to give structure to faith and to bear witness to it within the diversity of languages and cultures of humanity. To be good Christians and in fidelity to their spiritual dimension of service, this requirement obviously concerns Daughters of Charity.

3.3. Learning to “read”

We also find this concern for formation in Monsieur Vincent. It is also written in the rules. “You make good use of whatever free time you have after attending the sick; never be idle; study how to read, not for your own particular advantage but so as to be ready to be sent to places where you can teach. How do you know what Divine Providence wishes to make of you? Always be prepared to go wherever holy obedience may send you” (Coste, Conferences to DCs, 5). Certainly Daughters of Charity no longer learn to read like Marguerite Naseau. But allow me to interpret this learning to reading. Is it not necessary to unceasingly learn to read the Bible, the Christian mystery to deepen it? Is it not necessary to learn to read the “signs of the times”? Is it not necessary to learn to read sociological data in their complexity, situations of poverty and their causes?

Is it not always necessary to learn to read the Vincentian charism to actualize it? Is it not still necessary to learn to read Jesus Christ in order to recognize him in the person of the poor?

This concern for formation appears also through dialogues between Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul during a council meeting (Coste, French Edition, XIII, 664-665). A sister asked for a catechism. She was not satisfied with the one that was sent to her and asked for another one. “We sent off asking Monseigneur Lambert to send us one and he sent us the one of Bellarmine and told the sister to whom he gave it that it was very scholarly and it was only for clerics. Now, as we should not appear too learned, I had some thoughts of not sending it; and as I was in a hurry, I did not leave; I simply conveyed that she only read it, because what comes from the book does not come from oneself. It seems that it is not everything to just learn by heart and recite it.” Not to appear learned undoubtedly comes under humility. But this would be a false understanding of humility to refuse to be knowledgeable. Have Daughters of Charity and also the Congregation of the Mission never fallen into this? Certainly humility guides one to want to take the last place, that of servant, that of maidservant, but it demands, I believe, competence to take it at its best.

Vincent de Paul’s response is unequivocal: “To which our most honored Father replied: There is no better catechism, Mademoiselle, than that of Bellarmine; and when all the sisters know it and teach it, they will only be teaching that which they must teach, for they are for instructing, and they would know what the clerics should know. Do you know what is giving support to the two or three daughters of Madame de Villeneuve? It is knowing the meaning of this catechism. They teach it and by this are doing an unbelievable good. It would be good if it were read to our sisters and if you yourself could explain it to them, so that all learn it and sound it out for teaching it. Since they need to present it, they need to know it. They cannot learn more solidly better than from this book. I am delighted that we have talked about it for I believe this reading will be of great use” (Coste, French Edition, XIII, 664-665). Learn, examine, know how to show and teach, this no doubt comes under a course in initial formation, but also in ongoing formation.

Formation courses are certainly available in the provinces. The sisters can also participate in formation offered by the dioceses and Christian communities. As Directors, you have, in connection with the Visitatrix, a responsibility in this area and I am not telling you anything new. But is this concern for formation really taken into account within the dynamics of the provinces? Do the sisters show the same desire for competence in showing a high regard for the spiritual dimension of service as for the corporal dimension? Confronting the unbelief of so many of our contemporaries or their religious indifference, facing the diversity of languages and cultures, and observing the pursuit of spirituality, even if it is

diffuse, which we can perceive today, is there not a danger to the very quality of Vincentian service, a danger for the poor?

4. Vincentian formation

As in the preceding sections, I will simply suggest some reflections on this area of formation. Therefore, I am not going into the content of this formation and its diverse aspects of Vincentian charism, which must be taken into account.

4.1. An ongoing deepening of the charism

It is not so much the reality of the charism that is in question as much as the actualization which is done through institutions, communities, commitments, and practice. It would be illusory to claim to find this charism in an exact state to transfer it to our present time. We received it in the language and the culture of the 17th century. It is never, like the Gospel itself for that matter, outside of the realm of time and culture. The work of inculturation moves, therefore, through the process of confronting the charism just as we receive it with our time and the history of the poor today. References to sources, to founding texts, a simple fidelity to the letter, to practices and works would certainly be sterile. We recognize all the while that this could be the temptation of every institution, including the Church, to want to reproduce all identically, also adding other practices over the centuries, for fear of losing its identity. It is then that it well risks losing it. An authentic reception of the sources guides rather to look for the spirit, the intuitions and the convictions that lived within and animated the Founders. It is thus that fidelity can become inventive and give the charism a meaningful and significant translation during this time in the history of humanity, the history of the poor. Repetitive fidelity can paralyze institutions and people as witnesses to the past and sterilize commitments because the poor with their expectations and the needs that make up the world of the poor today can risk being forgotten. It is a matter then of deepening the charism, of working at the texts of the founders, but to actualize it and to live it today. Vincentian formation is always a required passage for Daughters of Charity. It also comes under ongoing formation which is certainly offered in all the provinces, and which also happens within community sharings. There is there a demand for the inculturation of the charism that was the theme of the last General Assembly of the Daughters of Charity.

4.2. A deeper understanding of society and the world of the poor

I would like to stop for a few moments and talk about another need. An ongoing deepening of the charism, as essential as it is, is not enough. One must still learn to better understand society, to better comprehend social facts in their complexity. The rapid and profound transformations of the world do not allow

understanding in simplistic ways with conclusive affirmations or ideological slogans. Reality today is far too complex to be satisfied with a superficial look. To “see” to “know for oneself,” a diversity of approaches and readings are needed: political, economical, social, cultural, sociological, socio-political, etc. We are no longer in a time where the categories middle class/masses or exploiter/exploited allowed the classification of a majority of people and to account for society. Today there is the “anonymous” power of money, the weight of multi-nationals, the egoism of rich nations clutching their interests, cold when faced with the question of the forgiveness of the debt of Third World countries, little concerned on environmental questions because the economy prevails. There are all these people that we can no longer call victims of exploitation because they are simply forgotten by the side of the road of profitability at all costs and fierce competitiveness. There is violence, ethnic and even religious conflicts. There is racism. There are the counter-values that the 1997 General Assembly document, “A New Fire,” evoked. All this obviously affects the poor and even creates new forms of poverty. How can one truly be at their service without taking an interest in the context of society, without taking the time to better comprehend it, without seeing the causes of poverty, of marginalization, or of exclusion, without learning the language and culture of the poor? This look at the reality of society and the poor is learned, without a doubt, by experience, but also by personal and communal reflection and by the means of formation. In what way are these taken into account in the provinces and communities?

A more profound knowledge of society and the world of the poor also allows – and I quote from “A New Fire” – to “discover personally and in community the ‘seeds of the Word’ and the values present in all cultures and among the poor.” The document evokes solidarity, the struggle for justice and freedom: the recognition of the dignity of all human beings; close personal relationships; a sense of celebration; trust and hope in Providence. The list is not exhaustive and we can add a commitment for peace and the search for avenues of dialogue, humanitarian actions, ecological and environmental accountability and so many gestures of friendship, sharing, everyday solidarity. Recognizing the “seeds of the Word” implies a look of faith but without economizing a serious analysis of the reality. This is how one can surpass it, as Vincent de Paul’s invitation of “the so often deceptive appearances.”

4.3. Love inventive to infinity

While elucidating on counter-values, we are called to love our world, this world “that God loved so much that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16). How can we say to this world that it is loved by God without letting a little of Christ’s tenderness for humanity, for the poor, show on our faces and the face of our communities?

Vincent de Paul reminds us that “love is inventive to infinity.” It is first and fundamentally the love of God that is inventive to infinity and our love comes from God in drawing from the source of the love given. From this we can never pretend to exhaust the infinite richness of love in the today of our responses and practices, both personal and communal. Humility guides us to know it. The Vincentian charism does not give Daughters of Charity ready-made responses in facing the challenges of poverty and the miseries of our times. It freely opens a space to renew and create the most appropriate responses to the calls of the deprived, the wounded, the suffering, the excluded and to find these responses with them. Fear and the need for security can cause regrets of the past, “the fleshpots of Egypt,” to the point of being frozen in this past along with the practices of yesterday without being really and fully able to live in the present. Such a backward-looking attitude is not only a risk for older people. It can also be seen in younger people. I believe that Vincentian formation must learn to make the necessary changes, to live them with hope, both personally and communally to witness that love is inventive to infinity. This certainly brings out our responsibility of accompaniment.

I will conclude in naming another area of formation. We know that in the experience at Châtillon, Vincent de Paul was aware that only a communal response, structured and organized, could relieve the challenge of poverty in a lasting and efficient way. The decrease of vocations, the graying of certain provinces, and I am thinking particularly of France, have led sisters to leave the responsibility for schools and retirement homes to the laity, while safeguarding the Vincentian spirit. Their own works have decreased and the commitments of the sisters in the social organizations and associations have become more numerous. I do not know if my reflection is pertinent but I will give it. Whatever the situation of the provinces, rich in numbers and youth or poverty, does not humility tell us that no Company, no Congregation, no community, can alone take up all the challenges of poverty and misery and have all the competencies necessary to confront them? Without questioning the responses provided by “our” works, I believe the service of the poor demands that we enter into a dynamic of collaboration today with the other members of the Vincentian Family, whenever possible, also within the framework of organizations or associations, ecclesial or not and with anyone who wishes to be an artisan of justice, peace, solidarity with the deprived, the suffering, the wounded, the excluded. This is the challenge for all Vincentians. Is it not also a chance for the Vincentian spirit to be widely shared with everyone who is in solidarity with the poor and to fight alongside them for justice and the recognition of their dignity?

(Translated by: Translation Center – Daughters of Charity, Paris)