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## Report on the International Formation Center: Saint Vincent de Paul

by John E. Rybolt, C.M.  
Director of CIF  
11.VI.2001

A few months ago, the two directors of the CIF programs, Juan Julián Díaz Catalán and I, received a letter from a confrere who had recently been in the Ongoing Formation Program. Listening to it is a good way to begin this presentation:

*I want to thank you both for a wonderful experience at CIF. I really enjoyed my time in Paris and in the program. I found it to be relaxing, very informative, prayerful, and it gave me a real sense of enthusiasm for my new ministry.... When I arrived back [in my province] it was a joy to share my experience with my confreres ... about the CIF program. Sharing my experience with some of the other confreres who had been in Paris was a real privilege, as well as sharing with those who have not yet had the privilege to participate in CIF. ... [T]he time at CIF was the best experience I had in my community life. It gave me the opportunity reflect on my ministry and vocation, it gave me the opportunity to share with and listen to the life experience and ministry of other Vincentians, and, more importantly, it gave me the opportunity to become closer to and to learn more about the charism and history of Vincent and the Congregation. ... I came back renewed and with an open mind about what it means to serve the poor in many different ways as a Vincentian.*

Since this is not the only letter we have received like this, we both have a great sense of confidence that a good formula has been found to help in the continuing formation of the Congregation.

### 1. Statistics

You might be interested in some statistics that summarize the number of participants, the number of sessions, the number of speakers, and the number of provinces who have sent participants.

	<b>Program</b>	<b>Sessions</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Provinces</b>
Ongoing 1994 —	Formation,	13	293	47
Vincentian 2000 —	Heritage,	3	56	24
Vincentian Specialists		—	—	—

[Ongoing Formation participants include four members of the Vincentian Congregation (India). Vincentian Heritage participants include one member of Brothers of Our Mother of Mercy (Netherlands)].

## **2. History**

Where did these programs come from?

I believe that the idea of continuing formation for the Congregation began in the time of St. Vincent himself. At the first Assembly held in his lifetime, in October 1642, we read the following paragraph:

*Next, the Assembly decided two things: 1) that henceforth there would be a second probation, which would take place at Saint-Lazare or wherever else the Superior General would indicate; that it would take place only six or seven years after the seminary, for an interval of one year, without, nevertheless, limiting the power of the Superior General, who can always either delay the six or seven years, or shorten the said year of probation, as he deems advisable for the good of the individual and the need of the Company (XIII, 295).*

Although this was his clear wish and the wish of the Assembly, the time was not ripe for such a program. The Assembly of 1668 spoke to the question, but the members had to admit that the time was still not ripe. The Assembly of 1711, however, agreed that the time had come. Consequently, Fr. Jean Bonnet, Superior General 1711-1735, decided with his council to begin the program on 15 August 1712, at Saint Charles, the former minor seminary on the Saint Lazare property. Ten confreres participated during nine weeks and, at the end, Bonnet reported they were “very happy and edified,” as were the confreres at Saint Lazare. This “seminary of renewal,” as it was called, lasted for a few years, but difficult financial problems in France caused its suspension. It seems not to have had much success, but was often called for, even up to 1786.

It would take many generations and crises before the General Assembly of 1992 decreed that such a program should begin again. The result was that Fr. Maloney inaugurated the program in the fall of 1994. Modifications were made at the Assembly of 1998 to open the already-successful programs to confreres above the age of 50.

## **3. Programs**

The result is that the CIF (the International Formation Center: Saint Vincent de Paul) has two functioning programs and one planned program. The oldest program is the Ongoing Formation Program, designed for confreres between the ages of 35 and 50, with at least five years of pastoral experience since their priestly ordination or the vows as brothers. The next program, Vincentian Heritage, receives confreres above age 50. The oldest participant in

the three sessions already held, was 83. The third program, Vincentian Specialists, is for those confreres who wish to concentrate on some particular aspect of Vincentian studies, especially in view of further work in formation. We may have our first confrere in this program in September.

The goals of the programs are defined in the statutes of the Center.

First, the Ongoing Formation Program:

**a. Mission**

*The International Formation Center: Saint Vincent de Paul (CIF) offers a program of ongoing Vincentian formation for members of the Congregation of the Mission, destined to help them carry out the objective of following Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor. The Center also proposes to promote mutual knowledge among members of the Congregation of the Mission and with other members of the Vincentian Family, the unity of the Congregation of the Mission, an international perspective, and interprovincial collaboration.*

*The Vincentian Ongoing Formation Program is geared primarily toward members of the Congregation of the Mission, but members of other groups sharing in the Vincentian charism will, from time to time, be accepted as participants.*

**b. Program Design**

*The Vincentian Ongoing Formation Program includes the following components: academic disciplines, personal study, research, teaching, the development of the vocation and ministry of the participants, liturgical celebrations, time for prayer and a retreat, the experience of community life, and visits to Vincentian sites. The program lasts for a period of fourteen (14) weeks.*

Second, the Vincentian Heritage Program. It has the same mission as the Ongoing Formation Program, but its program design is somewhat different:

**b. Program Design**

*The Vincentian Heritage Program includes the following components: conferences on Vincent de Paul and the Congregation of the Mission, personal reading and study, the development of the vocation and ministry of the participants, liturgical celebrations, time for prayer, the experience of community life, and visits to Vincentian sites. The program lasts for a period of four (4) weeks. The program is offered in one language at a time.*

Inherent in both these programs is the conviction that the confreres have been giving themselves already, sometimes for many years, to the work of the Mission in the Church. They often arrive tired and anxious, especially since many are leaving their home country and their work for the first time. They need time for rest and recuperation, leading to time for reflection, prayer and meditation. The centerpiece of all of the talks, the discussions, the visits to Vincentian sites, and so forth, is personal renewal in the Congregation of the Mission. Most of the participants agree that this goal is met and that they do return home refreshed and reinvigorated.

#### **4. Finances**

The question of finances always attracts the attention of the confreres, particularly of the Visitors and their provincial treasurers. The Statutes of CIF say:

*Individual provinces assume responsibility for the expenses of the participants. These expenses are primarily room, board, and program expenses. Program expenses include the support of the directors and the purchase and replacement of necessary equipment. The program is financially self-supporting in that it does not regularly receive subsidies from the Congregation of the Mission to carry on its works.*

To continue to be financially self-supporting the CIF has to manage its finances carefully. At the beginning, the program charged 30,000 FF for each participant. A year's experience showed us that this was too high, and the price was lowered to 29,000 FF. It has not changed since then. However, even with various cost-saving measures, the program has not been able to keep pace with rising costs, such as in the Motherhouse, food, transportation, translation services and supplies. Besides, the European Community will switch to the use of Euro currency within a few months. For this reason, the Superior General and his council have decided to price the Ongoing Formation Program at €5000, and the Vincentian Heritage Program at €1500. These new prices will be reflected as of 1 September 2001.

For several provinces the costs are high, particularly when you include costs of travel, pocket money and, sometimes, special medical insurance. To help the provinces meet these costs, Fr. Elmer Bauer, the Treasurer General, has prepared a six-page list of helping agencies. The CIF staff does not raise funds for the provinces, in keeping with the Statutes cited above: "Individual provinces assume responsibility for the expenses of the participants." Neither does the CIF give scholarships. However, the General Curia sets aside each year a small sum of money, about US\$ 10,000, for the CIF program to offer to individual provinces who have had no success in raising funds for the program. These funds are

designed, therefore, to help in emergencies only, and they should not be counted on as a regular stipend.

Although the CIF staff does not raise funds, we do know that several provinces have been generous in helping other provinces. In the name of those provinces that have already been helped, we add our thanks.

## **5. Conclusion**

To conclude, I have a couple of other issues. First, the CIF staff urges the Visitors to send only those confreres who are able to profit from the programs, especially the Ongoing Formation Program. The CIF is not a therapeutic program, a place of last resort for confreres who have failed at everything else they have tried. The CIF program is not designed for those confreres trying to decide whether to continue in the Congregation. The CIF program is not a vacation, nor is it Vincentian tourism. I repeat that the central purpose is ongoing personal renewal within the Congregation. Obviously, no confrere is perfect, and consequently anyone could profit at least somewhat from a renewal program. However, a confrere with grave problems should not be dumped on the others participating in the program. On the contrary, in our experience, one of the best results of the programs has been the peer ministry among the participants. These men, generally in their late 30s or 40s, have had a wide experience and are often powerful witnesses to their commitment to the goal of the Congregation of the Mission, following Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor. It is much more fruitful for all of them to spend their limited time and energy with others who, like themselves, can profit from the program.

As for the future, we have scheduled sessions of the Ongoing Formation Program and the Vincentian Heritage Program through the year 2004. The upcoming General Assembly could give us further suggestions for improvements or changes. One of these might be a further broadening of the participants to include Vincentian laity and other members of different groups sharing in the Vincentian charism. In addition, I believe that the CIF program should have better communication with the editor of *Nuntia* to inform the entire Congregation, as well as others, of the work being done in Paris.

I thank you for your support of ongoing formation.