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The Dimensions of Ongoing Vincentian Formation

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Introduction

The theme proposed to me: *The Dimensions of Ongoing Vincentian Formation* spans almost all of St. Vincent's activity as the head of his Lazariste community, for it was he who brought it together, encouraged it, educated it, sent forth and sustained in the mission the handful of formed people who were with him.

Young people also arrived to be "formed for the mission," and the Saint received them and placed them with his strongest collaborators, and he himself helped in their formation from above. But St. Vincent's real work was the formation of his missionaries in the daily life of St. Lazare through common prayer, liturgical celebrations, spiritual-pastoral conferences, repetitions of prayer, spiritual retreats, dialogues and personal meetings and all the complex and multifaceted administration of the extensive priory of St. Lazare. At the same time his letters, to which the solicitous Vincent gave much time and attention, and the visits to the most remote houses of Paris spread his formative message. It is surprising, when one looks at the indexes of his works in the last ten years of his life, that his formative messages are more numerous and solid: he was fully conscious of his responsibility, of the weight of his authority and of the acceptance he enjoyed: He had a burning and perceptive pastoral zeal which allowed him to see the reality of his family in the global perspective of past, present and future, as well as in the pedagogical perception of an individual case and of the formative detail in his local communities. So all the formation that emanated from Vincent was ongoing formation aimed at maturing, feeding, preserving, correcting and promoting the missionaries already initiated in "Vincentian" life and work.

Let us briefly analyze some of the characteristics and dimensions of our founder's formative labors.

1. Above all, a HUMAN FORMATION

The Saint was aware that the group of his immediate collaborators was deficient in the human values of culture, human relations and education in general as we say today. They were poor country people whom the Lord took from behind the flock to place them in the work of evangelizing the people and forming good priests. For this reason, from his awareness of their human conditions, he busied himself in forming them well in attitudes and human relations worthy of the priestly ministry, and in correcting in them the manners and conduct that smacked of installation or sensual and worldly comfort in the priestly office. There are texts that give us a full-length portrait of his efforts to form priests who were pure, gentlemanly, hard working and service oriented. For example: those who did not want so much work or diversity in the missions were: *“Idlers, lazy missionaries, guided by the love of their own comfort and rest...”*¹ As a good formator he had and he offered prospects for growth and maturity: *“If the Company, while still in its cradle is like that, with much greater reason will it be that way when it has grown older and gained greater strength than it has now.”*² In a repetition of prayer in July 1655 he cried out: *“We look for the shade; we do not want to out in the sun; we like our comfort so much; we cry for help when we are asked to do a tiny bit more work than we are used to. My room, my books, my mass... and all that. Enough! Being a missionary means wanting everything just so? God is our provider. He succors us in our needs and with more than we need. He gives us comfort and more.... I do not know if we think enough about thanking him for it.”*³

A true man should be a man who works, diligent and able. Listen to Vincent: *“Mr. Duval, a great doctor of the church, used to say that an ecclesiastic should have more work than he could do; for when idleness and laziness take over an ecclesiastic, all vices rain down on him from every side.... We were made to work... and a missionary, a true missionary, a man of God, a man who has the Spirit of God, everything seems good and possible to him, he undertakes everything, he can do everything....”*⁴ The idea of the priest as a man of work is a fundamental characteristic of the Vincentian image of the ideal priest.

The Saint makes an important distinction in the area of human values for the priest: one must think not so much in his doing as in his being. What counts in the person is his being, the virtues, the

¹ ANDRÉ DODIN, *Saint Vincent de Paul: Entretiens spirituels aux missionnaires*, Aux Editions du Seuil, Paris 1960, 150.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

prayer, the giving himself to God. The doing flows from that, and can even happen artificially apart from true existence; but this evaporates, it has no consistency, no real weight. Let us go on reading: *“A missionary who thought of nothing but learning, of preaching well, of speaking marvels in a place, of moving a whole town to compunction... such a man, who neglects his prayer and the other exercises of the Rule, is such a man a missionary? NO! He is missing the principal thing, which is his own perfection.”*⁵ It is a matter, by valuing life in that way, of becoming worthy to help others. It is beautiful to look at priestly ministry in this way: it is not a matter of rites and words, of influences and an atmosphere of piety, but rather of service to grace and to the Spirit, of mediating between the Christian person and the world of his graces and charisms. Where the Saint best expresses his option for true human values is in the famous conference of 6 December 1658, on the end of the Congregation, already cited, where, at the end of the talk, he asks: *“But... who will be the one who is going to separate us from the good we have begun? It will be the libertine spirits, the libertines, the libertines who seek only to amuse themselves, and as long as there is something to eat, do not worry about anything else. Who will they be? They will be... it is better not to say it. They will be the installed kind — (as he said this, he put his hands under his armpits as lazy people do) — the kind who have only a limited horizon and limit their perspective and their life project to a certain circle in which they shut themselves and do not want to go out from it. And if someone shows them a goal beyond that and they bother themselves to look at it, later they return to their circle like snails to their shell....”*⁶ A man, then, should be free, enthusiastic about his work, happy and animated to do it, overcoming those human failings so well described in words and gestures in the Saint’s conference.

2. Then a CHRISTIAN FORMATION

Following his most Christian teachers and formators, the Saint placed prayer as the peak and the synthesis of Christian values. In it we open ourselves to God to welcome him and listen to him and hand over to him what we have and are and to beg him for what we need with faith and the surety of hope, with heartfelt love for him more than for self-defense and concern for myself.

In the repetition of prayer on 10 August 1657, the Saint sums up the values of good prayer in our life: *“And so, let us all give ourselves very well to this practice of prayer, for it is from it that all good things*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 497.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 509.

*come. If we persevere in our vocation, it is thanks to prayer; if we are successful in our work, it is thanks to prayer. If we do not fall into sin, it is thanks to prayer; if we persevere in charity, if we are saved, it is all thanks to God and to prayer. God, just as he refuses nothing to prayer, gives nothing without prayer.”*⁷

Ever the realist, the Saint knows from his own experience and his missionary and community ministry, that formation takes sin into account and must face temptation if it is to be real and human, Christian and progressive. Therefore when he chooses the five virtues and the evangelical maxims, he does so to achieve in his sons true Christian freedom. He says word for word in the conference of 22 August 1659: *“The sons of God are those who enjoy true and perfect freedom, for it is only in the love of God that it can be found. The maxims can be reduced to three points: love of poverty, mortification of pleasures and submission to God’s will. These put the person in Christian freedom.”*⁸ One would not expect such an interesting anthropocentric focus on the five virtues from a man as selfless and detached from human and earthly values as St. Vincent was. But the fact is that his faith is contemplation of the work of God and he can do no less than discover in it the care for man that is always present in the mind and in the works of God. So **simplicity** triumphs over lying and duplicity, and causes God’s love to shine through in our works and triumph in our lives. **Humility** is also God’s love which triumphs over our pride and self-love and destroys at its root vanity and the valuing of worthless things. **Meekness** the Saint calls sweetness, remembering St. Francis de Sales, and he sums it up saying it is “putting up with our neighbor in his weaknesses” and not losing patience in the extremes of discomfort and annoyance. **Mortification**, for the Saint, is the way to achieve the first three virtues and to live well in community and for the mission. **Zeal** is a love in the heart which moves us to seek to be pleasing to God and very useful to our neighbor: *“If the love of God is a fire, zeal is its flame; if love is a sun, zeal is its ray. Zeal is what is most pure in the love of God.”*⁹ Notice well, then, how St. Vincent, as a true former of a community now mature in years and advanced in pastoral experience, takes from the gospel and the Christian tradition the values and characteristics of the missionary and tries to inculcate them and project them into the life and mission of his sons. It is ongoing formation in its purest and most genuine form. For ourselves, what or whom do we have today at the head of our already formed communities to fill this vacuum left by St. Vincent? It is a

⁷ *Ibid.*, 369-370.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 721.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 728.

question I cannot help but ask myself when I realize the enormous weight the presence and the formative labor of the Founder had for the nascent Vincentian community; and, on the other hand, how poor, routine and inconsistent are the means we have today for ongoing formation. We shall see how we react!

3. A COMMUNITY FORMATION

Very important for Vincentian humility and for the legal and ecclesial realism in which we live is the distinction our Saint so often repeats that the bishops and religious of solemn vows are in a state of acquired perfection and we are in a state of seeking and tending towards perfection.¹⁰ But, going beyond legal frameworks, the Saint uses all his resources for the love of perfection and promotes with all his strength the search for what is best for his community. It is enough to look at the Common Rules to perceive the Saint's clamor for Christian perfection, the search for Christian perfection in his community. I liked very much a part of the conference of 7 November 1659 (probable date). He says: "*The vows distance us from all these things, from the goods — temporal ones — that are the cause of the loss of so many souls. One of the advantages there is in this state is the rest which one enjoys when he renounces all these things.*"¹¹ The Saint channeled the esteeming of freedom of the spirit into pastoral zeal in order to organize charity and to dedicate himself to prayer in community. But how demanding and tough he was in his conferences and his admonitions as superior in demanding the observance of the internal rules of the community. Let us listen to some of them: "*Now this house of St. Lazare is for receiving sinners sick with spiritual leprosy who are cured by the grace of God.... But what a motive for shame if we become unworthy of such a grace.... And what would be the cause of this? If one asks a lax missionary: Sir, would you like to help a retreatant during his exercises? This would be a great annoyance for such a missionary. If he does not excuse himself, he will do no more than drag the broom.... He has such a desire to please himself and such annoyance at losing an hour of his time to help a retreatant, an hour that would be the best used hour of his day.*"¹²

The Saint was a formator fully and efficiently: he did not silence what had to be corrected and at the same time he valued the atmosphere of seeking perfection which he found in the community.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 790-791.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 792.

¹² *Ibid.*, 877-878.

4. PRIESTLY DIMENSION

For St. Vincent, the founding of the Congregation of the Mission responded to two factors within his reality which worried him enormously: Firstly, the situation of the poor, especially in the small villages and the countryside battered by wars and their consequences — hunger, extreme poverty, the abandonment by those who could and should help them: government, society and Church. Secondly, the deteriorated situation of the clergy: it was the refuge of people without education or vocation, with no formation nor pastoral perspective, without discipline nor theological training, who “placed” themselves in the profession of clerics as a place to prosper and find the economic solution for their life’s worries. Of course, instead of teaching doctrine, they caused scandal; instead of helping the people, they exploited them; instead of sanctifying them, they corrupted them with their anti-testimony. They were a nightmare for their bishops and the hierarchy anxious for an ecclesial renewal. For that reason, St. Vincent added another goal to his Little Company besides the evangelization of the poor: the formation of the diocesan clergy. His complaints and assessments of the evil bad priests do to the Church are impressive. Let us listen: *“Oh my brothers — he exclaims in a conference at St. Lazare in September 1655 — how we should pray to God about this and how we should work to face this great need of the Church which is being ruined in many places because of the bad life of the priests. They are the ones who cause its loss and ruin! And it is quite certain that the depravation of the ecclesiastical state is the ruin of the Church of God. Recently I was in a meeting in which seven prelates participated; and they, reflecting on the evils to be seen in the Church, clearly said that the ecclesiastics are the principal cause of them.”*¹³ Then he makes a geographical and sociopolitical summary of the countries of Europe to analyze phenomena such as heresy and religious wars that undermine the bases of the Christian faith. He was a well-informed man, current with the ecclesiastical problems and with a vision and a heart open to seeking solutions to this delicate matter.

In almost the same words he repeats the same thing three years later (conference of 6 December 1658) speaking of the end of the Congregation of the Mission: *“One could think that all the ills we see in our world could be attributed to the priests. To say that might scandalize some, but it is necessary for me to show the greatness of the problem in order to bring out the importance of the solution. The Church has no greater enemies than the priests themselves; from them heresies come forth... Luther, Calvin.... Because of them heresies prevail, vice reigns and ignorance sets up its throne in the midst of the poor people.”*¹⁴

¹³ *Ibid.*, 266.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 502.

But that disquiet and rigor flow from the great appreciation of the faith and charity of the priestly ministry that the Saint had: *“Recognize, my brothers, how much superior the office of ecclesiastics is to other earthly dignities and how we should hold in high esteem priests whose character is a participation in the eternal priesthood of the Son of God who gave them powers....”*¹⁵ From all this, negative in its criticism and positive in its praises and assessments, must spring up a concern and a clearly defined task for the formation of the clergy in the seminaries and in his community: *“O Savior, — he exclaimed in a conference in July 1655 — if a good priest can do so much good, how much evil a bad one can do if he puts his mind to it. O God, and how difficult it is to return them to a positive state. O my Savior, how necessary it is for our poor missionaries to give themselves to you in order to contribute to the formation of good priests since this is the most difficult task, the highest and most important for the salvation of souls and the progress of Christianity.”*¹⁶

Let us pause to consider — it is worth the trouble — a priestly ministry that always has high priority and is basic to pastoral work, and today more than ever is emphasized by Vatican II — the preaching of God’s word. Real workshops in sacred oratory were held in St. Lazare according to a repetition of prayer on 16 August 1655.¹⁷ The Saint programmed meetings to listen to and critique experiences and models of sermons. It was there, on 20 August 1655, that he presented and defended the famous Little Method: *“It consists in preaching like an apostle, with a common way of speaking, as well as you can, with simplicity and familiarity, as the disciples and apostles preached, as Christ himself preached: it is a great grace that God has done to this small and poor company that we have the happiness to imitate him in this.”*¹⁸ He gladly repeated what the people of Paris said in the parishes and in the court itself: *“This priest preaches well, he preaches like a missionary, like an apostle — like a missionary, like an apostle. And so, my brothers, simplicity. Let us preach Jesus Christ to souls; let us say what we have to say, as well as we can, humbly, but with force and charity; let us not seek to satisfy ourselves, but rather God... all the rest is nothing but vanity and pride, pure arrogance....”*¹⁹ Recently a preacher was speaking to me about this and he said: *“Sir, when a preacher seeks honor and popular acclaim, he hands himself over to the tyranny of the public, and dreaming about*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 505.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 867.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 209 ff.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 436.

becoming famous for his beautiful discourses, he becomes a slave to reputation."²⁰

We can say in conclusion that the Saint knew how to use all the tools to work for the formation of the clergy, as much in initial formation in the seminaries, as in ongoing formation in retreats, conferences, study sessions, personal interviews and letters. Some tools were, we might say, spiritual, like prayer, giving good example, spoken and written counseling; others were structural or pastoral, like the Tuesday Conferences, the seminaries, the meetings, retreats and formation courses for older priests, the brotherly welcome in St. Lazare and in the houses of the Congregation. But in both areas, in the spiritual and in the pedagogical, in that of grace and that of technique, in the mystical and the practical, the Saint devoted all his spiritual strength and all his capacity for persuasion to the formation of good priests and the reform and betterment of older priests whom he received in St. Lazare, whether they were of his Community or diocesan clergy. The Saint used every means, human as well as Christian, of psychology and grace, personal and communal and undertook the immense and arduous task of reforming — forming again, giving a second and definitive formation — to the French clergy of his time.

I have neither the time nor the ability to project to the present day situation of our clergy the little I have managed to present about ongoing Vincentian formation of a clergy already committed to pastoral practice and aware of its own limits, successes and failures in that practice. I would just like to present two simple conclusions:

1. The amount and intensity of Vincentian work for the formation of the clergy were poured into the ongoing formation of a clergy mature in years, rich in life experience, anxious to rediscover their faded pastoral ideals, but open to the grace of conversion and change which called it to retake the reins of a truly pastoral life.
2. That ongoing formation had very clear characteristics and dimensions in the human, Christian, spiritual, communal and pastoral aspects of priestly life; it took into account the full image of the priest and returned to the Church a clergy that was skilled in human values, fervent and grounded in the spiritual life, integrated into the presbyterial communion, and with a vision and a fruitful missionary commitment to pastoral ministry.

(JOSEPH V. CUMMINS, C.M., translator)

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 638.