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The Time of Ongoing Formation

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The Instruction, *Starting Afresh from Christ* (2002), speaks about ongoing formation as a life's journey in its relationship with time (day, week, month, and year).¹

In this context, I want to reflect on the time for ongoing formation from two complementary perspectives:

- a) Ongoing formation as a life-long journey;
- b) Ongoing formation in its relationship with physical time.

1. The time of ongoing formation is a lifetime: the entire life in all its stages and periods

The Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission, in defining formation as a *continuous process*, affirm that *the formation of our members should be continued and renewed all through life*.²

The Instruction, *Starting Afresh from Christ*, points out the motive why ongoing formation must last one's entire life: "*If, in fact, consecrated life is in itself a progressive taking on of the attitude of Christ, it seems evident that such a path must endure for a lifetime and involve the whole person, heart, mind, and strength (cf. Mt 22:37) reshaping the person in the likeness of the Son who gives himself to the Father for the good of humanity.*"³

Other Church documents have also insisted on ongoing formation as **lifelong journey**. The exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*,

¹ CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *Instruction, "Starting Afresh from Christ,"* Rome 14 June 2002, 15.

² C 81. Cf. C 77, "Our formation, in a continuous process, should have as its purpose that the members, animated by the spirit of St. Vincent, become suitable to carry on the mission of the Congregation. They should therefore grow daily in the knowledge that Jesus Christ is the center of our life and the rule of the Congregation." Also the Constitutions of The Daughters of Charity speak about formation as a life task, and assure that the sisters must be convinced of this continuous formation (C 58).

³ *Starting Afresh from Christ*, 15.

states: “At no stage of life can people feel so secure and committed that they do not need to give careful attention to ensuring perseverance in faithfulness; just as there is no age at which a person has completely achieved maturity.”⁴ In specific reference to the ongoing formation of priests the exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, states: “Permanent or ongoing formation, precisely because it is ‘permanent,’ should always be a part of the priest’s life.”⁵

A process which lasts all life long, ongoing formation has specific characteristics **in each one of the life stages.**

1.1. Ongoing formation in the first years of vocation

We know that in the Congregation of the Mission initial formation ends with the incorporation of the confrere into a local community other than the seminary or the scholasticate. Brothers have made vows and their specific formation and priests have completed their ecclesiastical studies. All, brothers and priests, begin a ministry in a local community.

These first years of vocation lived completely in a local community can be the years best suited for the confreres (brothers or priests) to embark on **specialized professional, pastoral, theological, spiritual and Vincentian studies.** Both the Congregation and the confrere realize and agree on the importance of this preparation for a more effective service to the mission in following Christ, the Evangelizer of the poor.

Ongoing formation in the first years of vocation arises from a decision on the part of the Visitor and his council in dialogue with the confrere to value:

- Choosing a local community where the confrere will be placed. Besides the geographical setting where he will study, more importance should be given to the **quality of the community life:** human, pastoral, spiritual and Vincentian.
- The adequate **personal accompaniment** of the confrere either by the local superior or another confrere in the community with whom he will meet on a regular basis in a dialogue of faith and spiritual and apostolic reflection.
- Choosing studies suited to the specific needs **of each confrere,** keeping in mind his qualifications, the needs of

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Vita Consecrata*, Rome 1996, 69.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Rome 1992, 76.

the province, the more urgent needs of service to the poor, and the new forms of poverty.

Ongoing formation in these first years of vocation must include **periodic meetings** with other confreres who are at the same stage. This will require provincial or interprovincial **planning**: the teams responsible together with the Visitor; plans and programs; support systems, resources, etc.

In these meetings, the confreres (I resist referring to them as *young confreres* since their chronological age may not always coincide with the reality of the stage) can help each other immeasurably, sharing experiences and reflections, animating each other to live in faithful creativity the ideals which they embraced in the seminary, and even enjoying time for recreation and relaxation.

The gospel scene of sending the disciples out two by two (Lk 10:1) can shed some light on ongoing formation during this stage of their lives: the disciples depart with joy and hope to announce the Good News. They live intensively the sense of their mission, the joy of communion with the Lord, and the need to encounter him to share the fruits of their labor.

1.2. Ongoing formation in the crisis of “realism”

It is not easy to separate the above stage with this one which we call “*the crisis of realism*.” We could say that ongoing formation in the first years of vocation can be extended during six, eight, ten or 12 years of vocation, depending on the person and place and will end when the confrere assumes specific responsibilities in the community or ministry (for example, he is named superior, or director, etc.). The boundaries between one stage and the other are not so much chronological but existential.

This new stage of the life of the missionary, which can be extended approximately from ten years vocation to the time when he reaches middle age, is a period when he will take up greater responsibilities. Ministry assignments become more frequent, and ministry tasks are greater and more complex.

During this time the confrere may experience a sense of **disappointment** and the risk of **routine** in his ministry, either because confronting “reality” produces a dissatisfaction in his community and pastoral life, or because of the monotony of doing over and over again the same things without a clear future vision. The lack of tangible results and confronting the “harsh reality” may bring about certain debility and lack of motivation.

During this time ongoing formation needs to direct the missionary to:

- Learn to **find the essence** of his vocation and mission: The Only One necessary is Christ, Evangelizer of the poor, who has called and summoned him to prolong his mission in fraternal community.
- Cultivate a **unity of life** in such way that his ministry, in unity with Christ, and his community life mutually support and feed on each other.
- Revise his **original option** and his Vincentian vocational inspiration so that he is able to live a radical and total giving of himself without relying so much on immediate results.
- Recover the taste for the **relationship with** the One who is the Rule of his life, **Christ**, the Rule of the Mission.
- Develop an adequate **balance** between prayer, commitments, fraternity, rest, friendship, work, solitude, etc.

For ongoing formation during this stage, the province or the Congregation could offer meetings according to ministries or responsibilities (for example, missionaries who work as advisors of lay groups, or in formation or in parishes, etc.; for local superiors, for administrators, etc.). Besides the themes selected for these meetings, special attention should be given to the atmosphere so that those gathered may experience the opportunity to seek those things which are essential in this moment of their lives and recover the taste for silence, reflection and study in finding Christ, as if choosing him all over again.

The support of the local community, the proximity of the Visitor, and the implementation of necessary formation means, must be equally decisive.

The response of Peter to Jesus: *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God”* (Jn 6:68-69), can serve as a motivating experience during this stage of ongoing formation.

1.3. Ongoing formation at middle age

For this stage of ongoing formation the boundaries of age do not appear exact. During this time the life of the missionary is characterized by intensive activity, and **leadership** in community, social and ecclesial activities. It is the time of great apostolic realizations. This period can be prolonged according to personal, cultural and environmental circumstances. It can also be suddenly interrupted because of unexpected illness.

The exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* points out the dangers which the priest can experiment during this time: *“... can be tempted*

to presume he can manage on his own, as if his own personal experience, which has seem trustworthy to that point, needs no contact with anything or anyone else. Often enough, the older priest has a sort of interior fatigue which is dangerous. It can be a sign of a resigned disillusionment in the face of difficulties and failures.”⁶

The exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, also points out other risks which can appear during this time: *“The danger of a certain individualism, accompanied either by a fear of not being in line with the times, or by forms of inflexibility, self-centredness or diminished enthusiasm.”⁷*

The presumption of not needing formation because one has lived and knows everything, the temptation of individualism, inflexibility or diminished enthusiasm, can provoke small or great affective compromises which may lead to accommodating behaviors, and even to living a “double life.”

Ongoing formation which corresponds to this particular period of the life of the confrere must address:

- The sincere and impartial review of himself and the activity in which he is involved.
- The constant search for adequate means and motivations for the mission entrusted to him.
- The availability to respond to new calls of the poor.
- The cultivating of a positive and favorable attitude towards ongoing formation, and to other means that the community, the Congregation, and the Church may offer him.
- The purification of those personality features which distance him from his Vincentian vocation.
- The recuperation of the spiritual and missionary disposition without adopting bourgeois and worldly ways.
- The joyful experience of participation in the redemptive work of Christ to help the poor to walk from conditions less human to conditions more human.

To accomplish this, it will necessary that the confrere will set aside **several consecutive months or one year**, away from his habitual work, so that he may be able to examine his life from a distance, make the proper readjustments, update his vocational response, and dispose himself to assume for the rest of his life a serene and purified participation in the mission of Christ.

⁶ PDV, 77.

⁷ VC, 70.

The question Jesus asked Peter three times, “*Simon, son of John, do you love me?*” (Jn 21:16) is the question which the confrere, stripped of all ambiguity, would be able to answer once he has reached the grace of ongoing formation proper to this stage.

1.4. Ongoing formation at retirement age or illness

Not all missionaries experience illness at the same age. There are missionaries 70 and 80 years old who still have strength to work. Others have to abandon their direct participation in ministry much earlier. All of us must dispose ourselves for our definite encounter with the Father.

These diverse situations in which the missionary encounters himself are also stages of ongoing formation.

*The gradual withdrawal from activity, sometimes caused by sickness or forced immobility, can be a very formative experience. Often a time of suffering, advanced age nonetheless offers to elderly consecrated persons the chance to be transformed by the Paschal experience, by being configured to the Crucified Christ who fulfils the Father’s will in all things and abandons himself into the Father’s hands.*⁸

The ongoing formation of the confrere during this time must address:

- His participation, according to his means, in the mission of the community and the province.
- The animation of the community with serenity, life experience and vision of faith.
- The cultivation of the conviction that he can be a participant in the mission of the Congregation and the Church.
- The development of qualities for dialogue, personal meetings, and welcoming within the community for all those who draw close to it.
- The professional support adapted to diverse situations.

“When you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go” (Jn 21:18). This announcement of Jesus to Peter can help the confrere to enter into those attitudes of ongoing formation proper to this stage.

⁸ VC, 70.

1.5. Ongoing formation in the different phases of each person

Speaking on ongoing formation in each of the stages of one's life we noted that is not easy to determine chronologically its duration. Beyond the life stages, the person, the concrete person who is the confrere, can experience critical situations due to external factors (assignments, change of ministry, being misunderstood) or personal factors (illness, crisis of faith, temptations, and relational problems).

These are phases which a person lives and which require a rethinking of ongoing formation.

The proximity of the superior or the Visitor, the quality of fraternal communion, the help of experts and professionals, and personalized accompaniment are means which can make the crisis an opportunity for growth and maturing, a real occasion for ongoing formation. *"The trial itself will appear as a providential means of being formed by the Father's hands."*⁹

Not only periods of crisis and trials, but also those times of euphoria, optimism, recognition, and triumph, when lived and interpreted from the perspective of the following of Christ, will be other opportunities to center our lives and vitalize the faithfulness of our response.

Ongoing formation cannot be understood as a course or a series of meetings in determined moments of our lives, but it must be the **permanent disposition** to become more like Christ, in acquiring his very attitudes and dispositions, a task which must last **our whole life**. In the words of Vincent de Paul: *"Remember, Father, we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ, and we must die in Jesus Christ through the life of Jesus Christ, and our life must be hidden in Jesus Christ and filled with Jesus Christ, and in order to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ."*¹⁰

2. The time of ongoing formation and its rhythms: each day, each week, each month, and each year

With specific characteristics in each stage of life, ongoing formation embraces all life, as we had just seen. Ongoing formation not only embraces all life, but it must adapt itself to **the rhythms of life**: days, weeks, months, years.¹¹

The Instruction, *Starting Afresh from Christ*, points out: *People in ongoing formation take advantage of time, they don't submit to it. They*

⁹ VC, 70.

¹⁰ SV I, 295, letter 197; English Edition: I, 276.

¹¹ Based on A. CENCINI, *La Formación Permanente*, San Pablo, Madrid 2002.

*accept it as a gift and wisely enter into the various rhythms of life itself (days, weeks, months, years) with wisdom, seeking the harmony between them and the rhythm, fixed by an immutable and eternal God which marks the days, centuries and times. In a very unique way consecrated persons learn to allow themselves to be moulded by the liturgical year in which the mysteries of the life of the Son of God are relived in order to start afresh from Christ and from his death and resurrection everyday of their lives.*¹²

The goal of this process is that each day, each week, each month, each year, we conform ourselves to Jesus Christ, becoming more Christ-like.

What steps can we take in order to ensure that we become more like Christ? How should we live the rhythms of our own time so that they are a time of ongoing formation for growing in becoming more like Christ?

2.1. The daily rhythm of ongoing formation

Each day the missionary prays, gathers with his community in diverse situations, offers different services, welcomes people. Each of these actions can be lived as routine or as a response to God's calling; and so, each of these actions can be a heavy burden or a **growth experience** in following Christ, the Evangelizer of the poor. The grace of each day, hidden in the ordinary, can transform each daily circumstance into a time of ongoing formation.

Each day the missionary needs to know how to apply a balanced **discipline** between work and rest, prayer, fraternity and mission. Fidelity to this discipline guarantees a healthy life for personal growth. On the contrary, losing this balance will result, sooner or later, in serious difficulties to make a time and space in his own life for growth in Christ.

2.2. The weekly rhythm of ongoing formation

Each week the missionary must set aside a **day** off, Sunday, or (if the ministry requires it) another day of the week. The Bible is explicit in claiming one day a week for the Lord, for rest, for charity.

In this way the confrere will show that the Lord is more important than his work, and will set aside necessary time for rest, reading, interpersonal relations, quiet prayer, more lively celebrations and that peace which makes his ministry fruitful and his fraternal love creative.

¹² *Starting Afresh from Christ*, 15.

2.3. The monthly rhythm of ongoing formation

The Vincentian tradition offers a means which has given and can continue to give much fruit in the process of conforming oneself to Christ: the **monthly retreat**.

The monthly retreats gives the missionary the opportunity to straighten up his life, distance himself from daily activities, and review (look again) each month his existence from the Lord's perspective. It is also a time to put interior and exterior order in his life, to live from within, to recover the spiritual and vocational tone of life.

If this monthly retreat is held with the community, it will offer it an opportunity to recognize community difficulties, a time for healing and reconciliation and communal animation.

2.4. The annual rhythm of ongoing formation

Contemplating and celebrating Christ's mysteries from the Paschal Mystery and toward the Paschal Mystery, the confrere tastes his own vocation and mission. He allows himself to be formed by the **liturgical year**, deepening his life in Christ, allowing himself to be questioned by him, whom he goes out to meet through his Word, and who invites him to grow "from age to age."

The **retreat**, which *we must faithfully make every year*,¹³ puts us in a climate of truth, which helps us to concretize our Life Project for the year; a project which will be the instrument for growth in Christ and ongoing formation.

The contemplation of **Mary throughout the year**, particularly on her feasts,¹⁴ will put before our eyes she who: *"More than all other believers, penetrated the meaning and lived out the teaching of the gospel."*¹⁵

2.5. The sustained rhythm of ongoing formation

Ongoing formation does not consist in an extraordinary effort which is realized on a few intensive days of activity, or in the heroic exercise of hours snatched for rest, or in a rush escape for annual gatherings. Ongoing formation is more like "a long-distance race" where it is more important to keep the pace and not let up in the sustained rhythm.

¹³ C 47, 2.

¹⁴ Cf. C 49.

¹⁵ C 49, 1.

Vincent de Paul, from his own experience, gives us the key so that the rhythm of our ongoing formation will have the same rhythm as our lives, and so that our identification with Christ will be a **process with sustained rhythm**: “*Our Lord Jesus Christ is the true model and the great invisible picture on which we must form all our actions.*”¹⁶ And he suggests the means to accomplish this: “*Another thing to which we must give special attention is to feel always dependent on the conduct of the Son of God; that is to say, that when I have to do something I need to make this reflection: ‘Is this that I do in conformity with the maxims of the Son of God?’ If you believe so, say: ‘Then, good, let us do it’; on the contrary, if it is not, say: ‘I will not do it.’ Besides, when you are to do a good work, tell the Son of God: ‘Lord, if you were in my place, what would you do on this occasion? How would you instruct this people? How would you console this person who is sick of body and soul?’*”

Vincentian mysticism of contemplation in action is surely the fullest fruit of this sustained rhythm of ongoing formation.

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(PRUDENCIO RODRIGUEZ, C.M., translator)

¹⁶ Repetition of Prayer 1 August 1655, SV XI, 212; cf. also, XI, 130.