

3-2005

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Stanislaw Wypych C.M.

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Recommended Citation

Wypych, Stanislaw C.M. (2005) "The Duties and the Ongoing Formation of the Formators," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 49 : No. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol49/iss2/10>

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The Duties and the Ongoing Formation of the Formators

by Stanisław Wypych, C.M.

Province of Poland

Introduction

There does not exist any profession or occupation or work which does not demand a continuous perfecting of one's ability.¹ The necessity of a continuous development in our times finds its justification in the fast changes in social and cultural conditions and in the new acquisitions of the sciences, both profane and ecclesiastical, and of the history and spirituality of our Congregation. Ongoing formation consents to maintain the "youth" of the spirit which each and every single member should take care of in himself. Only he who keeps alive the desire to learn and to grow maintains this "youthfulness."²

Therefore nobody is allowed to renounce his own growth, be it human or religious. At no phase of our lives are we allowed to consider ourselves so secure and fervent that we can exclude from our attention guaranteeing perseverance in fidelity, as if there is an age where we can say that our human maturation is complete and fulfilled.³

¹ Cf. *Pastores dabo vobis* (PDV), 70; see other documents of the Church in which the need for ongoing formation is highlighted; decrees of Vatican II: *Optatam totius* (OT), *Perfectae caritatis* (PC), *Presbyterorum ordinis* (PO); also: *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis* (RFIS), 1985, *Potissimum Institutioni* (PI), 1990, *Directives pour la préparation des éducateurs de séminaires* (DPE), 1993, the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (VC), 1996; also: "Ratio formationis pour le Séminaire Interne" (RFSI), in *Vincentiana* 27 (1983), 224-226, 245-262; "Ratio formationis vincentianae pour le Grand Séminaire de la Congrégation de la Mission" (RFGS), in *Vincentiana* 32 (1988), 211-238.

² Cf. PDV, 79.

³ Cf. VC, 69. In our Constitutions we read: "The formation of our members should be continued and renewed all through life" (C 81; cf. S 42).

The Christian matures in the aspiration *toward the full knowledge of the Son of God, toward the state of the perfect human being, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature.*⁴ St. Paul admonishes Timothy: *"Do not neglect the spiritual gift that is in you, which was given to you when the prophets spoke and the elders laid their hands on you.... Keep on doing these things, because if you do, you will save both yourself and those who hear you."*⁵

Since the future of the evangelization and the renewal of community life depends on ongoing formation, it is necessary that the persons concerned are offered the opportunity for continuous growth in fidelity to the charism and the mission of their own institute.⁶ If the so-called indications are valid for all those who have answered the call of Christ, then these concern first of all the formators and teachers. The educators and teachers must be aware that the formation of the students depends much on their way of thinking and acting,⁷ that this formation is tied to their mature and strong personality as seen under the human and evangelical profile⁸ and, in our case, also from the viewpoint of the charism of our Founder. The duties entrusted to the formators are indications of the need of a continuous formation.

1. The duties of the formators

The growth of a particular person in maturity and sanctity of life requires a suitable atmosphere in the seminary and a determined attitude on the part of the persons involved in the formative process of the personality of the student and in the formation of his conscience. The community responsible for the formation consists of the rector, director or spiritual director, superiors and teachers. In our Constitutions it is written: *"Moderators and students should form a true educative community by being open to mutual understanding and trust and by maintaining a constant and active contact with each other."*⁹ Under the guidance of the director they form a strict unity of spirit and action; among them and the students they form a kind of family bond which nourishes in the students the joy of their own vocation.¹⁰ The unity of the educators not only helps the educational program to be put into practice properly, but also and above all it

⁴ Ephesians 4:13.

⁵ 1 Timothy 4:14-16.

⁶ Cf. VC, 65.

⁷ Cf. OT, 5.

⁸ Cf. PDV, 66.

⁹ C 95, § 1.

¹⁰ Cf. OT, 5.

offers candidates for the priesthood a significant example and a practical introduction to that ecclesial communion which is a fundamental value of Christian living and of the pastoral ministry.¹¹ This indication regarding priestly formation is also valid and assumes a particular value for the formative process of the students of the Congregation. In the community they experience Vincentian life.¹² Since the charism is not transmitted theoretically, but rather will be sought after, discovered and lived within the community, that community becomes its epiphany. The educators united around the director must aspire towards the same goal, especially if it is a matter of establishing an educational program and of maintaining the harmony of its realization. The director, however, is not the only one responsible for the success of formation, but the whole formation team.¹³

The formator is for the candidate to community the representative of the Church and of the Congregation; he represents visibly Christ the evangelizer of the poor. Christ calls those he wants to follow him in conformity with the charism of the Founder and indicates concrete persons for the formation of his followers. The formator's love for the Church and for the Congregation should have a very high degree of zeal and profundity in order to be able to share it also with the students. Being a representative of the Church and of the Congregation, the educator presents himself to the candidate as a father and a friend. He is father because of his prestige, experience and care for the integral formation of the young men; he is friend because of his intimacy, benevolence and constant availability. As father, he gives advice, demands and forgives. In the role of friend he accompanies the student, works together with him and helps him in the process of self-formation. In the student's life the role of master and guide develops too. It is obvious that Christ, the evangelizer of the poor and the Rule of the Congregation,¹⁴ is the sole master. The principal task of the formator consists in accompanying the student to meet Christ for a dialogue with him about his life, his vocation and the quality of his mission. The spiritual aid given to the student during his formation is expressed mostly through prayer, spiritual sacrifices and personal witnessing of life. A profound knowledge of each student, of his character, his ability, his attachment and his behavior in various situations, is the important task of the formators. It is necessary to know the student continuously and personally

¹¹ Cf. PDV, 66.

¹² Cf. C 79.

¹³ Cf. B. TENBAILLEAU, «L'éducateur "interprète" du projet éducatif,» in *Seminarium* 34 (1994), n. 2, pp. 296-298; RFGS, 53.

¹⁴ Cf. SV XII, 130.

through discussions and an attentive observation of his conduct in the concrete situations of everyday life. It is also necessary to know the environment from which the candidate comes. The formators' common activities must make the student's education process become an ever more profound self-formation.¹⁵ It must be noted that self-formation is based on three rules: knowing oneself, accepting oneself and transcending oneself. The student will be helped in this process, but at the same time it is necessary to awaken his conviction that self-formation does not mean having the monopoly to direct himself. The candidate for the Congregation confirms his liberty in the best way when he permits the Holy Spirit to form him, as well as when he accepts willingly the mediators of whom the Spirit makes use. The efforts of the formators are really and fully effective only when the candidate collaborates with them sincerely and with conviction.¹⁶ Undoubtedly it is very important that, when educators fulfill their duties, there be mutual confidence between formators and students. A good guide knows how to foresee the obstacles, warn about them and remove them as far as possible. In his attitude he must keep in mind the rule: *suaviter in forma, fortiter in re*. Even the toughest demands will be realized if made with tact.

It would be useful to consider the duties of the particular formators. The **rector/director** is responsible for the direction of the community and also for the global formation of the students, for the conditions most suited for formation, for collaboration with the moderators, for relations with the educators and with the employees of the seminary, with the students and other persons who participate in the process of formation. Within the circle of educators the director is considered as the "sign of unity" (*signum unitatis*); he takes care that, under his direction the teachers and moderators, united in a community of spirit and action, are able to construct together with the students a friendly relationship. Even if some of these duties can be entrusted to collaborators, it is the director who supervises their realization. The director takes care that the students' formation conforms to the rules defined by the Church and to the directives approved by the Congregation. He is also responsible to his superiors for making an overall evaluation of the candidates' dispositions at the time of their admission into the seminary, as well as during the different phases of their education: before making vows and before priestly ordination. In our *Ratio formationis*¹⁷ we read: *The director has the main task in the formation community, in order to*

¹⁵ Cf. PDV, 69.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ RFSI, IV, 2.

animate and to coordinate the activity and the objectives, as a guarantee of the fulfillment of the Internal Seminary's end.

The director fulfills particularly delicate tasks regarding the students. In conformity with each candidate's age and development he examines accurately the righteousness of his intentions, his freedom of choice, his spiritual, moral and intellectual suitability, physical condition and psychological aptness, but also his preparation to endure a hard life and to exercise activities of the Congregation. In the sphere of the director's duties is included also collaboration with the communities which have an impact on the perseverance and development of the candidate's vocation. In particular this is about his family, his parish of origin and also the associations and youth movements where the student received his fundamental Christian formation and with which he remains in contact.

It is written in our Statutes that: *"In houses of formation, care should be given to provide suitable confreres who will function as confessors and spiritual directors, as the need demands."*¹⁸ In the area of the **spiritual director's** service it is necessary to distinguish two levels: the communitarian and the individual. His activity with regard to the community is expressed in taking care of the animation relative to the spirituality of all students by means of retreats and days of recollection, of conferences on the spiritual life, and of the liturgy and prayer in common. On the individual level the spiritual director fulfills his duties with regard to certain students, who choose him as spiritual director during the formation of their conscience, the discernment of their vocation and the development of their spiritual life.

The **confessors** take part in the formation of the interior life of the students. They must be easily accessible and must come regularly to the seminary at the times fixed to serve the students in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The tasks of the confessors regard the sacramental dimension.

In conformity with the directives of the Church, the **teachers** must consider themselves as real and proper educators: *"Experience teaches that they often have a greater influence on the development of the priest's personality than other educators."*¹⁹ It is not sufficient to have an academic degree in the chosen subject, but a spiritual, didactical, pedagogical formation is necessary and a sense of integral formation. The teacher educates with his own character, with what he teaches and in the way he teaches. A theologian, although he uses

¹⁸ S 50.

¹⁹ Cf. PDV, 67.

the scientific preparation of his subject, realizes his task on behalf of the Church, of the Congregation and he takes part together with the moderators in formation. He must avoid a subjective and individual standpoint. It is up to the teachers to work together in harmony with other formators, in order to secure an adequate level of teaching and to improve their own qualifications and professional ability.²⁰

2. The personality of the formator

Nobody is born as a formator, but he must have suitable dispositions. It is obvious that the effect of the formation depends to a large extent on the accurate choice of educators. St. Vincent was convinced that the formation of priests is an *ars artium, regimen animarum* (St. Gregory the Great) and that this task is the most noble. The most difficult part is to choose for this work the best and well prepared confreres.²¹ Confreres are chosen for this service who are distinguished for a certain experience of life, human maturity, balanced spirit, ability to listen and dialogue, positive opinion, but at the same time critical of modern culture, secure in their own vocation, with knowledge and love of the charism.²² The formator must first of all be a man of prayer, with a strong supernatural sense, a profound spiritual life, exemplary behavior and suitable and varied experience in pastoral work.²³

The formator is characterized by an adequate critical distance with regard to himself; he is willing to recognize and correct the demands he makes on himself and others, taking into account fatigue and human limitations. A mature educator does not draw others to his own person.

3. The preparation of formators

It is very important not only to choose the right formators but also to prepare them and help them toward a constant development of their professional capability in such a way that they may better

²⁰ Cf. F. LAMBIASI, «Il professore come educatore e testimone della fede,» in *Seminarium* 34 (1994), n. 2, pp. 319-326.

²¹ *The happiness of Christianity depends on priests.... Oh, how we must try to make them all good, because that is our job, and priesthood is something very held up!... O my Savior! how much the poor missionaries must give themselves to you in order to contribute to forming good ecclesiastics, because it is the most difficult work, the highest, the more important for the salvation of souls and for the advent of Christianity!* (SV XI, 7-8).

²² Cf. P. LAGHI, «Direttive sulla preparazione degli educatori nei seminari,» in *Seminarium* 34 (1994), n. 2, pp. 221-257.

²³ Cf. *O postudze w zyciu kapłana*, Rzym 1994, 90.

fulfill the work entrusted to them. *“The task of formation of candidates for the priesthood requires not only a certain special preparation of those to whom this work is entrusted, one that is professional, pedagogical, spiritual, human and theological, but also a spirit of communion and of cooperating together to carry out the program, so that the unity of the pastoral action of the seminary is always maintained under the leadership of the rector.”*²⁴ Already in the decree *Optatam totius* it is written that the educators of the seminary must be *carefully prepared in sound doctrine, suitable pastoral experience and special spiritual and pedagogical training.*²⁵ In the *Code of Canon Law* we find the advice to continue for our entire life spiritual, doctrinal, and practical formation.²⁶ In our Constitutions we read: *“Since the formation of students depends primarily on suitable educators, moderators and teachers should be prepared with solid doctrine, suitable pastoral experience, and special training.”*²⁷

In the exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* the suitable preparation of formators is mentioned in first place, a preparation of a professional, pedagogical, spiritual, human and theological type, but also the need to protect the spirit of community, collaboration and agreement in carrying out the program.²⁸ The preparation regards an introductory period, if possible, before taking on the functions and also ongoing formation.²⁹

4. The aspects of ongoing formation

Ongoing formation consists in continuing the integral process of ongoing maturation, in deepening each dimension of formation. We deal here with the goal itself, the aspects and the means: human, spiritual, intellectual, pastoral, communitarian and Vincentian.³⁰ The knowledge of the world of young people is very important.³¹ Deepening of formation must first deal with its **human dimension**, which constitutes necessarily the foundation.³² In this sphere there are characteristics which are particularly important like interior freedom, affective maturity, ability to keep in contact with people,

²⁴ Cf. PDV, 66.

²⁵ Cf. DPE, 2.

²⁶ Canon 661.

²⁷ C 94. In our *Ratio formationis* we read: “The role of the Director and of the Formators demands preparation. The Visitor must see to it that the conferes are prepared for this function” (RFSI, V, 2).

²⁸ Cf. PDV, 66.

²⁹ Cf. P. LAGHI, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Cf. PC, 18.

³¹ LAGHI, *op. cit.*, pp. 251-257.

³² Cf. PDV, 43.

serenity, sensitivity to the suffering of others, love for truth and uniformity between words and actions. Active pedagogy and the perfecting of knowing how to work in groups are necessary.

In **spiritual formation** we deal with living faith in a profound way. The purpose of the Congregation³³ orients and unites our formation: *“This purpose is achieved when, faithful to St. Vincent, the members... make every effort to put on the spirit of Christ himself (CR I, 3),³⁴ in order to acquire a holiness appropriate to their vocation (CR XII, 13).³⁵* This means uniting oneself with God, seeking Christ in faithful meditation on the Word of God, in the Eucharist, in prayer, in the poor and in the sick, in the needy from both a material and moral point of view.³⁶

The third aspect consists of **intellectual formation**. This regards, among others, the analysis of the documents of the Church, in particular those on social and religious conditions,³⁷ on the exhortation to organize works of mercy, on the reasons for poverty, but also documents which give answers to the new forms of poverty. It is necessary to keep oneself updated with regard to important new publications in the biblical field, theology, pastoral studies, pedagogy and Vincentian studies. In the latter case it is necessary to study the Rules, the Constitutions, the Statutes, documents of the Congregation and of the Vincentian Family.

It is also necessary to deepen **pastoral experience** within the social reality, which is undergoing rapid change, of the Church and the Congregation. Here too, the purpose of the Congregation orients our formation: they *“work at evangelizing the poor, especially the more abandoned; help the clergy and laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelizing of the poor.”³⁸* Here is treated direct contact with the poor, letting oneself be evangelized by them, getting to know the works of the Vincentian Family, studying the causes of poverty and, together with international organizations, seeking means to find solutions.

Formation to community. The dynamics of community life constitute a further field of formation. In the decree *Perfectae Caritatis* we read: *“Common life, fashioned on the model of the early Church..., and given new force by the teaching of the Gospel, the sacred liturgy and especially the Eucharist, should continue to be lived in*

³³ Cf. C 1.

³⁴ St. Vincent says: “It is necessary then, Father, that you empty yourself in order to put on Jesus Christ” (SV XI, 343).

³⁵ Cf. C 1, 1°.

³⁶ Cf. PDV, 45.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ C 1, 2° and 3°.

prayer and the communion of the same spirit.”³⁹ We are not surprised, therefore, that the Church wishes that the persons who live in community be *true experts of communion and [to] practise the spirituality of communion as “witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God’s design.”*⁴⁰ The people of God desire fraternal community to be the sign and testimony of the community of goods and fraternal feelings, of the community of prayer and common mission.⁴¹ And so, formators must continuously and tirelessly carry out the divine-human work of constructing the fraternal community; because this allows one to acquire the experience of life and of joy in living together. The community is built up on the base of prayer in common, liturgy and, above all, the Eucharist. It is also necessary to emphasize the need to develop useful characteristics in all human relations like good education, gentleness, sincerity, calmness, delicateness and the capability of putting all in common. The formator must know how to celebrate together with other persons, find time for recreation together; he must protect his own serenity, peace and joy.

A very important aspect is **Vincentian formation**. The relationship with the Founder and with the charism transmitted by him, deepened and developed from generation to generation, constitutes a fundamental factor. The charism of the Founder signifies an *“experience of the Spirit,” transmitted to [his] disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth.*⁴² The director of formation has the obligation not only to know and respect healthy traditions, spirituality, the charism and mission of the Congregation, but also to provide that, in the programs of formation, study and prayerful reflection, the person of the Founder and his charism find a place. The identity understood in such a way allows one to proceed with various creative activities, which can respond to the signs of the times emerging in today’s world and make the charism more alive and up-to-date.⁴³

A dominating element of the charism is formed by a profound eagerness of the soul to configure itself to Christ the evangelizer of the poor, the Rule of the Congregation, the healthy traditions of the Congregation, the spirit of the Rule, of the Constitutions and of the Statutes.⁴⁴

³⁹ PC, 15.

⁴⁰ Cf. VC, 46.

⁴¹ Cf. VC, 47.

⁴² *Mutuae Relationes*, 11.

⁴³ Cf. VC, 37.

⁴⁴ Cf. VC, 36.

5. The modality of the ongoing formation of formators

The task of the formation of our confreres cannot be realized without union with the universal and local Church. The need exists to create apt structures of ongoing formation of the educators and to exercise a certain alertness.⁴⁵ Within the sphere of the obligations of bishops and superiors is included the creation of projects and possibilities for ongoing formation. They are the ones who have to organize short or long periods to favor this. This obligation, however, is put above all on the shoulders of each educator. The formation must last for the whole life⁴⁶ and each moment (we may say) is a favorable moment.

It is important to define the plan of ongoing formation which regards the whole life. On the institutional level this will constitute a part of a plan of integral formation. There exist various modalities for carrying out the ongoing formation for formators. Under the sponsorship of the Congregation for Catholic Education, the Association of Rectors of Clerical Colleges has organized for some years monthly summer courses for the formation of formators. It is useful also to mention two others of universal scope: *a*) the Congregation of the Legionaries of Christ by means of the Queen of the Apostles Pontifical University organizes every year a monthly course for formators of seminaries, in which persons coming from around the world take part; *b*) the Congregation, in collaboration with Institutes of Spirituality and Psychology at the Pontifical Gregorian University, has created at that university an interdisciplinary course for formators of students, for young priests and for consecrated persons. The course takes a year and at the end a certificate is given. Interested persons have the possibility of continuing the study, completing the program's material, writing a thesis (two years of study) and at the end obtaining the diploma in spiritual theology with a specialization in priestly formation. In various countries and regions the bishops' conferences and those of major superiors organize sessions on the ongoing formation of formators. An example can be given from the organization of formation for formators in Poland. For the past few years, a special school for formators operates under the sponsorship of the Episcopal Commission for the Clergy. It has prepared two cycles of formation. First of all, it organized a two-year cycle for the formation of spiritual directors (1996-1997) and then another two-year cycle for the formation of other formators (1998-1999). After this experience a two-year cycle was created at the Formation Centre administered by the Society of the Divine Savior. It is a two-year school which takes

⁴⁵ Cf. VC, 66.

⁴⁶ Cf. C 15, 81; S 42.

care of the integral formation for all those responsible for formation. The planning council, which is made up of representatives of the episcopacy, of institutes of consecrated life and of members of the above-mentioned Society, has prepared a two-year cycle. The program is adapted to the needs of the formators' preparation and to their ongoing formation.

An other element which is useful for ongoing formation concerns the organization of congresses, diocesan courses, study centers, theological and pastoral libraries, cycles of conferences, retreats, meetings for reflection and verification on the pastoral way.⁴⁷

In this place it is necessary to mention the noteworthy initiatives of our Superiors General which consist in the organization of months of formation for the confreres engaged in the formation of our students like, for example, that of 1987.⁴⁸ For this purpose, the sessions of the International Formation Center in Paris and those in various countries and regions also serve; likewise, the reflections on the part of individual formation communities.

Formation is not carried out only through exceptional occasions or extraordinary activities. The formator learns, grows and matures also by means of the ordinary tasks which belong to his ministry. Ongoing formation is like respiration which accompanies man throughout his entire life in its extraordinary and ordinary events, i.e. every day. Respiration must be regular; when it is disturbed, anxiety follows.

It is necessary to emphasize that the ongoing formation is a work of the Holy Spirit and not only of human effort. However, this demands that one opens oneself and that there is an effort on the part of man. Formation is carried out and deepened throughout an entire life through a serious and systematic study and the observation of the development of science and culture. The basic modality of ongoing formation is made up of personal prayer. An important instrument for the formation of the missionary regards the practice of the five virtues which are like the faculties of the soul of the whole Congregation: simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification and zeal for souls.⁴⁹ The simplicity and humility of the educator lead to the conviction that the intellectual possibilities, knowledge and wisdom which he possesses are gifts from God and must serve to deepen and transmit the truth to others. Respect for the Gospel, whose purpose is union with Christ in a chaste, poor and obedient life constitutes another important modality. This practice is useful

⁴⁷ Cf. PDV, 79.

⁴⁸ For the conferences given, see *Vincentiana* 31 (1987), n. 4, 5 and 6.

⁴⁹ CR II, 14; C 7.

for the maturing of the personality and of liberty of spirit and also for the purification of the heart and strengthening of love. A further modality and instrument for carrying out formation concerns asceticism. Within the area of the modalities relative to asceticism we must mention self-discipline which helps to develop the personality in a harmonious way. We should not forget reconciliation, examination of conscience and spiritual direction. Conversion is helped by a frequent behavior check during the examination of conscience. Spiritual direction responds in a generous, trustful and modest way to the initiatives of the Holy Spirit within us. We must also emphasize attention to maintaining the formators' psycho-physical condition. An important modality of formation is also constituted by the moderate and programmed use of mass media.

Conclusion

We are convinced of the need for ongoing formation for all, but in particular way for formators. There are not yet well-outlined courses by which they could journey securely to the determined goal. That is why conscience is not the only thing needed. One must also have spiritual transparency tied to a concrete attitude which transcends a passive aptitude of the interested person: his full and active commitment, his being open to the Holy Spirit, to beauty and truth, and the ability to be in contact with people and with the surrounding reality in a moderate way. Nevertheless, there are always new incentives in order that the task of the formation of formators of seminaries be initiated and developed by all those to whom the Church and the Congregation entrusts one of the most important and delicate responsibilities. Since, however, as we mentioned above, the "youthfulness of the spirit," the level of basic formation and also the renewal of our life and activity will depend on the ongoing formation of the formators, it is worth promoting it.

(VICTOR BIELER, C.M., translator)